

Déjà vu

Menorca to the Ionian

James Baker



Bellatrix was launched on 29 April after an administratively interesting winter in Mahon. She was laid up afloat as in previous years in Marina Mahon at the end of November with a contract through until 1 May. A week after leaving her I was informed by email that Marina Mahon was no longer operating the concession and I had to leave the marina (almost) immediately as it was now ‘.. against the law for a vessel over 15m to be moored in the port’. As I was heading to South Africa

for some winter racing and had no intention of being back in Menorca for six months, this was somewhat inconvenient. In order to resolve the matter amicably and avoid a protracted argument, I ignored their communiqué. Two weeks passed before some form of legal looking Spanish order arrived and I was told my contract had been novated to the new operator (Club Marítimo Mahon) and I had to accept their generous offer of being allowed to stay – in return for a 150% price increase. Ignoring this also seemed like a good idea and a friend kindly relocated *Bellatrix* under the cover of darkness to the nearby Pedro’s Boatyard, and put her on the hard for the following months. This seemed to do the trick and the emails eventually





Bellatrix's Menorca launch

stopped. No one from Marina Mahon noticed she was 'missing' for several weeks.

Having launched and fearing some unfavourable chats with the marina, we victualled in record time and headed to sea, bound for Sardinia with a favourable and chilly N 3-4. *Bellatrix* was relishing the conditions

and we made good progress on the 300-ish miles to Villasimius. We were two-handed so there was plenty to keep us occupied.

With a distinct sense of déjà vu (see RC 62), the following morning water was heard sloshing about in the saloon bilge and I was slightly unenthused to lift the floorboards and see enough water to be mildly concerned. Some will disagree, but I sail without the automatic bilge pump enabled in order to better spot these type of things. I should probably fit a bilge alarm and/or warning light.

Some pumping and sponging later, the bilge was dry. As always it was hard to see where the water was coming from, but we had established it was salt and therefore should have remained outside the boat. Monitoring the situation saw some water continuously appearing in the bilge, but the source remained elusive for several hours before finally tracing it to a leaking fridge cooler plate, fitted to the hull but inconveniently accessed under the saloon table. No real cause for alarm, just a pump and sponge at each watch change.

Vulcano landfall

Landfall off Sardinia was a windy affair with some 45kt gusts. A bit of a shock as we rounded Capo Spartivento at dusk carrying full canvas; one gust was sufficiently powerful to snap the ensign mount – a first for me.

A night approach to the anchorage just north of Villasimius was



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straightforward and we rested for 24 hours +/- before picking up the next weather system to carry us toward the Aeolian Islands where we planned to stop on our way to Messina.

As rarely happens in the Med, we enjoyed consistent NW3 for the next 48 hours which enabled a comfortable passage from Sardinia, passing between Lipari and the smouldering Vulcano to the northern entrance of Messina. No desire to stop as progress was relatively straightforward. It was a remarkably enjoyable gybe down the eastern inshore traffic zone before gybing back onto port for the next 270nm to make landfall off Lefkada. While we were 30 miles west of the Aeolians, the crew woke me to say there was a missile strike going on overhead and what should we do? Finding the binos, I placated the excitable crew by reassuring them that it was either Father Christmas or Mr Musk's Starlink, but definitely not a salvo of missiles.

Arriving in the Ionian in the first week of May was unseasonably cool but the anchorages were already coming alive and the tavernas began to emerge from their winter hibernation to service the visiting yachts. By mid-June I was needed back at base camp in Jersey so took the opportunity to haul out at Ionian Marine and replace the leaking fridge plate. In a world of 'every excuse under the sun' there were no fridge plates pretty much anywhere in Europe but locating one in Scotland, Phil and Norma Heaton (RCC) came to my rescue by kindly flying the replacement out from the UK on their way to *Minnie B*. The yard was very accommodating and fitted me in at short notice. I know there are a few RCC boats that use this yard, and I can now see why.

Bellatrix remained ashore for a month and was launched (again) in mid-July upon our return, when Liesel and I set off for a two week family meander around the immediate islands and then up to Corfu.

Normally, in this area the NW F3-4-5 builds regularly on a daily basis; but for some reason it was largely missing during July so we made slow progress north with a light southerly pushing us along from Lefkas toward Anti-Paxos and then Gaios, Paxos.

