

“Tuning In” Ep. 16

The Aegean Greek Islands 2014

Our Greek season begins where it ended last year, in the beautiful harbour of **Symi**. After an ‘interesting’ and expensive start in Turkey, we are hoping the Greek Gods are on our side and will smile on us favourably.

It is the middle of June and we are very happy to be returning to these gorgeous islands. With three months ahead of us and no deadlines or specific places to be, we feel we can relax a bit. The plan is to go North as far as possible. It will be against the prevailing Meltemi/northerly wind but hopefully we will get to Samos and then west to Mykonos in the Cyclades before heading south to Rhodes. We will try to go to islands that we missed last year or at least to new anchorages, but of course, the weather and the Meltemi will have the final say. Our son Ian is planning to join us at some stage. We are looking forward to that.

Although the neoclassical Symi is very special, we don’t linger this time and take advantage of a lull in the wind to head north to the island of **Kos**, the second largest island of the Dodecanese and famous for the kos lettuce. The first thing we notice, as we motor into the main town are the bicycles. There is a continuous stream of people, of all ages and sizes, pedaling at various speeds along the foreshore. It still looks very mountainous, but there must be enough flat land around the coastline to make bike riding attractive. Whatever the reason, it looks like a perfect opportunity to unfold our bikes and join them.

We first spend two days at anchor with friends we haven’t seen since last year, and then move into the marina. This has a two-fold purpose, firstly to escape bad weather and secondly to allow us to leave the boat safely. The many bike tracks and the fact that bikes are given a healthy regard by motorists is a huge advantage and we cover a wide distance including a lovely trip to Therma hot springs. We even manage a push-ride to Zia, the highest mountain village. The 14 km trip up the steep, winding road is quite slow, mainly due to the frequent water stops whenever a shady tree presents itself. When we finally arrive, the pretty village, nestling in the tree-covered hills with its stunning backdrop of craggy cliffs, is well worth the effort. A welcome lunch at a café with equally stunning views refuels us for the trip back. The 3 hours it took to mainly push our bikes up, is radically reduced to one hour as we whiz back down – wind whistling past our ears and huge grins on our faces.

I learn from a local that the main nationality here is Dutch. ‘Ahhhh – comprehension!’ And In the summer, the numbers swell even further with family and friends visiting. Now that explains the number of bikes. And would you believe there are even bike rack stands at every beach and café. It also explains all the orange balloons decorating many of the tavernas with their huge TV screens and everyone dressed in orange. By excellent, unplanned timing, our visit just happens to coincide with the World Cup soccer match between Australia and the Netherlands. We

settle ourselves in among the orange and I am sorry we did not realize earlier so that I could bring my boxing kangaroo flag. I do find it novel to hear the Dutch commentary regarding the Australians and am glad I can still understand my native tongue. I translate it to David. When the Dutch score their first goal you can imagine the huge uproar, then a minute later, when Australia scores, the open-mouthed silence is comical and equally “deafening”. When we score again, my..... “ Yay, go Australia!!!” draws all stunned faces our way. We are beaming!! It turns out to be an excellent game. We may not have won but we both felt very proud to see our team play so well against a very ‘old’ and skilled soccer nation. David, ever faithful to League, normally refuses to watch the soccer but even he enjoyed the match.

With very little wind the following days we motor north to **Pserimos** and then **Leros** but again to new anchorages and then to another favourite, **Lipsi**. This time we anchor in the same lovely protected bay as last year and here after helping a Turkish couple on a nearby boat we are treated to amazing dinners on the beach – three nights running! “You must come to beach party,” we are told. What can you do? Not wanting to offend them, we plan to go just for an hour or so. Five enjoyable hours later, when we hop in our dinghies, it is with a promise to return the following evening. This time we will bring salads etc. Two nights turns into three and the numbers grow each night. These Turks were a lot of fun, friendly and generous. We make some new friends.

It is also here that Ian makes a sudden decision to join us. It is easy for him to fly into Rhodes, and catch a fast ferry to Lipsi. So we wait for him. It is July 9th and he will have nearly a whole month with us. We are delighted.

