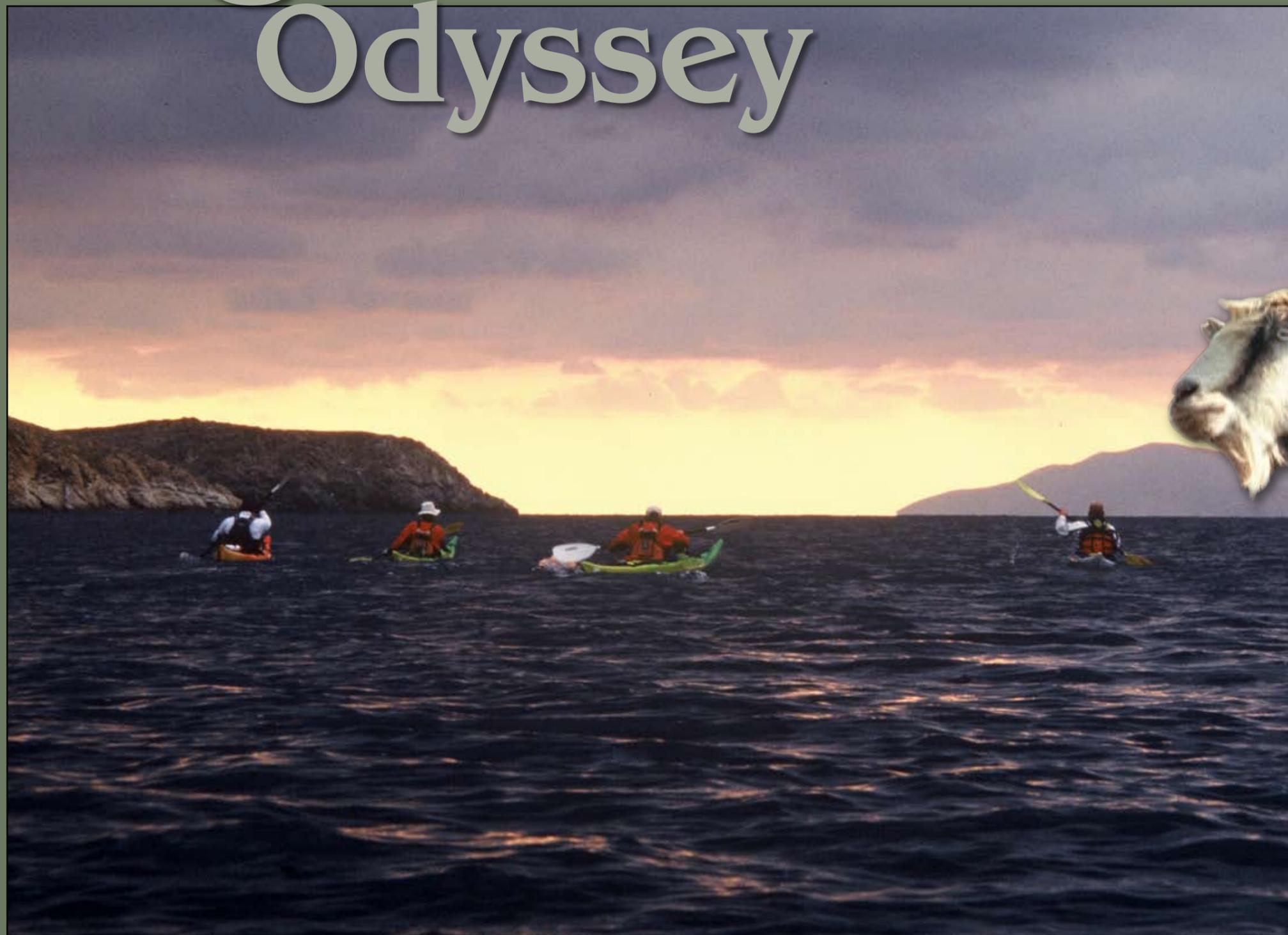


An Aegean Odyssey



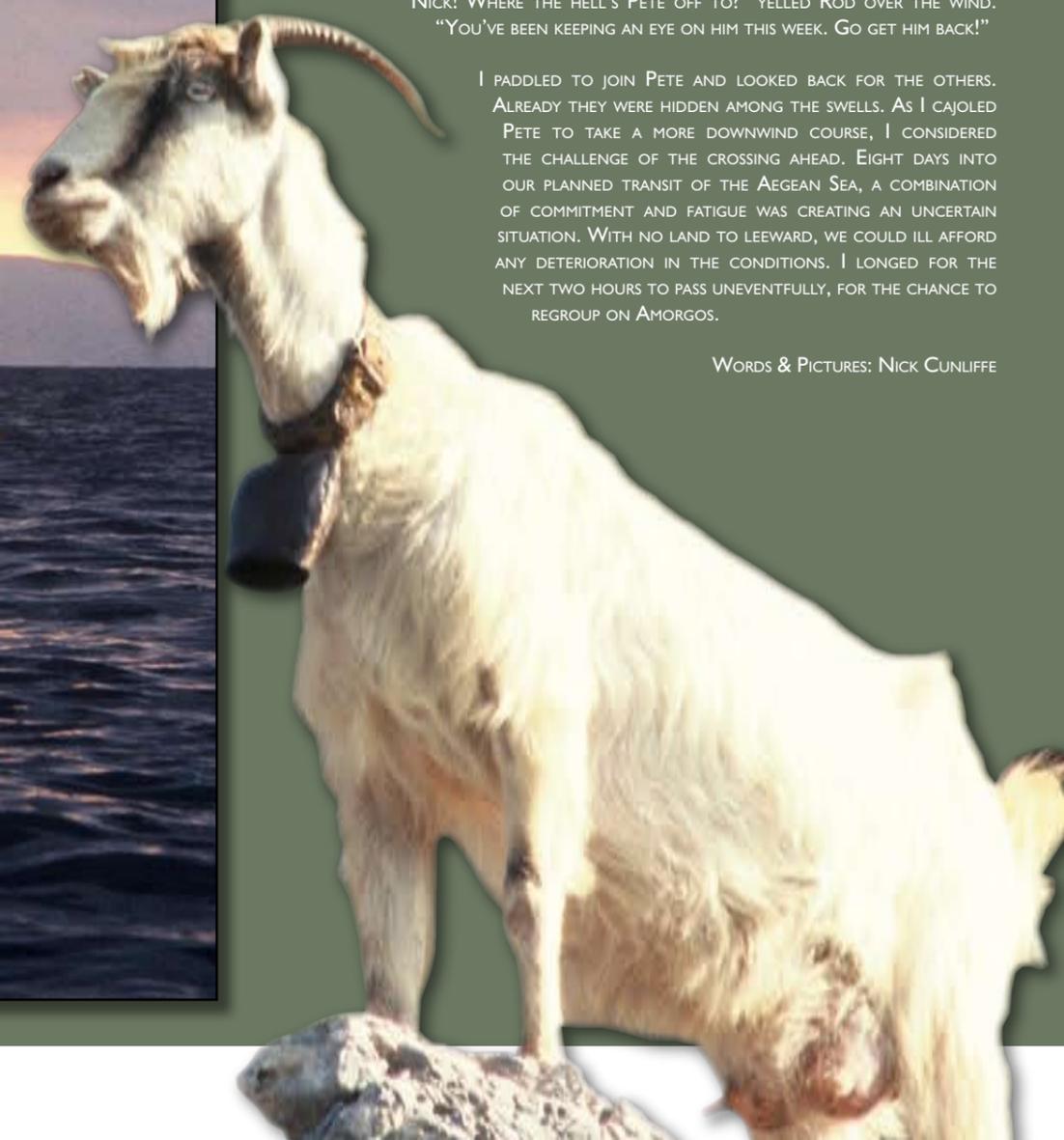
THE STILL-DISTANT CLIFFS OF AMORGOS ROSE AND FELL BEHIND DARK GREY SWELLS AS A 20-KNOT NE WIND BLEW HARD ACROSS OUR COURSE. FIFTY KILOMETRES DOWNWIND LAY THE VOLCANIC ISLAND OF SANTORINI; UPWIND, NOTHING SAVE A FEW SCATTERED GREEK ISLETS UNTIL THE TURKISH MAINLAND. WITH FORTY KILOMETRES UNDER OUR KAYAKS ALREADY TODAY, MOSTLY UPWIND, WE WERE TIRED. THE SUN FELL IN THE SKY BEHIND US; PERHAPS ANOTHER COUPLE OF HOURS BEFORE WE LOST THE LIGHT.

