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Mediterranean sailing holidays

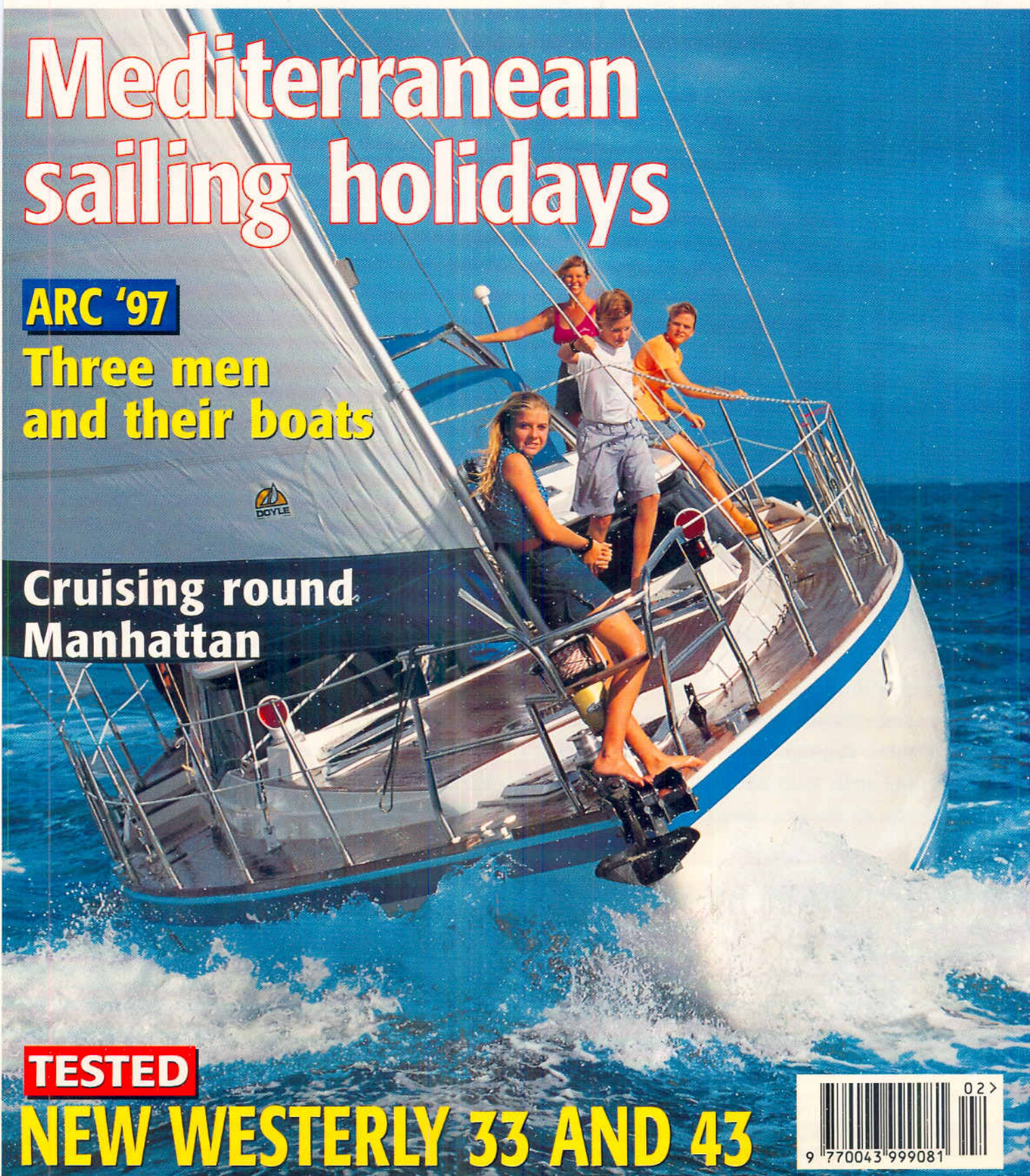
ARC '97

Three men and their boats

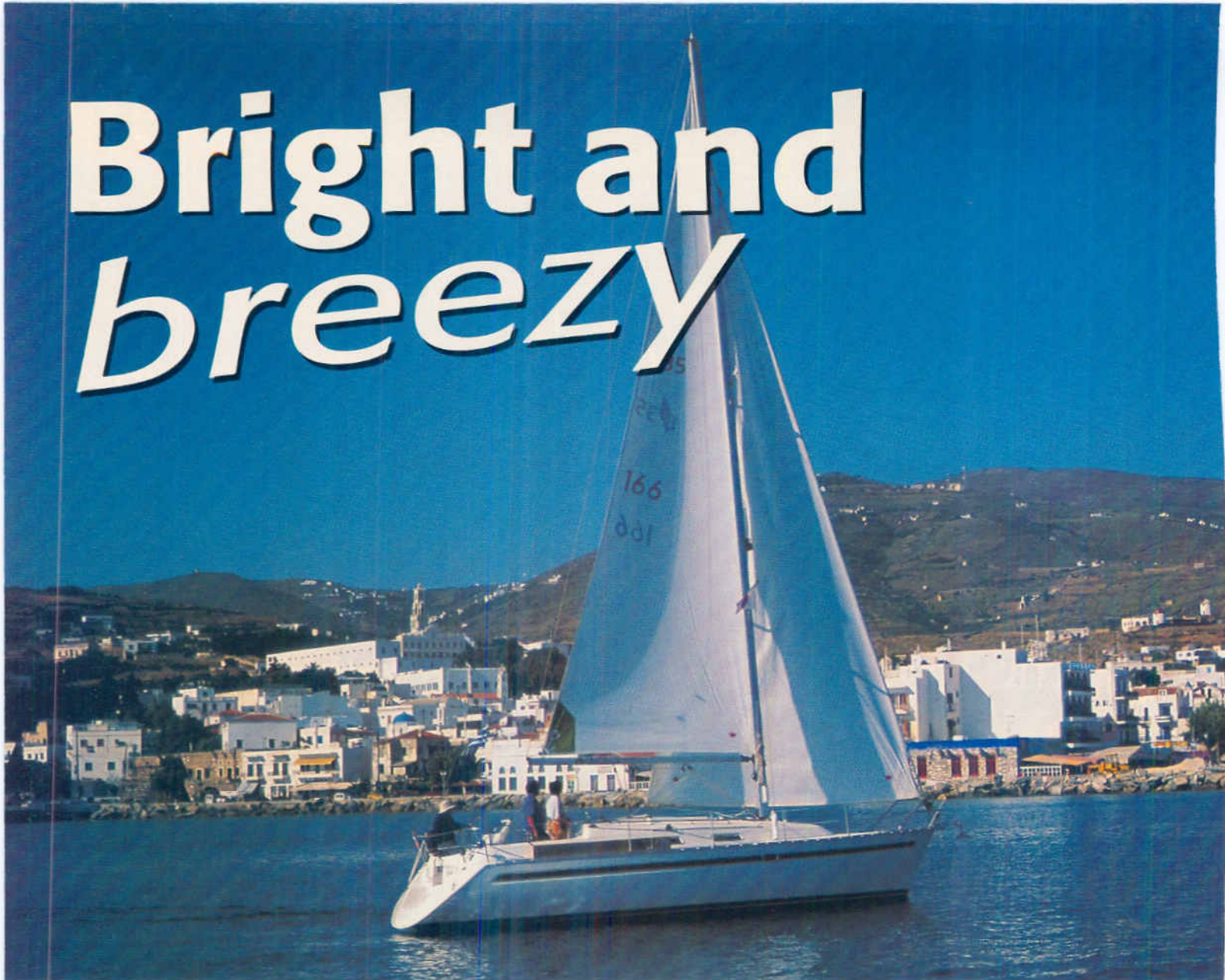
Cruising round Manhattan

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Bright and breezy



Mykonos was dazzling. The sun glinted sharply off waves in the harbour like rows of small, white teeth. Standing over a labyrinth of alleyways, even the shops and houses seemed feverishly bright.

