

CRUISING GREECE'S CYCLADES ISLANDS

Mike and Helen Norris

(Once again we join Mike and Helen Norris aboard their 37ft Countess ketch Island Drifter as they continue into year three of their four-year Greek Odyssey – see Flying Fish 2017/2, 2018/2 and 2019/1 or visit their blog at www.islanddriftergreece2019.blogspot.com.)

On our return passage from our circuit of the East and West Sporades islands in mid-July 2018, we used the northern Cyclades islands of Andros and Tinos as stepping stones on our way southeast across the Aegean to 'our' boatyard in Leros, stopping to explore both islands en route. Since the *meltemi* was by then blowing a consistent northerly 35 knots it was great sailing, but we realised it would be more difficult cruising. We therefore decided to cruise the rest of the Cyclades islands the following spring, before the *meltemi* started to develop at the end of June.

The Cyclades are the central group of islands in the south Aegean, so named

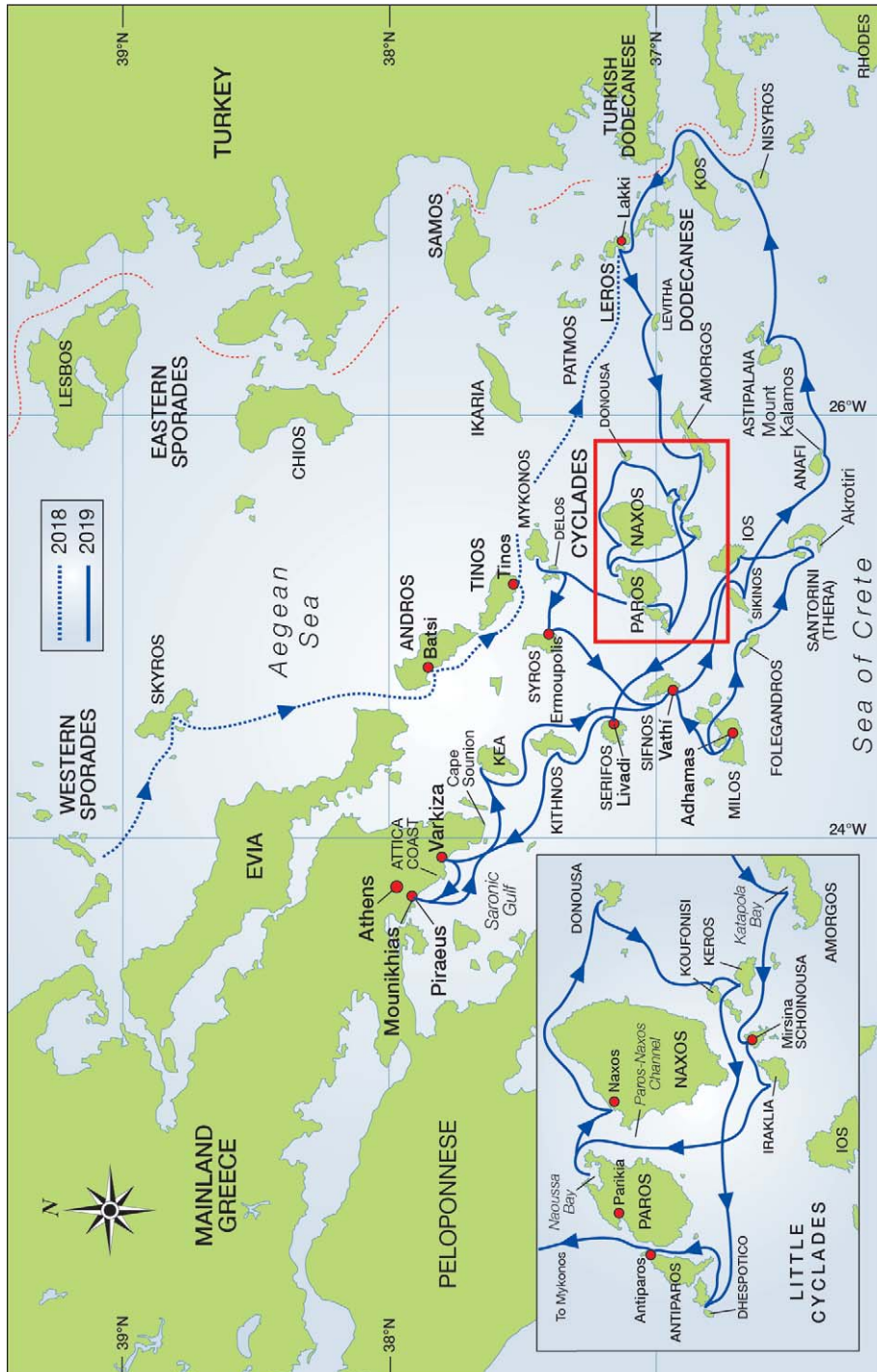
because they more or less encircle Delos, the ancient centre of trade and worship. Most islands participated in the War of Independence against Turkey and all, except Astipalaia (see plan overleaf), became part of Greece when the war ended in 1832.

