

YCC Sailing cruise 2011

Saronic Islands, Greece

3rd September

The first day of our sailing cruise. We spend the morning studying wind reports and charts, and inspecting our boat in Kalamaki harbour, Athens. She is huge and spotless, 46 foot long, and has accommodation for all the crew - Manfred (skipper), Dennis (2nd skipper), Paul and Suzanne, Dirk, Duane and myself, the least experienced of the group. While the skippers do the inventory and boat check with the company, the rest of us buy the stores according to the list Dennis has prepared. His list is mostly bottles.

By 4 pm we cast off, and Manfred steers us out of the vast flotilla of moored boats. Outside the harbour we discover that the weather forecasts we studied so carefully are wrong! The wind is not a very light northerly, but a decent easterly. It is a wonderful feeling as we haul and winch to see the sails rise up and fill out. We decide to go as far as we can to the south while the wind is good. We adjust the sheets and Dennis catches his finger in the winch - it is soothed with a can of semi-cold beer.

We sail until almost dark and turn into a small undeveloped cove on the south coast of Aigina, one of the Saronic Islands. We learn how to drop the anchor correctly and the skipper rewards his crew with glasses of anchor-schluk - campari and orange juice, except we have overlooked buying orange juice. "Who read the shopping list I sent in my e-mail?" asks Dennis. Paul and Suzanne produce a magnificent vegetarian korma. Towards midnight we jump in for a swim - the water is warm and sparkles with silvery plankton.



Anchor-schluk on board

4th September

I sleep well to the gentle rocking of the boat. In the morning another swim followed by a leisurely breakfast. We weigh anchor around 10 am and head south. The wind is a brisk north-easterly and the sea is frothing white caps. Dennis takes the helm while Manfred and Dirk plot our course using the GPS system and charts on board. Running with the wind we make good progress and our speed reaches 8 - 9 knots. Dennis invites me to take the helm and coaches me in how to constantly make many small adjustments. I am thrilled, but find it is not nearly as easy as it looks. The wind is quite strong and our boat rolls in the waves and swells. After a while I get the hang of it and Dennis relaxes. There is a discussion on board at what point we should make a jibe in order to head west behind the point towards Hydra (Idra) . I am enjoying myself immensely when suddenly - BANG! "Wrong way!" shouts somebody, but it is too late, we have jibed. I am shaken but Paul coolly takes over the helm. Oh dear, it will take me a long time to live this down. Joy-the-jiber! Skipper Manfred pops up from below to see what on earth is going on. He is charmingly forgiving and reassuring. The good news is that my unplanned jibe has placed us on the perfect course.

We anchor for lunch (transformed korma salad) in a sheltered cove. I am ready for a stiff drink! Dennis inspects the stores and laments our pitiful supply of beer. "Didn't anyone read my e-mail?" he moans again. We try to make contact with Detlef's boat, but no luck.

Late afternoon we put up the genoa and the wind blows us across the channel to the enchanting port of Idra. The setting sun lights up the warm colours of the old town as we enter the port. The harbour is packed but Dennis manoeuvres us into a double parking spot and we use the dinghy to paddle ashore. A pleasant evening wandering the old town. Supper at a traditional Greek restaurant in the back streets. We sample the local wine and traditional dishes.



Dinghy trip to land, Ydra harbour

5th September

In the dawn light Duane and I take a stroll through the town. It is peaceful as there are no vehicles, but mules are on the move carrying tourists' luggage. Late morning we sail on to Dokos .

At a stopover in a small cove Duane manages to drop his prescription sunglasses (who forgot the strap?) into the deep turquoise waters. He plunges in to try to grab them before they descend to the bottom, but cannot see! After an intensive search with snorkling gear, Suzanne's sharp eyes spot them and Paul makes a breathless dive to retrieve them.

We finally make contact with Detlef's boat. They have had a leaking diesel problem but it is fixed. We agree to meet this evening in Dokos around 7.30. We spend the rest of the day being very lazy. I do some snorkling - the water is very clear and there are many small fish. On the dot of 7.30 Detlef's boat motors into the bay and his crew join us for anchor-schluk .



