

A Voyage to a Desert Island

. . . and Sequel

Hugo Duplessis

Our revered Commodore, Admiral Sir Len Goldsmith, had spoken highly of the Greek Islands and had inspired an idea of seeing them before Tourism changed it all. I had a good boat and could have sailed, but it is a long was round via Biscay and already July. I had just sold my business. The next year I would probably have a job again. Camping seemed the solution. Joyce's family had always spent holidays at good hotels. Sordid camping was beyond the pale, but she soon came to enjoy it. Camping is much like cruising with the same sense of adventure.

In 1960 getting to Greece at all was an exciting adventure. The road went through Yugoslavia, as it was then, and unbelievably primitive. It was hard to realise we were still in Europe. This was behind the Iron Curtain, the time of the Cold War and Communism. The main and only road was the coast road, a two-rut, gravel and bare rock track carved out of the hill side with an unguarded drop into the sea on the other. Every day we would stop for a swim at a beautiful quiet cove and there were islands offshore. I began to regret we had not brought a dinghy.

Greece was better, at least the roads were. We tried hard, but unsuccessfully to acquire a taste for *retsina* wine and were invited to a local barbecue of delicious sucking pig. The menus in the better class of restaurants, the ones with tablecloths, were hand-written in Greek and quite incomprehensible. We preferred the cheaper ones, where customers went into the kitchen to see what was cooking. You might have no idea what it was, but if it smelt good . . .

Sightseeing was exhausting and hot. Athens was enjoying a heatwave and even the Greeks were complaining. It was not long before we were again seeking the sea. In the Peloponnese we were once more camped right beside the beach, a primitive informal camp in an olive grove, where a crude screen round a hole in the ground proudly but falsely claimed it was a WC. Fresh water was raised from a well by a donkey walking round and round, or, when the donkey was not there, by some husband whose wife, rather literally, had the whip-hand.

We spent several days recovering from being 'tourists' just swimming and sunbathing. But there, a little way off shore, was an island, a real, uninhabited desert island. It was tempting. But how could we get there? It

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looked no more than a few hundred yards, but even so that was too far to swim – for us anyway – and we would have to take food and in particular we must take water. We had no boat. Or had we? All we really needed was a raft of some kind. Why not use one of the air beds. Then if one of us got tired, Joyce in particular as the weaker swimmer, we could rest on it or just hang on. Moreover, it would carry those vital bottles of water, not chilled like the water everywhere in Greece, it is true, but what did that matter as long as it was water. The ancient Greeks survived for centuries without refrigerators. Admittedly they probably drank wine. We could even take a camera – the cheaper one anyway.

Next morning, full of enthusiasm, we launched the ship, which we formally named *Lilolitair* (The association with Lilo and air was pretty obvious and Lolita just seemed to fit. We had recently read the book, or was it the film.). The essential stores for life support were loaded with as much care as if for an ocean voyage.

In those warm waters we found we could swim much further than we would ever have dared to do in the cool waters at home. Nevertheless it was comforting to know we had a liferaft. Joyce did use it to rest and hang onto, and I too had a rest half way. It took us perhaps half an hour. As navigator I had to allow for a slight cross current. Then our trusty vessel grounded on the beach and we waded ashore, like the pictures of true explorers in days of old before ports and docks were built and yacht marinas sprang up everywhere. It was not exactly a foreign shore, but it was still a thrill, the same sense of achievement as one's first Channel crossing or even a first ocean crossing.

The island, which we found later was called Orixion, was long and narrow, about half a mile from end to end and perhaps two hundred yards wide, with a low scrub coverage along the middle.

We set off to explore. In popular adventure stories, desert islands are peopled by naked savages so we did the same. Who needs clothes in a hot climate anyway. We had sweated our fill, respectably dressed for a city, in that Athens heatweave. Half way across we suddenly came face to face with the island's only inhabitant, a sort of furry Crusoe. We could certainly claim later that the inhabitants spoke a strange language we could not understand, loud and unmusical. Like the braying of a donkey, which was hardly surprising, because that is what it was.

Over the hill was a long, sandy beach. This was really the idyllic desert island, the stuff of legends. We lay on the hot sand and when it got too hot, cooled off in the sea. After a while we were disturbed by the put-put of an outboard motor, and around the point came a rubber dinghy with two people, a man and woman. This could be a bit embarrassing. Our costumes were back by the ship and, as the camp was the sort of place where they were optional anyway, we had brought them only as an afterthought. But

we needn't have worried. As soon as they landed on the beach, some way away, it was clear they shared our ideas of what to wear on a deserted beach. Also of what to do and were soon doing it.

There was no shade and after several hours the heat really did become too much and by then we had drunk all our water. It was time to return to civilisation, or what still passed for that ancient Greek tradition in the modern world. We walked back to the harbour where we had landed. There was a slight breeze that side bringing a refreshing coolness and we lingered. I was lying on the air bed when there was a sudden pop and loud hissing. The heat of the sun had raised the pressure and under my weight as well the *Lilolitaïr* had exploded. An explosion, it is true, not as catastrophic as that which befell my great-great grandfather who was master of an East India Company's ship when the powder magazine blew up. But it had certainly sprung a serious leak and there was no doubt it would founder long before we reached the further shore.

