

The Ionian Islands

written by Marcus | 14 December, 2014



We were told by Doerte way back in Lübeck that after travelling for four weeks you stop counting the number of weeks. She had learnt this while on a 3 month tour round Europe in a camper van. Apparently we're now into our 4th month on the road but it's only the number of each day in my diary that gives us any idea how long we've been away. It also takes a bit of thinking to work out what day of the week it is. Without the normal structure of five days work and two days rest there's not a lot to differentiate a Monday from a Sunday (7 days of work for us), apart from when we find the shops shut early on a Sunday when we really needed some food. But coming up in December are some important dates which need some planning to be in a suitable place on the right day. First it's Kirsty's birthday, then mine, then of course

Christmas day before we hit New Year's Eve. We've decided that for all four we'll be on a different Greek island.



Sarandë

From Sarandë we catch a hydrofoil over to Corfu. This is exciting as hydrofoils feel a bit like flying on water but also because the tandem doesn't fit fully into the cargo bay and half the bike is hanging over one of the 'wings'. We keep a nervous eye on the view from the window in case a back wheel comes past.



The Flying Dolphin hydrofoil



Tandem on the Hydrofoil (just)

But we all arrive safely at the other end and get deposited onto the dock at Corfu Town (Kerkira) just as a few sprinklings of rain start to fall. Corfu is one of the greenest of the Greek islands and as any Irishman will tell you, you don't get a green island without a bit of rain.

We stop for a coffee and to work out where to stay that night but there seems to be a mistake with the bill. It's six times more than we'd been used to paying for the last few weeks. Granted we get at least six times more than the tiny cups of thick black Turkish coffee we'd been getting since Serbia but even so we're slightly shocked. Isn't Greece supposed to be recovering from near financial ruin? How can people afford these prices? In a country where they don't even have a sewerage system that can handle toilet paper it's surprisingly expensive.



Corfu Town

But it's the same in the supermarkets and also when we try to find a hotel, it's all several times more expensive than anywhere this side of Helsinki. But the next day is Kirsty's birthday so after some haggling we secure a room, grab some dinner and enjoy avoiding a night under canvas in a thunderstorm as a special birthday treat.



Corfu Town

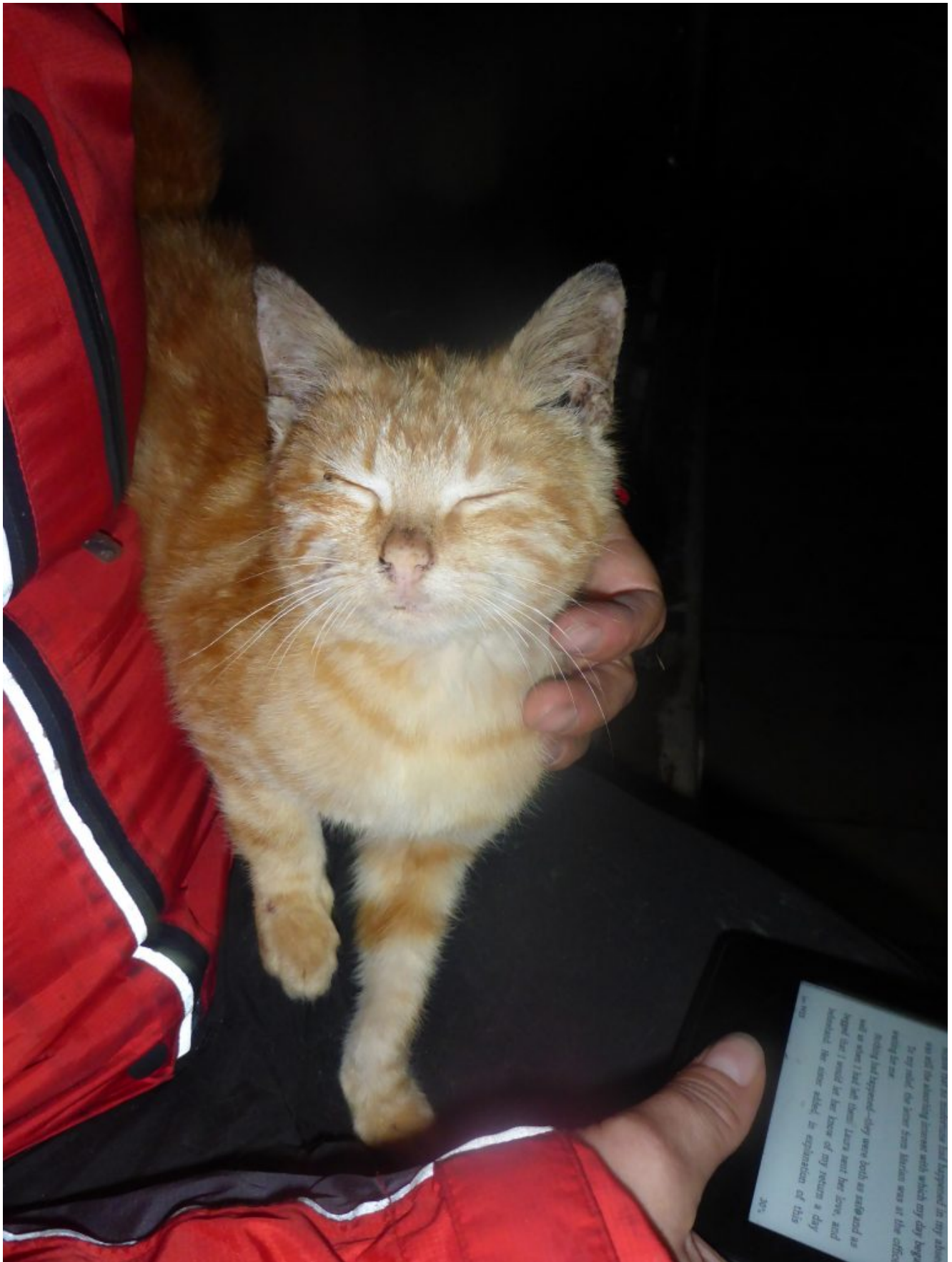
The rain continues the next day but we persevere with looking round the narrow streets of the old part of Corfu Town, which is all very nice even when soggy. It's the kind of day that would be best spent on a sofa with a couple of good films to watch but our Couchsurfing requests were a bit last minute and went unanswered. Instead we hide in McDonalds nursing a coffee and making use of their WiFi for a while.



