

First time  
First time  
**FLOTILLA**  
**VIRGINS**



82 Sailing Today October 2011





Joe Adams and Emma Lucas travel to Greece on their first flotilla with the aim of discovering whether it can cater for his sense of adventure and her taste for relaxation...

**W**hen it comes to sailing, I've always seen myself as a bit of a racer, but have never had much time for cruising. If some berk with sunglasses on his head isn't bellowing orders at me, it ain't really sailing. That was until *Sailing Today* offered me the chance to travel to Greece with my girlfriend and crew Emma Lucas to try a Nautilus flotilla in Skiathos. Suddenly cruising didn't seem such an awful pastime and, having completed the Day Skipper course a few years back and promptly forgotten all about it, this was a natural test if ever I saw one. A chance to find out how well a flotilla and their team can cope with rusty sailors in not so rusty boats.

In some ways I think Emma and I are a perfect example of how not to approach a holiday; me with a slightly arrogant indifference to stern-to-berthing and Emma's fear of my arrogant indifference to any form of stern-to-berthing. This trip would undoubtedly be comical and dramatic in equal measures, all under the guise of a laid back island hopping cruise.

As our plane descended through the clouds, we craned our necks to see the beautiful Greek islands sprouting through the shimmering blue sea. As it happens, Skiathos airport is pretty much next to the pontoons. Meaning there is a very

manageable five minute transfer. Rather amusingly, the transfer bus host decided to give us the whole welcome speech anyway, despite having to stop early upon our arrival.

## Huge jugs of wine

We were greeted by the delightful Martin and Sarah who would be our skipper and hostess. After the initial introductions they led us to our boats. We were introduced to *La Jolla*, a 39ft Bavaria. After all the boring details, such as inventory, engine checks and safety talks (which were dismissed by our travel weary brains) we unpacked, showered and headed out to dinner. The main strip in Skiathos, is as you would expect, aimed towards us tourists, with trinket and bracelet stores, souvenir and gift shops littering the newly cobbled streets. There are plenty of lovely restaurants posing as authentic Greek places. After a little bit of walking around the backstreets we found a lovely restaurant, which seemed to serve only fresh fish and huge jugs of wine.

At 0900 the next day our wearisome and slightly hungover eyes struggled to open. Slowly the realisation that we were on a boat brought us round. We had 15 minutes until our first briefing, with little (no) idea of what chart to take or if an almanac was necessary. So, hopelessly under prepared

Rafted up, flotilla style, below: typical stern-to mooring line and below right, Emma at the helm.





## The Mamma Mia Church

The Mamma Mia church is actually named 'Agios Ioannis chapel' and is on the north east of the island of Skopelos. It was used for the wedding scene in the 2008 musical romantic comedy Mamma Mia, which was adapted from the 1999 west end production of Mamma Mia. The film starred Meryl Streep, Pierce Brosnan, Colin Firth, Amanda Seyfried and Stellan Skarsgard. The coastline around the church is dramatic, and offers many good anchorages just to the north of the chapel. It also has excellent snorkelling, as well as a cheesy Mamma Mia restaurant which sells reasonably priced ice creams.



Achilles tower on Ahilio - famous in Greek myth

and grinning like nervous buffoons, we took a seat in a small café across the road from our yacht to await our briefing. We were to sail to Ahilio, supposedly one of the many towns that the famous Achilles used to occupy, also known as Achillion. The journey led us 25nm SW of Skiathos, to the brink of the gulf of Volos. The trip was dead downwind; easy. However, there were Force 6 gusts with big swells and the wind had a tendency to bend around the islands. In essence, this was exactly what I wanted, zero cruising about with the motor, total downwind blasting.

It is also the exact opposite of what Emma wanted; the rolling waves would ruin her tanning and get her book wet, not to mention turning me into some half naked hyperactive Jack Sparrow character swinging from the rigging. Not her idea of a calm cruise.

Despite the rolling waves and high winds, we managed to have a relatively pleasant wobble down to Ahilio where we were to face our first dreaded stern-to experience. This was something that I didn't cover in my Day Skipper. Typically there was a bit of a queue for us to get in, which built the tension. There was a sharp wind, which hit the boat diagonally, playing havoc with keeping the bow out straight. Naturally I

am making excuses for what eventually happened. In short, I panicked and reversed into the pontoon. The boat was fine, my ego was not, and my face was redder than its sunburnt self should have been.

