

# SLOW BOAT TO LEFKAS

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Light winds and plenty of sunshine make the Ionian an ideal family cruising ground. *Mike Trippitt* explored



The Ionian Sea on Greece's west coast is blessed with long summers, azure anchorages, safe harbours and an

abundance of tavernas. Little wonder thousands of sailors visit each year.

Just 90 minutes after arriving in this idyll we had been introduced to our yacht, had received our evening briefing and were enjoying a beer before dinner. That was how to start a sailing holiday.

Our charge for the week was a Jeanneau 33i, *Esta Bien*. Her saloon was light and airy, her deck and cockpit uncluttered. The furling genoa and a two single-line reefing mainsail were uncomplicated. Although capable of sleeping four, she did feel small. A 36-footer would provide much more space. However, she was easy to sail, and with the exception of the toilet seacock, ridiculously located under the rear cabin bed, everything was where it should be.

Before sailing here it is a good idea to buy Rod Heikell's

Ionian pilot guide. There will almost certainly be one aboard a charter vessel but reading it in advance pays huge dividends. Its value cannot be overstated.

On Monday morning, as soon as our full on board briefing was over, we were on our way south down the Lefkas Canal in bright sunshine and a light breeze. It was busy with yachts travelling to and from Lefkas town or making passage through it. We motored at 5kt until clear of No.1 buoy.

After an hour we hoisted full sail. In 10kt of breeze, *Esta Bien* ambled along at 4.5kt on a beam reach. An extra knot might have been gained if the mainsail was re-cut – it looked rather stretched.

By early afternoon the prevailing northwesterly of 9 to 11kt had arrived and the temperature was in the high twenties. The sea was a deep blue. The islands stood out a fertile green.

Off the island of Skorpios we passed a small motorboat at anchor 50m to port. One of the two fishermen aboard shouted as →



**ABOVE**  
The Sunsail fleet at Lefkas is its largest in Greece

**BELOW LEFT**  
Progress is slow in the light breeze

**BELOW RIGHT**  
*Esta Bien* anchored under blue skies, off Skorpios

we passed. What had we done, we wondered? We laughed and sighed with relief when we realised he was shouting at a gull stealing his bait.

Our first afternoon was giving us what we wanted: clear skies, sunshine and gentle wind. Ironically though, the best of the day's breeze came after we had put the sails away. The katabatic wind off the mountains produced a 20kt offshore blow in the last mile towards Sivota, our first destination. Those few who had kept their sails up to the end were justly rewarded.

Tuesday's forecast was again for a northwesterly of 9-11kt in the afternoon. Fiskardo on Kefalonia was our destination. Much is said and written of this striking village and

harbour, but it seems the sailor is faced with a stark choice; go straight there early and get a quayside berth, or spend the day out sailing and anchor in the bay. Our decision was made for us by the weather. The prevailing wind had given way to a light south-southwesterly, which was on our nose all the way across Steno Keffalonias, the strait between Lefkas and Kefalonia.

Yes, we had the mainsail up, but today was a day to get there early and enjoy a longer time ashore. The 12-mile passage was a tedious procession. A turn around to retrieve our tender after it had floated free was a welcome interlude.

Fiskardo was busy; crazily busy. But mooring stern-to, cheek-by-

jowl, gives plenty of opportunity to talk to those on adjacent yachts. A young French couple told us their next passage was a 200nm sail to the southern tip of Italy. They were on their way home having been out since May. With a →

