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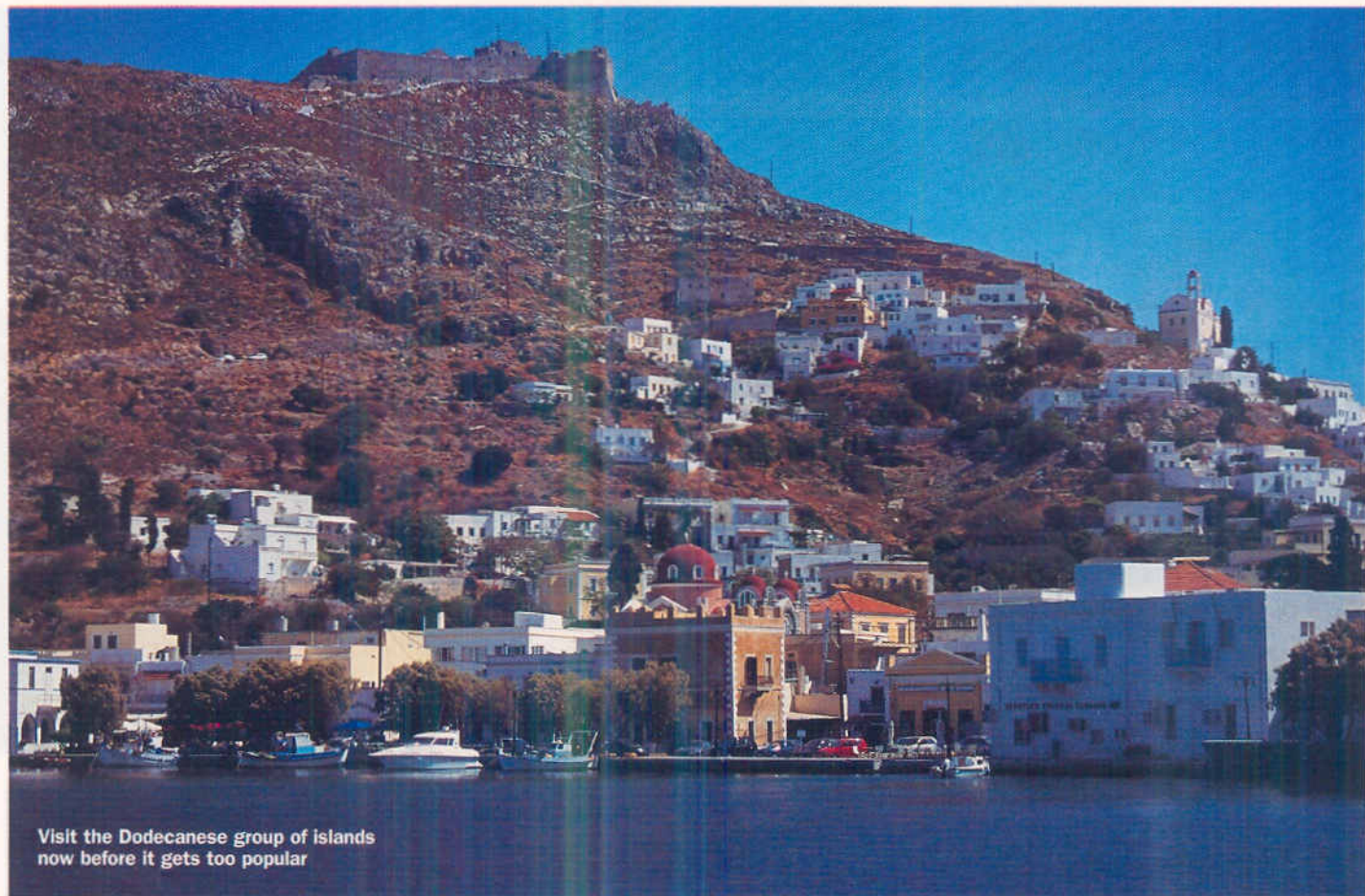
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Visit the Dodecanese group of islands now before it gets too popular

Blowing goats...



Lying just off the Turkish coast brought the Dodecanese a tumultuous past – now that same proximity looks set to attract a new army of friendly invaders. **Neil Worley** went to investigate

The two strapping blokes in fatigues, daintily holding each other's fingers at arm's length, hopped deliberately from booted foot to booted foot, while whistling birdsong, blowing kisses to each other and occasionally slapping



If you've never chartered a cat, give it a go

the side of a boot. "Are they soldiers?" we asked through our tears. This was the first overnight stop on our week-long navigation of the northern Dodecanese, Palionisou Bay in the northeast corner of Kalimnos, and it was already turning out to be a memorable evening.

We'd arrived at Kos Marina at about 0400 that morning, delayed by wildcat industrial action by Greek air traffic controllers, and quickly found our Tobago 35 cat *Manikoute* nestling by the quay, ready to depart. Kos is a bustling resort island. The marina is a relatively new and well-equipped facility and there's plenty to do and see, but we were itching to get moving. Later that morning we tracked down Pepos – the Kiriacoulis base manager – in his office, and he quickly had us under way.

