



BAVARIA 46

This comfortable new 46ft Bavaria monohull has an impressive sailing ability and spacious living accommodation that makes her just right for a luxurious family cruising holiday.



First watch of the night, there's something out there.



The boat and operator

We chartered a brand new *Bavaria 46* from Greek charter operator Kiriacoulis for one week in late June, costing £2,482 per boat/per week. The base was in the busy Grand Harbour of Valletta, a 30-minute taxi ride from the island's international airport. Kiriacoulis is one of the largest operators in the eastern Med and has a huge fleet of modern yachts, mainly Bavarias. Malta is one of its new bases, which was opened up for the 2007 season and should prove highly popular with British yachting families as English is widely spoken. The sailing itself can be quite adventurous and challenging in the spring and autumn – when the winds are stronger and gust around the headlands – but in the high season you mainly have to rely on the early afternoon sea breezes for sailing.

Meltdown in Malta

Ross Farncombe charts out of the new Kiriacoulis base on this beautiful Mediterranean island and makes a night passage to Sicily – just to escape from the heat.

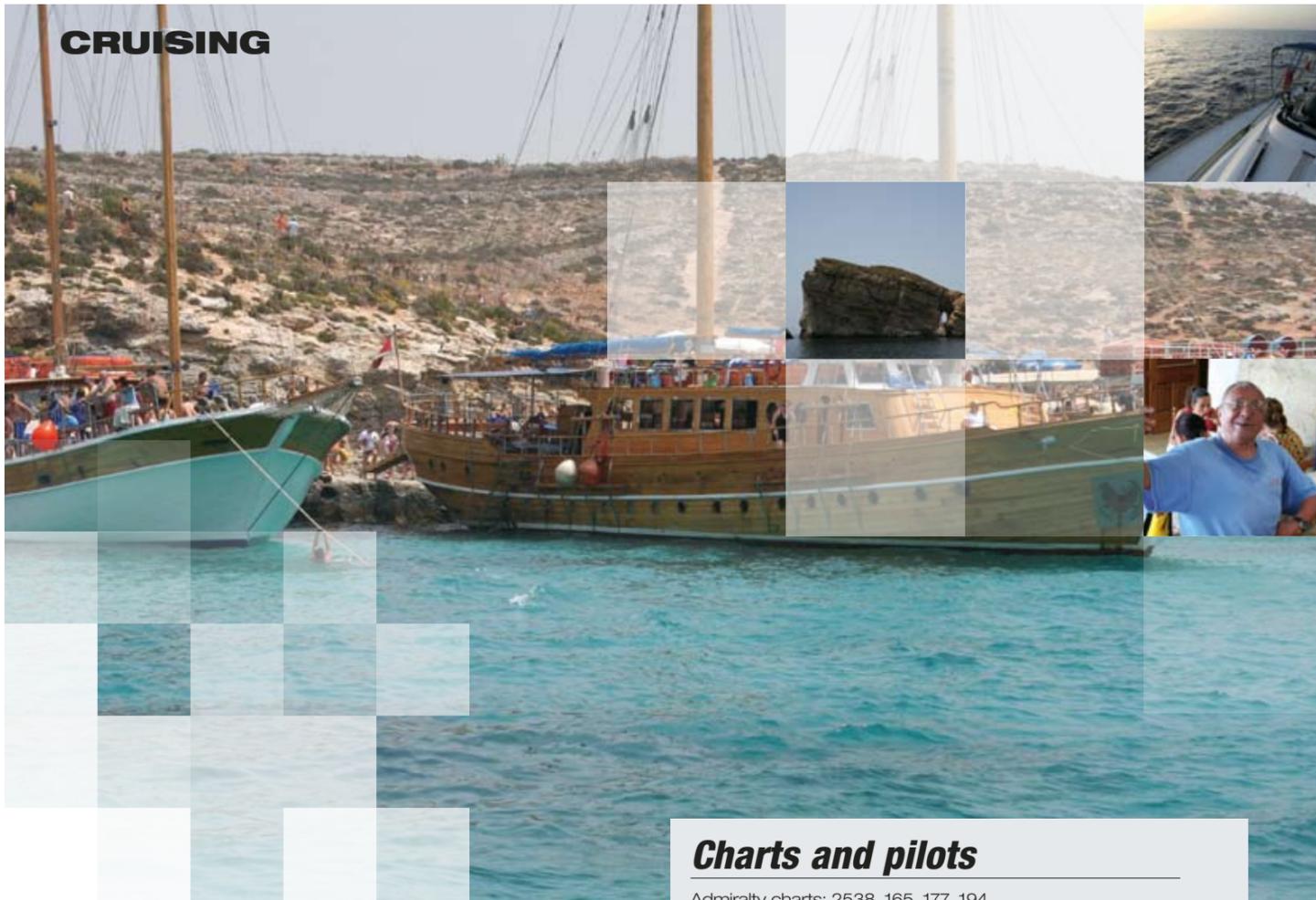
There have been a few occasions in my life when I've had cause to rue my failure of 'O' Level Geography and this was one of them. I'd completely forgotten – or maybe just never realised – how far south Malta is from the UK. It lies south of the northern tip of Tunisia, not too far from the Libyan coast, and is consequently hot – damned hot! Three and a half hours takes you a long way from Heathrow and a very pleasant flight with Air Malta, despite a very odd chicken something with rice, soon had me and my three crew – Dick, Kevin and Ian – gasping in the hot air in a refreshing 38°C. It was, after all, the last week of June – and Valetta was just starting to warm up. You can buy a voucher from the taxi office at the airport exit for a cab to the marina. There are also plenty of ATMs on the walk from

