

# Time Off in the Aegean

Zea, Piraeus to Agios Nikolaos, Crete

Steven Anderson

## *Awarded Juno's Cup*

A late cruise in December 2015 saw *Gem* safely moored in Mandraki harbour, Corfu and a great welcome at the Corfu Yacht Club. The Club's founder (and now RCC HPR for Corfu) observed that Jane and I must be the only two people in Britain who had never visited Greece; for us this was the start of a season of discovering a great country, its hospitality and some perfect Aegean sailing.

*Gemervescence (Gem)* is a one-off cutter built in 1989 by Southampton



Steven and Jane

Yacht Services to a design by Steve Dalzell. She is 50' overall, of wooden strip-plank construction using the West epoxy system. She was originally built for Eve & Michael Bonham Cozens (RCC - see earlier editions of Roving Commissions). We purchased her in 2011.

After winter and spring visits to Corfu and the Ionian the time came to move on. We had taken the opportunity of a Spring cruise with

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friends (including Sue and Sam Poole and Paul Bryans RCC) to take a trip through the Corinth Canal and left the boat in Zea Marina, Piraeus. Jane had stayed on with two friends and managed a great job sanding and varnishing. They worked hard and, by the sound of the evening phone calls, partied hard as well.



Close reaching along the mainland coast

*Gem* was poised for a cruise of the Aegean. Perfectly placed to take advantage of the summer meltemi to reach back and forth between the Aegean islands and end up in Crete. We had managed to find 19 days in July away from the office, between the wedding of one daughter and the graduation of another, to enjoy a cruise and

time to ourselves with just Jane and me on board.

Zea proved a good base for refit work, the Greek suppliers and chandlers being both helpful and reasonably priced. We had a jobs list to get though before leaving: sanding decks, replacing anchor chain and the hundred other maintenance tasks presented by a boat kept away from a home base. The marina staff were friendly, helpful and accommodating. Things we arranged happened and we found services on the whole better than at home. There is no doubt Greece is in crisis, but it is also a thriving country of hospitable and hard working people who had interesting views on the immediate post-Brexit Britain.

Zea Marina is within a circular harbour in the heart of the city. It is pleasantly busy with locals late into the evenings and has a relaxed atmosphere amongst the pavement



Ormos Ay Stefanos

restaurants and bars. Our evening meals overlooking *Gem* and the other boats were good for recovery from the contortions of boat maintenance.

After a few days cabin fever was taking hold in the heat of the marina. We broke free of the jobs list, both boat and office, and left Zea with full tanks and provisions. That should read 'almost' free of the jobs list as

we anchored off for the first evening with views over Athens to finish off some final tasks.

The morning of Saturday 9 July saw a steady breeze as the anchor came up at midday (mad dogs and Englishmen). We set all white sails heading on a close reach south-east along the mainland shore. The end of the peninsula was marked by the ruins of an ancient temple on the headland.

The sailing was perfect; while the sun was scorching hot the breeze was cooling and powered us along at 8 kts. Few other yachts shared our patch of sea as we headed out across the Aegean towards the island of Kithnos. Rod & Lucinda Heikell's *Greek Waters Pilot* was our standard reference and it recommended Ormos Ay Ioannis on Kithnos, but we found the bay buoyed off for swimmers from a few houses and we moved round a short distance to Ormos Ay Stefanos as our first Aegean anchorage. There was little swinging room but we had the small bay to ourselves, found a patch of sand in 4.5m in the fading evening light, dug the anchor well in and set two anchor alarms; the ships bar opened and all was well.

The island was rocky and relatively barren, as proved to be typical of the Aegean islands, in contrast to the green of the Ionian. The bay had a handful of houses, some very new, and an olive grove down to the beach. A young couple had camped on the beach and they were the only people around. We stayed on board, happy in our little world, preparing dinner and looking out into the bay. It was good to get away and have time to ourselves.



