

CRUISING THE NORTHERN COAST OF GREECE

Mike and Helen Norris

(Once again we join Mike and Helen as they continue their Greek Odyssey aboard Island Drifter, their 37ft Countess ketch – see also Flying Fish 2017/2 and 2018/2.

Earlier this year they were awarded the Water Music Trophy – see page 10 – for their significant and ongoing contribution to the Club in terms of cruising and navigational information, both in Flying Fish and on their blog at www.islanddriftergreece2018.blogspot.com.)

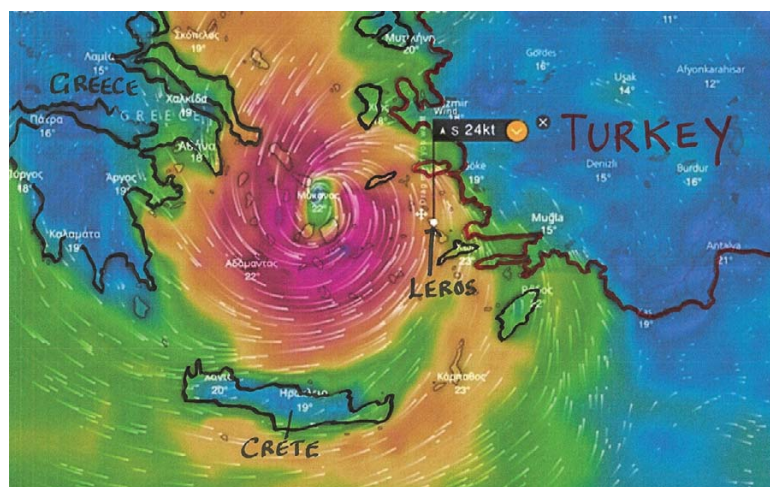
It was only when we sailed in the Sporades Islands that the cruising potential of the north coast of the Greek mainland became apparent. To paraphrase pilot and travel books: 'It is a sea seldom cruised by yachtsmen, yet it offers some of the greatest coastal scenery in Greece, a different history and culture, excellent harbours, ports and anchorages, and some of the finest beaches in the Mediterranean.'

Today Northern Greece is comprised of large parts of what were Thrace and Macedon (Macedonia). Other than for a short period under Alexander the Great in the 3rd century BC, these were never part of Ancient Greece or, indeed, the Republic of Greece after the 1821–30 War of Independence. In fact, for approximately 500 years prior to 1922, they were under Ottoman (Turkish) rule. In consequence, the people of Northern Greece are of a significantly wider ethnic mix than those in the south.

The climate is more Balkan than Mediterranean with greater extremes of temperature throughout the year – it can even snow at sea level. The terrain is very mountainous and therefore generates higher average rainfall, and hence is greener and more densely wooded, while its coastal plains, through which large rivers flow from the mountains, are fertile and well cultivated. From a sailing viewpoint, the winds are lighter since the area is less influenced by the *meltemi*.

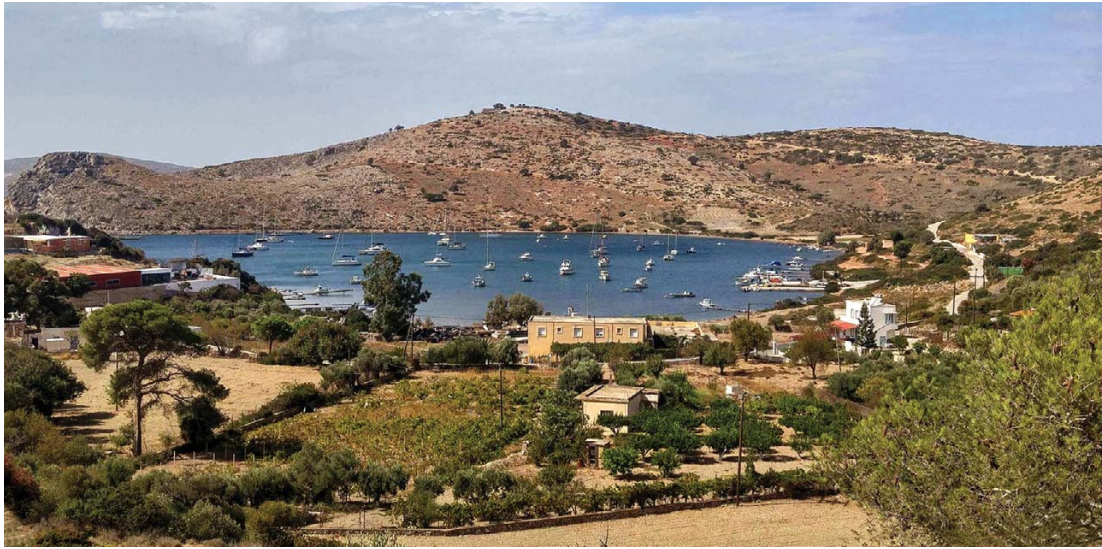
In practical terms, cruising the northern coast first involves getting there against the prevailing northerly wind, then cruising either east or west along the coastline, and finally returning south with the wind. Our 1000 mile circuit from Leros took over two

