



PHOTOS JEREMY EVANS

A wilder ride



Jeremy Evans and daughter Ivory went in search of a catsailing Shangri-La in the famous bay of Vassiliki, Greece.

Location, location, location... that's what matters most! Two decades ago Simon Morgan set out on a quest. He wanted to find a sailing nirvana where it blew hard every day, satiating his newfound obsession for blasting in a Hobie 16.

Simon comes from a well-known sailing family.

His dad Tony won a silver medal at the Olympic games in Tokyo in 1964, racing a Flying Dutchman with Keith Musto. So Simon enjoyed his first sailing experience when he was a wee lad, just tall enough to stand in the cockpit and pop his nose over the gunwale of Tony's Finn. A lot more sailing followed, and then Simon discovered Hobie cats. He was smitten. Nothing else would do.

Simon bought a VW Campervan, hitched up his Hobie and left home. He roamed across Europe seeking Shangri-La, and heard rumours of a windsurfing paradise in the Ionian Sea. Windsurfing and Hobie cat sailing have a lot in

common – both are rubbish without wind, and in those days of sinking boards you really needed at least the top end of a Force 4 to enjoy windsurfing. Simon pointed his trusty van towards Greece, located the island of Levkas and drove until he found the promised land – Vassiliki!

Fast-forward two decades and Simon is still in Greece, having established Wildwind. We went to find out if it lives up to its billing as ‘the ultimate sailing and windsurfing holiday’.

Greek charm

The Wildwind season runs from May 1 until October 15. The basic deal is that you buy a week’s sailing holiday including flights, transfer, accommodation and all the sailing you can handle with free instruction six days a week. If you want to include windsurfing, that can be booked with Club Vass which is right next door, plus other activities such as cycling, diving, waterskiing, wakeboarding, aqua-safaris and kayaking are also available.

On this occasion, most of the family got left behind. Instead, I spent a week at Wildwind as the guest of my 17-year-old cat-sailing daughter Ivory. She wasn’t too sure about taking her dad for company, and nor was I too sure about spending a week at Vassiliki with a teenager.

One important issue with holidays is the hassle-factor required to get there, for which I would award Wildwind four stars, maybe four and a half! It’s an easy trip with a short flight and coach ride, when you can sit back and admire the view as the Greek countryside rolls by. Levkas is an island, but it’s so close to the mainland you hardly notice as the coach crosses the bridge over the Levkas Canal. It also appears to be reasonably unspoilt. For sure there is occasional tacky tourism, but the island has retained much of its Greek charm.

Vassiliki, tucked away on the south side of the island, has a magnificent setting, with a rugged landscape and big hills all around. The horseshoe-shaped bay is huge, with a fishing village tucked in one corner and a high headland on the opposite side from where the famous wind blows. A dusty road runs parallel with the shingle beach at the head of the bay, providing access to a scattering of small hotels, apartment blocks, windsurfing centres and of course Wildwind. It’s fairly quiet and reasonably undeveloped, though for sure there will be more buildings beside the beach in time.

You can’t miss the Wildwind turn-off – there’s a Hobie 14 pointing the way at the side of the road! The setting is really very pleasant. Just a small gaggle of modest apartments gathered round an outdoor pool, with a couple of bar/restaurants, two minutes walk from the water’s edge. Some apartments have a sea view, and all you can see is the bright blue Mediterranean glimpsed through trees, dotted with Hobies and dinghies.

The Wildwind compound does not provide a luxury experience, but I’d still rate it another 4.5 stars. Some may find the apartments a little cramped and lacking in privacy, but I found the whole set-up ideal. Our next-door neighbours were a German family whose two teenage sons were



Above Vassiliki bay is a perfect natural sailing amphitheatre, with hot sun, warm water and reliable breezes.

Right The morning sessions are usually light winds, ideal for beginners.

Below With binoculars on the beach, RIBs on the water and VHF communication, the rescue service appeared fast and reliable.



“ With the famous wind ‘Eric’ up to full speed, we SAW more than a few pitchpoles ”

due to race a Hobie 16 Spi at the ISAF youth worlds. Dad was a keen catsailor but mum wasn't interested – all she wanted to do was read books and relax, while her family enjoyed their sailing. Having endured too many terrible sailing holidays she rated Wildwind as the best ever – by the end of the week they had decided to book a repeat trip the following year.

Waiting for Eric...

So, how about the famous wind ‘Eric’ that blasts across the bay every afternoon? Eric is a thermal wind, which is at its most potent in high summer. Like any famous wind, it is not 100 per cent reliable. I had experienced Eric's fitfulness on previous visits, so was wary about pushing expectations too high. We chose mid-June as the best possible time of year – ahead of the main holiday season, not too blazing, but hot enough to crank up the breeze. And we got it right. Eric turned on the moment we arrived, having refused

to perform during the previous week. Five out of six days provided conditions that came close to perfection, with hot sun and warm wind.