Blue door Loutra

A lazy Sunday morning saw us up anchor and sail round under genoa to the nearby harbour of Loutra. We were able to berth alongside the inner harbour wall for a stop of a few hours. The Harbour Master cycled round from his small office to take our lines and refused any payment for the berth. The harbour had space for a handful of boats. It was pretty well full during our visit, but a few were leaving and a few arriving; all lay to their own anchors, stern to the wall.

The confines of the small harbour provided some close-quarters challenges to the crews. We may have smiled thinking 'there but for the grace of god' as our own arrival had not been as straightforward as it should have been. *Gem* is heavy, 14.7 tonnes design displacement plus all the cruising necessities, and has a small, 40HP engine with a folding prop; making a very tight turn between a concrete jetty and the rocky shore into 15kts of breeze caused a concerned moment!

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Loutra is a pretty place, with white houses with classic blue doors. A hot spring runs down to the beach within the harbour. It is a small resort visited by the Greeks as well as other nationalities, particularly the French and English. We ordered in French from a waiter who had worked in the Caribbean and was a fan of reggae and Peter Tosh. We had been told at the Hellenic Offshore Racing Club during our stay in Piraeus that until the post-war era the second language had been French; we wondered if this persisted in the Islands or if the French were simply visiting in larger numbers.

We sailed in the afternoon, reaching at over 8 kts in the 15-20 kt cooling meltemi. Again few yachts were to be seen at sea, but there were many



Naoussa fort

in the anchorage of Finikas on the island of Siros. Our pilot promised plenty of space and there was, anchoring securely in 11m with plenty of chain out.

Going ashore somehow seemed unnecessary as we watched the sun go down in the cockpit with gin & tonics.

We needed a rough plan, so

consulted the chart, pilot, guide book and google. One aim was to get to Delos, the centre of the ancient world. The charts and pilot suggested it was possible, but the meltemi was a challenge. The alternative was to go to Mikonos and take a ferry. We felt that a visit would be much more satisfying on our own keel and had a prejudice against the holiday island of Mikonos (which we now think unfounded). We decided to sail in the morning and see if there was any prospect of anchoring.

The meltemi stayed with us all night blowing steadily in the morning as we weighed anchor and set the main and staysail. A close reach at over 8 knots took us south of the island of Rinia. We rounded the south-eastern tip of the island and pointed up into the passage between Rinia and Delos; inevitably the meltemi was blowing hard at 30kts between the islands and there was no prospect of a safe anchorage to visit the ancient site. We retreated to a deep bay on the south of Rinia but we were not alone. The afternoon breeze was by then blowing at full strength and funnelling such that we couldn't set the anchor safely amongst the other boats with our small engine and now misbehaving anchor windlass.

We bailed out and beat around the west side of Rinia to the anchorage of Ormos Miso where there was only one other boat. We anchored easily in 8m of clear water with good shelter. There were views across the low isthmus of Rinia to the distant ruins of Delos - as close as we were to get.

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The anchorage was a special one, looking across from the cockpit to Delos, an open bottle of wine and talk of future plans. We were deciding on new sails for *Gem*, what we wanted from them, the balance between performance and longevity. A new list of questions for the patient sailmaker emerged; we at least had selected our sailmaker and arranged to meet him again during Cowes week. The biggest question was the choice of sail cloth and it was one on which we had had conflicting advice. In the end we concluded that our cruising ambitions demanded a woven cloth not a laminate and that a weave incorporating dyneema was worth the additional cost.

We still had the meltemi the next morning - good for more sailing! The anchor came up at 1115. Jane was at the helm as usual as I persuaded the windlass into life. This was becoming increasingly difficult as again water seemed to have got in to the motor. The Francis windlass was original to the boat and had been fully refurbished during our 2012 refit. Since then the motor had been rewound twice after water ingress and each time I had been assured the seals were replaced. Our desire had always been to keep the original equipment where possible, however the erratic behaviour



Naoussa harbour front

of this critical piece of equipment was wearing our patience very thin. Complete replacement would have been considerably cheaper than the refurbishment spend to date.

