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Easy going in the Peloponnese

Duncan Kent takes a high season trip around the East Peloponnese Islands, a short hop from Athens



ABOUT THE BOAT

■ We booked our Kiriacoulis Bavaria 44 through their main UK agent, Tenrag Yacht Charters in Canterbury (☎ 01227 721874, www.tenrag.com), who we have dealt with in the past and always found to be very helpful. The same boat for June 2005 costs £2,261. Damage waiver insurance, 143 euros (credit card); fuel charged at standard rates after refilling by tanker on our return.

Above, from the top: Our Bavaria 44, Captain *Fanis*, at anchor
Simon and Helen about to enjoy lunch *al fresco*

Just as we had set up the cockpit table and poured the wine a huge inter-island ferry came hurtling past, pushing a bow wave of Southern Ocean proportions ahead of it. It was too late to turn our bows into the fast approaching wall of water, so we just hung onto everything that wasn't strapped down as best we could. Only one glass smashed on the cockpit floor, but it did entail a thorough sweep up and hose down to get rid of glass splinters. Twenty minutes later, thanks to Simon – our intrepid bosun and unusually buoyant swimmer – we too had joined the line-ashore set! Our cruise around the East Peloponnese Islands lasted a glorious 10 days and was on the whole a much more tranquil affair...

Our party, comprising myself, wife Helen and a friend, Simon, chose to depart from Kiriacoulis' Athens base in Kalamaki Marina because it is a short taxi drive from Athens airport and flights can be bought very reasonably. There is a supermarket near the marina, which delivers to your boat, so provisioning up is a doddle. It stocks almost everything.

We chose to take 10 days as a week often turns out to be just five days sailing by the time you've checked in and out and done the necessary paperwork and briefings. We stayed the first night in Kalamaki, as there are few decent anchorages nearby, and it was getting dark by the time everything had been stowed. There is a good restaurant in the marina but also plenty more in town, 10-15 minutes walk away.

The night was hot, sticky and very noisy. I had forgotten about the nightclub that pounds out heavy rock until 0400, and the heat from being trapped in an airless marina. Next time we'll set off straight away to avoid it.

We headed out the next morning, going south to Poros Island. There are two very popular islands in the Saronic Gulf, south of Athens – Aegina and Poros – and, rather like the Solent fleet that heads out to the Isle of Wight every weekend in the summer, on Friday night hundreds of motor boats and yachts leave the numerous marinas south of

Athens bound for these two small islands. In theory, many of them stop at Aegina first as it is the closest – a mere 15 miles or so from Kalamaki. For this reason we continued all day to make Poros before the local weekenders arrived. Poros is a fairy-tale, romantic island that is very nearly joined to the mainland. Just a narrow, shallow channel separates the two, giving the area a secluded, but not isolated atmosphere.

We approached from the west, entering the loch-like Poros Bay through the Dana narrows. There is plenty of water and the scenery is stunning. We anchored in what turned out to be one of our favourite spots for the holiday, Russian Bay, south of the island and just around past the tiny islet of Dhaskalia, with its lone whitewashed house. It's a long dinghy ride to the town from there, but we planned to moor up to the town quay the next morning to wander through the shops and markets, so we were content to enjoy the peace and quiet of the tiny bay and get the fish barbecue going – surrounded by the dramatic Peloponnesian mountains.

The shore line option

Being paranoid about shore lines I made a simple mistake that evening. All around us boats were anchored with a long line ashore from the stern. I'm averse to this idea unless the seabed is very steep to and it is essential to keep the anchor dug in, so I ignored everyone else and swung freely – there was plenty of room and I like to let the boat weathercock into the wind to get a good draught through the boat at night. Unfortunately, the aforementioned encounter with the bow wave of the local ferry caught us unaware, but we swept up the debris, learnt the lesson and won't make that mistake again.