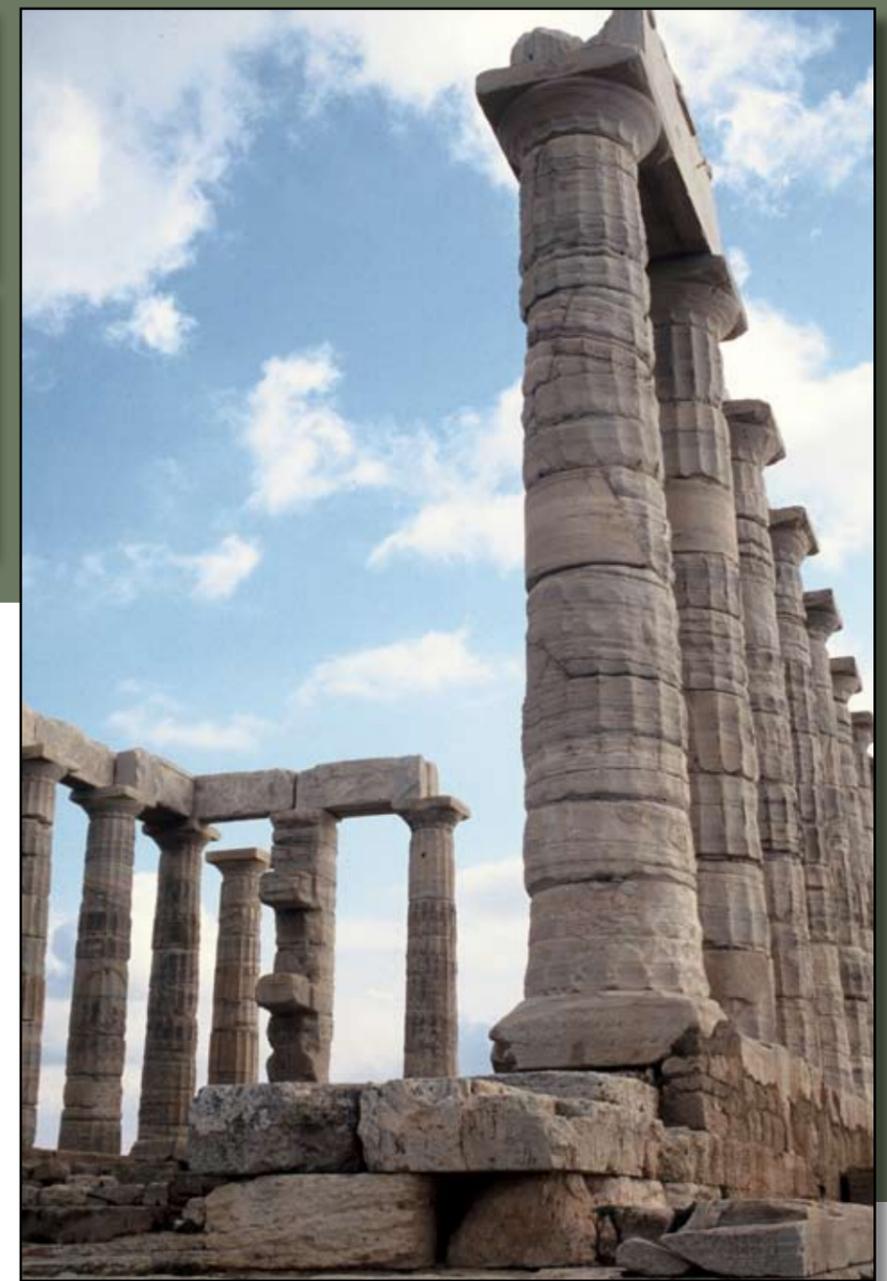
DEPARTING THE SHELTERING MID-CROSSING ISLETS OF ANTIKAROS, WE PADDLED INTO THE WAVES, BLADES SNATCHING IN THE WIND AS OUR BOWS CRASHED FROM CREST TO TROUGH. PETE BEGAN TO DIVERGE FROM THE GROUP, TAKING A MORE COMFORTABLE LINE THROUGH THE HEAVING SEA THAT OBSCURED OUR TARGET. IN LESS THAN A MINUTE PETE WAS FIFTY METRES AWAY.