Levitha

On leaving Leros in early April, the first Cyclades island we visited was Levitha, some 20 miles due west. We moored to a buoy in an almost land-locked bay at the south of the island which afforded excellent shelter and was a delightful location. The small island is

*Sailing in the lee of
Andros and Tinos in
force 8 with two reefs in*







Anchorage at the head of Levitha bay

inhabited by a self-sufficient, entrepreneurial family group of six adults who fish, herd, farm, provide mooring buoys for visitors and run an evening *taverna* in their attractive whitewashed farm complex, some 15 minutes' walk along an indistinct track from the anchorage. A good torch is essential for the return!

Amorgos

Continuing southwest, our next anchorage was off the town beach in Katapola Bay on the west coast of Amorgos, a large, mountainous island where the main settlements have only 'recently' been connected by road. From Katapola town it is possible to drive or hike via the *chora** to the iconic working monastery of Chozoviotissos, the island's principal tourist attraction, which is embedded in towering cliffs high above the sea. Even in this secular age it makes an impression on the most hardened cynic. Sitting quietly admiring the monastery's polished wood

* *Chora*, meaning 'the town' in Greek, is often used as the name of the main town on an island, particularly when it shares the name of the island itself.



interior, portraits, memorabilia and sweeping views while being treated to a shot of *tsipouro* (Greek un-aged brandy) and *loukoumades* (Greek Turkish delight) by the monks must rate as one of the most sensory experiences of our Cyclades cruise.

We intended to use Amorgos as a springboard for exploring Ano and Kato Koufonisi, Iraklia, Schoinousa, Donousa and Keros – the group of six tiny islands known as the Little Cyclades, which lie between Amorgos and Naxos. Each of the four inhabited islands has between 100 and 400 inhabitants, and over the past twenty years they have strayed from obscurity to being ‘in fashion’.

Schoinousa

Mirsina, the island of Schoinousa’s only port, is small, albeit well-protected from northerly winds, and the *chora* on the hillside above is the island’s only settlement. In the summer the village is inundated with day tourists from Naxos, but out of season it recovers its natural charm. In 2006 the island found itself in the headlines after it was exposed as the base for a major antiquities smuggling operation.

Iraklia

The 1½ mile passage over to Iraklia must rate as our shortest cruising passage ever. With fewer attractions and amenities than its neighbours, it maintains an atmosphere of secluded retreat for its ‘get away from it all’ devotees.

Paros

Given that a southerly force 9 was forecast, our priorities changed from exploration

The bay, port, tamarisk-shaded sandy beach and village of Ay Georgios on Iraklia



to preservation. We therefore headed north for 30 miles through the Paros–Naxos channel to Naoussa Bay, a large indented bay at the north end of Paros with a wide choice of anchorages depending on wind direction. We, however, chose to berth in the new visitors' marina at Naoussa town in the south of the bay. As well as offering excellent protection from southerly winds, the berthing, water and electricity were all free because the marina had not yet been officially licensed! We reasoned that we could leave *Island Drifter* there and explore the island while waiting for the bad weather to pass, something we'd not have dreamt of doing if at anchor in 45 knots – even had we been able to get ashore.

Paros has become, through its port at Parikia, the *de facto* hub of the Greek ferry system in the eastern Cyclades. It has everything that one would expect from a Greek island – old villages, monasteries, fishing harbours, *tavernas* and beaches. In early times its translucent white marble, extracted by slope mining, was much valued due to its suitability for the carving of fine sculptures – the Venus de Milo and Napoleon's tomb were both carved from Parian marble.