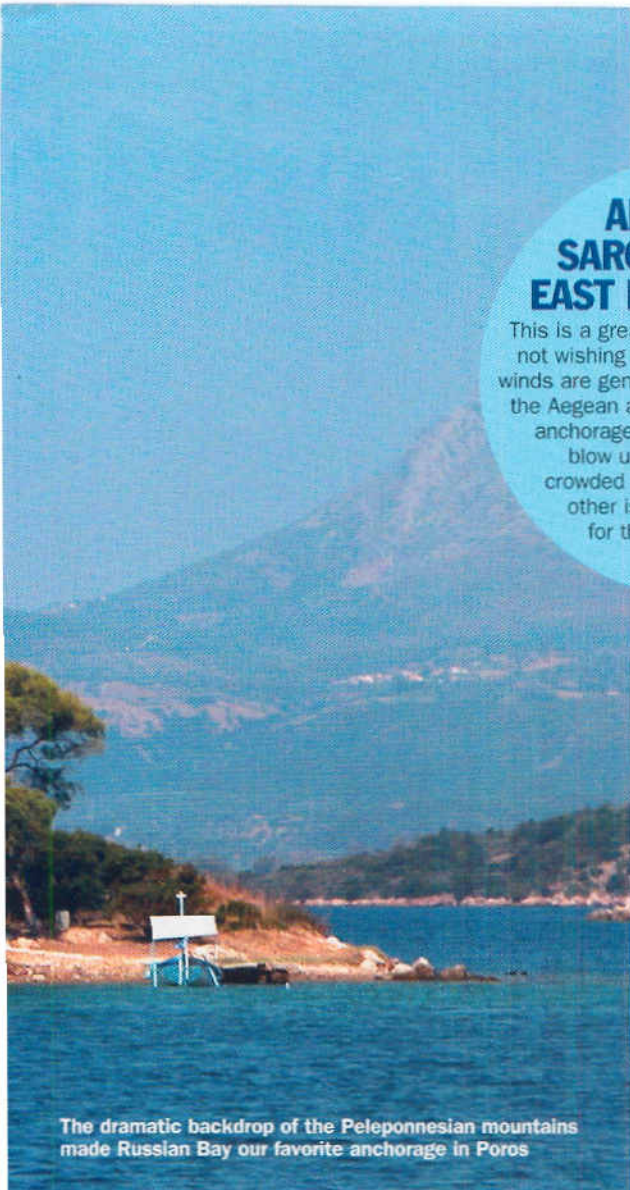
After a wonderfully tranquil night's sleep and an early morning swim, we weighed anchor and set off for Poros Town, intent on a double espresso and a pastry. It is easy to moor stern to the quay in several places along the quay, but we chose to drop the hook anchor just off the mainland and take