***Esta Bien***  
Jeanneau 33i

**LOA:** 32ft 8in (10.0m)

**LWL:** 30ft 0in (9.2m)

**Beam:** 10ft 11in (3.3m)

**Draught:** 4ft 9in (1.5m)

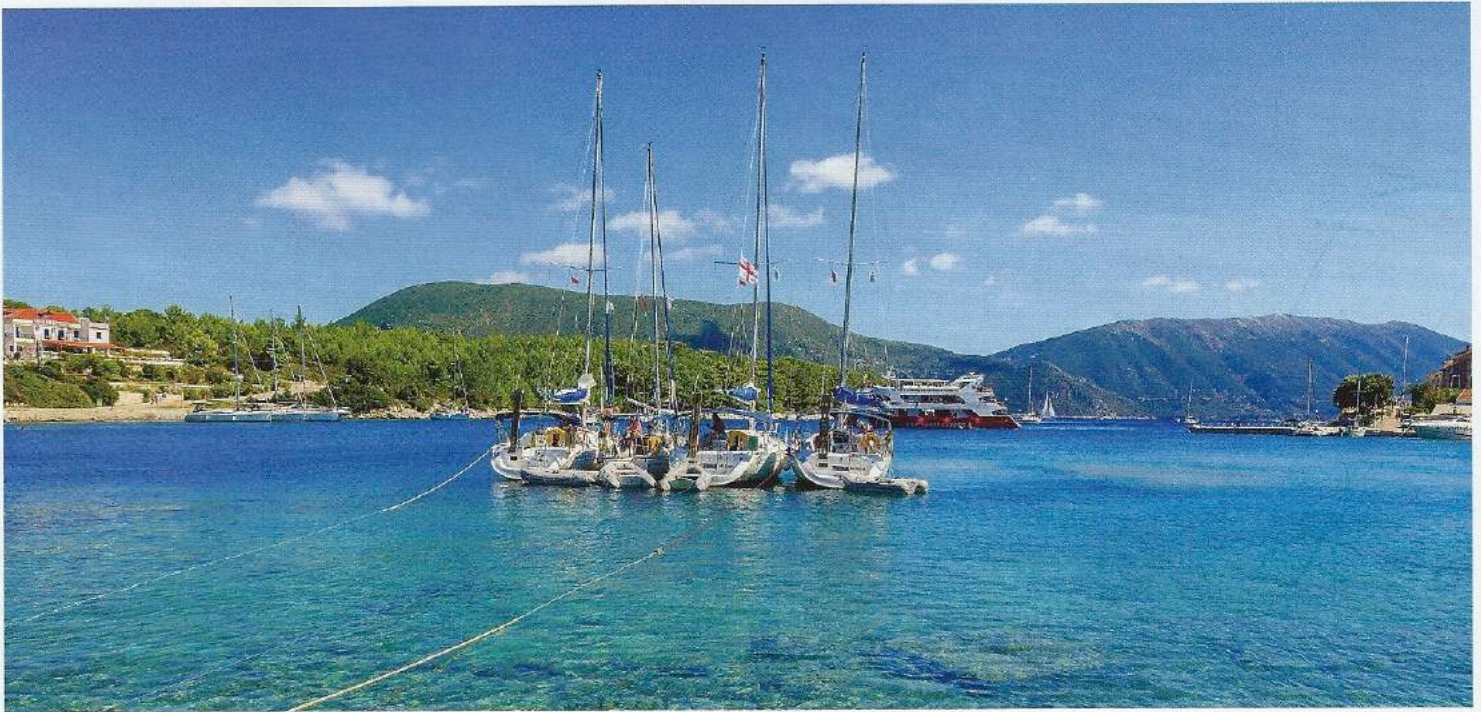
**Sail area:** 51.5m<sup>2</sup> (554sq ft)

**Engine:** 27hp

**Builder:** Jeanneau



SUNSAIL MIKE TRIPPIE



toddler on board, the skipper was cautious: "It will take us 40 hours and I do not want a head wind. On the beam or over the quarter is fine. It looks as though we will have to wait till Saturday."

That evening we enjoyed dinner at Lagoudera on the waterfront. We mentioned to our waiter Gregory how busy Fiskardo was. Was it the time of year? "It's always busy," he said wryly and wearily.

