

Brief respite from reality

Kos isn't just a port in the storm for Syrian refugees but an idyllic getaway for a family haunted by MS

WORDS HELEN FOWLER

OUR journey to the island of Kos in Greece has been less fraught than for the many who have arrived here from Syria, travelling via a myriad of illegal routes in the hope of asylum in mainland Europe.

Yet, like the migrants who are risking all to build a new life, my family too is on an escape mission of sorts, although a less obviously perilous one than that of the refugees.

My hope is for my young family to enjoy a "normal" holiday – free from the shadow of my multiple sclerosis, which is enveloping us.

It seems my dream is coming true. Two kids are laughing and giggling by the poolside, faces obscured by baseball caps, the blue Aegean Sea stretching behind them towards Turkey. Cats yawn nearby in the sunshine. There is no sign of the asylum seekers. Truth be told, we would never know of their existence, save for what we later read in the press back home.

Next to the pool are bougainvillea, hibiscus and oleander, plants I've seen previously only in glasshouses in the UK. They thrive in the open here in Greece, rather like us holidaymakers, who have escaped our usual confines as well.

These children seem to be so happy that for a moment I have to stop and look again to check they're really mine. My two girls have acquired a habitual look of boredom, alternating with anxiety. I saw it in their eyes at Heathrow as I was helped into yet another wheelchair.

"It's just my MS," I reassured them that day, while being wheeled through miles of airport walkways. "No need to worry."

They didn't look convinced that all was well. And I couldn't blame them. I wasn't sure myself how I would cope on holiday. Not with my MS coming along too.

Sadly, I'm far from being the only parent with the predicament of caring for young children while battling the

condition. Around ten thousand of us here in Scotland are living with the illness, which at its worst can lead to blindness, paralysis and memory loss.

I'm grateful that I'm not suffering those symptoms at the moment (although I have done in the past), but energy is limited; I can't walk far.

At last, the children at the pool turn round, shading their eyes from the sun; I recognise my two girls under the baseball caps. They shriek again. "Look, Mummy, look! We are jumping in the water."

My heart fills with happiness and pride. As recently as two months ago, the younger needed to hold hands with someone else before venturing into a pool.

Now she wants to celebrate her new-found ability to jump in unaided. We try to slap hands together in jubilation. Mine is so wobbly that I almost miss. "We can do better than that," she yells. "Come on." We repeat the high five, slapping hands together with a resounding smack.

Seeing my children enjoy themselves, I'm aware of how lucky I am, which might sound like a contradiction in



terms when writing about my condition. But for many years women like me were advised against having children. Childless and ill, that was the fate sadly awaiting too many of us. Today the illness is no longer considered the barrier to family life it once was.

But managing to entertain, educate and keep my children safe is a worry

when MS blinds me (occasionally) and flattens me with exhaustion (all the time) – even on the "good" days when I can just about see properly and walk without sticks.

An early clue that this place might offer some kind of respite comes from the name of the airport: Hippocrates. That has to be a good sign, naming



GREAT ESCAPE Clockwise from top: loungers by the beach; children are taught to sail; accommodation at the resort overlooks an enormous swimming pool



the airport after the father of modern medicine.

Our girls are soon happy here, hanging out with other children and learning to sail. The younger becomes engrossed in learning to tie knots. Sitting on the sand under the shade of a finikas tree, she is the picture of rapt concentration as small fingers push rope behind and through a loop.

For the first time in years I get to have breakfast with my husband, just the two of us. We sit outdoors under the shade of an olive tree in the early morning sunshine. MS? That's stayed at home in Scotland as far as I'm concerned.

FACT FILE

- * Mark Warner offers holidays in Lakitira Beach Resort on Kos in Greece starting from £570 per person, half board for seven nights.
- * The price includes flights, accommodation, resort transfers and childcare for children older than two. Flights are available from Glasgow and Heathrow.
- * Visit www.markwarner.co.uk/sun-holidays/greece/Lakitira; www.markwarner.co.uk/family-holidays

Later that day, while our children are learning to tack, steer and navigate in their quest to become infant mariners, my husband and I go swimming together in the sea.

I have to hold my husband's arm to walk across the beach to the sea. He doesn't seem to mind, and, for once, neither do I.

Nobody needs to help me when I'm in the sea, drifting in the ocean to the sound of children's laughter from the resort. Our kids are happy and safe, learning to sea-bob and kayak.