It was a short downwind sail under genoa to Paros and an anchorage in Ormos Ay Ioannou. The anchorage is large and perfectly sheltered from the meltemi; it was described to us later in the cruise by a single-handed sailor, who had spent the last 25 summers amongst the islands, as the safest anchorage in the Aegean. It is busy with yachts and super yachts, but there is space for all and the sunset is beautiful. There was good holding in sand and the clear water that is such a feature of the rocky Aegean.

We were happy on board, but thought that it was about time we tried out dry land again. Preparing the dinghy and outboard on *Gem* requires extracting both from a cockpit locker; a larger dinghy and engine had seemed a good idea for more distant anchorages and indeed once in the

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water they were just what we wanted. The transition from locker to water, however, was not my favourite activity, one best conducted out of earshot of others.

Once launched, we set off about a mile across the bay to Naoussa and its restaurants and shops. We were rewarded with an excellent seafood dinner, a good butcher and other provisions. Naoussa is a busy holiday town, but as so often with an attractive harbour front when visiting by dinghy.

After two nights at anchor in Ormos Ay Ioannou we sailed on Thursday morning. We needed a little push from



Sunset Paros

the engine for 40 minutes but otherwise were again under sail; simply being able to sail most of the time was a joy after the light winds we had experienced in other parts of the Mediterranean in previous seasons. Our course took us through the wide passage between Paros and Naxos and south to the island of Sikinos.

At 1800 the anchor went down in the bay of Ormos Skala, Sikinos, onto a sandy bottom. It soon became apparent that the ship approaching was likely to berth on the jetty. I tried a DSC call to check but that just confused everyone. We re-anchored further inshore out of the way of the ferry's manoeuvring. The taverna ashore provided a pleasant end to the day and the small mini market supplied ice for our cool box.

We had promised ourselves a visit to Santorini on the island of Thira which forms the rim of the submerged crater of a volcano. We sailed at



Fishing Thirasia

1000 and into a fog bank about 5nm south of Sikinos but still in good breeze. Speaking later with a local, fog is very unusual in the summer, nevertheless it was thick with vis down to 50m or less. AIS and radar were useful as the high speed ferries droned past at 30kts.

Approaching the northern entrance to the submerged crater formed by the volcano rim, the fog began to lift and the sight of the headlands of the two islands of Thira and Thirasia opening up into the sound was amazing.

Anchoring off Santorini is not practical, however, there are a few very

large mooring buoys south of the dock wall (Ak Aloniki). We took a line to one of these and another ashore. Another yacht was secured to the same buoy and there were super yachts moored to others. Looking at the weather forecast I felt that leaving *Gem* beam on to the predicted southwesterly and then extracting her from the potential cats cradle of lines would be tricky. We dropped the lines and went over to the sheltered bay of Ormos Ay Nikolaou on the island of Thirasia where the mooring buoys used by the day trip boats become free after 1830. The water temperature was 28°C in the crater; we wondered if we were slowly poaching *Gem*.

A neighbouring Greek yacht was anchored in the only patch of sand in the bay, right at the NE tip. Conversation with the single-handed owner was interesting. The island had not allowed overnight tourist accommodation and the architecture of the village was thus largely unchanged. The islanders had, though, seen the wealth generated by the hostels of Santorini and some limited development was now taking place. Thirasia also produced the most sought-after



Astypalia anchorage

Fava beans in Greece. From our cockpit Jane and I watched the sunset on Santorini. In a magical evening as we ate on board the white buildings reflected the reds of the western sky.

