

Ship *to* shore



On the Greek island of Lefkas, Tanya Jackson blends the adrenalin rush of sailing with an elixir of soul-soothing holistic activities on dry land





Clockwise from main picture: getting away from it all on Vassiliki beach; coming in to land after a morning's sail; Vassiliki Bay; enjoying a ride in the country; outdoor yoga leaves your local gym standing

My feet wedged under a strap, I hold my breath and lean out over the water. 'Pull the tiller back! Let the sail out... and turn!' my instructor cries. I can't believe what I'm doing. Half an hour ago I'd never set foot on a boat that didn't have an engine and someone to captain it, now here I am in charge of one: a sail in one hand, rudder in the other and the rest of me balanced somewhere between the sea and the wind.

This all happens in Vassiliki Bay, on the beautiful Greek island of Lefkas. My friend, Bridget, and I have come on a healthy living and sailing break, looking for an escape from our busy lives. The programme includes yoga and Pilates twice daily, a complementary massage treatment each, bike rides and a host of other healthy activities throughout the week. From the moment we arrive and gaze at the glorious view from our balcony, across olive and cypress trees stretching over the hills, we know we've come to the right place.

An hour and a half's drive from Preveza airport, Vassiliki is a fishing village tucked away in a lush green valley quite unlike the usually arid Greek terrain. Wildwind, the company running our Healthy Options package, is based at two neighbouring family-run hotels and started life as a sailing centre around 20 years ago, run by founder Simon Morgan. Originally equipped with nothing but a camper van towing a catamaran, Simon now has a fleet of more than 40 catamarans and dinghies, catering for everyone from beginners to serious yachties. A Royal Yachting Association certified teaching school, Wildwind offers a range of courses to suit all levels of expertise. Simon's wife Varvara joined the team two years ago, adding her training in beauty therapy, massage and aromatherapy to the sailing mix.

On our first night, we gather for a welcome meal at the seafront restaurant, where we meet the other guests who've signed up for this package. I sit between two strapping lads,

Martin and Mortin, long-time boat enthusiasts from Denmark. Opposite us are fellow sea dogs Jerome, a businessman from Holland, and Rosalind, a Scottish architect. We're not the only beginners, though – businesswoman Sonia and self-help franchisee Kim are also new to sailing. After a mouthwatering feast, including ratatouille, creamy tzatziki, dolmades (stuffed vine leaves), meatballs and a few glasses of crisp local white wine, everyone's beginning to enjoy themselves.

A far cry from the holier-than-thou style of holistic break offered by many operators, the

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ethos at Wildwind is to do as much or as little as you like and to take or leave the activities on offer as you fancy. With this in mind, having had a tiring journey the previous day, we decide to forego the Monday morning yoga session and relax a little more into the holiday spirit. When we wander down to take breakfast by the sailing centre, we find that meals and drinks are charged to the room and dealt with at the end of the week, avoiding that nasty business of keeping track of your wallet. The average meal costs about €6 (\$4.50), so there's no little voice at the back of your mind telling you to be careful what you order.

Not wishing to get off to a completely lazy start on our first full day, after breakfast Bridget and I join sailing instructor Tam for a morning session on the ocean. We push our boat out on to the waves and scramble inside. It's a Laser 3000 dinghy, a small sailing boat that's ideal for beginners. Tam's smiley but no-nonsense

attitude puts us at ease, and as the morning progresses we learn to steer, speed up, slow down, tack and gybe (turning the boat so the wind hits the other side of the sail). Nervous first-timers on the way out, we power back into shore a couple of hours later like a pair of capable seafaring women.

With the boat safely anchored in the bay, we decide to wander along the white pebbled beach down to Vassiliki town, just 10 minutes away. It's a pretty assortment of winding alleyways and steep cobbled streets with plenty of shops, bars and restaurants. We take our seats at a seafront cafe near the harbour and watch the fish whizzing about in the water, waiting for titbits from the table. Now in full holiday swing, we make the mistake of ordering starters, which turn out to be the size of a main meal. So after a long, half-eaten but delicious lunch of fresh-fried calamari, Greek salad, more tzatziki, stuffed aubergines, lasagne and a bottle of mineral water, we pay up (€10/£7.50 each) and stroll slowly back to base.

Later that day, we join the early evening bike ride, led by Varvara. We wind our way alongside fields of gnarled olive trees, past ramshackle farmyards, through orange groves and up and down gentle hills, the warm evening air scented with the soft aroma of cypress. The gentle motion of the bikes and the serenity of Vassiliki bring on meditative thoughts, and by the time Bridget and I arrive back at the hotel, we're both pleasantly lost in our own worlds for the rest of the evening.

The next morning, we meet at the yoga tent before breakfast for an hour of gentle hatha yoga with instructor Karen Simper. Throughout the session, Karen offers gentle constructive advice. 'Yoga should not become another path to self-criticism or competition,' she advises. 'The practice is undertaken to allow ourselves to meet our true nature.' I'm glad to hear this, as it's been a while since I last touched my toes. But by the end of the hour, I'm at least →

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able to grab my ankles, and the sense of peace and well-being lasts for the rest of the day.

