

## A clockwise cruise of the Aegean

William Garnett



William Garnett and Ned, our first grandchild

The uncertainties of getting back to *Hero* this summer and of getting her back to UK by the VAT deadline of 31 December 2021 were eased with Greece welcoming anyone who was double vaccinated, and HMRC agreeing to extend the VAT deadline for yachts to return to 30 June 2022. As in 2020 we were going to 'work from home'.

Our plan was to sail around the Peloponnese (as the Corinth Canal was closed due to a rockfall) across to Cape Sounion, up the Gulf of Evia then clockwise around the Aegean. Everyone advised a clockwise trip, protection as you go north and then take the building (July and August) NW Meltemi to blow you down through the islands once you get north to the Sporades.

Leaving Cleopatra Marina, where *Hero* had wintered and the yard had done minor works on time and budget, we met the Holbrooks (RCC) in Zante just three hectic days after stepping off the plane. After a happy rendezvous, we left



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View from the Palaio Castro, Navarino Bay

them to motor to Navarino Bay, (north of Pilos) and anchored off the spectacular beach at the north of this wholly enclosed natural harbour. In 1827 26 ships of the British, French and Russian Navies, had gone into the bay to show their strength to (but not intentionally to engage) the 89 ships of the Turko Egyptian fleet, who were threatening the independence of Greece. A Turk accidentally let off a shot, and as Admiral Codrington stated in his log 'The bloody and destructive battle was continued with unabated fury for four hours; and the scene of wreck and devastation which presented itself at its termination was such as has been seldom before witnessed.' Many of those ships lie preserved in the shallow bay. The walk up to the Palaio Castro and into Nestor's Cave offers a spectacular view of the bay and lagoon.

Pilos was our first experience of the neglect that is a feature of the Peloponnese and some of the Islands. No one manages the government built, EU funded marina and the electricity and water have been cut off. Although the stern-to-fixed mooring ropes were good quality, it was almost impossible to find one because unfortunately

German liveaboards were alongside rather than stern to the quay taking up all the space (beach towels!).

One treat that I was looking forward to was anchoring off the southern bays of Elafonisos Island across the Gulf of Lakonikos; two bays connected by a narrow isthmus, with gin clear water, very clean soft sand and set against a backdrop of the dramatic mountains of the eastern finger of the Peloponnese. With Yithion to the north being the historic harbour of Sparta, hopefully they had some 'non killing' recreation on these beaches.



Father and son land their catch, Elafonisos Is.

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Motoring north you arrive at the small harbour of Monemvasia. This is the Greek Gibraltar (an impressive mountain in the sea), on which is built an ancient village. At the end of a hot, steep walk, sadly the greatly praised restoration of the church mosque-church-mosque-church was closed.

Monemvasia is a hive of tourists normally, but there were none and, once again, no one collecting the money, checking the cruising tax or any of the bureaucratic papers that we had had to amass with the assistance of a local Greek agent before we had set off.

Save for a fantastic sail, in 24kts across the southern Peloponnese, motoring became the norm for the next five days as we passed through the Argolic and Saronic Gulfs. Hot and airless, I threw buckets of sea water onto the teak decks. In Spetses we rented a car to go to Epidhavros, another remarkable Greek theatre cut into the mountain in 544BC, with infamous acoustics ('Can you hear me?' was the dull refrain from the few other tourists ... I wanted to tell them that sadly I could!).

Porto Kheli and Spetses are where the wealthy from Athens hang out, either on their yachts or in their weekend houses (Porto Kheli has a small private airport as it had been proposed as a Nato base). Both are utterly charming, well maintained, but not flash. *En passant* we were to discover that the wealthy Greeks are pleasingly understated. It might have something to do with the fact that few Greeks pay income tax (despite the post 2008 bankers' demand to do so), all are taxed on their assets. So, if you have a Super Yacht you remain discretely low profile.

