



Chartering with novices

You don't have to be a pro sailor to charter a yacht – particularly in the Ionian in summer. Mike Trippitt took an inexperienced crew along for a trip around the Ionian islands

“Every sailing holiday starts with a curry.” My golden rule of sailing is not in any RYA training manual, charter boat brochure, or pilot guide. But when it comes to taking friends sailing, it serves me well.

If truth be told, a Chinese or pizza will work just as well, but getting together for a night out to talk boats is important if you have previously spent no time onboard together. It is a time for a skipper to get to know his crew, learn what experience they have and understand what they are seeking to get from the charter.

So over bhajis, bhunas and biryanis, we began planning a week's charter sailing in Greece that was still over 12 months away.

My wife Clare and I would be taking friends Marie and Cameron, their 15-year old son Jack and new mutual friends Paul and Lis to the Ionian Sea for a week in the sun, and to give them all a whole new experience.

Until 2018 primary school teacher Lis had done no sailing, but

did an RYA Day Skipper theory course over the winter. With husband Paul, she completed the Competent Crew practical course in May. It made a difference.

“The week made me realise I do love being on a boat,” says Lis. “I love sailing, I do not get seasick and I was happy being on a boat 24-7 with complete strangers. Having been on the Competent Crew course, I can't wait to learn more by going on another boat, and to continue to learn more about how to sail.”

But Paul's enthusiasm and how he saw his involvement was very different: “I'm kind of a hanger-on!” he said smiling. “I'm happy to do it because Lis enjoys it, but it is not a passionate hobby of mine. I've got no passion for spending lots of money or time, because I don't envisage having a boat at the moment.”

I knew Cameron had sailed over 20 years ago with work colleagues in his native Scotland: “We were known as ‘The Botchit Boys’. Apart from the skipper, we were all relative novices. We would go sailing regularly on the Firth of



ABOVE Snugly Med moored by a taverna in Kalamos harbour (left); light wind sailing as we beat up to Kalamos (right)

Clyde, round the islands, across to Ireland and up the West Coast.”

He had even owned his own boat (a 2ft Sea Wych Mistral), and although he'd introduced Marie to sailing, she says it was something she “tolerated”. The word “enjoy” was too strong. Cameron recalls “she did not embrace the fun and excitement of a force 5 or 6!”

So with our friends having different levels of inexperience and all happy being called ‘novice’ we



had to ensure that not only would we sail safely in conditions within their capabilities, but also deliver on their own holiday expectations. After all, they were each paying Sunsail £1,200 for the pleasure.

Clare and I felt we should charter from Lefkas. We know parts of the Ionian well, so we would not be sailing into the unknown. It was our holiday too, and we were also paying £1,200. I did not want stress!

To help us decide whether to go north from Lefkas up towards Corfu, or sail south out of the Lefkas Canal to the more numerous, but closer islands in the Inland Sea, I studied Rod and Lucy Heikell's Ionian pilot guide. Clare and I have been to most places around Lefkas, Meganisi, Cephalonia, Ithaca and Kalamos, so when deciding our destinations, we knew we could not go to every pretty harbour or anchorage in a week.

I was encouraged that Cameron had worked out for himself which harbours were better than others, taking account of winds and local conditions. I was happy to go with his suggestions.

After 12 months of anticipation, some thought and a little preparation we arrived eagerly at our charter yacht 'Islamorada' on a Sunday evening in July.

Differing expectations

I was pleased we had taken time to understand our friends' abilities, limitations and expectations. We had chosen a boat, destination and itinerary that might challenge them,

but would keep them within their comfort zone. All I had to do now was stay safe and give them a holiday of a lifetime. No pressure then!

After Sunsail's evening briefing ('Loos and Lights' as Sunsail rep Mylie so aptly described it), I gave my own skipper's briefing, running through the four dangers we would encounter as soon as we left the marina: the winches, the boom, the anchor windlass and the sea. On the subject of crew tasks, I said that I would rely on the crew to do as I asked quickly and effectively, especially when mooring close to other boats. I said I was always happy to discuss the reasons why we do something afterwards, but the skipper runs a sailing boat, not a committee.

The wearing of lifejackets can be a prickly subject, especially with children. The onboard lifejackets were fully functional but cumbersome. No-one ever really wants to wear one. I have never burdened crew with a list of rules of when they must wear lifejackets

ABOVE
Anchored off One House Bay, Atokos (left); the Sunsail fleet moored up for an evening of Mythos beer and Greek Salad (right)

BELOW
Claire, Lis, Jack, Marie and Cameron breakfasting at Tranquil Bay, Nidri

(fog, one-reef, night-sailing, etc.). Instead, I adopted my usual line:

"There are just two circumstances in which you must wear a life jacket: anytime you want to, and anytime I ask you to."

So with briefings over and the yacht provisioned, we pulled away from the dock into a gentle breeze and Greek Island air you could almost taste. I was relaxed and content. Our friends were prepared for the week ahead and I was sure none of us would let the others down.

