

## OUR GREEK ODYSSEY

### Mike and Helen Norris

*(Mike and Helen do get around! In our last issue Mike was sailing their Wayfarer dinghy around the Isle of Wight, and before that we heard about visits to latitudes as far apart as the Lofoten Islands and the Canaries aboard Island Drifter, their 37ft cutter-rigged Countess ketch, which they have owned since 1999.*

*Follow their travels at [www.islanddriftermediterranean2017.blogspot.com](http://www.islanddriftermediterranean2017.blogspot.com).)*

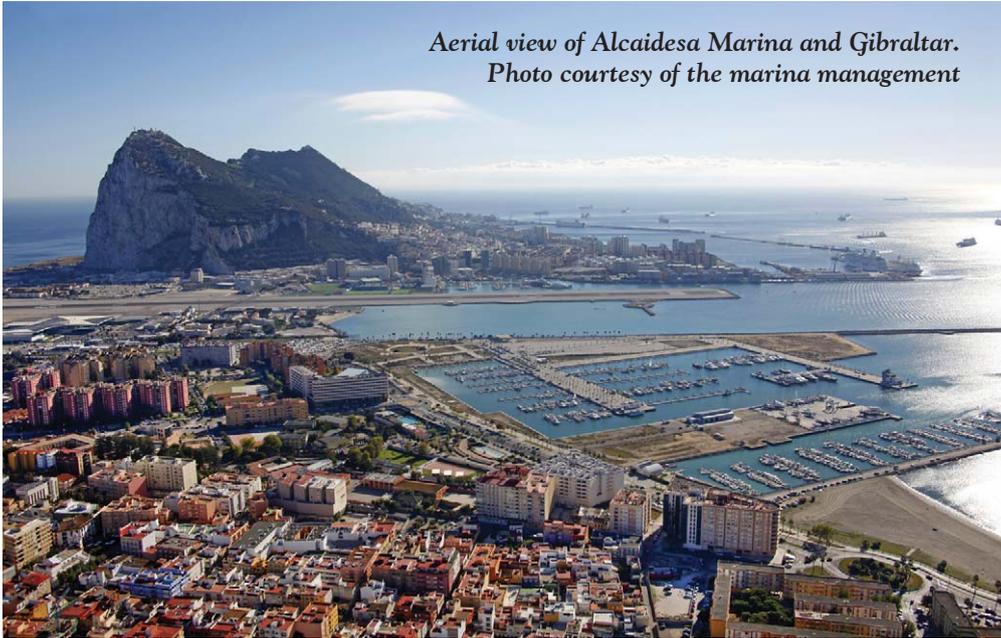
We'd always intended that our 2017 six-month cruise would include both a decent-length passage sail and the start of our three-year cruise of the Greek Islands. So on returning to Lagos, Portugal in June 2016 after a six-month winter cruise of the Canary Islands, we again left *Island Drifter* in the excellent Sopramar boatyard. We returned to Portugal at the end of February 2017 to recommission, launch and trial her before heading off for Greece, combining our sea trial with visits to a couple of anchorages along the Algarve and to Albufeira marina, none of which we had visited before.

*Portimão  
anchorage  
in the  
Algarve,  
behind  
its large  
eastern  
breakwater*



Our subsequent 200 mile passage at the end of March took us east across the Bay of Cadiz, past Cape Trafalgar, and through the Strait of Gibraltar on a broad reach in a force 5 – perfect conditions! Alcaidesa Marina in La Línea in Spain, where we halted, is adjacent to the Gibraltar airport runway. There we awaited a favourable weather window into the Med. Alcaidesa is less than half the price of the Gibraltar marinas, and one can still stop in Gib to buy duty-free fuel at 58p a litre.

A fast, 24-hour broad reach from Gibraltar east and then northeast along the Costa del Sol and Costa Dorada took us to the Balearic Islands, where Santa Ponsa bay near Palma provided safe refuge when we were headed by a strong easterly as we approached Mallorca. The anchorage is said to be one of the best in the island, and at 108€ per night we were not tempted by the adjacent marina. Two days later we left at midnight to catch a northerly front to, down, and around the south of Sardinia. Thereafter, the wind steadily dropped and we ended up using the iron genoa and autopilot.



*Aerial view of Alcaidesa Marina and Gibraltar.  
Photo courtesy of the marina management*

Thirty miles from Sicily the motor of our 16-year-old autopilot ground to a halt, so we pulled into Palermo's old harbour and berthed on a pontoon in one of the port's several small boatyards. We were told it would take four to six weeks to repair or replace the motor, so Helen flew back to Stansted with the 12kg motor in her hand luggage, and drove to Lewmar's factory in Havant, Hampshire. She was back in Palermo, problem solved, in four days. Then it took us an hour to fit and test the motor, before heading off east to catch the tidal gate through the two miles of overfalls in the Strait of Messina for our 300-mile passage to Malta.