ABOUT THE SARONIC GULF & EAST PELOPONNESE

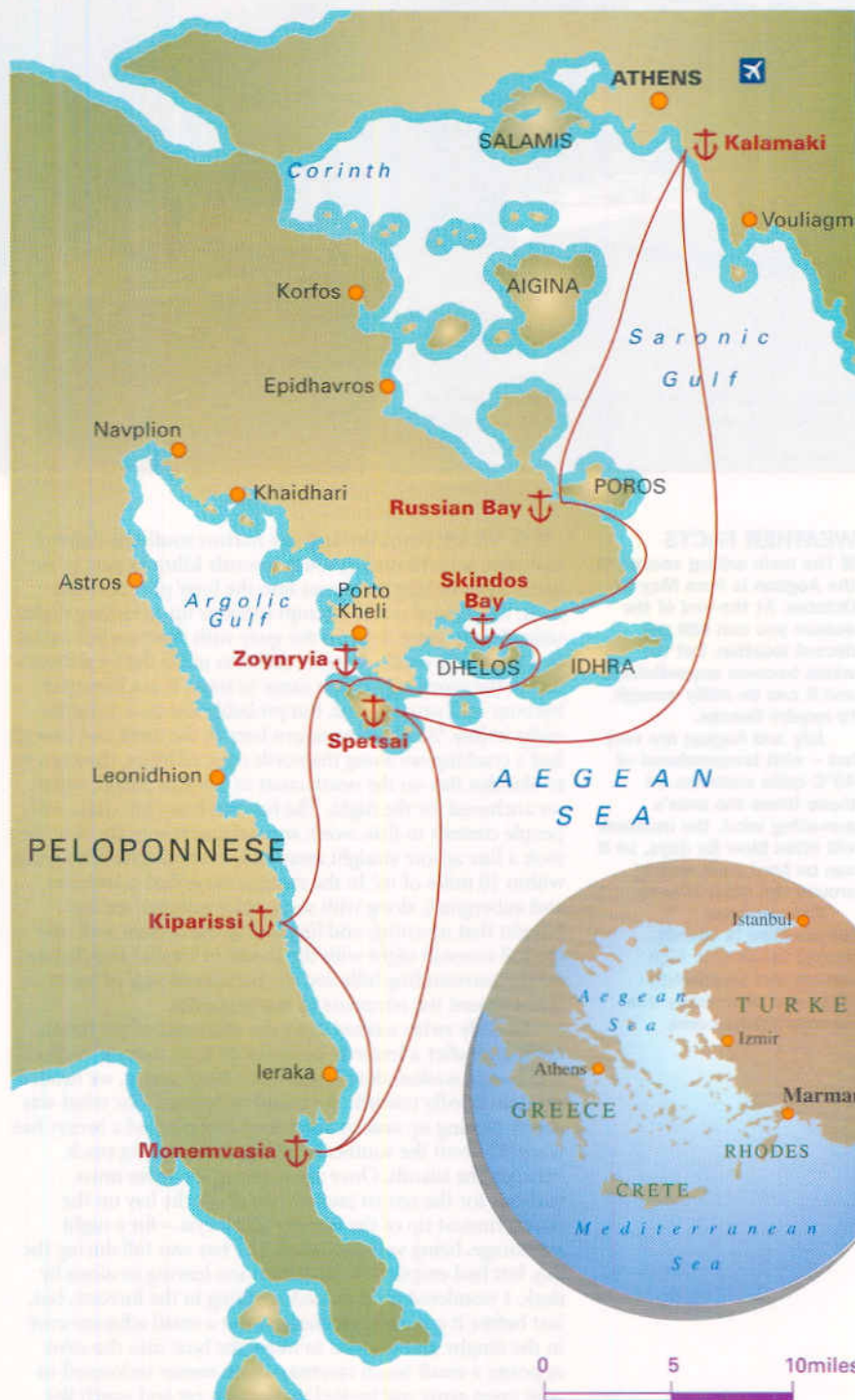
This is a great cruising ground for those not wishing to sail long distances. The winds are generally lighter than the rest of the Aegean and there are plenty of safe anchorages and harbours should it blow up. The area gets less crowded in the summer than the other islands, but watch out for the weekend rush in the Saronic



Simon takes the wheel as the wind gives us a good push towards our goal



The dramatic backdrop of the Peloponnesian mountains made Russian Bay our favorite anchorage in Poros



Photos Duncan Kent; Illustration Alastair Garrard



Local boats in Baltiza Creek, on the island of Spetzes

the dinghy across. That way we didn't need to risk entangling our anchor chain with the many others alongside for just a short stop and it kept us clear of the area where the numerous ferries plied their trade at frighteningly swift speed. That said, crossing the busy narrow channel in a rubberdub was a little hair-raising too – and there is no dinghy dock either, so we had to squeeze between two small fishing boats. Better to anchor in Navy Bay, further north to avoid the mayhem – although the walk to town is a little further.

The town of Poros is a delight to wander around and most things can be bought at very reasonable prices, although there is also the usual abundance of plastic Acropolis replicas for those who feel the urge to buy things made in China! The locals were so welcoming it was difficult to tear ourselves away. ▶▶



Taking refuge behind the old North ferry quay in Kiparissi saved us from a rocky night at anchor

WEATHER FACTS

■ The main sailing season in the Aegean is from May to October. At the end of the season you can still get decent weather, but the winds become unpredictable and it can be chilly enough to require fleeces.

July and August are very hot – with temperatures of 40°C quite common. At these times the area's prevailing wind, the meltemi, will often blow for days, so it can be hard work sailing around the outer islands.

