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A market stall in Argostoli, which is a small commercial port in Cephalonia, an island in the Ionian Sea. PHOTO/CAPT. JOHN CAMPBELL

Tips for a smooth entrance in Greece

By Capt. John Campbell

It can be a bit of a bureaucratic nightmare clearing into Greece for the first time. When Greece joined the European Union, because of its long history of shipping and the size of its commercial fleet, it got many dispensations granted to protect the shipping industry.

Whilst this has no doubt been of benefit to the prosperous Greek ship-owners, it has led to many problems for visiting yachts.

One of the biggest problems is that the multiplicity of laws are interpreted in different ways and enforced with varied degrees of enthusiasm in each and every port.

As a generalization, the rules are stricter and enforced more rigidly the closer one gets to Athens. In the outlying ports there is often a degree of flexibility and reasonableness shown by the authorities.

I strongly suggest that when yacht captains clear into Greece, that they do not do it in any of the Athens marinas. Coming from the west, we always clear in at Argostoli in Cephalonia. It is not a marina, but a small commercial port.

The following is based on my own experiences and observations, but as always, the responsibility is with the skipper to find out the current situation as it affects their own circumstances.

For any vessel other than a small cruising yacht, I strongly suggest the

hiring of an agent for the paperwork. A good agent will take away most of the headaches of dealing with officialdom. There are many agents; for more than 20 years I have used the services of A1 Yachting and have had no reason to try any other (www.a1yachting.com). They have agents in most ports and although their service is not cheap, they really take the pain out of visiting Greece.

My agents in Argostoli do the clearance for us, obtain the infamous Transit Log for the boat, and reserve a berth for us in port. They give us free Wi-Fi while we are in the port and can find most things and generally make the visit a pleasure. They can get Greek SIM cards for telephones and subscription cards for the satellite TV system.

Cephalonia has a small airport, with connections to Athens, so it is a good place for owners or guests to join. The island is worthy of a bit of exploration, too. Fiskardo in the northeast is a delight, and there are several other nice anchorages on the east coast. The agents can arrange guided tours by car or even by horseback.

When arriving in Greece, your first port must be an official port of entry. Not all ports have Port Police and ports of entry. Currently there are some 30 ports of entry; obtain a list from any of the pilot books on Greece, or take advice from an agent.

Because of the protections granted

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Call officials for permission to pass about 10 miles out from the Rion Bridge. PHOTO/CAPT. JOHN CAMPBELL

Transiting the Corinth Canal

When it is time to head east, the Corinth Canal saves quite a lot of miles compared to rounding the often windy southern tip of Peloponnesus. It is perhaps the world's most expensive canal on a cost-per-mile basis, but you can save a lot of time and fuel by going that route. There are several possible anchorages along the Gulf of Corinth, with Galaxidi being my favourite.

When going through the Gulf of Corinth, it is important to call the officials at the bridge at Rion for permission to pass. Call them on Channel 14 from about 10 miles out. They get unreasonably grumpy if you try to pass under their bridge without permission.

For the canal itself, if you are using an agent, it is possible to pre-

book and pay for the transit. This is well worth doing as it saves a lot of time at the east end. The canal is narrow and the traffic is one-way. The canal control will tell you when you are able to enter. You may have to wait an hour or more for the traffic to flow in your direction.

I do not know if it is a coincidence or intentional, but when we have pre-booked, we have never had to wait for a transit. On other occasions we have sometimes had to wait a couple of hours or more. If you have not pre-booked, then you have to go alongside at the eastern end, pay in cash and fill out yards of forms. If you have prepaid, then usually you do not have to stop, but can simply talk to control on the VHF and keep going.

— Capt. John Campbell

Identify official ports of entry

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to the shipping industry by the EU, it is all but impossible for a non-Greek-flag vessel to charter legally in Greece. If you arrive with a commercial registration certificate, the authorities immediately assume you are trying to charter, and your life will suddenly become very complicated. It is almost essential that you have a Private Certificate of Registry for your vessel.