*Our third crew member, steering downwind in a very fresh breeze*





Overfalls  
in the  
Strait of  
Messina

We'd always intended to visit Malta, to explore Valletta's enormous natural harbours and medieval fortifications and to acquaint ourselves better with the island's siege history.

*Malta's George Cross,  
which was awarded to the  
population of the island*

By contrast with our passages thus far, the 450 mile sail from Malta to Crete was in light variable winds. Crete is the largest and most important island in the Aegean and is dominated by a mountain backbone which reaches 2489m. The north coast is fertile and well populated, but the south is barren, drops steeply into the sea and has only isolated hamlets.

Walking the Samaria Gorge was on our bucket list – and apparently on many other people's too. The scenery was striking, but one could only enjoy it fully during the 16 mile hike from the White Mountains to the sea after the initial crowds had spread out along the route.



*Helen hugging the cliffside at the narrowest part of the Samaria Gorge*

Visiting the Commonwealth War Graves in Suda Bay and the German Graves at Maleme were moving experiences. The adjacent airstrip at Maleme was where part of the German airborne forces landed to establish a bridgehead during their successful invasion of Crete in 1941. Both sides suffered heavy casualties, but learnt different lessons from the engagement. The Germans never again used parachute forces on a major assault, while the Allies dramatically expanded their airborne forces and used them effectively with major drops on D-Day, at 'Market Garden' (Arnhem) and the Rhine Crossing.

We felt obliged to visit the old Venetian town and small harbour of Rethymno, described somewhat euphemistically by Rod Heikell in his pilot book as 'one of the most attractive spots in Greece'. Unfortunately, while we were authorised to stay in the old harbour, the restaurateurs who dominate the quayside wouldn't let us 'park' – so we left!

Further east it was fascinating to sail in the enclosed lagoon at Spinalonga and watch the seabed slipping past, sometimes no more than a metre under the keel. Anchoring is permitted anywhere in the lagoon – depending, obviously, on wind direction. While there, we visited the lagoon's island to see the old Venetian fort and the abandoned leper colony



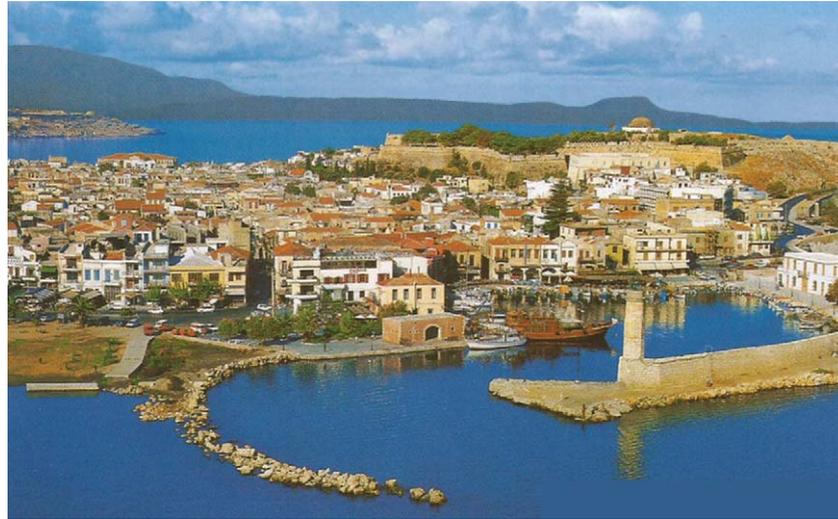
*Commonwealth War Graves at Suda Bay, Crete*

*The old Venetian harbour and town of Rethymno*

that still housed inmates as late as 1957.

Eight miles south of Spinalonga

is the town and marina of Agios Nikolaos, setting for the 1970s TV soap *The Lotus Eaters*. We had thought of leaving *Island Drifter* there for the winter, but were disappointed by the marina and boatyard's lack of security and the number of long-term liveaboards.



**The Dodecanese Islands**

These islands, close to the Turkish coast, were passed as reparation from the Turks to the Italians in 1919 and from the Italians to the Greeks in 1947.

The prevailing northwesterly winds were ideally suited for our 30 hour northeasterly passage from Crete to Rhodes, where we moored bows-to in the old harbour of Mandraki in Rhodes town. The entrance to Mandraki is said to be where the 105ft Colossus of Rhodes stood for 65 years from 290BC until it and a large part of the city collapsed in a massive earthquake. In its time, the Colossus was one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Bounded by a moated wall breached by eleven gates, the Old City of Rhodes is generally considered to be the best-preserved medieval fortification in Europe, and is an UNESCO Heritage Site. The town's defences were constructed by the Knights of St John, who

*Our route through the Dodecanese Islands*



*Part of the wall which surrounds the Old City of Rhodes, viewed across the inner harbour for local boats*



moved to Rhodes after giving up their aspirations in respect of

Jerusalem. The fortifications proved a formidable barrier to invaders, and in particular to Turkish ambition. It finally took a six-month siege by 200,000 Turks for them to take the city, which had been held by 290 Knights and 6000 Greek soldiers. At the end of the siege the Knights negotiated a formal withdrawal to Malta, where they built the fortifications we had seen in Valletta's Grand Harbour.

