

The Greek Island Odyssey

In Mycenaean times the Ithacan ruler Odysseus was conscripted by chief honcho of the time Manelaus to fight the Trojan wars in Asia in revenge for the alleged abduction of his wife Helen by Paris, son of the Persian ruler Hector. At the end of the ten year siege of Troy he then took ten years to make it back to his home on the Ionian island of Ithaca - or was it Levkada as is asserted in some archeological schools? Either he needed a new travel agent or his yearnings for the pining Penelope had waned along the way.

Several hundred years later the fantasized version of his exploits turned up in the poems of Homer's Iliad and today his name has become synonymous with journey in the English language. **In 2008 a group of 29 Australians and a lone Canadian woman sailing five chartered Beneteau yachts covered half the journey of Odysseus, from Athens to Levkada, in two weeks, suggesting that Odysseus had in fact encountered some major distractions along the way.**

Of course the modern journeymen and women had at least one major advantage; the trip had been shortened by some 200 nautical miles by a Frenchman who took a 1 million cubic metre slice out of the isthmus of Corinth to create the Corinth Canal. An engineering masterpiece at the end of the nineteenth century the canal today has limited commercial application given the size of most modern day cargo vessels but passage through the 75 metre high, 25 metre wide 3.2 nautical mile cut was a highlight at the beginning of the 2008 Odyssey.

Construction of the canal was first attempted by Nero during Roman times and he put 6,000 Jewish slaves to work for a brief period before Gaul attacks on Rome caused the premature termination of excavation in the limestone that comprises the isthmus.

The Roman emperor Octavian, or more to the point the slaves who dragged his ships on logs over the isthmus, would have much appreciated passage by water during his pursuit of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, who having deserted their defeated navy at the battle of Actium at the western end of the Gulf of Patras set sail around the southern end of the Peloponnese in search of sanctuary in Egypt. Octavian failed to 'head them off at the pass' but his pursuit was relentless and the rest is history.

First port of call after Corinth was Galaxhidi on the northern shore of the Gulf. Once a very busy trading port Galaxhidi today is a tranquil seaside village, which is largely unscathed by the ravages of mainstream tourism. Clean, friendly and with cobbled streets the town today greets visiting yachtsmen and a few land travellers. It also provides easy access to Delphi, a few kilometers inland and in the mountains that border the coast.

A clear blue September day provided perfect conditions for the half day excursion arranged by Mariner as an option on the Odyssey program. Delphi was a spiritual sanctuary in ancient Greek times and digital recreation of its splendor suggests that the engineers of the time were no slouches either. Located at the top of a sheer cliff on a precipitous mountainside the mere placement of 1 metre cube building blocks in the structures of Delphi defies imagination.



After an overnight stop at the tiny island of Trizonia another engineering marvel presented itself. The Rio-Anterrio bridge, a 2.88 kilometre cable stayed air-borne monster has its ends anchored to two different tectonic plates and its 4 huge pylons straddling a fault line between the two. The bridge connects mainland Greece with the Peloponnese from a domestic perspective but more importantly comprises an important component of a high speed road link between Brussels and Athens in the broader European scheme of things. The 25 Euro toll is indicative of what it cost to build this masterpiece.

Then into the Ionian Sea to the port of Sami on the island of Cephalonia, which provided the setting for Louis de Berniere's famous novel Captain Corelli's Mandolin and the appalling Penelope Cruze movie of the same name. The size of the island suggested that an excursion by land might be the order of the day and Assos on the north western shore and nearby Mythos Beach quickly validated that assertion.

The spectacular limestone cliffs that ascend from a lime tinted turquoise sea prompted a previously unequalled frenzy of camera shutters. The tiny village of Assos, overlooked by a Venetian fortress, offered excellent waterfront dining following the giddy descent from the cliff top main road.

A return to the Delphinia Restaurant on the night of the lay day in Sami saw a local band of musicians whip the suitably imbibed diners into a frenzy of Greek dancing, which continued unabated from 9 until 1, when exhaustion finally prevailed. A great night with terrific exchange between the mix of nationalities and the Greek proprietor, who at the end declared the night the best of the summer, 'because Ozzies he make it good party'.

At this point of the rally only two of the scheduled three races had been conducted but both had seen 20 knots and more of a spirited westerly wind, rather than the benign 10 knot north-westerly breezes that supposedly prevail throughout the Ionian Sea. In fact the weather did not follow a settled pattern at all, which the locals told us was really un-seasonal. Now where have I heard that before?