the plane, so getting some local Maltese Lira is no problem and a taxi fare of around 8.5 Maltese Lira (Lm) is reasonably good value for a 30-minute ride to the other side of this historic city. Vittoriosa Marina is situated in the Grand Harbour with conventional pontoon moorings. It's an exquisite setting, though somehow strange due to its inland city canal feel. The buildings are simply stunning, some having helped protect this tiny island for over a thousand years. The ever-present fortifications are just incredible in size and stature, reinforcing (no pun intended) this island's importance as a naval stronghold over previous centuries. After a short phone call, Kenneth the Kiriacoulis rep joined me on the boat while the others set off in search of supplies. Particular, is the word that springs to mind

with regard to Kenneth's handover, though he was letting me take out one of their virtually brand new Bavaria 46s. He was, however, extremely helpful and informed when it came to discussing how we might best spend our week. Having got every hatch on the boat open to try and encourage some airflow, the crew stowed our victuals and after a couple of leisurely sundowners we ventured ashore to try one of the many restaurants at the top of the pontoon. Restaurant ordering couldn't be much easier as most Maltese speak perfect English. The next day had us eager to set off, if only to get some breeze through the boat. 'Grand' is certainly not overstating this

fabulous harbour. Cruise liners seemed unimpressive against the massive stone backdrops and the increasing size and strength of the fortifications became more obvious as we neared the gap in the harbour wall. It's here that in days of old they used to stretch chains across the harbour to scythe through enemy ships that tried to invade the island. Valetta was never going to give up without one hell of a fight. Turning to port once clear of the harbour it soon became apparent that there was to be no sailing that day, so we motored up the coast past the increasing number of high-rise developments. The Blue Lagoon seemed like the obvious place to aim for, up on the northern side of Comino, the tiny island »

CRUISING



Charts and pilots

Admiralty charts: 2538, 165, 177, 194
 Pilot book: Italian Waters Pilot (by Rod Heikell, £37.50, Imray, ISBN 9780852889138)



about Malta was that it was going to be too small, even for a week and the lure had always been to go up to Sicily. We made a decision – not an easy thing to do when on holiday – and returned to Mgarr to stock up on a few essentials and check the boat over. You also have to clear customs in Malta to be able to return without any problem and Mgarr had the nearest Customs office. I had already questioned Kenneth about making night passages, because many charter companies don't allow it. There was

apparently no problem in Malta, so the opportunity of a cool trip up to Syracuse seemed irresistible.

