‘We didn’t want to lose our money’: UK tourists in Corfu get on with their holidays despite fires

Holidaymakers said news of the fires was 'terrifying' and they were considering safety precautions above leisure as they made plans



From left, Kitty Broome, Evie Palmer and Gillian Watchorn from London said they didn’t want to cancel their Corfu trip as they thought they would lose their money (Photo: Supplied)

By Katy Dartford

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IN CORFU – British holidaymakers in Corfu say they are “glad they came” to the Greek island despite the wildfires after deciding to go ahead because they feared they would lose their money if they cancelled.

Kitty Broome, Evie Palmer, and Gillian Watchorn, from London, arrived on Monday night and could see the fire from their Airbnb in Corfu Town. But they are pushing forward with their plans to visit the old fortress.

Ms Broome said “we read that the fire was under control and wouldn’t last much longer”.

“We looked at where people were staying and where they were being evacuated and we took a chance,” she told i. “We hoped that EasyJet would cancel if it was really needed and we were worried that if we cancelled, the insurance wouldn’t cover it.”

The wildfire that swept across the mountainside in northeast Corfu, affecting 18 municipalities, was largely under control by Monday as helicopters circled the flames dumping water. Around 2,500 people have been evacuated from the island.

“There’s no need for scaremongering,” added Ms Watchorn. “After what the deputy mayor said – in contrast to some other articles that made me panic – I’m glad we came.”

Corfu’s deputy mayor, Thofanis Skembris, on Monday told BBC Radio 4 that the fires were still burning in three places on the island but were under control and confined to the mountains, adding: “It’s no problem for anyone who likes to come to Corfu.”

Out-of-control blazes on Rhodes have forced the evacuations of about 20,000 people from homes and hotels as houses were destroyed, and the authorities warned of an “extreme fire risk” on the island of Crete.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis on Tuesday warned of difficult days ahead as ministers met to discuss a response to wildfires that have destroyed homes and forced the evacuation of thousands of tourists from Rhodes.

A Rhodes prosecutor has launched an investigation into the causes of the fires and the preparedness and response of authorities with about 10 per cent of the island’s land area burned, state broadcaster ERT said.

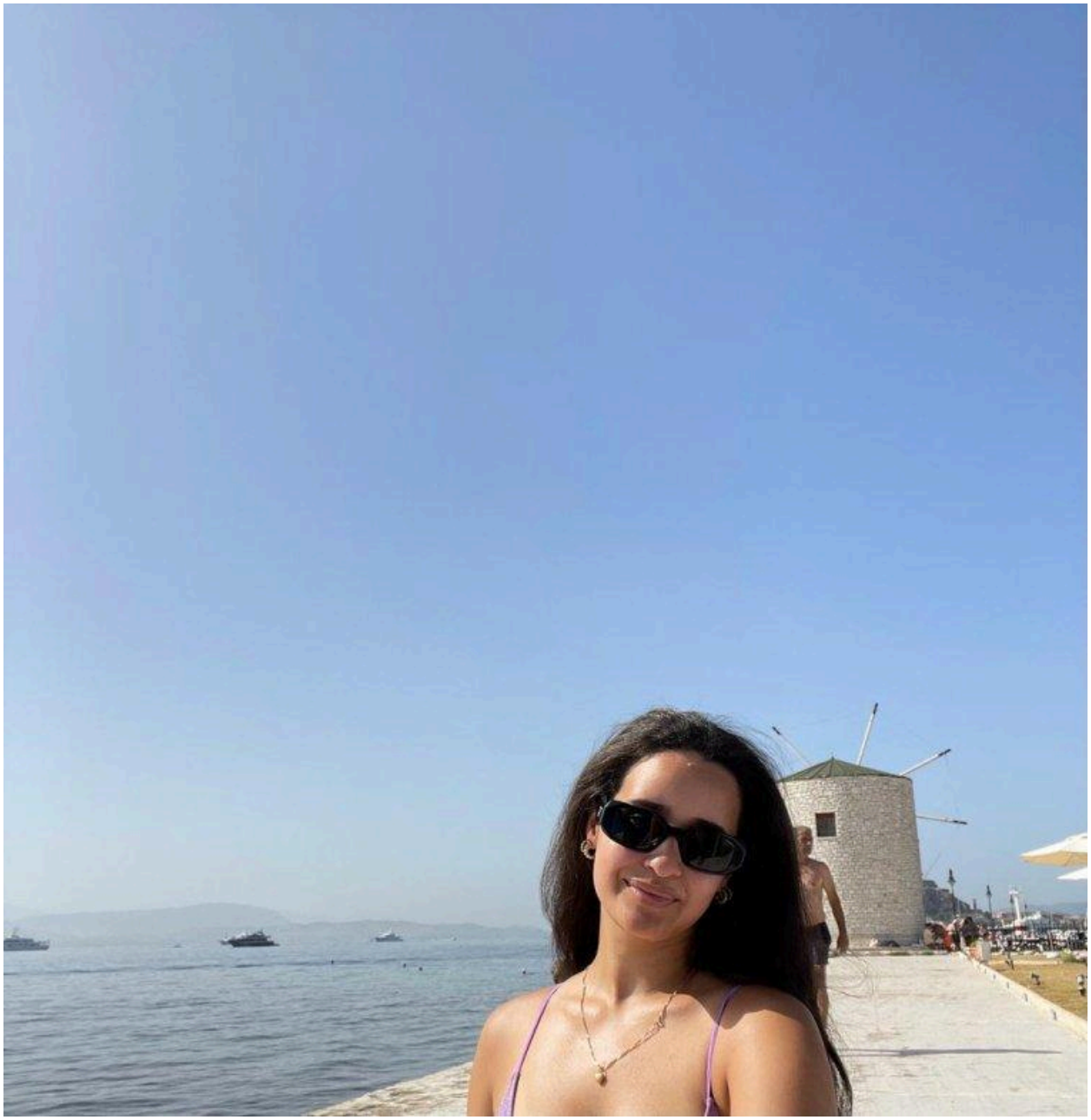
Corfu residents offered help and free accommodation to those evacuated from the largely non-touristic areas, but many families have now returned home. Those in the line of the blaze were taken to Kassiopi, Iposos and Barbati – with some British tourists evacuated before they had time to check into their hotels.