“NICK! WHERE THE HELL’S PETE OFF TO?” YELLED ROD OVER THE WIND.
“YOU’VE BEEN KEEPING AN EYE ON HIM THIS WEEK. GO GET HIM BACK!”

I PADDLED TO JOIN PETE AND LOOKED BACK FOR THE OTHERS. ALREADY THEY WERE HIDDEN AMONG THE SWELLS. AS I CAJOLED PETE TO TAKE A MORE DOWNWIND COURSE, I CONSIDERED THE CHALLENGE OF THE CROSSING AHEAD. EIGHT DAYS INTO OUR PLANNED TRANSIT OF THE AEGEAN SEA, A COMBINATION OF COMMITMENT AND FATIGUE WAS CREATING AN UNCERTAIN SITUATION. WITH NO LAND TO LEEWARD, WE COULD ILL AFFORD ANY DETERIORATION IN THE CONDITIONS. I LONGED FOR THE NEXT TWO HOURS TO PASS UNEVENTFULLY, FOR THE CHANCE TO REGROUP ON AMORGOS.

WORDS & PICTURES: NICK CUNLIFFE





This Greek adventure began with a speculative email to my friend Rod, who runs a sea kayak guiding business on the Greek Cycladic island of Milos. An ebullient go-getting Aussie with a “she’ll be right” attitude to all things sea kayaking, Rod had planned an ambitious 500km trans-Aegean kayaking route, linking 20-plus island crossings between mainland Greece and Turkey.

The Aegean Sea is a huge, deep basin of over 200,000 square kilometres - a watery gulf between Europe and Asia Minor. Scores of islands lay as scattered stepping-stones between the two worlds. Reaching for the Atlas, I traced an island-hopping odyssey from west to east; the urge to experience this journey was immediately irresistible. Rod’s invitation to join the trip demanded perhaps a half-second hesitation before I was clicking the “send” button and booking my EasyJet flight to Athens.

Thus, on the last day of October 2005 I found myself watching a startling tonnage of ferry traffic negotiating the unfeasibly narrow entrance to Piraeus, Athens’ harbour and the busiest port in the eastern Mediterranean.

Rod’s arrival, in a beaten-up Peugeot 205 layered in a thick film of Milos dust and sporting no discernable rear suspension, suggested that his exuberant attitude also extended to automotive matters. I breathed a silent prayer for the condition of my sea kayak that Rod was providing for the trip.

A speedy rattle through the back streets of Piraeus brought us to a south-facing beach hemmed in by sprawling apartment blocks. Here, loitering among our fleet of sea kayaks at the water’s edge – and clearly ready to go – was the rest of the team.

Brief introductions during a speed-packing session offered snapshot impressions of my companions for the next two weeks: Pete and Justin, a couple of athletic-looking Aussies; Jon, a young UK sea kayaker; Peter, a dry-witted northerner of uncertain age; and, of course, Rod. Immersed to my armpits in the hatches of a borrowed sea boat, I was unable to gain any clearer picture of my new paddling mates before launching into the warm waters of the Saronic Gulf.

And off we set, the team maintaining a cracking pace across the huge bay south of Athens, on a beeline for the Olympic sailing harbour. A light headwind rippled the sea as we glided along the Attica peninsula, gradually escaping the vast urban sprawl of downtown Athens. Eager to complete the 60km of this mainland “warm up”, we paddled on into the evening in idyllic conditions, as the sun slid into the mirror-like waters of the Saronic Gulf. Our first camp, amid straggling bushes at the head of a dusty beach, gave us the satisfying prospect of the now-distant lights of Athens away to the northwest.

