

# Demystifying the Med

## Seven sights to see

It is big, but doable and **Dini Martinez** does the hard yards dividing the mighty Mediterranean into seven regions, each with its own unique qualities to delight.

No tides, no extreme weather and barely any strong currents. Pristine anchorages offering a retreat from Western civilisation. Around the corner beach clubs and picturesque town-centres, state-of-the-art marinas boasting excellent facilities and yachting services. Everywhere, a pause from life's business during siesta time. Abundant cultural highlights, millennia of history, exquisite cuisines and generally laid-back and welcoming people.

All that in a mostly mild climate.

In other words, the Mediterranean Sea, Med for short, has it all.

### Med facts

Almost completely enclosed by land, the 14 kilometre-wide Strait of Gibraltar at the Atlantic Ocean is the only noticeable opening. At an average depth of 1.5km, evaporation is greater than precipitation and river run-offs. Thus, a constant two knot current flows along the African coast in the Med's western basin.

The eastern basin, divided by a ridge running from Italy to Africa, generally faces fewer depressions and slightly longer summers of up to nine months.

Both basins experience a weak anti-clockwise flow all year round.

The Strait of Gibraltar, the Bosphorus and Dardanelles (Turkey), the Strait of Messina (Italy) and the narrows between Evia and mainland Greece have by far the strongest currents.

Beyond the mentioned, currents are localised and depend strongly on the direction of the prevailing winds. Tidal range reaches a peak of 1.8 metres in southern Tunisia and up to a metre in the Aegean, but can be neglected elsewhere.

There are essentially four strong winds of which one needs to be aware. In the Strait of Gibraltar winds of 20 knots or more, coming from either east or west, are quite common and often significantly influence passage plans for days or weeks on end.

The Mistral (France) or Tramontana (Spain) blowing southwards in the Gulf of Lion can easily reach 45 knots at any time of the year, though it is more

common in winter and usually well forecasted.

The Adriatic Bora at 40 knots or more can affect northern Italy and Croatia any time but is most frequent in winter and spring.

The Meltemi is strongest in July and August and sweeps southwards at 40 knots or more through the Aegean Sea.

Moreover, with less force but equally regular appearance, the Vendavales blows in rather short intervals between North Africa and the Spanish coast. While the Sirocco brings hot air, sand and dust from the Sahara Desert in Africa; the Levant near the Spanish central coast forms depressions between the Balearics and North Africa and the wintery Gregale affects the NE coast of Malta, Sicily and the Ionian.

Less well forecasted, but equally serious are strong local winds, particularly near mountainous areas. During the hot summer months land and sea breezes can also be quite vicious.

### When and where to go

Mediterranean water temperatures peak around 26 degrees. The climate is pleasant for most of the year, although some parts, such as the northern Adriatic, experience regular unsettled weather and snow during winter.

From November to March some places shut down completely.

In July and August temperatures can rise over 40 degrees Celsius and prices for marinas, restaurants and boat charters often more than double. In the most popular places, colossal crowds can ruin even the most pristine beach, scenic promenade or favourite tavern.

This indeed makes spring and autumn the most pleasant seasons to visit the Med.



**Western Mediterranean**

Western Europe is one of the most crowded (in peak season - over-crowded) areas of the Med.

The Spanish coast is dominated by marinas and tourism developments. The French offer smaller ports, moorings and anchorages. Italy has generally more basic yet more expensive marinas (up to 120 Euros/night during peak season for a 12 metre yacht) and few protected anchorages.

Overall, the scene is set by picturesque towns, fresh produce markets, open-air cafés, delicious food, fancy boutiques, countless jet skis and views of millionaires' super yachts.

Discounted wintering deals are available, particularly in France and the slightly cheaper Spain.

Famous island groups invite for a month or more each of superb sailing. The Spanish Balearics boast over-the-top nightlife, as well as stunning landscapes and historic towns in a typical laid-back Mediterranean culture.

Corsica and Sardinia's pristine white beaches on the other side of the Gulf of Lion are the Med's closest Caribbean resemblance. However up to Force 10 winds north and south of Corsica are quite common, even in summer.

Sicily and Malta further south are often only passed in transit to the eastern Med, but are unquestionably worth their own stopover. Highlights include the Aeolian Islands' incredible volcanic diversity and 2,700 years old anciently powerful city-state Syracuse. Both islands offer the cheapest wintering options in the western Med, with numerous repair, maintenance and other yachting facilities available.

