



# WHEN THE BEAUTY OF AN ISLAND STARTS ON THE FERRY

Awareness. Life is often about being aware. Well, I was not conscious of the beauty of Zakynthos, one of the Greek islands in the Ionian Sea. And I only vaguely heard of a new company called Levante Ferries. Until an invitation popped into my mailbox. And off I went, succumbing to the charms of the island, the amazing hospitality of its people and, on top of it all: a splendidly aesthetic ferry.

TEXT AND PHOTOS: MIKE LOUAGIE



My first Zakynthos experience started with a wreck. This might sound a bit strange as a start for an article in a book about passenger ship design.

Let me explain what happened. A new Greek ferry company, Levante Ferries, invited me to take a plane to Zakynthos, or Zante as they say, and to discover their new ferry FIOR DI LEVANTE.

The island is one of the Ionian Islands or Heptanese Islands, which reflects the Greek expression for "the Seven Islands." (heptà in ancient Greek = seven). On the map Zakynthos can be found south of nearby Kefalonia, on the west side of the Peloponnesos.

The island has a rich history, with glorious days during the Venetian period, which lasted for three centuries. Many Venetian citizens were invited to live on the island. It was a period of peace and perfect cohabitation. It allowed the island to flourish from both a cultural and an architectonic point of view up to the extent that Zakynthos deserved the name of Florence of Greece. The Italians also nicknamed the island "Il fiore di Levante" or The Flower of the East.

Much to my surprise I had to wait 24 hours before I could see the ship. Strange, because after all I was there to photograph her and write a nice report. My schedule only allowed me to stay for three days, and in my mind there was no time to lose. However, the owners of Levante Ferries clearly had another plan: first I had to discover the island.

General manager Giannis Pylarinos first drove me to Lagana, a popular tourist destination with beaches and obviously lots of nightlife activities. We walked over the bridge to one of the most famous clubs, on Cameo Island. A glass bottom boat picked us up and as we sailed along Turtle Island the skipper started to search for some swimming species of the loggerhead sea turtle, or Caretta-Caretta. It was a matter of seeing them when they came up to the surface for a deep breath, after a dive which usually takes 20 minutes.

"Why do they want me to see turtles?" was a question that didn't leave my mind.

Around sunset we drove up the hill, overlooking the city and the port of Zakynthos. Plenty of delicious Greek food was served, and we had the visit of a group of three male singers and musicians. They performed some of the old

local songs, called Cantades. Even that was part of a plan.

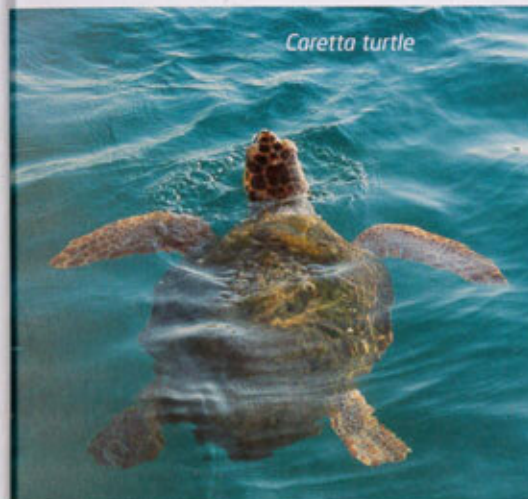
The day after I finally met all protagonists of my story: George Theodosios and Stratis Apergis, the owners of Levante Ferries, and Apostolos Molindris, architect and owner of Molindris + Associates. With George Theodosios at the helm of his yacht, we did a tour around the rocky northern coast, reaching the island's most iconic spot: Navagio Beach. I couldn't believe my eyes when sailing slowly into the cove with its clear blue water and surrounded by sheer limestone cliffs, and a rusted wreck of a cargo ship lying on the beach. The decor was stunning, and I couldn't stop taking pictures... before taking a dive into the delicious water.

The Greek hospitality reached an all time high during a sumptuous Greek lunch in the shadow of a tree, overlooking the sea. The masterpiece was a grilled 5kg grouper.