Many flag states will issue dual certificates – a “private” one for use in Greece and Turkey, and a “commercial” one for chartering in the rest of the world. Some flag states, however, will not let you carry both certificates, but they will make arrangements to switch from one class to the other, once they understand the situation. (This is possibly a consideration to take into account when choosing where to flag a new vessel.)

It does not appear to be a problem if, for example, you leave Italy as a commercial vessel and miraculously arrive in Greece as a private vessel.

Unlike most countries, Greek officials do not appear to be interested in who is the beneficial owner of a company-registered vessel; they want to know who is the “principle user” of the vessel. In the case of a company-owned vessel, this person must be nominated by the owning company and a notarized letter from the company authorizing this person to use the boat will be requested on entry. In theory, this “principle user” must be on board at all times and especially when entering or leaving.

If the principle user is an EU resident, the vessel is limited to a stay of just 30 days. For a non-EU resident, it can be up to six months. To me this seems to be totally against the spirit of the EU, but that is how it is.

It is usually possible to make the entry without this person on board, provided you have the letter saying that they are authorized to use the boat, and have a copy of their passport.

Once cleared, we have never been

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Agent can offer invaluable advice on preparing for declaration

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asked about principal users nor had to give more than names and passport number of guests on board. It would be best to take advice from an agent well before your planned arrival as to how best to prepare your declaration.

Once safely cleared in, you will be issued with a Transit Log. Captains are supposed to get this stamped by the Port Police in every port where they are represented, which is almost everywhere there is the semblance of a port.

In some places they will stamp the yacht in and out and in others, they will show little interest. I usually go to the Port Police only in those ports where we actually dock. If we are anchored out, then they really do not seem to care. Again, the further we are from Athens, the less interest they seem to have.

Except for the marinas in Corfu, and around Athens, dockage is incredibly cheap. For a 35 meter vessel, in most places we pay between 2 and 12 euros a night for berthing stern-to in a port. This is 2 to 12 Euros for the vessel, not

per foot or per meter of length.

The price is obviously a bargain, but you do not get much in the way of services. Some ports will have water laid on, but except for the marinas mentioned above, you will not find shore-power. The other problem is that it is all but impossible to reserve space, unless it is in a port with an active agent. The docks are all government-owned and as such you cannot reserve space.

What the Greeks often do is to rent a fishing boat to sit in a berth all day, and they leave when the yacht arrives.

**Be sure to pick up
The Triton next month
to read more from Capt.
John Campbell about
off-the-beaten-path
destinations in Greece.**

This is not easy for us non-Greeks to do or organize. However, in most ports, unless the weather is very bad and people are staying put, we find that if we arrive about 2 or 3 p.m. there is usually space, as people may have eaten lunch in the port and have gone to anchor off the beach for the day. If you arrive at 7 or 8 in the evening, during the summer, you will be less than likely to find space, especially in the popular places.

When you dock stern-to it is worth dropping two anchors. Not only is it more secure if the wind picks up, but it is quite common for a departing boat to snag your anchor while recovering theirs. If they lift your only anchor, you are likely to hit the wall.

It can be a bit of a nightmare shipping stuff to the boat from outside the EU. We usually send things to the UK and then have them forwarded to us in Greece. This makes our life straightforward, and does not cost as much as trying to clear things through customs in Greece.

If you have to ship items directly from outside the EU, then take the advice of an agent. Usually they will have the things sent to their address, probably in Athens. They will have a broker clear them and forward them to the vessel. This can be expensive and slow.

To receive mail, I would not have stuff sent to the local post office. Usually all the Poste Restante mail is lumped together in a box in front of the counter, for anybody and everybody to pick through and take whatever looks interesting. A much safer option is to find a friendly shop-keeper or local business and ask if they will receive mail for you. We have found this to be very reliable.

Although the rules and regulations can appear a bit daunting and may sometimes be a bit frustrating, it does mean that there are not hoards of big charter boats filling every anchorage. Despite the hassles and the sometimes boisterous winds, Greece offers some great cruising in mainly, as yet, unspoiled waters.

Capt. John Campbell has been yacht captain for more than 20 years and a sailor all his life. He is currently in command of the 35m Codecasa M/Y Laymar II, which is based in the Med. Comments on this story are welcome at editorial@the-triton.com.

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