



## The Elounda Variations

By Ann Abel

Photography by Frédéric Vasseur

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A new spa on Crete is a dramatic fugue of ancient and modern design elements

Crete's very name is shorthand for ancient history. Inhabited since 7000 B.C., this southernmost of the Greek isles is less a cradle of Western civilization than a bunk bed: Minoan palaces (circa 2000 b.c.) beneath Byzantine churches (c. 600 a.d.) beneath Venetian castles (c. 1500) beneath Turkish minarets (c. 1700). So it makes sense that the island's newest spa, in Elounda, is anthropological in spirit, too, a layering of great spa traditions from Europe (thalassotherapy), Southeast Asia (Thai massage), Asia Minor (the hammam), and India (Ayurveda). Treatments reference the locale--algae wraps and olive-stone scrubs--and the cosmos (crystal healing), and while the design doesn't go that far, it also shows a flair for cherry-picking with an overriding goal: to showcase the striking sea views at every turn.

"We wanted a space that would make guests realize they are in a very special place in Greece, on a par with the best spas in the world," says its architect, Spyros Kokotos, who with his wife, Eliana, owns the three hotels that make up the Elounda resort complex: Porto Elounda, which contains the spa; Elounda Mare; and Elounda Peninsula. They ring Mirabello Bay, a notch in the coast of Elounda Bay. Spyros designed all three hotels (and many others in the area), and Eliana has supervised their operation since Mare opened in 1981--which is probably why the properties, for all their worldliness, have a warm, familial vibe.

The spa building (24,000 square feet) rambles down a hill in the crook of the bay, and every window offers a shimmering sapphire vista. "Bringing the sea into the spa" is how Kokotos describes his spa concept. Jean-Paul Blissett, the managing director of the UK hospitality-design firm Syntax Group, which oversaw the design, says, "The stepping nature of the building creates dramatic and beautiful views across the bay, and we wanted to make the most of this." (The firm is known for its one-off spa creations such as Chiva-Som in Thailand and the ones at Chewton Glen in England and Atlantis in the Bahamas.)

The spa's centerpiece is the 3,200-square-foot tepidarium, a warm room in the style of Roman and Byzantine baths. But whereas ancient tepidariums were closed off from the outside world, here one wall (41 feet wide and 13 feet high) is almost entirely

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Photography by Frederic Vasseur

The 3,200-square-foot tepidarium is the focal point of Elounda's new spa.

glass, a vast vitrine for the Mediterranean's moody blue dance. The tepidarium is filled with luxe, exotic materials. Floors are "old-cut" marble from the Greek island of Evia with striations left by the wire-cutting, and walls are beige stone slabs from Syria, treated to show the holes formed from exposure to the elements over the eons, giving the room an ancient feel. But the real design stars are light and transparency. Syntax amplified those elements by sitting a large glass oval in the glossy white ceiling, the bottom of a reflecting pool on the floor above. Light wriggles through and mingles with the sunshine; shadows undulate over everything.

My partner, Andy, and I spend three days at Elounda in September, and on each one we arrive early at the spa so we can linger in the tepidarium. The wow just won't wear off. An aqueduct running through the room discharges a cascade of water into one of the most magnificent hydrotherapy pools I've ever seen. (The only other in its league in my experience is at Fonteverde, in Tuscany.) We cycle through the underwater-massage stations, the jets pulsing and pummeling our legs, backs, and shoulders, then swim through the cutout in the window to the outdoor portion, where the infinity edge blurs into the sea. Unfurling ourselves on submerged bubble loungers, we let the effervescence tap-dance against our backs.

Two things keep the eclectic design from being a mishmash: the use of Mediterranean marbles as grounding elements and the strict separation of functional spaces. The thermal suite (hot sauna, cooler sauna, steam room, and cold plunge), for instance, occupies its own room to one side of the tepidarium. Here the materials become more assertive: cinnamon-hued red slate from Syria on the walls and the swirl staircase up to the cold plunge, and pea-shoot green mosaic tiles on the curved wall behind it. It's a nifty chromatic representation of the hot-cool bathing ritual.

In another wing is a sumptuous Ottoman hammam, with a steam room big enough for a dinner party, chambers for scrubs (done on heated marble slabs) and massages, and a relaxation room of its own. A huge Turkish door on the wall beside the entrance sets the mood, and an antique wood carving festoons the ceiling. Here stone is deployed imperially, almost imperiously. A diamond pattern of marbles, silvery Afyon Sugar from Turkey and Indus Gold from Pakistan, covers some walls, harmonizing with the solid pink Crema Valencia from Spain on others. The steam room's centerpiece is a three-tier fountain sitting on an eight-point star inlaid into the Cretan-marble floor. The domed ceiling above it is made of jewel-colored glass bricks.

Upstairs the look is clean and bright. The 24 treatment rooms ring the waiting/relaxation room, where brown velveteen chaises encircle the reflecting pool that forms the tepidarium's liquid skylight. Here Syntax went for opulent ocular effects. There's a kind of meteor shower above the pool, a few dozen football-size stones and chunks of blue-green glass suspended on spaghetti-thin steel. They're the work of Costas Varotsos, Greece's best-known contemporary sculptor, who created several large-scale artworks in the public spaces. The hanging pieces vie for my attention with (and lose to) the six illuminated arcs of water swooping into the pool. It's a cunning creation--lights mounted inside the base of each fountain essentially turn the arcs into fiber-optic cables.

