

Padel PARADISE

If you know, you know. And if you don't – padel is the hybrid tennis-squash game taking the UK by storm. This Greek resort is a haven for those wanting to learn it, play it, or do nothing but sit on the soft, sandy beach, says **Louise Atkinson**



TRAVEL

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The glorious Aeolian Village Beach Resort by Mark Warner

Arms flailing, as I am staggering backwards, trying to reach the ball flying over my head, the coach shouts: 'Run forwards NOT backwards! Wait for the ball to bounce off the back wall!' After 20 years of weekly lessons, my tennis instincts are strong, but this is padel – a modern hybrid of squash and tennis, played on a smaller court enclosed by mesh and glass walls – and you are supposed to scoop the ball up when it is ricocheting off the corners. It's even 'in play' to run outside of the courts to lob an escaping ball back in.

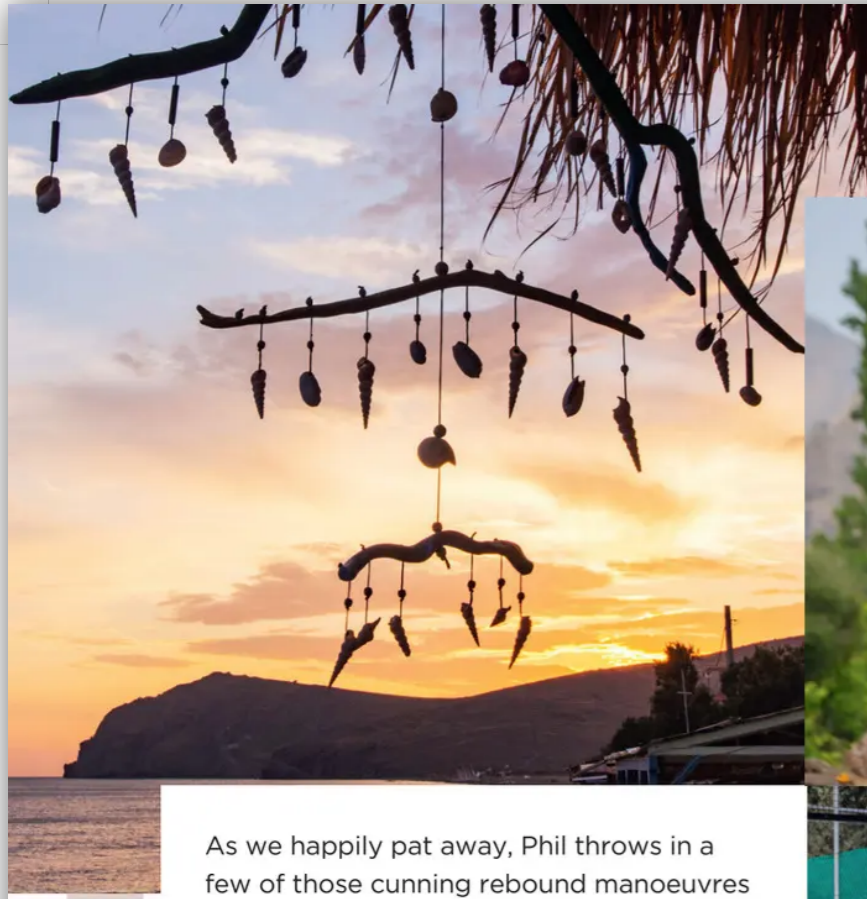
I'm still a long way off proper padel playing, but I'm staying at one of two Mark Warner resorts in Greece that boast recently built padel courts and I fully intend to make the most of the instruction on offer.

Padel has been heralded as the fastest-growing sport in the UK, and courts are starting to appear across the country, but you usually have to pay anything between £25 and £35 an hour to hire them, and group lessons often cost around £20 a pop. Here at the Aeolian Village Beach Resort on the island of Lesbos, the intro lessons, racquets and balls are part of the half-board holiday package.

The first surprise when I arrive for my first 'intro to padel' session, is the number of intrigued midlifers like me, turning up in the hope that padel might give our poor bodies a break from the rigours of tennis.

I get teamed up with Phil, from Devon, who must be in his early 70s but he's wiry and fit. 'Arthritis in my shoulder means I really struggle with the over-arm tennis serve now,' he tells me, so he's thrilled to discover that in padel you serve underarm using the familiar 'love 15, love 30, deuce' scoring system. ▶





As we happily pat away, Phil throws in a few of those cunning rebound manoeuvres off the back wall ('I used to play squash but my knees are shot now,' he explains, leaping about like a teenager). By the end of that hour we're both hooked and immediately book ourselves on to the 'padel plus' lesson the next day.

