

False starts, bad luck, good luck

A cruise from Sicily to Greece

Phil Heaton

‘Everything will be all right in the end, and if it’s not all right then it’s not the end.’ – old Indian proverb



Phil Heaton

It was cruisers’ Happy Hour at a bar in Licata, Sicily when it dawned on us that we were dealing with the frustrations and disappointments of engine problems in an unexpected way. Another cruiser commented on the repeated failure of our technicians to find a diagnosis and solution “You must be really angry,” she said. I replied, “No, would it help if we were?”

However, to go back to the beginning of this episode, in 2018 after nine years of world cruising, we sailed from the Caribbean back to Europe and over-wintered *Minnie B* in Albufeira, Portugal. Then in 2019 we cruised east via the Balearics, Corsica, and the Tyrrhenian Sea to winter *Minnie B* in Licata, Sicily. It was time for a more serious schedule of engine maintenance, including having the injectors removed



Phil Heaton



Norma servicing winches

which was diagnosed as faulty due to dirty fuel and diesel bug causing corrosion.

We made the most of our aborted cruise by getting on with boat maintenance such as winch servicing, and took the opportunity to see more of Sicily.

In January, we had visited the Valley of the Temples at Agrigento; the term 'valley' is a misnomer, as the site is on a ridge. However, there are the remains of seven Doric style Greek temples dating from the 5th century BCE (BC), with names ascribed around the 16th century. The Temple of Concordia, which was turned into a church in the 6th century CE (AD), is now one of the best preserved examples.

Similarly, we had visited the Villa Romana del Casale which has one of the richest, largest and most varied

and checked. When they were re-installed the fuel injection pump connections leaked requiring new O-rings, seals and involved removing the injection pump.

Our confidence in the local mechanic plummeted and we switched to a Volvo approved dealer in distant Ragusa, a two hour trip each way. Unfortunately, when the injection pump was re-installed the engine cut out when throttled back to tick over. This was our first false start. We were about to leave for a cruise in the Egadi Islands at the western end of Sicily. Bad luck it happened, but good luck it occurred while in the marina, rather than having arrived in the Egadi Islands. The Volvo technicians returned and took away the injection pump

Valley of the Temples, Agrigento



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Villa Romana del Casale

collections of Roman mosaics in the world, dating from the early 4th century CE. Much attention has been given to a mosaic of several women competing in sports that include weight lifting, discus throwing, running and ball-games, all depicted wearing two piece outfits closely resembling bikinis.

We revisited the Baroque towns of Ragusa and Modica and added Scicli which is famous for both its own Baroque architecture and also for being the setting for the delightful TV series *Inspector Montalbano*. All absolutely marvellous.

The replacement injection pump arrived during October 2020 and the engine was working, but Europe was increasingly closing down in response to rising Covid infections. We dashed back to England while we could, assured that the next time we went to *Minnie B* we would be able to go cruising.

We were back to *Minnie B* in mid July 2021 and hauled out to change the propeller shaft seal. The sails were bent on and she was prepared for cruising. The entry requirements for Malta were completed and we were ready for an overnight sail to Valletta. Norma let go the bow lines, I let go one of the stern lines, ready to let the other line go, throttled back to engage transmission ... and the engine cut out and would not restart. Quick scramble to secure the boat, checked fuel to the injection pump – OK; checked the fuel to the injectors – nope. Oh dear, a second false start but once again lucky that it happened while we were in the marina.

This was Sunday 31 July and the technicians arrived on Tuesday to diagnose ‘Oops, Volvo have sent us a faulty fuel injection pump ... we will get another one

Phil Heaton



Marianello beach, Licata

... but it will be the end of August because our firm closes for the Italian August summer holidays but it could be water in your diesel'. The company was sympathetic and apologetic but it was all out of their control, they said.

With three to four weeks to spare we settled in to enjoying Licata. The climb up to Castel Sant'Angelo (130 metres above sea level) provides panoramic views over the harbour, the marina and along the coast as well as being very good exercise. A walk along the cliff top leads to narrow roads reaching down to the wide and soft sand beach, bordered with cliffs riven by water eroded gullies, and the opportunity to swim behind the rock barrier protecting the shore.

The Baroque part of town has cafes, restaurants and the character that comes with faded glory. Our go-to bar was Blue Sky where Gaspare and Alla made us most welcome and the adjacent pizzeria served up abundantly topped pizzas for a song.

The mutterings of one of the technicians about water in our diesel was a major concern, especially after we had emptied and thoroughly cleaned the fuel tank and replaced the fuel lines in January 2020, as well as installing a water sedimenter which allowed us to cycle the diesel from the bottom of the tank back in to the top. In addition, we had poured in a liberal dose of diesel bug treatment along with fresh diesel. A further precaution in July 2021 had been to cycle the diesel, drain off about a quarter of the fuel and replace it with fresh.

We took a sample to a petrochemical lab in Augusta and made a trip of it, staying overnight in Ortigia, Siracusa which is a fascinating and charming Sicilian gem. The Duomo di Siracusa is a 'must visit' with the great Greek Temple of Athena having been built in the 5th century BCE on even older foundations, then incorporated into the cathedral in the 7th century CE, converted to a mosque in the

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9th century and back into a cathedral in the 11th century when Norman additions were made. 18th century Baroque renovations make it such a marvellous patchwork of styles.