We grab a quick bite to eat, then pile on to a bus, which takes us along the steep, winding road to Alexandros, about 30 miles to the north of Vassiliki. We've come to meet Brigitte Roth, a phytotherapist (medical herbalist) and wise woman of these hills, for a tour of the potent wild herbs native to this island. We've been told to expect a real character, and Brigitte doesn't disappoint. A tall, tanned German woman, she has a commanding presence and addresses us like students. Brigitte lives with her husband in a secluded house high up in the hills, where they harvest the herbs by hand. Brigitte lives and breathes nature, and her passion is infectious. She leads us along country lanes, introducing us to wild mountain thyme (for stomach cramps), mallow (which soothes inflammation) and pennyroyal (for love potions and relieving toothache). Each plant has its own history, and Brigitte knows the associated gods, planets and folklore for all of them. Entranced, I find myself making a silent vow to grow as many healing herbs as possible in my garden when I get back home.

We stop for lunch at a tiny taverna in the hills and enjoy a meal including butter beans in a tomato sauce, wilted spinach and courgette flowers, served with freshly baked bread and tangy local feta cheese. The whole meal is ladled with wild oregano, the most revered herb on the island. Everything we eat has been home-grown and harvested by the taverna's owner, Maria, whose expansive allotment we pass on our afternoon leg. When we get to Brigitte's herbal workshop at the end of the day, the quality of her wild oregano stock is obvious – the dried herbs are dark in colour

and thick with the volatile oils that give the plant its therapeutic properties. Everybody buys something to take home.

As the sun goes down, the second social event of the week gets going – the barbecue. With a live band (made up of staff), delicious food and local wine, Bridget and I start to feel like part of a family. We end up singing and playing guitar with staff and fellow guests until the early hours, surrounded by a million stars we wouldn't normally be able to see.

Our week continues in much the same relaxed vein, with daily yoga and Pilates, sailing and the famously healthy Mediterranean diet. Wildwind's guests have a fleet of bikes at their disposal, so Bridget and I explore the local area. Being in a steep valley, we're advised that far-flung trips are not for the occasional cyclist, so we don't stray too far from Vassiliki. But the scenery in and around the bay is pretty enough to satisfy our adventurous urges, with gorgeous beaches, whitewashed buildings and striking forest views wherever we look.

On the Friday morning, I team up with another sailing partner, Sam, a plumber and property developer from Brighton, to join in the boat race. Still aboard the same Laser 3000 I started the week in, we both feel confident that we can at least keep up with the bigger, faster vessels like the Hobie Tiger catamarans. But although we manage to stay the course, we find out what it's really like to have the wind taken out of our sails, namely by competitive peers who've crept up beside you and stolen it. On our second lap of the course, we find ourselves aimlessly drifting towards Cephalonia and are half tempted to keep going. That's the beauty of sailing in Vassiliki – even if you're not cresting the waves at speed, the warm sun, sea

breezes and stunning scenery have just as much impact as winning eight regattas in a row.

By the Saturday, Bridget and I are sporting our own healthy glows, and feeling light, fit and flexible. After breakfast, we join an 'aqua safari', where a speedboat takes a group of us to three snorkelling sites around Vassiliki Bay. It's another gorgeously hot day, and it makes a refreshing change to be on a boat and not have to think about navigating it. When we reach the first site, the water is too cloudy to see any wildlife, but it's fun splashing about in a little cave on one of the rock faces. There's a similar scene at the next site, and by the third I do feel slightly disappointed not to have

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spotted anything colourful, though the thrill of being on a speedboat makes up for it.

When we return, it's time for my massage. Varvara's therapy room has an open door into the orchard, which allows for the aromas of fruit trees and the sound of birdsong to drift inside. As she works her magic on my back, I drift into a daydream about my tranquil week.

For someone who usually gets itchy feet after three days, it's surprising when a trip holds my attention for the duration. But the balance of relaxation and activity has been just right. A holiday that gives you the chance to nourish yourself in such a beautiful environment, as well as building your confidence by learning a new skill, is the way forward for any woman in need of a boost for mind, body and spirit.

The week finishes with a trip into Vassiliki town and a huge farewell meal with staff and guests. I can see the benefits of the week on my skin and body – it's the only holiday I've been on where I've lost weight. I feel grounded, calm and ready to face my real life back home. Although I'd find it too cold for sailing in the UK, I'll definitely consider returning here next year for another taste. This could be the start of something beautiful. **SPIRIT&DESTINY**



Clockwise from top left: Brigitte Roth shares her knowledge of herbal healing; sailing on Vassiliki Bay; a late-night sing-song; the hotel's calm courtyard and pool; Vassiliki viewed from the village of Alexandros in the mountains



FACT FILE

- A seven-night Healthy Options package with Wildwind starts at £444, including return flights to Preveza from Gatwick, return transfers, accommodation (based on two sharing), daily yoga and Pilates, bike hire, a herbal walk, an aqua safari, a massage and a chance to try your hand at sailing. A nutritionist is also available on some weekends at extra cost. For further information, call 01920-484516 or visit www.wildwind.co.uk. The season runs from May to October.
- For more information on Brigitte Roth, visit www.lefkas.cc (the site is in German but can be translated using Google Translate).

PHOTOS: DK IMAGES, TANYA JACKSON, WILDWIND