

OUR GREEK ODYSSEY, CONTINUED

Mike and Helen Norris

(Flying Fish 2017/2 carried Our Greek Odyssey, Mike and Helen's account of their 2500 mile passage from Portugal to Greece, aboard Island Drifter, their 37ft cutter-rigged Countess ketch, and their subsequent visits to Crete and the Dodecanese islands in the southeast Aegean. Visit their blog at www.islanddriftergreece2018.blogspot.com.)

At the end of November 2017 we left *Island Drifter* laid up for the winter in Agmar Marine's excellent boatyard at Partheni on the Greek island of Leros. At the beginning of March the following year we flew back to Leros via Athens to continue our 'Greek Odyssey'. This time we planned to cruise and explore the Sporades Islands in the Northern Aegean. (charts 01 & 02)

We spent our first six weeks living aboard in the boatyard while working on *ID*, with the help of the yard's engineering staff where required. As it was at the end of the

rainy season (December to February), the weather was well suited to our task, each day being just like a very good spring or autumn one in the UK.

Helen servicing deck fittings

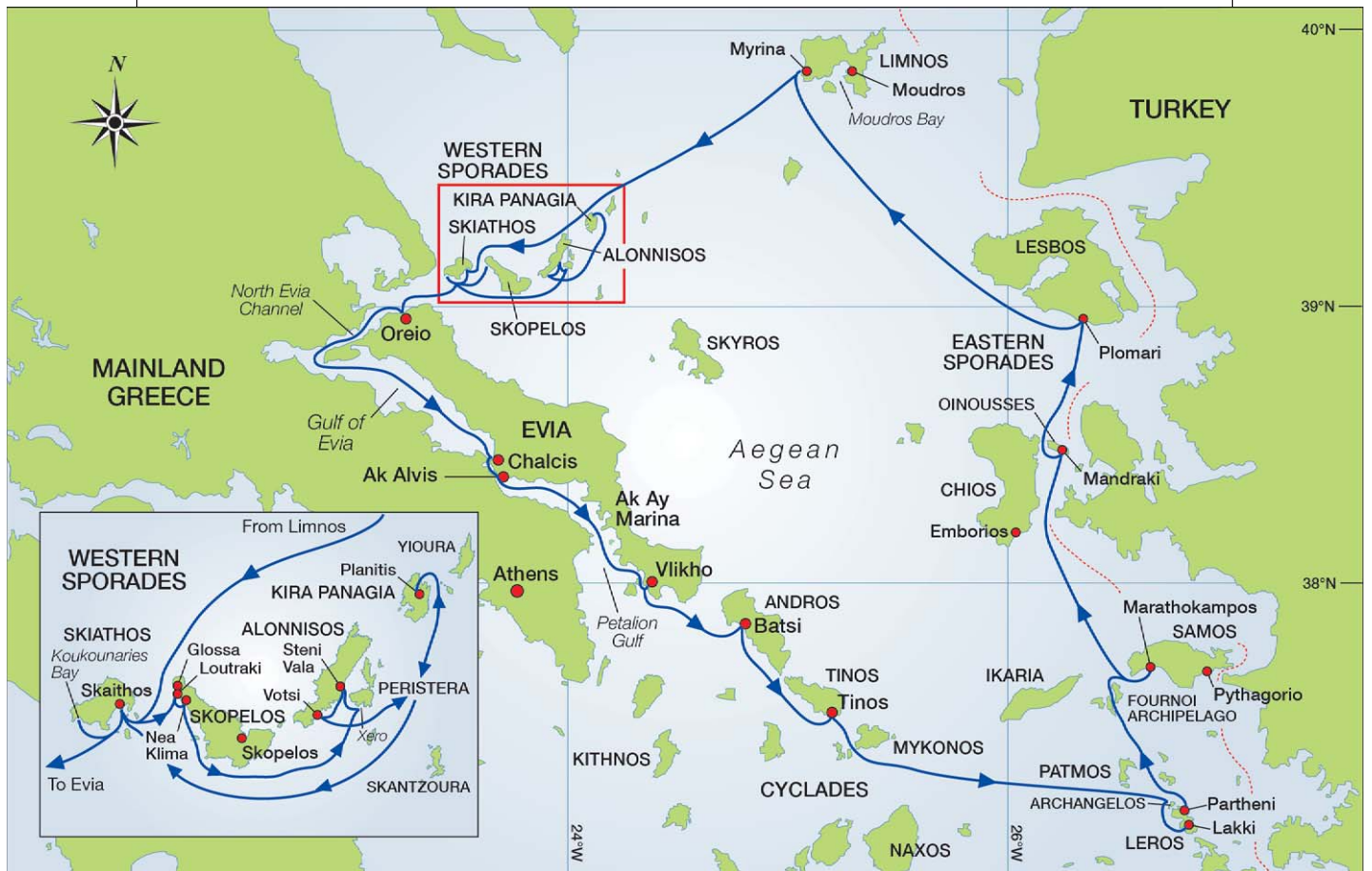
The Eastern Sporades

The eight principal islands of the Eastern Sporades run up the northeast Turkish coast for 200 miles from the Fournoi archipelago in the south to Limnos in the north. They do not form an immediately recognisable group, as each island has strong characteristics of



its own. What they do have in common, with the exception of Samos, is that they receive fewer visitors than the other island groups and therefore generally have a more authentic Greek atmosphere.

Fortunately, in April and May the strong Meltemi wind from the north had not set in and it was therefore fairly easy to make our way north, often with the assistance of a southerly wind, and our friends Max and Sue Walker joined us for this part of our cruise. Max has run his own international yacht delivery company for the past thirty years and Mike got most of his delivery work through him.





*Marathokampos with
Mount Kerkis in the background*

On our passage north to Samos we cruised through the Fournoi archipelago with its many attractive and well-protected anchorages. Only two of the islands are inhabited, though the principal one, from which the archipelago takes its name, has an active fishing fleet and boatyard. Visitors are few and far between, and Fournoi town's ambience is reminiscent of 1970s Greece with its slow pace of life and cobbled streets shaded by leafy mulberry trees.

