

# Meltemi madness

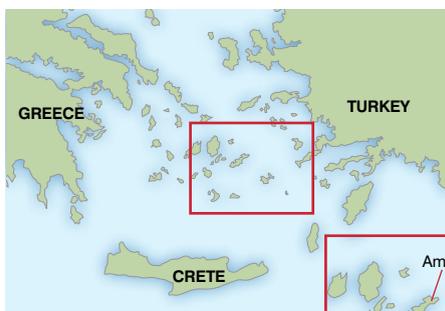


photo

Sailing against the legendary meltemi wind in the Cyclades is a thankless undertaking and emphatically not recommended, as Marinella Gagliardi Santi recalls

**W**e can't go any further: the head wind is too strong and it will prevent us from reaching Amorgos,' yelled my husband Rinaldo. The sea was getting too rough: the waves hit us violently and continuously, tossing our boat with such force that we almost lost control altogether.

It was an August afternoon in the Cyclades: Rinaldo, myself and our friend Elio had been engaged for some time in an exhausting battle with the notorious Greek wind, the meltemi, and Rinaldo had decided that enough was enough. We sought shelter in Astypalaia, the nearest port, which is part of the Dodecanese Islands. Arriving late at night, we had to anchor in the dark inside an unknown bay, accessible only through a very narrow passage. The only consolation was that the wind was now in our sails, and not fighting us every inch of the way...



Our adventure had begun when I agreed to help Elio sail his boat *Alga*, a Cyrano 38, from Turkey to the Peloponnese via the Cyclades. Elio had left Genoa on *Alga*, changing crews in his odyssey to the East: by August he would be alone in Turkey, waiting for us to honour the promise I had made. Rinaldo was frankly incredulous that I had accepted Elio's proposal.

'No one ever sails into the meltemi!' he exclaimed. 'In the Cyclades, everybody sails from west to east, before the wind. Do you really want to sail upwind against that kind of fury? Well, you drank to it, so we're committed now.'

'Yes, but I didn't understand what we were raising our glasses to!' I replied.

Consulting the pilot book, Rinaldo remarked that it advised against undertaking this course of navigation altogether, but recommended a precise route through the Cyclades if the journey was unavoidable. Having made my agreement with Elio in early June, there

was plenty of time for me to grow increasingly anxious as I read a variety of articles that underscored the folly of our forthcoming adventure. One phrase in particular kept playing on my mind: 'Only the natives of Caprera will sail against the meltemi, running the risk of damaging their



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beforehand while sailing close-hauled.

Problems arose after five hours of sailing, when night approached with a starless sky: suddenly, dark, shadowy hills appeared in the distance. Apart from a small lighthouse on the promontory to our left, there were neither landmarks nor lights on the land. Except for the light from the lighthouse, we were in total darkness. We carefully checked the latitude and longitude on our chart plotter, comparing the coordinates with the data from the pilot book. There was just a narrow passage between the rocks: our plotter indicated that this widened to an access channel which would finally lead us to a wide – and hopefully calm – inland bay.

Moving forward in pitch-darkness, I kept wondering whether we had managed to properly locate that narrow passage. After furling the jib, we started the engine and approached with caution.

The meltemi continued its brisk assault, driving waves onto the reef. 'The channel entrance is close now,' Rinaldo said, keeping his eyes on the chart plotter and wiping away the water which splashed continuously on to the screen from the punishing waves. At this point we were thinking about, and dreading, a recurrence of a problem we'd had before: on more than one occasion when berthing in ports, the plotter had not located our boat's actual position but had shifted it slightly. What if the plotter claimed that our boat was positioned in front of the channel, but got it wrong? At least we'd brought a plotter with us – unlike Elio, so eager to set sail that he was woefully unprepared.

Elio took the helm of *Alga*: given the situation it was his responsibility, and matters were now in his hands. 'Can you make out anything at all?' he called through the darkness. 'Should I go forward? Are the rocks getting nearer?'

We placed our faith in the plotter, according to which the entrance was just ahead of us. It was a tense moment in that impenetrably dark night, with the wind still brisk, the waves constantly pushing and the rocks looming.

Suddenly, Rinaldo cried: 'there's the entrance, right in front of us!' In the end, our plotter had been accurate: it had led us to the channel.

In the darkness, the passage felt extremely narrow. 'Move further to the right, Elio!' I yelled, sitting on the port winch and monitoring *Alga's* progress, acutely aware of the rock wall close to my side of the boat. 'But not too far to the right!' Rinaldo countered on the other side of the boat, sitting on the starboard winch and observing the wall of rocks opposite.

'How long is this channel? It seems never-ending,' complained Elio. 'Keep directing me even if I'm helming well in the centre.'

### Sighs of relief

The tension did not abate as we moved along the passage, but finally, off to port, it opened out into a large and peaceful bay surrounded by mountains. The meltemi finally left us, and the waves with it. We breathed our first collective sigh of relief. There was no light on the land but we could see two white houses, one beside the other.

We moved slowly towards the island.

Surprisingly, given that it was

August, there was no sign of any sailing boats. Sailing against the meltemi in the Cyclades, following the route suggested by the pilot book, had led us away from the main tourist islands where the Greeks go on holiday.

Arriving in this deserted bay at night was one of the most exciting aspects of our trip. We always derive the keenest

pleasure when we're away from the crowds of summer ports and urban life.

We set the anchor. Engine off, silence all around, and the sea as calm as a lake. This seemed somehow inconceivable after the howling meltemi had that been our constant companion during the passage.

We breathed another sigh of relief and spontaneously high-fived each other. The charmed silence was broken by the ringing phone. It was an anxious Miriam, Elio's wife. 'Where have you been sailing? I've been trying to call for hours.'

'We've just anchored in Astypalaia,' I replied.

'What were you all thinking, trying to cope with the meltemi at night?' she demanded. She was right, but how could I explain that we wouldn't have done it any other way? She would understand eventually.

'We'll meet again tomorrow, meltemi', I thought to myself. 'You may have won today, but tomorrow is a new beginning: and maybe this time we will leave as winners and with dignity.'

As a postscript, it may interest readers to know that Elio rushed out to purchase a chart plotter on his return to Italy... 

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### The meltemi, screaming in rage, sounded as though it hated us

boats' rigging or injuring themselves...'

Two months later, there we were in the Cyclades, facing one of the most critical moments of our journey by sea. Amorgos was only two miles away but our boat speed was reduced to nothing in the face of the fierce, punishing waves. It was bitterly cold despite the fact that it was the beginning of August, so we were stuffed into our sailing suits. The meltemi, screaming in rage at 38-40 knots, sounded as though it hated us: I've never known such a howling, intense and intimidating wind.

### Critical moments

It was at this point that we decided to reverse our route and head for the butterfly-shaped island of Astypalaia. Having the strong meltemi approaching us from the stern was a whole new experience: it was fun surfing on the waves, compared with the frontal impact we had endured

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Marinella Gagliardi Santi was born in Milan but has sailing in her blood. Her grandfather and one of her uncles both completed transoceanic voyages, while her grandmother rented boats on Lake Maggiore. Today, she lives and works with her husband and skipper Rinaldo on the shores of Lake Varese in the north of Italy.**

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