months. The 350 mile passage north was initially delayed by a *medicane* – the Mediterranean equivalent of a hurricane – which, after trashing Malta and parts of Italy,



*The medicane
as depicted on
www.windy.com*





The hurricane hole at Matronas Bay

returned to the Peloponnese before blasting its way up the Aegean. We took shelter in the 'hurricane hole' at Matronas Bay in the north of Leros, where we dug our Rocna anchor well into the glutinous mud and put out 70m of chain. Fortunately the *medicane*, which until 24 hours away was heading directly for us, veered north up the centre of the Aegean. Being on its eastern edge we experienced southerly winds of no more than 35 knots, with no significant fetch in our excellent, almost landlocked, anchorage.

Once the *medicane* began to pass we weighed anchor and headed north in its favourable wake, through the Eastern Sporades to the small fishing and ferry port of Kamariotissa at the west end of Samothraki. On approach this small, isolated island appeared as a dark mass of granite rising abruptly from the sea. It culminates in the lofty peak of Mount Fengari, at 1611m the highest mountain in the Aegean islands. Homer recounts that from there Poseidon, God of the Sea, watched the Trojan Wars unfold.

The island boasts one of the most important archaeological sites in Greece – the Ancient Thracian Sanctuary of the Great Gods. The ruins of the temple city lie on a rocky ridge among wild olive trees and *maquis*. In antiquity the religion revolved around the Thracian fertility figure of the Great Earth Mother. Her consorts, Castor and Pollux, were the patrons of seafarers, hence many sailors were among the numerous

*Ruins of the
ancient Sanctuary
of the Great Gods*





Modern metal depiction of the original marble Winged Victory of Samothrace, now in the Louvre

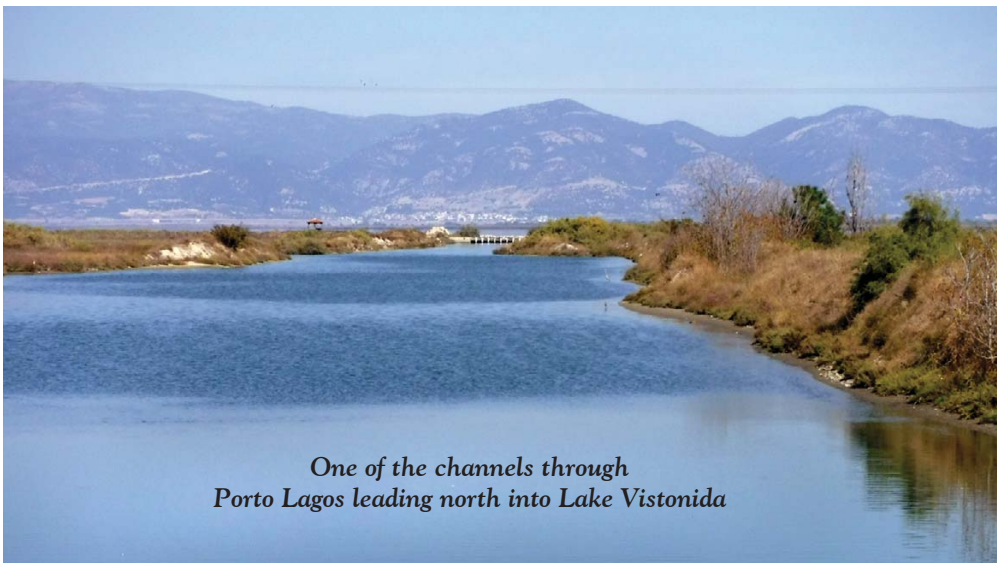
pilgrims attracted to the island and initiated into the rites of the religion. The adjacent museum houses those finds that were not spirited away by early explorers. Of these, the best known, 'The Winged Victory of Samothrace', now stands in the Louvre in Paris.