West of Samos lies the mountainous island of Ikaria, named after Icarus who, legend has it, fell into the sea close to the island. Today Ikaria's uniqueness lies in the fact that its inhabitants are proven to live longer than the population of the Greek mainland or any other Greek island. Indeed, Ikarians live on average ten years longer than the population of any US state or European country.

Samos has an international airport, yacht charter fleets, some excellent beaches and scenery, and caters seriously for tourism. The large town of Pythagorio on the southeast coast is only a mile or so from Turkey – indeed the island's mountainous east/west spine is a geological extension of Mount Mycale in Turkey. The town, built over the ancient city of Samos, is today named after Pythagoras (he of triangular fame), who was born there. We particularly liked Marathokampos, an attractive, well-protected fishing harbour and low-key resort spectacularly located at the foot of 5000ft Mount Kerkis on the southwest coast of the island.

Some 50 miles north of Samos, on the southeast corner of Chios lies Emborios anchorage – a small indented cove, well protected from the prevailing northerly wind. In the summer the town becomes a smart holiday resort, visitors coming primarily to enjoy the town's beaches at Mavro Volia, which are comprised of large, smooth, black volcanic stones that retain the heat of the sun.

Since a southerly gale was forecast we pulled into the well-protected harbour of Mandraki on the islet of Oinousses, less than a mile off the northeast coast of Chios.



Island Drifter at anchor in Emborios cove

The island has a seafaring tradition that belies its size. Its large, modern, concrete quay – financed, we believe, by local shipping magnates – and the large Merchant Naval Officers' Academy, mean that Mandraki differs considerably from the rough and ready rustic charm of many other small ports.

Thirty miles north of Oinousses lies the port of Plomari on the south coast of Lesbos. We were delighted to meet up with Scandinavian friends who have second homes there, whom we'd first met when cruising in the Baltic in 2012. With them we went on local walks and visited both an ouzo distillery and an organic olive plantation. At the latter we enjoyed an outstanding four-hour barbecue of local lamb, salads and wine, eating at long trestle tables in the middle of the estate's olive groves.