The anchorage in Lindos Bay, on the east coast of the island, is as good as you'll get – well protected from the elements, good holding, and with a view of white cubed houses clinging to the surrounding hills beneath an ancient fort and acropolis.

From Rhodes onwards we had to contend with the prevailing northwesterly wind as we made our way north through the southern Dodecanese. Our next stop was at Simi, which is tucked well into the shadow of the Turkish mainland, being only 2 miles from it. The island is very barren and rocky, and its lack of water has traditionally been

its most pressing problem – albeit, in retrospect, possibly its saving grace since it has never been able to develop a tourist-based hotel industry. Instead, local traders and restaurateurs concentrate on relieving day-trippers of their money before returning them by ferry whence they came.

Simi's golden age was from the 17th to the 19th century, when its shipbuilding and sponge-fishing industries flourished, and the neoclassical mansions which surround the port are said to have



*Testing our aft tape rode and lightweight Danforth anchor*



*Lindos Bay, Rhodes*

changed very little since that time. Painted in warm shades of ochre, powder blue, cream and rose, the mansions climb up the steep slopes around the harbour and create an amphitheatre of fine, local medieval architecture.

We gave Tilos, the island immediately south of Nisiros, a miss as although it would have been a pleasant enough sail on a beam reach, it was in the wrong direction – we wanted to keep moving north. In any case, we weren't desperate to see their principal attraction – a museum housing ten bones from a supposed 4ft foot tall European pygmy elephant.

Nisiros is a semi-active volcanic island 20 miles south of Kos. Its small harbour at Mandraki, the capital, is the island's ferry port, and each morning day-trippers arrive, are bussed around the island, shown the volcanoes, fed, and shipped out again at 3pm. We moored in Pali, the island's only other harbour. There was only 0.2m under our keel at the entrance,

hence it does not cater for ferries, commercial shipping or superyachts. On arrival, in 40°C, we simply berthed, jumped ship,



*Island Drifter moored bows-to in Symi harbour*



*Celebrating Mike's birthday in the Afrodite Taverna at Pali*

and walked 15m to the nearest *taverna* where we had cold beers and *mezes* for lunch. Another day we celebrated Mike's birthday with fellow cruisers, enjoying a lunch which lasted from 2pm until 10pm. Suffice to say it was a memorable occasion – insofar as the attendees can remember it...

Rod Heikell's statement that, 'Large areas of the island, in fact anywhere there is anything vaguely resembling a beach, have been turned into some of the tackiest resorts in Greece' put us off going to Kos. Kalymnos to its north, by comparison, is sparsely populated and generally unspoilt. It is a long, high, craggy lump of rock that appears to grow out of the sea like some prehistoric monster. It has several good anchorages, and we pulled into Palionisos on the east coast. It is well protected from the elements, being at the end of a small fjord enclosed by steep cliffs, and free mooring buoys have been laid by the two local *tavernas* at the head of the bay. The anchorage is, by any standard, a stunningly picturesque location. Once the centre of the Greek sponge-fishing, Kalymnos had a sponge fleet numbering hundreds of boats. Some of the grand villas in Pothia, the capital on the south coast, bear witness to the considerable wealth accumulated by local merchants at that time.

Leros lies close north of Kalymnos, and in antiquity the two islands were referred to as one – the Kalydnian Islands. Now they are separated by a shallow, narrow channel, which can quickly become very rough in bad weather. The large well-protected harbour of Lakki is the main ferry port of the island. It also contains two marinas, a boatyard and a free anchorage. In the 1930s, when the island was under Italian rule, Mussolini chose Lakki as the main base for the Italian navy in the Dodecanese and built a new town at the head of the bay, in art deco style with wide boulevards.

From Lakki we sailed the ten miles north to Agmar Marine's Partheni boatyard. There we picked up a waiting buoy, on which we stayed for five days decommissioning



*Palionisos anchorage at dusk seen from a nearby taverna*

*Island Drifter* ready for lift out. We then spent a day and a half in the boatyard effecting a few repairs and sorting out those jobs that can only be completed ashore. The boatyard is adjacent to the island's small airport, served by Olympic

Airways which flies from various UK locations via Athens. Very convenient – particularly so if the yard is as secure as it appears to be and its claims to be able to take on 'any' work prove valid.

In total we covered 2500 miles this summer on our cruise from Lagos to Leros, and visited 35 locations. Next year we hope to visit many more. Thereafter, who knows?

*Agmar Marine Boatyard at Partheni through a fish-eye lens.  
Photo courtesy of the management*