Corfu Town

We eventually return to the hotel to collect our kit and ride out north to look for somewhere peaceful to camp. But Corfu is

an island that knows how to make money from its assets and so almost every inch of coastline that's easily accessible seems to be occupied by a hotel, apartments or a bar owned by either Harry or Jimmy. These two seem to have done very well for themselves. Luckily most of these are sat dormant as the island is largely in hibernation at this time of year so we sneak into one of Jimmy's beach bars that has it's own waterside lawn and pitch the tent. The first of my gifts to Kirsty is a jar of Nutella and the second is a small ginger kitten that turns up during our dinner and curls up on her lap. We imaginatively christen him Stavros. All planned of course and he makes the birthday girl very happy.



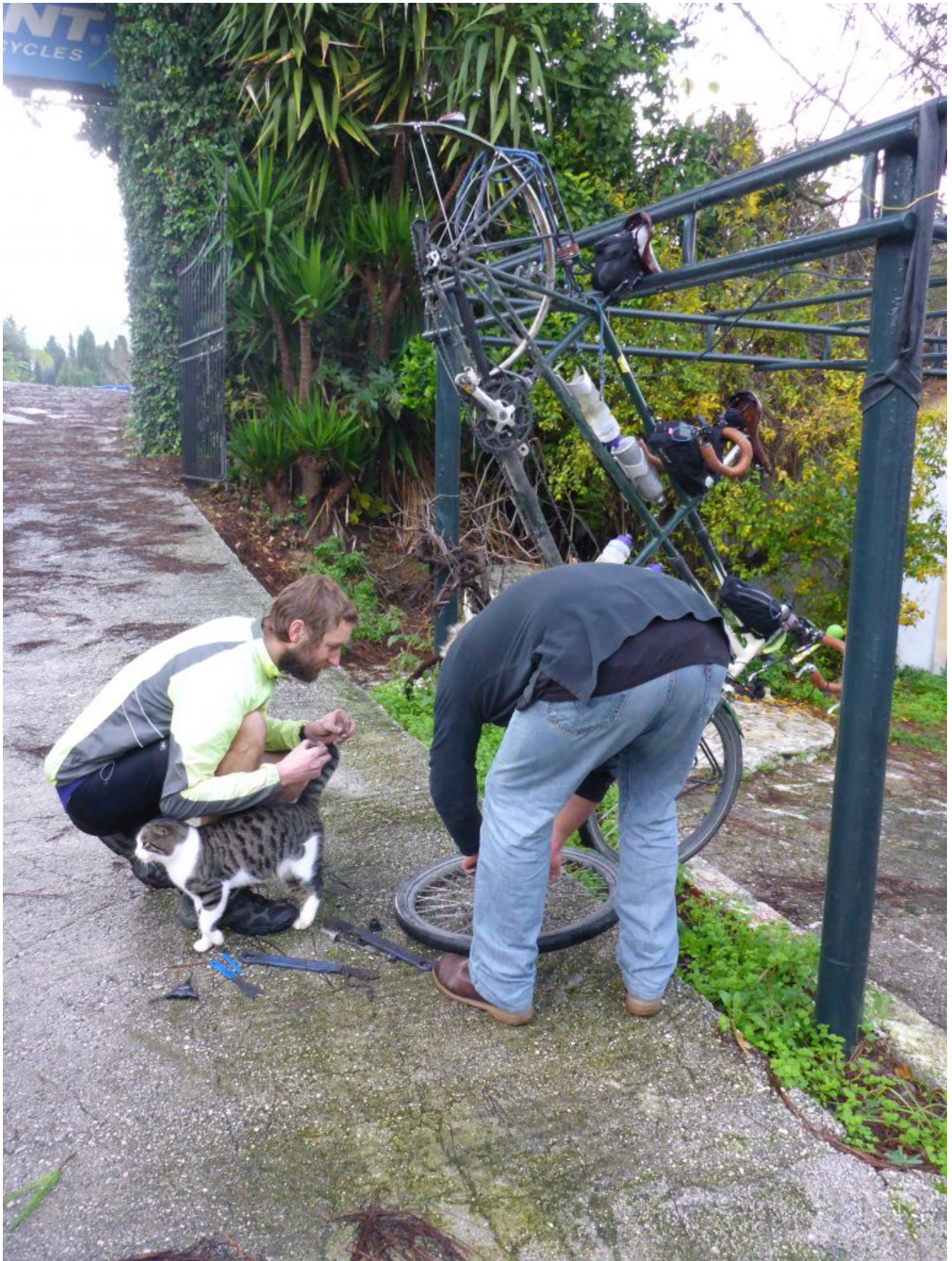
Happy Stavros



Happy Kirsty

It's a mountainous island with the biggest hills sat at the north end which is where we are heading. On the way the rear

hub needs a bit of adjustment again and by sheer luck we turn up at Corfu Mountain Bikes at the same time that the owner has called in to feed the cat. The shop should be closed for the winter but he's happy to let us use a few tools to get it sorted out and even buys us a coffee.



Hub maintenance with help from cat



Corfu coast road

Back on the road we work our way up and round the coast road that hugs the cliffs. Where there aren't buildings there is dense vegetation and fruit trees are laden with oranges, lemons and mandarins. We're again reminded why everything grows so well when another thunderstorm hits while we shelter under a small canopy next to an artist's studio.



Raining and pouring



