

GEMINI DUO TRIP THROUGH THE AEGEAN 2009 PART 2

Greece, Northern Aegean June 2009

After a 7 hour crossing in rough seas from the Turkish island of Bozcaada, on 4 June we arrived in the port of Mirina on **Limnos**, our first Greek island on this trip. Initial impressions were not good as the whole of the waterfront has been dug up and work was in progress. No water and electricity on the quay as a result, so we had to be careful with our usage.

We had fitted in neatly between a German and a British yacht, when later in the day a big Polish yacht insisted on squeezing between us and the Brits. Much fender usage and it was wedged in. We couldn't complain as there was no charge for mooring here.

The town itself is lovely – picturesque, narrow cobbled streets and a big choice of interesting small shops – bakers, butchers (our first pork since leaving muslim Turkey), greengrocers, supermarkets, hardware shops – in fact everything you could need is available here. We didn't think much of the Limnos wines though which, even when marked as dry, have a honeyed aftertaste!

Limnos is a recognised port of entry to Greece for boaters, where we visited the Port Police with our passports and ship's papers. We expected to find one harassed official, but instead there were a dozen or so uniformed staff, who spoke quite good English. Forms were filled in, papers were stamped but then came the catch – we had to go to the Tax Office to pay the €30 for our boat "Traffic Document". Being 3pm the Tax Office was closed so the next morning we set off in search of it. Locals were very helpful in directing us but it was difficult to recognise as all signs are in Greek lettering. After half an hour we found it in the suburbs and were dealt with quite quickly. Back with our receipt to the Port Police who duly issued the necessary documentation.

The Port Police gave us the phone number of a local fuel supplier. When we spoke to him, not only did he speak good English but he said he and his tanker would be with us in 20 minutes to give us 500 litres of diesel. We thought €0,97 per litre was an excellent price!

After a couple of pleasant days, during which time we had got to know the four 60+ year old jovial German gents on their 65ft yacht next to us, we set off on our travels again.

As it was going to be our only chance, we wanted to visit the **Halkidiki peninsula** in the far north of the Aegean. The beautiful pine covered three-pronged peninsula is renowned for Mount Athos on the most easterly finger, which at over 2200m high we could see from 40 miles away. The Monastic Republic of Mount Athos is home to many medieval monasteries housing priceless treasures, but as no females are permitted to set foot on land there, we headed for the middle finger to **Porto Carras**, a very smart marina, hotel and conference centre built by the Greek shipping magnate John Carras. We prefer stopping at picturesque little harbours, but as we needed water we were prepared to stump up the €60 per night here. Nevertheless we had a relaxing time as the beach was nearby.

Only 2km across the other side of the bay was the town of **Nea Marmaras** where we intended to stop just to do some shopping. Our 4 German friends were already there and told us that mooring, electricity and water were all free. So we thought we would stay there too! We had an excellent dinner at one of the harbour front tavernas run by mother and daughter who recommended the fresh sardines and souvlaki (also enjoyed by the small cat who sat next to our table!)

The weather was beautiful and virtually wind-less so we decided to visit an L-shaped natural inlet, **Porto Kufo**, where the entrance is only 100m wide between towering cliffs, but the water is over 50m deep! We dropped anchor in 15m in a quiet bay where the only disturbance was the tinkling of bells of a large herd of goats being shepherded down the hillside by four dogs. We had several swims in the warm sea, and a wonderfully quiet night gently rotating on our anchor chain so that every time we looked out we had a different view!

The following day's long journey took us to the **Northern Sporades**, which completed our crossing of the whole width of the northern Aegean. The 60 nautical mile trip took 6.5 hours but was greatly enlivened by a huge pod of over 100 dolphins which kept pace with us for an hour or so, jumping out of the water and swimming alongside. 6 or 8 individuals swam in convoy in front of our bows. Later two smaller pods joined us. Apart from the dolphins, we saw nothing except two vessels in the far distance.

Mid afternoon we tied up in the harbour of **Skopelos**, the middle inhabited island in the chain. The town is very pretty with whitewashed houses and churches stacked on top of one another on the steep hill. The narrow cobbled streets are only wide enough for donkeys, now replaced by scooters.

Mooring in Skopelos harbour is free with a €10 charge for their recently installed electricity and water. Teething problems with the new installations meant that length of time the €10 lasted depended on which point you were plugged into. The only downside of the harbour was the big wash created by the huge ferries coming and going but we soon got used to it. Yachts came and went each day, with one Swiss yacht having a musical crew who started up their accordions and 6m long alpenbläser one evening.