Another hot motor, as the sun rose behind Hydra took us across to Cape Sounion to anchor



Restored church-mosque Monemvasia



Sixth century Greek amphitheatre, Epidhavros



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Susannah at the Temple of Poseidon

minutes it was gusting 29kts. It stopped just as quickly as it started.

The southern part of the gulf up to Chalkis (approximately 50 miles north) is pretty bleak. Huge mountains of rock and scrub, no trees, not even arid loving olives.

Crossing the narrow gap at Chalkis with its famous retractable bridge is fun. Bureaucracy means it opens at an anti-social hour (because they want to minimise the disruption to traffic), but there is all the excitement

Ottoman mosque, Chalkis



amongst several other yachts, beneath the Temple of Poseidon.

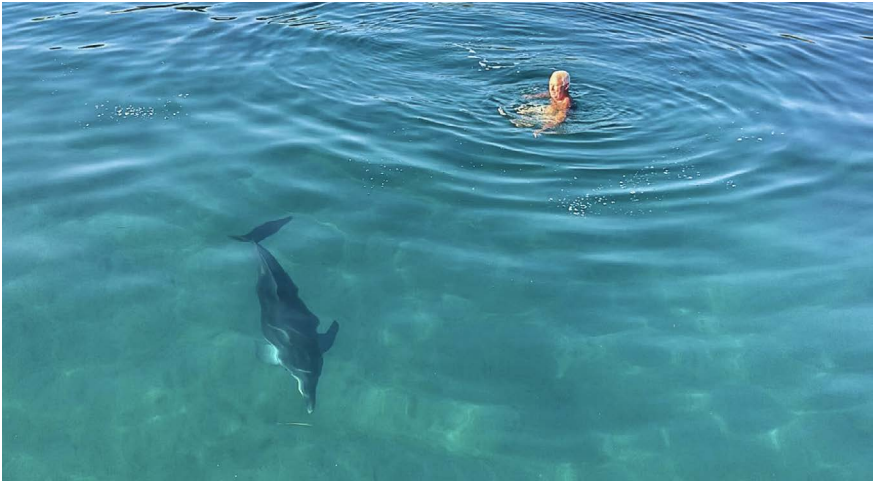
Having seen the sun set, we both felt that the swell coming in from the south west would lead to an uncomfortable night and so, in the twilight, with the temple lit above us, we motored into the southern part of the Gulf of Evia, a full moon rising behind us.

We anchored for the night at Voufalo which really does offer perfect protection for yachts. We had been advised that when the Meltemi blew it could arrive very quickly, and sure enough having anchored and dived into the sea to cool from the stifling heat, within five

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of the boat traffic moving at speed in a confined space at the very moment (and it is literally about ten minutes) between the current flowing one way or the other at 3 to 4kts. A walk around Chalkis as you wait for the bridge to open offers an Ottoman mosque and a couple of Venetian churches.

All the other yachts having got through the bridge stopped at Chalkis, but we chose the peace and quiet of a bay just a mile north on the mainland side and I will be forever grateful that we did. There are some things which when they happen, you know that you are creating a memory that will last you a lifetime and the following morning was one of those events. Before breakfast, I dived in to approximately 5m of clear water and, as I came up, I was joined by a friendly and inquisitive dolphin that swam with and around me, calmly and gently, within touching distance, for nearly five minutes.



As we left, another joined us and they stayed on the bow of the boat for ten minutes in crystal clear water.

Nothing could match that, but it was pleasing when a cooling breeze kicked in as we turned northeast around the top of Evia, the wind blew into our teeth at 18kts, giving *Hero* the upwind weather she relishes, full genoa, two reefs in the main, 8kts on a completely flat sea to Oreos.

Having cleared out north of Evia, the plan was to cross through the northern Sporades and sail through the islands across to the Dodecanese.

As we approached Skiathos Town, we passed the 46m *Pink Gin* owned by Hans Georg Näder. I had rather hoped that he would invite us to watch the England v Germany match on what must be at least a 5m television, but it was not to be.