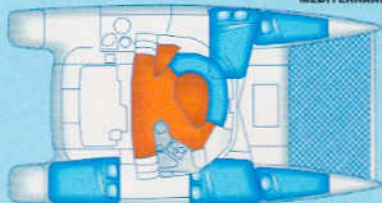
The Dodecanese have been an important commercial and cultural centre for over 3,000 years. Lying as they do just off the western coast of Asiatic Turkey, they held an important

position on the prevailing trade routes, and the inhabitants, particularly of the largest islands of Rhodes and Kos, coupled the fortunate location with some savvy political manoeuvring to make themselves important traders of the time. But as their wealth increased, so did their attraction as a target for invasion. A tumultuous period ensued during which some or all of the islands were invaded in turn by Persians, Saracens, Goths, Turks, Genoese and virtually any happy band of pirates that happened to be passing.

The 18-mile trip to Palionisou was eventful only in as much as there are always a few hiccups when you're getting to grips with a new charter boat. Our particular hiccup concerned the chain wheel on the windlass; either it or the anchor chain was just a bit too worn to mesh accurately together. Luckily, the bay was wide and there were only a couple of other boats at anchor to witness us dump about 100m of anchor chain on to the seabed on three separate

One hull or two

The pros and cons of sailing a catamaran



I'd never sailed a cat until this trip, and was sceptical to say the least. But there's one thing about a cat, even the relatively small Tobago 35, that you just can't knock – and that's the space. Below decks there are three good-sized double cabins with a further single in the forward end of each hull, a large saloon/galley area and a heads/shower compartment that's big enough to use comfortably. Perhaps best of all, though, is the size of the cockpit: plenty of room for five or six to lounge comfortably and the floor's always level.

Of course, it's under sail where monohulls really come into their own, right? Well, yes actually. You simply can't get as close to the wind in a cat, whatever anyone might tell you. And I found that I didn't really fancy risking it that much, either. There's something comforting about the proportional response of a close-hauled monohull; the stronger the wind blows, the more you tip over – and you know when you're getting close to the edge. You don't get that with a big cat – you just don't know when the upwind float might take off, and these things are not designed to sail Hobie-style. Perhaps under the tutelage of an experienced cat sailor I would learn how far you can push. This time I just tended not to get too close to the wind or put up too much sail.

Overall, a cat's worth a try for a cruising charter. You may not break any records but the sheer comfort is tough to beat.

◀ occasions as the chain jumped the wheel and snaked overboard at a startling rate of knots. The other startling thing about Palionisou is quite how stark and remote it feels, despite being on one of the most heavily visited islands in the region.

Sailing conditions around the Dodecanese are not dissimilar to much of the rest of Greece, although there are far fewer boats than, say, the Ionian. In fact, if you get as far north as the



Oi, Pettengale! You're supposed to be watching where we're going

small islands such as Arki, you can even start to feel a bit lonely. There really is very little in the way of human habitation up there and most of the islands in the chain are quite dry. The landscape is generally barren and striking in a way that reminded me of the Kornati Islands of the central Croatian coast.

Kalimnos was a wealthy and important island in antiquity, reportedly sending 12 ships to the Trojan War, before a 6th century earthquake devastated the island sending its capital Kellaris to the seabed. It was also the centre of Mediterranean sponge diving, before a bright chemist put paid to that ancient market. But it's still on this historical peg that the Kalimniots largely hang their tourist trade, that and the sheer limestone crags that lure thrill-seeking mountaineers from all over Europe. And it's in one such craggy inlet that you'll find Palionisou.

The only sound to hear once the anchor chain had been tamed was the distant jangling of goat bells from the steep grey flank of the eastern side of the inlet. Not that we could see any goats; in fact, all we could see was a near-vertical plane of dusty shale and rocks dotted with rosemary bushes and a tiny, ramshackle tin shack bang in the middle. But as the sun started to dip behind the western side of the inlet, a raucous din ensued.

In the altering light we were able to make out a ring fence 50m away from and surrounding the shack, and a shabby fellow had emerged, opened a gate in the perimeter and was banging what looked like an old, metal baby bath with a big stick. The man from the shack was calling in his goats, and suddenly the cliff was a mass of movement. Hundreds of animals appeared out of the landscape like a painting coming alive, all accompanied by the din of bells.

Prevailing weather around the Dodecanese follows the familiar Mediterranean pattern – in other words, a strong (F4-6) northwesterly meltemi blows frequently during the months of July, August and September, and sporadically for a month either side of that period. So June, September and October are considered the best months to visit. Having said that, with the recent relaxation in transit regulations between Greece and Turkey (see the Go To Turkey box for more details), it would now appear worthwhile



Paul Pettengale, First Officer, Ship of Fools: "That man's blowing a goat!"

considering a visit while the meltemi is blowing. A reliable northwesterly would mean that you could feasibly visit Turkey one day and the Dodecanese the next – one day, port tack; next day, starboard tack. Once this regulation change takes hold, the Dodecanese charter business is likely to expand beyond all recognition. My advice: go now, before the rush.