Vathi on Ithaca was to be our next destination. The Royal Yacht

**ABOVE**  
Yachts in Fiskardo port, the most visited tourist destination on Kefalonia and the main yacht port

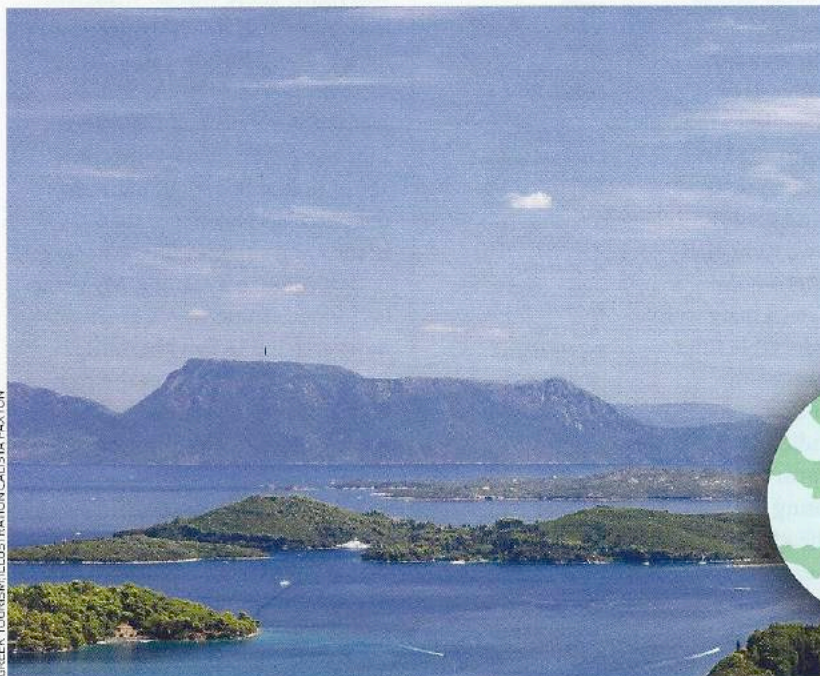
**BELOW**  
Low-lying Skorpios is in the centre, Meganisi's Hydra headlands behind and the escarpments of Agiou Dimitriou on the horizon

*Britannia* visited here during the Prince and Princess of Wales' honeymoon in 1981. The forecast was for a northwesterly of 10kt in the afternoon, so we decided to sail around the north of Ithaca to get the best of the wind down the island's east. A katabatic fills in here in the afternoon.

Claire Shields, base manager at Sunsail in Lefkas, a Yachtmaster and seasoned sailor has lived and worked in the southern Ionian for 16 years. She knows it well. "When

I first arrived you could set your watch by the weather," said Claire. "You would get light southerly, Force 1 or 2 in a morning. It would get very hot at lunchtime and by two o'clock the katabatic would kick in. The northwesterly would hit and that stayed until about seven or eight o'clock." But Claire believes the area should not be renowned just for katabatic winds. "Nowadays, it's always windy here. It is an easy place to sail but the wind is quite fickle."

We sailed most of the way to →



GREEK TOURISM ILLUSTRATION/ALISTAIR PAXTON



Vathi, albeit with the assistance of the motor on occasions. It proved an interesting stop-over. Just outside Vathi we came across the superyacht *Lionheart*, owned by Sir Philip Green, anchored in Skhoinos Bay. The former BHS boss had made news headlines the previous day when confronted in the town by a Sky News reporter. That evening the wind blew strongly at Vathi and we were glad to be on the southwestern quay. Those on the southeastern quay were having a more uncomfortable time of it. By morning, however, the wind had gone. Water bowsers and a fuel tanker trundled along the quayside in the warm morning sunshine. It was tempting to stay a while. But, we headed off again, this time northeastwards. A westerly breeze was forecast: 7 to 12kt. For a second day, 30 degrees Celsius was predicted.