Ian loves sailing and we are happy to let him skipper which includes anchoring and manoeuvring us onto quays. As good fortune would have it, we even manage some southerly wind which lets us sail to **Nisos Arki** and **Agathonisa** plus some wing on wing sailing with the gennaker and headsail to the beautiful island of **Samos** where we stay a few days. A quick sail to the windy but lovely **Fournoi** has us ready for the 60 n. miles trip to Mykonos the following day. An early start should get us there before dark but the wind has other ideas and after 20 miles of wind on the nose and bashing waves, we abandon plans and let it blow us south to **Patmos** where we wait for things to settle. More northerly winds give us some great sailing down to **Leros**.

Ian is in his element. Taking his skipper role very seriously, he is forever tacking or ‘tweaking’ the sails to get that extra knot of speed especially when there are other boats nearby and he can ‘race’ them. I enjoy his “” Whooooo” and “ Wheeeeeee’ whenever a wind gust hits and we seemingly fly over the waves for a second or two before crashing down the other side. I don’t think David quite shares his enthusiasm – not on the ‘crash’ bits anyway.

Gentle winds, swinging south, finally allow us to tack back to **Patmos** and we decide to do a night sail to Mykonos from there. Ian hasn’t experienced an overnight sail before and is very keen. We leave Patmos at 7pm. This time the sea Gods are smiling on us and with much quieter seas and steady winds, we even manage 8 hours of sailing in the 16 hour trip, with a few hours of motor sailing as well. Everyone is happy.

At noon next day, we arrive in Ornos Bay in **Mykonos** and try to anchor but it won't dig in so we reluctantly go to the "new port" near the main town. This has a marina that was never finished and has a reputation for giving anchor problems. You need to drop your anchor then back in to the quay and tie up. Inevitably anchors are dropped over other anchors and they get tangled. We spend the trip discussing ways of untangling caught anchors. But, by wonderful fortune, the marina is nearly empty and we are directed to go alongside the quay – no anchor out... "Yay!!!"

It seems we have also timed it well. It is Thursday and the following evening is unbelievable. Every spare space is filled. Most are charter boats. I remember someone saying to avoid Mykonos on the weekend. We now nod in agreement, especially on Saturday morning when we watch as the first 5 boats leaving all have caught anchors. It is quite an education watching the different methods of attack. Some manage to free themselves easily while others take some time, often suffering the abuse and yelling of the opposing boat that will now have to re-set its uplifted anchor. The strong wind doesn't help. It is actually quite amazing that an up market place like Mykonos does not have a decent marina with proper laid lines. The only good thing is – you don't have to pay.

We finally leave on Sunday, with "In Tune" no longer white but distinctly light brown - compliments of the force 7 wind. Still determined to have a last laugh it manages to deposit most of the dirt from the nearby parking area all over us. But ... we are not complaining. Not even when we notice that our wind speed indicator has stopped working. Now the boys have an extra challenge of judging the wind by the waves – like sailors of old!!

Ian books his return flight from Mykonos and still has nearly two weeks with us so we head off to one of my favourite islands – **Paros** and Naoussa Bay. Huge and well protected from the meltemi, this bay has many very lovely and safe places to anchor, a good ferry service, great walks and an attractive town with lots of lovely tavernas. One special and unique place, called Calibethres, has amazing sandstone sculptured boulders which lie on top of each other like spoonfuls of smooth meringue. Between these molded pillars, narrow strips of sand accommodate countless bathers and "bakers" all squashed together. Many others play volleyball or bat ball or just sit with their hats and sunnies on in the shallow, transparent water. The Greeks know how to enjoy themselves. I love watching them, especially the children. It is great to be able to anchor in so many different places and at night, we have the pleasure of enjoying yet another glorious evening scene. I try to absorb every detail, hoping to lock it into my memory. Photos are great but they rarely capture the true atmosphere.

