

IT WAS THE FIRST SERIOUS moment of the trip. We had to make a decision – and, as we gathered around the long wooden table at the stern of our big Turkish sailboat, we knew that we had to make it *now*. After three days of lazy progress through the **Dodecanese** islands of Greece, we had reached a crossroads, so to speak, and Sidar, our affable Turkish guide, presented us with two very distinct options. On the one hand we could stick with our original plan and sail all the way to **Santorini**, but face a tough crossing over to the **Cyclades** islands, one that might include up to eight hours of high winds and rolling seas. Or, Sidar said, a smile creeping slowly across his face, he could show us something truly special – something that few visitors ever get to see. “You can go to Santorini anytime. Every day there are flights and ferries from Athens,” explained Sidar, his smile now irrepressible, revealing his preferred itinerary. “But this, well this is something you may never have a chance to see again.”

Soon we would all see what he was talking about. Sailing aboard the *Zeus*, a twin-masted 100-foot vessel called a *gulet* (pronounced *goo-let*), our boat – hand-built in **Bodrum, Turkey**, out of mahogany and teak, and based on ancient designs – would, over the course of 10 days, take us to a series of hidden inlets, tiny tavernas and unique adventures well off the tourist track. In most cases, our small group of eight had never before heard of the islands and villages that we would visit along the way. But each one turned out to be a place we would never forget.

Following the meeting, our eccentric, wild-haired captain, a man named Selahtin Cura (who skippered the boat based on experience and instinct alone – his personally hand-drawn plans for the *Zeus* didn’t even include a compass) steered us toward **Arki**, a tiny island with a mere 54 permanent residents. Dropping anchor in a near-deserted harbour, we mixed among the locals, popping into charming shops, tipping back frosty mugs of Mythos beer at a friendly bar on the main square, then poked our heads into the smallest Greek Orthodox church I’d ever seen, opening the door with a key we found outside in an old-style mailbox. Overnighting in the harbour, most of us chose to stay up on deck under the stars, a warm Aegean breeze lulling us to sleep. We would be awakened just before dawn by the sound of hundreds of clanging bells. Moving his herd to the other side of the island with great enthusiasm, a local shepherd created quite a racket; his many goats plodding along in the murky



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darkness, the bells around their necks splitting the early morning air with a cacophony of exotic sounds.

A day or two later, Cura – who preferred to be called ‘Captain Yorgo’ – took us to another unexpected place. We went to see his old friend Niko Makarounas, a former professional soccer player and sponge diver who now runs a four-table taverna at the end of a mile-long inlet that would be difficult to find on a map, the bay and the village both known as **Palionisos**. The menu at his place is simple: whatever his wife makes that night. And fortunately for us, his wife – who never actually made an appearance – had cooked up a storm, our table quickly filling with Greek salads covered with giant hunks of feta cheese, mouth-watering sausages and great heaps of calamari. And the entertainment for the evening was also very simple: whatever Niko decided to sing for us. Pulling out a traditional lute, a tiny cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth, the swarthy Niko plucked out a series of Greek folk songs, drowning out the cicadas and crickets that created their own chorus once the sun sank behind a nearby ridge. A couple of hours and a few ouzos later, I chatted with Niko, who told me about the trials of running a restaurant in such a remote place as Palionisos. The village, he said in his distinctive staccato, accented English, didn’t get power until just two years ago, and running water reached his place just this year – before that, he used a generator and had to bring water in using buckets from a well two kilometres away. With all these challenges, why even set up shop here? This village, he explained, is his hometown, and he wanted to come back. “It’s very quiet here. You can find tourism everywhere, but in those places, people don’t even say good morning to each other,” he said, the little cigarette bobbing in the corner of his mouth. Palionisos is a place of family and friendly neighbours – and that’s why, he concluded, he’s there to stay.

The next day – and every day of our trip – took on a pleasant, relaxing routine. Breakfast on deck was followed by a swim, lunch was taken onboard and was generally followed by a nap, which in turn was followed by afternoon and evening walking tours of new ports of call, capped off later in the evening by healthy doses of *raki*, the anise-flavoured Turkish spirit. On volcanic **Nisyros**, we rented a car and drove as far as we could go, then parked and hiked the rest of the way into the giant steaming crater in the centre of the island.

On **Leros**, we passed traditional Greek windmills as we scaled the highest hill on the island, visiting the centuries-old church right at the top, chatting with a charming old woman who served as its caretaker and marvelling at its recently restored paintings depicting various Biblical scenes. On **Symi**, we visited a stunning Italianate monastery on a back bay, and then rolled into the main harbour just as the setting sun cast a dramatic orange hue on the picture-perfect white buildings perched on the steep inclines all around it. Later, we would dine on saganaki and souvlaki at a small local place on a point that jutted into the sea, while watching the lights of **Symi Town** twinkle across the water.

And in **Knidos**, a Turkish port of call – and one of our last – we snorkelled high above ancient amphoras, which, centuries ago, had tumbled from the great ships of antiquity as they unsuccessfully attempted – in high seas – to enter the very harbour in which the *Zeus* was now anchored. In the evening, we hiked to a lighthouse that crowns the point where the **Aegean** meets the **Mediterranean**, sipped boxed wine at sunset and dined on Turkish delicacies. Then we returned to the boat under the strange light of a lunar eclipse – which, it turned out, was the longest total lunar eclipse in more than a decade. Splashing the water, we discovered that it had become phosphorescent, glowing like dozens of tiny little lightning bugs when disturbed. A couple of the women in our group took a late-night swim around the *Zeus*, casting an outline like pale green snow angels as they circled the boat.

It was a special moment, and one that won’t ever be replicated for any of us who were there that night. But it was just one in a series of extraordinary experiences – fascinating conversations with local Greeks and Turks, wonderful feasts aboard the *Zeus* and in the towns along the way, hands-on lessons in history and up-close brushes with culture – experiences that, as Sidar had promised, we couldn’t have found in a simple sailing to Santorini. Sitting on the deck of the *Zeus* that night on the flat, quiet waters of Knidos harbour, looking down at the ‘snow angels’ and up at the giant eclipsed moon, nobody in our group regretted our decision. We learned that, when it comes to far-flung islands and seafaring adventures, sometimes the best discoveries are the ones you would never have expected. **V**