The whole area stands in stark contrast to the Med's underdeveloped eastern and African coasts, with Greece and Turkey providing the middle grounds.

Third party insurance is compulsory in most countries bordering the western Med. Non-EU crews need to make sure they have a Schengen visa and relevant entry and exit stamps. The three months stay can usually be renewed if the EU zone is left for at least three months - inviting for a visit to Turkey, Tunisia or even the Levant.

**Adriatic and Ionian Sea**

The Ionian Sea provides one of Europe's easier cruising grounds.

With basically no dangerous winds and exquisite island hopping, more charter companies and flotillas operate between Corfu, Lefkada and Kefalonia than anywhere else. Idyllic harbours with free town quays and moorings, delicious taverns, welcoming people and some excellent facilities, including affordable wintering choices, invite for a couple of weeks, a season or more in Greece.

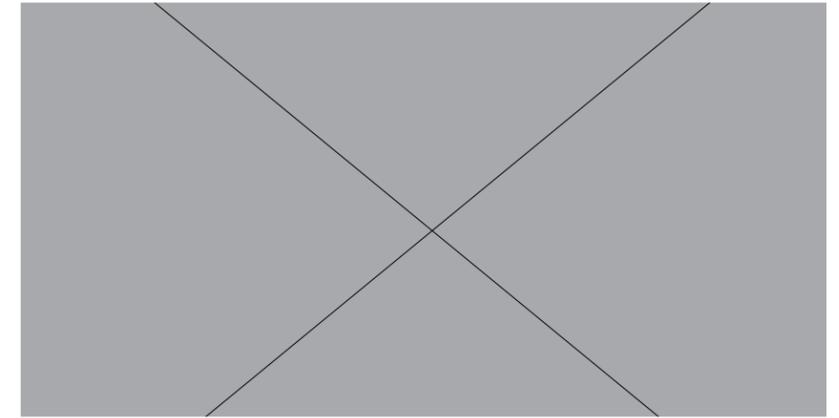
If time in the Med is limited, a shortcut through the 6.4 kilometre long and only 21.4 metres wide Corinth Canal can take you straight to the Saronic Gulf in the Aegean Sea.

If time is not an issue, a detour through the Adriatic to the north is unlikely to disappoint. An anti-clockwise current welcomes the Ionian cruiser past Albania. An aspiring EU member and former socialist state which is opening its pristine beaches to cruisers and tourists alike.

Montenegro, also on the way, is renowned for its outstanding Bay of Kotor, the longest fjord in southern Europe. Entry permission charges here can exceed several hundreds of Euros depending on engine power and boat size.

Further north, Croatia dominates the Adriatic coastline and conquers the cruiser's heart with more than 1,000 islands of which only 48 are permanently inhabited. They form parallel rows providing countless safe anchorages, magnificently preserved history, beautiful nature parks, over fifty marinas and cheaper fuel and food than western Europe.

This typically counters the pricey 'Navigation, safety and pollution prevention fee', 'Soujourn Tax' and expensive marinas, town quay berths and over-priced moorings.



Italy, in the west of the narrow sea has more basic marina facilities, but higher prices and less protection from the Bora with mostly alluvial coasts and no islands. Having said that, World Heritage listed Venice is a must for the soul and the Italian food a must for the palate.

ABOVE: Map of the Med with the directions of the major wind forces.

LEFT: Historic hinterland, Spain.

**Aegean Sea**

The Aegean Sea between mainland Greece and Turkey is best approached by heading as far north as possible before June.

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ABOVE: Seyne sur mer.

BELOW: Marine de Cogolin, France.

INSET RIGHT: Corinth Canal.

This then allows for a sail south in favourable winds to explore Greece or Turkey's coastlines. Also inviting are some of Greece's estimated 6,000 islands, all former mountain tops, bridging the gap between Europe and Asia.

Running clockwise around the Aegean, the Saronic Gulf experiences much lighter winds than the Cyclades, even when the Meltemi is blowing at its best. North of Athens, the narrow and well protected stretch between the elongated island of Evia and Greece's mainland has been dubbed the Greek Riviera, with many Athenians and some charter boats from the northern Sporades, spending summers here.

Northern Greece resembles more the Balkan than the Med, both people and climate-wise (snowy in winter). Despite fine sandy beaches and grand scenery, yachtsmen seldom venture here. Yet those who do tend to love it.

