



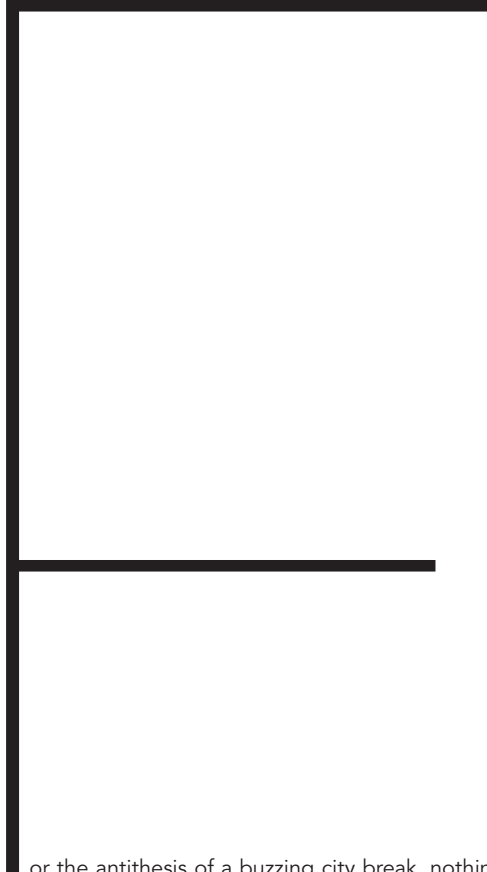
IDYLL WAYS
Symi Island, where
neoclassical houses
hug the hillside and
Greek tavernas fill
the village squares



SLOWLY DOES IT

SUN, SEA AND THE SIMPLE LIFE UNDER SAIL – *THIS* IS THE WAY TO HOLIDAY, INSISTED VICKI SLEET AFTER DAYS ON THE AEGEAN SEA. AND SHE'S STILL SINGING THE SAME SONG MONTHS LATER

PHOTOGRAPHS VICKI SLEET



or the antithesis of a buzzing city break, nothing beats boarding a boat. When my boyfriend and I returned from our Turkish and Greek sailing odyssey, our friends and family questioned our rather vacant descriptions of the long days spent gazing across the Aegean Sea as we made our way from isolated sapphire bay to quaint island port. Why weren't we more animated about our afternoons that consisted of protracted games of Scrabble and lazy lunches of grilled aubergine drizzled with peppery olive oil, hefty helpings of garlicky moussaka, feta-studded salads, sweet, sweet apricots and more gin and tonics than is polite? Or the endless swims in turquoise waters, and afternoon naps interrupted only by the dinner bell calling us back on deck?

At first I wondered, did we not have a good time? Did the visits to those remote mountain-top villages with their endless sea views not move us as I thought they had, and were we unmoved by the centuries-old monasteries positioned in places so beautiful only God Himself could have chosen them? And then it hit me. We'd spent a full week without any of the usual holiday woes – no hotels to find, no maps to decipher and fight about, no left-hand-drive rental cars to raise our heart rates, no umming and aahing over suitable restaurants for our mood or budget (or choosing restaurants that ruined our mood and budget).

Our reaction, I realised, was based on the fact that we had spent an entire week with just the delicious basics to enjoy: sun, sea and the simple life under sail. We had been officially deprogrammed from the rat race, so much so we were practically horizontal with calm (some asked if we'd been for 'treatment'). Those who know us were afraid. But sadly, surely enough the sheen of serenity inevitably wore off, and so we found our voices, becoming loudly insistent that *this* is the way to holiday. And we're yet to shut up.

OFF TO SEA

Our escape began in Turkey – in Bodrum, the popular coastal port and party town that, come summer, is jam-packed with cocktail-wielding students enjoying their few months off university, as well as a significant population of package-tour holidaymakers easily recognisable by their severe sunburn and empty pint glasses. Once the most important seaport town in the Aegean, today, life and industry in Bodrum still revolve around the sea and the waterfront, where traditional Turkish *gulets* (wooden sailing boats) sit cheek by jowl in the water, promising day trips and charters along the coastline and to the nearby Dodecanese islands.

