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A Discreet Paradise by Rory MacLean

Most mornings around dawn Spyros Kokotos casts his nets into Elounda Bay along which he has built his remarkable hotels. 'Last week I didn't catch enough to feed our lunch guests,' he told me, 'so I threw the nets back, but a dolphin stole in and ate all the fish.'

'That's nature talking,' laughed his wife Eliana, 'telling us to take only what we need.'

I had fallen into their discreet paradise the evening before, winding down the hill from Ayios Nikolaos, arriving on the last day of the Elounda Mare's summer season. As dusk settled I wandered down from the main building, with its terraced suites and open wood-panelled lounges, past Venetian door frames beyond which nestled private 'bungalows' each furnished with antiques, with walled garden, swimming pool and unobstructed views of the sea. The meandering lane descended to the Aegean, through gardens of oleander and carob, past three restaurants and the Orthodox chapel, built with the hotel and complete with Byzantine ikons. The last group of guests lingered, listening to the soft whisper of waves, anchoring themselves in deep armchairs, reluctant to leave and break the spell.

The most remarkable aspect of the Elounda Mare, the only member of the Relais & Chateaux in Greece, is that it is the creation of one couple. Over 20 years Spyros Kokotos - a blond, blue-eyed Cretan architect - and his charming Athenian wife Eliana have created a three-hotel development, skilfully arranging the buildings along the coastline to maximise privacy. Beyond the Elounda Mare is the more affordable, year-round Porto Elounda Resort, with the green expanse of its nine-hole golf course, and further still the new, exclusive Peninsula with breathtaking views over Mirabello Bay and the far mountains of Sitia.

I stayed the night at the Peninsula, in the 'Mykonos' villa with steps sweeping down from its pool to a private rocky landing on the sea. Next door was the Grande Suite with heated outdoor and indoor pools, staff quarters, sauna and Turkish bath. Dr. Karl Flick, the owner of Mercedes-Benz, was among the Elounda's first guests, commandeering nine villas for his entourage of body guards and fitness instructors. He only moved out when a Saudi oil minister sailed into the bay on his personal steamship and rented the rest of the hotel.

The Porto Elounda Resort also caters for guests who do not control national economies. The rooms in its main building are simple and comfortable, with marble bathrooms and sea views. And everyone benefits from the remarkable setting, likeable staff and fine cuisine: parma ham with Cretan bananas, swordfish marinated in olive oil and lemon, quinces candied in their own syrup, excellent Greek wines. Every year manager Chris Tzianos, a skilled and gracious host, sends two or three young chefs to apprentice for a month at Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons or L'Auberge du Raisins.

Fifty years ago there was no road to Elounda. The land was so poor that it was said to produce only rocks. Visitors would come ashore and, after enjoying the local hospitality, see children fight for their discarded watermelon rinds.

Tourism is transforming Crete, destroying much in its sun-oil-and-concrete advance, but along this sunny coast one couple has brought prosperity and elegance while preserving elements of the past.

'I enjoy myself,' says Spyros Kokotos. 'And the fishing is wonderful.'

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