

Club Holiday to Milos – June 2016

November 2015...

“This is an invitation to join the club trip to Greece next year, paddling from the island of Milos in the Aegean Sea, during the week 11 - 18 June...” read the email from Andrew. The kayakers from the 2015 Croatia holiday sprung into immediate action; myself, Jenny, Peter, Derek and Norma. We knew what we were in for, we knew what had to be done....

Fast forward to June 2016...

A 4am start, two flights later and flushed with excitement (though it could have been the 30+ degrees heat), HCC were out in force in Milos. We had convinced two further Hamptoneers to join us - Amanda and Maxine – who were excited and nervous in equal measure about the upcoming adventure. In order to make up the group numbers, we were joined by three outsiders – seasoned paddlers Suki, Jonathan, and John, henceforth referred to as ‘the Strays’. We regarded these strangers with a healthy dose of suspicion because you can’t be too careful these days.

From the well-appointed airport (read concrete bunker), we hopped into a fleet of waiting taxis and drove the short distance to our home for the week, ‘Petronella’s’; a clean and charming guesthouse in the village of Triovasalos where bed and breakfast was to be provided.

For those of you who are not familiar with Milos, it is a rugged and geologically impressive island that sits in the most beautiful clear, turquoise sea. It is not very large - you can get from the bottom end of the horseshoe shaped island to the top in about 40 minutes by car, and is very non-touristy compared to the more famous neighbouring islands.

Day 1 Mandrakia to Papafragas (17.6km)

This year Andrew had decided to take a back seat on the trip and put us kids in the very capable hands of Rod, the owner of Sea Kayaking Milos. Rod has been running the business for 15 years and knows his stuff, both in terms of paddling and local knowledge. He tailored our trips according to the weather conditions, showed us the most interesting caves to paddle into, and was full of facts about the geology and history of the island. In addition to Rod, we were accompanied by his able assistant Paul, whose main job was to make sure we behaved ourselves and not get lost in caves.

The first task was to set us up in the sea kayaks. We were quickly and efficiently allocated boats which included Wilderness, Neckys, and a double for Andrew and Norma. Andrew took the back seat here too, even referring to Norma as his ‘front engine’ throughout the week. If only she had turned around during the holiday she would have seen that he was in fact leaning back in the boat and reading the daily paper...

Once the kayaks were loaded up onto the trailer, we drove up to Mandrakia on the North Coast to start our first expedition. I think Rod was pretty impressed by our enthusiasm, which made up for the fact that most of us had no sea kayaking skills. By most of us I mean me, and the nine others who shall remain nameless.

It was a gorgeous day with a southwest wind. We stopped for a Banana Break at Sarakiniko on a beach called Dead Turtle Beach. We soon found out that Rod’s naming of pit stops was incredibly imaginative; Dead Turtle Beach because he found a dead turtle there, Donkey Beach as there is a donkey that lives there, Cow Beach because...you get the picture. Marketing and advertising companies are literally queuing up at his door as we speak...

Club holiday 2016 – Milos, Greece

Sarakiniko was an amazing first stop. On the way to this beach we had paddled past an almost entirely submerged tanker wreck which we were then given the opportunity to snorkel around. Lying on its side in the shallows, it was huge, dark, and ominous.

We wolfed down bananas and biscuits and then headed off further to Glaronisia, paddling past volcanic rocks and arches on the way to our lunch stop. Derek tried to paddle through ones of the low arches because John had told him that he had done it by lying back on the deck of the boat. The arch was barely 10 inches above the water line. Needless to say Derek did not succeed.

The rest of the day was spent paddling towards Papafragas in wonderful conditions. The water off Milos is crystal clear, the sort that you see in holiday brochures and wonder whether it is real or photoshopped, and it was a joy to peer down to try and spot fish and other wildlife. (No sharks). Seven hours and 17.6km achieved – not bad for day 1! The days were nicely broken up with a paddle-banana break-paddle-lunch-paddle-end, which made it challenging enough for us professionals, but also kept that holiday feeling alive.

After a quick freshen up, it was time for dinner. Much to HCC's disgust, we were starting to warm towards the Strays, as they were doing a great impression of being nice people and getting involved, which meant we were forced to ask them to join us. Despite our best efforts, being cliquy clearly was not going to work on this holiday...