And then, only then, we headed in the direction of the ship. During my first 24 hours I had been Zakynthosised, and with my head full of positive impressions I was ready to discover the ferry.

Please follow me in my discovery.

George Theodosios (left) and Stratis Apergis (right).



Cameo Island



Navagio or Shipwreck Beach.





The FIOR DI LEVANTE has a very Mediterranean way of accessing the ship, via the stern.



The main garage on Deck 3.



Upper car deck.







Seagulls, flying below a vividly painted blue-sky ceiling welcome the embarking passengers.



As usual in Greece foot passengers have their own embarkation ramp. Once the tickets are controlled an escalator invites them to go to the main public deck, which is Deck 6. During the ascension we were being welcomed by three-dimensional seagulls, flying below a vividly painted blue-sky ceiling.

Once up on Deck 6 I immediately felt some kind of natural direction in which to go, as if a magnet was attracting me. Was it because of the huge side profile of the ferry on the glass wall, with a forward facing bow acting as an arrow? Well, I did not have the intention to step to the aft of the ship. First I needed to see what was forward.

Just a few steps away from the elevator I stood in what I felt was a lobby. In-lay floor tiles depict the sun in a compass rose, whilst the ceiling just above is ornamented with over-sized metallic pebbles. They do of course refer to the beaches of the Ionian Islands.

The reception has a conspicuous red and white lighthouse structure. "It is a tribute to Mr Theodosios' father who was a lighthouse keeper on the island," said the architect Mr Molindris.



The reception area.







Just beyond the reception and a small shop I discovered the visual centre of the ship: a real vintage VW camper van, perfectly restored and painted in the company's yellow color, RAL 1023. This "heart" of the ship is the information center of 11880 and vrisko.gr which are sister companies.

"Sending this car to the Chinese yard and having it on board was quite a challenge," said Molindris. "The big question was how to import and declare it. If we said it was a car then there were big issues with certificates etc." Mr Apergis added that they had to convince the authorities that it was intended for

decorational use, not a car. "The only solution was to ship the car and the engine in two different packages. We had to remove the engine and demonstrate that the car could no longer be driven."

The amazing thing is that due to delays in shipping the Volkswagen arrived when the ship was closed again. It meant that torches had to be used to make an opening in the new hull to get the camper in.

Next problem was how to fix the car on the deck. "Our naval architect was afraid that we would have troubles in bad weather. If it was not well fixed it could start to move. So we secured

it underneath. Then our naval architect asked us to install a sprinkler and a smoke detector inside the camper, because it is a closed space," said Stratis Apergis. "When you start to do something you are confronted with these regulatory issues." With a smile he added that the naval architect was joking when asking why we were going the extra mile for the VW van, arguing that it was not going to bring us extra revenue. "For us it was important, bringing our interior design to another, lasting level."

During my several crossings I could only see how popular the VW was. Most people got a smile on their face and

wanted to take family pictures in front of it. The camper van is not just a piece of decor; I saw how it genuinely brought happiness.





When walking even more forward I was surprised by the clear view throughout the longitudinal direction of the ship. Somewhere at a point next to the central staircase (more about this on page 26) I could see light coming from both forward and aft windows of the ship, something I saw for the first time on Brittany Ferries' ARMORIQUE.

Just beyond the aforementioned staircase we entered the ship's main lounge and bar. The illuminated ceiling of the area facing the bar is decorated with a large black and white aerial photograph, showing the port of Zakynthos and the FIOR DI LEVANTE entering it.

Tiny lights are placed strategically on this photograph to resemble the lighting poles of the main streets of the city, and they are illuminated by optical fibers, in order to make the ceiling more dramatic and animated after dark.



The background of the bar's bottle display is a representation of the city as viewed from the sea, formed by miniscule 10 x 10 mm mosaic tiles. The tiles wrap around the corner of the bar's wall to complete the view of the seaside city.

Main lounge and bar.







The ceiling is decorated with the lyrics of local "cantades".

Moving forward we arrived in a nice serene lounge with a panoramic view over the bow. I immediately noticed the carpet with a music instruments theme. What I hadn't seen was the ceiling, and Mr Molindris had to point it out to me. Indeed the ceiling was decorated with the words of the traditional Zakynthos serenades, the *cantades*. I remembered my first evening in the nice restaurant, and slowly it became clear why I first had to have a quick immersion in the island's culture, nature and traditions.

