

At peace in Greece

Sailing the azure waters of the Cyclades inspires the art of relaxation

By journalist and travel writer Stephen Henderson | The Baltimore Sun

November 25, 2007

There are blessed moments in every life that are so wildly out-of-the-ordinary, it's as if one has floated free from reality. This past summer, I had one of these rare experiences when I woke up one morning aboard a gorgeous, 60-foot sailboat, Arianna, which was moored in a secluded cove off the Greek island of Rhenia.

Was I still dreaming? I couldn't completely believe my good fortune, as I crept up to the deck, dropped my towel and dove into the still, chill waters of the Aegean Sea, naked as the day I was born. My partner, James; my brother, Douglas; our friend, Alison; and our captain, a 24-year-old half-French and half-Greek man named Niko, were still asleep aboard Arianna, so I had the whole wide world all to myself for a few magical minutes.

This dip was the dazzling beginning to a week spent sailing from Syros to Santorini, primarily through an archipelago named the Cyclades. Cyclos (pronounced "kee-close") is a Greek word for circle and the Cyclades ("Kee-Clah-days") are arranged like a ring around the sacred island of Delos. According to Greek mythology, it was on Delos that Leto gave birth to Apollo, god of light, and the fruit of her union with Zeus, father of all gods.

The paradox of liberty bounded by implicit rules is, I learned, quite similar to what exploring on a sailboat is like. One is free to journey where one likes - but only if the wind, water and one's shipmates all agree.

Arriving in Athens in early September, we took a high-speed ferry to the island of Syros, and were happy to see Niko waiting for us in the harbor. He showed us about Arianna, which has four cabins with baths, surrounding a comfortable dining area and small, but serviceable kitchen. Niko had his own captain's berth up front.

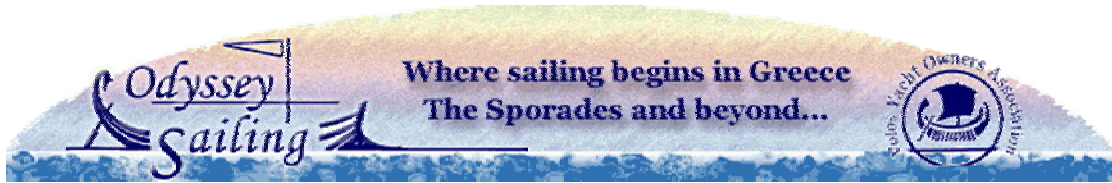
Above, the decks were teak and the cockpit roomy enough to have two banquettes on which to sunbathe. There was a dodger, or weather covering, about the upper deck, providing shade for those who'd had enough sun.

After a good night's sleep - we were all shocked that the hubbub of the tavernas and bars along Syros' waterfront didn't keep us awake - we began our leisurely sail south. Days would begin with a breakfast of strong coffee, fruit and fresh Greek yogurt. Then, we'd pull up anchor and off we'd go.

September is the season for meltemi winds, which blew strong all day.

Douglas, by far the most experienced sailor among the passengers, claimed to be miffed that the winds were "broad reach" or right into the sails all day, so he couldn't practice his nautical technique by tacking back and forth. Since all the Cyclades lie fairly close to each other, we were never out of view of land - another slight disappointment for my brother, but something that delighted James, Alison and me, the landlubbers. We felt nestled and safe by always being able to see our destination on the horizon, and knowing exactly where we were headed.

Days passed slowly and pleasantly as I sunbathed and caught up on my reading. I'd also brought along a watercolor set and, to my delight, found myself so inspired by the pure clarity



of colors in the sea, sky and horizon, that I was soon busily painting away with a focus I hadn't manifested since art classes in college.

Usually, at about 1 o'clock or so, Alison and I would go below to the kitchen to rustle up a Greek salad for lunch. Nothing could be easier, as the ingredients we'd find in produce stores each afternoon were locally grown and tasty. Tomatoes, cucumbers, green peppers, fresh oregano, feta and black olives - chopped together and served with crusty bread - made an excellent lunch.

We would sail for no more than four hours, till we arrived at our next island. Usually, I could convince my shipmates to explore by going for a run, which was punishing as the Cycladic islands have rocky, hilly coastlines, and the road away from the beach often went up, up, up at a heart-pounding incline. The exercise always had its rewards, however, and it was awe-inspiring to stand on a windswept summit, survey the coastline in all directions, and see how the sea's vibrant azure color close-in melded into shades of green, navy and, yes, wine-dark purple, farther out from shore.