And, as I am fast discovering, there's always a gang of rapidly converting tennis fans, like me, itching to make up the four required for a good doubles session on the padel court.

'We've been completely overwhelmed by the interest,' says Will, the resort's dedicated young padel coach, who is now the hot ticket at the Aeolian. His intro sessions fill up as soon as the lists go live, as holidaymakers migrate from the tennis courts, attracted by the bellows of laughter.

FUN, FOOD AND FRIENDS

By day three I'm beginning to get a handle on some of the specialised padel shots, such as the 'badeja', the 'vibora', the 'gancho' and the 'rulo' (the Spanish terminology comes from the sport's Spanish and South American origins), and I've got a bevvvy of new padel friends, including two couples in their 60s who met 15 years ago on a Mark Warner holiday with their children, but who now get together every year to toast their freedom, independence and the cost savings of being able to holiday during school term time.

It looks like shoulder-season Mark Warner could be a secret haven for midlifers like us who love being active, safe in the knowledge that the sporting equipment and tuition will be excellent, the accommodation more than comfortable, and the food divine.

Breakfast and dinner each day are displayed across numerous hot and cold self-serve counters with the exuberant and ever-grinning chef Thassos creating a bit of Instagrammable theatre with his 'live cooking'



Clockwise from top left: sunset at Skala Eresou; Louise enjoying a guided group bike ride; the resort's relaxed beach bar; octopus is one of the nearby village's specialities; the mouthwatering garlic prawns; Louise gets to grips with padel

section (individual paella one day and flambéed garlic prawns or saganaki mussels the next). With an expansive salad bar, vegetarian sections, a meat counter and fish always an option, I really am spoilt for choice.

It's just as well there are so many calorie-burning activity options to counteract the gluttony!

In fact, most days I feel like a kid in a sweet shop struggling to choose between a wildlife biking trip (the resort boasts 50 new bikes), a try-out at windsurfing, circuit training or sunset stretching by the pool, tipsy tennis (at which drinking is actively encouraged), or taking the short stroll either along the very quiet beach or through country lanes to the nearby village of Skala Eresou to browse the jewellery shops, or try the homemade fig marmalade topping on the Mr-Whippy-style sheep's milk ice cream.

My book remains unread because every day is packed. Things might kick off with an early morning rowing session on mill-pond waters



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(proper Olympic skulling boats, not the sort of up-turned bucket you'd find in a boating pond), a jog over to the padel court for some coaching, which inevitably extends into a sneaky bit of foursome matchplay. Then, after lunch, I might sign up for a guided group bike ride and nip back in time for another hour of padel, followed by an early-evening sea kayaking on a mission to try to spot the elusive local dolphin pod.

IT'S NOT ALL SPORT

I sleep like a baby in my bright and airy double room with a balcony overlooking the well-tended gardens, the pool and the sea beyond, but there are interconnecting rooms, too, if you do decide to bring the children (the kids' clubs here cater for 2-17-year-olds, and they're so good you might barely see your offspring), and a cluster of villas clinging to the hillside, which offer flexible accommodation for families, extended families or groups of friends.

Of course, there's no obligation to do anything more energetic than lie by the virtually deserted pool or to pick a spot under an umbrella on the soft sandy beach - but it would be a shame not to make the most of all the sporting facilities available. It strikes me that this holiday could be a great way to fast-track myself from 'pretty dismal' into 'not at all bad' padel status to impress my friends with when I get back. And I'm having a lot of fun trying! ■

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARK WARNER/LIME PHOTOGRAPHY, GETTY IMAGES

THE DETAILS

A seven-night stay at the Aeolian Village Beach Resort outside of the school holidays costs around £899 per person (based on two people sharing a twin/double room). This price includes direct flights from London Gatwick, half-board accommodation, transfers to and from the resort and access to a variety of land and watersports, including tennis, padel and cycling, as well as fitness classes. For more information and to book, visit markwarner.co.uk or call 0845 322 5037.

3 BEST BITES

1 Strolling along the sandy beach to the lovely little village of Skala Eresou for lunch in one of the seafront restaurants perched on stilts over the water. Here, fresh octopus is pinned out to dry in the sun and served in a rich wine sauce, fried in an airy batter, or gently grilled - so deliciously tender you can pull it apart with a fork - for just €14.

2 The chubbiest, juiciest smoked mackerel, caught and prepared by Theo who owns the Aigaio restaurant in the village, and who begs me to try the dish because 'we've been waiting years for the mackerel to be like this, and this summer it is perfect!'

3 The Aeolian Village dessert buffet - namely an iced homemade take on a Bounty bar, with booze-soused tender fresh coconut covered in tempered dark chocolate.