We boarded *Naviga 2* on a balmy Saturday afternoon and were greeted by resident captain Hakan Uguz and his crew, suitably attired in turquoise polo shirts and navy-blue bermuda shorts, looking ever the nautical part. The boat, an 85-foot ketch, is an all-wood affair, one of three in the SCIC (say 'chic') Sailing fleet, reassuringly sized and built more for comfort than speed – and one that uses sail power as well as the usual engine oomph. The boat caters for a full complement of 16, with eight double cabins, each with air-con, shower and (because I know this question is coming) a flushing loo. We discovered there's plenty of space both on and below deck for R&R, card games, reading and idle lounging about.

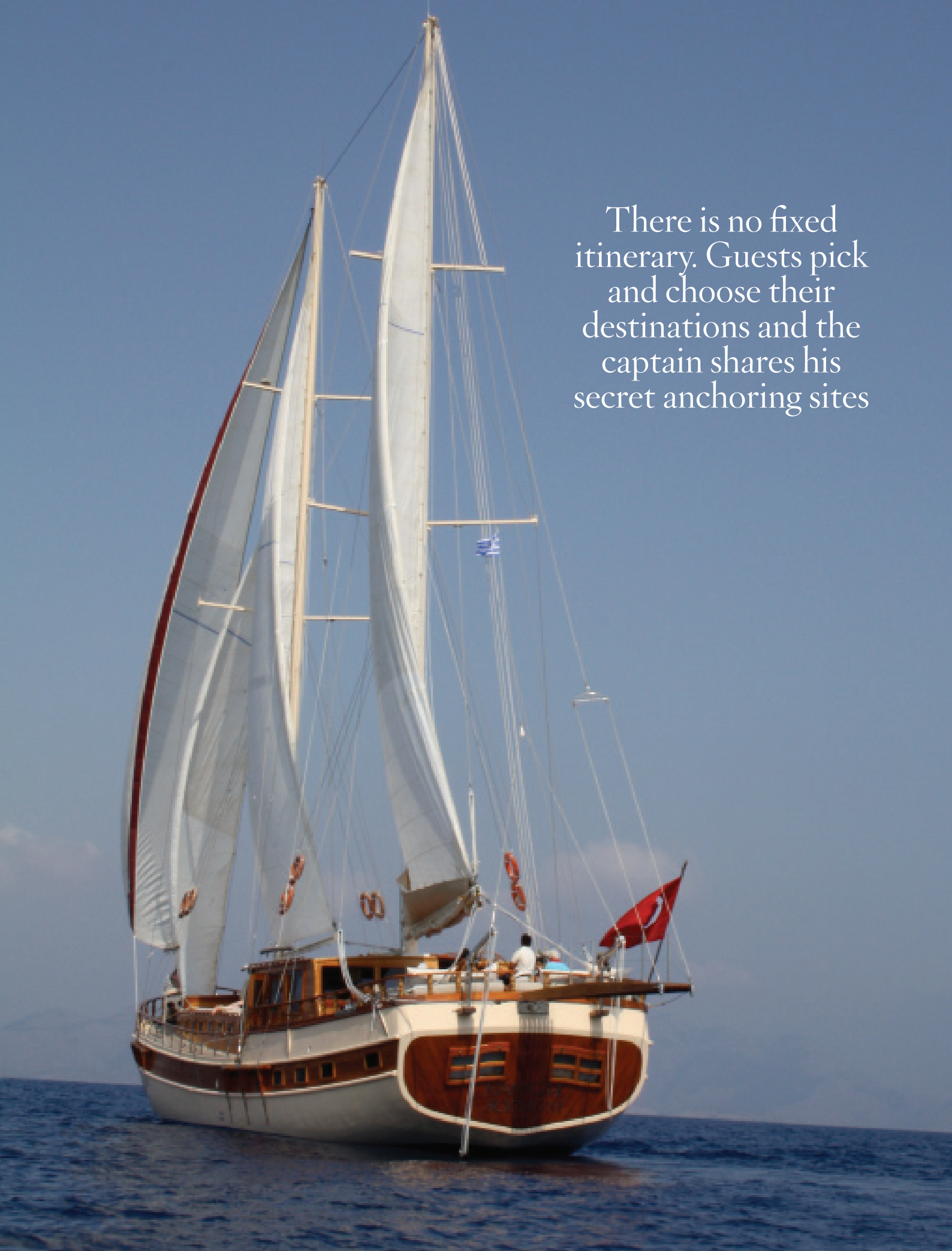
On the morning of our departure, we woke to the unmistakable throb of engines firing up – we were on our way into the big blue. Destination: where the wind blows. One of the attractions of SCIC Sailing is that there is no fixed itinerary. Guests pick and choose their destinations and captains share their secret anchoring sites and good sailing spots with you, their chosen few.

