

Nick Crane's Ionian Islands voyage

Dolphins, swimming in deserted bays and eating at village tavernas were highlights of Nick Crane family's boating holiday in Greece. Just don't mention the parking.



'In my humble opinion, the islands off the west coast of Greece are the most magical in the world after the isles of Britain' Photo: Nicholas Crane

By Nicholas Crane

12:57PM GMT 28 Dec 2012

The website promised nautical bliss: two weeks on a sailing boat among the Ionian Islands of Greece.

"But Dad, you can't sail."

Actually, that's not entirely true. A few mishaps on the Norfolk Broads don't mean that every outing will lead to a collision or a capsize. The point about a flotilla holiday, I explained, is that experts are on hand for the tricky bits.

So we found ourselves one inky Sunday night in the little port of Palairos looking for a sailing boat called Hercules. Boarding a boat at the beginning of a voyage is even better than birthdays. For the children (then aged 11, 15 and 16), it was mainly about furniture. Up front, Hercules had a triangular cabin fitted with two berths. In the stern, there was another double cabin. The long upholstered seat in the main saloon converted into a fifth berth.

There was a galley with gas rings, oven, sink and coolbox, and through a narrow door behind the chart table, a loo with a shower. Ranged around the cabins were hideaways, shelves and cupboards for books, cameras, hats, sun cream and all the related gubbins that had exploded from our rucksacks. Hercules was about 20 years old, with enough shiny hardwood to make her feel as if she'd been crafted with chisels and care.

We woke in gently moving beds. Outside, the sun was shining and waterfront cafés were opening. Reflections slithered on brochure-blue water. We met our “lead crew”: Jack, a laid-back Devonian boatie whose military background equipped him for almost anything, and Ann, whose cheerful, thoughtful nature would convert our motley flotilla into an extended floating family. We were a group of eight boats. After a tech-talk on the yacht’s working parts, we all gathered in a café for the day’s briefing. From Palairos, we were to sail for the island of Kalamos, about eight miles to the south. The wind was forecast northerly, veering north-west, at force three to four. Off Kalamos, we could expect gusts from the south. Jack told us to arrive no later than 5.30pm and to call him up on the VHF radio when we were half a mile from the harbour.



Fiskardo on Kefalonia, above, was one of the few villages to survive the 1953 earthquake

By midday we were sailing away from Palairos and the pink mountains of Akarnanika. The hubbub of mainland Greece faded. Hercules felt good. Newer, larger boats in the flotilla had a steering wheel but Hercules had a long, varnished tiller. An hour into the voyage, a silver swordfish crossed our bow in three glittering, airborne arcs.

For reasons of family harmony – and an aversion to getting lost – I spent a fair bit of time that first day taking GPS readings and transferring them on to the sea chart. When the on-board doubters asked where we were, I could point with supreme confidence to Imray’s South Ionian sheet and say: “Precisely here.” (Although in fairness to the doubters, the first time I tried this, I fixed the position of Hercules part way up a mountain on the island of Levkas.) We sailed all afternoon, way out into the balmy vastness, then turned east to meet a couple of dolphins in the straits separating Kalamos from the mainland. Beneath the mountains, we could just make out the distant white triangle of another sail, the family from Basingstoke.

When the wind began veering through the strait we furled the sails, fired the engine and checked the Ionian Cruising Companion, a compendium of detailed information and large-scale maps covering every navigable nook and cranny we’d be using over the next couple of weeks. We were heading for a little harbour just over two nautical miles down the east coast of Kalamos. Jack had told us that the

harbour entrance was narrow. And the chart warned us that we'd have to avoid an ominous black cross – the symbol for “underwater rock, over which depth is unknown”.

But the real test came once we were inside the harbour. Parking a yacht backwards in a gusting side wind is a bit like reversing a three-wheeled car one-handed across a ski slope. Over the coming days, “Oops I'll try again” became a familiar refrain.



But this is where flotillas work. During the day, you're on your own to play Pirates of the Mediterranean, yet every evening the lead crew are there to guide you into a berth or anchorage, catch ropes and generally make sure that your yacht doesn't take out café tables with its boom or wrap itself around a rock. That evening, Ann fixed punch for the whole flotilla, then we wandered into the village for Greek salad and yemista at George's Taverna.

For the next 12 days we sailed the Ionian Sea. In my humble opinion, the islands off the west coast of Greece are the most magical in the world after the isles of Britain. There are seven main islands in the group, and another 40 or so smaller ones. Cooler and greener than the Aegean over on the other side of Greece, the Ionian was popular among 19th-century Britons, who were lured there by Murray's Handbook for Travellers in Greece and its promise of “delicious” springs and autumns and yachts for hire at £20 a month.