It was only May, and here we were, transported direct to summertime. The islands of the Cyclades, with Mykonos at their heart, were new territory. Our plan was to discover some of it in *Ageliki*, one of Greek charter company Kiriacoulis's Bavaria 35 Holidays.

Mykonos is an unexpectedly lovely town. It has a maze of streets full of expensive, stylish shops and restaurants, as well as the gay bars and nightclubs for which it is famous. It felt bohemian. We liked it, and we could have stayed a few days immersing ourselves in the atmosphere.

Nikita from the charter base did not share our soft-focus view. As we readied ourselves the following day, he reappeared, looking a bit anxious. After indicating the sky, the hazy visibility and the wavelets of white teeth in the harbour, he said: "Bad weather is on the way. Shelter in Mykonos is very bad and you should leave today."

This was easier said than done. Our anchor cable, clearly



Top: Ageliki, our Bavaria 35 Holiday, sails into Tinos harbour. Above: a typical whitewashed alleyway in the town of Mykonos

visible in the gin-clear water, was crossed under our neighbours'. Envisaging a merry reel, I insisted (cannily, I thought) that he extricate the boat for us. No point in starting off with frayed nerves.

After 20 minutes of manic Latin-style self-expression, several scrapes to the topsides and toerail and a dinged pulpit for our neighbours, the anchor was free. Now, I was about to be installed as master under God.

Meanwhile, Nikita was preparing for a pierhead jump in reverse. He aimed the stern of the boat right at the ferry pier and went pell-mell for the lumpy-looking concrete. As I watched helplessly from the side deck, all I

could think was: 'Exactly when am I responsible for this boat?' Something like that, anyway.

Two feet from the pier, Nikita knocked the throttle forward, took a flying leap at the concrete and our boat shot away with her engine roaring, like a greyhound out of a trap.

Happy holidays!

Globules of warm water came flying over the bow as we hobby-horsed out to sea under engine. As soon as we could lay our course for Paros, we bore away, unfurled the genoa and cut the engine. Gradually, we left the effects of this marked wind

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... but not so free and easy, the Cyclades offer a challenging charter destination. But for an experienced crew of an independent mind, that's part of the attraction, says Elaine Thompson



Photos: Elaine Thompson

acceleration zone behind. The waves became more regular, the boat's motion steadied and things were good again.

We had a week to get round the islands of Paros, Naxos, Siros, Tinos and Delos. It's not taxing, as most are short day sails of ten or 20 miles and, at this time of the year, before the Meltemi (see Charter facts, page 87), the winds ought not be too boisterous.

First, we were off to Paros. The island came into view mistily and the sea faded away until it was a matt plane of bright blue, striated with glassy runnels of current. It was so good we just had to have another beer.

After anchoring for lunch, we darted over to Naoussa and moored stern-to the harbour wall. As the light mellowed, we looked round the pretty waterfront of this fishing port and chose a restaurant. Some advertise by festooning their signs with suckered strings of calamari, though this doesn't guarantee universal appeal.

Earlier, I had watched a fisherman tenderising octopus by pummelling it on the pier to a mass of suds, like a washerwoman dealing with a stubborn wad of grubby clothing.

We had a fast passage over to Naxos the following day, skirting the islands and headlands along the north of the island. The boat rolled happily in quartering seas as we cantered along under part-furled main and genoa.

At Naxos, the harbour policeman to whom I went ▷

Above: lunch in the cockpit after a swim at anchor on Siros. Below: the pelican is one of the hallmarks of Mykonos town, greatly beloved of tourists with cameras (like us!)



to pay our dues, studied some papers and then declared baldly that the forecast for tomorrow was 'the same'. Presumably, this meant more north-easterly Force 6?

With this prospect, it was a good opportunity to explore Naxos. John and Hazel negotiated with Thalassis, the ebullient driver of a trusty old Mercedes taxi, and arranged for him to take us on a day's tour.