The next morning, still beautifully calm, saw us reach Attica’s south tip. Our departure from the mainland followed a visit to the 2500-year old cliff-top ruins of Poseidon’s Temple, an essential place of worship for early mariners and a fitting lunch stop for us before venturing on towards the still-distant Aegean islands. Offshore at last, a 16km crossing in calm waters to the seemingly deserted island of Kea made a suitably peaceful end to our second day afloat.

Rod also enlivened the day with a demonstration of mid-paddle comfort breaks, flopping into the briny to thrill the fishes before scrambling aboard again, cowboy-style, over the rear of his kayak. The rest of the team, clearly accustomed to colder waters, resorted to trusty “pee bottles” rather than take the big dip. Our concerns at the jagged edges of Justin’s hastily improvised Evian bottle were forgotten once Jon revealed, some days later, that the mug from which he enjoyed his evening brew served a double purpose throughout the day. For some reason this revelation particularly unsettled the Aussies. Perhaps the sight of him dunking his Chocolate Bourbon into the scalding liquid was too much for them...

The days slid by as we paddled south, deeper into the Cyclades chain. Kea, Kythnos, Serifos, Sifnos, Antiparos – each day brought a new crossing and a new island experience. The balmy conditions of the early days gave way to unsettled, autumnal weather – an increasing NE breeze created choppy crosswind seas between the islands with messy reflected waves greeting our arrival off each headland.

On day four, as we surfed downwind before an ugly squall that raced us to Kastro’s sheltering harbour on Serifos’ east coast, Team Australia suffered the first casualty. Justin, clearly new to such conditions, finally embraced the elements as a wave lurched unexpectedly under his boat. Swiftly rescued, he determinedly battled into calmer waters as we offered variously supportive observations and suggestions.

Camped that evening in distinctly un-Mediterranean temperatures, we discussed the likely challenges ahead and the ability of our team to meet them. Rod’s plan, while commendably ambitious, had allowed little scope for delay. A daily distance of around 35km – a reasonable target given the modest cruising speed of our Rainbow Laser kayaks – would require all fourteen available days to reach the Turkish mainland. It was also clear that Pete and Justin, despite world-class outrigger canoe skills, were pretty new to this game and, if not buckling under the strain, were certainly finding the conditions taxing. A lengthy debate produced a considered decision and a subtle plan for the days ahead: “keep going until it all goes pear-shaped”.

The discussions had also thrown up another

fascinating revelation. Rod, our man in Greece, had arrived some years ago on the island of Milos as a gold-seeking geologist. Having failed to unearth the real stuff, he had stumbled across a far more precious gem in the shape of Petrinela, a beautiful islander who had caused him to forget his original quest. Thus, the sea kayak business had been an inventive project for his new island-based existence. Work and family commitments, however, had reduced the available time for our Aegean adventure to a minimum - Rod was clearly under the cosh and had a must-make ferry booked for Milos several days hence. As the wind blew across the restless sea, I began to sense the true commitment of this trip.

All sea kayak journeys develop their own unique character; this one was no exception. Committing paddling days, combining 16-20km crossings and long unbroken stretches of limestone cliffs, typically ended in the calmer waters of protected inlets, hiding peaceful fishing villages at their heads. Here lay the fleshpots of civilisation that weary sea kayakers craved: deserted beach bars, abandoned for the winter, provided grassy terraces upon which to pitch tents; village stores allowed daily restocking with fresh bread and local delicacies; taverna owners, hoping for a little late-season trade, supplied vast Greek salads and fresh-caught fish, washed down with the produce of the islands’ vineyards. Accustomed to sea kayak journeys in more isolated environments, I found myself questioning the virtues of wilderness paddling compared to the delights of this Aegean gastronomic odyssey.