Dirk's dance:

Step One



Step Two

6th September

Another peaceful walk in the early morning. The island is deserted except for a small white-washed chapel on the beach and a ramshackle shepherd's homestead. Guinea fowl announce our arrival and wake up the sleeping sheepdogs. Fortunately they are friendly. Back at our boat the waters are swirling with fish as Manfred tosses breakfast breadcrumbs into the water.



There is almost no wind and we have to motor most of the day. Dennis is not happy about this. Throughout the day he calls for the raising or lowering of the sails as a gust of wind appears or disappears, disturbing my relaxation on the rubber dinghy beneath the genoa. With Suzanne at the helm we sample several rocky coves before we find one suitable to anchor in for lunch. Today is her birthday. The sea is glassy and merges into the hazy land and sky.

By evening we arrive at Poros harbour. We plan to moor in the marina, but a friendly Greek on the quayside of the town beckons us into a berthing spot alongside another large yacht. We assume he is the harbour authority but no! - he turns out to be the local restaurant owner. There is no avoiding eating at his restaurant *Duane helping to raise the mainsail* after he has been so helpful to us! After the meal we celebrate Suzanne's birthday with more drinks and a dessert we concoct on board. The night is hot and I sleep on deck, quite comfortable until a group of drunks (from Switzerland as it turns out) on the neighbouring boat begin singing in the early hours.

7th September

There is good wind this morning, yet the sails will not behave. We struggle to reef the sail in a narrow strait beyond Poros. The problem turns out to be a series of security ropes and knots that Dennis had put in place for the night and forgotten about. We undo them all, and finally the sails behave as they should and the rocks which had been getting closer begin to recede.

We sail northwards along the coast of stark bare rocks, white surf, and mountains faint with heat-haze. Suddenly Paul calls out "dolphins!". Manfred tells us they will come if we tap on the boat. We do so and soon a pod of them is cavorting around our bows and stern.



Rounding a point we spot a small fisherman's chapel perched on rocks, accessible only by boat. Towards sunset, we turn into the small Vathi harbour. To our dismay it is packed with a flotilla of boats from www.sailingholiday.com - and there is barely room to turn to berth. It is a test of the crew's skill with anchors and helm but soon we are securely moored alongside our neighbours (all from the Midlands, U.K. - they missed the dolphins, ha, ha!) Escaping the crowds we go for a swim beyond the small village and take a pleasant stroll along an almost deserted road lapped by the sea. We enjoy a couple of canteens of retsina at a small tavern on the shores looking out onto the tranquil blue waters (this is the life!) and return to the port to eat Greek food at a tavern that Dennis remembers.



Beating towards Epidavros (L2R: Suzanne, Paul, Dennis, Manfred)

8th September

Our anchor chains are crisscrossed so we allow the flotilla to depart first and then set sail for Epidavros to view its ancient amphitheatre. I am now familiar with all the various ropes and nautical terms, although still prone to error in my hurry to execute orders!

The wind is perfect and we take turns at the helm, but after a couple of hours the wind disappears to barely a breath, and we discover we have a problem with the battery for the yacht's motor. It is dead, but with 3 CERN engineers and Duane on board, we trust that they will solve the problem before we drift onto the rocks. Their solution is to tap into one of the auxillary batteries. We motor on to Epidavros harbour where we visit the Amphitheatre before sailing onwards to a quiet bay on Angistri island, with verdant pines looking out onto a small rocky island. The bay is deep and we pay out all the anchor line. Manfred swims ashore to attach another rope to the rocks to stabilize us. Our last night. We drink up all the remaining bottles and eat the avocados which we bought on the second day and which have finally ripened. "Should have bought more alcohol, but nobody read my e-mail," Dennis mutters into the night air.

9th September

Our final sail of the trip. We say goodbye to the misty turquoise mountains of Peloponnisos and its scattered islands and head back along the southern coast of Aigina, moor in a cove on its east coast, take a final swim, and then set sail for Athens, dodging the speed boats and container ships. The wind is steady and we reach Alimos Harbour honourably under sail, and on time. Paul and Suzanne, wisely as it turned out, went off to their hotel. The rest of us endured the throbbing beat of a marina-side Greek disco that finished just short of our early morning taxi ride to the airport.

We may have finished tired and sleepy, but our memories are of beautiful days in a beautiful place. The trip met all my expectations and more and I would love to do it again.

Joy Stephens