Children have their own little domain in a glass room centrally positioned as a half circle in the forward lounge. There is the possibility to play on the oversized tic-tac-toe or to play



on the interactive quiz game, which is about the island's main sights.

During our promenade I also had a peek into the different toilets, which were spotless. I liked the door walls which were laminated with a big funny photo depicting for example a detail of football players in the boy's room, or females with photo cameras in the ladies' room.

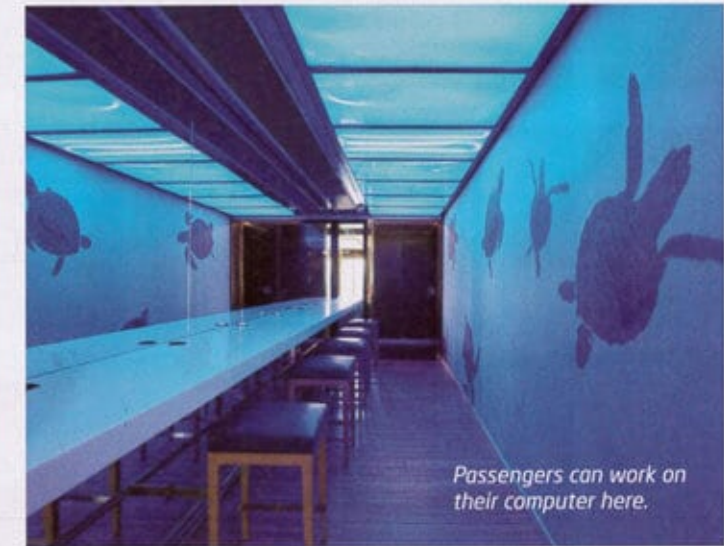
I also liked the wall somewhere on port side, with a group of paparazzi taking pictures as if I was the star walking on the red carpet.



This photo wall makes the guests feel like movie stars.



Reclining aircraft-style seats.



Passengers can work on their computer here.