Not all the islands we visited, of course, were remote or unpopulated. Mykonos, for instance, is a playground for sun and sin seekers from around the world. When we arrived, we rented a car and toured the island. Even though the high tourist season was over, the island was still hopping. We ate lunch at a place that someone had assured James was the "chic-est" spot on the island, Psarou Beach, feasting on grilled squid, fava bean spread and tarama (a salty froth of fish roe mixed with whipped cream) at a restaurant called Namos.

The next day, we landed at Delos, an island that reached its zenith in the classical period (5th to 4th century B.C.), when nearly all commercial activity of the eastern Mediterranean was centered there. Rich merchants, bankers and ship owners built lavish homes with terraces, courtyards and indoor plumbing. There were hardly any visitors besides us, and it seemed unimaginable that we were able to wander freely through these huge ruins, stepping across ancient mosaic floors, and running our fingers across marble work carved millennia ago.

Our sail continued to Naxos, Ios, Iraklia and Schinoussa before we ended up in Santorini. On our final night, we decided to have a barbecue on the beach, and Niko arranged a circle of rocks - shaped like the Cyclades - in the sand.

While our eggplant blackened, and the lamb sausages sizzled, we lay back on the sand, watched the sun set, and then the winking, blinking arrival of the evening's stars. Jupiter was the first and brightest light to appear in the sky. In Roman mythology, it is Jupiter, not Zeus, who is the king of Heaven and Earth, and leader of all the Olympian gods.

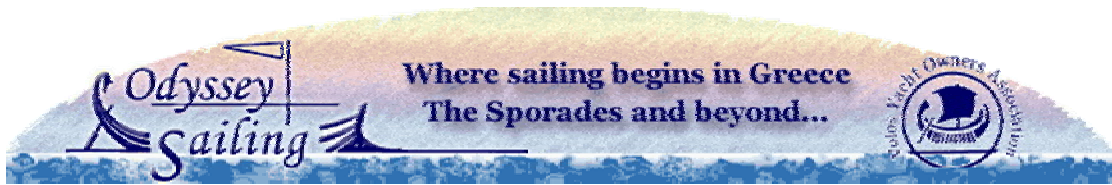
So insistently and rashly did Jupiter (or was it Zeus?), shine forth his beacon over all below, as he had for millennia, that I felt quite mortal, quite aware of the brevity of life, yet quite happy to be there at that particular moment. And in that confusion of feeling, I suppose I also felt quite Greek.

If you go: GETTING THERE

To reach the Cyclades Islands, it's best to fly into Athens, Greece, and travel on via a high-speed ferry to the island of Syros. From Baltimore, multiple carriers offer connecting flights to Athens. To get from Athens to Syros, there are departures several times a day from Athens' Port of Piraeus aboard either GA Ferries (gafferries.com) or Blue Star Ferries (www.bluestarferries.com).

Odyssey Sailing
www.odysseysailing.gr
info@odysseysailing.gr

Antonopoulou 158D, Volos, Greece
Tel: +30 24210 36676



Further comments from previous clients....

"Enjoyed the smaller, less populated islands that we visited, in addition to the normal islands. Nikos +++"

"Our trip was fantastic & our skipper, Nikos, was fabulous! We will definitely be coming back! The Arianna was a superb ship!. ++++++++" "

"I just wanted to drop a note and say what a wonderful time I had this last week on the Arianna, with Niko. She is a beautiful boat and you can tell she is well loved by her owner and her skipper. Thank you for letting us share and enjoy her. Everything about the week was great from the time you picked us up on the pier in Syros to the time Niko walked us to the ferry in Ios. He is very professional skipper who knows what he is doing. At no time did I ever feel nervous or unsafe, every port we pul"

"Another great trip on the Arianna. Although the weather was not the best we really enjoyed the islands we visited. I was glad to be able to help with the sailing. As always Niko was the best! Very informative and fun. I look forward to future trips with both."

"Nikos Rocks!"

"Our trip was truly memorable. The yacht was nice and Nikos made the trip beyond compare."

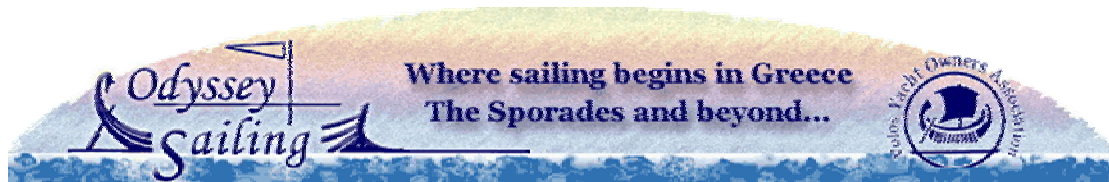
"This was an absolutely fabulous trip. Nikos truly made this a memorable experience - I wholeheartedly recommend this trip."