Club holiday 2016 – Milos, Greece

Day 2 Voudia round trip (18.5km)

Each morning Rod would brief us on the day ahead. We'd already been warned that there would be strong winds, so we were advised to double up. Norma and Andrew were already sorted, Peter and I had experience in a K2 so we naturally paired up, Derek and Jenny got together, as did Maxine and Amanda. The theory was that we would be more stable and stronger in doubles in the windy conditions, but it is probably worth noting that between Maxine, Amanda, Jenny and Derek, their time spent in either a K2 or double sea kayak was less than two hours. HCC are nothing if not brave and foolhardy!

The other three (now fully integrated as honorary HCC members), sensibly decided to stay out of this madness, choosing instead to stick to their singles and laugh from afar.

We drove down past one of the many mines on the island and set off into the choppy waters. Peter and I, experienced in the club K2 Viper, spent the first 30 minutes arguing and generally looking completely incompetent. The four newbies simply got in their boats and sped off. I am not bitter.

Rod was right, the day was blustery. We paddled along the east coast and stopped for a break at sulphur mine which looked like a set from a zombie apocalypse film. From that point we carried on to a nearby headland in pretty challenging conditions, it was quite a change from the more calmer waters of the Thames. What can I say about that stretch? It was brilliant! Over confident in the more stable boats, we all went charging off around the coastline; up and down on the waves which look large and menacing when you are on them – but not so when you see the photos afterwards. We had such fun! Rod had to herd us all back as we would have happily continued on for the rest of the day.

On the way back the waters got calmer, but the temperature rose and it was particularly hard to deal with. Rod's decision to call us all back at the headland was wise and we were grateful for it, as the return was a struggle even in the doubles. Once our end point was in sight, Peter and myself (having run out of energy for squabbling), put in a concerted effort to catch up with Jenny and Derek who were leading the pack...the race was on! 500m of hard paddling and we beat them, displaying paddle strokes only seen at Elmbridge, and pulled up elated onto the shore. Jenny and Derek, seconds behind us, gracefully informed us that they let us win. What. Ever.





Day 3 Firapotamos (not hippopotamus) round trip (15.2km)

Day three we woke up to bright sunshine and stunning conditions – again. Sigh. When would we ever get our wet and miserable DW training sessions in?

We loaded up in the cars and headed off to Firapotamos (not hippopotamus). Rod got us practising our turning sweep strokes and edging, causing most of us to make a mental note that many of these techniques should not be applied in the K1s back at the club unless we want to get very wet, and very cold.

The sea was fairly choppy in places, so we hugged the shore and went in and out of caves and crevices towards Trachilas and the headland of Cape Vani, before turning back towards fear and near death! Yes, you heard me right! Fear and near death!! (Da da daaaaaa!)

Jenny was the star performer in this drama. As we surfed the waves back from the headland, she decided to do a particularly sharp edge and before we knew it, she had capsized! Off the headland, in choppy waters, by some rugged rocks – well, why do things by halves? We all raced to get her to safety, and Rod raced to get his camera out. Jenny was still underwater. I zoomed in to the side of the boat and she emerged, sunglasses still on, hair barely out of place. “My paddle!” she screamed. Ok, it was more of a soft bleat, but said with urgency nonetheless. I rescued the paddle and proceeded to get caught on the rocks myself; my rescue attempt was over. So it was left to the seasoned doublers, Andrew and Norma to step in. Andrew the unflappable – he is quite frankly, the Bear Grylls of the paddling world – Jenny was in safe hands.

After this mishap we had some lunch and Maxine continued her rolling training with Rod which she had started the day before. He had promised that after only a few short sessions we would be rolling by the end of the week. Maxine was a natural with her ‘give anything a go’ attitude and had already progressed well. Her success encouraged both myself and John to give it a try, so Rod and Paul had their hands full for the next half hour. I have to say that these one-to-one sessions were amazing. Both Paul and Rod were really patient, breaking down the technique of rolling into tiny bite sized chunks and only moving on once we had grasped the concept. Did we all manage to roll? Read on for an update from later in the week!

We ended the day back at Firapotamos (not hippopotamus) and headed off for dinner at various restaurants. Our day off was due the next day, so a few cocktails were to be had...



Day 4 break day (no paddle miles)

Break day arrived and to be honest we were tired. Despite all the fun we'd been having, sea kayaking really is quite a workout so our bodies were glad of a respite.

We set off in various groups to explore the island, although we actually ended up doing very similar activities, bumping into each other throughout the day at the catacombs and amphitheatre. It was a relaxed day of history and spending time at the beach, and not one foot was placed into a kayak...