Early in the 16th century the Dodecanese became part of the Ottoman Empire and were to remain so for the next 400 years. Because of their trading significance, the islands were granted special tax dispensations by the Turks, and it was only when this status was under threat at the beginning of the 20th century that the name 'Dodecanese' was actually coined. A group of 12 islands from the region (excluding Kos and Rhodes) came together to challenge the right of the Turks to deprive them of their 400-year-old financial privileges, and all the islands in the area became known as the Dodecanese.

Soon after this spat the islands changed hands again – this time Italy was awarded control after the Italo-Turkish war of 1911-1912 on the understanding that it handed them over to Greece. This never actually happened and it wasn't until the death of Mussolini (and following a brief German occupation) that the islands finally became a part of Greece in 1947.

Go to Turkey Because now you can

For many years, sailors in the Dodecanese have looked over at the Turkish coast and wondered why the authorities made it so difficult to sail between the two. In Kos Marina you're actually closer by sea to Turkey than you are to the other side of Kos.

The two nations' historical antipathy (let's be polite here) toward each other has until recently meant that if you chartered a boat in Greece, the Turkish authorities would charge you through the nose (like hundreds of dollars) to transit a Turkish port. Now, after pressure from the EU, you should be able to arrange a multiple-entry transit log for Turkey for any yacht chartered in the Dodecanese. The cost is US\$50 and your operator should be able to handle the paperwork on your behalf.

See the Tenrag website at www.tenrag.com and click on Tenrag News for more information.

We were beckoned over by a large man with long, curly hair who was drinking Ouzo and holding a net full of very small bream. Would we like to eat some for dinner? They're very fresh. Blown out of the water with dynamite just this afternoon...

I've heard surprise expressed that the Dodecanese are so Greek, despite only being a part of Greece for such a short period of time. I'm not so sure about that. My impression was that the islands had their own distinct cultural flavour. Not a flag-waving, separatist fanaticism, like say the Basques, just a gently different approach from the other regions of Greece I've visited.

That could fit with a region constantly adapting to life under new invading forces. Perhaps the inhabitants are still clever politicians and have, over time, cultivated an adeptness at fitting in with the new 'boss'. After all, they still somehow manage to enjoy that special tax status...

The reason for so much food soon became apparent when a group of about 20 Americans arrived from the other two boats to populate the trestle tables. This turned out to be a bit of a blessing, since it meant we were largely left to our own devices because we were gatecrashing a flotilla party.

With the eating done and the drinking starting in earnest, an eerie wail struck up and an old man walked around the corner with what appeared to be a whole goat hanging from his mouth. It was, in fact, a traditional instrument, not unlike a small bagpipe. Unlike a bagpipe, the bag wasn't made from a haggis (is that really what they're made of?), it was fashioned from the empty skin of an entire goat. The mouthpiece was inserted in one of the unfortunate animal's forelegs, and the bit that you finger was poking out of the other. As the player blew, a goat seemed to balloon into shape before our eyes, legs and all, and a high-pitched wail filled the air.

Then the soldiers started dancing. It turned out they were hunters, in fact, but by that stage our earnest attempts to show an interest in



You always get a proper gin & tonic in Greece

local custom had been well and truly overtaken by uncontrollable laughter. Not even

Nikolas, telling us sternly that his father was the best and most experienced goat-blower in the whole area, could stop our guffaws each time the old fella started to inflate his goat in preparation for the next 'new' number.

Still, we had a wonderful and unusual evening, and I don't think Nikolas was too offended. The following morning, he and his friend rowed out to our boat in a heavy wooden fishing boat in the high heat of mid-morning to give us a handful of almonds and his business card. It bore his name, a picture of a diver and the legend BROWN MEDITERRANEAN - LONG LASTING (your guess is as good as mine). This was going to be an unusual trip...



Dan Hutchinson, Cabin Boy, Ship of Fools: "Where are we again?"

There appeared to be no buildings ashore at Palionisou, just a few ancient dry stone walls at the head of the bay, delineating one barren slope full of big rocks from the next. But as we put ashore, we spied a small, hand-scrawled 'taverna' sign and large blue arrows, pointing away from the shore, painted on rocks.

Well, you can't ignore a warm welcome like that, so we stumbled off up the path, first negotiating boulders, then traipsing through the back (or, perhaps, front) gardens of a tiny hamlet of single-story stone dwellings, until eventually we came across a small yard. Under the harsh white light of a butane lamp hung from a branch of an olive tree were two long trestle tables, arranged at right angles, and a couple of further small tables with an assortment of odd chairs scattered around.

At this point, the taverna's hyperactive proprietor Nikolas bounded over, introduced himself to us, and us to a gaggle of men we could only assume were his mates, then seated us at a small table. Nikolas is a teacher now, although he used to be a sponge diver, and he does a bit of fishing - and runs the taverna, of course. Maybe we'd like to see his photographs? Meanwhile, his mother and another mate were inside a small building nearby preparing vast cauldrons of food.

Contact

Our Dodecanese charter was arranged by Tenrag Yacht Charters

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