Naxos

When we arrived in Naxos port we were only just able to squeeze in amongst the local boats, there being no room on the visitors' quay. Naxos is the loftiest, largest and, it is generally considered, most magnificent of the Cyclades islands. Naxians were initially disdainful of tourism since, like Crete, the island was able to support itself through agriculture and fishing, but that view is slowly changing. To date, however, the impact of tourism has been relatively benign and the island's natural character has not been seriously damaged. Talk of extending the ferry quay to accommodate cruise ships could change that!

Apart from the island's *chora*, Naxos's principal attractions have always been the golden sands of its west coast beaches, its verdant mountainous hinterland, unspoilt villages and coastal scenery. In the past Naxos's roads could be positively lethal, but they have been significantly upgraded as part of the EU's contribution to infrastructure, making both beaches and interior more accessible to Naxians and visitors alike.

Donousa

Donousa rises steeply out of the sea some 10 miles off the wild and less inhabited east coast of Naxos. It is the second largest but least visited of the four inhabited islands of the Little Cyclades and, compared with the other islands, it is somewhat out on a limb. While in August it gets swamped with day tourists from Naxos, out of season the island attracts those looking to enjoy a tranquil holiday in a traditional Greek environment, with good walking, excellent beaches and crystal-clear water, in what is generally considered one of the most beautiful and least spoilt islands in the Aegean.

Koufonisi

Koufonisi is the smallest of the four inhabited islands of the Little Cyclades, yet it is the most populated and accommodates the greatest number of tourists each year, attracted by its beaches, plentiful beachside *tavernas* and good accommodation, all within easy reach by road or track from the island's port. It has a substantial inshore fishing fleet which services both Koufonisi and Naxos. Fish is the first item on every taverna's menu.



Island Drifter at anchor off Ay Stavros town beach, Dhinoussa, with Naxos in the background

Keros

Southeast of Koufonisia lies the island of Keros, with its rugged mountains and steep sea cliffs. It is uninhabited, even though it is the largest of the Little Cyclades. Once the dominant member of the group, it became the spiritual home of early Cycladean culture and the burial ground for its inhabitants. Today it is an important source of archaeological information – casual visitors are not encouraged.

