

The beautiful Kioni Bay, in north-east Ithaca, is a very deep harbour

Walking on water

Sea Trek Adventures promises to make seamen out of landlubbers in just four days. Adrian Morgan goes in search of a seamanship qualification in Greece

Forty years mucking about in boats, with only a school life-saving certificate to my name, and they finally gave me a piece of paper. RYA Seamanship Skills, it reads, and I'm quite proud of it. It was won – I won't say hard won – in Greece, last year, not on some wind-swept chunk of sea off Ushant, in a beaten-up Sigma 33 with an ex-RN lieutenant commander breathing down my neck. It was also flip-card, COLREGS and secondary ports-free. Less of an RYA course, more like a two-week sailing and walking holiday on Cephalonia and Ithaca (which it was).

It is ironic that it's taken nearly half a century to achieve my qualification when James and Susy – who run Sea Trek Adventures – reckon they can make a seaman out of a landlubber in four days. It's their unique selling point – 'Come with us, we'll give you a boat, your own instructor, and he'll give you the confidence to set off on your own after a few days. All we ask is that you feed him at lunch time!'

But consider this – would you send off a family of strangers who'd never sailed before in your boat? James, who ran a Sunsail operation in Greece until a few years ago, has

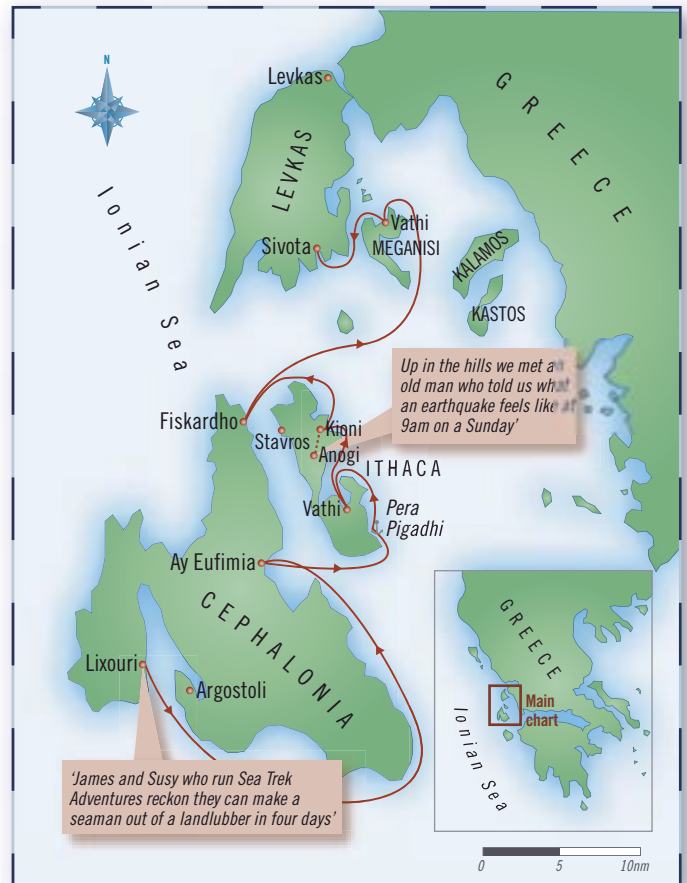
no qualms. He's not daft enough to let you loose without a thorough grounding in the basics of sailing and, let's face it, what can go wrong in such a benign cruising area?

Sea Trek is based at Lixouri on Cephalonia, Captain Corelli's island, the largest of the Ionian islands and close neighbour to Ulysses' birthplace, Ithaca – although the Cephalonians would dispute that.

And the cruising ground? Think Greece – tavernas, little harbours, rocky coves, women in black, donkeys, wind in the afternoon, none in the morning, and sun – guaranteed. With one noticeable difference: Cephalonia



ABOVE: A shipshape crew with warps at the ready. **LEFT:** Cephalonia is a delight – even by Greece’s usual standards. **BELOW:** author caption XXXXX



Main photo: Corbis / other photos: Adrian Morgan unless stated



was flattened by an earthquake which struck without warning on a Sunday morning in 1953, demolishing 85% of the houses. Today’s Cephalonia is no more than three storeys high. No high-rise hotels; no hideous apartment blocks. In a word, delightful, and getting more so by the year as the patina of age softens the walls of the towns and bright colours begin to fade to pastel.

James and Susy run a small operation: a mixed fleet of Feeling 306s, three Atlantic 31s, a Sun Odyssey 37.1, and a Jeanneau 33.

It’s how chartering used to be before the big boys moved in with their identi-fleet 33s, karaoke evenings, mass raft-ups and enforced conviviality. Not for us. We liked our own company, and the confidence James and his guys inspired in us. We’d done it all before, and yet the day we spent going through the manoeuvres, stern-to docking shenanigans in Lixouri’s huge, deserted harbour was most welcome. And no-one watching.

How many of us have a sneaking fear of that Mediterranean stuff? The fear of making →

‘This is how chartering used to be before the big boys moved in with their identi-fleet 33s, karaoke evenings and enforced conviviality’



Greece’s Olympic spirit and European Championship victory combine for a colourful waterborne display



Kioni on Ithaca still has houses that survived the 1953 earthquake. New houses are built in traditional Ionian style

prats of ourselves in a crowded harbour. Who can honestly say their heart doesn't beat a little faster when they identify that tiny gap, commit to the final approach, hit reverse gear, prop racing, stern wave building, stone quay approaching, and a hundred pairs of eyes waiting (let's face it hoping) for the crunch of glassfibre against granite?