Mandraki harbour quay on Oinousses, with the mountains of Chios in the background

From Lesbos we sailed northwest overnight (unusual in Greece) to Limnos, our final, 90 mile, passage in the Eastern Sporades. Once away from light pollution the view of the stars, and in particular the Milky Way, was truly magnificent. Myrina, the main town and port on the island, is overlooked by a huge Venetian fort on the hilly peninsula which

*Enjoying a
communal
barbecue in the
olive groves*

shelters the harbour from the prevailing northerly wind. The town's old quarter, with its narrow alleys, is shaded by giant vines that date back to the Ottoman occupation.

The enormous bay of Moudros, to the east of Myrina, was the base from which the ill-fated Gallipoli Campaign was launched in 1915.

Casualty numbers were horrific. For Australians and New Zealanders the Gallipoli Campaign holds particular poignancy, and both countries commemorate Anzac Day annually on 25 April.



Island Drifter at anchor in Myrina harbour, Limnos



The Western Sporades

For some unknown reason the Western Sporades are also known as the Northern Sporades! Some 100 miles from Limnos, they were our next target destination as we were due to drop Max and Sue off at the international airport at Skiathos, the group's capital, and pick up our next guest, Peter Coy. With a convenient wind shift to the northeast, we enjoyed another overnight sail from Limnos to the Western Sporades.

The principal chain of islands in the group spreads for 50 miles northeast from Skiathos, itself only three miles off mainland Greece. These islands are in fact an extension of the Greek mainland's Petalion peninsula. Skyros, some 40 miles southeast of the principal chain, while included in the Western Sporades, has more in common historically, culturally and economically with the larger island of Evia to its west.

The four larger inhabited islands of the Western Sporades – Skiathos and Skopelos, and to a lesser extent Alonnisos and Skyros – are, unlike the islands of the Eastern Sporades, very much on the main tourist track. All the other rocky islets that form the National Maritime Park are uninhabited, and indeed access is mostly restricted or prohibited.

Skiathos is all about beaches, bars, restaurants and nightlife, and tourist and charter boats dominate the town quay which can best be described as 'pleasantly chaotic'. We therefore chose to drop our anchor in the town anchorage, where planes coming in to land at the airport at the head of the bay sweep overhead, seemingly at mast height.

Early the following morning we motored over to the empty ferry dock, where Max and Sue disembarked to get a taxi to the airport. We then headed off to Skopelos where Helen, who had been suffering for some time from a trapped nerve in her neck, had located an excellent lady physiotherapist via the internet. We therefore based ourselves in Skopelos for ten days until Peter Coy joined us for our cruise of the Western Sporades islands.

After another night in Skiathos town anchorage we picked up Peter from the empty ferry quay at 0600, then headed for Koukounaries Bay on the southwest coast. It claims to have the best beach in Greece, but unfortunately, like most good beaches in the Med, was dominated by parasols and sunloungers belonging to adjacent *tavernas*, hotels and apartments, which detracted somewhat from the bay's natural beauty. Water skiers, speedboats, parasailors, towed plastic doughnuts, wake boards and jet skiers didn't help matters either!



Helen on the rack

Skopelos, the next island to the east, is larger and more rugged than Skiathos and its concessions to tourism are lower key and in better taste. Much of the island's countryside and coast is as spectacular as in the film *Mamma Mia!*, some scenes of which were filmed on the island. The towns of Skopelos and Glossa are the most attractive in the whole of the Sporades. Loutraki port is near the north end of the island's west coast. With its splendid beaches and the very attractive village of Glossa perched on the hill above, it remains, even with the daily influx of ferries bringing tourists, a very pleasant location. The Taverna Agnanti in Glossa has a stunning view of the harbour and serves food 'to die for' – as Mike nearly did when he saw the prices on the menu. Nea Klima, further south, is another charming village that also continues



Peter enjoying his first of many souvlakis on our cruise! Unlike us, Peter built his own Countess from scratch over a period of six years so is knowledgeable about boat construction



Loutraki harbour



Island Drifter moored bows-to at Steni Vala

to survive on a modest summer tourist trade. It has particular appeal for cruisers since there is an excellent sandy beach with crystal-clear water adjacent to the quay.

We returned to Skopelos port for the last of Helen's physio treatments (her physiotherapist worked wonders). The houses and churches of the old town are piled up on top of each other, creating an amphitheatre above the harbour. Its narrow alleys restrict access to all but pedestrians, donkeys and the occasional suicidal motorcyclist. It is a truly delightful location.

