

# Reminiscences of an Ionian Summer

Joan Abrams

*A modern Odyssey: Joan Abrams recounts the story of an ambitious cruise she made in Greek waters.*

**W**e launched *Hronrad* from the beach at Igoumenitsa. In early April it was warm enough to wear swim suits. Tony and I had trailed the boat across wintry England and France, then across sunny Italy, to cross by ferry from Ancona. Tony set off to drive home for his university term, and I rowed out into the calm morning.



*Hronrad in Igoumenitsa Creek*

*Hronrad* is an adapted Morag dinghy, fifteen feet over all, six foot two beam, clinker built, with no built in buoyancy. I had added small side decks and stern deck, a mizzen, and water ballast under covers each side of the centreboard case. The tent was lashed across the boat aft of the mast and under the boom, so that it could be set more or less instantaneously. There was a spray cover always in place, so that the foredeck could be used for stowage – it became my bookshelf. Food was kept in plastic boxes to starboard of the mast. On the port side my root berth extended under the foredeck, and aft of it was the galley box, with the primus. This was to be my comfortable home for four and a half months.

Such wind as there was came from the west, so I had to use my auxiliary power - a pair of ten-foot oars. I was to row for many miles in the coming months. That summer, 1986, was a lucky one for my trip, as I now realise. In

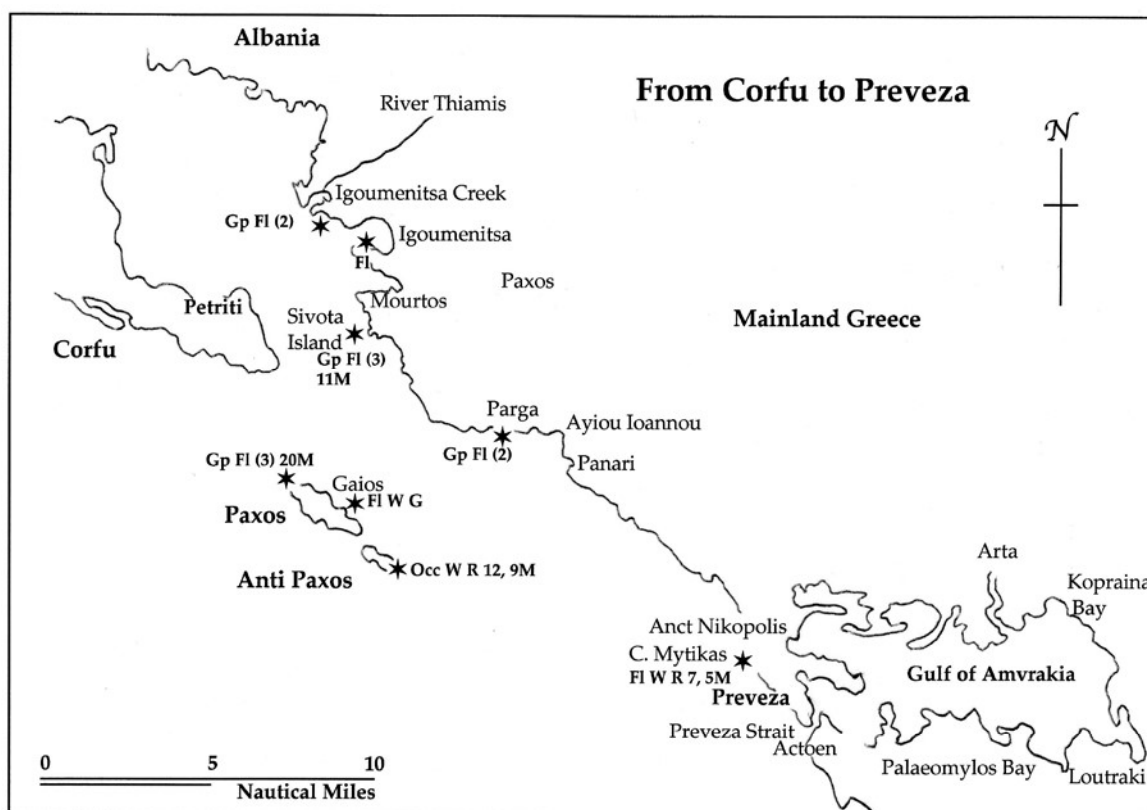
later years we had calm mornings, but afternoons so blustery that sailing became impossible, but for my first venture I could usually sail in the later part of the day, and had very little weather that I could not cope with. I rowed most of the five miles to the entrance of Igoumenitsa Creek, a long inlet to the north of Igoumenitsa. Then I could sail up to a sheltered bay near the head of the creek where I anchored. It was like the dreams one has about sailing in Greece. Goat bells sounded, as the goats were brought to a well on shore for water. When I went up the hill to explore I met their owner, who proudly showed me his plantation of young olives, and asked me to photograph him.