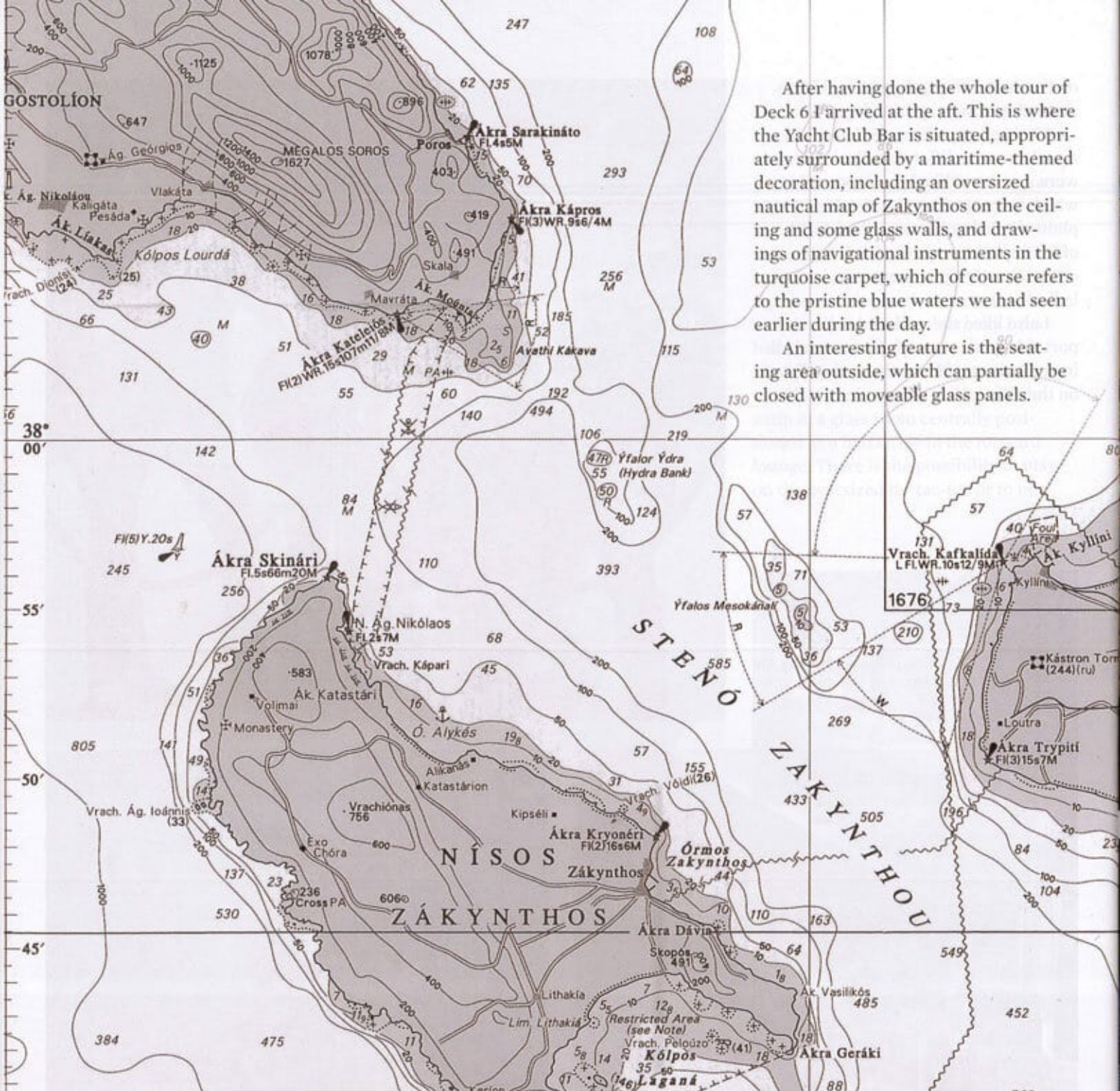


Ladies' toilets.



Men's toilets.





After having done the whole tour of Deck 6 I arrived at the aft. This is where the Yacht Club Bar is situated, appropriately surrounded by a maritime-themed decoration, including an oversized nautical map of Zakynthos on the ceiling and some glass walls, and drawings of navigational instruments in the turquoise carpet, which of course refers to the pristine blue waters we had seen earlier during the day.

An interesting feature is the seating area outside, which can partially be closed with moveable glass panels.



Yacht Club Bar







Caretta-Caretta turtles.



Large detail picture of a lighthouse.

Then it was about time to discover the upper deck, Deck 7, which could be reached from the open deck astern of Deck 6. Mr Molindris wanted me to discover the central double staircase instead.

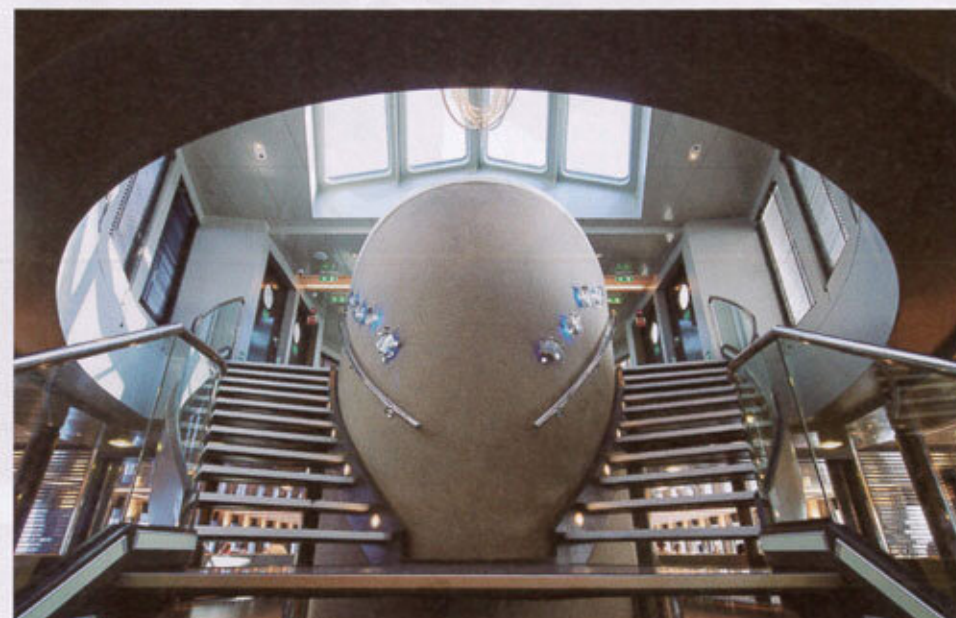
The circular staircase wraps around an elliptical volume, covered by the sand of Kalamaki beach, where the newborn caretta-caretta turtles take their first steps.