The Northern Coast of Greece, eastern part

The eastern half of the northern coastline of Greece, from Alexandroupolis to the Khalkidhiki Peninsula, principally comprises alluvial coastal plains, mountains bordering Bulgaria in the distant north, and two inhabited islands, Samothraki and Thassos.

Alexandroupolis, on the mainland some 30 miles northeast of Samothraki, is the capital of Thrace. It is a modern, attractive, bustling city with a cosmopolitan atmosphere, served by an international airport, motorways, railways and a large commercial harbour and ferry port. Given its location and facilities, it has become the centre for cross-border activity between Greece, Turkey and the Balkans. The city's Ethnological Museum is 500m north of the port, in a small 1894 stone Neo-Classical building which forms an exhibit in itself. The museum proudly features the history of the multicultural Thracian region before its partition in 1922.

Porto Lagos, further west, is located in a well-sheltered natural lagoon, connected to the sea by a channel dredged to 6m with long retaining walls at its entrance. The



One of the channels through Porto Lagos leading north into Lake Vistonida

*The impressive 4m statue
of a man carrying a ram in
the museum at Limenas*

town is at the centre of the enormous 100 hectare East Macedonian and Thrace National Park which boasts deltas, lakes, lagoons and wetlands. It has a veritable mosaic of plant life, 277 species of birds nesting or over-wintering, fish which have evolved to survive in the brackish waters of the lakes and lagoons, and local mammals including the golden jackal, European otter and wild cat.

Further west, and only ten miles off the mainland, is Thassos, the most northerly – and greenest – island in Greece. It once enjoyed power and prosperity as a consequence of its large natural harbour, mineral wealth and unlimited supplies of marble. Today its prosperity is based on its enchanting natural beauty, sandy beaches, excellent weather and archaeological sites. The modern town of Limenas was built on the site of the ancient capital of Thassos. In the reception area of the town's archaeological museum stands its principal exhibit – an imposing 4m statue of a man carrying a ram. This was discovered in 1896, buried at the acropolis on the hill overlooking the port.

The principal landmarks in the mainland city of Kavala are its 280m aqueduct, rebuilt

by the Turks in the 16th century based on a Roman design, and the Byzantine citadel on the rocky bluff overlooking the harbour. The outdoor market on the quay is enormous – one can buy almost anything there.





Kavala's open-air Saturday market

The Bay of Eleftherón lies only seven miles south of Kavala, with the Manitsas Marine Boatyard owned by Stavros, a Greek American, in a well-protected cove in its northeast corner. Interestingly, Stavros favours wooden supports for boats, which he considers cope better with earth tremors!

The Khalkidhiki Peninsula

The second half of our cruise of Northern Greece encompassed the Khalkidhiki Peninsula, one of the most prominent geographical features in the Aegean with its three smaller peninsulas of Akti, Sithonia and Cassandra extending like fingers from the hand of Khalkidhiki. By returning to Thassos and stopping at the newly modernised