Before visiting the island of Alonnisos, northeast of Skopelos, we stopped in the small cove of Xero on the south coast of Peristera, a smaller, virtually uninhabited, islet east of Alonnisos. Not another yacht or house in sight, just crystal-clear water and excellent protection.

Alonnisos itself is more rugged and wilder than its southern neighbours, but no less green. The island is more up-market than either Skiathos or Skopelos and hence attracts fewer tourists. We pulled in to Steni Vala, a small, shallow pretty cove, where we moored with our bows to the quay. From there, and with a northerly gale forecast, we sailed all of three miles to Votsi, a small harbour with excellent all-round shelter favoured by the local fishermen who have taken over the €5,500,000 quay, which was financed by the EU for visiting yachts! There was only limited room to swing at anchor in the harbour but we overcame the problem by putting out an aft shoreline. Fishermen apart, Votsi is a very attractive harbour.

Once the gale had passed we headed for the anchorage at Planitis on the northern coast of Panagia. This large double bay has a very narrow (82m) entrance where, in strong northerly winds, a considerable sea piles up – being pushed towards it by the wind and sea is said to be a very frightening experience. Conversely, once in it is impossible to get out until the weather abates, though regardless of the conditions outside, inside the bay it is always calm.

Finally we returned to Skiathos port, where Mike took Peter ashore by dinghy at 0400 in pouring rain to catch his early flight back to Heathrow. The rain, thunder and lightning continued for two solid days, but fortunately Mike had spotted an empty berth on the quay while taking Peter ashore so we quickly moved into it. Some sailing friends nearby had recently been struck by lightning, so we were keen to avoid isolation.

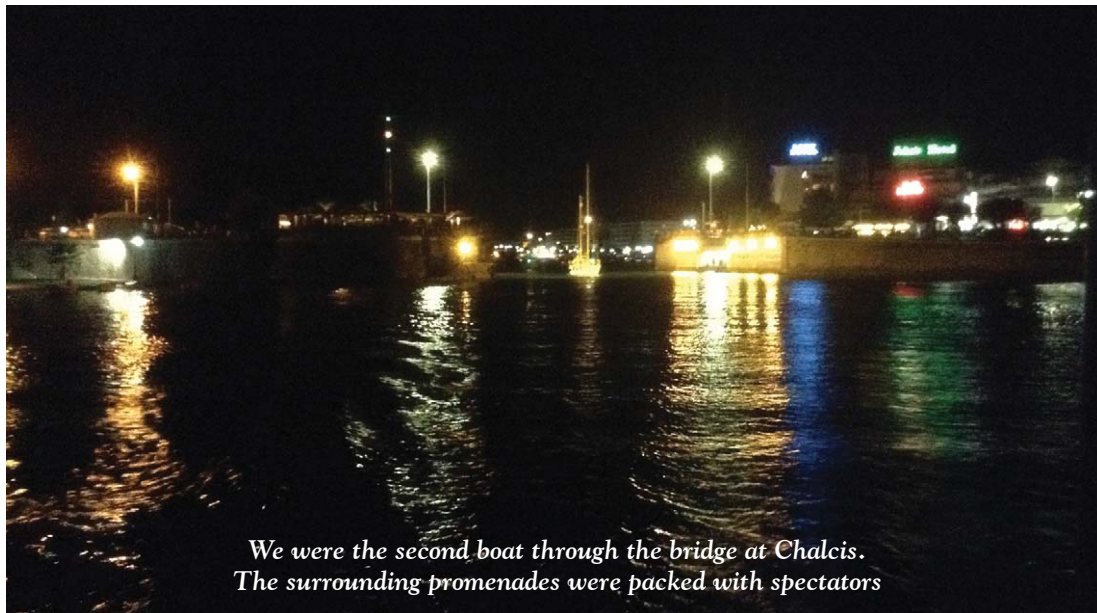


Evia and its gulfs and channels

Peter's departure was the signal to start our return to Leros – south via the Evia Channel, and then east-southeast across the northern islands of the Cyclades.