The rain has left the ground extremely boggy so a boat would be a better bet rather than a tent that evening. After a bit of searching for somewhere dry we chance upon an old beachside house on the north coast that is at the early stages of being renovated. It's a great spot and a nice solid shelter so we trudge down the muddy track to the front door (no door) set up the bed on the floor (no flooring) and watch the lightning over the mountains in Albania back on the mainland through the windows (no windows).



Beachside accomodation



Beachside accommodation, Roda



Storms over Albania

The next couple of days mainly involve climbing sharply up from sea level, getting a great view, then plunging down

through ghost-town like beach resorts before winching back up again. The rain and thunder come and go but it's warm enough not to matter too much. We suspect it's much more preferable than being here in the summer when the island must be infested with tourists on scooters as there are dozens of hire centres. The 40 degree heat at that time of year would also make the riding much tougher.





Agios Georgios



Earning a view





Looking down to Palaiokastritsa

In the centre of the island we catch a glimpse of an area that is not devoted to serving tourists with several sheep farms and some orchards, but judging by the state of the houses it looks to be far less profitable than the tourist trade. How these communities afford to buy their groceries is hard to understand.

On our last evening on the island we stop to buy some fruit from a van parked by the side of the road and get our bag of fresh oranges and kiwi fruit bought for us by another friendly punter. We spend the night high on a hill next to Kaisers Throne overlooking the rest of the island with a couple of cats for company.