The sculptor Aphrodite Liti created glossy metal sculptures of them, and as we watched them on the sand of the elliptical volume where they were placed, I could imagine them approaching the sea.

Once I reached the upper deck I saw a huge photo showing the interior of a lighthouse reflector. Again a subtle wink.

The sundeck gave me a very refined impression. It was spotlessly clean, and I liked the two-shades-of-grey wave pattern on the floor on both sides.

The dark blue funnel with the yellow logo, the red fire hydrants, the grey flooring and the yellow "H" helicopter landing pad form a modern combination. Adding the blue sky makes it perfect.



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*Outdoor bar and grill area.*

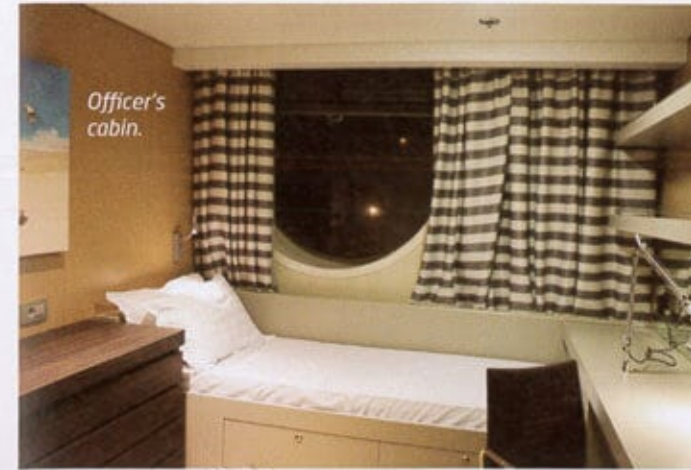




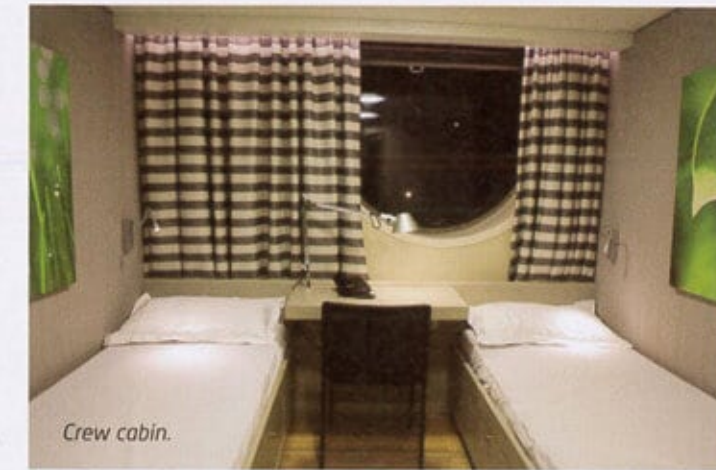
Walking through the corridors on our way to the navigation bridge we could have a glimpse of the officers' cabins. There are no passenger cabins, because the crossing only takes an hour. ■

Architectural design: Apostolos Molindris & Associates  
 Naval architectural design: Athanasios Kopoukis  
 Lighting design: Apostolos Molindris & Associates, Artemide Hellas S.A  
 Main contractor of the interior: Decon S.A  
 Electromechanical design: Antosi technical Ltd.  
 Shipyard: COSCO Zhoushan

Owner's cabin.



Officer's cabin.



Crew cabin.