The seawater temperature is usually around 26-28°C in high season and surprisingly clean and clear away from commercial harbours.

◀◀ We left Poros through the narrow southern channel and were soon motoring south towards Idhra in next to no wind. After poking our noses into the busy port of Idhra itself, we decided not to attempt to moor up as visiting yachts were already three deep on the quay with their anchor cables in a huge cat's cradle. I wasn't about to make the local diver's day in the morning when it came to leave. It is a beautiful harbour and worth a visit, but probably not on a Saturday night in July. We chose to return later in the week and instead had a cracking sail along the north coast of Idhra, then across to Skindos Bay on the north coast of Dhokos Island, where we anchored for the night. The bay was busy, but quiet with people content to fish, swim, snorkel and laze in the sun. We took a line ashore straight away and, of course, no ferry came within 10 miles of us! In the evening we grilled courgettes and aubergines, along with some spicy sausages we had bought that morning, and lingered in the cockpit well into the full moonlit night with the sound of cicadas ricocheting off the surrounding hills and the occasional slop of water as fishes chased the remnants of our baguettes.

An early swim washed away the stickiness of the humid night and, after a leisurely breakfast of fruit, natural yoghurt and honey, washed down with thick, black coffee, we headed off unhurriedly towards the island of Spetzes. The wind was slowly picking up and by lunchtime had reached a breezy but warm F5 from the southeast, giving us a cracking reach between the islands. Once again saving the main town harbour for the return journey, we chose the bay on the northernmost tip of the island – Zoyioryia – for a night anchorage, being well protected. The bay was full during the day, but had emptied by late afternoon leaving us alone by dusk. I wondered if I'd missed anything in the forecast, but, just before it got dark, we checked out a small adjacent cove in the dinghy and decided to move the boat into the cove, opposite a small beach taverna, whose owner welcomed us with open arms and invited us along to eat and watch the



Helen takes charge during the passage south to Monemvasia

football. The menu was limited, due to the need to clear the kitchen before the footie started at 2130, but we dined well. As Greece won the European Championships that night we celebrated long and late, watching the fireworks light up the sky over on the mainland as the wind faded away to nothing.

The sun rose to find us gently swinging in a perfect world far removed from the hustle and bustle of the 21st century. Little stirred except a goat on the hillside and a dog scratching its fleas under a tree on the beach. Tiny waves broke on the shore to add a delicious sound to the thoroughly tranquil and lazy scene and shoals of tiny silver fish darted this way and that under our keel, reflecting brightly through the turquoise hue of the shallow, clear sea. Days like this make you wonder why you ever need to move – maybe we could lounge here for the entire week and concoct the story of our travels from



The houses on many of these small islands rise steeply up from the coastline – Ihdra from the sea



Many of these islands discourage, or disallow cars. On Ihdra these indigenous ponies take the tourists around the sights



One of the dreaded inter-island ferries that can create a frightening wash if you're not prepared

fellow sailors that might pass by? But soon the excitement of discovering more new and, possibly, even more beautiful destinations nags you into clearing away the dishes and hauling up the hook. Feeling it might be an insult to such a precious peaceful spot to drown out nature's sounds with our engine, we manually weighed anchor and unfurled the sails without starting the engine, drifting gently out of the cove at less than walking pace on the whispering beginnings of the early breeze.

Plan A was to head for Baltiza Creek near Spetzes Town, but something was

stirring among the weather gods and it wasn't long before our trusty Bavaria 44, *Captain Fanis*, was crashing through the waves in a fresh F5 northeasterly – nearly bang on the nose for our chosen course. Not wanting to waste such a good sailing breeze we chose to take a long reach straight across to Kiparissi Bay, on the Peloponnesian peninsula. The sail was exhilarating as the wind reached a steady 24kn and we inched away a few turns on the main and genoa furlers to give us a more comfortable ride. Kiparissi Town is situated on the south end of a wide-open bay, into which the sea and steady northwesterly were now stampeding.