The sky at night

We had an early supper in *Sammy's* again, because it was the only one occupied, then we slipped out of our berth at dusk and motored north leaving the Maltese coastline looking as if it was under attack yet again. Such are the size of the many Maltese firework displays that run late into the evening.

Night sailing is wonderful.

Log

The destination

The Maltese archipelago lies 60M south of Sicily and comprises three islands – Malta, Gozo and Comino – with a total population of around 400,000. Malta is the largest and the cultural, commercial and administrative centre. Gozo is next and is more rural, while Comino is largely uninhabited. The narrow meandering streets of many Maltese towns and villages are crowded with Renaissance cathedrals and Baroque palaces. The national languages are English and Maltese and the unit of currency is the Maltese Lira (Lm). Tourist information: visitmalta.com.

Weather

Winters are mild, with the occasional short chilly period caused by north and northeasterly winds from central Europe. Summers are hot, dry and very sunny. Malta's climate means a daily average of five to six hours sunshine in mid-winter, to around 12 hours in summer. Daytime temperatures in summer are often mitigated by cooling sea breezes, but in spring and autumn a hot wind from Africa known as the Sirocco, or in Maltese the Xlokk, can bring high temperatures and humidity. Annual rainfall is low, averaging 568mm a year, and sea bathing is possible well into mid to late October.

Food & drink

Maltese food is fairly rustic and largely consists of seafood and vegetables. They've also developed a slow baking process in which they put delightful stews in mud vessels over a hot stone called *kenur*. Maltese alcohol is inexpensive and there are some good quality local wines. The wines from Gozo tend to be a little more robust.

I adore it. The peace and quiet (despite the constant throbbing of the engine) and the heightened senses. I'd split us into two watches of two, as half the crew hadn't sailed at night before. I turned in at 0100 to be woken again at 0400 with Kevin to see the Sicilian coastline and just the merest hint of sunrise starting to appear. The lights and physical presence of *Cozzo Spadaro* and *Carpo Passero* provided great navigational references allowing us to pick up on the southeast corner of Sicily and motor north through the early morning mist and the increasing number of tiny fishing boats skimming back and forth across the mirror smooth waters.

After a 12½ hour run we rounded the headland at about 0930 and Syracuse revealed herself in all her splendour. I called the marina on Ch 69 and we were soon tied up stern to a pontoon. Beware though, this sort of luxury doesn't come cheap, as we later discovered – a one night stay was a hefty €60. Dropping the anchor and going stern to the harbour wall is an awful lot cheaper.

Syracuse has a wealth of wonderful architecture and is a joy to walk around, although it did bring us out in a bit of a sweat. The midday sun is very hot indeed and probably for this reason alone the waterfront doesn't come to life until after sunset. It seems like every one in town has come out to be seen perambulating along the seafront. The bars and restaurants are full to bursting and everyone seemed of good cheer. It turned slightly sour the next morning, however, with the news that there was a strike, so no market stalls or shops were open. Decision made, we were going to head south again and see what we could find along the South coast of Sicily. It was the

prospect of another long haul on the donkey, but we had no alternative. We rounded the headland to set south and it was as if God had opened the oven door. We were hit by a blast of hot and it didn't want to fade away. We soon had the sails set fully and were making 6-6.5kn SSW. This was heaven; this was what we had come to do. The words 'perfect' and 'sailing' don't often come readily together, but this was to be one of those rare days. A quick discussion and to hell with southern Sicily; we'd keep going.

The sun was starting to set when we got company. A school of some 25-35 dolphins came to play. They

returned after dusk, just to see that we were all right. The wind held until 0300 the following morning and sustained by huge chunks of Mrs F's fruit cake we cracked on through the night.

I sent Kevin to bed soon after 0600. The sun was up, Gozo was in sight and I was quite happy in the cockpit alone. I was rewarded by the wind, which returned after about an hour and unfurling the genoa I settled into a couple of hours' singlehanded sailing, tacking back and forth in the channel between Gozo and Comino to drop anchor in the Blue Lagoon for an early dip before breakfast.

