

Small boat in the Sporades

Stewart and Jane Baggs trailed their Drascombe Coaster to Greece to spend a summer sailing the islands of the Northern Sporades. There they found wonderful beaches, starlit nights – and boisterous Meltemi winds

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

■ Having recently retired as Lancashire's Head of Outdoor Education, Stewart Baggs has been able to spend his



summers sailing in Greece with his wife Jane. They keep a Drascombe Lugger on Windermere, reserving *Pelagus Rapids*, their Drascombe Coaster, for trailer sailing further afield. They have also recently bought a Bénéteau First 305.

I wonder how many anchorages in the Mediterranean can boast a starscape like this?' I mused to my wife Jane, as we leant back in the cockpit against the lumpy folds of the Avon dinghy. 'No amber loom over the horizon, no street lights, no headlights, just a jet-black velvet sky with a thousand million stars.'

We had crept into the tiny cove on the last of the afternoon's breeze. The only sign of human activity was a small church surrounded by goat tracks leading up the hillside. To seaward a narrow strait stretched north-east up the coast towards Steno Trikeri, the Meltemi-swept channel that separates the Greek mainland from the Northern Sporades.

We had the whole summer to enjoy. Spending a long time on a small boat isn't as difficult as it might seem. Drascombe Coasters are usually described as dayboats or weekend trailer-sailers but, given good weather, a modicum of organisation and a willingness to forgo some of life's little luxuries, they can provide a capable and seaworthy cruising home for weeks at a time.

As a young man in the 1970s I read Ken Duxbury's *Lugworm on the Loose*, an account of an adventurous couple's early-retirement voyage from Greece home to the UK in their 18ft Drascombe Lugger. I was fascinated and inspired by the low-tech, low-cost approach.

Now Jane and I were heading for the

Pelagus anchored in Ormos Vasiliko, Peristeri

more direct route from Igoumenitsa in the west, crossing the 1,524m (5,000ft)-high Katara Pass. There, during an earlier visit, our Transit Camper/Drascombe Coaster partnership had a narrow escape when the 13.7m (45ft)-long combination lost braking power downhill – the brake fluid boiled. So, until the new road and tunnels through the Katara Pass are completed... take the ferry to Patras and thence the bridge over the Gulf of Corinth.

In previous years our Mediterranean holidays had been limited to a few weeks in high summer, dashing south to our chosen cruising ground, and back for the return to work. Now, having taken early retirement and rented out our house, we could take our time, sailing as-and-where our inclination and the weather took us. We'd coastal-hop our way around the Gulf of Volos and the northern coast of Evia with the Sporades as our target.

Island hopping

After a brief struggle we broke the anchor out of the clayey seabed at Trikeri Island and began our chug along the coast to Trikeri Port, in order to make south out of the Gulf of Volos. By 1000 a north-easterly had started to blow, scuffing up a short white-crested sea. We were abreast of Trikeri Port when we lifted the outboard, dropped the centreplate and set the yawl's full complement of tan sails.

As the waves began to build we headed up into the larger ones to ensure that hard-gained ground to windward was conserved. Beating to windward isn't the Coaster's finest point of sail but we did well despite a slight adverse current.

Eventually the limestone peaks gave way to a deeply quarried scar that marked the entrance to Ormos Andriami. *Pelagus* accelerated as we eased sail and bore away across the increasingly sheltered water with the prospect of a swim, a sunbathe, a glass of wine and a restful night.

Another early start saw *Pelagus* motoring past the small harbour of Platania, preparing for the short crossing to Skiathos, the busiest island in the Northern Sporades. As the morning breeze ruffled the surface we raised sail and soon skimmed past the halfway buoy at 6 knots. We sailed a comfortable distance off the happily-humming beaches, trying to find a quiet anchorage away from the wake of ferries taking trippers to waterside bars.

No sooner had we settled in a suitable cove than the local waterskiing class

arrived, followed by parascenders towed by powerboats capable of producing a wash big enough to surf on. Eventually things settled down and we slept well.

Next dawn we were ready for the crossing to the second island, Skopelos. In a fitful northerly breeze we pointed for the distant hilltop town of Glossa above Loutraki Port. As we neared the coast we



Sunset in Loutraki on the north-west coast of Skopelos

were increasingly headed by strong gusts from the land, heralded by dark patches on the surface. Although Drascombes are dry, seaworthy boats, when slow or stationary they are vulnerable to heavy gusts of wind. It was fun, though, to use these blasts of hot air to claw the last mile into harbour. We anchored stern to, some distance from the main quay. When the cabin has sitting room only, life is lived more in the cockpit so we usually seek out quiet corners.

