

August 3, 2008

On Tuesday, July 1, we finally sailed out of Marmaris, Turkey, headed on our way home across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. We wanted to be out of the Mediterranean by the first two weeks in September. On that first day the task ahead seemed daunting as we had just a limited number of weeks to sail the necessary 2000 nautical miles west, and there were still ports that we wished to see along the way.



Departing Marmaris, our route took us first to Symi, where we checked into Greece, and then to Rhodes (Rodos), our first “must see” port. Our main reason for stopping in Rhodes before starting our journey across the Mediterranean was to visit the medieval fortified town founded by the Knights of St. John in the 14th century, as last year we had visited their castle in Bodrum, Turkey. In the 11th century, merchants out of Amalfi, Italy, had set up a hospital and guesthouse for poor pilgrims in Jerusalem, and it was from this beginning that the Knights of St. John evolved during the Crusades. Originally known as the Knights Hospitaller of St. John of Jerusalem, the Order grew over time into a military order, offering not only hospitals to pilgrims en route to the Holy Land but also protection. When Muslims gained control of the Holy Land in 1291, the Knights were forced to leave, resettling in Rhodes in 1306. The Knights’ members consisted of Catholic noblemen from basically five nationalities: Italy, France, England, Germany, and Spain. Each nationality lived and dined in separate quarters, and each group protected a different area of the town’s walls. At the head of the Order was the Grand Master, elected for life. The Knights lived in Rhodes for over 200 years, withstanding two great sieges by the Turks in 1444 and 1480, before succumbing in 1522 and being forced to leave the island.

During our stay in Rhodes, we anchored in the same harbor as most of the cruise ships. Rhodes’ old medieval town was impressive surrounded by massive walls, up to 40 feet thick. Especially interesting was the Knights’ Quarter, situated near the waterfront inside the medieval town. The Street of the Knights, where the knights had once lived, was lined with the various Inns of the Knights that had comprised the Order. Above some inns could still be seen the crest of that individual group. At the far end of the street lay the Palace of the Grand Master, a fortress itself, which in times of battle became the last refuge for the entire Rhodes population. The sheer size of the palace was best seen from the waterfront. Most of the restoration work we saw occurred during the Italian occupation under Mussolini in the first half of the 1900’s.



Kuhela

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Inn of France



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Before leaving, we walked out to Mandraki Harbor's entrance, where at one time the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, hypothetically "might" have once stood. This huge bronze statue, 115 feet high, was said to have been so tall that ships of that time were able to pass under its legs. Begun in 302 BC by the islanders to honor the sun god, Helios, after having successfully resisted a year long siege by Demetrius Polioketes, it took 12 years to complete. The statue stood until toppled by an earthquake in 227 BC.

After working so hard on the boat this past spring, it seemed hard to believe that in our first three days out of Marmaris, a new boat problem occurred each day that required fixing by Phil. During our passage out of the Mediterranean this season, quite a few things have needed fixing, more than usual, but never so much as in those first three days. At the time, it seemed an ominous beginning to our long journey ahead, and we began to wonder what would be the next boat problem to occur. The first day out Phil had to fix the carburetor to our dinghy's outboard motor; the second day Phil had to re-caulk the fittings to our new fuel tank as they were leaking; the third day the head needed fixing. When people asked Phil what he did, he started saying "I am a fixer. That is all I do." So, while we waited for a weather window in order to leave Rhodes, Mary stocked up on supplies and Phil worked on the boat.

Sailing the Mediterranean can be a challenge due to the many different weather systems that must be encountered along the way, each with its own weather pattern. Moreover, when sailing west the weather windows are generally shorter as the winds are more contrary. We've known cruisers that have had to wait a couple of weeks at one port for the correct weather, and then when the wind finally comes from the correct direction, it is usually either too little or too much. As we were short of time, we hoped that the "wind gods" would grant us favorable winds, allowing us to continue on as expeditiously as possible.

The first leg on our track west after leaving Rhodes was to cross the Aegean Sea. The Aegean Sea is probably one of the hardest seas to cross in the Mediterranean, especially from east to west, as the predominant wind comes from the NW during the summer. Many times gale force winds will occur for days at a time throughout the central part of the Aegean Sea, causing not only high winds but rough and sloppy seas throughout much of the area. With weather information from Phil's brother, our weatherman, we departed Rhodes on Tuesday, July 8, just as a new cruise ship was entering the port.



