

Special Issue: Exotic Sailing Destinations for All of Us

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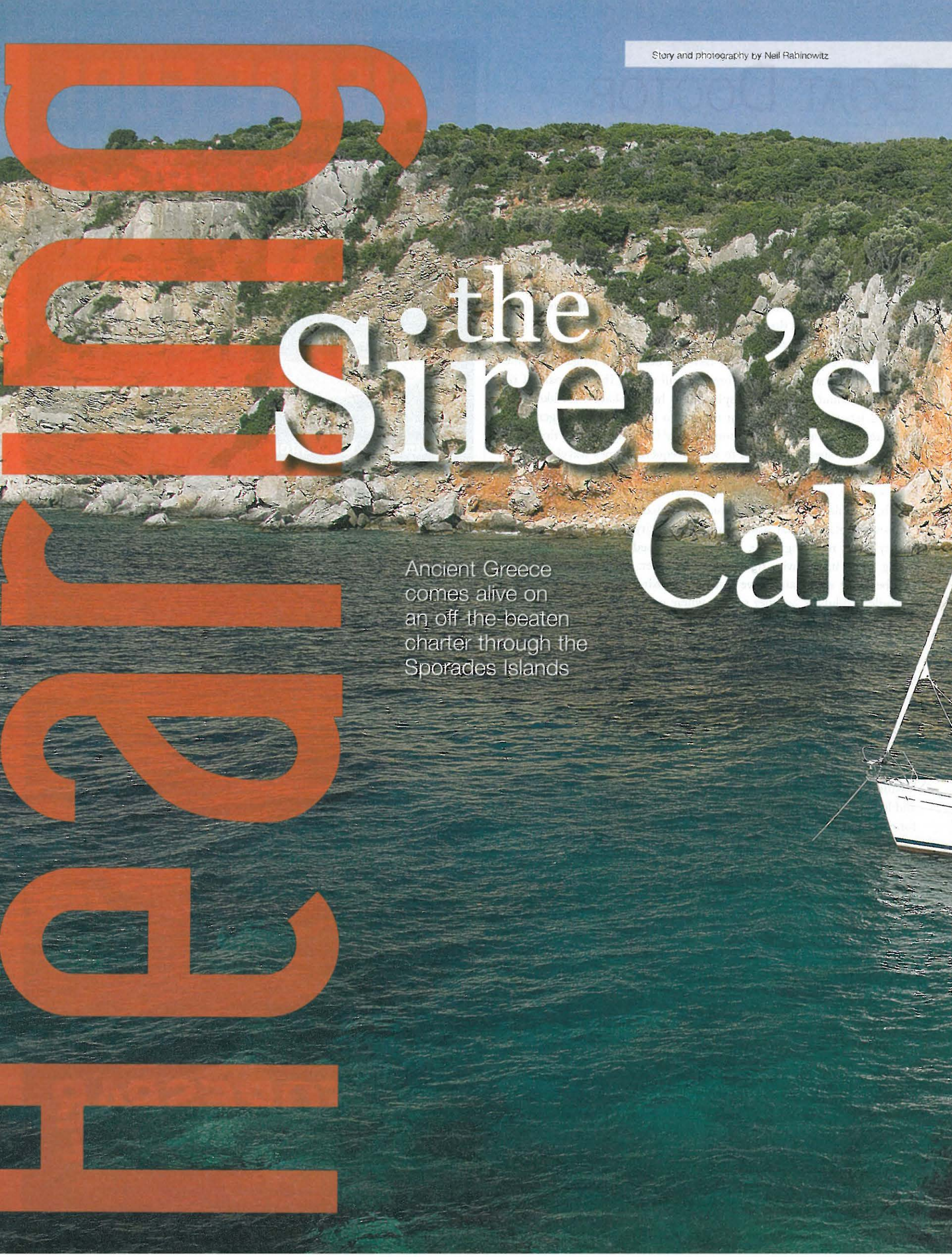
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Charter sailing Greece
aboard a Bavaria 42

Story and photography by Neil Rabinowitz

Following the Siren's Call

Ancient Greece comes alive on an off-the-beaten charter through the Sporades Islands





The cruisers tuck into the small tranquil cove on the southeast corner of Alonissos. Maroushka shows off a moray eel she caught off the beach at Psathoura, right.

