

From Rhodes to Levkas via Istanbul

Lionel Hoare



After spending Easter in St Mawes, I flew to Rhodes to fit out *Alcyone*, not realising that the Orthodox Easter was a week after ours and everything was closed for the weekend.

Somehow, all was restored; except we had to sail without our spray hood and sail stack-pack.

The Meltimi had put paid to our hopes of sailing to Istanbul last autumn; but the spring weather was fair. We left Rhodes, heading north on

Sunday 16 April, on a lovely sunny reach, seeing dolphins.

Symi was remarkable for the most extravagant Easter firework display, accompanied by children throwing very loud bangers around. No health and safety spoilsports to be seen! Here we fitted a passarelle, acquired in Rhodes, to replace the plank which had been in use since 2017. Why didn't we do that earlier?





Memorial to Pythagoras in Pythagorion, Samos

went on to the rather charming Nisos Oinoussa, seeing a turtle, dolphins and a mermaid en route.

Mytilene on Lesbos is busy and noisy, with an attractive old quarter and a massive fort. Here we made up on the town quay to clear out of Greek waters, laboriously visiting customs, immigration and port police.

The islands surrounding the narrow entrance to Ayvalik lagoon are very beautiful and would offer many anchorages should time permit. We suffered from Turkish pricing: €200 for the night in an unfinished marina and €150 to spend 1¼ hours clearing immigration and customs.

We were able to lie alongside in Babakale, a small and somewhat remote town with a secure harbour about 30 NM south of the entrance to the Dardanelles. The fish restaurant on the quay did not serve alcohol or permit us to bring our own wine, but they did deliver a fine dinner to the boat, which was great; because we ate and drank well aboard and didn't have to do the washing up! Annoyingly, we were constantly employed in chasing cats off the boat, not being keen to share the calamari, sardines, swordfish and bass.

In Nisiros the crew hired a buggy to see the island and visit the volcano crater, while the skipper failed to mend the bilge pump.

At Leros we found a Rocna anchor to fulfil a promise made at the end of last season and here we were re-united with spray hood and stack-pack which had caught a ferry to catch us up. The Rocna never let us down. Why didn't we do that earlier?

In Samos we paid our respects to Pythagoras. Rod Heikell is disparaging about Khios Town harbour so we



Mermaid outside Manrdaki, Oinoussa

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The following day a superb tailwind took us to the Dardanelles. The two former army officers aboard were delighted that it was Anzac Day and we lifted caps to the British, French and Turkish memorials on the way in. Making up in Çanakkale, which was full of Australians and New Zealanders, we went back 3,500 years the next morning at Troy and just over 100 years at the Anzac landing beaches and trenches in the afternoon. The sun shone and the wind blew from the SW; perfect sailing conditions!

Sadly, the fine weather lasted for only a fortnight then left us and we continued into the fierce counter current with a stiff, cold headwind, drizzle and spray; having to motor most of the 60 miles to Port Marmara, which is not yacht friendly. We just managed to squeeze in for a cold night between two fishing boats.

After an early start into another unpleasant and chilly headwind, the decision was made to bear away to a much more comfortable heading and we sailed for 60 miles to an alongside berth in Esenkoy, a pleasant, quiet harbour about 20nm south of Istanbul.

Sailing into Istanbul satisfied a long-held ambition. It is a fascinating and beautiful meeting of Asia and Europe, Islam and Christianity with thousands of years of history. The first conspicuous sights are the Blue Mosque, completed in 1617 and the Hagia Sophia, completed in 537, standing side by side. Entering the Bosphorus you sail past the site where the walls were breached by Doge Dandolo with the Venetian and Frankish army in 1204 as the finale of the disgraceful 4th Crusade. It also represented the finale of *Alcyone's* circuit of Europe's Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts, begun in Tromsø in 2014, covering 14,000nm. No wonder she is falling apart! Happily, before my wife arrived, I was able to fix the bilge pump, which empties her shower; by the time honoured, high-tech method of connecting the pipe to the dinghy foot pump and stamping on it!