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On our way across the Aegean Sea, we wanted to visit the Greek island of Astypalaia, WNW of Rhodes. Our intended route was to sail first north, using the Turkish coastline as a wind buffer, in order to get a better angle on the NW winds before starting westward across the Aegean Sea toward Astypalaia. Although the winds were NW 10 to 15 knots upon leaving Rhodes, the seas were slight. This made for a great morning sail as we tacked our way north. In the shelter of Symi Island, we motored straight north. Making great time, we decided to continue on to the Turkish Datca peninsula, our most northern destination, rather than stop for the night in Symi. Six nautical miles out from our intended anchorage along the peninsula, we were hit by strong 25 knot winds, making those last miles ever so difficult. That evening, we both breathed a huge sigh of relief when we finally dropped the anchor in Kalaboshi, Turkey.

From our weatherman, we found we only had one more good day, if that, before it would be just too difficult to start crossing the Aegean. As we didn't want to stay at Kalaboshi for possibly four more days, we left early the next morning and started heading westward toward Astypalaia. Luckily, the wind gods cooperated, allowing us to get within 6 nautical miles of the island before hammering us with strong NW winds 25 to 30 knots. Using both sails and engine in order to sail closer into the wind, we forged on, taking quite a bit of water over our decks in the process. A couple of hours later we were anchored in the sheltered harbor at Astypalaia, free of the strong winds. It was an amazing feeling to realize that we had made it to Astypalaia, a distance of 111 nautical miles from Rhodes, in just two days. Before leaving Rhodes a day earlier, we never would have thought that possible. Thank you, wind gods!

Before leaving the Aegean Greek islands, we wished to enjoy one more typical, picturesque, laid-back Greek island that was off the beaten tourist track. Astypalaia fit that criteria. So for the four days while the wind was blowing strong outside the harbor, we enjoyed the peaceful setting of Astypalaia. We walked up to the Chora (hilltop village) with its windmill square and visited the ruins of the 13th century Venetian castle on top the hill with its two 14th century churches. In the Middle Ages, Astypalaia had flourished when the Venetian Quirini family ruled the island. During that time, most of the population lived within the castle's walls for protection against piracy, with the houses actually built into the castle's walls for added protection.



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Given a good weather report by our weatherman, we departed Astypalaia on Monday, July 14, just after noon, bound for Rethymno on the island of Crete, our next “must see” island. As it was 110 nautical miles to Crete, this was to be an overnight sail. We thought we were to have winds NW 15 to 20 knots our entire way to Crete, making for an easy sail. Instead, we had every type of condition handed to us -- choppy seas, winds off and on, and winds from different directions and different speeds -- making for a very exhausting sail and a long night. To top it off, the winds toward dawn came from the SW, our intended course. In all, we sailed 18 more miles than originally planned. Our sail to Crete was definitely like a “box of chocolates”; we never knew what we were going to get.

Crete was the largest island in Greece and the fifth largest in the Mediterranean. Its long mountain chain, running from east to west, formed the backbone of the island and consisted of three separate mountain groups interspersed with fertile plains and plateaus. Due to its temperate Mediterranean climate, Crete was perfect for growing grapes and olives; its wine and olive oil were known throughout the Mediterranean. During our stay in Rethymno, we rented a car for two days to explore Crete. The first day we drove inland up into the mountains and along the Amari Valley, enjoying the Cretan specialty of rabbit for lunch in the mountainous village of Spili. Later, we drove along Crete’s southern shore before returning once more to Rethymno on