Sheltering for a soggy sunset



Looking towards north Corfu



Night time view over Corfu

In the morning a glove thief pays us a visit. He would have got away with it too if he hadn't been caught red-mouthed trying to take the second one out of my helmet which was left on the ground. After an extensive search of the area we can't find the first glove so the thief gets a scolding which of course he won't understand being a Greek dog. There's nothing for it but to put up with wearing my winter gloves for the next few days until we can find a bike shop.



Looking towards South Corfu



Kaisers Throne

On our way to the ferry port of Lefiniki we call into a local distillery to buy the island's speciality: kumquat liqueur. It's not quite a single malt but should be a nice little throat warmer in the evenings.

It's a 90 minute boat trip back to the mainland and from the deck we can see that the road up ahead doesn't look much flatter with mountains looming along the coast in all directions. The colours are also browns and reds so we it looks like we may have a drier day or two ahead than on the lush, green, rain soaked Corfu. In the evening we get some puppies for company who are being nursed by an enthusiastic mother under a tree in a layby but have run out of Greek names to give them.



Igoumenitsa



Layby puppies

Despite the size of the mountains when we start heading south the next morning we find the road is much easier than Corfu with gradients in single figures and our speed (mostly) in double figures. We get some great views along the coast and back inland towards the bigger hills and thankfully it's warm and dry day so the jackets stay off but my hands get sweaty.





Our destination that day is Preveza and as we approach the town we spot some perfect camp spots alongside a huge and empty beach but without food and water yet we're not able to

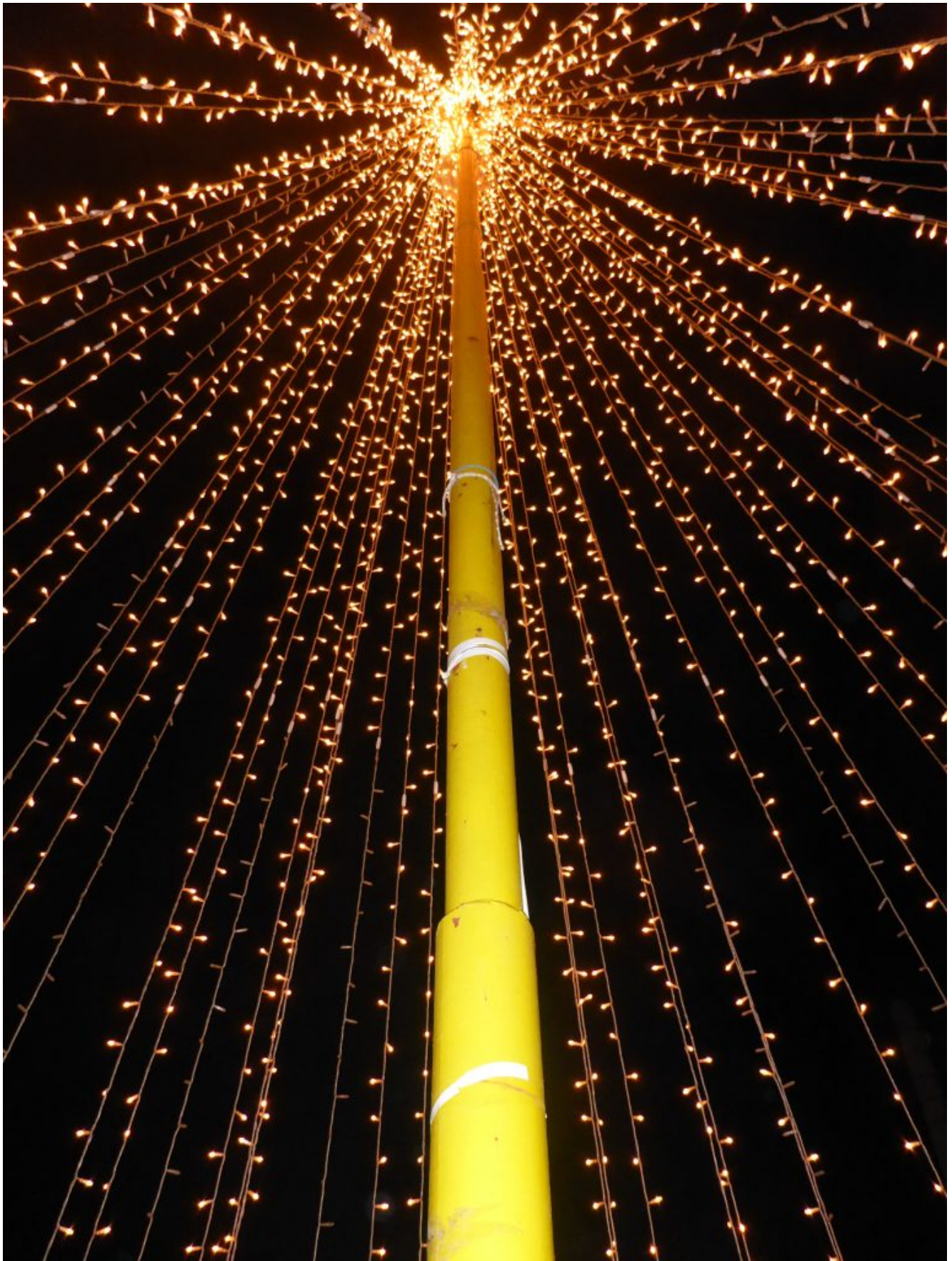
stop. This is often the way and works the same for the best picnic spots as you always pass them at the wrong time of day. In the end it doesn't matter as a last minute Couch Surfing request has been answered by Tassos and he's happy to host us for the night right in the middle of the town.



