

BY MARY CONROY

INGERLY edge my way into the water, dipping a toe into the ripples of Sweet Water Bay. 'It's lovely!' somebody shouts up. 'Come on – you'll love it... Hold on – what's her name again? Mary? Come on, Mary – you'll love it!' I take a deep breath, fold my legs and plunge down into the the Libyan Sea. It's cold – refreshingly cold, rather than the numbingly freezing cold of the waters off Salthill – and it's just the tonic on a day like today.

We've been hiking for a few kilometres now, along this southern Crete stretch of the E4 (a cross-European walking trail) and as one of the younger walkers, I've been thoroughly shamed by my new companions. One man in his 80s led an advance party on this sheltered corner of the Chania region.

Me? The loose rocks and shale on the cliff path induced a fit of the knock-kneed Bambis, while the occasional knee-high boulder had to be negotiated like a large-scale project as I sized up the topography before broaching the obstacle as if it were Croagh Patrick on a rainy Reek Sunday.

I'll be honest: if it weren't for the company, I probably would have given up long ago. Everybody is so encouraging that any qualms I have melt away. There's Vicky from the north of England who strode up to me in the breakfast room that morning and said, 'Hello – what's your name?' as she flashed me a wide smile. Vicky took me under her wing, showing me the meeting point and sitting beside me on the hotel's mini-bus to the start point. But there's also Harry, Jan, Kim, Linda, Jo, Geri, Shaunagh, Claire, Roger and John – he's the ultimate 'sprightly pensioner' whose limber form belies his eightysomething years.

They've been drawn from every background to this corner of the Mediterranean to soak up the sun and take part in Walking Week.

LEADING the way are Vassilis and Panos. They both grew up around here and know this area like the back of their hand, which is why they've chosen this secluded beach with just a few facilities (my post-dip 'shower' comes via a bucket that's been lowered into a well – the source of that 'sweet water') as a stopping off point on the way to our destination.

Before long, we're on our way again, travelling single file along the coastal path that hugs the southern Chania coast, with the turquoise waters of the Libyan Sea glistening below us, and the occasional vivid pink oleander tree clinging to the cliff face.

Surrounded by such beauty and stimulus, and with the first ocean swim of 2018 under my belt, I soon hit my stride.

We're on our way to a particularly interesting village. Loutro is a tiny town where you'll find no cars or buses: the only way to access it is via ferry... or on foot. As the coast weaves in and out, we catch regular glimpses of the settlement only for it to disappear again for 100m or so, the goats that graze the hills around here no

Crete walks of our time



Walking Week in this charming Greek island is ideal for a solo traveller to meet new friends

TRAVELFACTS

THE PACKAGE

Seven nights accommodation, including 7 breakfasts and 6 four-course dinners with wine and coffee, at the Mistral Hotel, Maleme, Chania, Greece, from €854. €232 supplement for Walking Week (October 2-9, 2018 – includes four guided walks with lunch). No single supplement. See [singlesincrete.com](mailto:info@singlesincrete.com), email info@singlesincrete.com or tel: 0030 28210 62062. Ryanair flies direct between Dublin and Chania. See ryanair.com



doubt looking on in amusement. Just as I start to believe that Loutro and its pretty low-rise buildings set into the hillside are a mirage, we encounter a gate.

'We must close this gate after us,' Vassilis warns us. 'Or else the goats will end up in the village – and on the spit!'

Vassilis leads us over the terraces and steps that serve as streets here to Pavlo's, a waterfront restaurant. Pavlo himself is no longer hands-on in the business but his nephew has learned his trade well, and in typical Cretan fashion, the dishes arrive at pace. There's beautiful vegetable stew briam (a little like ratatouille, but including potatoes), typical Cretan dish 'gossip' (another one-pot wonder, traditionally made by

thrifty Cretan housewives from whatever ingredients were to hand), a huge bowl of Greek salad, deliciously roasted pieces of pork and, of course, lamb ('there's more sheep on the island than humans', as Vassilis points out).

As everywhere on Crete, everything emerges from the kitchen in large dishes that you help yourself to. If something doesn't appeal, or you are simply not hungry, expect to be peppered with questions about what you would really like.

One woman in our group, back at the hotel, declared herself defeated by the time of the desert course. Our waiter was stricken: would she like something else instead? No, not at all – she was simply full and couldn't fit another morsel in. The waiter

didn't bat an eyelid. Was she sure? Would she like some fruit? Some chocolate? A sandwich???

The story becomes part of the folklore of the group.

Not only are we walking together, but every night – after relaxing by the pool, say, or taking the bus to Chania's historic Venetian port – we gather to break bread at a communal table where all 18 of us sit down for dinner at 8pm to feast on dishes such as soutsoukakia (meatballs in a light tomato sauce), moussaka, mushroom crepes, chickpeas in a creamy lemon sauce, and bourekia (a potato and courgette gratin dish) – all washed down with wine.

As we pass along the serving plates piled high with salad or platters of pork in lemon sauce with grilled vegetables, we swap stories from over the day, and incidents such as Jan's exchange with the waiter or, say, the day this writer took the bus to bustling Chania but ended up in the sleepy village of Platanias because she got off at the wrong stop ('you mean to say,' muses Roger in kindly bafflement, 'you're a travel journalist...and you got lost?') become the stuff of good-natured ribbing and running jokes.

This nightly experience of sharing a meal is something I start to look forward to – and is a particular feature of the Mistral Hotel, which Vassilis Gialamarakis runs with his brother Adonis. Charging

no single supplement, the Mistral Hotel welcomes single and solo travellers, and offers what Vassilis calls 'unstructured holidays'.

'It's unstructured in that there's an extensive list of trips to go on, and – from cocktail making to cookery lessons – there's constantly something going on here at the hotel. But there's no pressure to join in,' says Vassilis.

For the solo traveller, it can be daunting to enter a social situation where it appears that firm cliques are established, particularly as I am arriving 24 hours after almost everybody else. But either I was blessed or Vassilis's concept of 'no-pressure unstructured holidays' actually works.

It's a theory that Vassilis has honed over the years. He was a teenager when his father, Manolis, built 'with his bare hands' the first incarnation of the Mistral Hotel over four years in the late 1980s here in Maleme, a village about 25 minutes' drive from Chania.

Manolis and his wife Katerina spoke no English, and so let Vassilis and Adonis run the business. Vassilis attended university in Glasgow, and his rich Greek-accented English, which is flawless, betrays a Celtic influence as he recalls how the first hotel had just '15 wee rooms' and 'a wee bar'. In the years since, the hotel has grown, gaining another storey in the core hotel building, a modest-sized wing to the rear, and two