The water is a little warmer now, though still not warm enough for David to manage more than a few minutes 'dunk'. I am well conditioned now and manage to snorkel for hours though this is usually broken up with frequent stops to explore the dozens of tiny coves, caves and beaches where I still collect that special shell or stone. I love stones and the beautifully magnified, rounded shapes with their colours high-lighted just beneath the surface, provide a tantalizing temptation. I want to gather them all. Oddly, many of these beaches, stony at the waters' edge, quickly deepen to sand which is a big bonus when you are trying to anchor.

We have also been very fortunate with the heat. Rarely has it reached 35 degrees in our cabin and it always drops by 10 or so at night. Naturally it is much hotter in the sun but there is usually a breeze to take the sting away. Plus the bonus of only a rare mosquito and very few flies means pleasant evenings outside. Also, the sun here, unlike our Aus sun does not seem to burn – even with hours of exposure. It makes for a very favourable and enjoyable environment.

The lovely sail to **Syros**, our next island has the boys whooping. We spend a few days here in different anchorages and also meet up with friends. A very calm day also allows us to winch David up the mast to check the speed indicator which is still not working. I am glad Ian is there to help. A trusty can of WD40 does the trick - what would we do without it?!!

The winds are still with us and we are delighted to manage another 3 hour sail to the barren and desolate but arresting island of **Rinia** which has few other boats and incredibly clear water. Close by, is the ancient city of Delos, first occupied in 1400 BC in the Mycenaean period and reaching its peak in the Hellenistic period. Looking at the totally barren and now uninhabited island it is hard to imagine that once a large city of about 30,000 people flourished here. We will explore it later.

Finally we must return to Mykonos – sailing again and here we say a sad farewell to Ian. We will miss him. Having that extra, skilled person allows us to be more adventurous but mainly we will miss having his cheery company. Ian loves tavernas, but they must have a nice outlook and sell beer. He and David decided they like FIX beer the best of the Greek beers, but they had to drink quite a few and test **all** the beers before they were really sure. I was very happy to leave them to their 'testing' - gave me a chance to browse the shops unhampered.

With still a month left in Greece, we decide to stay in this area for as long as possible. We really love the Cyclades and Dodecanese, both the people and these amazing islands are truly unique and special. Someone asked me which one was my favourite but the answer is impossible because each one has its own beauty and its own special character. Also, how you view a place can often be influenced by how you are feeling at the time or unfortunately, by the opinions of others. For example, we had heard negative reports about glitzy Mykonos but once away from the bustling port, I was pleasantly surprised by the charming streets and alley ways. Meandering deliberately, to defy both winds and pirates of old, narrow little lanes hide gorgeous little shops, selling some very unique craft and art items. It is one of the loveliest examples of a Cycladic chora (old town) we have seen.

Then we go to Naxos and we are impressed even more. Here the gorgeous Chora rises up the hills to an imposing Venetian Castle. When we go exploring we notice a small open theatre beneath its walls, advertising a classical guitarist. He proves to be excellent. Two nights later, a skilled Russian violinist provides another enjoyable evening. The atmosphere, with the multitude of shimmering lights reflecting off the water below, is magic.

With an excellent bus service, we also manage to see some of the interior of Naxos, and while we were impressed with the mountaintop village of Lefkes in Paros, because it is surprisingly green, here the interior is also filled with olive and fruit trees and gardens. It is a wonderful

contrast after always viewing the mostly barren coastlines. Being the largest of the Cyclades islands and central, Naxos is also an excellent access point for day trips to Santorini, Delos and many surrounding islands including the Little Cyclades where we spend the next two weeks. The small islands of Schinousa, Iraklia and Koufaonia are not so well known and apart from the Greek holiday-makers here, there are few tourists. The islands still seem to function as they did hundreds of years ago but then there is no 'high-rise' anywhere in the Greek islands. Even the new resorts springing up on the larger islands conform to the square shaped, white-washed dwellings. Rarely is a building above three stories high. The uniformity may sound boring but I find the startling white beautiful against the often inhospitable landscape. It also provides a wonderful canvas for the brilliantly coloured bougainvillea and the decoratively placed pot plants which so artistically line the steps and balconies. The Greeks are very aesthetic. You can probably imagine the number of photos I take. It provides a never-ending gallery of 'post-cards'. I don't think David is quite as impressed. He adds,

Just about everything is white, from houses to rocks, pavements and the trunks of trees. If you stand still for too long you risk having your legs painted white, so you have to be alert.