SCIC Sailing's co-owner and our fellow passenger for the week-long trip, Loes Douze, is well-known in Turkish sailing circles. Formerly a partner in Tussock Cruising, Loes started her own venture earlier this year and thus far has a fleet of three custom-fitted vessels. Having spent the past 20 years exploring the area, Loes has created a number of trips that cater for people like herself, who are more interested in out-of-the-way destinations than the run-of-the-mill cruise-ship stops. 'We try to find the more hidden spots and the unique elements of every island or coastal stop,' she says, explaining that SCIC Sailing delights in discovering the beauty in places that others might initially scorn.

Guests are encouraged to choose their own itineraries on booking their sailing experience, though there are plenty of tried and tested routes to choose from too. The aim? To whisk you away from reality into a world of endless dreamy days on the water; into scented lemon groves and gnarled olive-tree orchards, sun-splashed village squares and whitewashed Greek churches fragrant with handmade beeswax candles. And into that space where it's almost always gin o'clock.

SMOOTH SAILING

We soon settled into a rhythm. A protracted breakfast featuring fresh fruits, breads, tomatoes and salty feta cheese, followed by a briefing from Captain Hakan as to the day's destination. After that? Lounging around, book in hand, sunscreen close-by, with the easy loll of the boat inevitably causing one's eyes to sink to half-mast by mid-morning. With only one destination per day, stress is not a word aboard ship. History buff? How about a stop at a centuries-old ruin? Foodie? Guests can dip into the regular cooking workshops on board and, on dropping anchor, visit markets or the kitchen of a local taverna for a lesson. ►



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Despite his now-faded blue eyes, no doubt Elias's flirtatious ways are a hit with any passing Shirley Valentines

Families are well-catered for on child-friendly sailing experiences, where kids go on snorkelling tours of 'octopus gardens', participate in interactive cooking classes and are kept occupied with games and activities by an ever-patient crew, while parents enjoy that elusive indulgence – the afternoon nap. Singles cruises are popular (though Loes says they tend to have more women sign up than men) and, yes, given its popularity among German and Dutch visitors, naturist weeks can also be arranged (although the line is drawn at naked lunches and dinners).

HAPPY LANDINGS

With little in the way of bright lights and cocktail bars in our out-of-the-way port stops, we were able to get up close with the real side of Turkish and Greek island life. On the teeny-tiny island of Tilos we spent an afternoon wandering the seaside village of Livadia's steep streets, stopping in at Elias Lardopoulos's taverna for a glass of icy ouzo. A resident here for more than 60 years, Elias still goes out onto the water daily to check his nets for fish to serve in his eatery. His shrimps were suitably garlicky with a generous twist of lemon. Despite his now-faded blue eyes, no doubt his flirtatious ways are a hit with any passing Shirley Valentines.

Another morning, after a jaunt to the sulphuric live volcano on the island of Nysiros, we climbed up the mountainside to visit the almost deserted village of Nikeia, a picture-perfect Greek idyll where the brightness of the whitewashed walls is in stark contrast to the navy-blue ocean that stretches into eternity. Like many

Greek islands, Nysiros suffered a mass exodus after WWII and entire villages were emptied as families moved abroad to make a living. Now, come summer, Australian and American accents bounce off narrow streets as their descendants make the most of their inherited homes and get a taste of their cultural heritage.

JUST SPLENDID

One of the undoubted highlights of our six-day sailing experience was a visit to the island of Symi. A narrow, V-shaped inlet dwarfed by a steep mountainside of yellow- and ochre-hued homes greets arrivals as they round a corner and prepare for approach in this tiny port. Arriving in the late-afternoon magic hour, the sun's rays cast a surreal Sistine Chapel-like light on the buildings, creating a photography frenzy. Symi was once an enclave of wealthy sponge merchants who built their Italianate homes here. Today these have been restored under a strict architectural code, giving this mesmerising island its unique character.