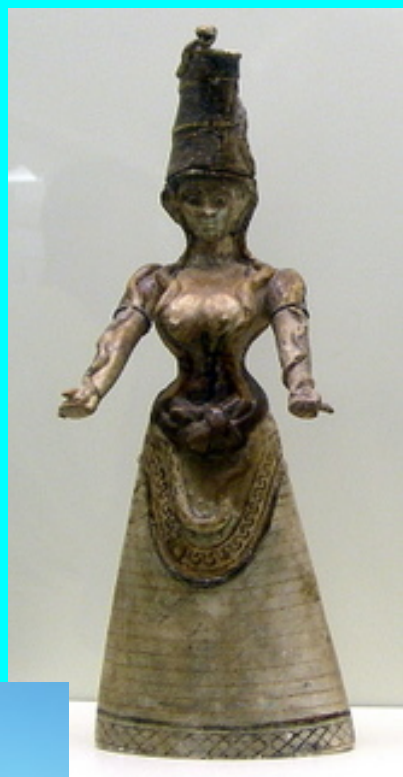
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The next day we drove to Irakleio to visit the ruins of the great Minoan civilization unearthed at Knossos, supposedly home to King Minos and the mythical Minotaur mentioned in Greek Mythology. The discovery of this ancient Minoan city in 1900 by British archeologist Sir Arthur Evans was immense. Through his discoveries, much was learned about the Minoan civilization that lasted over 1500 years, from 2600 to 1100 BC, as the artifacts excavated showed an advanced sophisticated civilization. The major part of the excavation at Knossos was the palace. Apparently, it had contained over 100 rooms, complete with running water and a good drainage system. At the heart of the palace was its central court where business was conducted surrounded by royal living quarters, storerooms, devotional shrines, etc. Sir Arthur Evans was so excited by his discovery that he spent a fortune of his own money reconstructing parts of the palace. Unfortunately, his imaginative restorations made considerable use of reinforced concrete, a material foreign to Minoan architecture. Having seen so many fantastic restored Roman, Greek, and Egyptian ruins, the Knossos archeological site was disappointing because when we looked at the ruins it was impossible to know what was real.



Afterwards, we visited the Archaeological Museum, home to the world's greatest collection of Minoan art. Three items of interest were the 16th century BC bull's head rhyton, a libation vessel carved from stone used in the pouring of ritual wines as the bull was considered sacred; two 1600 BC figurines of the snake goddess as snakes symbolized immortality; and the gold Minoan double axe, a cult object connected to the Mother Goddess. On our way back to Rethymno we drove along Crete's northern coastline.



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Rethymno, with a population of 29,000, was Crete's third largest town and the perfect place to use as a base while exploring Crete. Its large 16th century Venetian fortress of Fortezza still dominated the town and harbor. For 400 years, from 1204 to 1669, the Venetians ruled Crete before being ousted by the Ottoman Turks. As Crete's northern harbors were of critical importance to the Venetian trade route, fortresses, such as in Rethymno, were built to defend the island against pirates and the threatening Ottoman Turks. Today, Rethymno retained much of its old Venetian charm. From our boat in the marina, we had a lovely view of both the Venetian fortress and, below at the waterfront's edge, the picturesque inner Venetian harbor. At the entrance to this small harbor still stood the 13th century lighthouse. In addition, we enjoyed walking the quaint, narrow streets of the old Venetian quarter adjoining the harbor, now lined with shops and cafes. One of the most notable Venetian landmarks still remaining was the 17th century Rimondi fountain with its lion-headed spout.



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In Rethymno, Kuhela was moored in the small town marina. Here, we were not only near to the old Venetian quarters, but the marina adjoined the town's new main ferry wharf. This wharf now was the hub of activity for the town of Rethymno, and when you live on a boat and have no transportation, this is an added benefit. Every Thursday, Rethymno held its weekly market in the parking lot on the main wharf. As Crete's favorable climate was ideal for growing fruits and vegetables, its Thursday market was bountiful and relatively inexpensive, making Rethymno a great place to provision. In the marina, we were entertained for a few nights by the stage production of "The Ship of Fools", moored nearby. Uniquely, this boat itself acted as the stage set, and during the summer it traveled to different ports presenting its show. Also, from the wharf we had a great view of the town beach.



