

## SLOW BOAT TO PAROS

MARCH 12, 2006

COVER STORY, SUNDAY TELEGRAPH TRAVEL SECTION

There's nothing like the feeling of holding the wheel on a 49ft cruising yacht, watching the gentle roll and passing of the waves below and peering across the horizon to the hazy silhouette of a distant Greek island. This dream may be easier to achieve than you think. You don't need to charter an entire boat, you don't need to hustle ten of your best friends to fill it and you don't even need to know how to sail!

My whole life I have wondered what it would be like to sail the Greek Islands. It's the stuff of dreams. I have listened to my yacht buddies for years recalling tale upon tale of their adventures. They speak of sparkling islands that shimmer against the blue waters, easy passage from port to port and tempting culinary offerings at every Taverna. Every word was true.

The only challenge with this style of holiday is finding the yacht. Marinas at Kos or Santorini, for example, cater for hundreds of vessels so knowing the name of your boat before arrival can be useful. Once on board you have a maximum of eight passengers plus an experienced skipper who doubles as your guide. Think 'small group adventure' on the water.

A cruising yacht is more than just transportation; it also doubles for accommodation. Below deck the living quarters are cosy but comfortable, this is a yacht after all, but step up to the cockpit and you have the entire Mediterranean to play in.

Making passage from island to island is a relaxing affair. For those who wish to get more involved this is a golden opportunity. Steering a modern yacht is very easy and with a well informed skipper aboard, to trim the sails and navigate a course, you are always in good hands.

The local knowledge on the water is just as valuable when you get off the water.

Pulling into the small granite-lined harbour of Vathi, on Kalymnos, you are greeted with three Tavernas, a handful of local fishing boats and a pair of white domed churches that sit high above the cliffs. Next to the boat builder's yard patrons are treated to the kind of home-cooking you could never replicate in your own home. The menu on any given day is determined by Yannis and his mother, who cook up a batch of this or that according to what they had yesterday and what remains in the vegetable garden.

When you've had enough to eat and drink, or possibly too much of both, it's a short walk back to the boat and lights out. No need to set an alarm, you have all day to get to the next island.

The beauty of cruising on a sailboat is the flexibility. Ios earned a less than salubrious reputation for drunken youths in the 90's, but on the far side of the island lies a sheltered cove with two

Tavernas, one beach, and no pier to speak of. It's a simple matter to throw out the anchor and motor a rubber dinghy to the beach; but if you're in a hurry then just jump in the water and swim across yourself.

The gentle pace of the islands is what gives them character. It seems the further you sail from Athens the more pleasant the locals are, and the less attention anyone pays to their watch. "Slowly, slowly." The reason the majority of Greek Islands are not filled with tourists is because they can't get there in a hurry. Those lucky few who own a yacht, or were clever enough to buy a week on one, have it all to themselves. Only the brightly painted fishing vessels outnumber the cruising sailboats, which is why calamari is such an abundant delight.

When you do hit one of the more populated ports like the charming town of Paroikia, on Paros, you can enjoy exploring the island in greater detail and get a little lost in the winding narrow streets. Fine dining options are nestled into the white washed town centre, but the best seafood is still found closer to the water.

At the end of my cruising adventure I caught the next available ferry back to Athens and onwards. Shuffling along with hundreds of back-packers I could hardly be further removed from the intimate luxury of the sailing boat. Now when I hear someone drifting back to their days sailing the Greek Islands, I simply smile and drift back with them.