Anchoring off the town quay – our first plan – was out of the question due to the large rollers, so we dropped the hook just off the beach at the north end of the bay for lunch and a swim. By 1800 the swell was uncomfortable and the thought of a night rocking about at anchor didn't appeal. We motored gently alongside the old ferry quay, now semi-derelect thanks to a recent earthquake, which had created a large crater in the middle of it. We called to a fisherman who was cleaning his net further along and he gave us the OK to come alongside, telling us the water was clear from obstructions, and just as we had finished tidying up and the ubiquitous angler had shifted all his gear along a further 10m, along came the cruising yacht, *Dolcetto*, with similar thoughts. We helped Jan and Sue alongside and set about swapping tonic for ice in order to fulfil our cravings for a good ol' G & T.

While we were relaxing in the cockpit with our drinks a small car wound its way laboriously along a track cut into the steep hill overlooking the bay, finally arriving at the old quay. A young lady got out and asked us if we would like a lift to her restaurant back in town. We felt very guilty saying no thanks, but had just started cooking the last of our fresh meat and I didn't want to be feeding the fish with our best slow-cooked lamb shank in the morning. It continued to blow hard all night, but we were safely sheltered behind a small headland and well warped up, so an undisturbed night ensued.

Meeting the meltemi

We woke to find the wind blowing just as hard and waves breaking loudly onto the nearby beach. We were experiencing the start of the meltemi – a brisk N/NE wind that often blows for 3-4 days in the summer. Around the Saronic and Eastern Peloponnese its effects are reduced and it can provide some exhilarating sailing, but further out in the Cyclades one can experience F7-8 winds and quite steep seas during this time.

Having decided the previous night to continue on down the mainland coast to the historic town of Monemvasia, we breakfasted, then stowed well for a rolly downwind ride. In fact, it wasn't too bad – with a F5 on our quarter we kept up a steady 7kn all the way, although it was a little rolly. We weren't too sure what we might find in the town – we knew that there was a harbour of sorts and a protruding headland in the lee of which we could drop anchor fairly safely.

On rounding the headland the remains of the ancient Byzantine walled city slowly revealed itself against the rough, rocky headland. Much of it has since been rebuilt, but in the same style and using original materials, so it retained all of its charm and beauty. We anchored in the bay, but were buffeted around by strong downdraughts. The one boat on the concrete jetty on the north side was being thrown around viciously by the strong swell, so we decided to avoid it and, instead, as the

wind dropped later in the afternoon, entered the small harbour to the south. There is some seabed fouling in the harbour where the outer pontoon was wrecked by a storm, so I decided not to drop the hook too far out and risk fouling it on the debris. It dug in after two attempts and we tied up stern first to the rickety wooden pontoon. By this time it was too late to visit the walled city, so we contented ourselves with a meal out in a waterside restaurant, promising to get up early and visit the city before the sun became unbearable. After a comfortable night we went to town for some bread and fruit and ▶▶



FOOD & DRINK

■ The food is generally freshly cooked, generous and cheap, although fresh fish can be a little pricey sometimes. Mezzes (tasters) are great for lunch or starters, but don't be tempted to order too many – they are surprisingly filling, especially when served with irresistible bread.

The ubiquitous Greek salad is a cheap and pleasant way of eating lunch ashore, but its contents can vary. Usually it contains eggs, tuna, anchovies, olives and lettuce.



The local wines are usually fine, although I would avoid the heavy retsina (resinated wine) unless you particularly like it. The beer is cheapish and easy to get, but usually imported. Greek brandy, of which Metaxa is one of my favourites, is much smoother than many and makes a great nightcap with strong, dark coffee.