Anchoring off Skiathos town is preferable to going stern to, where a nasty chop bounces around the harbour, hours after the breeze has slipped away. In truth we were unimpressed by Skiathos. It is pretty but the harbour has lost the character it

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had 40 years before. The restaurants are ‘chasing the euro’ as are the shops. Hugely high property prices have displaced the local community.

Skopelos has found recent (and not unwelcome) fame although it has historically eschewed it, as the church at the centre of the film *Mama Mia* is on the east coast, so an early start to arrive before the ferries and coaches was required. We sang and danced to Abba in the cockpit for days afterwards.



More significantly it has an excellent harbour with two long quays to moor either against or stern to. The old town is an Aegean classic with houses higgledy piggledy, one on top of another, all in white with mainly blue paintwork. Skopelos has retained its character and recognises the value of tourism but does not genuflect to it and it retains immense charm. We hired the ubiquitous moped and whizzed Skopelos

across the verdant island, with the wonderful scent of Maquis, pine and honeysuckle, not to forget the sweet scent of figs ripening in the hot sun (offset by the cool breeze that we had so missed in the gulfs to the west).

We were getting itchy feet (we don't like to hang around) and more than 24 hours in a port is rare for us, and so we took advantage of the afternoon breeze and passed south east of Alonnisos, spending the night in the spectacularly remote anchorage on the north of Kira Panayia (Planitis), recommended by Ant Fawcett (RCC).

Overnight the wind began to build from the north east and we





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were excited at the prospect that our first Meltemi would, as forecast, (Windy was hugely reliable) blow us down to Skiros, and it did. Superb goosewing sailing with dolphins on the bow meant that we got to Skiros at speed. Whilst Skiros village (Chora) is on the north east of the island, the go-to-harbour is at Linaria. It is absolutely delightful, albeit at least twice the price of anywhere else.

Whilst the Greek orthodox Friday evening service was amplified outside (it felt rather as though this was a call to prayer from the Ottoman period) there is between 1900 and 2000 a 'disco bubbles' shower in the marina. The normal lights in the showers are turned off, and instead there is a sound to light system and 70s and 80s rock & roll blares out over the shower cubicles: memorable.

The bus to Skiros ties in with the late morning arrival of the ferry and as a consequence you get to Skiros when everything is closed. So instead we set off early and walked the 12kms and caught the bus back having hugely enjoyed the tiny alleyways, white paintwork, ancient minute Greek chapels. The burning of incense in each of these chapels, whilst triggering not such happy memories of Susannah's Catholic education, made me feel very comfortable and we agreed that we would buy an incense burner and every evening burn incense to raise our thoughts (and the mosquitoes) to a higher level. Privately I was struggling with how to repair the heads where (as it turned out) five years of sea water and urine had created a monumental blockage.

Rather than going from Skyros straight to Ikaria (an island famous because it has the highest average life expectancy in the EU) we went via the islands of Psara and Chios. Chios is definitely one to miss despite the picturesque windmills north of the town. The main harbour unfortunately has not adopted the most basic environmental and hygiene standards, so the town's raw sewage, evidence of which sits all around the quay, pours into the main harbour. Truly foul. Its fame lies in the growing of trees from which mastic and sticky liqueur (Mastica) are made.

Ikaria, 30nm to the SE was wonderful. Once again we picked up the meltemi (which was to blow for the next six days). We sailed goosewing in 18kts down

Windmills of Chios



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to the south west tip where, as the pilot says, there is a south westerly inversion close in, although just out from the coast were the most vicious katabatic winds we witnessed in the entire trip. The surface of the sea literally being ripped into the air.

