



Flotilla fun in the Saronic Gulf

A first-ever flotilla holiday for experienced sailors Caroline Stevens and her husband Tom proves a hit in the Saronic Gulf of the Greek Aegean

Fear of flying means it's not unusual to see me pacing nervously around the departure lounge at the airport, but for once this was not the main focus of my anxiety – I was 'shoe spotting'.

My husband Tom and I were about to embark on our first ever flotilla sailing holiday and were filled with apprehension about the whole thing, in particular about our fellow flotilla crew. Hence my study of footwear. Aha... here was a likely customer: not only was he sporting a pair of well worn deck shoes, he was also reading a copy of the latest PBO – bound to be with us. I quickly reported back to Tom and the two of us studied the poor unsuspecting family surreptitiously from behind our newspapers. Did they look like 'our sort of people' – were their children going to plague us with irritating antics?

Now it's not that we are particularly antisocial people, although Tom does have a doormat that says 'go away' on it: it's just that we love our independence when sailing. We have our own cruiser in Aldeburgh on the East Coast, and have bare boated in the Med and Caribbean for the last 15 years, taking our own horde of 'irritating' children with us. The greatest joy to us is the total freedom to plan our own itinerary, searching out those deserted anchorages, going where you like, when you like, each trip being a new adventure. I have to say, we have also been guilty on occasion of getting in early to a small harbour, tucking ourselves in to a berth, then settling down smugly with an early evening drink to watch the antics of the flotillas coming in, struggling with stern-to moorings before presumably heading off for some ghastly group meal. Oh no, this was not for us!

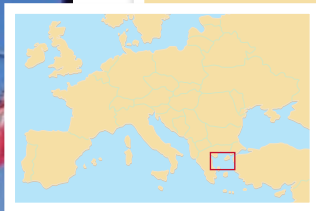
So why on earth had we chosen to go on a flotilla? Well, I suppose the main reason was that up to this stage, with our four children and more recently their sometimes girlfriends/boyfriend, we have been socially self sufficient. Now the children are older and scattered, it has been getting increasingly difficult to co-ordinate. We considered bare boating with friends, but as we'd been having a hectic and stressful year, organisation again seemed a pressure we could do without.

We'll give it a go

So, in a moment of madness, we decided to give a flotilla a try. We would have, hopefully, like-minded company, no one else to organise, and once we got there we could just sit back and enjoy the sailing. Seemed like a good idea at the time... but what would it be like in practice?



Morning departure from Hydra, sorting out the spider's web of anchor chains



Dolphins added to a wonderful passage between Spetses and Plaka



The cockpit party gets under way with new-found flotilla friends on the final evening back at Kalamaki



Caroline tries out the the only transport available on the island of Hydra

We deliberately chose what appeared to be a fairly unstructured flotilla with Nautilus Yachting, leaving from Kalamaki on the Greek mainland and doing a circuit around the islands in the Saronic Gulf.

Nautilus reassured us that if it all got too much, we could peel off for the odd night and do our own thing, and we certainly didn't have to take part in any group activities or themed evenings. Despite this comforting knowledge we were still unconvinced so, hedging our bets, only booked for seven days. How wrong could we have been! We virtually had to be dragged, kicking and screaming off our boat at the end of the week.

From the moment we met our lead skipper Ian, hostess Abi and fellow flotilla members at the first briefing, we knew we were going to be firm friends. And so much for us sneering at group activities; Tom and I were the first on the quayside for the welcoming drinks party on Poros, we piled in to a taxi to visit a cliff top monastery at Plaka and zoomed off on scooters to the temple on

Aegina as well as joining every possible group meal. It was one long party with excellent sailing in between.

Kalamaki welcome

An afternoon flight from Gatwick to Athens and a 45 minute transfer to Kalamaki saw us arriving at the flotilla base early evening, in time to do a basic shop for supplies before enjoying an excellent meal at a nearby beach restaurant. We were warmly greeted by the Nautilus team, Ian and Abi, who welcomed us on board *Nana*, an 11m (36ft) Bavaria, which was in good working order and kitted out to meet our needs. While Ian went through the technical details of the boat with Tom, I got the low down from Abi on the likely itinerary for the week. Already we could feel the magic of the Mediterranean seeping into our bones and all our former misgivings fading gently away. A couple of beers, a beachside meal, a good night's sleep and we were ready to meet the rest of the team at the first briefing.

Our initial impression of Ian was of a really

laid back guy, but as the week went by we were constantly impressed by his professionalism both in the morning briefings and in the way he calmly shepherded us in to our berths every evening. He never raised his voice – in fact relied totally on a very specific set of hand signals – and nothing seemed to faze him. However many times anchors dragged and had to be re-laid, there was absolutely no panic. He had a knack of squeezing a boat into the smallest space and he never settled down to a beer until he had checked out that everyone was firmly moored and happy.

Nautilus offer flexible one- or two-week flotillas, covering a northerly and southerly route. The week we arrived was going to follow the southerly route, spending the first night in Kalamaki, then heading south to Poros, Hydra and across to the Eastern Peloponnese past Spetses to Plaka. We would then return via Ermione to Poros, and finally back to Kalamaki.