Above, from the top: Fresh octopus being gently barbecued for lunch in Poros. Early morning and the local fishermen our taking their latest catch ashore. A huge selection of fresh fish on offer from a stall on Poros Town quay

CULTURE ON POROS

The Archaeological Museum is on the small Korizi Square, off the quayside road. It houses various finds from the Sanctuary of Poseidon, among which are a section of an Ionic column from the temple and a piece of the statue of Poseidon. Many small churches and chapels are scattered around the island – all can be visited. The most imposing and important of the ecclesiastical buildings is the Monastery of Zoodochos Pigi (Source of Life), 4km east of Poros Town*

The ancient walled Byzantine town of Monemvasia is slowly revealed as you round the steep headland



The harbour in Monemvasia is small and the pontoons rickety, but it's a beautiful place to eat out



Leonidhion's pretty harbour offers a comfortable and safe refuge and is right beside a sandy beach for swimming

◀◀ noticed the wind rising rapidly again. On returning we realised our anchor was starting to drag and there was no choice but to reset it. By the time we had hauled it on board the wind was blowing 20kn into the harbour and rather than risk T-boning myself on adjacent fishing boats, we left. We dropped anchor in the bay for breakfast, but as the wind was now gusting to 30kn, we scrapped any plans for visiting the city and set off for a well reefed, wet beat back up the coast.

We arrived at Leonidhion after a hard, five-hour slog to windward and were relieved to find a decent quay to moor to. Mooring alongside is unusual in Greece, but here it was recommended as the holding is poor and rafting up causes less problems. The village is small and pretty and we were made welcome by the port police – who asked to see our papers and charged us the vast sum of 1.75 euros (£1.20) for the night's stay. We ate at a table overlooking the harbour, after being taken on a tour of the kitchens of the Taverna Michel. The sardines and octopus were fresh in that day and were delicious lightly grilled with aubergine strips and melted cheese. The bill for four, with wine, was 15 euros a head – and we were given a huge bag of fresh vegetables to take back with us.

Tight spaces

In the morning we swam from the beach, right in front of the harbour wall, and took refreshing showers in the adjacent public facilities. Then large espressos and croissants were the order of the day, taken overlooking the pretty little harbour. A swift visit to the mini-market replenished our beer, bread and drinking water supplies, and for a mere two euros we filled the boat's water tanks before setting off on a cracking reach back across to Spetzes in a warm F4-5 wind. Baltiza Creek on Spetzes is the only viable mooring for a leisure yacht, as most of the town quay is taken up with day-tripper boats. The creek is narrow but bursting with character. At one time it used to house a large boat building industry, but

now it is mainly a fishing boat harbour although there is still one working yard that we saw. We squeezed in between a few other yachts using the traditional Mediterranean 'nudge and shove' technique, and thinking ourselves lucky to have 'created' the last possible available mooring, were amazed when another 10 or so boats were shoe-horned in around us. A short walk took us into town, which was the usual mixture of old and new with plenty of tacky tourist shops, but a few very inviting restaurants just a street away from the front. No private cars are allowed on the island, so pony and trap tours are available for the adventurous, but we chose to stick with Shanks' version, stopping on the way around for a quick swim in one of the numerous little bays.

After a serious meal in a waterside restaurant some 10 minutes walk away, we spent much of the night people-watching from the cockpit sipping large Mataxas (local brandy). Don't expect to get much sleep here until the early hours – it was 0300 before the last of the clubbers wended their weary way homewards and we finally headed below.

As usual, we had left ourselves with a long hike back to base on the last day, so we had to content ourselves with a quick turn and gaze in Idhra's quaint town harbour in passing. It is a busy place, with endless ferries plying in and out at breakneck speed, and the harbour is surrounded with bars, cafés and clubs, so I'm not sure you would get much sleep in the high season, but it's definitely worth a daytime visit if you've the time.

We headed back to Kalamaki with a perfect F4 veering from north to east during the day to give us a comfortable reach all the way back to base without changing tack. On arrival at the base we were shocked to see several damaged yachts limping in from the Cyclades, where the winds had been F7-8 for most of the week, confirming that our trip along the Peloponnesian peninsula is more for the less experienced, or those, like us, just wanting a more relaxed sailing break.

FLIGHT INFORMATION

■ We booked our own flights to Athens, as there are so many to choose from. Flying from London Gatwick to Athens direct with Easyjet cost us £160 return each, booking three months ahead. We also stayed the night in the Gatwick Europa hotel, which provided one night's stay, 10 days parking and free airport transfers for £105, which took the pressure off us and gave us another two hours in bed! The cab from Athens to Kalamaki took 45 minutes and cost us 20 euros.