Naxos is the most fertile of the Cyclades and especially green in late spring. Perched up in the white-marbled mountains (marble is one of Naxos's exports) is a scattering of medieval towns. These and the villages of the lowlands are worth taking a day to see.

The abundance of Naxos is mirrored by its rich history. The resources of the island were prized by various colonisers, including the Venetians, who settled here between the 13th and the 16th Centuries and left a legacy of stone-built towers and fortifications. The Cretans, too, left their mark, particularly in the mountain villages.

Thalassis collected us from the harbour and took us round the winding roads, through country beyond the pale of package tourism. Every so often, he would stop the car and dart across the road, disappearing into the verges. Then he would return with a bunch of thyme, rosemary or oregano.

Several times he beckoned us to get out and look over a valley, and even in the open air the scent of wild flowers and herbs wafting up the hillside on the hot wind was distinct.

At lunchtime, we arrived in the mountain village of Apiranthos, and were taken to the courtyard of a tiny restaurant which had startling views over the countryside below. Thalassis, assuming command, had some discussion with the owner and along came carafes of cold Greek rosé wine, plates of bread, local cheese and bowls of fat, slick olives.

On the way back to Naxos, our tour of Nature's fecundity continued. In a village at the north of the island, the taxi stopped again and Thalassis disappeared into a walled orchard, coming back out with his shirt piled full of thin-skinned, sweetly fragrant fruit. "Papa's lemoni!" he said as he presented us with them triumphantly.

We put Naxos in our wake the next day. We heaved back round past the north of Paros in 20 knots of steady sailing breeze and bright sun, with a rollicking, but not excessive sea. It was enough, though, to get the harnesses out of their locker for a second time. They went on over T-shirts; at least here you can make an offshore passage without having to dress up as if you're about to go to work on a nuclear reactor.

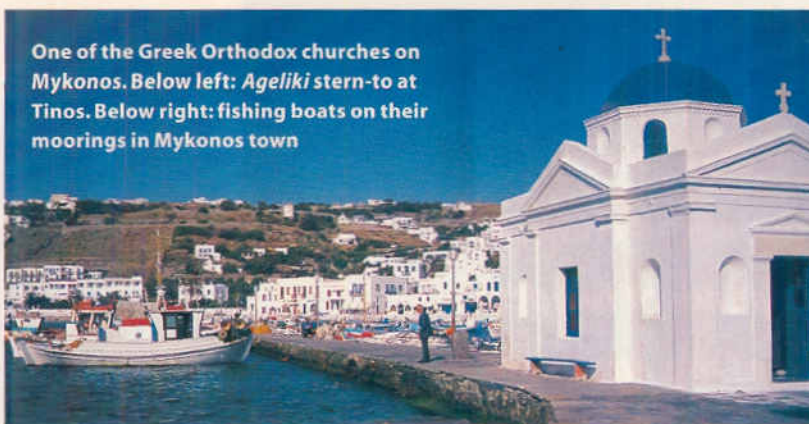
In another couple of days, we were back in the channel off Mykonos. From Siros, we beat over to the island of Tinos in deliriously light winds. *Ageliki* sailed along ably, tacked smartly, did everything and more that you could ask for from a charter boat with absolute compliance.

We had only one evening in Tinos, but this is another island that deserves some inland investigation – again mountainous and with over 60 villages from the summits to the coastline.

The main harbour, also called Tinos, is busy with roll-on, roll-off ferries, 'Flying Dolphin' hydrofoils and chunky tourist boats. Besides all these, the shallower part of the harbour is packed with small fishing boats, and even with the mix of mainly private yachts, all fit together amazingly harmoniously, with little clamour or disturbance.

Tinos is locally famed for the purity of its water and for its wine. We can't say we especially noticed the sweetness

One of the Greek Orthodox churches on Mykonos. Below left: *Ageliki* stern-to at Tinos. Below right: fishing boats on their moorings in Mykonos town



Above: a Greek villager selling baskets. Below: typical whitewashed buildings of the islands contrast with the azure blue of the sea and account for the two national colours of Greece

of the water, but perhaps we weren't trying hard enough. We tried harder with the other – well, who wouldn't?