We arrived in Kalamaki at the tail of a





On the tourist trail at the Acropolis before flying out of Athens

the weather immediately settled down to a gentle south-easterly breeze – perfect conditions for a fetch all the way to the tip of Poros. The island of Poros is just a stone's throw from the Peloponnese mainland and the approach from the north is said to be one of the most attractive in Greece. The town, which is quite sizeable, literally tumbles down the rocky slopes to the busy waterside.

Poros was our first experience of mooring stern-to with only the two of us on board. I must say, in recent years I have become a little lazy! With all the children on board, Tom has a young, competent and agile crew, all keen to be involved, – now he just had me. Usually I am on deck enjoying the approach and taking photos, but this time I was actually needed which was quite refreshing.

Friendly mix

Once we were all snugly moored under Ian's guidance, we joined a drinks party on shore arranged by Abi to give us all a chance to get to know each other better. The flotilla, including the lead boat, comprised seven Bavarias of varying sizes and with a great mix of people. They included two retired couples, a young family from Switzerland, two families with delightful teenage/twenties boys and two other couples of similar age to us.

Over our drinks, another of our misconceptions about flotilla sailing was soon dispelled. We were under the impression that people on the whole opted for a flotilla because they were not experienced enough to go it alone and needed the guidance of a lead boat. Untrue – we soon realised that everyone in our group was fully competent. The common reasoning among them for choosing a flotilla over a bare boat charter was that it took all the stress out of a sailing holiday. There is absolutely no planning or organisation to do – you can just enjoy the sailing. It hadn't really occurred to us before how much pressure you are sometimes under in the afternoons, when bare boating,

worrying about the night's mooring, especially if the wind gets up. Would you find a space, and if not, where was the nearest safe anchorage? Now we could relax for the afternoon in a quiet anchorage and have a leisurely sail into harbour in the early evening, assured that Ian would be on the quayside guiding us in to a berth. They all agreed good company was a bonus, and it seemed after our first evening that we'd hit the jackpot.

Although usually there was no need to get to our destination before early evening, Ian suggested that if we wanted to get in to the tiny harbour of Hydra the next day, we would all need to gather at the entrance no later than 1pm and be ready on our radios to be called in. When we arrived, we could see exactly what he meant. Even at this time of day, boats were scuttling in, and it took all of Ian's skill to find us places, but it was well worth the effort despite the fact that some of us were rafted up three boats deep.

Hydra has attracted numerous artists and celebrities over the years including, according to the Rod Heikell pilot book, Leonard Cohen, champion of depressive music. He certainly

can't have found anything gloomy here – the town is utterly charming with its bustling quayside, and perhaps best of all no motorised transport. When the cargo boats arrived in the evening, it was fascinating to watch everything being unloaded and piled up onto the trains of donkeys and mules.

After an exciting morning, with everyone trying to untangle the spider's web of crossed anchors while the flying cat ferry was trying to berth, we headed off for a lunch stop on Spetse and then a glorious sail across to the Eastern Peloponnese to the little hamlet of Plaka. The wind was really favouring us, and just when we thought things could not get any better, a school of dolphins arrived to play under the bow.

Plaka is a dear little village with crystal clear water (no soap allowed) and several quayside tavernas.

Cruise highlight

I had read both in Heikell and Lonely Planet of the spectacular cliffside monastery of Elonas which is about a 30 minute drive away and I was really keen to visit. We enquired in one of the tavernas and had soon organised two taxis for 7.30am to take a group of us. Despite the impossibly early start after a late night in one of the rooftop bars, we all agreed it was one of the highlights of the cruise.

The plan originally had been to spend the next night in Ermioni, a pleasant little town which saddles a tiny peninsula, having a harbour on each side, before going back to Poros, but Ian was entirely open to the group's suggestion that we should miss out Poros and go instead to Aegina. An excellent decision, and it meant we were able to choose our own mode of transport to visit the beautiful temple of Aphaia on the north east corner of the island, or the fascinating camera obscura on the edge of the bay in Perdika.

Sadly it was then time to head back to Kalamaki, for one last night and one last party with our new-found friends.

We could not believe the fun we had, and as you are reading this, we may well be organising our flotilla reunion on the Nautilus Yachting stand at the London Boat Show!

Contacts and info

GETTING THERE

We flew from Heathrow to Athens, with Olympic Airlines, for £262 each – but could probably have found cheaper flights had we booked earlier than two days before departure.

EATING OUT AND PROVISIONS

Every harbour we visited had a good choice of restaurants. The food was excellent and always well under £20 per head, despite not holding back on wine.

Some of the smaller harbours did not have ATMs so it was important to keep a cash float, especially as not all restaurants and shops took plastic.

Provisions are readily available at reasonable prices.

CHARTER COST

Prices for a week's charter in the Saronic Gulf start at £586pp based on two sharing a Bavaria 36. Airport transfers, services of the flotilla staff, welcome drink, starter pack and end cleaning are included. Harbour dues were paid by the lead boat and we settled up at the end of the week. They came to the princely sum of €5.

CONTACT

Nautilus Yachting Holidays, tel: 01732 867445, www.nautilus-yachting.com