**ABOVE**  
Sailing and fishing boats share the quay in Fiskardo port

**LEFT**  
A Neilson charter yacht on a beam reach in a northwesterly towards Kefalonia

**FACING PAGE**  
Unofficial harbour master and local restaurant owner George takes a neighbour's lines at Kalamos

**FACING PAGE (BELOW)**  
The old and new lighthouses at Fiskardo

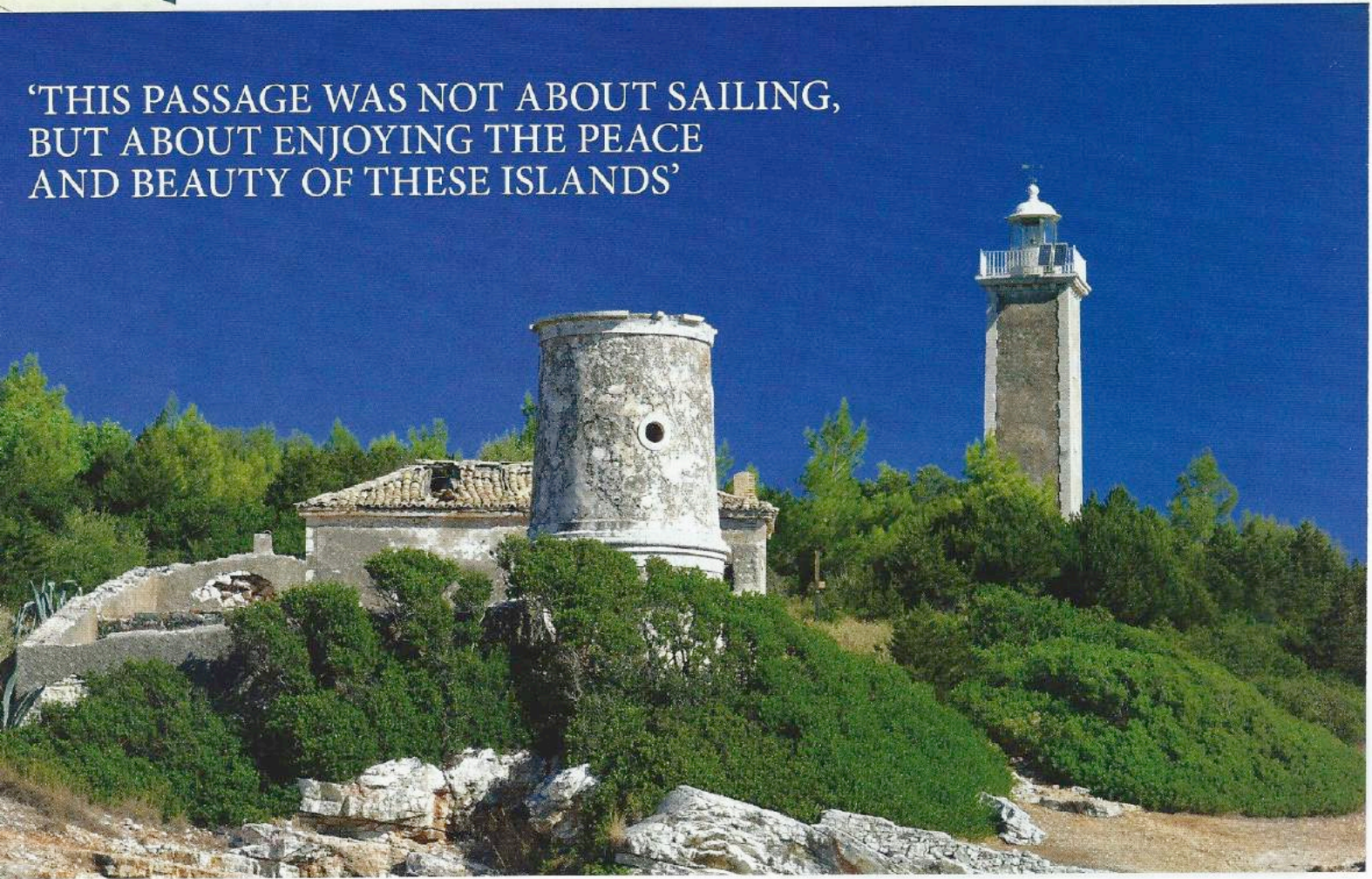
We have made the 20nm passage from Ithaca to Kalamos a number of times, and today our instinct was right. There was no wind. For five-and-a-half hours we crossed a millpond. The oily-calm waters were broken only by the wakes from motorboats and the Minoan Line ferry. This passage was not about sailing but about enjoying the peace and beauty of these islands and surrounding waters.

"Welcome to Kalamos. My name is George." These words greet most arriving in this charming harbour as George takes the stern lines. The restaurant proprietor, turned unofficial harbourmaster, is well known, thanks to his help and Heikell's guide.