You used to moor stern to on a small pontoon in Ikaria's main harbour but they have built a new yacht harbour just to the north east. We again witnessed the extraordinary situation where the government builds the harbour but no one then runs it, no electricity, no charges and no one there to keep an eye on the place. It was most odd, although we were later told that until EU funded projects earn an income the debt repayment is not triggered. We were grateful of it as the wind roared throughout the night. The following day we hired a motorbike and visited Evdilos where they are building a huge sea wall and I anticipate that this will become the main harbour of the island.

With the meltemi still blowing hard, we put, for the first time since we have owned *Hero*, a third reef in the main and sailed on a broad reach down to Fournoi, an island with an astonishing number of indented anchorages all providing good protection from the meltemi. It is described as the 'lobster capital' of the Aegean, because the water is 5°C colder than the neighbouring island. It is unclear why, as the surrounding water is not particularly deep.

The following day we ran downwind again in 24kts to Patmos and, having anchored in one of the superbly protected bays, in the evening came into the Skala (the harbour) and walked up to see the cave in which St John the Evangelist wrote Revelations ('Alpha and Omega the first and the last') and to the Chora on top of which sits the 11<sup>th</sup> century Greek Orthodox Monastery of St John the Theologian,



a pretty serious hike (pilgrimage) – both were closed. The monastery still owns much of the land in Patmos and the neighbouring islands which was ceded to it by the Knights of St John.

It is clear that the islands around Samos, Patmos and Leros and the plethora of small islands within them are an extremely popular area in which yachts of all sizes cruise. It is easy to be discreet and low profile anchored in one of the many small bays. The water is crystal clear and although the sun is ferocious, the constant meltemi (day and night) means that the day temperature is below 30°C, the sea is 25°C and there are no mosquitos.

Monastery of St John the Theologian, Patmos



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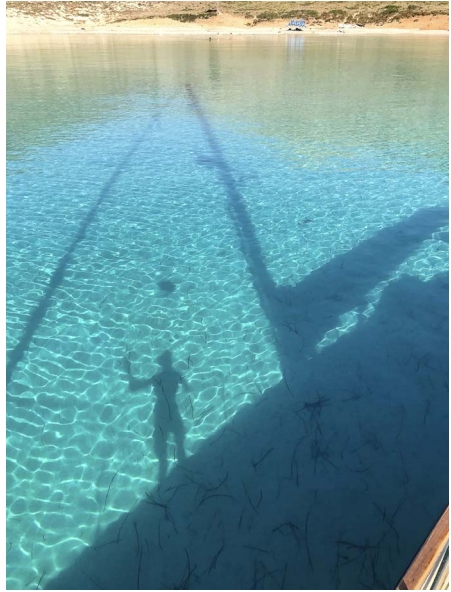
The very popular islands around Patmos are Arki to the north east and Leipsoi (Lipsi) to the east. We reached across to the turquoise anchorage at Tiganakia beach, which in truth is not a beach but a strip of turquoise water amongst a pile of rocks. With it still blowing 20kts and with rocks pretty much all around us, and little room to swing, we put out a second anchor.

Having not sailed in these islands previously, we wanted to understand why those we respect, Nigel Southward and William Maltby (RCC), amongst others who have sailed here, were such strong advocates of the area. They describe the proximity of islands, sailing from one to another in a day, being free to anchor where you want, space to tie up to a quay, friendly

locals, and the food ranging from tolerable to, in exceptional cases, first class. We evidenced all of this at Augusto on Arki. It is a narrow anchorage where the government in the late 80s built a quay. The Tavernas told us how normally the quay was maxed out with 16 yachts stern-to (we were the only one) and once again we felt embarrassed by the fact that we were beneficiaries of the consequences of the pandemic.

Within this protected cruising area, there was high praise for the island of Lipsi, with sandy beaches (a rare thing), an excellent natural harbour run formally by the port authority and rather informally by a local fellow who charged us €5 to catch our ropes and then opened his pannier to offer us smoked mackerel in oil, lemon marmalade etc. It was the first time that we had come across a charter fleet, (of Swedes). Their courtesy, beauty, genetic fair hair, and youthful optimism were refreshing, and they all promised to host us if *Hero* gets to the Baltic (as we plan to do in 2024).

