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ALL QUIET ON THE GRECIAN FRONT

Visit Greece out of season and you'll avoid the crowds and have the place all to yourselves. But, as *Emma Bamford* discovers, there's always a pay-off...



PHOTO: ALIA SCHAEFER



My *Sailing Today* colleagues are bored to tears with my constant updates on the Greek weather

ahead of my trip to the Magnesia region and the Sporades islands.

"Look!" I say, gleefully, "27 degrees in April! One day of cloud but then wall-to-wall sunshine."

I make sure I pack plenty of sunscreen, T-shirts and flip-flops.

Thessaloniki doesn't disappoint.

It is hot when I arrive and, when I reach the town of Volos, from where Jason started his quest on the Argo to claim the golden fleece, people are sunbathing on the narrow beach in Speedos.

Smug, I tuck into an ice-cream.

Sail Aegean, a charter company which has its main base here in Volos, with 14 yachts for bareboat or skippered charter or flotilla, ranging from 33ft (10m) to 51ft (15.6m), lends me a new (2014

model) Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 469 – *Rodi*, named after Poseidon's daughter. With four double cabins and four heads, it's more than enough for me and my tour guide – the base manager, Christos Liapis.

It's a boat undoubtedly suited to charterers – the cockpit is huge and fitted with subwoofer sound system and up- and down-lights, and our meagre supplies of oranges, strawberries and a few Alfa beers look lost inside the gigantic fridge.

Volos (39°20'9N 022°56'8E) is on the northern edge of the Pagasitikos Gulf (*Kolpos* in Greek), a circular bay about 16nM wide with a narrow 3nM entrance at the south. The mainland and islands of the region are mountainous and green, and the sea is deep. The prevailing winds are from the northeast, so the eastern edge of the gulf is protected by the mountain range. If winds come from the southwest, Volos can suffer (a big blow in May 2014 saw three boats sink) but in most conditions, it's fine.

"Pagasitikos Gulf is like a lake," Christos tells me, and he's not wrong – we have a gentle beam-reach sail in flat seas along the eastern rim of the gulf.

The first stop is Kala Nera (39°17'5N 023°08'5E), a small fishing harbour about 8nM clockwise around the gulf from



THE WATER IS BEING WHIPPED UP INTO A SHORT, SHALLOW CHOP AND THE WIND KEEPS ON RISING: IT PEAKS AT 57 KNOTS

Volos. Christos wants to show me this place because Sail Aegean will build a small marina here, a base for its fleet that will also welcome visitors. The plan is for a small complex of apartments, chandlers, showers and a supermarket and the hope is to move boats there for the summer 2017 season.

Another seven or eight miles clockwise and we're at Milina (39°09'N 023°12'E). The wind is picking up and we're glad to tuck behind a narrow island. There are a few private moorings here and we try to grab one, but the wind is up to 30 knots plus and *Rodi*, with her high topsides and dinghy on deck, has a lot of windage. We drop anchor instead.

When we up anchor after a lunch of Greek salad (of course) and peek around the corner of the little island, it's like we've jumped through a gap in the space-time continuum. The sunshine has gone, the water is being whipped up into a very short but shallow chop and the wind instrument keeps on rising: 35 knots,



