

Sailing in Greece: Dodecanese islands

Clare Mann and crew grapple with a tricky stern-to anchor and teenage high-jinks exploring Greece's most easterly islands.



Symi, where Venetian villas spill down the hillside to a harbour Photo: Alamy

By Clare Mann

2:14PM BST 10 May 2013

This was to be our ninth family annual sailing holiday and we decided on the Dodecanese islands in Greece. New waters and a new skipper, my 22-year-old son, Francis. He had taken his day skipper course the year before and had recently returned from sailing 4,000 miles from Panama to Santiago, so we felt in safe hands. For good measure, he brought a couple of friends along, eager to learn the ropes and help sail our 55ft chartered yacht.

The Dodecanese consist of 12 islands, the most easterly in the Aegean, scattered along the Turkish coast. Unfortunately, we only had a week to explore them. For sailors like ourselves who only hoist

sails once a year, a fortnight is preferable: the first week can be tense, remembering knots and adjusting to the lavatory and shower arrangements, while the second week is always more relaxed. We started at Mandraki marina, where once the mighty Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, straddled the entrance to the harbor. It is still a spectacular setting, with a Venetian fortress at the entrance, three windmills on the breakwater, and the city's medieval castle, the Palace of the Grand Master of Knights, as a backdrop. We landed at 1pm and were on board our yacht, Fani, an hour and half later. Our provisions were delivered from the quayside mini market: wine, beer, yogurt, honey, bacon and eggs, feta cheese and olives, peaches and cherries. When Tasos from Kiriacoulis yacht charter company gave us our briefing, Francis asked the crew to tune in. "Everyone must know how the radio works, how to drop the sails, and the man overboard drill," he insisted. Blue sky can quickly turn nasty in the Mediterranean, but Tasos predicted only gentle breezes during our voyage.



Fani and her crew

Over the years, we have encountered various situations, from mislaying our dinghy to running out of fuel, but I did wonder what kind of weather Francis might be expecting as he inspected the flares. Tasos suggested a neat itinerary and circled his favorite bays, ports and taverns along the way. "Where shall we head for our first night?" we asked, thinking Tasos would suggest something around the corner, but no, he pointed out to sea. "Symi, straight across, two hours; in Panormitis there's one tavern and a monastery."

Francis consulted the charts and tapped the coordinates into the GPS. It was late afternoon when we set off across sparkling cobalt water, ruffled by a gentle breeze. It was a far cry from our flotilla

days, or bare boating with a group of families on several yachts waiting for everything and everyone to be ready. In those days we spent the first night at marina base, itching to be away.

Panormitis was enchanting, unspoilt and peaceful, with just a handful of yachts in the bay. We arrived as the sun set and dropped our anchor in the still, clear water. The morning dawned with cockerels crowing and chanting from the monastery. I bought fresh bread and clothes pegs from the sleepy little shop next to the Greek Orthodox church. The church houses the icon of the Archangel Michael Panormitis, patron saint of sailors. The setting was so serene I would have been happy to stay anchored in the bay the entire week. However, with a lively crew (aged 17 to 23), there was little chance of this; Symi town beckoned for our next night.

Symi harbor is exquisite. Venetian villas tumble down the hillside and the harbor is crowded with bars, taverns and chic boutiques. Our first stern-to mooring did not go to plan, despite the well-organized crew. We arrived late afternoon to an audience of comfortably moored yachts, locals promenading and crowded cafés. It was a Greek holiday; Symi buzzed and was about to be entertained by Fani and her crew. The mustached harbor master blew his whistle and indicated where he wanted us to moor up. This entailed dropping the anchor mid-harbor and reversing neatly between two yachts. An unexpected crosswind blew up, the skipper held steady, turbo engines purred and bow thrusters pushed Fani gently around. But the harbor master wasn't happy, he whistled frantically. "Abort!" he indicated wildly, flapping his arms. As we pulled up the anchor, we discovered three anchor chains wrapped around it. As the wind buffeted us, the chains became tightly bound.

The entire quayside had advice to shout or, in some cases, scream at us, while the harbor master became more animated by the second.



The Grand Master of Knights at Mandraki harbor

Help was at hand with some kindly Scots who untangled our chains from their dinghy. An hour later, we were finally securely moored and the crowd had melted away. Francis was ordered to take the boat papers to the harbor master's office. He returned looking glum – a €300 fine for disturbing the peace. Then he grinned. “Joke!”

The crew thoroughly enjoyed the Symi nightlife. Fani made quite a hit, decked out in Union Jack bunting for the Diamond Jubilee, and cocking up while parking proved a great way of making new friends, we discovered.

There were no more such dramas in the following days. We were envious of one yacht whose crew told us they had spent an hour with a vast shoal of bluefin tuna and had even swum with them, but we were well content with dolphins in our bow wave. We sailed to the lovely tranquil islands of Tilos and Khalki, the entrance of Khalki marked by windmills silhouetted on the hillside. We watched children dancing in the village square, proudly watched by their parents.