With the Meltemi due to blow for two more days but then die away to light southerlies, we grabbed the chance to shoot down to Kos. The ancient harbour is impressive, and we were moored stern to the Knight Hospitallers medieval fort. The ruins of the ancient city are extensive (and well protected) but little has been done to make much sense of it all. We then pushed on to Symi, that Greek island surrounded by Turkey. The journey takes longer than you think, and is indirect, as the advice was to keep out of Turkish waters, with tensions with Greece running high over the migrant issue, and Greece refusing to allow any boats from Turkish



Aegean blue

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Symi Harbour

water to enter Greece. We saw numerous Greek and Turkish coastal patrol craft and gunboats (some from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, built out of wood), and they were being assisted by a frigate from Germany and fast patrol vessels from Denmark.

Symi Harbour is a gem. Nestled into the barren rock cliffs, with multi coloured houses, with pediments rather than flat roofs, it feels more like you are in Amalfi (the locals know this, mooring fees were twice anywhere else, but still only one fifth of the cost of the western Med).

We returned north but having bought a Turkish courtesy flag decided to cut the corners and halve the time, finishing at Vathi on Pserimos. This island is the 'go to place' for the armada of tourist 'Pirate theme' vessels offering day trips from Kos. Most go to a bay on the south west side, but Vathi on the south east is a superb simple natural anchorage offering nothing but clear water, the hum of cicadas and the gentle ringing of bells from goat and sheep foraging on this rocky landscape.

The white islands to the east of Lipsi (named because of their white chalk and the aqua marine water around them) were our next objective, but we spent the night en route on the east coast of Leros at Panteli. Above Panteli is a castle which in

View from Panteli Castle



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453BC was an Acropolis. Whilst over the years the castle withstood seven attacks, it fell as did all of the Dodecanese islands to the Ottomans in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century and Leros admitted defeat without fight, which meant that they kept their heads (subject to them paying their taxes).

After a couple of days we sailed south west to Levitha, a small island on the east side of the Cyclades, on which live two families herding goats and sheep. The meltemi blew night and day and a broad reach was followed the next day by a close fetch back across to Leros where we left *Hero* to return to the UK for August to meet our first grandchild, Ned.

We returned to Leros at the end of August and had five weeks to get *Hero* back to the Ionian. With Mykonos being the only Cycladic island with international flights, we needed to get there to welcome Ned, age 3 months, and his parents, who were joining us for a week sailing around Paros and the islands to the south. I had been told that beating into a meltemi was a deeply unpleasant experience and that the meltemi can blow at 25-30 kts for more than a week. The weather gods were against us and we found ourselves holed up on the island to the east of Naxos (Dhenoussa) stern to the rocks, which protected us from the worst of the wind, but over 24 hours the swell entered into the bay and it was clear that it was no longer tenable.

So in 25-30kts we beat in a really remarkably unpleasant sea round the top of Naxos and reached across at speed to Naoussa on the north coast of Paros (10.4kts surfing into the entrance). The forecast was for the wind to go northwest and therefore getting to the west would make the approach to Mykonos easier. Unfortunately the wind backed so we had to beat into the teeth of a gale with three reefs and a blade staysail to get to the rendezvous at the SW of Mykonos. I have never been in such an unpleasant sea. The wind running down both sides of Mykonos created swell from the north east and north west and on top of this swell were random waves breaking in all directions. It was like being in a boiling cauldron, punching into the waves.

Having loaded the 'special cargo' we sailed the following morning west to Rinia, the birthplace of Artemis, passing Delos, once the political and religious centre of





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the ancient world and the birthplace of Apollo. It was hard to associate the barren windswept island with its past.