I'm enraptured before I even meet a therapist, and I actually fret that treatments might be a letdown. But even though the spa has been open just three weeks when we visit,

the staff executes their steps almost perfectly. (The spa is managed by Six Senses.) Front-desk employees give us cold eucalyptus-scented towels, water, and detailed questionnaires; our treatments are customized accordingly. Attendants guide us through the tepidarium, explaining the benefits of the bathing ritual. In the relaxation room, another attendant greets us with a mile-wide smile and, by day three, brings ginger tea before we ask for it.

Therapists have the choreography down, too--our scrubs are executed efficiently, facials done thoroughly, and massages given with care--and many have that unquantifiable nurturing element that can't be taught in school. The one misstep occurs during the marine salt bath I have on day two, when my therapist doesn't add enough water to fully cover the air jets. When she turns on the power, I get a face full of saltwater. Spa manager Elli Soumaki quickly adds water to submerge the jets and offers a face-saving bit of flattery: You're too thin to displace enough water, she tells me.

The staff is primarily from the island, says Soumaki, and are taught many modalities in order to discover their strengths. "We believe in hiring locals and training them rigorously. When talent appears, we nurture it." Many therapists worked at the hotels' previous, much smaller spas, and Six Senses trainers come regularly, for up to two months at a time. She singles out three especially skilled energy workers on her staff of 14: Manolis Kaparakis, Antonis Sarris, and Giorgos Kaloudis. We meet two of them on our last day.

After Andy's holistic massage, a "soothing and balancing" freestyle treatment, with Manolis, he says, "Can I bring him back to New York with me?" then settles into speechless stillness. I take a risk on one of the more esoteric offerings, the Absolute Wellness Massage Including Crystal Therapy and Chakra Energy Balancing, with Antonis. His presence is soothing, and he gives great massage. After kneading my back, he places crystals on my seven chakras, or energy centers, then moves them around, leaving each combination in place for a few moments. I fall asleep and have vivid dreams, try to remember his steps so I can write about them, and then just grow antsy. The postmortem is perplexing: When I ask what energy he felt from me, he shakes his head, hesitates, and finally says I was "difficult." He felt a "lot of stuff" out of whack but holds back when I ask for specifics, other than to tell me my throat chakra, the communication center, is blocked. He could be onto something: I finished a very difficult assignment right before this trip and have been plagued with doubts about my writing ability.

If the crystal treatment stirs up thoughts, the crystal-like glass over the reflecting pool and the crystalline water outside keep them at bay. Elounda is a reminder that great design--grand but not imposing, precise but not cold--can be as much a balm as any aromatherapy oil.

## **SPA HIGHS AND LOWS**

High Holistic massage with Manolis Kaparakis

High The illuminated fountains in the reflecting pool

High The polished, attentive service

Medium Wellness Massage Including Crystal Therapy and Chakra Energy Balancing

with Antonis Sarris

High The striking design, executed with spare-no-expense precision

High The bay view from the tepidarium

## **The Elounda Hotels**

The new Six Senses spa serves three hotels, Porto Elounda, Elounda Mare, and Elounda Peninsula. All their rooms and public spaces have full-on sea views. Porto is the largest, with 168 rooms, and is well-suited to families. The other two offer a more intimate, adult experience and a higher level of luxury. Porto and Peninsula are so close that it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins; Mare is about a third of a mile away from them. A shuttle runs between all three, and guests have privileges at all of them.

Elounda Mare, which opened in 1981, is the first hotel in the development and still the most refined of the trio: stone walls, white buildings, rambling bougainvillea-draped paths, two dreamy open-air restaurants, and a postcard-perfect chapel. The 74 rooms have an old-world vibe, with thick stucco walls, real fireplaces, and antique accents. The best are the Presidential Bungalows, which have private saltwater pools and a front-row seat on the bay. The hotel attracts an older, sophisticated crowd--they dress conservatively for dinner, in jackets but not ties.

Elounda Peninsula, which opened in 2003, is more contemporary in design and more energetic in spirit. The guests skew younger and, at least during my visit, flashier--one morning at breakfast, a 20-something Russian fat cat barked into his teensy cell phone the entire time. Fashion here leans toward miniskirts, oversize jewelry, and designer logos. Each of the 53 rooms is a suite and has its own saltwater pool with a hammock over one end. Avoid the duplex Peninsula Collection suites as their layout is awkward (big staircase, one cramped room on each floor) and their pools aren't as private as those in the other room categories. Instead, book a Junior Suite, which cost less and are more private; although they're smaller, their open layout makes them live larger. Since they're in freestanding buildings slightly down the hill from the main building, they also have better access to the beach.

What's surprising at both hotels is the room furniture: It's generic and dinged up, not at all on a par with the public spaces. But all rooms have balconies, and both hotels have large swimming pools with ample lounging space, lovely paths for strolling, and, at Peninsula, the seductive Serene's Bar, built over the sea with glass panels in the floor. Service is discreet and polished. While I thought the food was just okay, the convivial atmosphere and breezy alfresco settings make dining a pleasure. The highlight was Peninsula's romantic Elies restaurant, where the tables sit in an olive grove. This is what you come to Crete for.

Rates Elounda Mare: \$459--\$3,275; open April 23-October 23. Elounda Peninsula, \$1,179--\$11,790; open April 28-October 8

Reservations Mare: +30-28410-41512. Peninsula: +30-28410-68012

Website [www.elounda-sa.com](http://www.elounda-sa.com)

\*The information in this article was accurate at the time it was published on 01/11/06.