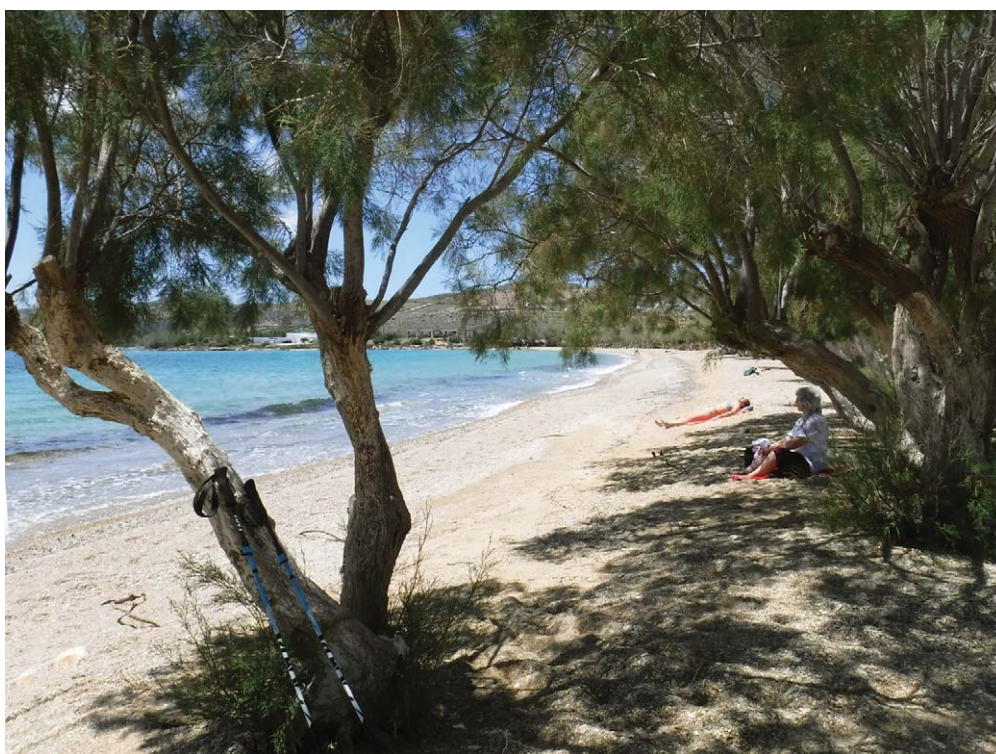


Mike about to get stuck into a locally caught grilled squid at Koufonisia

Antiparos

After leaving the Little Cyclades, and on our way to Mykonos to pick up our friends Max and Sue who were flying in from Manchester, we pulled into Antiparos off the southwest coast of Paros to break the passage into two day-sails. The quays at Antiparos town were completely dominated by local pleasure and ferry boats, however, and much of its bay is too shallow for a monohull with a fixed keel.

We finally anchored in a large, sandy and well-protected bay between Antiparos and the smaller island of Dhespotico to the southwest which apparently was once used for R&R by pirate galleons! These days the principal attraction of Antiparos town and the north of the island is its excellent beaches which accommodate the 'needs' of families, surfers and nudists.



*The town beach at Antiparos looked inviting
with its beach bars and tamarisk-shaded sand*

Mykonos

Boosted by direct air links with Europe, cruise ship docks, an excellent ferry service, one of the most scenic harbours in the Mediterranean plus a profusion of good sandy beaches and the nearby premier sightseeing island of Delos, Mykonos has become one of the most popular, high profile and expensive islands in the Cyclades. In high season one should only visit if well bankrolled and intent on joining the young, jostling street crowds and oiled-up lounge lifestyle at the island's packed beaches – and the

*Little Venice's colourful
seafront and balconies in the
Old Quarter of Mykonos town*

relentless party scene. Out of season, one can, and indeed we did, enjoy the island's natural charms.

Delos

While not permitted to anchor there overnight, it was inconceivable that we would bypass Delos on our passage to Syros. The mythical birthplace of Apollo and Artemis, Delos became a shrine turned commercial centre. Today it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most important archaeological locations in Greece.

Syros

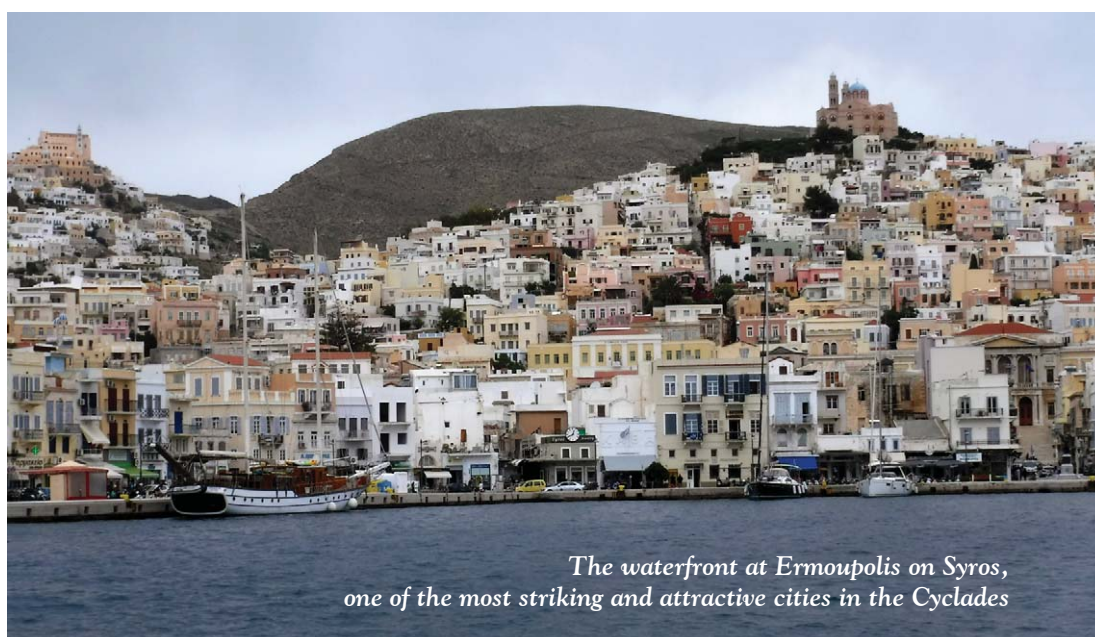
An oddity among Greek islands, Syros avoided the chaos and destruction encountered by most Aegean islands at the hands of pirates because of the patronage and protection of its Catholic community by the French monarchy. It also, somehow, remained precariously neutral during the War of Independence with Turkey in