Tassos, our host in Preveza

Along with a spare room Tassos has a restaurant where he treats us to some very tasty mezze. The only drawback is that we have to put up with having to watch 22 men with extraordinary haircuts chasing a football on the TV (Olympiakos 4 – Malmo 2). A few of Tassos' friends have also been invited but no-one seems interested in the game and instead they have a heated and high volume discussion about politics. Tassos gives us a brief overview as to what the conversation is about which is to do with the upcoming elections and who is the most suitable out of a selection of mostly unsuitable candidates. Everyone is finding it tough and

the higher cost of living of taking its toll. They also have to put up with some over zealous police who have started enforcing laws like having to wear a helmet on a scooter and not smoking in public places which Tassos considers to be 'ridiculous' and are also largely ignored by just about everyone.



Christmas lights, Preveza

Preveza is another town that comes alive in the summer when it becomes a mecca for sailors from around the world. But even in

December there is enough going on in the streets outside our window all night to make sure we don't get much sleep. It seems the Greeks prefer to stay up late and catch up on their sleep during the afternoon siesta when a lot of the smaller shops will be shut.

The lack of sleep along with the ill effects of a mysterious green sludge that has been growing in our water bottles mean that Kirsty needs a bit more rest but we don't have much to do the next day. I'd suffered on Corfu with a dodgy stomach too, so after a wander round the town we give the bottles a long overdue scrub and saddle up again for a short ride to the island of Lefkada. However to get there we have to negotiate a subsea tunnel that runs underneath the entrance to the huge Ambracian Gulf that sits next to Preveza.

Some research had told us that you can't cycle through this tunnel even though it's only 1500m long. We'd also found reports of some cyclists getting charged a fortune to take a taxi through it, while another had simply turned up and played innocent and then been carried through in a pick-up by the tunnel operatives. The latter seemed preferable so we made for the tunnel entrance and nearly began the descent down underground, but suddenly there were red lights in front of us so we pulled up with a queue of traffic behind us. We waited for a short while then a truck arrived with flashing orange lights and a man jumped out waving his finger saying 'no bikes in the tunnel'. He instructed us to wait for 10 minutes in a layby and someone would come and get us. Low and behold a pickup turned up and after some shaking of heads when they see the size of the tandem it gets loaded and we're driven through to the other side. This is actually all part of the service that they offer but they don't like to advertise it as it's clearly a pain. For us it saves an extra 100km of riding around the bay to get to Lefkada which would be a much bigger pain.



Getting a lift through the sub-sea tunnel

Once on our way again we are joined by a chap from Norfolk who now lives on Lefkada and is going for a spin on a shiny carbon road bike. He pulls alongside for a brief chat and tells us how he once rode back to the UK in 11 days on the same bike with nothing but a credit card in his back pocket. He admits it was a bit stupid and we'd agree as he must have missed a lot on the way.