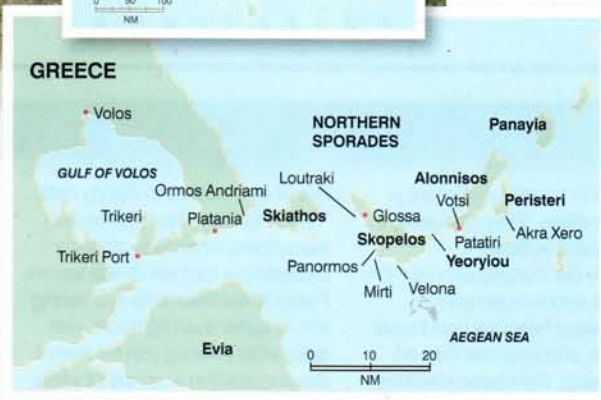
Hilltop hiatus

The picturesque towns of the Sporades cling to the steep hillsides in a response of the people of the Middle Ages to the unchecked activities of pirates. Leaving the coast they withdrew to the more easily-defended interior, crowding their stone houses on top of each other above narrow streets barely wide enough for loaded donkeys to pass.

In the evening heat we were breathless as we climbed the cobbled paths to Glossa. Eventually we looked down on the harbour. *Pelagus* looked very small. We'd spent the afternoon buying fresh food, seeking out drinking water and swimming.

Greek taverna food is great but when you find a proper Greek restaurant specialising in fresh local dishes you realise the limitations of the tourist menu. That night we slept to distant music from the harbour cafés, well exercised and well fed.

Weather forecasts are problematic as a laptop isn't practical on such a small boat. We pick up VHF forecasts on our handheld but when reception is poor we scan the skies and ask advice from boaters with tall masts and lots of aerials.



Aegean coast, planning to sail our own Drascombe *Pelagus Rapids* to the Northern Sporades, a string of islands off the north-east coast of Greece. It wasn't until our arrival that I realised that we were unintentionally following in the footsteps of the Duxburys – it had been the starting point for their voyage.

For the long-distance trailer-sailor there are two routes across the Greek mainland to the north-east coast. Either leave the ferry at Patras in the south or take the

Sunsail's flotilla leaders, well-organised and friendly, were happy to alert us to anything nasty coming our way. With just such a forecast, next afternoon we tacked south-east down the coast to the picturesque all-round shelter of Panormos. As we arrived, beating hard into the lagoon entrance, the light took on an uneasy metallic hue.

Everyone was expecting 'a blow'. Many more boats arrived as the evening wore on, squeezing into ever-smaller gaps until the scene resembled preparations for a boat show. Around 0100 the wind arrived, whistling through the conifers, tugging on lines and fenders and jostling the sleeping crews into a frenzy of shouting and retightening. Gradually only the sound of the wind remained and we drifted back to sleep.

Meeting the Meltemi

Next morning the breeze showed no sign of abating, despite a forecast of a calmer afternoon. We poked *Pelagus'* bows out of the haven – a bigish sea was running before a NW Force 4. We elected to go for it, unfurled the genoa and spent a lumpy hour rounding the low rocky headland of Mirti. Just as we were expecting to hoist the main and broad reach at speed towards Velona the wind dropped. It took us another day to sail to Alonnisos.

After a brief stay in the crystal-clear waters of Votsi harbour we entered the shelter of Nisos Peristeri using hot, aromatic land breezes to accelerate us towards the outer Sporades islands. A 10-mile crossing is relatively run-of-the-



Jane off watch on the cabin top

mill, but 20-mile hops in our small boat receive greater consideration, sometimes giving rise to coastal detours to reduce exposure. Sensible contingency plans, good forecasts and well-found equipment complement realistic expectations

– we don't deliberately seek out unnecessary excitement.

The crossing to Nisos Panayia promised to be a brisk affair with steady Force 4s; we would not embark on a crossing if more is forecast. We left early to benefit from flat water before the breeze kicked it up, but

by the time we reached open water we were doing 6 knots through metre-high waves. Panayia is uninhabited save for a small monastery on the east coast. There are two anchorages, South and North Bay. Given the favourable breeze we elected to sail 'east about' and head for the latter. The wind gradually dropped to find us ghosting into the narrow entrance channel by late afternoon.