● TOP LEFT
Emma tries raki on Skopelos

● ABOVE
Skiathos to Skopelos in 40 knots

● FACING PAGE
Sunset in the Pagasitikos gulf

Tips

- **Definitely visit Trikeri** (39°09.2'N 023D 04.5'E) if you can. Saturday afternoons and Sundays are the busiest, when locals pop over for the weekend.
- **Tzasteni bay** (39°08.9'N 023D 07.9'E) looks like little more than a white house from the sea but head in and you'll find a well-protected bay, pretty curved beach and perfect water for swimming.
- **We paid no harbour fees anywhere during our trip.** In Trikeri, if you use the jetty, it is suggested that you visit the taverna, which can also provide electricity and water for you. In high season there may be small fess to pay in the Sporades islands.
- Christos advises boats to use **official harbours for overnight stays**, rather than small bays, in case the wind changes. But one bay he does recommend for a night is **Panormos** (39°06'.6N 023°39'.3E), 3Nm from Loutraki, which has good shelter in all wind directions. But put out a lot of chain and run a stern line ashore.
- Good spots for a lunch and swim break are **Milia** (39°06'6N 23°39'.1E) on Skopelos, and the three bays next to **Kastani** (39°07'.9N 023°38'.8E), which is one of the places where the musical *Mamma Mia* was shot. Most of the spots where the movie was filmed are on the north coasts of Skiathos and Skopelos, so no-go areas in prevailing winds.
- **Dasia island** (39°07'.02N 023°39'.0E) near Skopelos has a series of caves underneath. Find the correct entrance and you can pass right through the island in your dinghy.
- **Planes fly low** on their approach to Skiathos harbour. Be careful not to anchor in their flight path.

40, 42, 50, 54. It peaks at 57 knots.

"It is a good job we are this side of the gulf," Christos tells me, as we surf, reefed (well, furled) at eight knots with a following sea. "If we were on the western side of the gulf it would be bigger waves, like Aegean Sea. Here can be katabatic winds but the sea is usually calm." *Rodi*, for a heavy whale of a yacht, handles the wind really well. I've only been in winds that strong a couple of times – once mid-Atlantic and another time in a squall on the approach to Singapore that ripped the clew off our jib – but this feels almost easy. No struggling to bring the helm over and no really bad heeling. In fact, I am having more trouble trying not to be blown over than the Jeanneau is.

It's only 6nM to Trikeri, our stop for the night (39°09'4N 023°05'0E), and with our high boat speeds we're there in no time at all. We go alongside a tiny concrete jetty, our stern a couple of feet from a brightly-coloured fishing boat behind us. Time for a hot shower in one of the four heads then it's into Isalos taverna for their famed crayfish spaghetti.

I've been hearing about this crayfish spaghetti practically since I stepped off the bus from Thessaloniki. Christos's sister Anta, who also works for the company, mentions it at least three times the night before we set sail. And it doesn't disappoint.

But first, the tsipouro and the small dishes that come with it. →



PHOTOS: EMMA BAMPFORD



PHOTOS: EMMA BAMFORD

Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 469 *Rodi*

LOA: 46ft (14.05m)
Beam: 14ft 9in (4.49m)
Draught: 7ft 4in (2.24m)
Year built: 2014
Engine: 54hp Yanmar
Sail area: 105.5 sq m
Berths: 10 (4 cabins and two in saloon)



I usually have a healthy suspicion about local drinks, and I fear that tsipouro, distilled from grape skins, is going to be like ouzo. But, mixed with ice and water, it's actually very smooth, warming and refreshing (and hangover-free). It's served in aeroplane-miniature bottles, and comes either with or without aniseed. Order a tsipouro in this area and, a bit like aperitivo in Italy, small sharing plates come with. Two tsipouros cost about €7 (£5 or under), which is fantastic value with all that food thrown in. At Isalos we share a delicious octopus stifado, cooked with lots of onions and oil, skate, a Greek salad, small fried fish with garlic sauce and a deep-fried, breaded cheese. And then comes the crayfish spaghetti – eight palm-sized crayfish still in their shells, tails digging into their bed of tomatoey pasta.

There is only one other yacht in our small harbour but in the summer, Christos says, it's a lot busier – maybe 10 boats on the jetty

and another 10 at anchor. It's not quite Yarmouth-in-July busy, though, and there'd be room. The village of Trikeri on Trikeri island (not to be confused with two other Trikeris locally) is home to about 200 people in the summer but only 20 now in April. The two tavernas are open but the small supermarket is closed and shutters are drawn on all the houses as we climb the hill to the top, where there's a monastery for religious retreats. That's closed, too. With only a couple of cars on this tiny island, it's very quiet and I can hear the clanking of bells that grazing sheep wear around their necks.

Everywhere we visit, over the next few days, is like this – empty ice cream kiosks, boarded-up restaurants, empty tables and chairs in the streets. Christos tells me of charter guests who have complained about Skiathos before, saying they found it too noisy, busy and touristy.