Weightless and peaceful, I really do forget that I even have this stupid illness. And for a time I'm free, unaware of my limitations. I lie back, looking up at the azure sky. Floating. At peace. I have succeeded in escaping my MS, or so it seems.

It's only when I stagger as I haul myself out of the sea, moisture dripping down my nerve-damaged back, that I remember – oh, yes, that'll be the MS at work. But at least now I know, just like the refugees fleeing their own conflicts, that escape from a personal demon is possible here. This is a place where it's OK to forget about illness – for a while. Hippocrates, one senses, would have approved. □

DO NOT DISTURB THE LOCH LOMOND ARMS HOTEL, LUSS, LOCH LOMOND

FEVER you feel the need to reconnect with nature (before sitting down by an open fire with something equally warming to hand), or simply to remind yourself what a truly beautiful country we live in, head to the Loch Lomond Arms Hotel.

Set in the conservation village of Luss (all two streets of it) on the western shore of the loch, it has been welcoming visitors since its 17th century days as a coaching inn.

Having abandoned our two children with their grandparents, my husband and I have left Edinburgh and frantic family life behind for a couple of days. Described online as “a country pub with bedrooms”, this place oozes charm and character. A quick walk to get our bearings and before you can say “Large gin please”, we are settled down against tartan cushions on the sofa by the fire, trying not to cheer out loud.

BUDGET OR BOUTIQUE?

Boutique, boutique, boutique. From the duck-egg blue walls to the flickering fire, stags' heads and tasteful hints of tartan, this is one carefully thought-out interior.

ROOM SERVICE

Bedrooms are named after Scottish clans, and each of the nine rooms are individually styled using plaid blankets and antique furniture. Our spacious Colquhoun room has wingback chairs, super-king bed with canopy drapes plus en-suite with double-ended bath and rainfall shower. And if you peek outside you can enjoy the lovely views across Luss. I madly snap pictures on my phone to show my daughters, quashing a pang of guilt at leaving them behind. Guests can also stay in seven cottages situated a short walk away; most of them have kitchens and some are pet friendly.

WINING AND DINING

The dining room is an extension of the bar area with a partition wall that houses the fire, so you get the effect in both rooms. It's a gorgeous space with deep blue-grey walls, church-style bench seats, vintage prints and an ornate case of stuffed owls, while candles in brass holders add to the warm atmosphere.

Head chef Allan McLaughlin uses fresh local produce in an inventive way (the day we leave, one of his staff is out foraging for mushrooms). The menu changes regularly and we enjoyed wonderful Shetland mussels with homemade bread, roast Ayrshire beetroot salad (a particular high point for my veggie husband, although not quite as high as the hand-crafted ales). The fish and chips (fresh haddock and the most delicious thrice-cooked chips) are excellent, and well priced at £13.50, while the pappardelle with walnut and basil pesto is also a hit. And if you can manage dessert, the crème brûlée is quite special.

At breakfast the next morning,



the sunlight creates a dappled effect across the groaning wooden buffet table in a Downton-esque manner, while the cooked options are very good for both vegetarians and carnivores.

WORTH GETTING OUT OF BED FOR

There is a lovely walk just by the side of the local school which leads you through a field and up the hill. It's not overly arduous, but it will work off that breakfast and you'll be rewarded with stunning views. Just a short stroll away is the Luss General Store (www.lussgeneralstore.com) where you can buy presents for your abandoned children. Weather permitting, you can take a speedboat trip on the loch. Staff are familiar with the local sights and the best places to visit and will happily suggest walking, cycling or driving routes. And after it all, you get to head back to that lovely fireplace in the bar.

LITTLE EXTRAS

Tea and coffee-making facilities; toiletries.

GUESTBOOK COMMENTS

This is quite simply a great place to escape to. The interior is lovely, and there's good food, friendly service and stunning scenery on the doorstep. If you can manage a midweek break, you're more likely to bag that seat by the fireplace. And although the hotel does welcome children, it's rather nice going without them. □

Lynn O'Rourke

Celebrate the festive season with The Black and Bling Christmas Party, 18 December, £38 per person. To stay at the hotel costs from £120 per room, bed & breakfast, based on two people sharing. Visit lochlomondarmshotel.com/christmas-new-year-loch-lomond for Christmas Day and Hogmanay offers. The Loch Lomond Arms Hotel, Main Road, Luss G83 8NY (01436 860 420). For speedboating and other activities on the loch, visit www.lochlomond-scotland.com and www.lovelochlomond.com.