The Duxburys found North Bay a depressing place. We thought they must have coincided with sombre weather: to our eyes the large, crystal-clear lagoon provided perfect all-round shelter. But perhaps they knew something after all. Before long, clouds masked the sunset and distant thunder became local. In minutes the wind was shrieking, driving cold horizontal rain over the spray hood and wrestling the bows from side to side. We sat tight as the wind increased, with thunder directly over us and lightning illuminating the bedlam downwind. Two hours later peace was restored. I shone the searchlight out into the blackness, but all had held and we slept soundly for the

The Meltemi

The principal feature of summer weather in the Aegean is the Meltemi. This warm wind blows from the north/north-east and can howl for days, even weeks, on end. Advice and experience confirm that if it starts to blow in the night, stay in port, if it blows later in the morning expect a good sail, and if nothing happens by lunchtime it'll either remain flat calm or suddenly begin to blow in the late afternoon. Generally, expect wind and be ready for very strong katabatic winds in the afternoon and evening when closing the land.



ABOUT THE BOAT



■ *Pelagus Rapids*, our 6.63m (21ft 9in) 1980 Drascombe Coaster, lacks many features found on charter and flotilla boats. We have no water tank, simply carrying about 24lt of water in 1.5lt plastic

bottles – we use about 3lt a day. Although we hold food and water for about eight days we could resupply about twice a week in the larger harbour towns – we have no fridge but fresh local produce

stores well in plastic containers in the bilge lockers. With no heads, a chemical toilet suffices.

Tanks are discharged ashore – on this trip, all anchorages and harbours were free if we used local restaurants and tavernas (not an arduous task). With basic electrics for cabin lighting, navigation lights and echo sounder, our battery is recharged by the 7.5hp Mercury outboard, but that's run as little as possible – we like to sail slowly or, better still, wait for a fair breeze. On a 24-day voyage covering 250 miles we used less than 20lt of fuel. There's no bimini but our sun canopy extends from the sprayhood to a boathook lashed to the mizzen mast (between 1100 and 1600 you need full skin cover,

lots of sun lotion and floppy hats).

The Duxburys knew what they were doing when they chose a Drascombe for their Greek travels. *Pelagus'* footless sails suit strong winds better than light airs. Her adaptable yawl rig can be reefed down quickly in a variety of ways, helping her cope well with the strong katabatic winds that sweep down from the hills with little warning. She's a very dry boat and despite clocking surfing speeds of up to 8.5 knots, shipped only the equivalent of a couple of buckets of water during the entire voyage. She floats in 30cm (12in) of water with the centreplate up and she's easy to anchor, so we can access tiny anchorages that deep-keeled boats cannot enter.



Pelagus anchored near Trikeri, Gulf of Volos

remainder of the night. In the morning we found our inflatable dinghy full of rainwater which, funnelled into folding water carriers, meant we'd have freshwater showers for the rest of the voyage.

The narrow entrance to North Bay faces north-east, directly into the Meltemi. Large waves bowled down the channel: it was time to move. We gunned the engine hard. Slamming down off the backs of the steepest waves it was obvious that conditions demanded a downwind route. Surrounded by large waves and a confused sea, we set just the foresail to finally arrive at South Bay, completing a circumnavigation of Nisos Panayia.

South Bay is more open than its northern counterpart so we were on our way early the next morning, anxious to return to Alonnisos before the wind really hit stride. The 28-year-old Coaster was in her element, broad reaching through moderate seas at a steady 6 knots. Confident after two weeks at sea we decided to return around the south coast

of Peristeri, despite the risk of strong katabatic winds.

Progress continued briskly into the afternoon, and in very strong winds and following seas at Akra Xero we clocked our fastest speed for the cruise – 8.6 knots – before Jane quite rightly requested more leisurely progress and a shortening of sail. The remainder of the afternoon we anchored in the lee of cliffs, tending lines between swims, as the wind whistled through the pines above. In the evening we set sail across the short strait to Votsi carried by strong land breezes, pursued by a stylish Italian ketch that inevitably overtook us with a friendly wave from the crew.