Coming in April, long before the season starts, means we have the places all to ourselves. We go

● **ABOVE**
Skiathos town quay

● **BELOW**
Crayfish spaghetti is the signature dish at Isalos taverna



alongside several times just for the hell of it. It's a novelty factor for Christos, who is used to squeezing the stern of a yacht between the bows of two others, rafting out ster-tro from the quay. In some places, like Loutraki on Skopelos island, the harbour authorities put out floating pontoons for the season but when we visit these are in storage.

The prices to be paid for all the space, peace and quiet are the weather (it swings between no wind and 40kts); the cold (I haven't brought nearly enough warm layers with me) and a reduced choice of places to eat.

The next morning we do a U-turn around Trikeri island, pass through the narrow Volos Strait and head gradually northeast towards Skiathos.

After 7nM we stop at Tzasteni bay (39°08'9N 023°07'9E), which Christos tells me is his favourite. It's a beautiful spot. After we leave, the wind is directly on the nose, so it's a long head-to-wind motor for 35nM towards the town of →



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Eating

As well as Tsipouro, octopus is a speciality of this region. It can be boiled or grilled, or slow-cooked with onions, tomatoes and fruit into a stifado (a casserole-type pan). The traditional way to prepare it is to slam the octopus on to the stone floor repeatedly to tenderise the flesh.

RESTAURANTS

Isalos taverna, Trikeri island

Papades taverna/tsipouradiko, Volos, +30 24210 29360

Aegean Wave hotel restaurant, Skopelos, +30 24240 33700
aegeanwave.com

Lagou Raxi hotel restaurant, Lafkos, Pelion +30 24230 65144 lagouraxi.com

Kritsa hotel restaurant, Portaria, Pelion +30 2428 0 99121 hotel-kritsa.gr

Skiathos on Skiathos island where, once again, Christos is amazed to see few yachts on the quayside.

We stop, on the way, at Koukounaries bay (39°08.9'N 023°21.3'E). It's easily spotted from shore because the large brown Skiathos Palace hotel glowers on the hillside. There's a wide beach. "Don't come in July or August," Christos says. "Can you imagine people everywhere? Very popular for watersports." I can imagine it, but now we're the only yacht at anchor. A couple of French cruising boats are barbecuing in the tiny harbour in the far right corner behind a stone breakwater. We take the dinghy into the harbour, under a bridge – and once again it's like we've been transported, this time into the middle of the countryside.

A lake of brackish water bends north and west and as we putter along I hear herons' cracking cries and watch swallows darting over the flat water's surface. Small garden birds cling to tall plants and sheep eye us suspiciously from the bank. The smell of the pine trees is

PHOTO: ALIA SCHAEFER



DO IT YOURSELF

- There are **frequent scheduled flights** from London or Manchester to Thessaloniki and Athens with EasyJet, British Airways, Ryanair and Aegean Airways. Prices start at €30.
- **Monarch** flies direct to Volos in August and early September.
- Seats are also available on **charter flights** to Skiathos during peak season, but may involve a change in Austria.
- **KTEL coaches** run from Thessaloniki and Athens to Volos bus station and take 2.5–4 hours. A one-way ticket from Thessaloniki to Volos with KTEL is €18 (£13).
- **Charter companies** ask for a skipper with a minimum of RYA Day Skipper (or ICC) and a co-skipper with at least RYA Competent Crew.
- **Sailing Holidays** have yachts for charter in the Ionian Sea, Saronic Gulf and Sporades islands (sailingholidays.com).

- **ABOVE**
A tranquil mooring at Tzasteni bay

thick in the air and I feel like I am in New Zealand – not Greece.

Coming out of Koukounaries bay, Christos, full of helpful tips and local sailing knowledge, advises me to head out to sea quite a way before turning to port towards our harbour. "There are many rocks and reefs here and they have no lights," he warns. I ensure I do not cut corners.

