

Dancing with the **WATER ON AEGEAN SWELLS**

A guided rowing adventure off the coast of northern Greece leads to many memorable discoveries

— *By Cathy Senecal*

We're atop the crest of one big, blue swell on the Aegean Ocean and careening down into the trough of another.

Nikos Gountoulas, a tall, dark Greek Olympian, is shouting at me from the bow of the coastal rowing double we're in.

"Dance with the water! Relax your shoulders!"

While trying to relax, I also pray to Poseidon on my first rowing lesson ever because I'm in deep—and very unstill—waters off the northern beaches of Greece's Halkidiki peninsulas.

I'm not a rower, but when a friend asked me to drive the shuttle bus on

an excursion in the Halkidikis, I agreed. She and I had hiked in Slovenia and Italy and travel well together. At the time, I happened to be on a biking trip in Rhodes, just a short flight away.

Halkidiki has well over 500 kilometres of coastline, from long stretches of powdered gold beaches to rocky inlets and secluded coves catering to Thessalonian and Bulgarian watersport seekers—or, in our case, rowers popping in for a cool Mythos beer or invigorating Freddo espresso.

Our tour begins from the Thessaloniki Coastal Rowing Club, from which we launch a quad, a double and a coach boat piloted by Nikos, our guide, and me. The group acclimatizes there, gliding

past Aristotle Square and the White Tower, seeing the city from the sea, like so many Greek rowers before.

We drive south to Sithonia, the middle of Halkidiki's three peninsulas and put in the water again. Bold, blue Mount Athos, on the third peninsula, backdrops our view. That is as close as we get, since Mount Athos is reserved for a couple of dozen monasteries which only men can visit, and only by permission.

Late dinners are filled with laughs and shared plates of dolmades, sea bream, grilled octopus, roasted lamb, and always, Greek salad with soft slabs of Macedonian feta. Locally produced wines are as welcome as the sweet pluckings of a lyre.





The days go by in a blur of launches and landings, eight to 14-kilometre rowing stretches, winding roads and cliff-top ocean vistas; a vivid vision of greens and blues. Once, driving to Vourvourou, I spot the rowers hundreds of feet below, tiny sticks on turquoise waters. I shuttle the van, dodge goats, deliver coffee and carry gear.

We learn a bit of Greek and, more importantly, how to order coffee. Freddo espresso is cold coffee with two shots of espresso. Americano is plain filtered coffee, like coffee in North America. Greek coffee is boiled and served with grounds in the cup, almost chewable. One day, too rainy to row, we visit one of 28 wineries along the Wine Roads of Northern Greece and channel Anacreon, sipping a kylix or two of crisp Limnio, a red variety of wine first referred to in *The Odyssey*.

Over a late dinner, Nikos shares his personal history. He tells us he competed in flat water and ocean rowing, winning European and world

championship medals from 2004 to 2012 with his identical twin, Apostolos. They also placed ninth in the 2012 London Olympics. After competition life, Nikos started the only exclusively coastal rowing club in Greece.

Coastal boats are cut wide to handle the ocean water, which makes rowing easier to learn. Still, rowers need to “get” the cadence of the seas with both their bodies and their oars. Seems Nikos’ tips work. Soon, everyone is dancing on the sapphire seas like performers in *Zorba the Greek*.

These rollers seem massive, but later that day, I receive my wild, first lesson from Nikos as the sun soothes the sea with slanted light. “Find the water with your blades,” Nikos instructs me, on this impromptu lesson in a double. And I marvel that I am rowing with an Olympian just north of where the Games began in 776 BC.

“Never stop rowing.” Does he mean now, or never in my life? I focus on the

repeated series of clicks, pushes, pulls and slides I’m meant to synchronize. This is nothing like rowing at the gym, but with Nikos’ guidance, I begin to feel one with the water, which does seem a bit like dancing.

To row with an Olympian, book through rowingtheworld.com. ■