Once James was happy with our level of skill, he let the three of us loose in our Feeling. Over the next four days we skirted the southern coast of Cephalonia, popped into Ay Eufimia, headed over to Ithaca, dropped anchor in Pera Pigadhi for lunch (where the returning Ulysses met his pig man) before settling down for the night (and the Greece versus France Euro 2004 game) in Vathi.

At Kioni, on Ithaca, we moored stern-to in front of a blue house not far from a

taverna, rented bikes and sped all over the island, trying to track down Ulysses' palace. In Anogi, up in the hills in the middle of the island, we met an old man by a cafe with stuffed birds on the walls who remembered the Italian occupation during the Second

'A hundred pairs of eyes were waiting (let's face it hoping) for the crunch of glassfibre against granite'

World War, and what an earthquake feels like at 0900 on a Sunday.

Our itinerary was ambitious and after a walking interlude, we headed off again in a big Jeanneau that James keeps at Fiskardho, perhaps the most obviously picturesque harbour on Cephalonia. We got as far as Vathi on Meganisi, and watched the Euro

2004 final at Sivota on Levkas.

The couple moored beside us had spent a week learning and were off on their own for a second week in a Lixouri-based Atlantic 31. They weren't expecting to get anywhere too ambitious. Yet they were entirely confident...

which is not to say over-confident. We watched them leave Lixouri in RYA-textbook style. Warps doubled, crisp commands between cockpit and foredeck, mooring dropped, fenders in and away to sea. But

then this was only their second week ever on a cruising yacht.

A WALK IN THE HILLS

Sea Trek is unique in running walking tours alongside the sailing. It was one of the reasons we chose the company. Yet very few, if any, yachtsmen take the option and



ABOVE: Lord Byron's statue. The hero of Greek independence spent four months on Cephalonia shortly before his death in 1824



Tiny white-painted churches are to be found along much of the mainland and island coasts

Photo: Paul Gelder



ABOVE: As if the tavernas weren't tempting enough, there are plenty of opportunities to fish at Poros on Ithaca. **RIGHT:** Almost half a century in the making: Adrian's RYA certificate finally supplements his school life-saving certificate



» DON'T MISS...

Must read: Anything to do with Ulysses, in particular Ernie Bradford's *Ulysses Found*. And to leave behind? *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (but then you've read it already...)



Must eat and drink:

The Cephalonian meat pie is tasty but overrated, and the fish tasty but expensive. The taramasalata is disappointing for those weaned on Waitrose's best. Try also spicy cheese (hot, cheesy), salads, feta and sweet sticky puddings. And excellent local wines, especially the whites, are not to be missed.

BELOW: author caption XXXXX

go walking, or vice versa. This seems a pity. Seeing the islands from the sea, the only point of contact being the harbours, means there is much to miss. Sure, we rented bikes for a day, but walking in the interior gave a new perspective to the island.

We left at the crack of dawn to avoid the heat, walking swiftly through villages and olive groves, seeing the island wake and stretch itself, catching glimpses of island life we'd have missed.

'This is the real Greece,' reads Susy's walk notes, 'untouched by tourism with a real feeling that time has stood still here for many years.' ▲



» THE BOTTOM LINE

Is it for me? Sea Trek suits a family who want their confidence building. Three days of tuition and you are free to set off alone, or in company. James and a powerful RIB are no more than 30 minutes away, at the end of a phone. Or you can take a skipper with you. They also run pot-luck singles weeks for those with little or no sailing experience.

About Cephalonia: Lixouri is an excellent base, 50 minutes from



The lighthouse at Fiskardho, a favourite haunt of sailors

Photo: Paul Geller

the airport facing the capital, Argostoli, across the gulf of the same name. Big enough to have all the shops and nightlife, but a far cry from the pulsating hell of the package holiday Greek town. Cephalonia is laid back and Ithaca 'steeped' as the cheap guidebooks say in Ulyssean myth.

The sailing: The Ionian is unchallenging, apart from a few well-marked hazards, and the weather predictable: morning winds light and from the south, with prevailing north westerlies from midday reaching Force 5, and dropping at dusk.

Eating out: Spyros Antonellos' restaurant **Spiaggia** at Vatsa near Lixouri (Cephalonia). Driftwood-built, beachside, romantic. Great atmosphere, serving fish, barbecue, salads, etc, run by a local and his English partner. Don't mention Shirley Valentine! Tel: 6977 631053. **Polyphemus** at Stavros on Ithaca. Lunch in the cool, open air under



author caption XXXXX

olive trees. Motto on business card 'We are the worst'... I think they meant the best, which is closer to the truth. Tel: 26740 31794. **Metropolis Cafe**, in Lixouri's main square, where the young crowd hang out to see and be seen.

Biggest surprise? The beauty of the islands from on foot. Walks average around six miles. The best time to go is May and September when it's cooler. Those who just sail miss this. Ithaca is fabulous (literally) and Ulysses seekers can speculate to their hearts' content

about where he landed, lived, loved and slaughtered his wife's suitors when he finally reached home after wandering the Mediterranean at the whim of the gods after the sack of Troy.

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We stayed at the excellent La Cite Hotel in Lixouri (£176, £257 or £340 for a twin room/seven nights, depending on the season), a clean, friendly, family-run 28-room hotel, five minutes walk from the Sea Trek base with a great pool and quiet atmosphere. Hotel La Cite, 29th Octobriou, Lixouri. Tel: 0671 92701. Fax: 0671 92702

Cost: £450 per person per week (May and October), rising to £599 in August, based on two people chartering. Total of six days sailing, with three days of tuition included.