Gems of the ancient world, the Greek Isles are an enchanting Mediterranean cluster of archipelagos that have seduced sailors for centuries. Bathed in cloudless Hellenic light, pocked with volcanic slopes covered with olive trees and tranquil stone villages dating back to antiquity, their stark beauty is so steeped in history that even the most desolate landscape claims an archaeologically captivating past. No other place in the western world declares itself home to the deities with such defiance, filling daily lives with the evidence of stone ruins. Like most of earth's treasured cultural remains these locations are only accessed by boat and Kiriacoulis, a prolific supplier of Mediterranean charters that calls the Aegean home, hosts one of the largest Greek fleets since Ulysses.

After a month of trekking from Crete to the Peloponnese, over rocky, beaten tourist paths, we were three days into our voyage through the Northern Sporades when we anchored alone in an Aegean amphitheater of towering marble. The shadow of our Bavaria 42 rested on the bottom through a mingling of sapphire and emerald hued waters. We hovered

over the sea floor as the anchor hit with a puff of sand. Glossy pink marble walls tumbled from the hillsides toward the sea in giant blocks, like dice from the gods. These undeveloped shores are the most protected parklands in all of Greece, where the solitude of a quite cove, in the height of summer's season, was a routine joy in the Sporades.

Islands, more than 6,000 in the Aegean alone, make up 20 percent of Greece's total land mass, forming 12,000 miles of coastline. Three historic seas surround Greece. The Ionian to the west reaches Italy; the Mediterranean to the south with Crete and the Dodecanese Islands near Turkey; and the famed Aegean to the east. On the cusp of the Aegean, the Cyclades feature notoriously popular vacation destinations like Mykonos





The chartered Bavaria 42 slips into the south anchorage on Pelagos on a light breeze.



and Santorini among other tourist haunts. The Saronic Islands host a daily procession of high-speed ferries from the Athens metropolis. These islands ooze Hellenic charm, but our own voyaging plans looked beyond sun-drenched beaches and whitewashed houses bewitching most Greek charterers.

We live on a quiet island in the Pacific Northwest and favor wildlife to nightlife, and starlit evenings in solitary anchorages along the undeveloped cruising grounds of the inside passage of our home waters. Its is why we chose the Sporades, Greece's most undeveloped archipelago, which includes 11

hour five of us, two couples and a teenager, were supplied with a week's worth of gear and comfortably aboard in three double cabins. A dry northwesterly that blows each summer, the Meltemi, the Med's rarer version of summer trades, faded into the evening. The sailing season stretches from April to October, boasting the best weather May through September, and while the Meltemi has its blustery moods and can rage up to near hurricane strength, it is normally anticipated and subdued. Reliable steady breezes carried us a short reach from the base.

Our route traced reddish shores of carnelian sands, passed stone windmills and rounded the

An encounter with the small population of craftsmen, farmers, herders and fishermen enrich any charter face-to-face with the authentic Greece. Local farmers tend olive trees, vineyards, figs and almonds while adjacent waters provide fish and the slopes host a stunted pine used to produce retsina, a popular alcoholic drink that requires an acquired taste, something like a blend of Chablis and paint remover.

Our first night we anchored off Skopelos Island, where one small village of cubed white houses with common verandas and courtyards filled with flowers, snake through narrow



islands, four of which are inhabited along with other island fragments under the protection of the marine park. It remains Europe's largest marine preserve for both aquatic and terrestrial Mediterranean life and except for its recent notoriety as the set for the movie "Mama Mia," the disco tempo of the Skiathos charter base was an aberration of nightlife among this mellow island group. It represented the final bustling harbor before we sailed for the tranquility of the outer islands.

We began a few hours north of Athens and then traveled by ferry from Volos to Skiathos, where we picked up our boat and within the

rubble of a nondescript point that locals claim to be 100,000-year-old archeological ruins. There was no avoiding the marvels of history. Even the most oblivious charter crew would immediately acknowledge these unspoiled barren rocky shorelines had a remarkable past, marking cycles of civilizations that had risen, been vanquished and risen again long before Columbus took Isabella's charter fleet for a cruise and sparked the "new" world.

Greece gets 17 million tourists a year, and a few thousand of those charter, but only a fraction of those make it to the Sporades where they barely impact the outer islands.

alleyways with whitewashed steps. Our Greek language lesson for the day was a root word inspired by the random footprint of these islands—sporadic. In Greek, Greece is known as Hellas from "Hel" meaning shiny and "Las" meaning stone, the land of shiny rock (marble), a feature surrounding us with shades of glistening crystallized limestone, the complexion of an ancient culture.

Circled by the polished stone, we stern tied to shore and sat in 40 feet of turquoise water so clear we could read the CRQ on our anchor on the bottom. At sunrise two grizzled shepherds led a single-file caravan

Greek churches with their distinctive blue domes dot the islands. The charter fleet lines the dock at Skiathos Harbor, facing page.