Kuhela



Ship of Fools



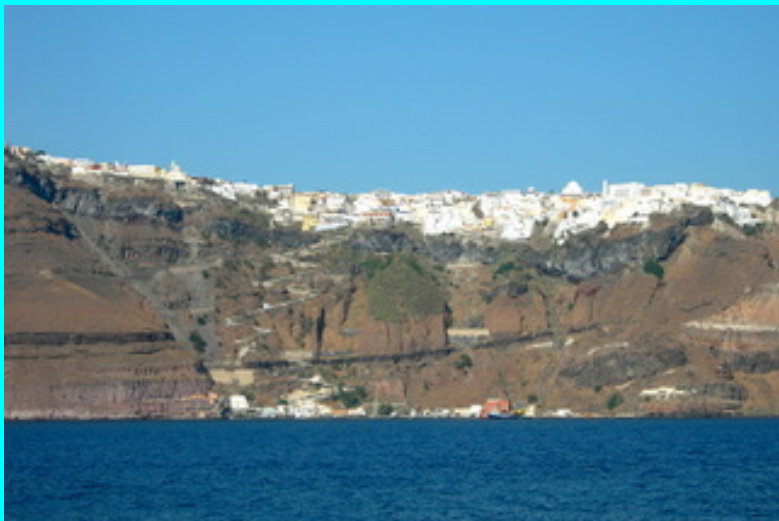
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Originally, we had intended to sail from Astypalaia to Santorini, but with the winds being so contrary and strong at times in the Aegean Sea, we decided instead to visit Santorini from Crete. Santorini (Thira) was said to be the most spectacular of all the Greek islands, and hence one of our "must see" islands. Once this island had been circular, but around 1450 BC an immense volcanic eruption occurred causing its center to collapse, leaving instead a submerged caldera with high cliffs. Initially, we thought that we would have to take a 1½ hour bus ride to Irakleio to catch the ferry, but instead we found that there was a twice weekly excursion Super Jet Catamaran leaving directly from Rethymno's wharf, only a five minute walk from our boat. With this new information, we enjoyed a jam-packed full eight hour day of sightseeing on Santorini, departing Rethymno at 8 am and returning thirteen hours later.

On Santorini, we first visited Oia, the most northern village, especially known for its breathtaking views. As the streets were so narrow, mules were one of the main means of transport for carrying supplies to different vendors and restaurants. Later, we enjoyed walking along the crest of the caldera between the cliff-top villages of Imerovigli, Firostefani, and Fira (Santorini's capital). In Fira, we visited the Museum of Prehistoric Thira which housed finds from the Minoan settlement in Santorini before the eruption in 1450 BC. Last, we enjoyed a boat trip around the caldera. From the water, the houses on top of the cliffs looked like snow. Below Fira could be seen its small port, Fira Skala, and the switchbacks leading down.



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In all, we spent 13 days in Rethymno, with the last four being spent waiting for a good weather window. From Crete, our next “must see” island was Malta. As this encountered two different weather systems, that of both the Aegean Sea and the Ionian Sea, our intended route was to first head northwest to Pylos, a Greek town on the Peloponnese peninsula, to acquire more favorable wind conditions before heading across the Ionian. We departed Rethymno on Monday, July 28, anchoring in a small cove 18 miles further west along Crete’s coastline for the night. Early Tuesday we started our sail northwest. We had a great sail to Kithira with winds NE 20 knots. However, we took quite a few waves over the deck during the sail as we still experienced 6 foot seas caused from gale force winds in the central Aegean Sea. Originally, our plan had been to break the sail up into two days, but upon reaching Kithira we decided to continue on overnight to Pylos. At Kithira we also lost our wind, due to our being in the lee of the Peloponnese, and so motored the rest of the way. With our arrival in Pylos Wednesday morning, we had traveled 161 nautical miles from Crete to Pylos in 28 hours.

Pylos, a Greek town of 2000 inhabitants, was idyllic. This small town was situated at the southern end of the Bay of Navarinon, an immense natural harbor, where in 1830 during Greek’s War of Independence, the decisive battle was fought against the Turkish-Egyptian fleet. Originally, our plan was to rest here a couple of days before starting our three day sail to Malta. Instead, our weatherman informed us that our weather window was closing on Monday near Malta. So the following morning, July 31, we checked out of Greece, turned in our transit log, and headed out the bay.



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The first two days we had a beautiful sail, enjoying slight seas with winds NW 10 to 15 knots. Early Saturday morning our winds changed. Although light, they came from the WNW, exactly the direction we wished to go, and so we started motoring. On Friday while still under sail, we started smelling diesel again. The thought of having another problem with our fuel tank was not pleasant. With calm seas Saturday morning, Phil siphoned off six gallons of diesel to an extra fuel can, alleviating the problem until we could investigate further once in Malta.

At 8 am, Sunday, August 3, we arrived in Malta, having sailed 357 nautical miles. We took a berth at Msida Marina, cleared customs, moved our clocks back one hour due to our arrival in a new time zone, and then went to bed as we were both very tired. It certainly felt good to finally be in Malta as this country marked the dividing point between the Eastern and Western Mediterranean.



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