Gaios is not my favourite anchorage and despite the appeal of the town, I have had a few unpleasant nights there where an unforecast E/SE blows into the anchorage and creates a nasty, rocky lee shore. To avoid a repeat of this, before our arrival I studied all manner of forecasts, assessed the CAPE forecast

Gaios Anchorage



and asked a fisherman; all were unanimous in their views of settled weather and a light/variable NW overnight. However, as feared we had been ashore for a matter of minutes when the black clouds appeared on the horizon and the breeze arrived.

The next four hours were not pleasant; the wind picked up to 40 kt gusts and we were no more than 50m from the shore unable to retrieve the anchor. The holding was mediocre and I was on my own on board. Two boats were driven aground, one small French boat somehow sunk at anchor and the coast guard was doing what they could to help. I also learnt that *Bellatrix* has a new trick up her sleeve – being pooped at anchor by the waves refracting from the low rocky shore and rolling up her transom; will remember to close the aft cabin hatch from now on.

Fortunately, despite the chaos our anchor held and with some judicious engine use, I avoided the boats dragging around me. By 0100 things had calmed down and power had returned to the island after the earlier lighting strike plunged the island into complete darkness. During these fun filled hours, Liesel was ashore in the dark, watching the excitements unfold just outside the harbour. With that excitement behind us, the next week was spent enjoying the anchorages around the north of Corfu.

A particular highlight of this trip was sailing alongside (briefly!) *Velsheda* and her support boat *Bystander*. The unsubstantiated rumour ashore in Kerasia was that King Charles was on board, and we did spot what looked like a royal pennant flying from the port spreader, but we were unable to be certain. While the scale and cost of the boat is immeasurable, it is very satisfying to see the immense work and dedication needed to keep a boat like that in such perfect condition.

Summer adventures



Late July we were back in Vliho via Parga and Meganisi where we met Heugh and Fi Symons (RCC) on *Alethia*, both Ionian stalwarts. Then we were back to Jersey for three weeks of ‘normal life’ before once again going back to Vliho on 12 August.

During (our) winters I am generally lucky enough to spend a few months in South Africa racing most recently an L34 in a series out of Zululand YC and Durban; and also a Pacer 27 on the Vaal. In order to reciprocate for the hospitality and fun we enjoy there, the offer to our South African friends has always been to come and sail with us. This year three couples made the trip to Greece for two weeks in late August and September. Their arrival

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coincided with the awful fires in and around Athens which made collecting them by minibus feel like a Hollywood action film, but they all arrived in great spirits, keen to see what this Ionian sailing is all about.

The 'SAFFAs' were full of enthusiasm yet struggled with the idea of leaving an anchorage and not stepping straight into the southern ocean swells and having to make do with more gentle short passages between the islands. They are all sailors and form the committee of the newly established King Shaka Yacht Club in Richard's Bay. We cruised in company with *Walidada*, a beautiful S&S 47 which co-hosted our southern hemisphere friends.

Having extra and competent hands gave a new dimension to cruising; we had the spinnaker up, down, packed and ready to go again most days! We ghosted our way up wind to (again) Paxos and it was delightful to have many competent and willing hands on board. The weather was kind and light; we enjoyed 13 excellent days around the islands with a different anchorage each night and one memorable beach braai (BBQ for us lot), expertly cooked, on the southern end of Ithaca. I celebrated my 50th in Kastos and was joined by *Alethia* for the celebrations – thankfully there were no lasting injuries to anyone!

Bellatrix, upwind off Ithaca

This area has such an abundance and variety of anchorages, all within 100 miles. We enjoyed the buzz of Fiskardo, the wild pigs on Atakos, the serenity of southern Ithaca as well as the beauty of the more northern islands. It's hard to think of any other cruising ground that competes.

By 5 September sadly the SAFFAs had to fly south again and while we definitely missed their company and excellent crewing skills, we were left to enjoy a recuperating few days around Meganisi. On (the short) passages we sailed past *Freebird*



and *Horus* (RCC) and managed a brief 'hello' with both.

Many say September is the best month here and with the crowds gone, settled weather and warm water it takes on a very different vibe than the craziness of late July and early August.

18 October saw *Bellatrix* hauled at Ionian Marine (after an incredible thunder storm in Tranquil Bay) for the



Anchorage on Atokos

winter of 2023/2024 where she will sit under her smart new cover as we count the days down to getting back on board next year.

I spent a few nights aboard putting her to bed and witnessed the Jon Buoy deploy for no apparent reason. At least I know now what one looks like out of the box.

In December we will hopefully be flying south for a few months and likely reliving the adventures of summer '23 with a braai or two and getting afloat in probably more challenging waters.

Lightening storm in not so Tranquil Bay