

The Arrival and the Journey of the Melida: A Captain's Diary

I am living in a two-man tent in the sand dunes on the island of Gavdos, Europe's tiny southernmost piece of land .

Behind us, at the ancient Minoan port of Chania we left the raft which, as I write this in the shade of a spreading Juniper tree, has been lifted: (Note to crew, it weighed 2.8 tons when wet) from its berth outside the Chania Sailing Club and swung onto a flatbed lorry. Tonight the combination arrives on Kythera aboard the bi-weekly ferry to our beloved island.



Fast forward to Kapsali where the crew said farewell to pre-dawn on the morning of July 17, 2014.

Well we were supposed to say goodbye that early but as it was, Robin Davy and I were the only ones that early at the raft, both looking vaguely around for the other eight members of the crew. The local Coastguard officials were on time, though, still badgering me to issue lifejackets to the crew which were long ago declared too hot, non-photogenic and would have hampered the paddlers.

Each crew carried only a hessian sack with the few clothes they might need and a 24 hour supply of bottled water, nuts, fruit and dried figs. Kapsali is not an early-rising place, there were but a dozen well-wishers to see us on our way to Chania on Crete some 64 nautical miles to the southeast.

There was a breeze, a kindly, light northwesterly; perfect for the getaway once we had manhandled the raft off the beach where the night's high tide had left it stranded. The mood was buoyant, I suppose. Nobody said much. They just dipped their paddles into the

sea to tighten up the blade lashings, assumed their positions and stroking in unison for



the first time, we headed out to sea, aiming just left of Kapsali's iconic rock, Hydra, where it is supposed the sirens lured Odysseus and his crew on his voyage back to Ithaca.

Log entries were to become impossible in the crowded space. There were 10 of us aboard, each with a claim on one of the hessian bags which made a great pile midships, and there wasn't much free space left. At night, with paddlers resting, there was no space at all. But I did manage at the beginning. The first entries read:

July 17

0620 - Dozen well wishers to see us off. Harbourmaster and assistant playing their role as Lifejacket Police. Ignored. Light northwest breeze, paddle for the first 10 minutes then raise the strictly Paleolithic cane non-sail for a glamorous departure from harbour.

0720 - moved one nautical mile; course 120 degrees, steering between Antikythira and the two prominent rocks said to represent Zeus' testicles.

0820 - Still heading 120, long, sloppy swell, crew making paddling motions. No power, no wind.

1145 - Fickle west wind, paddling with more enthusiasm, still making only 0.9 knots. Morale good.

1640 - Wind northwest 5/7 knots, being set east. No shade, very hot. Crew good, keeping cool by plunging overboard. Sea the bluest of blues, friend Manolis appears on a jetkski to take photographs, then two other boats with camera-toting tourists. First water delivery from support boat. Nine hours, nine miles. Night watch system set.

1800 - 0600 (July 18) No hourly log, no facilities to write anything. Half moon, beautiful night at sea. Full complement of stars. Messy cross swell in the vicinity of Antikythira, wind steady 4/6 knots. Very cold experience for off-watch paddlers. Six on, six off watch system working well. Trouble with support vessel losing us. We not caring at all, situation well under control. Foolish incident with regular flashlight signal checks, captain and single crew round-the-clock drunk. Steady progress now, registering 2.4 knots at times which makes us seem like we are racing along.

0800 (July 18) At sea 26 hours. Distance covered, 32 miles. Halfway. Wind holding, course steady. Steering not so easy. Crew still amusing each other but quiet and tired. Stoic, paddling well. We are getting there!

And there the log entries stop as the wind picked up and the journey became gruelling with following swell growing and another fiercely hot day to get through. We were making good time but early signs of sleep deprivation were bothering. Paula passed us sandwiches from the support boat.

Late afternoon with one cape on mountainous Crete to get around, the wind moved to the west and then the southwest. We had less than 20 miles left and the crew bent to their paddles like never before. The 'non sail' was bent to trap something of the offshore wind but the paddlers were saving us. Come

nightfall the wind had reverted to north of west again and then at midnight it inexplicably turned east, but light enough to not send us back to Kythira providing the crew kept paddling. We could now see the harbour light of Chania. We paddled through the night, a heavy swell from the south now came slopping over the starboard side. We still made headway but as the harbour we longed to make moved further south as we were driven north we called for the support vessel to correct the issue. Which it did, but not with captain or crew on the helm, but our exhausted, harassed beyond imagination Paula – enjoying her first ever yachting experience - who had been steering the ship while they slept.



Chania is not an early morning place either, at least not in the summer months. A couple of aged fishermen, a pair of partied-



out girls teetered along the quay still aboard the absurdly high heeled shoes the young Greek ladies can't seem to do without. So as we left Kapsali with the dozen early risers waving goodbye so we were welcomed on Crete. But we were too tired to care. The wind had died now as we paddled through the picturesque harbour entrance, creating a scene from a long, long time ago, and headed for the only buoy we could see. And that was that.

My principle thanks goes to the crew. Yes, three months is a long time in this day and age for young people on the move to sit around tying pieces of 'Kalamia' together. I can only hope that they feel as rewarded as I do along with a large portion of scholars around the globe. The paddling boys and the amazing Rose Ridgeway might be physically up there alongside today's youth. Their original counterparts would have been stronger, more robust and with such physical stamina that we cannot even imagine. Too bad. They did their best, and the result shows

that it was good enough.

Alongside Katerina Kopaka's great tool discovery on Gavdos was the American Professor Thomas Strasser who discovered similar tools on the Cretan mainland. He was there in Crete to receive us as well. I am grateful also for his highly valued support for our efforts as I am to those who made donations to our self-funding cause. And to those who bought the damned t-shirts, my personal nightmare. There are many out there who believed we would succeed; and that for once the feared stretch of sea between Kythira and Crete would settle down and be reasonable for a couple of days. Well they can feel as rewarded as us. It could have gone the other way, but it didn't.



There are others who should get a mention but the list would go on and on and anyway they know who they are; the unassuming fishermen at Kapsali for example, none of whom sniffed at our construction, not even once. But here our Greek-Kythiran dynamo John Kalligeros does get a special mention. Only because if the voyage hadn't gone ahead because of stubborn Greek Government disapproval, which John played a super major role in reversing, and in translating and in various other everyday ways, it would have been because he wasn't with us.



In a way the project he has personally undertaken to preserve the raft as part of the already formidable heritage of Kythira requires even more effort and support than building it and even sailing it to Crete.

So thanks John and thanks to everyone concerned; those close, those faraway.

From Gavdos. Bob Hobman

This is an edited version of Bob Hobman's diary which can be accessed at <http://www.thefirstmarinersexpeditions.com/#!The-Arrival-and-the-Journey/cour/102043A7-51D4-4B25-B61C-13DA0EA635A2>