*A small part
of Limenaria's
magnificent
marble
breakwaters!*

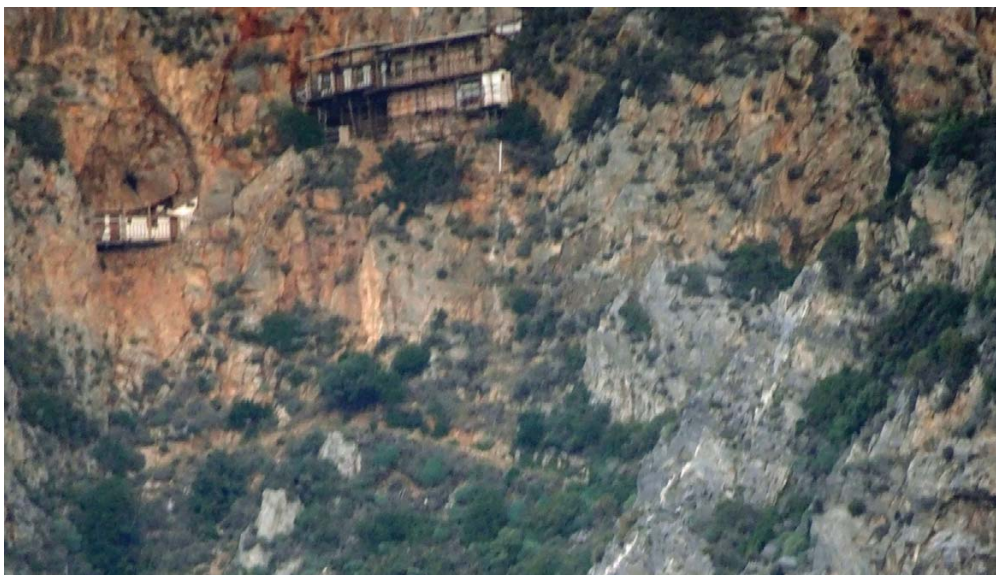


port of Limenaria on the southwest corner of the island, we broke what would otherwise have been a 120 mile overnight passage from Enevtherón Bay round the Akti Peninsula into the Gulf of Singitikos.

The Gulf of Singitikos

The Gulf of Singitikos lies between the mountainous peninsulas of Akti and Sithonia. The Akti Peninsula has existed in a world of its own for ten centuries, because it is central to Greek Orthodox beliefs that 2012m Mount Athos at the foot of the peninsula is a holy mountain. A monastic community lives on and has jurisdiction over the peninsula, with many of the monasteries occupying spectacular sites on rocky bluffs or clinging to precipitous cliffs. Hermits and vagabond monks often live in almost inaccessible locations on cliff sides. While organised road tours are available, women are not permitted on the peninsula and nor can one anchor off it – indeed there is a 500m exclusion zone for all boats, or twice that if women are on board!

A monastic building perched precariously on the cliffside



Once round the cape, we sailed up the west coast of the Akti Peninsula to the island of Ammouliani, where we pulled into the small, shallow harbour used by local fishermen. Next morning, we were approached by Mohammed, the enterprising Egyptian mate of a Greek owned and skippered purse-seiner, crewed by Egyptians, from whom we purchased a bag of fish (three days' worth of meals) – for only 10€.

From Ammouliani we sailed 25 miles across the Gulf of Singitikos to the Dimitri islands. There we anchored at the head of the relatively long and narrow bay of Kriktos on the northeast coast of Diaporos island, a safe and pleasant location made doubly so by being the only boat, or people, in sight. The island group and adjacent mainland coast are popular with Greeks who want their own space – and can afford it. Not surprisingly, the area is referred to as the 'Greek Riviera'.



Mike purchasing fish from Mohammed

The mountainous, heavily-wooded east Sithonia coastline becomes increasingly more rugged and less inhabited the further south one gets, though its excellent little bays and beaches attract independently-minded campers and caravanners. We anchored in Sikias Bay for the night in order to round the peninsula in daylight next morning.

The Gulf of Toronais

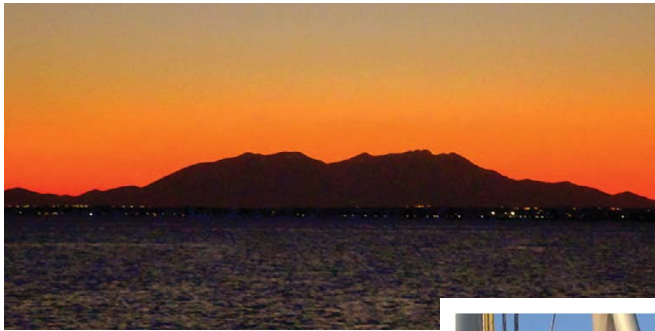
The Gulf of Toronais lies between the finger peninsulas of low-lying Kassandra to the west and mountainous Sithonia to the east. With a gale threatening, we pulled into the shelter of Koufo harbour just around the toe of the Sithonia peninsula, generally considered



Porto Koufo harbour

Swordfish!

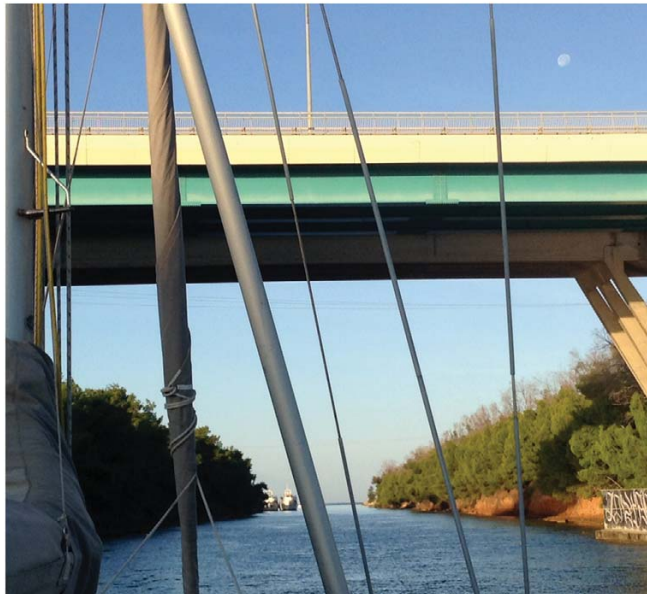
to be one of the most magnificent natural harbours in the Mediterranean. The evening before the gale came through, a small fishing boat arrived and unloaded an amazing catch of some thirty or more swordfish, each of around 20 kilos. These were carefully wrapped and individually weighed and numbered, before being taken away to market in a refrigerated lorry.