George's assistance in Kalamos is useful but such an offer of help is not unique. Those daunted by the fear of stern-to mooring in small, busy harbours need not fear. There



‘THIS PASSAGE WAS NOT ABOUT SAILING,  
BUT ABOUT ENJOYING THE PEACE  
AND BEAUTY OF THESE ISLANDS’



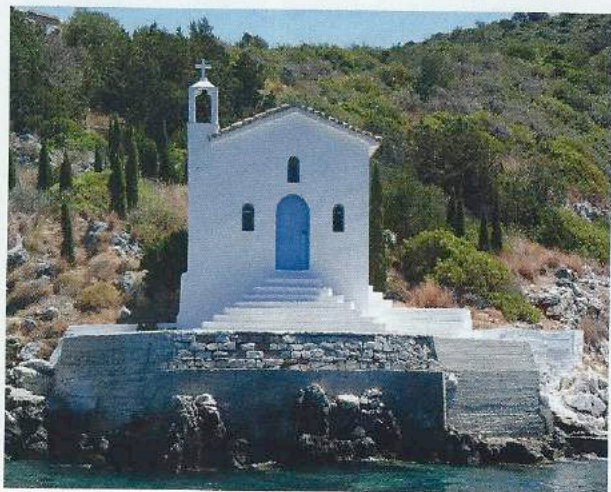


**ABOVE**  
Sailing boats at the port of Fiskardo in Kefalonia island, Greece

**BELOW**  
The chapel at Akra Andreou on the approach to Vathi, Ithaca

is always a fellow sailor, a restaurant owner or charter company skipper around to take ropes and provide that extra pair of hands. Sunsail's Claire Shields has always been impressed. "I have never been anywhere either as a skipper or sailing with friends where someone is not willing to come and take a line. It is not pretentious out here and it is not scary. Everyone had to start somewhere and everyone is in the same boat [as it were!]"

The following day, Friday, could have ended so differently. It was hot, humid and set to reach 30 degrees again. The forecast was for a northwesterly, 12kt. Our passage to Little Vathi on Meganisi could give us the best sail of our trip. But



## CHARTER IN THE IONIAN

The Ionian Sea has become a popular charter destination for British sailing families due to the region's light, consistent winds and warm sunshine from May to October.

All the main charter companies are represented in the area: in the north – Corfu to Paxos – and the south – Lefkas to Zakynthos (see below).

Scheduled and charter flights are plentiful in season. Holiday company airlines and budget operators fly from Birmingham, Manchester and Gatwick into both Corfu and Preveza.

Flight times are three-and-a-half hours. Transfer times to most yacht bases are 30 to 40 minutes.

Charter monohulls are typically in the 32–50ft (9.8–15.2m) range while catamarans are increasingly available from 38–48ft (11.5–14.5m).

The larger charter companies all offer flotilla sailing, bareboat charter and skippered charter, while some also offer 'assisted bareboat' giving the option of having a skipper on board for an afternoon or a day at the start to help build skill and confidence.

Greek law requires the skipper of a charter boat to have an appropriate qualification in their home country whether they are bareboating or on flotilla. This is taken to mean

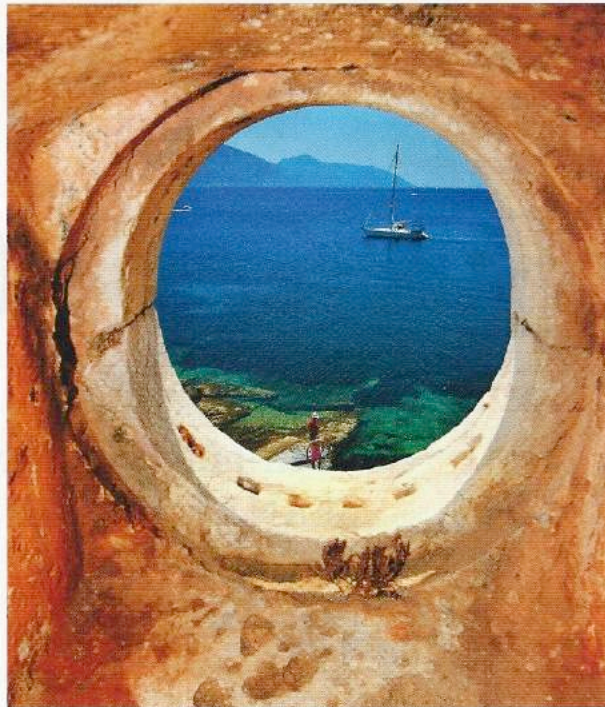
RYA Day Skipper practical or above, or an International Certificate of Competence endorsed for sail. Several of the charter companies offer RYA-recognised training that can be done as the first half of a two-week holiday.