...I was getting desperate, what could I write in the trip report if there were no paddling stories to be told? I needn't have worried as Peter had the answer: a car crash. So on returning our hire car to the office in town, he kindly arranged for another car to hit us from behind resulting in me being ambulated to hospital in a neck brace. Two hours later, a concussion, shock, and most importantly, no dinner, we were back at the hotel. I vowed to include this incident in the trip report as soon as I could remember how to write and once the headache had gone...

Day 5 Pollonia roundtrip (17.4km)

We were raring to go after our break and set off from the North East coast from the small harbour of Pollonia. We crossed over to Kimolos Island, past Elinika and landed at Donkey Beach (Athinias) for lunch. The donkey of Donkey Beach was overjoyed to see us, and feasted on enough melon rinds to last him to next year. We aim to please.

Continuing the dramatic theme of the past couple of days, Suki also decided to go for a capsized. She was busy squeezing her kayak through some rocks in the shallows and splash! In she went. Now Suki can roll. Suki likes to roll. But Suki likes to roll on her own terms, **not** without warning. As with Jenny, Suki's only concern was not for her own safety, but for her new waterproof shoes which had come off and were now floating happily towards Santorini... Not to worry, as our capsized training kicked in and Jonathan came to her aid immediately. Shoes and Suki were rescued with minimal effort.

The day had been a combination of cliff jumping (for a few brave Hamptoneers), exploring, and longer stretches of paddling, ending up in a 6.2km leg all the way back to Pollonia that took only 1 hour 12 minutes!



Club holiday 2016 – Milos, Greece

Day 6 Psathi round trip (19.3km)

This day involved the longest mileage of the trip and began with a fairly long drive to the south coast. It was a beautiful day with temperatures reaching well over 30 degrees, so we were happy to be on the water where there was some breeze and relief from the heat.

Amanda, our first time sea kayaker, had worn the same expression the entire holiday. This face was known as 'speechless with joy', the phrase she had said on day one and had stuck ever since. The wide grinning pretty much summed up how the rest of us were feeling!

This day was made up of quite a lot of training and taking advantage of Rod and Paul's vast skills. I re-joined rolling class where Maxine was at the cusp of doing an unaided Eskimo roll. Amazing! She did it! Peter and Jonathan decided to do a roll in the double kayak, so Norma and Andrew were booted out and off they went. Incredibly they managed to do it, and no doubt we will never hear the end of it down the Club...



Club holiday 2016 – Milos, Greece



It was with sadness in our hearts that we got on the water for the last time. With a cooling north wind, we headed off towards the ladder beach at Tsigrado, stopping for our last banana break at Provotas and on to lunch at Yerakas.

We made the most of this last expedition, exploring caves and rocks, trying to spot elusive turtles and sting rays, and grabbing Rod and Paul for last minute tips and tricks. Maxine had already rolled, and as promised, both John and I had managed a couple as well. Rod then performed numerous styles of rolling, with the most impressive being the hat roll, where he managed to keep his hat dry – it has to be seen to be believed. Peter and Jonathan also managed to get into an upturned boat from below and propel themselves inside before righting it. Again, skills that are completely useless for when we get back into the Vipers and Cirruses...

The group then got back into the kayaks and headed back to Kiriaki. It came up on us quicker than we expected and we were all reluctant to land and put the boats on the trailer. But it had to be done. I couldn't look at the sad faces so I gathered everyone up and insisted we go racing into the sea in 'wild abandon' and splash each other in celebration of the week! And that is exactly what we did, and it was the best way to end our 2016 adventure in Milos!



Club holiday 2016 – Milos, Greece



The temperature had reached over 38 degrees and it was time to go home, with the exception of Norma and Andrew who decided that one week of kayaking simply wasn't challenging enough so were staying for a second, and John, who thought that he would cycle around the mountainous island in stifling heat on cheap rental bike...He's still alive for those who are interested.

Jonathan and Suki returned to London; Jonathan keen to get back to the quiet of his apartment and not be woken on the hour, every hour by church bells and the odd rooster, and Suki who was still getting over the trauma of nearly losing her brand new waterproof shoes...

As for Jenny, Peter, Derek, Maxine, Amanda and I, well we have been back at the club already and, rumour has it, thinking about the DW...

I could have written page after page about this trip and every funny and exciting thing that happened - apologies for anything I have missed out! Hopefully those that did not make it this year will be inspired for the next, it really is a brilliant experience with lovely people. We hope to see you in 2017 wherever the HCC holiday takes us!!

Anne-Lise - July 2016

<http://www.seakayakgreece.com/>