*The famous Naxian Lions of Delos in the onsite museum
(the ones outside are plaster cast copies)*



the 1820s. Thanks to its superb natural harbour at Ermoupolis, and the energy and entrepreneurial skills of its mixed Catholic and Orthodox populations, Syros became one of the most prosperous of the Aegean islands and hence the capital, legal and administrative centre of the Cyclades. Ermoupolis's faded neoclassical charm gives Syros something that neighbouring islands cannot match, and contrasts with the traditional whitewashed Cycladean villages that dominate almost everywhere else.▼

Syros remains a working island, with only a fleeting, recent history of tourism. While it is one of the smallest inhabited islands in the Cyclades, it has the highest permanent population of any in the group.



*The waterfront at Ermoupolis on Syros,
one of the most striking and attractive cities in the Cyclades*

Sifnos

On our way south to Santorini we anchored off the small, attractive holiday resort and sandy beaches at Vathí, an almost landlocked circular bay on the west coast of Sifnos. The island has a reputation for its cuisine, and in particular for its sophisticated casseroles cooked in traditional clay-fired *gastres* (pots) from where the word 'gastronomy' derives.

Milos

Milos is the southwesternmost of the Cyclades islands. Unlike most other Aegean islands, which were geologically once mountains on the Aegean Plain, Milos and its more scenic and touristic neighbour Santorini are volcanic in origin, having been created when the Aegean Plain was flooded after the Ice Age. There the similarity ends. While the Santorini bay is a *caldera*, resulting from an enormous explosion, that in Milos is due to a large number of smaller explosions that have, by chance, built the island and bay into the shape they are.

The replica of the Venus di Milo in the chora's archaeological museum at Milos

Milos is probably best known for the Venus di Milo statue, which was found on the island and now resides in the Louvre in Paris. As a sop, a plaster cast replica has been supplied by the Louvre and can be seen in the town's archaeological museum. The island came late to the tourist scene, having relied on mining as the mainstay of its economy. Indeed, the mining companies still employ over 30 percent of the population and the island has the largest perlite and bentonite deposits in the EU. The mining museum in the port of Adhamas is well worth visiting.



Folegandros

Folegandros lies on the southern edge of the Cyclades, with the Sea of Crete to its south. Its attractive *chora* and *kastro* (castle) are perched on a cliff edge. The island has become an increasingly trendy location for Greek, French and Italian visitors in particular, with a predictable effect on prices and retail therapy opportunities.

Enjoying a beer with our friends Max and Sue in one of the five beautiful, tree-shaded squares in the chora of Folegandros



Santorini

The most visually spectacular of the Greek islands and also one of the most expensive, Santorini (also known as Thera) is subjected to ever-increasing waves of tourists, drawn by its scenic location, archaeological discoveries at Akrotiri and the legend of Atlantis. When entering the vast bay (a flooded *caldera*) one is immediately faced by steep, multicoloured cliffs some 300m in height which encircle much of the island's indigo waters. White Cycladean houses line the cliff rim and cling tenaciously to the terraced rocks below. Even the cruise ships are dwarfed by the cliffs and do not look out of place as they lie at anchor.

Santorini, incidentally, is one of the largest active *calderas* in the world – five times the size of Krakatoa, between Java and Sumatra, which erupted in 1883. It felt rather odd to be sailing into the island's bay knowing that there was an active volcano beneath the keel.

Ios

Ios, due north of Santorini, developed a reputation in the 1960s as a popular destination for students, who were attracted by its reputation for providing a heady cocktail of SSS*. It remains popular with young backpackers in July and August, when the island becomes ludicrously overcrowded as today's youth do their best to maintain the 'standards' of their forefathers. Out of season we found it very pleasant.