Amorgos, our next stop, is also less well known and staying on the quay in town allows us to take a bus to the incredible Hozoviatissi Monastery. Built in 1088 and clinging to a cliff face, 180 m above the sea, the huge fortress can only be described as awe inspiring. After climbing the countless steps in the late morning heat, we have to cover our sweaty bare skin with skirts, scarves and long trousers before we are allowed to enter the cooler interior where narrow, winding stone steps take us to a simply decorated chapel displaying the "miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary". A monk then offers us a very welcome sweet wine and large glass of water and we sit in peaceful silence and enjoy the brilliant blue of the ocean far below.

I am reminded of our visit to the 11th century Monastery of St. John the Apostle in Patmos. Regarded as one of the richest and most influential monasteries in Greece by Orthodox and Western Christian faiths alike, it stands majestically on the highest hilltop above the town. It was a month ago when Ian was with us and we are again moored on the town quay. A taxi takes us up to the imposing fortress which was mainly built (again in 1088) to protect its religious treasures. It is very impressive and interesting and we enjoy exploring the vast interior. A bit concerned about the swell in the harbor and not keen to walk back in the heat, David and Ian take another taxi back down to the port, allowing me to wander slowly down the ancient Byzantine path to the sacred cave where St. John wrote the Book of Revelations in 100 AD. It is a very calming, peaceful place and I sit and absorb the stillness. I notice one lady writing in a tiny cubicle near a cleft in the rock. A candle burns on a small stony shelf near her elbow. When she finishes I take her place. There is a pen on the shelf and small sheets of paper and I take one and write "*Dear God, blessings, love and healing to..... and add all the names of family and friends, and hoping I have missed no one, end with 'and all others in need.'*" It takes a while. There are a lot of names. I feel super blessed to be able to remember all of you in such a special place. Much, much later, still filled with a wonderful gratefulness I continue on down the stony path. The early afternoon sun has kept people away and I value the fact that I am alone and see no one.

From Amorgos we mainly sail the 40 n. miles to **Astypalea**, in the middle of the Aegean. There are force 7 winds forecast so we are happy to stay on this beautiful island. The Greek Gods have certainly been treating us kindly and we have so far been able to dodge the Meltemi when it has decided to blow at force 7. It means a bit of pre-thought and planning and sometimes missing places we'd like to see but being well dug in and in a safe place, with plenty of room to swing, certainly takes precedence over everything else. The big winds themselves are not a problem as long as we are well protected from the waves, which can make things very uncomfortable. So far we have chosen well and that is why I am writing this now, even though the winds are gusting at 30+ knots. No 'rocking and rolling" - and this bay is beautiful.

There is the lovely Livadhi beach 200 m away. Close by, on a hilltop, a well-preserved castle, built in the 12th century, as protection against pirate attack, casts its stately eye over the Aegean. Hugging a cluster of white-washed houses, one arm spills down into the valley towards our beach. It is even more imposing at night when a warm golden light illuminates the massive walls. Lights from the surrounding homes twinkle in the moonlight and the scene floats softly on the water. It provides us with a stunning backdrop.

So this is where I will end this episode.

Tomorrow we will hopefully sail south to Nisyros, then Symi and then to Rhodes where we will check out of Greece. Rhodes will be a new destination and we are hoping to have time to look around a bit. Once back in Turkey we will slowly make our way back to Finike where we will leave "In Tune" again for the winter. Our flights home are booked and we should return on 16th Oct. to return to Turkey on 15th April 2015.

I had better stop and send this because every time I read over it I add bits and it is getting far too long again.

Take care all of you. May good fortune smile on you and keep you healthy , peaceful and happy.

Love and warmest wishes,
Louise(Lucy) and David