Our three month old grandson didn't seem to mind either the close reach or short beat in 34kts and he was marvellously unaware of the fact that the closest we had brought *Hero* to grief, occurred in just 4m of water. To get as much protection as I could, we motored into the narrowest part of the bay, rock strewn on either side but with a wonderful (and rare) sandy beach at its head. Preparing to drop the anchor and trying to hold the bow into the wind, I suddenly lost drive on the engine. Susannah brilliantly dropped the anchor and 20m of chain as we started to be blown sideways towards the rocks. With a considerable 'yank' on the bow it held and we rushed to lower the dinghy and put out a second anchor to hold us while we sorted things out.

The Morse cable on the throttle had snapped and we set about taking it out and running a mouse line, resigned to having to extricate ourselves from this crack with one of us below managing the throttle in our fingers. When we bought *Hero* and completely restored her, I was amazed at the amount of kit that there was on board. Searching through the bottom of a locker, to my delight I found a replacement cable which we fitted and once again we were raring to go.

South Bay on Rinia provides good holding but very little protection from the meltemi which whips across the Isthmus. The night at anchor was horrible and frightening for all of us. Whilst the sea was flat and despite two anchors, the yawing was considerable as was the yanking of the chain (despite two snubbers) and we all just longed for the dawn to come. When it did, we wasted no time in going south to Paros, where higher mountains provide considerably greater protection albeit with the increased risk of katabatic gusts. We anchored in the bay at Paroikia to see the classically Cycladic town but also to see the spot where my father had died of a sudden heart attack. Having Ned with us put the loss in perspective. Candles lit and incense burnt, we went south around Anti Paros to anchor betwixt it and North Dhespotiko.

Thereafter we sailed southwest, spending the night on the quay at Psathi, on Kimolos. A desalination plant benefits the harbour and the Chora, but the Aegean already has a high salt content and the desalination plants are adding to the difficulties. It hasn't rained in the Cyclades for nearly two years and with the highest heats recorded in Greece in the last 46 years, the 'climate crisis' is indisputable.

When we sailed to the famous limestone cliffs on the SW tip of Milos island we found they were rammed with huge 'stinkpots' and tripper boats, but when they left we moved in for the night. A remarkable anchorage with 0.3m under the keel.

Though the islands of the Cyclades and Dodecanese are all very similar (rock hard, dry as a crisp, and a Chora at a high point, to which all would retreat when under attack), the quality of the Choras is variable. Amongst the best was to be found at Folegrandos. The Pilot rightly refers to an oasis on a mountain edge. It is a sight to behold, and such a contrast to the barren rock on which it is situated.



Famous limestone cliffs at Kleftico, SW Milos

The 'smaller' Cycladic islands, northeast of Ios and south of Naxos, are lower, more fertile, the best known being Koufonisi and Schoinusa. We anchored stern to at Mirsini on the northwest tip of Schoinusa in a perfectly protected anchorage at the top of a ria, with a small quay.

From there it was a tough beat in 28kts up to Paros through the narrow and shallow channel betwixt Anti Paros. With two reefs in the main and a tiny jib but still going at speed, we found ourselves for a moment with 0.4m underneath us. We kept the heel on and got through. Having said our goodbyes to our daughter, her husband and Ned we waved as the Bluestar ferry left. Our tears were soon dried by the most pleasant sail of our entire voyage, on a fetch across to Serifos.

Serifos like many of the Cycladic islands is 'under development', but noticeable has been the tasteful investment round the harbour rather than in the Chora, which despite the spectacular view is rather rundown. The harbour frontage has been sympathetically enhanced with beach side dining right at the water's edge. To our pleasant surprise, despite our concerns at the increased salt levels and the absence of fish in the eastern Aegean, the fisherman here were catching (albeit in small numbers) fresh tuna, an encouraging sign, but also a sign that the seasons were changing, as the tuna move east as the water begins to cool.

Following a day of boat duties, we left early to motor from Serifos across to Yerakas on the eastern Peloponnese. During the 10 hour passage we had the excitement of the reel 'screaming' and we actually landed a good sized tuna, which within an hour we had filleted to be able to cook the loins and prepare the rest for sushi. It provided 25 meals.