Cruise ships anchored in the bay below the chora at Santorini

Serifos

Serifos's port of Livadi appears to have had a complete makeover, no doubt courtesy of Brussels. It now provides excellent all-round shelter and has eliminated the usual problem of ferry wash. The number of quality *tavernas* on the town quay clearly indicates that they cater for many visitors in the 'season', who also have the opportunity for some serious walking on numbered trails and a range of unspoilt, quiet, sandy bays.

* Sun, Sea and Sex...



*The harbour master,
Greek style, at Kithnos*

Kithnos

The island of Kithnos has the earliest known Cycladean settlement, dating from before 4500BC. Today it is one of the lesser visited and lower key of the larger Cyclades islands. Visitors don't come to Kithnos for the sightseeing ... the island's principal attraction is its lack of attractions! None of the principal locations can offer much in terms of tourist appeal, other than the indisputable fact that they are unspoilt.

Varkiza (Attica coast)

We split our passage from Kithnos up the Attica Coast to Athens at Varkiza, a southern suburb of central Athens, some 25 miles north. Sunshades and loungers totally covered the beach, jet-skiers were drawn like magnets to yachts at anchor, and music blasted out from three beach discos until the early hours. Even so, being a statutory 300m off the shore, protected from the strong northerly winds, and with good holding, a G&T and an excellent meal on board, it suited us fine.

Mounikhias Yacht Harbour, Piraeus (Athens)

Max and Sue had flights booked back to the UK and Helen also returned home for a few days on family business. Meanwhile Mike remained with the boat in Athens, on a Piraeus Sailing Club pontoon in the circular harbour of Mounikhias. He had time to explore parts of the city, the coastal strip and Athens waterfront, including its eight marinas, ferry and cruise ship docks. King Constantine's Dragon, in which he won a gold medal at the 1960 Olympics in Rome, is stored at the club – inspiration for its very active dinghy section, whose members include two bronze medallists from the Rio Olympics in 2016, currently training hard for Tokyo.

The harbour is overlooked by the prestigious clubhouse of the Yacht Club of Greece, which appears to have taken over from the Royal Hellenic Yacht Club of which King Constantine was a member.

The Attica Peninsula

Our passage southeast from Mounikhias to the island of Kea took us through the Saronic Gulf and down the Attica coast. The Temple of Poseidon stands conspicuously on the top of Cape Sounion at the southern tip of the peninsula. This craggy spur plunges 100m to the sea, and the large bay to the northwest has traditionally been used by sailing vessels waiting for the *meltemi* to abate.