While the boat spent six expensive nights in Atakoy Marina, Caroline and I slumped it in the Pera Palace Hotel and thoroughly enjoyed exploring Istanbul.

Having had wind against us on the way in, there was too little on the way out and we motored most of the way across the Sea of Marmara, enjoying the company of dolphins. The bimini went up to keep the rain off on the first day and the sun off, on the second.

After anchoring for the night off Silivri, conditions in Yigitler on Avsa Adasi (one of the smaller Marmaris Islands) were the opposite to those in Port Marmara. We had a large, sheltered harbour to ourselves. The logbook reads 'A friendly man came along in a yellow taxi to help us make up, connect to water and electricity and relieve us of 400 Turkish Lire (£12). In return we got sole parking on a long quay, and gifts of a few broad beans, a large bunch of herbs and two eggs. Could have done without a visit from a cat; through the stern heads window!'

After another night in Canakkale we were swooshed out of the Dardanelles, where sailing is prohibited, onto a very pleasant broad reach to Bozcaada, which was lovely. Now Turkish, the former Greek Island of Tenedos is where the Greek

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fleet hid while deploying the Trojan Horse. Its sheltered harbour, uncrowded in May, sits under a large Ottoman fortress, beside an attractive town of narrow cobbled streets and brightly painted houses, with many good restaurants. Being strategically important, near the Dardanelles, the island has had a busy history, from classical times. It is now renowned for its wines. When we left the Harbour Master asked: "Why are you going? Don't you like it here?" We liked it very much.



Alcyone below the castle at Babakkale

After a fresh sail to Babakale, we had to motor into a cold headwind to get to Ayvalik to check out of Turkey. This time we avoided the marina, anchoring in the shallow, sheltered waters of the Pasa Koyu Lagoon. After the tedious and expensive business of checking out of Turkey and into Greece, we were back in the Eastern Sporades. There was much drama, armed RIBs and plenty of policemen blowing

whistles on the town quay in Mitilene for a visit, via a warship, by Katerina Sakellaropoulou, the President of Greece.

The south side of Lesbos is green and fertile, with two large landlocked bays, providing superb anchorages. When we weren't at anchor, we were alongside in largely empty harbours: in Plomarion, where the locals were all out on a Saturday evening and in Mithimna; extremely charming, at least in mid-May before the tourist hordes arrive. Limnos was equally beautiful and undeveloped. There was a minor difficulty leaving the anchorage off Mirina as we picked up three abandoned anchors while lifting ours.

Thence to Thasos for a fascinating time, back in Classical Greece. The agora is by the beach, then it is a steep climb to the dramatically situated theatre, which has signs saying it is closed until 2015! It is still closed; but can be seen from above. There is a spectacular walk around the defensive walls high on the hills above the town, taking in the Genoese Castle, the Temples of Apollo and Aphrodite, the shrine of Pan and the Gates of Zeus, Hera and Hercules.

Losing the path in twilight we just managed to scramble down before a torrential downpour. A violent mutiny was narrowly avoided!



Aqueduct in Kavala

Philippi

Kavala, on the mainland, is a busy modern town, with an old hill fort and an impressive aqueduct, looking Roman; but built by the Turks in the 16th century. It is a short bus ride to Philippi, site of the crucial battle of 42 BC. The ancient city has been well excavated to show the remains of a superb theatre, forum, acropolis and three large Byzantine Basilicas.



I was a little aggrieved to be told that a stay of two nights (and less than 24 hours) alongside on the pontoon in Kavala would incur a charge for three days. An elaborate invoice was painstakingly filled out for the grand total of €3.97.

Sailing around the Akti Peninsular under the towering Mount Athos, we studied the medieval monasteries and their associated buildings, impossibly sited on sheer cliff sides. After a peaceful night at anchor in Porto Kaufo, on the middle finger of the Khalkidhiki, it was time to turn south and make for the Northern Sporades.