The results of the fuel analysis were good, showing water content of 108ppm and the international maximum standard is 200ppm.

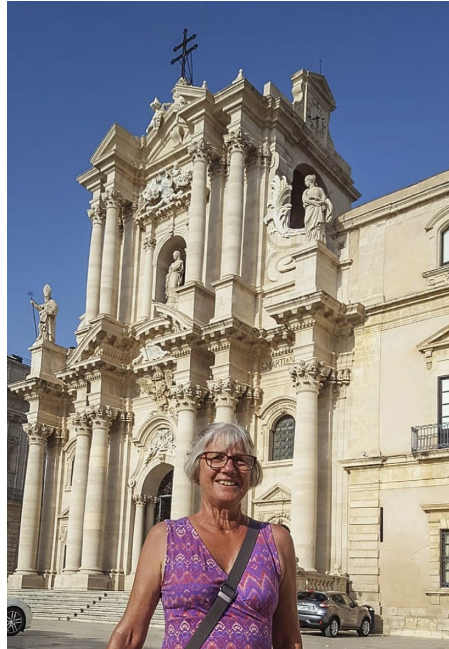
We settled into a regime of yoga, long walks, and pop-up gym on the boat using dive weights, exercise bands and the companionway steps. There is a convivial community of cruisers in Licata, though with the British contingent now much depleted because of the Schengen rules, and excellent staff at the Marina di Cala del Sole. An on site chandlery can get pretty much everything a cruiser needs and there are cafés for relaxation.

There are two downsides to Licata: a lack of waste recycling and collection and the feral dogs which make their presence known by requiring pedestrians to be very wary about where they step.

Our technicians reappeared at the beginning of September refreshed and enthusiastic, installing a second new fuel injection pump. This was fine for 30 minutes and then the engine cut out when throttled back. We were now on our third pump counting our original, so clearly the pump was not the problem. Much head scratching led them to determine that the problem lay with the speed governors and the fuel pump activation rod, so more parts were ordered from Volvo and a return trip would be required. And so it came to pass, but Volvo had sent the wrong parts.

Another delay, more yoga, pop-up gym and walking then, more espresso macchiati and cannoli at Café San Angelo, then negronis at Café San Angelo. The sun shone, it was warm. We should complain? We also joined with other cruisers in the marina on 18 September for International Coastal Clean-up Day, retrieving vast quantities of polystyrene from boxes discarded by local fishermen and hundreds of plastic bottles.

Our technicians returned late in September and installed the new parts. We ran the engine. Revved up, throttled back, engaged transmission, turned it off, started again, for 30 minutes, for another 30 minutes and another 30 minutes and crossed our fingers.



Duomo di Siracusa

Phil Heaton



Scicli, south east Sicily

Minnie B

and good shelter, except from the south. After two days, during which we had a splendid lunch in one of the harbour's many fish restaurants, the wind shifted to the south.

Uncomfortable, in the now exposed anchorage, we motor sailed the 30nm to Siracusa which has another large anchoring area. Our concerns about the batteries were heightened as there was insufficient power to raise the anchor using the electric windlass. Manually operating the windlass to haul in 40 metres of 10mm chain

In the meantime, we had been developing increasing anxiety about our service batteries (unrecognised Chinese brand bought in South Africa) which were not coming up to full charge. They were six years old but had only been through about 1200 cycles. Nevertheless, our optimism was undented and finally with a certain amount of trepidation we left Licata on 30 September bound for Preveza, Greece where we planned to haul out for much needed hull and rudder maintenance.

With little wind, we motored the first leg of 70nm to Porto Palo at the south-east corner of Sicily which could be our jump off point for Preveza. There is an enormous anchoring area



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and a 27kg anchor provided much needed exercise now that the pop-up gym was no longer popping.

On 4 October we left for Preveza and arrived on 6 October having motored the 285nm. We were sorry not to get wind and enjoy a long sail, but the forecast choice was to go with little to no wind or wait and have F6 and torrential rain. Somehow, after our false starts, comfort trumped too much weather. It was good to have a two day trip and *Minnie B* moving again, albeit to the sound of our engine. In a way that was reassuring after its period of not working. We were joined by some playful dolphins for a while on the first day and on the second night three small swift-like birds hitched a ride.

With our windlass not functioning we decided to see out our cruising season in Cleopatra Marina and began preparing for haul out and working on the long list of maintenance work required. The marineros were very efficient and professional so the haul out was smooth and well handled. There were so many boats in the three boatyards on the Aktio side across from Preveza, it was quite staggering.

We found time for some exploring and with a hire car we drove to Lefkada, Nidri and Vasiliki. What a shock. We were last in Levkas over 25 years ago with a charter boat and there were just a couple of other boats on the town quay, but now hundreds if not thousands. Nicopolis to the north of Preveza has interesting ruins, founded in 29 BCE by Octavian to celebrate victory over Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium. Then to Parga which is also a delight and not much changed in the last 25+ years but clearly easier to visit in October than August we imagine.

The series of false starts did not dent our enthusiasm and although we had what might be seen as some bad luck it did happen in the most favourable circumstances and so we count our blessings and look forward to cruising in the Adriatic in 2022.

Oh yes, we never did manage to summon up any anger and it really would not have helped if we had.

Nicopolis