Seven days into the journey we reached the 8km sound between Paros and Naxos. This central region of the Cyclades group is notorious for the strength of the prevailing Meltemi wind; sure enough, our progress from Athens had been marked by a daily increase in breeze. Indeed, we had spent the morning battling a rising headwind as we paddled north up the east coast of Paros, snatching refuge wherever possible as we inched towards the final sheltering headland. Hunkered down in the lee of Marpissa’s harbour wall, we gazed across a wasteland of tumbling wave crests towards Naxos’ distant shore as a 25-30kt crosswind turned the sea to foam.

For the first time since leaving Athens we risked losing momentum, this stormy crossing threatening to bar our progress east. I felt conflicting emotions; my desire to take on the wild conditions was tempered by concern for some of my fellow group members. My uncertainties were short-lived; with confidence enough for all of us, Rod announced our impending departure.

“This’ll be interesting”, I mused as we covered the final kilometre of protected water. House-sized waves surged past as we organised ourselves under

the cliffs. Pairing up with Pete and Justin, Rod and I paddled out into the sound.

“If this goes wrong, it’ll go in the first kilometre”, I assured myself, gauging the effort required to make a rescue, set up a tow and regain the protection of Paros. I didn’t dare consider the implications of a mid-crossing incident.

Boom! I needn’t have worried, for only 300 metres into the sound a huge wave bore down on us, its foaming crest catching Pete square in the chest. He disappeared downwind, buried in a wall of water. Spinning to surf after him, I could hear Pete long before the wave released him.

“Yeah!” he roared, still upright, still stroking determinedly towards Naxos. I grinned in relief; maybe we would get away with this wildly exciting crossing. Two hours later, I was still grinning as we surfed down Paxos’ west coast in a solid 30kt tailwind, competing for rides on the bigger sets.

That evening, camped among sheltering bushes at the head of a beautiful crescent beach, we lazed around a driftwood fire, recalling our near misses and great waves. It seemed that nothing could prevent our onward progress towards Turkey. The next day, we figured, would be an easy paddle to Amorgos...

And so, that next evening, we finally reached the sheltering inlet on the south tip of Amorgos as the last rays of light illuminated the water ahead. Weary from a twelve-hour day battling headwinds through the Little Cyclades, we beached our kayaks with relief and pitched camp on windswept gravel at the head of the beach. Too tired to discuss plans, sleep came quickly that night.

Daybreak arrived with news from Rod that the wind had, if anything, gained strength during the night. The nylon fabric pressed against my face offered an equally accurate forecast. A breakfast meeting gave the chance to review our physical condition: all minor aches and pains were forgotten at the appalling sight of Pete’s weeping sores, his sides chafed bare under the waistband of his shorts. Eight days of Aegean exposure had not been kind to Pete’s delicate skin. These soggy craters vied for attention with his fantastically blistered hands that now attempted to provide first aid to the rest of his tattered body. As the horrified team gazed silently at this sorry spectacle, Peter found the words that eluded the rest of us: “By ‘eck Pete, for a trained athlete you’re a ****ing mess!”

Improving conditions later that morning allowed us to reach the sheltering waters of Katapola, where we agreed to spend the remainder of the day. Tiredness forgotten, we played tourists among the bars and restaurants of this welcoming village. Save for three flotilla yachts tied up to the stone harbour wall, we appeared to be the only travellers in town. Rod

obtained a forecast for the week ahead, with the happy news that we could expect calmer conditions as we paddled east. Fears that Amorgos would be the end of our Aegean adventure were dispelled and we looked forward to the next, most committing section of the journey with renewed confidence.

Twenty-four hours later we had exchanged the comforts of village life for a barren, rocky beach at the north tip of Amorgos, surrounded by towering limestone peaks and equally mountainous stacks of driftwood. An exhilarating white water ride beneath overhanging sea cliffs, swept along on the decaying swell, had taken us to this distant edge of the Cyclades chain. 80km beyond lay the island of Kalymnos, part of the Dodecanese group and our final stepping-stones to the Turkish mainland. Two rocky islets, Kinaros and Levitha, rose sheer from the ocean to provide the only landings in this eastern expanse of the Aegean. Climbing to the top of a nearby peak, Rod and I gazed at our objectives and muttered the same hope: “give us two calm days.”