Also off the beaten track lie the green, fertile and soldier-infested eastern Sporades. Some view the absence of semi-sophisticated Mikonos-like tavernas and marinas as a blessing rather than an inconvenience.

Hugging Turkey's Asiatic Coast and curving towards Crete, the twelve Dodecanese islands revolve around world-heritage listed Rhodes, Greece's second largest island. Summers here are hot, winters mild, chandleries well-equipped and pristine beaches a big tourist attraction.

Crete, the fifth largest island in the whole Med, cups the Aegean from the south. It is culturally quite distinct and economically self-sufficient not only due to tourism, but also due to its unique agriculture.

Overall Greek people are warm, tavernas welcoming and food outside the peak season less expensive than western Europe.

Properly developed marina's aside, harbour fees are rare, especially outside the peak season.

On the other hand, the Greek government has introduced a cruising tax which could account for up to €1,240 per annum for a 12 metre yacht, once a proper collection system is in place, (updates on this widely disputed development can be found on: [www.cruising.org.uk/news/greektax](http://www.cruising.org.uk/news/greektax)).

At the time of printing, it is sufficient to acquire a 'DEKPA', loosely translated as 'Private pleasure boat maritime traffic document' for EU-registered yachts, or a six months transit document for non-EU registered yachts with the local authorities – either for less than 100 Euros.

#### Turkey

Turkey's thousands of kilometres of diverse coastline boasts reasonable marinas and facilities, mostly free anchorages and charming local town quays at convenient day-sail distances.



IMAGE COURTESY PETER COX.

The Meltemi's heyday aside, winds tend to be lighter and nights calm. Food is good value, people friendly, English spoken in the major yachting hubs and ancient history abundant.

The further east one travels, the less charters and other cruising traffic one is likely to encounter. Places like Finike, Bodrum and Marmaris are renowned wintering spots for live-aboards.

On the practical side, holding tanks are a must and fuel can be tricky to obtain. Thus, it is wise to fuel up whenever possible and carry a few extra cans. It is also wise to take contingent anti-theft measures before leaving your boat in an anchorage.

Reliable charts for the country's territorial waters (12 nautical miles) can be purchased from the Turkish Navy for a fraction of the price of the British Admiralty Charts. E-visas can conveniently be applied for online and upon arrival a transit log is issued for the duration of your stay in Turkey.

#### The Levant

Unquestionably the road less travelled, the rapidly changing political situation and relevant travel advice should be studied before deciding to explore.

Territorial waters of Israel must be entered coastline, with prior travel permits.

Joining the Eastern M might be the way to ski and still discover the h abundance of this area is certainly not limited and Tel Aviv; Syria's Fc abandoned settlements; Lebanon the Crusaders in the 1; ancient Jerusalem and

Note that after visiti will grant entry, so travel need to be determined with foresight.

#### Egypt

Egypt's most worthwhile cruising ground is the Red Sea, with beautiful coral reefs and convenient spots to explore the country's rich history and interior.

Most Mediterranean cruising, however, uses Egypt purely as an entry or exit point, if at all, given the unstable political situation, violent demonstrations and piracy risks.

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TOP: Southern France hinterland.

INSET: Where else but Paris!

RIGHT: Sunset in Port Camargue, France.

It is essential to check relevant authorities' travel advice.

#### Northern Africa

Tunisia, closely followed by Morocco, is logistically the easiest place to visit on the Med's African border.

With cruising permits upon arrival, competitive marinas deliberately located within day-sail distance from one another, great value for fuel and food, colourful towns and breath-taking historic relics. More and more cruisers have been choosing Tunisia for wintering, afloat or ashore.

Same does not count for Morocco. Despite its strategic position bordering both the Atlantic and the Med, stable political conditions, visa upon arrival and increased investment in tourism, few cruisers stop along the kingdom's largely steep Mediterranean coast.

Two Spanish enclaves, Ceuta and Mellila, see more visitors. They offer fully serviced marina facilities, cheap fuel, good provisioning, regular ferries to Spain and a safe spot from where to

explore Morocco's rich culture and history.

Libya and Algeria, on the other hand, have been politically unstable and barely any leisure cruising precedence exists. Relevant authorities' travel advice must be sought before a planned trip.