In the Western world, this is the make-believe archipelago of “islands, a number well-inhabited” that frame Homer's epic poem, The Odyssey. Odysseus didn't sail a 32-footer with a roller-furling genoa and an electric anchor windlass, but these were the waters he navigated in his “well-built galley” with its oxhide rigging and mast of fir. The islands, especially Ithaca, are saturated in Odyssean sites.

When I was 19, I pedalled my school bicycle from Norwich to the Ionian Islands. To sail at last past these ragged capes and enfolded bays was a dream come true.

The children loved it. Hercules was a recreational Tardis. With the cabins below, and a deck and a cockpit up top, there was plenty of space for a family of five to spread out with books and iPods. We found ourselves doing the kinds of things that don't happen in London, like playing cards and chess, and chatting. And swimming in sea the colour of a Hockney pool. The dozen or so teenagers in the flotilla quickly formed their own evening-clan, aided and abetted by Ann's barbecue on a deserted

island beach. Polled later for their “best moments”, our own crew came up with “jumping off the back of the boat into the bright blue sea” and “getting off the boat in the evenings to have dinner in local Greek villages”. The snorkelling was wonderful, though there are far fewer fish than I remember as a teenager.



Every island told a story. The Ionian sits at a crossroads where the sea routes along the Adriatic meet the east-west highway through the Gulf of Corinth. Romans and Corinthians, Venetians and French have all occupied the islands over the past 2,000 years, while the archipelago was variously mugged by Vandals and Goths, Saracens and Normans. In the 1800s, the islands suffered an unhappy spell as a British Protectorate. The Second World War brought particular horrors, with thousands of islanders rounded up by the Nazis, never to return, and 5,000 Italian troops executed on Kefalonia, the atrocity woven into Captain Corelli’s Mandolin. In 1953 an earthquake killed 476 people in the Ionian Islands and flattened most of the buildings on Kefalonia and Zakynthos. The history of the Ionian Islands is written in invisible ink; on the surface, you catch but the faintest traces.

In all, we sailed to eight islands. Uninhabited Atokos we visited one lunchtime, anchoring for a swim beneath precipitous cliffs. Much busier, but no less fun, Fiskardo on Kefalonia was one of the few villages to have survived the ’53 earthquake relatively intact so its waterfront is still lined with colourful Venetian facades hung with wrought-iron balconies and flowers. We’d anchored on the north side of the bay, and it was a short walk through the pines to an abandoned stone lighthouse. Inside, a gritty spiral staircase climbed to a parapet with views across the straits to Ithaca. Behind the lighthouse simmered the ruins of a Norman church.

My favourite anchorages were deserted coves where we could fall from the bathing platform on the yacht’s stern and swim to the chirrup of cicadas. One night after an aborted attempt to find shelter in a full-to-bursting harbour on Kastos, we motored through the setting sun to neighbouring Kalamos, where Jack knew a beach protected from the wind by mountains. Just in case the anchor dragged, I slept in the cockpit, drifting off to sleep as the masthead light played tag with the Milky Way.

Contrary to expectations, we had no nautical dramas beyond a “Carry on Sailing” moment one evening when we managed to drop anchor into our own dinghy, an unconventional procedure that

had little effect on the momentum of Hercules as she continued to drift backwards towards a sharp and immovable chunk of Greek geology. Throughout the voyage, the sailing was alternately sublime and exhilarating. Most mornings the breeze was soporific or absent while afternoons could blow up to about force five. And every day there were Odysseus moments aplenty, the currents of history tugging at the tiller as Hercules bounded across the blue Ionian under two bowed sails.



Essentials

To reach Palairos, we took trains from **London to Venice**(raileurope.co.uk) and then the Minoan Lines car ferry to Igoumenitsa (directferries.co.uk), where we were met by a minibus transfer organised by Nautilus Yachting. A more direct route is a flight to Preveza airport. Airlines flying there from the UK include flythomascook.com,monarch.co.uk and thomsonfly.com.

I booked our holiday with Nautilus Yachting (01732 867445;nautilusyachting.com). A two-cabin yacht costs from £1,028 for a week in June, to £2,591 for a fortnight in July. Three-cabin yachts cost £1,596 and £3,478 for the same periods. The prices are for the whole yacht on flotilla regardless of the number of people on board (within reason). They include transfers from Preveza airport but not flights. Sailing a boat offshore is a serious business requiring previous experience. Many people thinking of taking a flotilla holiday will have already taken the Royal Yacht Association Day Skipper course, or will hold an International Certificate of Competence. RYA Day Skipper courses take five days (rya.org.uk). Flotilla yachts are equipped with the local information necessary to sail Ionian waters, but for those who want to prepare in advance, the Ionian Cruising Companion, by Vanessa Bird, published by Wiley Nautical, RRP £32.99, is indispensable.

For onshore sightseeing try the Lonely Planet guide Greek Islands, £14.99