“We were treated very well,” Nick O’Hare, from Liverpool, told local news outlet *Enimerosi*. “They offered us everything we needed. We were not afraid at all. Now we are ready to return to our hotel in Kalami and continue our holiday.”

Lorena Alves de Carvalho from Kildare and Ciara Kearney from Dublin had travelled from Vietnam to Ireland, and into Corfu late on Saturday. “It wasn’t until the following morning, on Sunday, that my friend and I woke up to messages from her mum notifying us of the wildfire,” Ms Alves de Carvalho told i. “It was really terrifying and we were trying to map where it was and whether we needed to evacuate. Having just been in a typhoon in Sa Pa, Vietnam, it was unnerving being in another natural disaster.

“Luckily we asked a few locals about the chances of us having to evacuate from the Old Town and we were reassured that the fires were under control. We were still uncertain at this point as to whether we should remain out and not venture too far, given that we were 10 minutes from the airport.

“So it did affect our plans to visit other parts of the island and definitely influenced our decision to consider safety precautions above leisure.



Lorena Alves de Carvalho, from Kildare, said hearing of the fires was ‘really terrifying’ and has made her rethink her holiday plans (Photo: Supplied)

“Even today, two days later, we’re still choosing to stay nearby and hopefully venture further north tomorrow onwards.”

Many tourists have been forced to change their plans since the heatwave began, with museums and other sites shutting during the afternoon since last week. The Archeological Museum shut its top floor, home to its famous Gorgon Pediment from the temple of Artemis, because it has no air conditioning.

“I heard about the fire this morning and we changed our plan to travel to Ipsos for the day,” Alicia, a tourist from Ireland holidaying in Corfu Town, told i. “It’s just scary to see how close the fire was last night.”

For some, this kind of wildfire is nothing unusual. Paul McGovern, from Gravesend in Kent, has lived in Agios Ioannis for more than 20 years and said they occurred frequently even back when he arrived. “We had one coming towards our house and I hadn’t insured the property. I was rushing to get the hosepipes ready and friends in the village thought I was crazy as they said a hosepipe wasn’t going to stop the fire. Fortunately the wind changed direction and blew the fire away from us.”

Mr McGovern said that while Corfu is experiencing a heatwave, temperatures aren’t unusually hot for this time of year. But he warned that it’s wildfire season and there are some who want to set fire to forestry land because they are not allowed to build on it. “So they start these fires to clear the land.”

The suspicion is not unfounded. The mayor of the north of the island confirmed that he suspects arson.

“Locals believe the fires were intentional arson, because they appeared simultaneously at multiple locations,” Lia Manesi, who owns apartments in Kassiopi, told i.

Ms Manesi congratulated the hard work of the emergency services and locals who helped get the fires under control.

“Fires were pretty close to Kassiopi village… up in the mountains. A number of local volunteers were helping the fire brigade, and firefighting reinforcements were sent from the mainland.

“People were evacuated from homes and holiday homes for precaution. I congratulate the initiative of Kassiopi people who were awake all night helping to house these evacuees. I believe others were evacuated towards Agios Markos, which is further south.”