I had to pump a good deal during the night: it was some time before the boat took up after the long trail. The next day was calm again, and it was dark before I reached Petreti on Corfu, where I anchored. In the morning it was cloudy, and eventually a real wind came. I sailed fast to the Sivota Islands, where I spent several days in weather more like home. While I was there a lead boat from a flotilla came in, obviously getting practice for its crew in such manoeuvres as anchoring. When the weather improved I sailed on to Paxos, to the idyllic bay of Lakka, and the crowded quay of Gaios. There was a rough night there, before I could go on back to the mainland. I was crossing the water where it is said that a voice called out 'Great Pan is dead'. As the wind rose so that I had to reef, the sea turned green and the sky darkened. I feared that Poseidon had trouble brewing for me, and indeed I ran into the only worrying weather of the trip. The thunderstorm broke before I reached the shelter of the headland west of Parga, as I rowed hard with sail stowed to get into the harbour there. The picture-postcard village of Parga was drowned in torrential rain, and I waited a day for better weather before venturing on the longest section of the cruise without easily available shelter. It was twenty five miles to Preveza, at the entrance to the Gulf of Ambrakis. There was the usual very light wind against me, so I rowed past bays which might have offered uncertain shelter, and in the evening found a little shallow harbour not shown on my chart where the locals advised me of the right place to anchor, I think it was close to Kastrosikia. During the night I was entertained by the classical 'koax koax' of frogs. From there I had a better breeze to the entrance to the Gulf, and I was able to sail past Preveza town to an anchorage just past the narrows among fishing stakes on the southern side. At that time Acteon was not even a village, where now there are busy boatyards and a flourishing taverna.

The next lap was to the Levkas Canal, in those days crossed by a chain ferry, where now there is a lifting

bridge known as a ferryboat. One is not supposed to sail through the canal, so when I had crossed the eight miles from Acteon, (ancient Actium, where Cleopatra hoisted her sails and fled from the battle) I entered the canal round the sand spit which leads to it and lowered the sail, I had to wait for the chain ferry to let me past, with much shouting. I then continued past Levkas town, where I remarked on the contrast between the traditional boatyard on the island opposite the town and the regimented uniformity of a flotilla fleet. My next stop was at Nidri, which became the focus for the rest of the cruise. It was still like a village then, though expanding fast. It was the resting place of many who had retired to live aboard their boats. They were a friendly lot, and used to gather to chat with the locals at Nick the Greek's welcoming and unconventional taverna. There too was Falcon Sailing, where friends we had met on the ferry over from Ancona were looking after my trailer. The manager there was the only other dinghy cruiser I met. He had sailed a Wayfarer round the Peloponnese.

I had promised to meet a couple from my Greek language class, in Ithaca, at the beginning of May, so when the weather served I went on through the Levkas Channel and round to sheltered Sivota Bay, not then crowded out by flotillas. It was the starting point for the crossing to Ithaca, which I still regard as Odysseus's island, as of course its inhabitants do. I scrambled round the hilltops at its precipitous northern end in search of his palace, and went looking for the place where he met Eumaus, the pig herd. I met my friends, and then had a fairly rough sail back to Sivota. After that I explored Meganisi, with its many convoluted bays. At that time an English couple were running a beach holiday centre in Abelike Bay - nothing pretentious, just a few huts and good meals. I visited Katomeri village where there was a bakery, a village store and a butcher's. Then I sailed on to the islands of Kalamos and Kastos, passing by their magnificent limestone cliff formations. My trip furthest south took me to barren lands, sunburnt and almost desert. At the port of Astakos I tried to legalise my position by getting a visa to stay more than two months. This proved to be so difficult that I didn't bother, especially as I was assured that the penalty for



overstaying amounted to a few pence. I was hailed by a boat coming in to ask if I really did come from Heswall, as the board on my transom said. The skipper of *Blue Moon* had sailed all the way from West Kirby, and was a fellow sailor of the Dee estuary. He told me of the best anchorage in these waters in the long creek of Pandelamona. South of that the coast is deserted, though now I believe it is much obstructed by fish farms, and by a mysterious concrete development in one of the best bays. One creek which might have been a good anchorage was full of laid-up freighters. I went as far as the cave where the bats nest, on the hillside by the muddy bay past Petali Island, and then turned back as my bread was stale. Before going back to Katomeri for more I went to the best bay of all, a quiet rocky inlet on Dragonera. When we went there in *Red Knot* ten years later it had been discovered, and several motor cruisers filled it, but I had it to myself.

I returned to Meganisi and to Nidri, where I stayed between shorter trips for the rest of the cruise. I met Bertie Bloomer, sailing single-handed in the lovely old Falmouth quay punt *Twilight*. I was joined by friends from home, and later by Mary, who was to help trail the boat home. With her I had a mishap, when a chainplate pulled out in the blustery afternoon breeze. I lashed things up, but we avoided long sea passages. We went back to Kalamos, and to the port opposite its northern end, Mytika. Mary went by ferryboat to Ithaca, and my son Jan came, bringing the car in which he had been seeing Northern Greece. With the help of the friends I had made, we beached *Hronrad* and got her onto the trailer for the long journey home. The sailing part of my summer was over. I set off with my rucksack to see more of Greece.



Damage due to chainplate failure

I think I did well to go when I did. It was still something of an adventure to sail in Greece, especially in an engineless dinghy. The Ionian coast was then less sophisticated than it is now. The donkey tracks through the olive groves of Meganisi are now roads, and instead of donkeys there are jeeps. There are few goat bells to be heard, and the olive groves are neglected. The simple tavernas where locals and visiting yachts-people drank together have been tarted up and cater specially for visitors. It is still a splendid place to spend a sailing summer, though. The so-called Inland Sea, when one emerges from the marshy flats by the Levkas Canal to see the mountainous background and the rocky and wooded islets, seems like the west coast of Scotland with good weather. What more can one ask? It's easy to get to now, too, and well worth the effort. JA