Mary Burney, owner of jewellery boutique Symi Silver and local hangout the Vapor Bar (translating as 'Boat Bar'), has lived on Symi for 25 years. The UK-born entrepreneur met her Greek husband here on her first visit and, bar an annual return to London in the winter months, she's never left. Mary's commitment to living a life less ordinary seems to us a sign. And on our last morning aboard *Naviga 2*, we make a commitment to invest in an annual dose of sailing in the Dodecanese and Greek islands to set us straight when life gets too damn serious. ●



OPPOSITE (left) Chef Ali leads a cooking demonstration on board *Naviga 2*; (right) fresh seafood is a daily staple ABOVE The church square in the village of Megalo Horio on Tilos Island PREVIOUS PAGE The 85-foot ketch *Naviga 2* is the perfect size for dropping anchor in small harbours and hidden coves



TRAVEL NOTES SAILING THE AEGEAN

WHEN TO GO High season is late June to end August – reflected in flight prices, restaurant queues and people on even the most sparsely inhabited of islands. Mid-May to mid-June and the first two weeks of September are excellent – the weather is milder, the islands less busy, euro prices friendlier.

VISA South Africans do not require a visa for Turkey, but will need a Schengen visa (€60/about R670) to visit the islands (the Dodecanese are Greek territory) – apply at the Greek Consulate-General, 011-214-2300. Embassy of Turkey in SA, 012-342-6055, turkishembassy.co.za

CURRENCY The Turkish lira, divided into 100 kuruş (say 'koo-roosh'). 1 TL = R5.30. Euros on the Greek islands. €1 = around R11.

HEALTH If, like me, you suffer horribly from seasickness, don't worry: on arrival the crew handed out pressure-point bands to be worn on the wrists, and they worked like a charm.

NEED TO KNOW A week aboard a SCIC Sailing boat costs from €765/R8 620 per person, including meals and drinks. Discounts for group bookings (scicsailing.eu). The cabins are spacious, configured with a double bed or two twin beds, complete with white percale linen and fluffy towels. SCIC Sailing arranges transfers from the airport to Bodrum (at extra cost). Useful websites: tourismturkey.org, turkeytravelplanner.com, www.gnto.gr

PACK THIS Less is more, but bring your board games, playing cards and books. No shoes are allowed on board, but you will need sneakers for island exploration. Suncream and a large hat are essential. The crew supplies *hamam* towels (like African kikoi) to use as wraps.

WHAT TO DO In Bodrum, visit the 15th-century Castle of Saint Peter, built by the crusading Knights of Saint John – now housing the Museum of Underwater Archaeology – and the ruins of the Mausoleum of Mausolus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, completed in 350BC. Bargain at the Bodrum market. Stand-alone stores also carry beautiful wares: leather bags, Persian carpets and Turkish kelims. Visit the active volcano at Nisyros, where steam rises from cracks in the Earth's crust (nisyros.gr). Pay a visit to Papa Manolis, the last remaining monk at the St Panteleimon Monastery on Tilos (tilos.gr), or pop into the bakery at the Archangel Michael Panormitis monastery on Symi.

STAY HERE Depending on your flight times, you may have to spend a night in Bodrum before boarding the yacht or after the cruise. The Majesty Marina Vista Hotel, from €110/R1 230 per person, is a four-star place close to the swanky yacht marina (www.bodrumhotels.net/majestyhotelmarna). The budget-friendly Mars O Tel in the old quarter is cheap and cheerful with clean and spacious rooms, from €22/R245 per person (www.marsotel.com). It's five minutes' walk from the waterfront where the boat is moored.

EAT & DRINK THIS Traditional Greek salads with chunks of feta, plump cucumber, olives, tomatoes and sweet onion. The *doner kebabs* in Bodrum – wraps stuffed with spicy slivers of roast lamb, fresh tomato and chillies (€2/R22 each). Symi shrimps – especially on the pizza at Bella Napoli on Symi island (+30-22460-72456). Mussels in saffron at Mylopetra, one of Symi's culinary gems (+30-22460-72333, mylopetra.com). Icy almond milk from the taverna in Nikeia, and ouzo, of course – with a dash of iced water.

READ THIS For perfect holiday reads, try *Dream Seeking: On Nisyros, a Small Greek Island* by Lina Anritz (Trafford Publishing) and *The Island* by Victoria Hislop (Headline). *East Aegean* by Rod Heikell (Imray Laurie Norie & Wilson) is a complete guide to the Greek Dodecanese Islands and the coast of Turkey from Gulluk to Kekova.

GETTING THERE British Airways flies from London to Istanbul and Izmir, on the Aegean coast. ba.com