Evia, at some 90 miles long, is the second largest island in Greece after Crete. A mountainous spine divides the island's eastern cliffs, which face the prevailing northerly Meltemi wind, from the well-protected west coast and Evia Channel. Ferries link the island to the mainland, as do two bridges at Chalcis, the island's capital. Evia's proximity to mainland Greece and in particular to Athens has meant that many second homes and holiday complexes now exist on the island. Even so it is not on the main tourist route for foreign visitors, albeit that Greece's enemies invariably approached Athens from the island! Fortunately it is so large and wild that its natural beauty has not been seriously affected. The bulk of the island's anchorages and resorts are on the west coast, surrounded on adjacent plains by grain fields, olive groves and pine forests. The mainland coast is generally more rugged, sparsely populated and either barren or covered by *maquis*.

After leaving Skiathos we enjoyed a broad reach to the mouth of the North Evia Channel. Thereafter, as we progressed into the channel, the wind slowly dropped and



we ended up motoring to the small port of Oreio on the north coast of the island, our target destination for the night. In ancient times Oreio was an important maritime city and the remains of an acropolis that guarded the harbour can be seen above the town. Today it is off the beaten tourist track, although it does have a modest summer trade. After arriving, we enjoyed our customary G&Ts while watching the sun setting over the mountains of the mainland.

To be certain of arriving in good time to sign in and pay the bridge toll at Chalcis, we departed at dawn next morning for the 60 mile passage down the northern Gulf of Evia. Chalcis is one of the ten largest cities in Greece and, not surprisingly, it has an urban rather than an island feel. Right in the centre of the city, beneath the unique 40m-wide drawbridge which spans the channel to the mainland, the gulf waters swirl by at speeds of up to 7 knots. Then, for some unknown reason, every few hours the current reverses. Aristotle is reputed to have jumped into the water in frustration over his inability to explain this phenomenon and even today there is no entirely satisfactory explanation for this capricious current.

The first bridge was built in 411 BC and had numerous successors before the current bridge, which slides back into a recess under the road, was constructed in 1962. It is opened once every 24 hours, always at slack water and at night to avoid inconveniencing the heavy traffic that uses it. Once through the old bridge, we motored south through the city, passed under the 30m-high suspension bridge built in 1993, and eventually emerged into the Southern Gulf of Evia via the narrows at Ak Alvis.

South of the sprawling suburbs of Chalcis Evia becomes increasingly barren, bleak and windswept, and in places very narrow. Once in the Southern Gulf we pushed on south through the night, passing through the narrows at Ak Ay Marina into the Petalion Gulf. Eventually we anchored in the peaceful, well-sheltered sandy bay of Vlikho towards the southern end of the island, had breakfast, and then slept until noon. Then we swam in the crystal-clear water and chilled out.

The Northern Cyclades

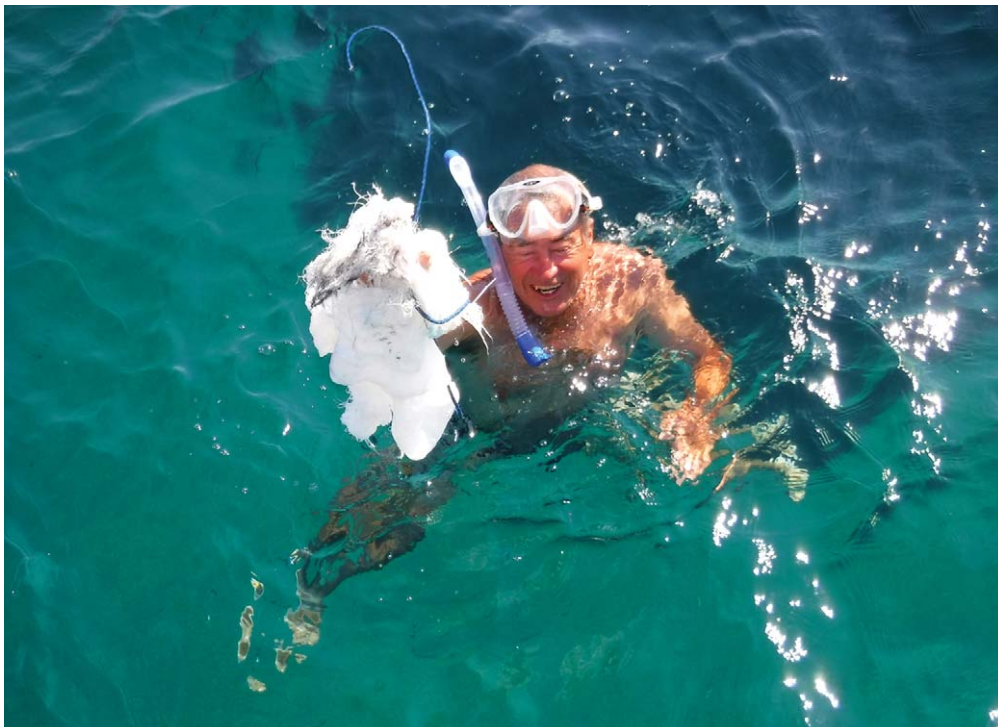
The second leg of our return to Leros was via the Northern Cyclades. The Cyclades as a whole are the central group of islands in the Aegean, so named because they more or less encircle Delphi, the ancient centre of trade and worship. We plan to cruise these islands properly in 2019, but in the meantime used them as convenient stepping-stones on our way back to Leros.