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A fine, if chilly, sail took us to a superb, secure anchorage in unspoiled solitude, in Ormos Paignio, on the uninhabited Nisos Pelagos. Bliss!

Although rarely alone again, there were many lovely anchorages around the islands of Alonisos and Skopelos and the weather had warmed up. The first swim of the year was on May 24. The ancient Chora above Patriti on Alonisos was well worth the taxi ride to see the hill town, restored following earthquake damage in 1965, with its spectacular views. Unfortunately, on Skiathos we re-encountered mass tourism ashore and charter boats afloat. The bow-thruster failed here. For once it was not the fuse.

Skyros lies on its own: 30nm south east of the other islands of the Sporades chain. It is underdeveloped and very beautiful, being verdant in the north and barren in the south. We hired a car (avoiding high winds at sea) to explore the dramatic Chora of narrow alleys with white washed houses, clad with bougainvillea, jasmine, oleander and amaryllis, leading steeply up to a monastery of St George and a Venetian castle at the top. We also saw the remains of the large neolithic settlement of Palamari set on a beautiful bay at the north of the island.



Chora on Skyros



A long, downwind sail took us to the Cyclades and we were pushed through the notorious Doro Strait between Evia and Andros to Batsi.

Paroikia on Paros is an attractive town with the Panagia Ekatontapyliani, a beautiful Byzantine church and a Frankish Castro, built from re-cycled Greek slabs and columns.

On leaving the remote bay of Fykiada on the southern tip of Sifnos, Frankish Kastro on Paros

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the engine stopped and would not re-start. A long, slow sail in light airs took us to within 50 metres of the quay at Adhamas on Milos and we took a short tow to make up. We were immediately issued with a 'Detention Order' by the Port Police, who deemed the boat to be unfit to go to sea. Unbelievably; the permission of our domestic regulator was required to lift this order and I sat in disbelief as fruitless calls were made to the UK embassy in Athens and the Foreign Office in London.



Diesel block

Finally, a compromise was reached and I had to pay €100 for a certificate from a Naval Architect, who never came near the boat. This was in addition to the massive bill from the engineer who cleared the blockage in the fuel system and a fee of €300 for the 50 metre tow! All in all, not a good experience in Milos, so we were glad to get out to enjoy charming anchorages on Serifos and Kithnos

A brisk sail took us to a night on the charming town quay at Poros, before the obligatory and most worthwhile

trip to Epidhavros and - yes you can hear a whisper on the stage from the top tier of the theatre.

There are some lovely anchorages in the bays of the islets off Ak Skillaion, the eastern-most point of the Peloponnese. On Idhra we anchored with a line ashore in Mandraki Bay and took a water taxi to the town to enjoy lunch and a wander around. At Spetses there was no space in the old harbour and we were put off from mooring to the quay by the amount of wash from passing ferries. Ermionis, on the mainland, was a sheltered and peaceful alternative.

Our last night before laying up in Olympic Marina on 13 June was spent at anchor in the bay below the striking Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion. Conspicuous on the headland by day, it is floodlit at night.

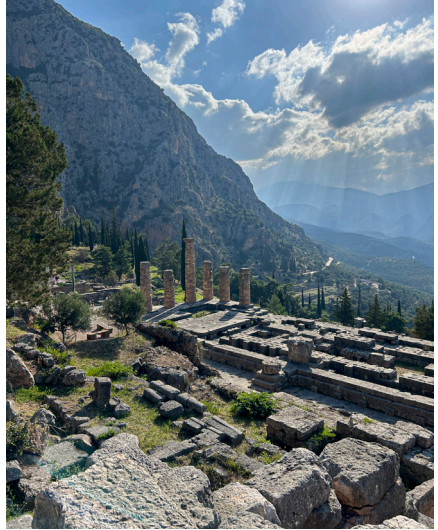
We returned to the boat on 10 September in the middle of Storm Daniel. It was hairy launching the boat and making her up. With the assistance of a RIB and five yard hands we still managed to damage the newly repaired transom. A day was spent with engineers finishing half-done jobs. At least the bow thruster was working again. Making a break for it, I saw a 50 knot gust as we sailed in high winds and big seas to anchor off Poros where we waited 48 hours for the wind to abate. The forecast of persistent strong winds led to a change of plan. Instead of crossing the Aegean to winter in Turkey, it was decided (I was told) to transit the Corinth Canal to enjoy calmer weather in the Ionian.