Nisyros, with its picturesque, sleepy harbor, was one of our favorite places, famous for its extinct volcano that is two and half miles wide. We hired mopeds and set off to explore, up windy roads and then down into the very crater, lush and green, cultivated with citrus trees. Sulphur pools still bubble at the volcano's core, and give off a tremendous heat.

On our final day, we changed our Greek flag for a Turkish one and stopped for lunch in the idyllic bay of Bozuk Bükü on the Turkish coast across from Rhodes. An ancient ruined fort defends the bay, and the Hellenistic ruins of Loryma lie scattered on the hillside. Our last night was back at Mandraki. The crew was given strict instructions that the boat needed to be handed over the following morning in pristine condition. Two (nameless) crew members returned in poor shape at 7am, in no state to swab decks. Skipper Francis was not amused. “A hundred years ago, I would have given them 20 lashes.” For once, a week was enough.

GETTING THERE

Direct flights to Rhodes with easyJet (0905 821 0905 ; easyjet.com) from London Gatwick from £44.99 one way. Ryanair (0871 246 0000; ryanair.com) from London Stansted from £39.99 one way. Fly Thomas Cook (0844 879 8400; flythomascook.com) from £49.99 one way.

PACKAGES

Nautilus Yachting (01732 867445; nautilusyachting.com) is the booking agent for Kiriacoulis yachts in Rhodes. Nautilus organizes sailing holidays and yacht charters in the Mediterranean and worldwide, and flotilla holidays in Greece, Turkey and Croatia. A 43ft Bavaria Cruiser (sleeps nine or 10) costs from £1,757 for a week in Rhodes, excluding flights, transfers and yacht fuel.

WHEN TO GO

May to October is the best season for sailing in the Mediterranean. During July and August, the prevailing wind is the Meltemi, which blows from the north-west, force 5-7. It can blow for a day or so, or sometimes for a whole week. In spring and autumn, the wind is usually force 2-4 and blows from the south-east. The daily weather forecast in English at 1.30pm on 1493 kHz.

THE INSIDE TRACK

There is a pilot book on board, but if you want to plan your trip, it's a good idea to buy your own, available from Imray nautical charts and books (imray.com).

If sailing from Greece, don't enter Turkish ports, even with a Turkish flag, as you will have to present boat papers and go through customs with passports. This can be a considerable hassle. Quiet bays represent no problem; hoist your Turkish flag. If in doubt, check regulations with your embarkation base.

If you are a keen snorkeler, take your own flippers and mask. A couple of pairs are provided on board, but they may be the wrong size.



Monastery at Panormitis, on Symi

Take plenty of euros, as the remote taverns and shops will only take cash.

Symi is busy in July and August; finding a berth can be stressful. The islands are much quieter outside high season.

Don't set off without checking your boat thoroughly; make sure vitals such as the outboard engine on the dinghy, showers and heads work to full capacity.

Check nothing crucial is missing in the galley. A decent coffee pot and plastic cups (only glass provided) are worth packing, plus tea towels, which are not provided. Clothes pegs are essential; sudden gusts will whisk drying towels and favorite swimming costumes out to sea.

Don't over-shop on the first day; most ports have small shops with fresh fruit and vegetables.

THE BEST RESTAURANTS

Tholos, Symi Harbor £

A 10-minute walk from the harbor front, tucked away beyond the boatyard, is this delightful, small, family-run tavern, patronized by the locals. Delicious home-cooked food and the best stuffed vine leaves and taramasalata in the Dodecanese. €20/£16.50 per head (0030 22460 72033).

Nautilus, Tilos Island £

There are plenty of tempting restaurants to choose from in Livadia. Specialties of this traditional tavern are the seafood risotto and tender goat dishes. The baklava is freshly made by the owner's wife. €19/£15.50 per head.



The Turkish coast

Agori, Rhodes £

Hunt among the stalls and cafés until you find this little gem in the new market (Nèa Agora) opposite the marina. It's tightly packed with glamorous locals and there's a lively atmosphere, folk singing some nights and friendly staff. Great value for a traditional menu. €18/£15 per head.

Aphrodite, Nisyros Island ££

Right on the quayside in Palon harbor. Family-run with pretty blue and white tables and chairs. Fresh, crispy whitebait and tasty calamari are washed down with ice-cold Mythos (local beer), and liqueurs are on the house. €25/£20 per head.

Pantelis, Symi Harbor £££

On the far left of the harbor front (close to the harbor master's office), this simple yet elegant little tavern with pots of fresh herbs along the pavement is an unexpected find. Nouvelle Greek cuisine with a twist. The shrimps in garlic are sensational. €30/£24 per head (69772 61710).