Andros, the northernmost and second largest island in the Cyclades, is very mountainous with a summit of 3721 feet and snow-capped peaks in winter. It is a walker's paradise – valleys with streams and ancient stone mills cleave the wild mountains, each village has its own spring, and waterfalls cascade down the hillsides for most of the year. The island is popular with Greek holidaymakers and has become something of a weekend-cottage suburb for Athenians, but only a few 'in the know' foreign tourists go there. We anchored in Batsí town harbour – though not without difficulty as a plastic sack had become wound around the prop and left us significantly underpowered. Batsí is as pleasant a location as the pilot book indicated – very Greek, quiet at night, a good town beach, very clear water, and no ferries or tripper boats.

Tinos, our next stepping-stone to the southeast, has a particularly rugged coastline although the interior is very fertile. On our way there the wind blew at over 30 knots, so we ruled out the possibility of stopping at one of the dozen anchorages on the southwest coast. Instead, we headed for and eventually moored in Tinos town port near the south end of the island, as it has an excellent reputation for all-round shelter.

There are over sixty small villages peppered throughout the island. The interior is extensively terraced and cultivated, and swathes of oleander bushes and other

Mike with the plastic sack that had wrapped itself around the prop





Tinos harbour viewed from the east

colourful shrubs were in full bloom. Tinos is particularly famous for its old, elaborate, Venetian dovecotes – many the size of a two-storey house! – and the marble which it both exports and uses as a local building material. Even the water points on the quay were works of art in carved marble.

The vast majority of visitors are Greeks, who come to see the impressive all-marble church of Panagia Evangelistria. It was erected over the spot where, in 1822, a Greek Orthodox nun now canonised as St Pelagia, the patron saint of Greece, was directed

Hydrovane, towed generator and mizzen all enjoying a good workout



in a dream to discover an icon of the Virgin Mary. This seemingly proved capable of effecting miracle cures for the sick and disabled, and is currently housed in the church. There are two major annual pilgrimages during which Tinos is inundated by the faithful and the desperate.

A 24-hour weather window of unusual but favourable (for us at least) west-northwest winds was forecast, so we decided to take advantage of it and depart two days earlier than planned for Leros, some 90 miles to the southeast. The force 6 wind proved perfect for a Countess, which likes a bit of a breeze, and we enjoyed probably the best passage we've had so far in Greece – a broad reach with two reefs in both the main and genoa and with the mizzen up. *ID* happily bowled along at 6 knots on a stable platform. We allowed the third member of crew, our Hydrovane, to steer, made the most of the overnight sail by trailing the towed generator for only the second time since we've been in Greece.

Before decommissioning *Island Drifter* at Lakki and then having her lifted back out into Agmar Marine's boatyard in Partheni, we anchored for a couple of days off the small island of Archangelos, just north of the boatyard, sharing it with just the *taverna* owners and a resident herd of goats.

The colourful Taverna Stigma on Archangelos



After a fairly hectic week in very hot conditions decommissioning *Island Drifter*, we returned to the UK, with plans to return to Greece in mid-September to continue our explorations.

