

# Sailing the Saronic Gulf

by John Michael

## A Greek Islands Adventure



We'd just dropped anchor in a rather secluded bay and secured the ship for the night when Captain Jonathan gestured us back to the stern with a secretive air. Casting a darkly suspicious glance at the few other ships floating nearby, as if they might harbor spies or worse, he lowered his voice. "See that point over there? Just about ten meters off the shore there's a very plentiful oyster bed on the bottom. If a couple of you will put on your snorkel gear and go get some, we'll have grilled oysters with our dinner tonight. But most people don't know about this place, so you mustn't tell anybody, OK?"

He shared our burst of laughter. Who could we tell? We were on the last day of our week of sailing the Greek islands of the Saronic Gulf, and in a mere 48 hours we'd be back to our ordinary lives an ocean away. Would anyone back home even know where we'd been, let alone comprehend its magic? Greece conjures images of ancient civilizations, modern sophistication, and maritime beauty; and this week had brought all these things and more.





Our Internaturally vacation began the week before, in Athens, with drivers who appeared right on schedule to bring us from our hotels to our home-away-from-home for the week, the *Koralia 3*. She's a 55-foot Jeanneau racing ketch with teak decks, cozy staterooms, and an ample galley, all of which promised a week of comfort. Her three cabins would be accommodating just five guests: Karen and Steve, from Nova Scotia; Ruthie and Marcus, from Pennsylvania; and me, Mike, from Tennessee.

Our Greek captain, Jonathan Chandler, greeted us dockside with perfect king's English, a legacy of his very proper British boarding school education. He's owner of the *Koralia 3*, and takes his ship — and his sailing — very seriously indeed. His background includes a couple of years on Dennis Connor's America's Cup teams, so it's not surprising that he's rigged his ship for speed and safety. A quick stop at the local grocer to select wine and beer for the larder, and we were on our way.

Our cruise began due west, and in no time the busy seaport was a smudge on the horizon. The Saronic Gulf is a broad body of water to the south and west of Athens, bordered by the mountainous Peloponnisos peninsula and dotted with islands large and small. As a result, the entire week was one breathtaking view after another; broad calm waters were dotted with picturesque islands and charming fishing villages, all set against the backdrop of the towering peninsular mountainscape. Our first stop was the



We arose the next morning rather late. An indolent languor settled on us all, setting the pace for the entire week. No industrious schedules, no rigorous planning. Jonathan declared himself capable of handling all the sailing alone, and we were free to pitch in if we chose, or not. We occasionally helped with the anchor, or took a turn at the wheel; but mostly we took the “not” option. Jonathan’s familiarity with these waters proved invaluable in his choice of routes and anchorages, which permitted us to remain nude as much as possible. We did dress each evening when we made port for the night, and were amply rewarded with one quaint fishing village after another, and authentic local food at restaurants and *tavernas* every night.

The next port was certainly one of our more memorable stops: the ancient city of Epidavros. More than three millennia ago the temple of Asclepius was here, god of healing; and, in consequence, Epidavros was a major center of health and medicine in ancient Greece. Pilgrims sought relief from illness through prayers, ritual meals, and medicated baths, leading to the night when Asclepius himself visited the patient in sleep to effect a magical cure. In the extensive ruins can still be seen the temples and bath houses, the halls where the sick pilgrims stayed — essentially an early hospital — and the spectacular amphitheater. The latter is especially noteworthy for being very well-preserved and still acoustically perfect: the softest whisper spoken in the center can be heard with perfect clarity to the uppermost row of seats. We visited the site in the morning, and consequently we had it

village of Korfos, with its historic domed church and delightful quay dotted with *tavernas*. We explored the village a bit, then returned to make dinner plans. Jonathan, it seems, had a cousin in Korfos who owned a good restaurant, and thence we all went. Nor were we disappointed; the meal was really excellent, and the owner stopped by our table with an extra dessert treat for us from the kitchen. A short time later we were back on the ship, being rocked to sleep by the yacht’s gentle motion.