Whilst a one-way trip round the Peloponnese, ideally going east taking the north westerly down the west coast and then reaching across to the Cyclades is welcome,

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the return is harder work. We beat our way, over a couple of days, round the three fingers, stopping in very remote anchorages but seeing a side of Greece that doesn't exist in the Aegean or the Ionian. The buildings in the small anchorages are Maniot in origin, (small stone houses, with tall towers on each of them). The best example of this was at Gerolimena on the tip of the middle finger.

The following day we beat the 30nm to the anchorage at Methoni, famous for its castle, built by the Venetians in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Bourtzi, on the headland, is particularly impressive. The fort, as with so many others, evidences the history



Venetian Castle, Methoni

of this area with ongoing battle between the Venetians and the Ottomans with its mixture of competitive trading and cultural and religious clashes. I am sure the Venetians could be brutal, but the Ottoman habitual beheading of the vanquished (unless sold into slavery), recorded

in a number of the coastal cities that we visited in the last two years was particularly grotesque (and they also did it to their own).

The prevailing (and pretty relentless) NW winds and accompanying swell make the uphill return to the Ionian a bore, but as we motor sailed up, and despite the waves and swell, we noticed two turtles close to each other. A closer look revealed they were both hopelessly entwined in deep sea fishing line and a plastic sack. Susannah launched the rubber dub and rowed across with a knife and cut them both free. A lifetime memory, and we felt less guilty at catching the tuna (Bluefin have become increasingly rare).

Despite the faint praise given to the marina at Katakolo, it breaks the journey up to Zante. It is an utterly grim place, devoid of any character, built for cruise ships to be able to visit Mount Olympus.

Susannah releasing the turtles





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After supper, and with the wind surprisingly swinging into the east, we left in the dark to arrive in Zanta harbour at 0400, where we heard our second grandchild had been born.

We needed to get north and motored to Kioni, on the east coast of Ithaca. We went to Kioni last year, days after the Medicane, only to witness sunken charter yachts being hauled out onto the beach. What a fantastic transformation has occurred in the last 12 months. The quay has been rebuilt (and improved) and the small harbour really is very chic. The walk around it through pine woodland, maquis, epitomised the charm of the Ionian. We then sailed north on the afternoon breeze to Ormos Rouda east of Sivota on the south of Lefkada.



Windmill, Kioni, Ithaca

The following day we pushed north at speed to get up to Lakka on the north tip of Paxos in the northern Ionian. 2.5nm east of Paxos are submerged rocks (1.5m, unbuoyed) and in the course of a pleasant evening beat, to our horror and lacking concentration, we saw them 20m under our bow and directly ahead of us. A prompt tack took us to Lakka where the harbour was absolutely choc-a-block with charter yachts and the partying went on until 0400. The Ionian is 'Greece light' and the lack of wind and heat made us delighted to have got to the Aegean, but the lower islands and the greater prevalence of fresh water within them, does create a beautiful place in which to walk and cruise.

Having been in the Aegean and around the Peloponnese, to find ourselves in the company of so many boats and, with the charter business booming, created mixed emotions. We were delighted that people had enough confidence to come on holiday and that the businesses were getting back together, but we absolutely understood why people who own their boats have concerns about sailing in the Ionian where if you want to go stern to, there is a race to get your slot by mid morning. We grabbed our place on the quay in Gaios, one of our absolutely favourite harbours where we entertained our goddaughter.

Finally, we headed for Preveza to be hauled until next year. As we motored out of Gaios passing south of the anchorage at Mongonisi, I noticed a yacht with a long burgee anchored in the tiny crack on the tip of Paxos. It turned out to be the Burtons (RCC) to whom we shouted hello before moving on. That burgee is so distinctive and it is so understandable why the club requires us to fly it.