The causeway to Lefkada



Lefkada Marina

There are quite a few ex-pats living round here who have been drawn to the area by the warmer climate and reliable wind conditions and after a night on the top of the island of Lefkada we're off to stay with a couple more: Joe and Karen who have been living in Vasiliki for 18 years now with Joe working for a sailing holiday company and Karen as a yoga instructor. We were put in touch by a mutual friend who had also worked with boats on Lefkada and also ridden back to the UK several years ago. In fact Quinty and Rona's epic ride which included climbing over the alps in the middle of winter, has been an inspiration for us. We've decided not to follow Quinty's advice of carrying a crowbar to fend off unfriendly dogs though.



Dockside in Nydri, Lefkada

The weather is a bit British on our way down to Vasiliki, which sits at the south of this small island and we get a good soaking right at the top of the big hill before dropping back down to the sea. But once we're there we're welcomed in to their huge house overlooking the bay. Joe admits that he's actually house sitting for the owner who only uses it for a few weeks of the year. It's a chance for us to wash just about everything we own which is unfortunate for Joe, Karen and their son Harry as they have to eat dinner with me in a pair of tights and a t-shirt. Kirsty dresses properly and is resplendent in her 'going out' skirt (and a t-shirt).



Cyclist tan. Or maybe she just needs a shower.



Joe, Karen and Harry, our fantastic hosts in Vasiliki.

For anyone with a passing interest in wind-powered water sports Vasiliki is one of the top locations in the world so it almost seems a shame that we have to catch a ferry the next day rather than a yacht. Perhaps once day we'll return and join one of Joe's sailing holidays. I don't think they'll be leaving anytime soon and who can blame them.