It had been a simply wonderful 24 hours, the like of which I've rarely experienced. The return trip had been quite a bit longer with the sailing; we logged 105.8M, against 77.5M for the outbound leg. It was well worth it though – every inch of the way.

We somehow found ourselves back at *Sammy's* that night, I don't know why, but staging posts like that are hard to find.

West side story

Time to investigate the west side of Malta and as we'd had our wind for the week, or so we thought, we motored out from Mgarr for the last time. There's an area of sandy beach to be found on the west coast, but since it's dwarfed by a huge Radisson hotel complex we didn't see fit to stop. We did however sneak in behind the huge fuel and container depot at Kalafrana and if you keep on going you eventually reach the fishing village of Marsaxlokk. This is a broad, shallow bay approximately 2.5m deep and always cluttered with fishing boats both large and small. Consequently there are moorings everywhere, so be prepared for the early morning swim to clear the line wrapped around the rudder! It's not so much the early morning swim,

or the stray line, as the reminder that Malta is yet another European country within the Med that doesn't enforce the use of holding tanks. Marsaxlokk is a pretty harbour, though, with a plethora of harbour side restaurants and bars to choose from. It's another place that springs into life just after sunset.

As usual the next morning looked as they all did – calm, far too sunny and not much hope of a sail – but as we motored out of the huge harbour we were confronted with a very respectable 25kn of wind and were soon well heeled in a desperate attempt to get the most from any wind that might be there to be had. We didn't have far to go though – just around the corner and into Manoel Island Marina. This is another charming facility tucked away inside the fortifications on the other side of Valetta. A completely different aspect to the city for not such a great distance and a move from what was obviously the more commercial side to a livelier, residential part of town.

The next day was our last and we had a very lazy start before motoring out of Marsamxett Harbour and straight back into Grand Harbour. Revisiting this marvel of military architecture revealed just how seriously the defence of this tiny island was taken. You could spend days in Valetta alone just visiting some of the military museums and buildings that show why the island of Malta was almost impenetrable. Safely back in the middle of town on our mooring and a last supper ashore. Sitting outside the *Two and a half Lemon* restaurant, watching the world go by and enjoying a gorgeous meal at a not overly expensive 75Lm, was a satisfying end to our week. Malta proved to be a far bigger island than we expected, full of friendly English speaking people living at an enviably relaxed pace I'd love to go back. ■



Some of the many visitors to the Blue Lagoon.

that separates Malta from Gozo. It's true, it is blue and it is a lagoon, but between around 1030 and 1630 it's difficult to see either, because of the number of boats that cram in to enjoy what is a very pleasant and easy anchorage.

Going to Gozo

Having lunched, swum and partaken of the prerequisite siesta, we motored across to Gozo to pick up a pontoon mooring in Mgarr. The visitors' pontoon is the

“With a heat wave up in the forties forecast, it was time to go to sea again”

one closest to the village and has perfectly adequate shower and toilet facilities. The water is crowded with fishing boats big and small, all overlooked from the balcony of the Gleneagles Bar. This is a great spot for an early evening drink and with all the fishing and seafaring

memorabilia hanging from every possible place it has a certain Hemingway feel to it. In fact if there's a drawback with Mgarr it's the constant to and fro of the ferries that make it seem like Yarmouth on the Isle of Wight at times.

Just down the steps from the bar we found a choice of three or four restaurants. Of them all *Sammy's* seemed to be the busiest by far, which I always take to be a recommendation in itself. We were presented with a superb platter of the day's fish from which to choose. A super meal in lively, laid back surroundings and all for a not unreasonable 45Lm.

Early next morning it was soon obvious that it was going to be yet another hot day. The locals were predicting a heat wave up into the 'forties'. It was time to go to sea. Unfortunately we again had no wind, but then it was late June in the Med. We took a gentle run up the west coast of Gozo to discover Fungus Rock and the Inland Sea – a magical place and an idyllic anchorage for a swim and some lunch. Again, weekends tend to be heavier on the tripper boats, but we anchored with only another six or so boats and it was beautiful.

One of our early reservations