A restless night gave way to a 5am start, afloat before daylight and beyond the huge sea cliffs of Amorgos’ northern tip as the sun cleared the horizon. With a gentle swell beneath our boats, we absorbed the inspiring view before turning to our task: the

25km crossing to Kinaros. Poseidon was in an indulgent mood as we cruised effortlessly toward the calm waters of this isolated islet. We rafted beneath its cliff-bound southern shore and speculated on the likelihood of a landing place. A hidden inlet produced a remarkable surprise: a tiny shingle beach between guarding cliffs, a driftwood shack, chicken coop and an old couple, visibly startled at the arrival of this international paddling team.

One more 10km hop took us to the south east corner of Levitha, where we scratched around for a suitable camp site among bushy limestone terraces. A brief hike to the summit of this small island revealed an almost unbroken seascape, with no sign of Kalymnos on the hazy horizon, still 35km distant.

The next dawn found us at the eastern tip of Levitha. Already a fresh northerly breeze blew across our course, creating waves that slapped noisily against our hulls. Aiming a few degrees upwind to compensate the likely drift, we began the crossing. With no visible land ahead we followed a careful course, ticking off rest breaks each hour. Mid-crossing, as the hills of Kalymnos began to appear ahead, the monotony was enlivened by a passing freighter that seemed determined to match our every course change. The irony was not lost on us



as we sought to avoid a collision on this otherwise empty ocean. Finally, we watched our would-be pursuer pass 100m astern, with not a sign of life anywhere on deck.

Kalymnos continued to play cat and mouse among the clouds; distant hills gradually took detailed shape, white smudges became villages and inshore boat traffic began to cross our course. Eight weary hours after departing Levitha, we finally beached our kayaks and set off in search of the nearest celebratory drink. Nothing could stop us reaching Turkey now.

Two days later, our final day afloat, such confidence was but a memory as Rod sat alongside the Greek naval vessel that had just intercepted our course. Departing the final stepping-stone of Pserimos, our beeline route for the Turkish mainland – tantalisingly visible only 10km distant – had taken us past a Greek military outpost. The sight of a sentry racing from his observation post was alarming enough; before we could discuss a plan, the roar of diesel engines brought our challengers into view. No grasp of the language was necessary to understand the outcome of Rod's discussion: shaken heads and arms pointed in

the direction of Kos told their own story. Deflated, we turned our kayaks and headed back towards Greece.

Ashore in Kos town, it seemed that we had reached the end of the road. Turkey was a one-hour paddle across the Skandari strait; it might have been the dark side of the Moon so far as the Greek military was concerned. The game was up; or so I thought, not reckoning on the "never say die" Aussie spirit. Pete and Justin triumphantly returned from their meeting with the harbour police, clutching permission papers for the crossing. We raced around the harbour to the customs' office, stamped our passports and charged back to the beach on a wave of euphoria. An hour later, we were disbelievably sipping Turkish beer, our quest to cross the Aegean complete.

That evening, we began our farewells. Pete and Justin remained in Kos, en route to Istanbul, while the rest of us boarded the overnight ferry back to Athens. It seemed strange to be cruising, in fifteen hours, what had taken the previous two weeks to paddle. As I reflected on our adventures afloat, I realised how little I had known of the Aegean before I began the trip. With no expectations upon arriving in Athens,

my impressions of the islands, and the kayaking between them, had been hugely impressive. Rod's imaginative plan and excellent leadership, combined with the fine company of my team members made the entire experience unforgettable. I will return to paddle the Aegean again one day.

Nick Cunliffe spent two weeks crossing the Aegean Sea in November 2005 with Rod Feldtmann, Peter Roscoe, Jon Hunter, Peter Avery and Justin Gallager.

Rod is the owner of Sea Kayak Milos, specialising in sea kayaking holidays to this magnificent island in the Greek Cyclades.

Nick runs Surf-Lines, an outdoor activity business in Llanberis, Snowdonia.

Courses include a wide range of sea kayak training programmes.