It was very light in the mornings – just enough for learners to learn and hotshots to toddle round the bay. Then after a civilised break for lunch – picnic at the apartment or a meal at the Wildwind beachside café – spent waiting for Eric's arrival, he was blowing by 1400hrs. It quickly built to the top end of Force 4, occasionally hitting Force 5-6, holding strong into the evening while the sun was in the sky. The only exception was our sixth and final sailing day, when the sky was overcast in the morning and Eric's behaviour was temperamental in the afternoon. But by then we were well and truly sailed out, so it really didn't matter!

Sailing amphitheatre

The sailing amphitheatre provided by Vassiliki is superb. You are given limits to stay inside, but the area is still as big as anyone could wish for. The

Right When the ‘Eric’ wind was in full swing there were plenty of pitchpoles out in the bay.



wind is strictly side-shore – reach out on one tack, then reach back in towards the beach. As an alternative, the instructors ran a few races which were essentially relaxed and friendly, but would no doubt swing to a more serious level when people want that kind of competition. With Eric up to full speed, we also saw more than a few pitchpoles while the Wildwind asymmetric dinghies were going over every afternoon. With binoculars on the beach, RIBs on the water and VHF communication, the rescue service appeared fast and reliable – definitely worth five stars.

Wildwind's fleet includes pretty much all the Hobie range. They have a load of Hobie 16s as the perfect cat for strong wind blasting, plus a handful of F18 Tigers (due for replacement in 2008), singlehanded FX-Ones, Pacifics and Hobie 15s for more relaxed cruising and a single, magnificent 20ft Hobie Fox. On the dinghy front they have Picos, Lasers and Vagos, plus a curious mixture of one-offs including a 49er, RS400 and Laser SB3 keelboat – definitely fun for an all-out ride!

Instruction is there if you want it, with most RYA courses on offer from Level 1 'how to sail' through to race training on cats or dinghies. The only extra money you have to pay is for RYA certificates and booklets.

The Wildwind instructors seemed like a nice bunch of people who were friendly, relaxed and very professional. Some had been working there for years – none as long as the boss Joe Bennet, who will start his 13th Wildwind season in 2008! Joe is a very accomplished F18 sailor who also manages to spend most of each winter kitesurfing in South Africa – nice work if you can get it.

As Simon Morgan points out, 'All the instructors have to be good – it's simply too windy for them not to be.' On our visit they included Drew Taylor, another top-ranked F18 racer, and former Laser national champions from the UK and Ireland.

Not only sailing...

From Wildwind it's a 10-minute stroll along the shingle beach into Vassiliki. Surprisingly, tourism (and one suspects a handy dose of EU money) has made this quaint little fishing village seem a lot nicer than it was when I visited two decades ago. It's busier with restaurants and bars lining the quay, but also charming and just the right size to be hassle-free. There are loads of reasonable places to eat or drink in a nice setting, plus a few useful shops including two excellent bakeries and a slightly larger supermarket a short walk from the town.

If you want to enjoy nightlife through to dawn,

Vassiliki will provide. This suited Ivory down to the ground, many hours after I had plugged in the mosquito killer (watch out for them) and hit the hay. What's more, Vassiliki seems pretty safe and friendly for a teenager to be out and about with new friends late at night. It's neither loutish nor scary, and when you've had enough it's a pleasant walk home.

Wildwind provide their own evening entertainments with an organised welcome meal, barbecue and cocktail night for those who want to sign on, including a live music show courtesy of the more extrovert instructors – not my cup of tea, but most visitors thought it was great. What I did like best – apart from the sailing – was the cycling, which is quite frankly awesome. Wildwind has a small fleet of mountain bikes for their guests and there are superb rides through the olive groves and up the hillside. For an après sail activity, I managed 90-minute rides in the early evening most days. I seldom met anyone – they were all still out sailing! On an even more relaxed level, Wildwind offer a Healthy Options programme for 'not so keen on sailing partners', which includes daily yoga and pilates classes, fitness and aerobic activities, a guided herbal walk around the interior of the island, aqua safari, cycling and massage with an inclusive package starting at £399. Alternatively, you can book into bits of the programme to make a change from sailing.

Your kind of holiday?

Wildwind is unlike anything else. It's independent and runs with its own style which is very relaxed. The location is very pleasant and easy to reach from the UK. The sailing is potentially superb, but strong winds rely totally on Eric. The equipment is pretty good – very strong on cats and perfect for a jaw-dropping introduction to twin-hulled sailing, but the boats are more of a novice/intermediate level for dinghy sailors.

So, how did it work out with a teenage daughter dragging along her dad? I did my thing, she did her thing – we touched base for breakfast and dinner to check what was going on. Excellent on both sides. ■



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Further information:
 The Wildwind season starts on May 1. Prices for one week's sailing holiday including flights, transfers, accommodation, sailing and free instruction start at £499. For more information visit www.wildwind.co.uk