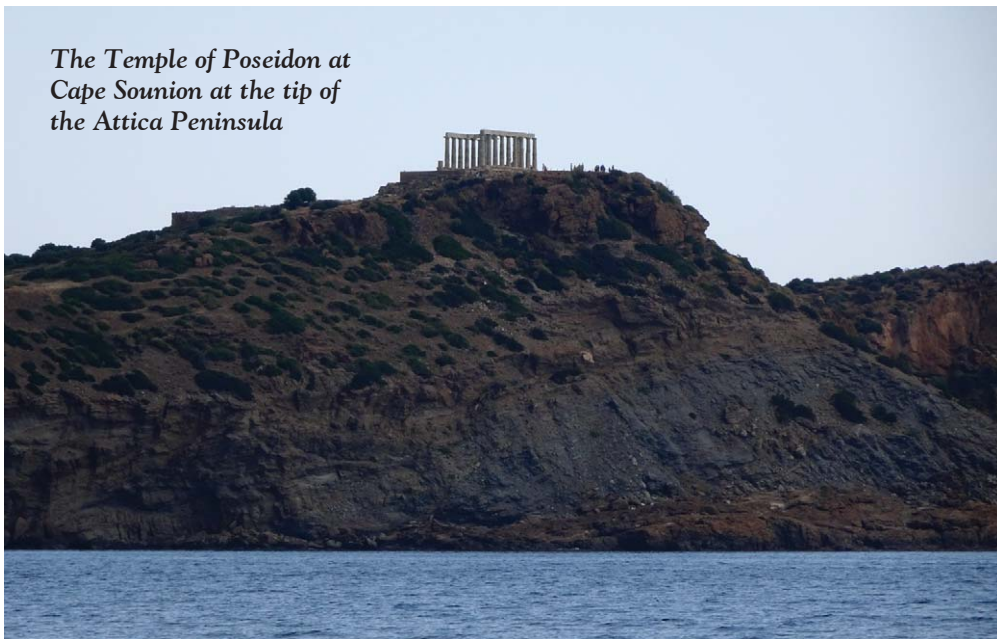


Very young children and their dinghies at the Piraeus Sailing Club

Kea

Kea, only twenty miles off the Attica peninsula and three hours by ferry from Athens, is popular with cruisers, charterers and Athenians. Much of the countryside and many of the bays are peppered with holiday villas, both in isolation and within small communities. Many are attractively built in the locally-quarried greeny-brown stone, with the traditional red-tiled roofs for which Kea is known. The island's principal tourist attraction is the sculpture of the Lion of Kea, a 6m-long grey granite Sphinx-like creature, carved around 300BC from an outcrop of rock. It lies in an olive grove 15 minutes' walk from the island's *chora*.

The Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion at the tip of the Attica Peninsula





The Lion of Kea

Once an important outpost of the Minoan empire, Kea boasted four city states (whereas most islands managed only one). The Minoan civilisation on the island practised the custom of *keion nomimom*, by which those over 70 whose

intellectual faculties or physical abilities were no longer 'beneficial' to society were obliged to commit suicide by drinking a cup of hemlock. The custom is believed to have originated during a siege of the island when food was scarce.

Sikinos

Sikinos is the second-least-visited island in the Cyclades, after Anafi. It offers a great insight into what life was like in the islands before modern tourism burgeoned in the 1970s. Apart from a few *tavernas* and a couple of bars the islanders make few concessions to tourism beyond some purpose-built holiday accommodation around the port. Few foreigners – other than cruisers who value such locations – include the island in their itineraries.

Anafi

The small island of Anafi, due east of Santorini and the last of the Cyclades islands that we visited, is undoubtedly the least known and accessed tourist location in the Aegean – so much so that the word 'Anafi' is the Greek equivalent of 'Timbuktu'. Like Sikinos it offers visitors a glimpse of what island life used to be like.

On the limestone pinnacle of Mount Kalamos at the extreme southeast point of the island is the monkless monastery of Kalamiotissa, the island's principal 'sight'. The mountain is the highest rock formation in the Mediterranean, outstripping (it is claimed) even Gibraltar, and the monastery is spectacularly located at its summit. It was a steep 2½ hour hike up to the monastery and back, but the views were well worth the effort.

Astypalaia

Architecturally, geographical and historically Astypalaia should belong in the Cyclades group, but by a quirk of history it was mistakenly positioned in the Turkish Dodecanese by the major powers who 'oversaw' the 1832 Peace Conference.

Astypalaia's *kastro* overlooks the harbour and town and is one of the finest in the Aegean. Built by the Venetians in the 13th century, its thick outer walls are part of four-storey buildings rather than purpose-built battlements – the windows were opened up in the 19th century. In its prime it housed 4000 people within its walls and contained a labyrinth of staircases and alleys in addition to two blue-domed churches.



*The tall, thick outer walls of Astypalaia's kastro,
seen from the chora's main square*

Leros

We sailed back to Leros via Nisyros, south of Kos, in order to get out of the worst of the *meltemi* which was beginning to develop, as the waters nearer Turkey are significantly less affected than those of the Central Aegean. We celebrated our return with Ian and Melian Tomsett from *Indian Summer*, a 40ft catamaran, who were anchored in Lakki harbour. We had met them in Anafi and they were following our blog. Originally from Australia, they had only reached Greece in June having spent three years cruising Indonesia, India and Africa before sailing up the Somali coast and through the Red Sea and Suez Canal.

We returned to the UK via Athens airport on 4 July 2019, well satisfied with our 1400 mile cruise of the Cyclades during which we had visited 30 islands.



*Enjoying an
end-of-cruise
meal with Ian
and Melian
Tomsett at
a great little
taverna on the
ferry quay in
Lakki, Leros*