We hired a car and explored this green and lush island, stopping at coves and small harbours. The air was thick with the aromas of pine and wild herbs and sounds of cicadas.

On the north coast we found the tiny church perched on a narrow peninsula that was used in the wedding scene in *Mamma Mia* the movie, with hundreds of steep steps leading up to it. Meryl Streep and the rest of the cast spent four months making the film on Skopelos.

On another day we took the local ferry to Skiathos, stopping enroute at the less developed island of **Alonissos**. **Skiathos** copes remarkably well with the huge influx of tourists who fly into the charter flight airport close to the main town. The harbour is chockablock with charter yachts, so no room for us. That decided us to stay put in

Skopelos, but the chandlery in Skiathos was a good source of nuts and bolts we needed to fix our anchor winch.

Apart from the anchor winch, the bulb in our top light had blown meaning we couldn't be seen in the dark when at anchor in a bay. We tramped round Skopelos town seeking out parts we needed for running repairs, directed by helpful locals to various shops all over town. While tourism is gaining momentum in Skopelos, the island for now continues to be a place very much for the local population.

Our stay on the island was somewhat longer than intended as the weather was rather unsettled. At 4am one morning we were awoken by screaming wind tearing over the harbour wall, and had to get up to put on extra ropes and take down our bimini which was straining at its ties. This was just a taste of what was happening mid Aegean where force 9 winds were blowing!

Daily we monitored the weather forecast as we needed a two day window to make the full 130 nm crossing west to east across the Aegean to Lesbos. On 16 June the alarm woke us at 5am, we lifted our anchor and were off by 6 o'clock just as the sun was rising to do the 65 nm voyage to the tiny island of **Ayios Evstratios** in the mid Aegean. Once we were out of the protection of the Sporades, the sea was rough so we were very pleased when after 8 hours of rocking and rolling we tied up on the main concrete quay in the tranquil harbour at Ayios Evstratios. The harbour master greeted us but didn't want to see any papers, showed us where the free electricity and water was, and we were charged nothing for the night. The water in the harbour was so clear we swam before exploring the village – which only took a short time with its church, one shop and two tavernas. A rusty old island ferry came in late afternoon, but shortly before 8pm cars, pedestrians, dogs, men pushing handcarts piled high with goods all started to congregate on the end of the main quay where we were moored. We joined the throng to watch the big mainland ferry dock outside the small harbour bringing all the island supplies.

After a very peaceful night we departed just after sunrise to do the second leg to **Lesvos**. Early afternoon we arrived in Mithimna harbour on the north coast of the island. We dropped anchor and reversed into the last available space on the quay alongside four other yachts. The electricity point was so far down the quay that we needed to use both our 30m electric cables plus every domestic extension lead we had on board! When we took our papers to the port police they told us that we would all have to move to clear the quay for a 140ft super yacht, *Hetairos*. Early next morning everyone was up and we all moved across the harbour to where the fishing boats normally moor. The plus side of this was that we were right in the centre of things, but the downside was the noise from the numerous quay-side restaurants and bars until very late! Nevertheless **Mithimna, or Molivos** as it is also called, is delightful. Small and quaint with old stone houses and cottages on narrow cobbled streets. Some streets are completely shaded by ancient wisterias, giving the feel of a cool tunnel which is very welcome when it is over 30C. We certainly felt the heat when we climbed up through the village to the hill-top Genoese castle which commands good views across to Turkey.

On our last day on Lesbos a British-built Broome 42 flying the red ensign came into the harbour. Bob and Brenda had brought their boat through the French canals all the way from Harleyford on the Thames. Small world!

The third largest of the Greek islands, Lesvos is less than 10 miles from Turkey on its north and east coasts. These parts are fertile and mountainous covered in millions of olive trees, while the south and east are dry. We hired a car and drove through hilltop hamlets clinging precariously to the mountainside, fishing villages and seaside towns and into the capital **Mitilini**. We had thought of taking the boat round to Mitilini but it was just too big and noisy for us. We also found the tiny fishing village of **Sigri** on the east coast where we could have stopped, but were dubious about getting our boat into the small harbour. There are many anchorages around Lesvos, the most appealing in the two big enclosed gulfs of Gera and Kallonis. In the event we chose to return to Turkey to take in some ancient ruins, so more to follow in our next report when we will be hopping between Greece and Turkey.

Anchors up!

Diane and Roger

The logo for Gemini Duo London features the word "GEMINI" in a large, bold, blue serif font. Two gold stars are positioned above the letters "I" and "N". Below "GEMINI" is the word "DUO" in a similar bold, blue serif font. At the bottom, the word "LONDON" is written in a smaller, bold, blue sans-serif font.

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