The wines of the islands ranged from passable to surprisingly good. Food is the one thing that doesn't seem to vary much. Prices for a meal out in Greece are no longer laughably cheap, but nonetheless you can expect a good meal with several courses and wine for about £8-£12.

The same items crop up again and again on menus, but it doesn't have to be souvlaki and chips every night. If you like cucumber, plenty of succulent, scarlet tomatoes and all manner of fresh fish, you can eat well.

One thing we hadn't done was get thoroughly mired in the history of ancient Greece. The small sausage-shaped island of Delos, several miles west of Mykonos, would be the perfect place to do that before the end of our charter.

Delos was long ago the political and religious centre of the ancient world, the epicentre of trade between Europe and Asia. This important site still has acres of telltale remains, all evidence of the enormous wealth that accumulated here.

Yet its wealth spelt its downfall. In the last century BC, when the Romans had made it a free port, it attracted plunderers and never recovered from their looting. In the centuries that followed, its great architectural bounty was picked away piecemeal by visiting seamen.

We slowed ourselves after storming down at over six knots under only a part-furled genoa, only to find the anchorage near the slipway untenable. We anchored further south, but the wind flicked the boat from side to side, making her chug disconcertingly at the chain. It was uneasy; this wasn't good.

Leaving the boat to go ashore was out of the question – in fact, we decided to leave immediately and motor the few very wet miles back upwind to Mykonos.

Even in Mykonos harbour it was blowing old boots. The stern-to berth we needed to get back to had a huge Ro-Ro four

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Photos: Elaine Thompson

Pictures Colour Library



Perched up in the white-marbled mountains of Naxos is a scattering of medieval towns

boatlengths in front, and a 30-knot wind whistling right across it. Halfway through our first attempt I noticed Nikita, who had suddenly appeared and was waving us strenuously away, yelling instructions at top volume.

We went further up the pier as requested, where I shut my ears and aimed straight at the side of the ferry while giving the boat plenty of revs. When we were a few feet from the ship, John let the windlass run free and went full tilt astern, hoping we'd get there before the bow could blow off.

We were in. Relief all round.

There are plans for a marina at Mykonos, and please may it be soon. We decamped ashore that evening because the boat was heaving so much at her berth that Hazel and I actually began to feel queasy. It was four hugely relieved people who crawled warily over the dancing passarelle and relinquished responsibility for *Ageliki*.

But that was just one strand of the story. Could I recommend this charter? Unreservedly, yes. The islands are lovely; the sailing is good and there is plenty of variety in both. May is generally a fine time, though we were unlucky with the weather, and September, too, would be an excellent month.

You do, though, have to be attracted by the prospect of proper sailing and real 'weather'. If you absolutely never want to have to wear a harness, and passagemaking under sail isn't the top priority, the more placid Ionian would be a better bet.

For a group of sailing friends with a pool of experience, the Cyclades are fresh territory. You can feel independent and free-ranging here, entirely your own masters. □



Top: looking out to sea past one of the Venetian castles that are dotted across the island of Naxos. Above: calamari strung out to dry in the sun above the entrance to an ouzo bar and restaurant

Charter facts

Getting there: We flew direct from Gatwick to Mykonos for £235 each return.

The boat: A week's charter of a Bavaria 35 Holiday with Kiriacoulis Yachting costs from £800-1,500.

We had nothing but praise for the boat, which was virtually brand new. Three double cabins gave the four of us plenty of room, but she could easily swallow a crew of six without feeling cramped.

There was everything we needed, including the unusual, but extremely welcome features of in-mast furling, remote-control operated windlass and 60m of chain. Safety equipment, charts and pilots were comprehensive. **The Meltemi:** The Cyclades typically succumb from mid-June to August to the strong winds of the Meltemi. Generally from

the north-east, these winds vary from Force 4 to Force 8. Of the harbours we visited only Naousa and Tinos offer complete shelter. May to mid-June and September or October, though, are still warm here and winds lighter.

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