Nevertheless an arm wrestle was developing between recently crowned Australian IRC Champion Peter Sorenson and Mark Hendry, who both sailed identical Beneteau 50 footers. Sorenson is a pretty competitive bloke

and the step down from the glamour of the national championship to 'mickey mouse' passage racing in the Greek Islands did not dampen his competitive fervor.

The handicapping system developed by Mariner also brought total racing novice Robert Tardif and his similarly inexperienced crew into the picture and before the start of the last race only 1 point separated four of the five yachts in the fleet.

Back to the rally and on to Fiskardo at the northern end of Cephalonia, and the only town on the island not destroyed by the 1953 earthquake, which you can have described but which is still impossible to imagine. In some villages every single house was reduced to rubble and on Cephalonia the entire population was driven into the streets in terror as the quake shook the ground like jelly on a child's dessert plate.

Fiskardo today has a busy tourism-driven waterfront where one of the great past times is the coming and going of the huge fleet of yachts that visit during their charters out of nearby Levkada. Reverse parking misadventures, knitted anchor chains and futile attempts at throwing tangled mooring lines made for great viewing while sipping a cappuccino in one of the many cafes. Not cheap mind you - 5 dollars for a coffee!

Cephalonia's neighbor Ithaca is the diamond of the Ionian Islands and Kioni is probably the diamond of Ithaca. With a dog-leg closing the harbour to the open sea Kioni is a perfect haven. The classic two story house on the right as you enter the harbour was for sale in September 2008 for a cool 1 million Euros. Built in 1896 it was owned by an English woman with a Hamilton surname who operated a fleet of barges on the Danube in Bulgaria and married her chief captain, a Greek from Ithaca. When he eventually brought her home to Kioni she built the mansion to specifications that easily survived the big earthquake.

An excursion to nearby Stavros brought us closer to the home of Odysseus but a sunny day and an appetite saw us lunching in the tranquil garden of the excellent Polythemos restaurant where we ordered and shared a range of excellent entries accompanied by some equally excellent house wine. We then briefly contemplated the 7 kilometre walk back to Kioni before the school bus came along and we took the ride with the kids. The bus stopped at or near the house of each of the kids who respectfully thanked the masterful driver as they left the bus to be met at the front

gate in the time tested fashion. How long is it since you saw that happen in Australia?

Now it's only a matter of days before the end of what was evolving into an amazing journey with Sivota on the southern end of Levkada and Spartachori on nearby Meganissi, where an impressive thunderstorm accompanied a Queensland style deluge, passing into clouded memory banks. It's time for the last race from Scorpios to Levkada to settle the rally score. Water tanks were surreptitiously emptied, boat bottoms rubbed and loins girded for the final touch. This is of course 'fun racing' you might recall.

Finally the much vaunted 10 - 15 knot north - westerly appeared on a brilliant sunny day as the 5 yachts first circumnavigated the Onassis Island before making for the finish at the southern end of the Levkada canal. Flat water, with the occasional flash of white contrasting the indigo blue of the sea and the boats heeled close-hauled made a great sight. Sorensen's Ikaros took the lead with Galaxy, Theodosoris and the two Keas in hot pursuit.

He wins on the track by 10 seconds in the 2 hour race but Frank Hetherington and family, with 20 month old grandson Liam on board, win the day on handicap by 2 seconds. Nissos Kea 1 wins the series and Rob Tardif, straight out of sailing school and still learning the difference between a tack and a clew has beaten the master. At the end of the day it was all just a little spirited fun in an idyllic setting that put 'the icing on an otherwise scrumptious cake'.

The yachts were checked in with the operator in Levkada and a bus then transferred the group to Corfu, or Kirkira as it was known in ancient times. Architecturally more European than Greek Corfu offered a totally different experience from all the stops along the way of the Odyssey. The 300 year old Cavalieri Hotel had grand views over the old Venetian fortress and its central location prompted easy walks along the promenades and through the narrow streets of the old town.

The only sub-standard meal of the whole trip came from the UNESCO heritage listed Rex Restaurant but the final night celebration nevertheless reflected the warm glow of the participants in the 2008 Greek Island Odyssey, possibly the first trip of its kind since about 1200 BC.