***Mount Olympus silhouetted
by a glorious sunset***

the west. Six miles west of Gerakini, the narrow, shallow Portas Canal bisects the Kassandra peninsula. It is half a kilometre long and – crucially – is said to have a vertical clearance of 17m under its two bridges, giving *Island Drifter* a theoretical clearance of 1.5m.

***Approaching the bridges
over the Portas Canal ...
with trepidation!***



The Gulf of Thermaikos

The Gulf of Thermaikos, which we entered from the Canal, is enclosed by the Western Sporades 100 miles to the south, the massive mountain ranges – including that of Mount Olympus – to the west, and the relatively low-lying Kassandra peninsula to the east. The dominant features of the gulf are undoubtedly the mountain ranges of the mainland. Although there are other mountains in Greece also called Olympus, this is the one famously associated with the Gods. Here Zeus ruled and the Gods cavorted in what mortals below believed was the ultimate in terms of ‘the good life’!

The gulf terminates in the Bay of Thessaloniki in the north. Thessaloniki, at its head, became a major city due to its excellent natural harbour and its location both at the gateway to mainland Greece and on the Via Ignatio land route between present-day Italy and Turkey. It was the old capital of Macedon and is now the second largest city in Greece, even though Greeks only became the predominant nationality in the city after population exchanges with Turkey in 1922. The city has a prosperous air, stimulated by two major universities and a famous avant-garde music and entertainment scene. The city’s main sights are all within walking distance of the recently renovated waterfront and include the White Tower, an iconic landmark, and the Archaeological Museum dedicated to Macedon history.

We berthed in the municipally-run marina in the pleasant grassy, wooded, high-rise suburb of Kalamaria, about 7 miles southeast of the city centre. Spacious and providing excellent shelter, several yacht charter companies keep their fleets afloat there during the winter. On our way south down the west coast of the gulf we stopped for a day in Savvi Marina at Platamonas, close to Castle Camping, which we had visited by road in 1970 when we camped in the shadow of Mount Olympus. The castle, built to control access to Athens, overlooks the town and the campsite. It is illuminated very effectively at night and proved a useful navigational aid when we arrived!

Heading south along Greece’s east coast

We began our return to Leros with an overnight downwind sail via the Western Sporades with a stop at Skopelos, to the island of Skyros, which we had bypassed on

Thessaloniki’s renovated waterfront has become a popular place to promenade



***Rupert Brooke's
immaculate marble
tomb in a peaceful
olive grove in
southern Skyros***

our previous cruise of the Sporades islands. Administratively and geologically it is part of the Western Sporades, but commercially it has more in common with Evia. Historically, the island was important because its position in the middle of the Aegean made it a major

location on the maritime trade routes to the east. A particular reason for stopping at Skyros was to visit the grave of the poet Rupert Brooke. When he died from blood poisoning in April 1915, he was a 27 year old Sub Lieutenant in the Royal Naval Infantry on the way with his Regiment to the Gallipoli Campaign. His gravestone is inscribed with his famous sonnet *The Soldier*, which begins with the following well-known epitaph:

*If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England.*

From Skyros we continued downwind through the notorious Kairefs Strait between Evia and Andros, getting into the lee of the Northern Cyclades islands of Andros and Tinos before turning east towards Leros. After a sleighride to Tinos, in a katabatic force 8, we enjoyed an overnight broad reach in northwest force 5 to Agmar's portside marina in Lakki, where we effected those decommissioning jobs that are best done afloat.

Finally we motored the ten miles north to Agmar's Partheni boatyard and completed decommissioning on the hard, before flying back to the UK via Athens from the adjacent airstrip at Partheni.

