

# YOUR CRUISING STORIES

Duncan Kent is an experienced sailor and a marine journalist who has owned a number of cruising boats.



Relaxing on the tranquil waters of Mongonissi Bay, Paxos



Feasting on freshly caught fish is a highlight of the day

Corfu offers a plethora of idyllic anchorages



## Exploring the Ionian

Corfu and neighbouring Paxos have long been a haven for sailors, but it's still possible to find a sleepy spot to drop anchor, as Duncan Kent discovers

Steeped in mythology, Greece's Ionian Sea has been a favoured sailing ground for cruisers and liveaboards for decades. With its myriad islands and predictable weather patterns you're rarely far from a secure bolthole if the afternoon sea breeze becomes a little too fresh.

Much is said about the southern Ionian islands, Levkas, Ithaca, Cephalonia and Zakynthos, but less about Corfu, Paxos and Antipaxos in the north. Having heard that the delightful Emerald Bay on the north-east coast of Antipaxos is one of the finest places in the Ionian to swim off an anchored yacht, I was determined to experience it first-hand.

Via its UK agent, Tenrag Yacht Charters, we chose Greek-owned Kiriacoulis to provide our yacht – a smart, three-cabin Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 409 based in Gouvia Marina. Home to 1,250 boats, it's a mere 20 minute, €25 taxi ride from the airport and a 15 minute, €1.70 bus ride to the delightful Corfu Town, with its numerous good restaurants, well-stocked supermarkets and large outdoor swimming pool.

We arrived after sunset, but our boat was left unlocked with shore power connected

and the fridge on. After decanting our luggage, we wandered into the nearby town, Kontokali for a dinner of delicious, yet simple Greek food at a very reasonable price.

### EXPLORING CORFU

A week is never enough to check in and out and discover the delights of such an excellent cruising area, so we booked 10 days. There are numerous small bays on the north-east coast, most with reasonable holding, a beach and a taverna or two ashore. Many, though, are open to the high-speed ferry wash, which can be uncomfortable. Others are more sheltered, although during our stay the winds often blew from the north-east instead of the north-west, making them untenable.

We found Ay Stephanos in the north-east corner of the island an ideal overnight anchorage. The holding is good in 5 to 6m just outside the small boat harbour and there are shops, bars and restaurants ashore. We dined on board watching the sun set over the Albanian mountains and were woken at a respectable hour by a few small local fishing boats pottering gently back in.

Otherwise there was little sound other than the noise of cicadas and the splashing of crew diving overboard for a refreshing early morning swim.

After a lazy breakfast we motored up to Kassiopi, an hour or so north, to take a look around. This is a lovely village with what is normally a well-protected harbour and anchorage. But in a strong northerly or north-easterly breeze you would need to find a berth stern-to on the short quay. Ashore there are numerous holiday apartments and the small town is busy but not manic. There are nice bays with sandy beaches each side of Kassiopi but, being open to the north-west wind and ferry wash makes them lunch or swim stops only.

We were keen to head south so, after a quick run ashore for bread, we headed for Corfu Town with the building north-east wind giving us an exciting broad reach. On reaching Corfu Town we checked out the old harbour, which has stern-to moorings for around 20 visitors. Owing to the recent poor weather, though, the harbour was full. If you phone ahead you can sometimes berth in one of the two private yacht club marinas,

Poiath or Naok – both well-protected harbours with lazy lines. Alternatively, you can anchor safely in the large bay immediately south of the old fort, but it's a long dinghy ride and walk to the town.

Corfu Old Town is definitely worth a visit, though, as it is a fine example of Venetian architecture and boasts a fascinating history, with the town being in the possession of various invaders over its 1200-year existence, including the Venetians, French and the Brits, before being handed back to Greece in 1864.

### SLEEPY PAXOS

After a bumpy night anchored off Petriti, a small but busy holiday town in the south-east corner of Corfu, we beam-reached across to Mourtos on the mainland to make the most of the fresh Force 5 northerly breeze before spending a very comfortable night anchored in a tiny bay between two off-lying islands. We took a stern line ashore to keep our bows pointed at the entrance, from where any swell or ferry wash might emanate, but the night was dead still and the only company were schools of curious fish swimming around our hull looking for scraps.

The next day another brisk sail took us back across the Gulf to Paxos, where we hoped to get into the island's favourite port, Lakka, before the hordes arrived.

The Ionian has become a favourite with both yachties and tourists over the past few decades, so many of the best anchoring spots and



Set aside some time to explore Corfu's fascinating Old Town



Impressive Venetian architecture is prevalent

beaches are filled by mid-afternoon. That said, Lakka was fairly quiet when we got there late morning, so we had plenty of room to anchor just outside the harbour wall. After a food delivery to our dinghy – saving us from lugging heavy bags in the 30°C heat – it was time for lunch. We expected to pay top dollar for the best views in town, but our superb lunch of mixed grilled fish and excellent house wine cost €55 per head. That afternoon involved little more than swimming, sunbathing and siesta-ing!

Short of fresh water, the next day we put into the busy port of Gaios late morning. The 'capital' of the island, Gaios is a quaint, but seriously bustling port crammed with

boats of all shapes and sizes. We found a stern-to berth on one of the three quays and paid €10 for the use of the metered water tap. Re-stocked with Mataxa, cheese pies and water we continued south to Mongonissi – an attractive and peaceful little bay with room to anchor, good holding, safe swimming and two good tavernas. If intending to reach the famous Emerald Bay on Antipaxos early in the morning, this makes an ideal overnight stop.

### SWIMMING IN EMERALD BAY

We left at 0830 to reach Emerald Bay before the day trippers, and an hour later were anchored off the small beach with fish darting around our hull. Swimming in the impossibly clear turquoise water was one of the highlights of our holiday, but everything changed when the first of many noisy day tripper boats came careering into the bay at midday. We upped and left, ghosting back to Mongonissi for a leg-stretch ashore followed by a celebratory meal.

The next day we again poked our bows into the marina at Corfu Town but decided instead to get back to the base and save our visit for the spare day after the boat was returned. We were glad we chose to do this – it was certainly worth finding the time to wander the streets and explore the corners of this stunning old town.

**A seven-day charter costs £2,912; refundable security deposit €2,000 or non-refundable damage waiver insurance €315; outboard €80; cleaning €95. For more information, visit Tenrag Yacht Charters: 01227 657450; www.tenrag.com**

Lakka is the most popular place to anchor in Paxos