### SUNSAIL

**Bases at Corfu and Lefkas.** Flotilla, bareboat and skippered charter  
sunsail.co.uk

### OTHER CHARTER

- Sail Ionian** – sailionian.com  
Family-owned charter in Lefkas
- Nautica** – nautica.com.mt  
Based in Malta
- The Moorings** – moorings.co.uk  
Corfu and Lefkas bases
- Seafarer** – seafarerholidays.com  
Lefkada base and beach club
- DIYachting** – diyachting.co.uk  
Luxury yacht charter
- Vliho YC** – vlihoYC.com  
Friendly people-based club
- HDM Sailing** – hdmSailing.gr  
Lefkas base
- Dragon Drascombe** – dragondrascombe.com  
Traditional sailing round Lefkada
- S.Y.C.** – sycg.gr  
Corfu, Lefkas, Kefalonia bases



when we tried to raise the mainsail in the channel between Kalamos and the smaller island of Kastos we found the main halyard caught around a bracket on the mast. The bracket had no purpose; it could only hinder. How frustrating.

After countless attempts to loop the halyard free we gave up. Neither of us had any intention of scaling the mast. Grumbling and disheartened, we resigned ourselves to a day without a mainsail.

Thirty minutes later, with defeat gnawing away at us, we tried again. This time we kept the boat off the wind and although the sun made it impossible to see we freed the halyard after several blind attempts with the help of the breeze. We were free to sail. Our persistence was rewarded. After one tack, *Esta Bien* skipped along northward on

a beam reach, the 10nm or so to the northeast edge of Meganisi. It was an excellent sail; as good as we have had in our travels here.

Our last morning aboard dawned bright, warm and still. We had a plan, but it did not involve sailing. We were anchored in the bay at Skorpios by 10am. Jackie Onassis' beach hut was metres away. In the lee of this island, close to the last resting place of Aristotle, Alexander and Christina Onassis, there is peace and tranquillity. We spent all morning there, swimming and reading. A sail in these parts is not complete without a quiet moment at Skorpios.

By the end of our week and our 98nm, we felt we had learned something new: in August, the charter sailor has a choice. Stay out late and get the stronger late afternoon winds or get to

**ABOVE LEFT**  
Zakynthos in the Ionian Sea is a popular summer resort

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
Looking through the window of the old Venetian lighthouse on Kefalonia

a port early to secure a good spot. There is no right or wrong. It is a matter of choice.

Equipped with Heikell's guide, a sound anchoring technique and the ability to moor stern-to, the skipper and competent crew should encounter little outside their experience on a summer charter here.

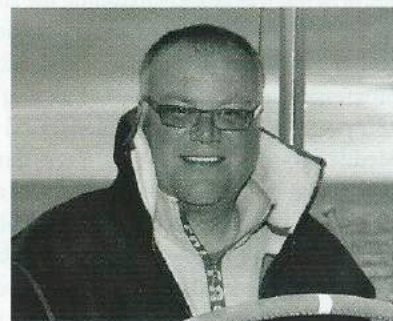
One charter company describes the Ionian as an area to have a great holiday where the sailing is secondary. Rod Heikell says: "This is gentle daysailing at its best."

Back at Sunsail, Claire Shields agrees. Like many, she came to the Ionian and stayed. The reason, she said, is simple: "I live in paradise." ✦

## PREVAILING WIND

Winds in the Ionian are largely consistent from June to September. Mornings dawn calm with light airs only. The waters are smooth. Around noon a northwesterly or west-northwesterly fills in – this is the prevailing wind. The *Maistro* will typically blow at around 10–25kt, being at its strongest between 4pm and 6pm and dying off at sunset.

Katabatic winds blow off the higher mountains and locally, winds can be higher than predicted. Occasionally, the afternoon wind is stronger than expected. A daily forecast should always be obtained and charter company staff are a good source of local knowledge.



MIKE TRIPPITT

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Trippitt is a freelance writer with 20 years' sailing experience. Having sailed their own Maxi 1100 on the East Coast, Thames Estuary and Northern France, Mike and wife Clare now charter regularly in the Greek Islands.