Another ferry crossing

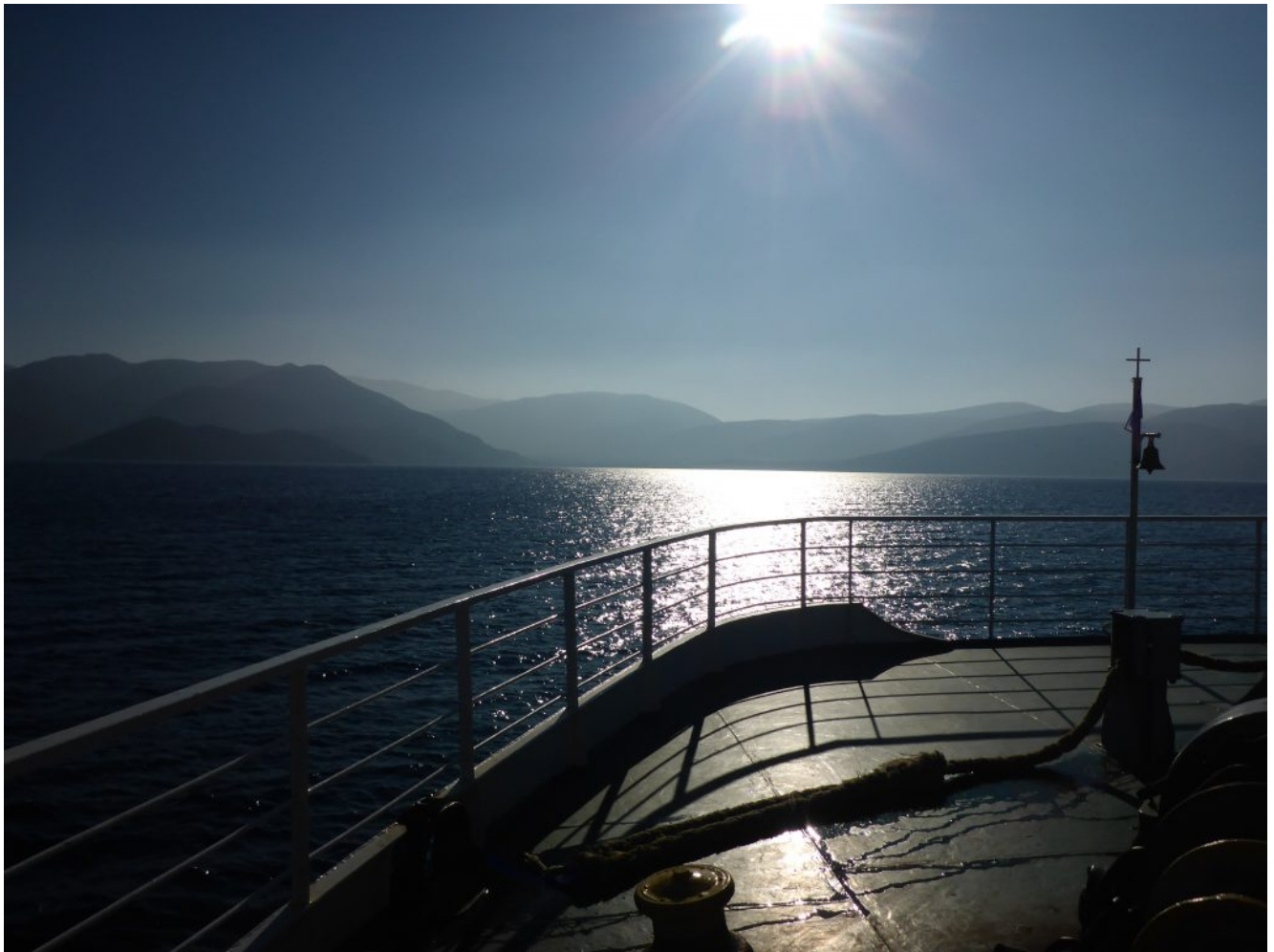


Vasiliki

The ferry takes us onto our next island of Kefalonia after a quick stop at Ithica. For fans of the ancient classics Ithica is where Homer's *Odyssey* was set. Kefalonia also has some literary connections as it was the setting for Captain Corelli's *Mandolin*. On the boat we meet a French couple who are seven months into a year long trip in a camper van. They are heading east after the islands and plan to cross the Peloponnese to get to Crete for Christmas. We also meet Rita and Mario who rolled onto the ferry just before it weighed anchor. They'd ridden from Switzerland and also plan to be on the road for a year but this is one of many big trips they've completed. They have been bitten badly by the travel bug and don't work for more than 5 years before heading off on another big adventure. This is a life-long lifestyle for them.



Kefalonia





Arriving at Sami

We decide to join Rita and Mario for the evening and after we've all stocked up with food and water in Sami we venture off up the coast to find a camp spot made for two tents. And we find the perfect location just a pebble's throw from the sea though Rita and Mario are nervous about it as it's clearly visible from the road. Their preferred camp spots are usually well hidden and at least 50m into 'the bush' so we concede by letting them hide their small tent behind our dark green mansion.



Convoy! with Rita and Mario



The sea is invitingly tepid and clear so even Kirsty gets in for a dip. Then it's time for supper, a few swigs of kumquat liqueur and star gazing to round off a very pleasant evening.