"Nikos was an amazing skipper. Our trip would not have been half as great as it was, without his presence. He is a great tour guide and a lot of fun to be around. I will certainly recommend this to my friends and family."

"Nikos was an amazing skipper. We would not have had such a great trip without him. His knowledge of the waters, land, and culture made this trip one of a kind for all of us. The memories we made here will last a lifetime."

"Our skipper, Nikos, made the trip very enjoyable. He was fun, easy to get along with, and extremely capable with the boat. Broken toilet + couple minor things"

"The captain fit in with our group very well. He was easy to work with and very helpful. Our toilet was not working"



"Nikos was great! He was very flexible & fun, we had a great time."

"I wanted to send you a note to tell you what a great trip we had aboard the Arianna. It is a beautiful boat. We actually had the opportunity to truly sail, unlike our previous trips. It was amazing. Niko is such a great skipper. You remember us telling you our experience with Kostas last year. Honestly I have nothing bad to say about Niko at all."

"Both Kathy and Noreen forwarded me the e-mail you sent to them. I wanted to also say what a great time we had and that it was a genuine pleasure meeting you. You went out of your way to show us things we wouldn't have seen. I would have liked to spend more time in Syros - you were an excellent tour guide!"

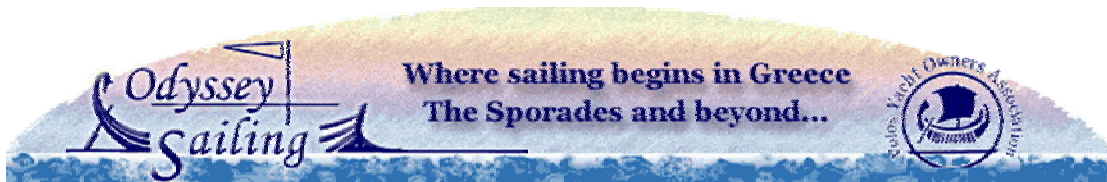
"Had a great time on our trip, everything was beyond my expectations, and having Nikos and Nyla with us made it even better. Both of them were really great to be with, I thank you very much for the whole experience, and also for the gift, very kind, I am sorry I did not get to meet you while we were there, maybe some other time. Again thank you"

"I apologize for this being so late. After we returned from our wonderful Greece trip, life became extremely hectic. Our work had piled up and we wished we were back on the Arianna instead of here. I can't thank you enough for the wonderful time we had on your boat. Everytime our group gets together, we share the memories we made in Greece. Thank you so much for your hospitality and kindness. I have recommended you to many friends already! I will remember our trip for the rest of our lives. I hop"

"Hello from the cold USA...our trip on the Arianna was a wonderful experience....when we return to the Greek islands we will give you a call.."

"Once more thank you for the opportunity to enjoy with our family a vacation filled with fond memories. Arianna was the perfect venue for us, she is sleek fast and comfortable. Our captain Nikos, is indeed very well mannered, experienced and considerate person, we all immediately became very comfortable with him, he taught us plenty, so that we can help him as a crew. He did not take chances, was a very calculating and knowledgeable skipper. He gave us the opportunity to experience a part of Greece"

" I am sure you already know it, but Niko is terrific skipper. He is very knowledgeable and wise beyond his years. I like to say he is an "old soul" and has lived a lot in a few years."



"I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and tell you what a wonderful time we had on the Arianna during our Charter."

"It is good to hear from you again. Quinn and his wife are out of town at their place where they keep their sailboat. I am sure when he returns that he will contact you. In the meantime, I wanted to respond on the behalf of our group. We thank you so much for chartering Arianna to us. It was a pleasure to have such an experience. The trip was truly unforgettable. Your country is magnificent and I can't imagine being able to see it in a finer way than sailing on the Arianna to some of your most be"

"I apologize for not getting back to you sooner but I was aware that Alithea had responded to your last e-mail and as you know the computer and I are not on the best or terms. Anyway , I do want you to know from me personally that our "Arianna" charter met or exceeded our expectations in every way. WE all voted it to be our best family sail trip ever. The only improvement would have been an additional week on the blue Aegean Sea but the young folks had to get back to work. This was the first time"

"I had the pleasure of chartering your company's sailboat with my family for a ten day trip in the Cyclades in May of this year (2005). Of course the scenery of Greece, the wonderful and hospitable people of the country, and the experience of creating one's own agenda all combine to make this kind of a trip special and memorable. We were fortunate to have a number of things in addition, however, that made this trip a vacation we will remember fondly for a long time, and one we hope to repeat in t"

"The trip was wonderful as it always is. The weather didn't co-operate so we were in IOS a few days longer than planned but had a great time anyway. As always Niko made the trip enjoyable no matter this situation! Would recommend Arianna and Niko to anyone."