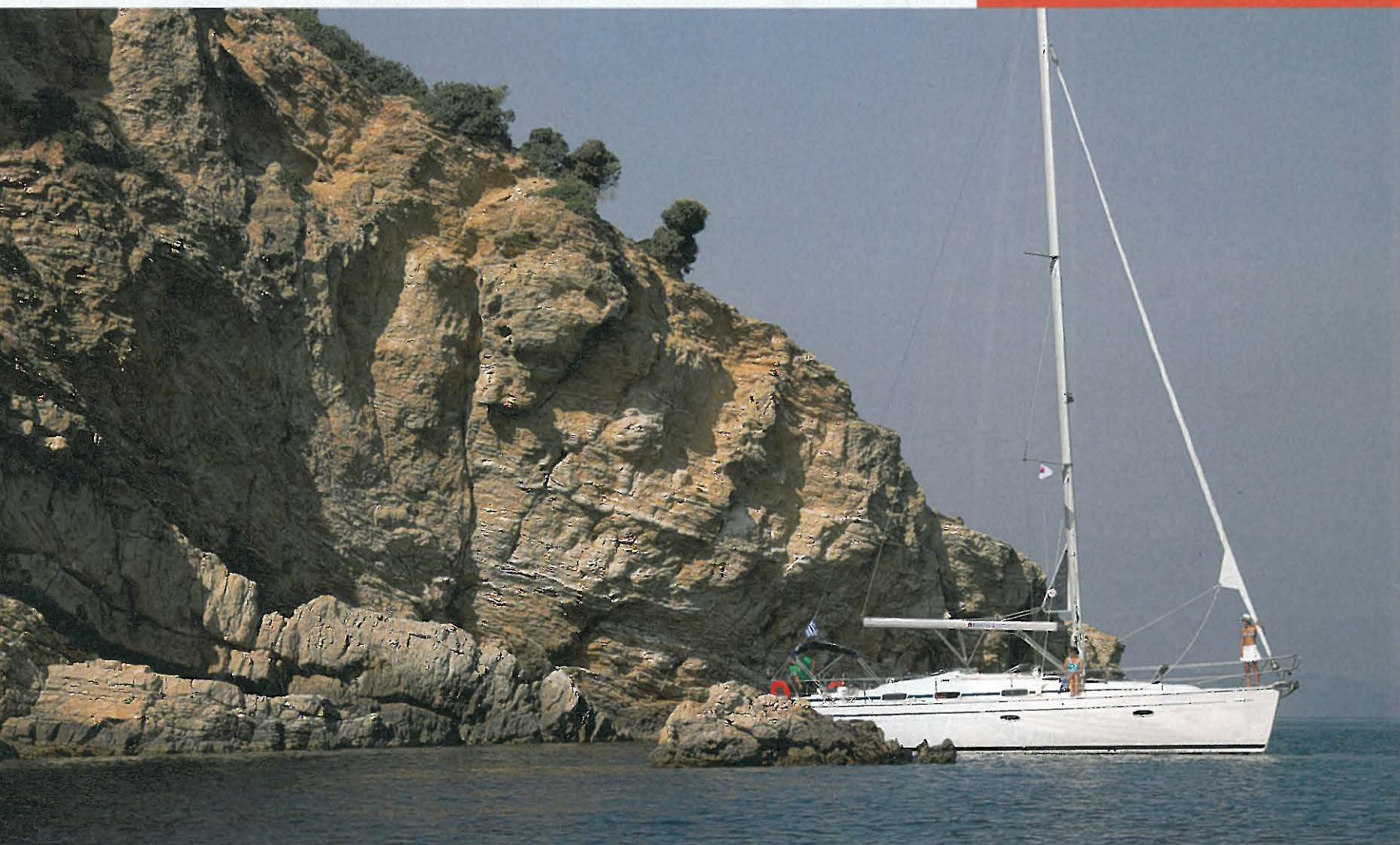
of burros down the rock-strewn landscape, around the cove and out of sight. Once the breeze filled we set sail for Alonissos, designated in 1992 as one of Europe's six "Eco Islands" and the beginning of the marine park inspired to protect the endangered monk seal.

Red corals, rare Audouin gulls and loggerhead turtles are among many protected

jaunts between secluded anchorages filled with quiet treasures.