We round the southern cape of Skiathos and turn northeast, still motoring into head winds. To our right is a small island called Tsoungria (39°07.2'N 023°29.7'E). It's a good anchorage for the day, with a nice beach and a kiosk on the beach for lunch. But Christos warns not to stay at night. "Why?" He grins. "Mosquitoes." He also advises avoiding the southern corner of the bay as it's "too shallow".

Skiathos town (39°09.7'N 023°29.8'E) is a very popular resort, narrow, steep alleyways crowded with tables and chairs and shops displaying their wares on the flagstones. By the time we arrive, just after sunset, I am chilled to the bone

but the wind and even a steaming shower doesn't help all that much. Again, in April the town is half asleep and the good restaurants aren't open yet. Only kebab shops seem to be in business but we manage to find a bar that will fry some meat for us. I don't care that it's not crayfish spaghetti, as long as it's hot, and I ask to sit inside, out of the wind. In the morning, we walk the town's streets, which are busy in a way – with business owners painting and renovating their shop fronts ready for opening in a month's time. Everywhere I look someone has a tub of white paint in their hand.

The weather forecast says we'll have force seven winds from the northwest. In Skiathos harbour in the morning it's quiet and calm and I doubt the weathermen. But then I watch the smoke from a tanker back 45 degrees and when we leave the lee of the island we're in 40 knots and big waves that have rolled all the way down the north Aegean. Winds get funnelled through the Skopelos Strait when they have some north in them and it's an →



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EMMA BAINFORD

exhilarating ride over to Loutraki on Skopelos's west coast. Once again, *Rodi* has no problems and I find it easy to steer in the waves, bearing away a little in the bigger gusts.

But when we motor into Loutraki (39°09'.8N 023°36'.9E) and try to berth against the quay, she's not so biddable. Even with a bow thruster, her bow keeps being blown off by the winds shooting over the breakwater. It takes three goes until we are close enough to jump onto the quayside and wrap the thick stern line twice around a makeshift bollard – a bin someone has filled with concrete.

Sail Aegean is opening a second base here this summer and Christos tells me floating pontoons will be lowered into the water from a smaller jetty. The harbour can accommodate 30-40 boats, including those on anchor in the southern part, clear of the ferry's turning circle.

We have a late lunch at Aegean Wave hotel, a 15-minute walk up the steep hill into Glossa village. There, we sit on a terrace and look down on *Rodi*, Christos marvelling that

she can be parked alongside on a quay she has all to herself. The food here is excellent – octopus stifado so tender it could pass for chicken, tsatsiki, Cretan cheese bruschettas, very good home-made wine and raki. The sun comes out, the wind drops and finally, after days of wearing all of the clothes I brought with me, I peel off my jacket, my jumper, scarf and second jumper, until eventually I'm just in shirt sleeves. As we're the only customers, the owners come to join us for a drink and a chat.

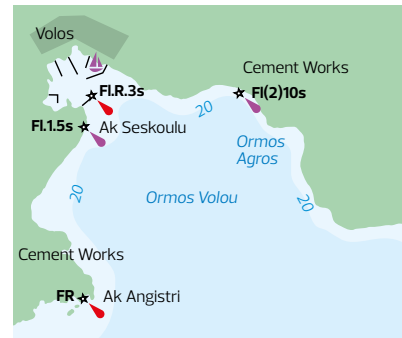
It's a stunning spot and reminds me why the Greek islands are so popular. After years of cruising really remote places like the Andaman islands, the thought of tussling with 20 flotilla boats for a single rafting place in a small Greek harbour hadn't really appealed to me. But coming here, out of season and getting the place all to myself, has re-ignited my love for the country where I first learned to sail. I'll definitely come again – out of season, in May or September. I'll just make sure to pack my woolly hat next time. ●

● ABOVE
Alongside in
Loutraki, Skopelos

Many thanks to
Sail Aegean and to
Christos Liapis for
his local knowledge.

A one-week
charter with Sail
Aegean costs
€1,000 to €3,000
(£720-£2,170)
in low season to
€1,800 to €5,500
(£1,302-£3,976)
in high season,
depending on
boat length.
sailaegean.eu

VOLOS



SKIATHOS TOWN



PALIO TRIKERI



LOUTRAKI