*Church at Korfos from the harbor.*

all to ourselves. Knowing I’ve had more than a little vocal music training, the others demanded an impromptu recital. To be honest, it didn’t take much persuasion; the chance to sing in a 3000-year-old amphitheater doesn’t happen along just every day. Nothing too ambitious, just a simple setting of a Robert Burns poem; but what I had failed to notice was the crowd of Italian tourists just beyond the lower platform and immediately behind me. So the surprise was on me when the last note faded and a burst of applause from behind let me know that my “private” recital had been widely broadcast by that acoustically perfect amphitheater! After a hasty retreat we were soon back on the ship and making way for our next port of call.



*John sings “My Luv is Like a Red Red Rose” in the amphitheater at Epidavros.”*

As the day warmed, not a breath of wind stirred, and the water was as flat as glass. We quickly shed our clothes and motored quietly across the bay in eerie quiet, hushed by the beautiful seascapes all around us, still as a canvas painting. Easy conversation and reading soon gave way to dozing in the sun or watching uninhabited islets slide quietly by. And then we rounded a point and came upon the lovely town of Poros, situated on either side of a narrow channel between the mainland and an island. We could see the ruins of ancient fortresses which, in bygone eras, guarded both ends of the channel to prevent unwanted invaders from entering — and sometimes to prevent the escape of ships trying to sneak an unauthorized departure. We eagerly dressed and spent a delightful hour walking the steep and narrow streets of the town. Every home was immaculate,



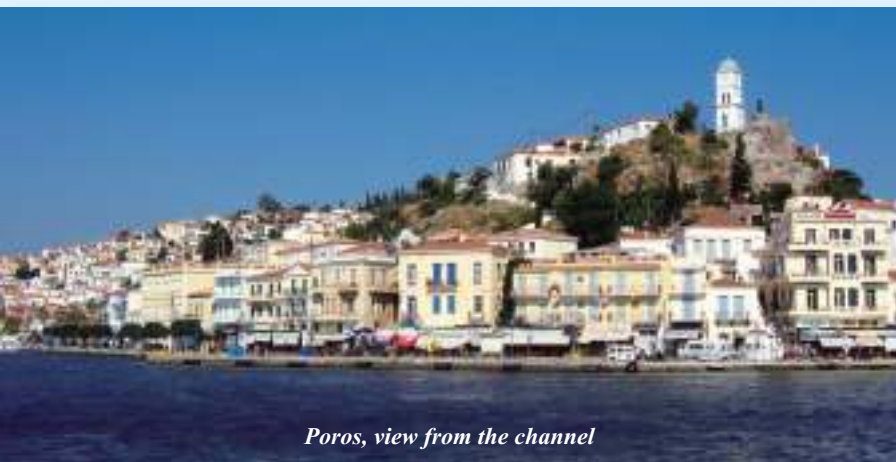
*Karen and Steve were high school sweethearts, and it shows.*



*Spetses*



*Hydra*



*Poros, view from the channel*

*Steve tries his skills at the wheel of the Korelia 3. Captain Jonathan didn't feel threatened.*



and nearly all had some sort of garden ranging from a few potted plants to spectacular displays of bougainvillea and hibiscus. We returned to the ship hungry, and by happy coincidence, here too, Jonathan had a cousin who owned a nearby taverna. Again we readily agreed, and again we feasted on an excellent meal in authentic local style — expertly prepared seafood including fish and octopus, juicy grilled lamb, superb eggplant and other vegetables, liters of house wine, and hearty ouzo to finish.

Our next port of call was the village



of Ermioni, and here our visit was inaugurated with a highly entertaining argument between Jonathan and a pompous mega-yacht captain who seemed intent on wedging his mammoth boat into the tiny sliver of space next to the *Koralia 3*. As the air hazed blue with shouted Greek epithets and Jonathan reached for a long pointy gaff, we decided it was time to hurry away for a glass of wine at the local taverna. Nor were we surprised to watch, from a safe distance, as the big boat circled off to find another mooring. We added olives, crusty bread, and

taramosalata to our snack, then explored the narrow picturesque streets and beautiful water vistas of this delightful village. A short while later we returned to our boat, hungry of course, and wouldn't you know it, Jonathan told us of a cousin whose taverna, just up the street, was really quite excellent, if we cared to go. By this time we were detecting a pattern, and a happy one at that: Jonathan's extended family included enough restaurateurs who knew their onions to keep us well fed the entire week.