Brilliant bolt-hole

If you have to be weather-bound there's no better place than Votsi. This quiet town offers gin-clear swimming, white pebble



The Meltemi kicks up the sea around Alonnisos

beaches, a choice of eateries, supermarkets, water on the quayside, privacy and space, all within walking distance of the ferry port of Patatiri where you can get fuel, chandlery, English papers and hire a scooter. While the Meltemi whistled we swam, visited Alonnisos old town on the hill, scrubbed the hull, oiled the woodwork, sunbathed and reprovisioned, ready for the crossing to Skopelos town. Days of continuous north-easterlies had created big seas – ferries had been halted until conditions improved. Local sailors warned us of the waves that build up in the entrance but, as the days wore on, impatience eventually got the upper hand.

Advised that things would improve still further later that day, we left, happy that we could handle the conditions.

Skopelos town is the principal north coast harbour on the island of Skopelos, separated from the south-west tip of Alonnisos by a narrow strait and a stretch of rocky coast. Leaving Votsi the breeze was fitful and the sea smooth, but conditions on the north coast would only become apparent as we crossed the strait. From a distance waves and wind strength did not appear to be too bad. Nervously we ventured closer, promising ourselves that we would turn round if necessary. The wind became increasingly gusty blowing spray off the waves as we approached tiny Nisos Ay Yeoryiou island. I'd just said 'it doesn't look too bad' when we



Home-made shelving keeps the cabin tidy – a necessity when living aboard a small yacht with limited space





Clear waters in Votsi harbour, Alonnisos

suddenly found ourselves in the biggest waves of the trip. *Pelli* began to slam down off the tops, she was suddenly travelling far too fast and was seriously over-canvased. With each shuddering blow, displaced water flew into the air and, on meeting the strong north-easterly wind, began to douse the cockpit. We dropped the mainsail fast. Being aware that sometimes when it's obviously time to turn round, turning round isn't possible, I seriously considered going about and beating our way back to the shelter of Alonnisos. 'But', I thought, 'the Duxburys wouldn't retreat at the first sign of adverse conditions.' We pushed on, surrounded by steep reflected waves, only able to see the foot of the cliffs when we reached the peaks. Steadily, as Yeoryiou receded and we entered open water, wave height reduced and the jib/mizzen combination began to work well. But big sea conditions were still in force – what if we were to arrive only to find the harbour impossible to enter?

Having got this far there seemed little alternative other than to go on. We arrived at the entrance to Skopelos town at the tail end of a week's Meltemi. The wind still blew, albeit with less aggression than before, but huge turquoise waves ran into the entrance, rearing up and throwing themselves against the stone breakwater with a roaring explosion of spray. Entry

looked feasible, however – a narrow, deep-water channel free of breaking waves promised safe passage into the harbour.

Bearing away we furled the mizzen, leaving just the tan genoa to sail us in. We made steady progress, slow enough to ensure that we didn't surf away into a broach. I was just beginning to relax when Jane shouted: 'We've sprung a leak in the cabin!'

It never rains...

A jet of water hosed the cabin from a hole in the side of the centreboard casing, where Jane had spotted a small salt encrustation on the gel coat three weeks

before. (I'd decided it presented no short-term danger and I'd fix it at home...) With pressing problems

outside, I concentrated on getting into harbour whilst Jane stayed below stuffing cloths into the hole. Before long we were able to turn into the shelter behind the breakwater. I was surprised to see a small sailing dinghy come alongside to welcome us in – their first arrival for a week.

Anchoring stern-to between 40-footers our kedge failed to bite, foiled by a white training shoe on the seabed perfectly masking the points. Once installed among



Relaxing on Panayia after the thunderstorm

our Meltemi-bound neighbours I set off in search of chopped strand matting and resin, a quest that taxed my very basic

Greek and involved a journey to the other side of the island, only to eventually find supplies in a back street less than 500m from the boat. After a day spent with *Pelli* beached and under repair, we motored in flat calm along the north coast back to Glossa.

The highlight of the return voyage came some days later with the 20-mile broad reach back to the mainland, surfing down waves under the hot sun. We took turns to helm or read, glancing behind from time to time to see our wake stretching back towards the shimmering islands.

As we reached for cold beers, back on the mainland, we were left yet again with nothing but admiration – both for Greece, one of the most scenic countries in Europe, with a people who are among the most generous, easy-going, warm-hearted anywhere – and for the Duxburys. After the Northern Sporades they began their two-year voyage around Greece, then to Italy and home to the UK in their Luger, an open Drascombe 0.9m (3ft) shorter than our Coaster.



Rare copies of Ken Duxbury's book *Lugworm on the Loose* can be found by searching the internet