The waters between Libya, Tunisia, Malta and Sicily often observe a considerable influx of illegal migrants leaving from North Africa which is why increased navy patrols and dangers of small unlit crafts carrying passengers are common. If cruising the area, rather frequent check-ins with officials are required, patience for paper work is a must and sometimes 'baksheesh'-cigarettes or other gifts – are in order.

Outside main tourist resorts alcohol is hard to find and clothing covering arms and legs should be worn. Fishing, scuba diving and anchoring between ports is mostly forbidden.

#### Permits, tax and regulations

It is important to bear in mind that crew visas and your ship's cruising permits work independently from each other.

Cruising permits vary widely in administration and price from country to country, often reflecting the nature of the regime in power. Further expenses of twenty percent or more of a boat's value can be incurred if its VAT status is not considered when purchasing or bringing a vessel into European waters.

Inspections of private yachts are rare, but if they happen things that may be requested beyond the usual ship registration papers: crew list; six months valid passports and clearance papers include the skipper's Certificate of Competency; radio licence for the boat; radio operator's licence for at least one crew member; VAT paid or exempt

certificate (when in the EU); appropriate third-party insurance (with specific covered values requested by some countries such as Greece and Italy); a list of electronics and other valuable items on board and an appropriate holding tank.

#### Pollution and respect

Because of its enclosed nature, pollution has become a real issue in the Med.

Even more so, it is a matter of respect and etiquette to adhere to good seamanship, international regulations and simply common sense.

Things like disposing of floatable rubbish less than 25 nautical miles off a coast, pumping out your waste tank in a marina or throwing plastic overboard under any circumstances attract fines, to say the least.

'Reduce, reuse and recycle' should be a no-brainer for all cruisers. Often the cleanliness of beaches and existence of rats give an indication of how much or little a particular country has embraced this principle.

Whatever the case may be, studying the latest update of the MARPOL rules ([http://www.ukpandi.com/fileadmin/uploads/uk-pi/Documents/Conventions/Environmental\\_](http://www.ukpandi.com/fileadmin/uploads/uk-pi/Documents/Conventions/Environmental_)



Compliance/Annex%20V%20discharge%20requirements%2001-2013.pdf) is a good preparation for any cruise.

The increasing water poverty in most Mediterranean countries also asks to be respected. Hosing down your boat with fresh water when water restrictions are applied to the rest of the village is simply not acceptable, even if you pay for it.

On the matter of mutual respect, it should also be noted that timeliness and the lack thereof is



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Rosas, Spain.

a matter of cultural adaptation in the Med and better managed without frustration.

#### Fishing and diving

Fishing and scuba diving, can require special licences.

Both activities are prohibited in some countries, the more so the further east one travels and categorically where underwater antiquities can be found.

At times, local fishing boats with diverse gear and questionable signage pose a danger to navigation.

Nevertheless, the Med still has some fauna highlights to offer. This includes dolphins, whales, turtles, flying fish, tuna, swordfish and sunfish in many places; not to mention the remaining estimated mere 600 highly-endangered monk seals, whose home is the warm waters of the Med.

#### Summary

Culturally, archeologically and historically the most densely populated region in the world, the Med caters to every genre and gusto.

The rule of thumb has it that the further east and south one travels, the simpler life becomes. Also, constantly-changing cruising permits tend to be higher, the less affluent a particular country's economy is.

However, typically cheaper food and inexpensive fuel more than make up for this initial cost.

Similar counts for the English language, whose lack thereof can add to the charm of more remote places where, with a bit of patience and good will, the necessities can be

communicated.

One thing which should be mastered in advance is the berthing stern-to manoeuvre, often with an anchor over the bow, which is most typical in all Mediterranean countries.

In summary, since the 2nd century BC onwards, the Med, has provided important trade routes and facilitated cultural exchange for emergent peoples of the region. Today, albeit in a different way, it continues to do the same.

Its extraordinary variety makes it impossible to list the highlights, but instead invites you to explore the areas most suitable to your cruising style and budget.

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#### cruisinghelmsman Dini Martinez



Mother and skipper Dini gave up settled life in Sydney in July 2013 and moved onboard the Moody 425 Happy Dancer with husband and two little boys. They are currently sailing the Greek islands and will make their way back to Australia slowly over the next years or decades. Updates on their journey can be found on [yogicsailingfamily.wordpress.com](http://yogicsailingfamily.wordpress.com).