Now we were in desperate straits. It would be stretching the point to say we were shipwrecked, but we were certainly castaways. Joyce rushed across to get help from the pair with the dinghy in time to see them disappearing round the distant point. She came back almost in tears. We could not hope to last long in that heat. By the same time the next day we would probably be dead, painfully from thirst. We had told nobody where we were going. The tent and van were still in the camp of course, but if anyone did think we were missing they were as likely to steal everything as tell the police. The owner of the olive grove was a real ruffianly-looking fellow, shifty-eyed, swarthy, with a black moustache and hooked nose.

Joyce was adamant she would not be able to swim back without the *Lilolitaïr*. We would lose the camera too and the sunglasses. As the stronger swimmer I might just be able to reach the shore and get help. But she burst into tears at the thought of being left alone. Suppose I didn't get there. Suppose I was eaten by a shark. Suppose I drowned. What hope would there be for her then?

It was time for some serious thinking as I lay on the wreckage of our faithful ship. I am an engineer and I reckoned that if we simply turned the air bed over so that the burst part was underneath the *Lilolitaïr* would retain enough air to float. It might even support her. It would certainly be something to hang onto. The idea worked perfectly. Half an hour later we were staggering ashore, back to our tent and long cool drinks, well fortified with our last bottle of Yugoslav slivovitch.

But I certainly found the sun-baked, stony ground was hard that night without an air bed. I was also closer than I would have liked to what the previous occupants of that site had left. The smell of goats was overpowering.

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Sequel

Fifty years later there was a surprising sequel. I was cruising in the Caribbean on my proper yacht *Samarin*. South America lay within easy reach, the Spanish Main, romantic haunt of my boyhood pirate stories. I ordered the chart needed from Imrays in London. At that time Imray was getting rid of their large stock of old, uncoloured, fathoms charts as the new, metric ones came out. They had found the thicker old ones made a good, outer wrapping when posting rolls of the more delicate new series. That is how an old chart of the Peloponnese, half the world away in Greece, came on board with the roll of new charts of Venezuela. Yet to me it could not have been more interesting.

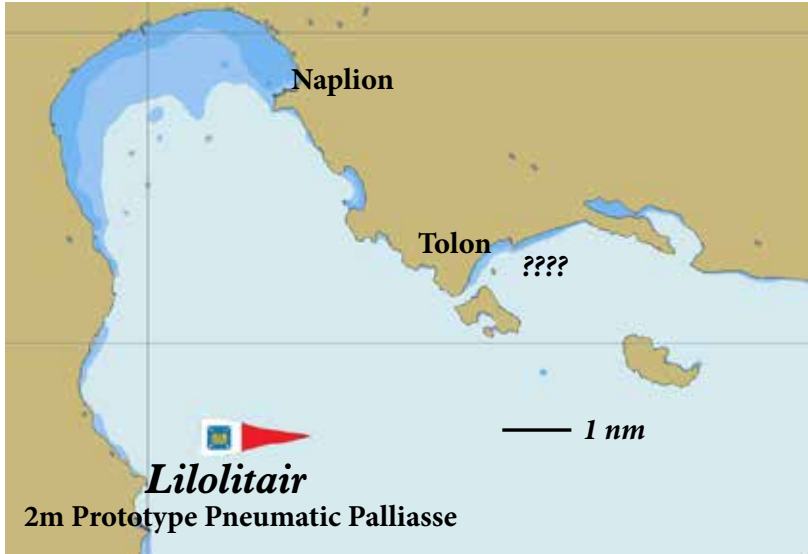
Would it, I wondered, cover the coast where we had been shipwrecked, those years ago in our great camping tour of Europe. I tried to remember the names of places. Prominent, I was delighted to see was Argos, the ancient Minoan city, one of the places visited. Moving along I recognised the name Nafplion. This looked hopeful, then round the point the little fishing village of Tolon with its small hotel where we bought our bottles of chilled water. It was simple from there to locate the sandy beach where we had camped in the goat-smelly olive grove and donkey-powered well. I laughed at the memory. This was the beach where we had sat and looked at the small island and were tempted. It looked so near. If only we had a boat. But we did. We could make one of sorts, the *Lilolita* out of our pneumatic palliasses and sort of sail there. We got back too despite being shipwrecked.

Several small, unnamed islands were shown on this old chart but which was the one on which we were wrecked? First clue had to be the distance. I reckoned the furthest we could swim, or even think of swimming, even in those warm waters, would have been half a mile. I drew a circle. Yes there was one island near enough but it was just a small rocky outcrop with no sandy shore. There was nothing else which in any way resembled my memories of a long sandy shore and a low scrub-covered hill. The chart was trustworthy, based on the meticulous surveys by the Royal Navy. Nothing, however small, escaped their attention. Within this wide bay, which we could clearly identify as the one where we had camped and the beach from which we had sailed, the chart did not show an island. However, Greece is full of myths and legends about the Gods. Moving an island would be nothing to them.

There is a sense of adventure and magic about desert islands: fairy islands which come and go, enticing mermaids, caves full of wicked sea monsters, wrecks of course, child hood stories and worse on television. This uninhabited, little island had looked everything a classic desert island should be.

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All I can say is that the island had certainly seemed substantial enough
– and so did the prospect of being marooned on it to die of thirst !



Where is the uninhabited desert island?