I had worried about our first night mooring in the weeks leading up to the trip more than anything else. We had never been to Nidri on Lefkas before. Heikell says it is busy in the summer, so I was concerned that we would be unable to get a space at the quay. Even though we came into harbour at 5pm there was no room at the dockside. Consequently, we anchored off in Tranquil Bay and used the tender to go back and forth.

Nidri bustles at night and whilst the lights and noise from the tripper boats and numerous tavernas are not representative of the Greece that Clare and I love, Nik the Greek's waterfront restaurant, the oldest in Nidri, was delightfully typical. Service was slow, a little hit and miss, but the food beautiful. Just what island life is all about.

Light winds

At the end of the week we would perhaps look back and wish we had had more sailing and stronger winds, but on day two between →



Lefkas Island and the more easterly island of Kalamos the crew were upbeat. In light westerly breezes of 7 to 10 knots Islamorada had eased along happily.

"We've had a fantastic sail from Nidri to Kalamos," Cameron reflected. "Two hours of good sailing. I think Lis achieved the speed record of five knots under sail, which is quite impressive. I thoroughly enjoyed the day."

Even Marie enjoyed the time on the water in near perfect sailing conditions: "The scenery was lovely, the weather was great and I didn't particularly want it to stop!"

The following day dawned under a blue sky, and the temperature soared rapidly. Sailing around the eastern tip of nearby Kastos before a westerly passage to Vathi on the island of Ithaca proved something of a frustration. A short spell of motor sailing was all that was possible in the lightest of airs. For most of the day, sails were conspicuously absent on any survey of the oily calm waters of the Inland Sea.

But less than 24 hours later, the



Greek chartering law

Greek law requires that to charter a boat there must be at least one certified skipper and one experienced crew member. For English sailors, certification is RYA Day Skipper practical or above, or an International Certificate of Competence (ICC). An ICC is available after completion of the ICC Assessment or to RYA members who hold Day Skipper practical or above on application. The crew member must hold a RYA Competent Crew qualification or an equivalent issued by any recognised sailing association. Some charter companies issue their own certificates on production of a 'cv' of satisfactory sailing experience.



wind picked up. Within minutes it had increased from 5 knots to a steady 17 knots. White horses showed themselves for the first time, and Islamorada's sails unleashed their power.

"It felt like we were finally doing what I wanted to do here," said Lis at the end of the day. "Sailing with just the sails, sailing fast, pitching and going with the waves. It was really exciting. I could hear only the sails, the sea and the wind. Wonderful!"

The 47-foot Jeanneau is the largest boat we have chartered, but she sailed easily in light winds. She had a surprising turn of speed in the force five.

That evening, at a restaurant in Agia Eufimía, a charming harbour on the eastern coast of Cephalonia the mood was different. We had sailed hard and fast, and for sure, it felt like our friends had got what they came for. If we are anything like fisherman, the couple of hours at 7.8 knots in 17 knots of wind will, in the telling over the years, morph into 10 hours at 12 knots in a 50-knot gale. It was great whilst it lasted.

Sadly, we would not see wind like that for the rest of the week. Despite this, the wind and location certainly matched Cameron's expectations:

"You don't come here to sail as such. You come for the variety."

Sitting in Islamorada's cockpit back at Sunsail's base in Lefkas, protected from the sun by the bimini but still in the midst of baking heat, Cameron, Lis and I looked back on the week that was coming to an end.

Teamwork

I was pleased to observe how the crew came together as one unit during the week. As we came to moor, each would go to a task they

ABOVE
A peaceful anchorage off Kalamos (left); Paul and Lis after swimming and snorkelling (right)



were familiar with, and perform it efficiently. Anchoring and mooring were carried out smoothly, as each person's role became clear. Everyone had done as much or as little as they wanted, but were a better crew by the end of the week. It is the prospect of stern-to mooring that worries first time charterers more than anything else, but with competent crew and a helpful restaurant owner or fellow sailor ashore offering to take lines, it is usually straightforward enough.

But Lis felt that she would have preferred more open seas. She had been surprised how close together the islands were, giving her the feeling of "sailing on a very large lake rather than the sea." She also agreed with Cameron that by staying at a different port every night they had had something of a whistle-stop tour, and it would have been good to stay in places longer.

For my part, with five friends to look after, I had not found it easy to separate my role as skipper, from that of trip organiser. In the past, when we have taken friends for a weekend's sailing on our boat, I have not given too much thought to whether they were enjoying it. But with everyone paying the same amount for the holiday, I felt under a duty to provide enjoyment. "Are they enjoying this?" preyed on my mind more than "Are they safe?" That was a surprise.

But it was once again a thrill to be in this beautiful place, and rewarding to facilitate a holiday that our friends could not do alone. So in those respects, my expectations were fulfilled.

After saying our goodbyes, Paul and Lis travelled south to Sifnos for a week in a Greek hotel. A few hours later I received an email. Paul, the photographer, the hanger-on, and the man who had no passion for sailing had detoured to look at an ex-Sunsail yacht that was for sale in Athens. I had not expected that!



MIKE TRIPPITT
Mike Trippitt is an RYA Coastal Skipper, RYA VHF Assessor and RYA Inland Helmsman Instructor. He sails in East Anglia and charters in the Greek Islands.