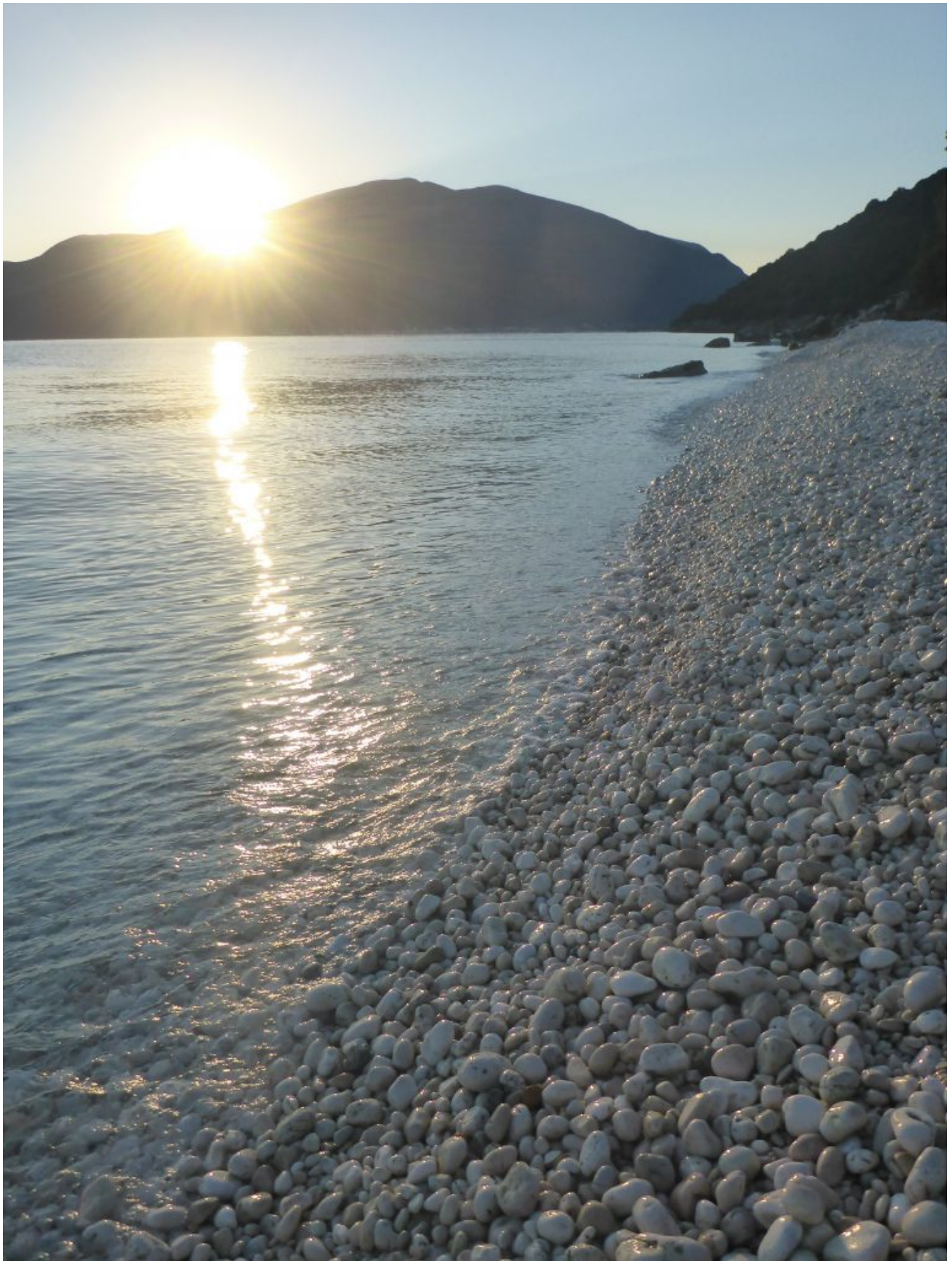
Evening swim on Kefalonia

I get a solo performance of Happy Birthday in the morning from Kirsty and it looks like I might have a bit more luck with the weather than she did for hers. It's Mario's birthday the day after and Rita's on the 28th so we're all December babies.

After a leisurely start and a stunning sunrise we discuss our plans and when we suggest that we're heading north Mario and Rita say they're going south. Maybe we enjoyed the previous evening more than they did. They plan to ride across the Peloponnese and then onto Crete after Kefalonia but are spending more time off the bikes than us as they like to hike as much as bike.



Birthday beach breakfast



The ride that morning is mostly uphill but the sunshine and views mean that we hardly notice the effort. The road takes us up to the north east of the island so we get views over to

Ithica then back to Lefkada before rounding onto the west coast where we get to look down on to the castle at Assos as we drop down a ladder of steep hairpins.







Looking across to Ithica



Tandem selfie

There are goats with their kids on the road on one of these corners and we chase them over the side only to meet them again at the next hairpin further down so they have to scarper all over again.



Assos



Goats on the road!

From Assos we get to enjoy a glorious stretch of road that sits on the cliff side and with a still, calm, bright blue sea to our right. The road is closed as there is work going on to secure the rock face but we get waved through by the workmen and have the tarmac to ourselves. Kirsty has pulled out all the stops to make this a birthday to remember and I feel a bit guilty about the soggy day that she had had on Corfu. Hopefully this will do for both of us.



The coastline at Assos



Riding the coast road from Assos



Securing the rocks. Apparently it was safe for us to ride past.

After a stop for lunch of a meat feast mezze we keep working our way round the coast and onto the west side of the island

and eventually to Lixouri in time for a drink. I can only wonder where we'll be for our birthdays next year.



Riding to the south west of Kefalonia

The next day is a double ferry day as we cross from Lixouri to Argostoli first thing, passing some rowers on the way. A pretty good place to train by our reckoning, certainly compared to the Bristol docks. It's then a 40km ride round the south of the island which seems a lot more densely populated than the north end. We drop into the port of Poros at lunchtime and it's not long to wait before we board the boat back to the mainland.



Rowing at Argostoli



Valerianos



Gorge before Poros

With the Ionian islands and our birthdays behind us we're thinking about the next big day in December. We've got a bit of time before Father Christmas does his rounds so the plan from here is to cross the mountains of the Peloponnese then catch a boat to Crete from Piraeus. Let's hope there's still room on the boat with all the other campers and cyclists heading that way!



Merry Christmas! Lixouri