We passed traces of human settlements reaching back to Neolithic times. Remote monasteries, many from the 12th century Byzantine period, erected in the most dramatic, difficult to reach locations, poised high on precipices, in mountaintop caves and offshore islands, are found in the most striking places

past one or two other charter boats each day, glimpsing them in distant coves as we trimmed for speed. At sunrise our anchorages were calm, turquoise pools impelling early swims. Goats bleated from shore beneath the buzz of acrobatic hummingbirds, while octopus and moray eels wiggled amongst the rocks. We snorkeled, feasted on Greece's abundance of seasonal fruits, roasted figs and honey and fresh bread



life forms in the park where after centuries of exploitation it may take lifetimes to replenish, making chartering the least obtrusive way to sample the park's flora and fauna.

We reached on a slight heel along the island chain with a slight lee blanketing a hundred yards south of the islands through gentle seas and plenty of sun. Afternoons were spent sweeping softly past coastlines, with frequent swim sessions, sunscreen, fresh melons and reading beneath the bimini seeking pockets of shade. The Greek landscape appears stark at first; parched, desolate and brown. But the subtleties of flora and fauna, the unique geological skeleton, pooled with inviting waters and shaded with surrealistic tones of sun and stone transformed our refreshing inter-island

throughout Greece. For charterers in need there were provisions of ice, food, fuel and water, or conversations at the local taverna normally lined outside with crusty old salts sitting at tables, drinking and waiting. But we were well stocked and didn't require stopping, preferring instead to stay with the breeze. Steep cliffs edged the north shore, climbing to the 1,500-foot Mount Kouvouli, while the south coast of Alonissos featured quaint ports, some taken by pirates and others abandoned after a 1965 earthquake. The five of us decompressed as Greek tunes lilted across the deck and we claimed lounge spots and sailed



For more information on this charter visit www.kiriacoulis.com on the Web.

filled with feta, olives and tomatoes, and after a night in the cockpit beneath the Greek constellations, hoisted sails for the farthest reaches of the park—Psathoura, land of the sirens.

Who wouldn't claim the sirens as their own temptresses? Given the chance, Nebraska could be next. But with so much of our classical heritage inspired by Greek literature it was tough to resist acting out the legends of the Sporades. Cousteau exposed the truth of a large Bronze Age city submerged in shallow waters off Psathoura, the easternmost volcanic island of the chain. He called it the City of Sirens. The remnants still lay visible at certain tides so there remains no doubt that civilization once thrived in the outermost islands. But whether the legendary one-eyed giant Cyclops actually lived in the cave filled with stalagmites and stalactites off nearby Yioura, or that Jason and his Argonauts actually set out searching for the Golden Fleece from Psathoura where Sirens later tortured Ulysses, who knows? But cruising these waters, tracing the remnants of a thriving culture engulfed by the sea is pure charter magic. It turns a leisurely cruise of gentle gunkholing into a noble quest for exploration, adventure and historical meaning. Cyclops beware!

"Pass the suntan lotion, please," my wife said. It was a slap back to reality and my swashbuckling dreams of conquest and adventure on the heels of Greek heroes faded like jousting at windmills. But even if glory and noble quests had long disappeared from this route, chartering on the heels of history gave life and scale to those classic Greek tales.

The shallows of Psathoura's anchorage stretched ahead like a Bahamian inlet, saturated with greens, blues and swirling sands, topped with a surreal lava-rimmed low-lying island and a lighthouse covered with sea birds. We nosed the dingy ashore, carefully grazing the razor sharp lava rock. Our hike across the island was a sweltering expedition for the submerged tops of an ancient civilization we hoped would erupt from the depths of an azure sea in blinding statues of polished bronze. It didn't happen, but we had a good hike, and for most of us an even better swim to the boat.

The directive for park permits dictates powerboaters keep the engine noise down and water sports to a minimum so as not to disturb the wildlife or other boaters, and everyone monitors the Park Service on VHF 12 while cruising and respects the sanctity of park life and the temperament of the preserve.



Alex takes the helm on a relaxing inter-island sail. The crew tucks into a bay for a midday snorkeling stop, facing page.

We sailed at first light, before the Aegean's summer heat reached a fever, and with the sunrise behind us we trimmed with more finesse as we returned west along the north coast toward Kira Panayias, a keyhole anchorage on the far shore of Pelagos. After so much history of Turks and Greeks, vanquishing and domination, earthquakes and cultural nobility, our crew surrendered to the wonders of the landscape of quiet Greek coves reserved for sailors. On the ridgelines of distant islands we

could see the white stone villages cascading past pines and olive trees. The sea and air were perfect, enticing yet another swim beneath the cliffs of our marble-lined cove. There was no denying that history kept a low profile in these islands and what seemed a natural state were all marked with the subtleties of great civilizations come and gone. What better way to pay homage to what has gone before and helped define our own culture than to gently cruise with soft footprints along a sacred chain of history. ♪