We had a lovely group meal on the quay and went for an early night, vowing to be smoother operators in future.

The middle part of the week was based in the Gulf of Volos, which is huge; it also provides brilliant views and great anchorages, not to mention calmer and flatter waters, which everyone appreciated

after the epic sail on the first day.

We cruised through light winds right along the west coast of the Gulf with the aim of stopping for lunch. I was eager to practise

my anchoring and boat handling skills. Naturally Emma was unenthusiastic and somewhat exasperated with my attempts to regain some confidence, but humoured me quite pleasantly regardless. We stopped in the bay of Nies, not going all the way in, but finding a pleasant anchorage, which was secluded, and very quiet, a tuna sandwich and a quick swim and we were off. Motoring east towards, N. Palaio Trikeri which was a picture perfect Greek island and my favourite stop of the trip.

Anchoring took a few attempts, because

**"It was magical to be in the land of Mamma Mia."**



A perfect Greek anchorage



Naked fender surfing



Bring a pot night

of the sandy bottom, but the mooring went fine and, therefore, made me feel so much better about myself. This was topped off by having to swim to shore to tie on the stern line, pirate style. It also helped that the waters were fantastically clear. There were two tavernas and one pub/shop on the island. Both the restaurants were identical and had the freshest seafood (pretty much still wriggling). I intended for this evening to be quite romantic, with the quiet island, stirred only by the jingle of the fishing boats on their moorings and the water lapping at our feet while we ate. However,

as it is a small island, and a flotilla, we were seated next to what Emma called the 'party boat', a group of Essex guys and girls, who roared with laughter long into the night. Listening to them becoming more and more intoxicated and hysterical soothed the rest of the flotilla to sleep.

**Dancing Queen**

Grudgingly, we left N. Palaio Trikeri and headed deeper into the Gulf of Volos. We headed to a tiny island just around the corner from Vathudi, which is right over on the west side of the gulf, and was roughly

11nm, so a pleasant trip. With no wind at first, slowly building to a Force 3, then to a 4, then to a 5. It provided fuel for yet another disagreement about what flotilla holidays were all about. After I whooped in triumph at getting the beloved caravan to 7.4kn upwind, Emma gave me a firm talking to, saying I either keep the boat flat or I take the sails down. I flattened her (the boat, not Emma).

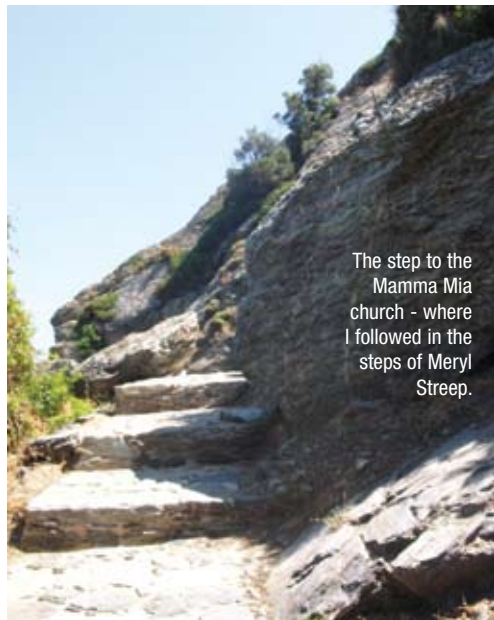
That evening we enjoyed an amazing sunset silhouetting the masts against the horizon. It was a great social experience too, allowing us to properly mingle with

SAILING LOG.			
Day	Trip	Distance	Description
1	Skiathos – Ahilio (Akillion)	25nm	Windy and wavy, especially through the gaps in the islands – F4-6. NE
2	Ahilio – N. Palaio Trikeri	11nm	Light winds, very fickle, a pleasant sail. SW
3	N. Palaio Trikeri – Vathudi	9nm	F1-3 in the morning, building to F5 in the afternoon and holding till sunset. NE
4	Vathudi – Pigadhi	19nm	Gentle breeze from SW, swinging northerly midday, settling NE.
5	Pigadhi – Nea Kilma	31nm	Strong winds from 1100, gusts of F5-6 for a time, dropping to variable F3 in the afternoon from the NE.
6	Nea Kilma – Skiathos	8nm	We sailed in light variable F2-3 from the north; we spent some time reaching along the south coast until the wind gave up.
<b>Approx total:</b>		<b>103nm</b>	



