

The Northern Echo

We are sailing...

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By Bill Oldfield

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First-time skipper Bill Oldfield enjoys a flotilla holiday in the Ionian Sea

SO, you don't think you could hire a yacht. Neither did I. But I was wrong. And so was the church clock on the quayside; consistently.

I have spent decades hankering after my own yacht, but the reality was limited by it being a rich person's pastime and by my lack of any experience of sailing one. But finally I decided to bite the bullet, took a Day Skipper's course, signed up for a flotilla holiday and sampled the delights of the Ionian Sea in the northern Mediterranean.

After a two-and-a-half-hour flight from Manchester and only a 20-minute transfer from Preveza airport, we were travelling down the hill into the picturesque Greek village of Palairos. We gasped as we got our first glimpse of the achingly beautiful harbour, surrounded by little tavernas and shops, and a gleaming regimented row of yachts bobbing gently on an azure sea. Questions sprung to my mind. Which one is ours? What's it going to be like? Will my non-swimming, never-been-on-a-yacht wife hate every minute of this week-long floating holiday?

It was as we were disembarking the minibus and carrying our cases down the pontoon to our 39ft temporary home Calyce, that we heard the village church clock strike the hour - despite showing 15 minutes past. Somehow very Greek and reinforcing our impression of a very laidback lifestyle, it was to become a running joke - as well as helping to distract my worryingly-quiet wife.

We spent the next couple of hours acquainting ourselves with the boat, which was beautifully fitted out with all home comforts, three double cabins, two loos with showers and more than enough headroom in the saloon, though we spent a lot more time in the cockpit on deck with something cold and refreshing in our hands.

We were shown around and literally shown the ropes by our flotilla leaders for the week, Tim and Anna, two knowledgeable, impossibly blonde and bronzed twenty-somethings, in whom we quickly found confidence and hung on their every word.

They were employed, and the boats were owned, by Odysseus Yachting. While we'd booked the holiday through their UK-based agent, Nautilus Yachting, it quickly became apparent that the friendly people at Odysseus cared about their boats, the area and, most of all, their customers, a fact perfectly demonstrated later in the week when we reported that it was becoming increasingly difficult to pull on one of the ropes. It transpired that a pulley was snagging, right at the top of the mast. So it was

a delight to watch Tim, assisted by us holding his safety ropes, shimmy 50ft up the mast and, with a squirt of oil, free the offending part. I've a video to prove it.

And so began a week of bliss. Each morning we'd meet in a cafe with Tim and Anna to hear the weather forecast and discuss where we were going to end up that evening. They'd tell us what to avoid, what to look out for and which routes we might like to try during the day, with suggestions for bays in which to anchor for a swim or a barbecue or a glass of wine.

And then we were left largely to ourselves. We knew that our leaders' boat was always relatively close and on the end of a radio or mobile phone call if needed. But to all intents and purposes, it was if we were on our own yacht, making our own decisions and doing what we wanted.

The Southern Ionian is an ideal place to learn how to sail and put your recently acquired skippering qualification into practice. There were four of us on our yacht. Our two friends had been sailing once or twice beforehand and so had some experience of what to expect and which ropes to pull, but you could hardly call us hardened sailors.

We usually spent each morning motoring between the islands, practising our anchoring technique over lunchtime, which enabled us to sunbathe, dive off the back of the boat and swim or explore. And then, as the wind usually rose, helpfully, during the afternoon, we'd act like real sailors, going-about, gybing, tacking and allowing the boat to heel over.

As evening approached and the wind started to die down, we'd head for the previously-agreed port and, as we approached harbour, we'd radio the flotilla skipper who'd be waiting to catch our ropes and help us avoid bumping into other boats and harbour-edge taverna tables.

The islands are home to the most beautiful little harbour villages and we berthed in such wonderful-sounding places as Meganissi, Fiskardo and Frikes; all with breath-taking scenery, ancient history and quiet little tavernas serving freshly-caught fish and local wine.

If you like being on the water and in the sunshine, it's difficult to beat the Mediterranean. And for those new to sailing yachts, or who just want a really relaxing time, the Ionian is ideal. It's a benign and beautiful sea.

If you don't have a skippering qualification, Odysseus Yachting can provide you with an onboard skipper and all you have to do is drink gin and tonic while working on your tan - oh, and occasionally pull on a rope when asked.

So, at the end of the week, the final port was our starting point, Palairos. At which point, because we'd had such a wonderful time, with none of the expected nautical dramas, my landlubber wife declared that she couldn't wait to do it again next year. She's even learning to swim.

So that's the plan. And I'd bet money on the church clock still striking the hour, while showing it's a quarter past. Very Greek indeed.

Travel facts

Flotilla fleet owned and operated by Odysseus Yachting odysseus.gr. Booked through Nautilus Yachting www.nautilusyachting.com

Seven days flotilla holidays on a three-cabin yacht range from around £1,000 in the low season up to £2,956 with accommodation for up to seven people. Flights from Manchester to Preveza from around £280 per person.