The next day was planned as a long

day of nude sailing. We left Ermioni at a suitably indulgent hour of the morning, and soon found ourselves dropping anchor in a delightfully isolated little bay with calm turquoise waters and rocky white cliffs. Jonathan had promised us quiet swims, good snorkeling, and lunch *al fresco*. We took our time to enjoy all these things, along with a bit of rock climbing; the latter was somewhat less adventurous than it sounds since we were barefoot and naked. Such a busy afternoon demanded a *siesta*, and then it was time to weigh anchor

and make for our next port, Spetses. But the water delights of the day were not over yet. As we sailed across a broad flat bay, I was talking to Karen when I noticed a splash some distance behind her. Then another, and another. “Dolphins!” someone behind me yelled, and immediately all eyes went port side as the ship was brought around. For the next half hour we admired a pod of at least two dozen dolphins leaping, splashing, and chasing the boat’s bow. The show was as wondrous, as if they had known we were watching, which no doubt they did. And then, tired of the game, they vanished as quickly as they’d appeared. The ghosts of ancient sailors who admired these beautiful creatures thousands of years ago seemed to whisper, and we recalled the lively frescoes and mosaics of dolphins we’d seen dating to the very earliest Greek civilizations.

Soon we found ourselves approaching Spetses. It might be supposed that the parade of quaint Greek fishing villages might have started to blur together. Not so; each one carried a unique charm that rooted them distinctly in our memories. In Spetses the road from the quay meandered by the harbor and then over the ridge of a short hill to the main part of the town, abounding in notable architectural details, picturesque churches, and amazing views. We explored them all, netting a few noteworthy finds at the artist galleries and, of course, the obligatory ouzo at one of the many delightful tavernas along the dock. Then it was back to the ship for a hot shower and fresh clothes, a cocktail, and off to a restaurant owned by yet another of Jona-

than’s many culinary cousins.

Alas, we had reached the furthest extent of our travels, and the next day it was time to begin making our way back to Athens. The town of Hydra was our next stop, and it is difficult to say enough about its charms. Nestled in a broad valley near the center of the island of the same name, Hydra seems carved out of an era now lost. On its steep streets can be found only pedestrians and donkeys; years ago the village outlawed all motorized vehicles except the island’s three garbage trucks. Hydra boasts three small but very interesting museums, a spectacular overlook above the harbor entrance, and an especially vibrant town center of shops and tavernas. Craft jewelry is a specialty of the local artisans, and Ruthie is quite professionally knowledgeable about the subject. Her positive opinion of the handiwork was validated by the number of items she bought for herself and friends. Indeed, we all took advantage of this last chance to find special mementoes of our island holiday, and Hydra did not disappoint. What most captivated us about Hydra were its many quirky surprises, such as the provocatively modern paintings of one local artist in the town’s art gallery. Or the dozing cat curled up on a ledge outside one of the shops, beside a basket containing a few coins and a sign that read, “Pet me, €1.” And, not surprisingly, we were lured by a cozy little restaurant up a steep flight of steps that offered memorable views across the town and the harbor, where we enjoyed delica-

cies made from fresh local produce and even fresher local seafood.

And then our last full day was upon us; unfurled sails carried us across waters of the deepest blue, blown by the same winds which have carried adventurers across these waters for uncounted centuries. The magical week which blended past and present counted down its final hours, and Steve and I found ourselves pulling on snorkeling gear to harvest oysters at the secret oyster bed. “Surely they’ve both got sense enough not to haul up more than we can eat,” remarked Jonathan to the others as we swam away, and then a few minutes later rolled his eyes in exasperation as we returned with plastic bags strained to the bursting point. Half went on our grill, and the rest to passengers on one of the nearby boats who, no doubt, still can’t quite figure out what was up with the naked dudes delivering free seafood. The sun set and the light faded. Food and wine, laughter and stories all flowed freely. Adventures were recounted, plans were made. And overhead, those same stars and constellations named and admired by the mariners of these islands for millennia gone by gazed down with soothing tranquility. There was magic enough yet in Greece to last one more night — or longer.

And that secret oyster bed? Sorry, we promised not to tell. You’ll just have to visit for yourself and find out. ☀

