

# Dipping & diving

*An art retreat is a safe space to reflect on more than your creations, discovers Olivia Watkins >*





Photography: Artful Retreats

There is no judgement on the quality of your artwork here. Instead, retreat-goers look inwards as they create.

*“As I take in my surroundings, I realise the rest of the world feels miles away”*

the gates to my home for the next few days, I am met with a wave of calm. All is still here. No longer are my senses overwhelmed with the sights and sounds of the nearby city, Chania. Instead, they are gently greeted by the scent of wild herbs growing on the estate – I detect lavender, rosemary and mint with each cooling breeze – and the light tinkle of bells from the goats who roam nearby.

I find myself in Villa Levanda for the duration of my stay, a bright and tranquil space decorated with artwork by local painters and potters. Stepping out onto one of the many verandas, I am faced with the sight of the White Mountains, so named because of their perpetually white peaks, bleached either from the snowfall that covers them in winter, or the reflection of the sun on their limestone summits in the warmer months.

As I take in my surroundings, I realise the rest of the world feels miles away. This secluded spot, reserved solely for us retreat-goers, already seems like a safe space in which to share, even for this emotional recluse. It's here where each day we rise early for yoga on the terrace overlooking the olive grove; feast on traditional Greek food, such as dolmades (stuffed vine leaves), yemista (stuffed bell peppers) and galaktoboureko (a moreish custard tart) by the pool; and, most importantly, create art with the help of our guides Penelope Orfanoudaki and Romny Vandoros.

A series of exercises fill our days, each beginning with a prompt. Creative cues range from the simple 'draw an animal', to the slightly more daunting 'trace the outline of your body and fill it however you see' ➤



Photography: Bleverde Estate

art therapy

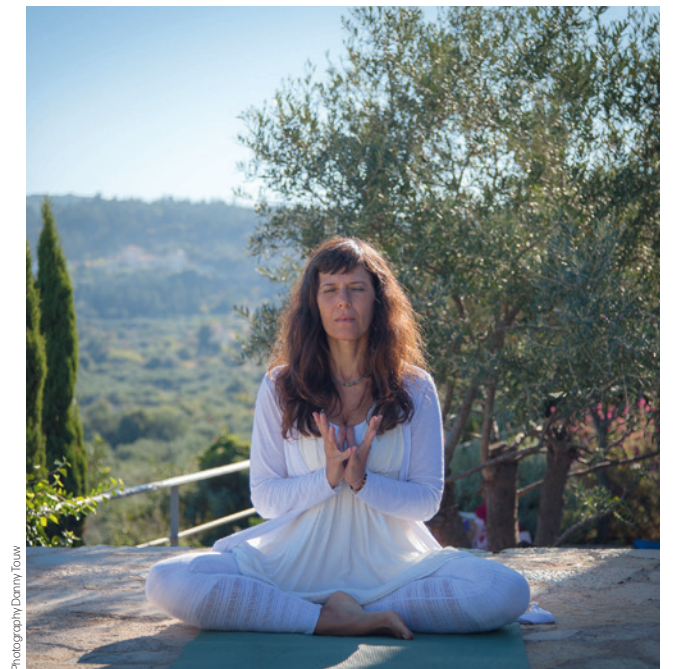
When it comes to swimming, I'm not a run, jump and dive kind of girl. I'm a tentative toe-dipper and, at the first sign of trouble, I run for the refuge of my towel until I deem it safe to venture forth. This approach to swimming also happens to be my approach to dealing with those pesky little things called emotions.

I like to hang out at the shallow end of life: I don't do deep and meaningful (keeping a stiff upper lip is my favourite pastime) and humour is my first line of defence when approaching such enemy territory. So, when faced with the prospect of four days exploring art as a form of therapy, learning how to process potentially difficult thoughts and emotions (in the company of strangers, no less), I was left with a sudden desire to reach for the safety of 'the towel'. But I needn't have worried...

My creative journey with Artful Retreats ([artfulretreats.com](http://artfulretreats.com)) begins on the island of Crete, at the beautiful Bleverde Estate ([bleverde.com](http://bleverde.com)). Situated in the traditional and picturesque village of Gavalochori, the estate provides two luxurious sanctuaries, Villa Elia and Villa Levanda. As I enter



Photography: Artful Retreats



Photography: Danny Tovar

Clockwise from top: away from the rush of the city, two villas perched on a lush hillside form the Bleverde Estate; each day begins with yoga guided by teacher Eleni Blazaki; Olivia's favourite spot for finding her creative flow.





Clockwise from left: retreat-goers experiment with different mediums; Penelope and Romny act as guides throughout the experience; the group come together to share and reflect.

This page of photography: Darny, Tovar

fit'. Penelope and Romny then give us the opportunity to find a spot anywhere on the estate (poolside quickly becomes my favourite haunt), with any art materials we desire (queue a spectacular bout of indecisiveness). A few hours later we return to share our creations, and the possible meanings behind them, with the rest of the group (gulp).

Self-conscious mumblings and apologies for not being the next Picasso ensue, but, with some gentle encouragement from our guides and reassurance that there is no judgement on the quality of the work, we tentatively begin to talk through our art.

Insightful questions from Penelope and Romny allow us to reflect on what we have created and the emotions involved in the process. It is surprising how a simple, subconscious choice – the colours we have selected, the way we have drawn a line – can say so much about who we are. And although the thought of inviting comments from the rest of the group seems mildly terrifying, doing so helps us to see our work, and therefore ourselves, in a way we may not have considered before.

Between the exercises, cups of tea (and a steady supply of honey and almond biscuits) refuel us and give the group time to get to know each others' lives outside of the retreat. Quickly this band of strangers,

ranging in age from twenties to seventies, form an unlikely bond, and a shared sense of humour provides welcome light relief.

All too soon we find ourselves preparing to re-enter the real world, but before we say our goodbyes, Penelope and Romny set us one last task: to make the transformation from artists to gallerists. We share the journey we have been on and how each piece of art has led us to where we are. It seems amazing how the act of putting paint to paper can give us a better understanding of ourselves.

As I stand before my makeshift gallery discussing (albeit rather awkwardly) my creative journey, I realise I am capable of sharing much more than I had given myself credit for. It seems that after a slow start where I felt I was treading water, I didn't so much as dip my toe into the pool as dive in head-first. Thankfully, in Penelope and Romny I found two lifeguards on hand to help me stay afloat. 🌊

### **Getting there**

*Return flights to Crete from London start from £180.*

*Artful Retreats Crete runs over four days with prices*

*starting at £900 per person, including full board*

*and accommodation. For dates and further information,*

*visit [artfulretreats.com](http://artfulretreats.com)*