Nautilus Yachting offers a choice of breaks on yachts throughout the Mediterranean, Caribbean and tropical destinations. Its Skiathos and Athens flotillas are run in partnership with Kiriacoulis, which has almost 400 yachts from 27 bases in the Mediterranean. The company aims to provide sailing holidays to suit everyone from experienced skipper to eager novice

**To book through Nautilus, go to the website: [www.nautilusyachting.com](http://www.nautilusyachting.com) or call on 01732 867445.**



The step to the Mamma Mia church - where I followed in the steps of Meryl Streep.



the other guys on the flotilla. Everyone was great fun and very approachable. Throughout the week, Emma and I had named most of the people, such as Daniel Craig, the Party Boat or the Sex and the City girls, so it was good to see if our first impressions were fair. The night was topped off by a night time swim, creating fluorescent shadows wherever you moved, which was quite something.

There was little wind the next morning, so I steered us out of view and went naked fender surfing. This is not to be recommended past 7kn with your tackle free. With that odd ambition ticked off, we sailed past N. Palaio Trikeri and east to Pigadhi, which is at the foot of Achilles Tower. After watching *Troy* a few days earlier, Emma and I were both eager to make the climb to see the famous tower.

After a lazy sail across, we entered Pigadhi relatively early, at about 3pm. It was, thank the Lord, a coming alongside stop and that almost made my day. It would have done if it hadn't been for the beautifully quiet and sandy beaches just minutes away.

## Mamma Mia! Here we go again

Martin and Sarah informed the group that we would have a free sail, heading back over towards Skiathos, with the aim of winding down the week. Naturally Emma



and I were apprehensive about being left to our own devices. We successfully talked ourselves up enough to enjoy the 31nm tight reach all the way past Skiathos and to its neighbour, Skopelos. We aimed for Nea Kilma, which has a new harbour with, again, lovely beaches nearby. It is also a short drive away from the film set of *Mamma Mia*, an Abba based musical, which I adore. Emma and I were unashamedly excited about visiting the set, most notably for the church that features in the film.

With the help of pretty much everyone on the island, we eventually managed to get the anchor laid straight and the boat safely secured for the night. We had a nice meal, in a pleasant restaurant, hastily hitting the hay ready for our last day's sailing.

Half of this day was spent travelling to and seeing the *Mamma Mia* church. We had a leisurely breakfast and took a taxi to the church. The church was a long, hot walk up some steps. It was pointed out that Meryl Streep did this while skipping and singing. Not that the steps to the top are that strenuous, but I think Meryl misled us because it is definitely hot and thirsty work. The views again were fantastic, and we took great delight in ringing the bell while my favourite Abba tunes blared from my phone.

Once back on the boat we had to navigate out of the small marina. It was made somewhat more difficult by the complicated maze of anchors resting resolutely over ours. After kindly asking a Greek chap to relay his anchor, we made it out of the marina to discover that somehow (an obvious combination of my ridiculous steering and Emma's aggressive windlass control) the chain was caught in the fairlead. I am not sure this advice is technically sound, but hammering it with a wooden spoon for 20 minutes whilst furiously swearing did the trick. We had a pleasant

reach across to Skiathos; we were now very relaxed. With the wind dying, we were forced to motor into Nautilus's base and say a fond farewell to our island hopping ways. However, after five days of practising, Emma and I finally pulled off a relatively faultless stern-to-berthing. We repaired to a restaurant, which served the largest coldest beers I have ever seen.

The next day we tidied our yacht and were relieved that Nautilus had organised a place for us to top up our tan while waiting for our transfer later in the day. We sunbathed and swam in a lovely tennis club, just a few minutes away from the boats; no one was interested in the tennis, although the food was excellent.

We stepped onto our coach taking us to the airport in high spirits. It didn't give us too much time to reflect on the wonderful trip and adventure we had just completed. Nautilus were incredibly helpful and organised. Martin and Sarah, the skipper and hostess were very relaxed; despite some abysmal berthing from yours truly they remained completely professional and very attentive.

I felt like I had had an adventure and Emma was suitably tanned and relaxed. Mission complete. ■

## Costs

**Flights:** Nautilus let you shop around for flights, but they can also organise them. Prices vary, but expect to pay £200-£300pp.

**Charter:** £1,709 for the boat, which can sleep up to eight. Extras on top are fuel, which will come out at £50 and you'll have to pay €140 in insurance. The good news is marina fees don't really exist out there.