By now we had a week left and an ambition to see Simi on the eastern side of the Aegean. We slipped at 1030 on Saturday morning, taking the W F3-5 gybe by gybe pretty much due east on the short, 50nm passage to the butterfly-shaped island of Astypalaia. There was 45 minutes of motoring as the breeze dropped on the evening thermal effects, but a bit of convergence around the south of the Islands saw us sailing fast again into the bay and by 2050 we were anchored just outside the harbour of Skala.

A charging problem seemed to have developed and Sunday morning became a jobs morning. The charging problem was tracked down to a defective voltage sensitive relay but was manageable until it could be replaced. Going ashore the Port Police were not interested in our transit log, but they did want us to move into the harbour. The inside of the wall looked newly developed with power and water for yachts. We did not find the lower town attractive, however, and decided to move on and found that we had the bay of Maltezana to ourselves a little further north. We

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spent Sunday evening in the cockpit watching a herd of goats pick their way around the hillside, hearing the gentle sound of their bells.

Monday morning looked good for a fast 70nm passage to Simi and we set off at 0915 with a perfect 18kt north-westerly breeze pushing us along



Simi

at over 8kts under white sails. Reaching in *Gem* with genoa and staysail is about as good as it gets!

We had heard news of the attempted coup in Turkey two days earlier while the President was in Marmaris and kept studiously out of Turkish waters, although no doubt the navy had much better things to do than pay attention to a small yacht.

By 1800 we were approaching the west coast of Simi. The thermal effects of the evening and the high island took the breeze away completely and we motored for a short time before the wind came back at 30kts around the northern tip and into the bay. I find it hard to predict the effects of the heat and height of the islands in the Mediterranean, which often have a much more significant impact than the gradient wind.

The approach to the harbour of Simi is spectacular. Historically a wealthy island, the neoclassical architecture of the town is very different to that of the Aegean islands further east. The harbour is long and narrow with boats lying stern to along each side, their anchors crisscrossing the harbour. We were arriving in the fading light in plenty of breeze with a small engine and dodgy windlass; needless to say, we didn't do well! After fouling the anchor of a motor cruiser, forcing him to re-moor, we abandoned any further attempts and went on the ferry berth until 0800 the next morning. A trip ashore went little better with a bad choice of harbour-side restaurant for a late supper. We retired to our bunk looking forward to a better morning.

The next morning we left at 0800 to motor around to the bay of Pethi, anchoring there in 9m as suggested by the RCC pilotage notes. The bay was sheltered but busy with other vessels so swinging room was limited and the holding less than perfect.



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Simi town is a short bus ride from Pethi. A neighbouring boat, *Adventuress*, was happy to keep an eye on *Gem* for us in the gentle conditions and so we took a trip into town. Simi was beautiful, lunch was excellent. More eating was in order and we had supper ashore with *Adventuress*, discovering mutual friends and learning of their recent rapid departure from Marmaris.

Our cruise plan was to leave *Gem* in Crete until later in the summer and we needed a day in hand to pack the boat up and get her covers on. We would have liked to stay another day on Simi, but a Wednesday morning departure was pretty much unavoidable. We took our leave from *Adventuress*, motored out of the bay and south along the eastern coast of the Island. We rounded the rugged and spectacular southern tip of Simi and poked our bows briefly into the lagoon of Panormitis before departing for Crete.

The forecast was for light winds until we reached Nisos Tilos in the evening and then for a good breeze to take us on a reach all the way to Crete. The forecast was spot on, at 1800 we turned the engine off put in a reef and sped off at 9kts for a glorious overnight sail. The wind blew steadily all night and the moon lit our way, ending our cruise with great sailing.

Postscript. We packed up the boat in the Marina Agios Nikolaos on the eastern end of Crete: helpful, efficient and sheltered, in the centre of the town with all supplies. We returned for an 'ashore' cruise along the north coast of Crete and moved on to Malta. Our new sails have been delivered and we are on an October circumnavigation of Sicily with a full crew. The winds are light as we head back to Malta, but less of that, this is the RCC and we are under the wrong burgee!

Lighthouse Akra Korakas Paros