A happy week was spent finding secluded anchorages in the Saronic gulf before making up in the last space in Aigina Town, in time for the annual pistachio festival.

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The entrance gate to Mycenae



Overlooking Delphi

As well as feasting on the delicious nuts we made a fascinating visit to the surviving churches of the otherwise deserted Paliochora, particularly enjoying St George's, where his skull resided before being removed to Venice. I seem to remember he is also buried in Portofino!

Alcyone went through the Corinth Canal in a convoy of three and we made up in Corinth marina to begin an overload of culture. Ancient Corinth, Mycenae and Delphi in consecutive days; increasingly wondrous!

There was a minor problem in leaving Corinth; the port police would not let us go without a receipt of payment of harbour dues; but the harbour master does not work at weekends!



Luckily, we had gentle tail winds to sail out of the Gulfs of Corinth and Patras. The prevailing wind would have been on the nose. We enjoyed making up in Galaxhidi (for Delphi), anchoring at Nisos Trizonia and outside the small medieval harbour of Navpaktos, beneath an imposing Venetian fort.

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In Patras commercial port a friendly harbour master took me on his scooter to the port police a few kilometres away and waited, a long time, for the formalities to be completed.

There followed a week in the south Ionian islands, enjoying old favourites, and finding new ones such as Asos on Kefalonia and Sami. After a quick crew change and refuel in Levkas, *Alcyone* somehow squeezed into the tiny harbour of Episkopi on Kalamos; a charming spot, with a very friendly restaurant and a slightly less friendly German, over whose anchor chain we had to scrape to get in (and out). A first and last broach of the year and an upturned dinghy provided excitement, after an over canvassed fetch between Nisos Atakos and Vathi on Ithaca

A short distance north is Kioni, where, after anchoring in the bay for lunch and a swim, we took the last place on the quay in the charming little village. There, at the end of September, we saw our first burgee of the year; Anthony and Bimbi Fawcett, with whom we dined well, sheltering from heavy rain, which continued with a massive thunderstorm for most of the night. The Fawcetts told us of an impending, impromptu RCC Rally.

After lunch/swim stops in secluded bays and a night on the quay in Vasiliky, we duly turned up in Ormos Vlikho for a party aboard *Alcedo of Ryne*, followed by dinner ashore with the crews of *Alethia*, *Moonlight Lady*, *Mina 2* and *Minnie B*; all RCC and a very jolly time was had. So good that no-one was able to answer Ant Fawcett's call to arms after dinner. Mournful music was heard coming over the water from the squeeze box of *Moonlight Lady*.

The last few days were spent anchoring in Ormos Ay Andreau, Goat Bay, Nisos Arkoudi & Ormos Atheras, swimming in waters of 30°C and making up to enjoy the fleshpots of Sivota and Fiscardo.

The boat was laid up in Levkas on 3 October. My frustration with Greek bureaucracy boiled over here. Having laboriously paid online for the boat tax for October, I was nonetheless fined €150; because the boat transit log said, in Greek, that it expired on 30 September.

However, apart from the irritation of the Greek and Turkish paperwork, it had been a great season's sailing; covering 2,103nm, over 40 islands, countless anchorages, 3,500 years of history and much, highly enjoyable cruising. The Rocna worked so hard and so well that it wore out the windlass, which is top of the list of repairs before next season when we will start going west again.