

Free and easy on the Italian Adriatic

Christopher Smith and Cocky Taanman's 500-mile voyage down Italy's eastern coast provided some unforgettable memories despite the inauspicious start...

Our smiling faces evaporated in an instant: clouds of smoke were coming from the saloon and in a few moments the engine was dead. We had left *Scube* over winter up the creek at Monfalcone, between Venice and Trieste. By early May, with the bottom freshly antifouled, we set off down the shallow creek shortly before high tide. Mediterranean tides are usually considered insignificant, with a range of 10-20cm, but this varies widely. The tide funnels up the Adriatic and at Monfalcone is over 100cm.

Hurrah for the open sea again, we thought, but windless and now motorless, we had no option but to tie alongside one of the channel marker poles. We grounded while waiting for help from the boatyard, which came in the form of a small rubber dinghy – 'Sorry, nothing we can do now'. Several Italian yachts passed by, apparently anxious to get to their lunch stops, but eventually a fishing boat came to our aid, along with three young blokes in a sailing boat which they seemed to be using as a beer tent. The fishing boat took our spare mast top halyard



A tight squeeze fitting a new engine at Monfalcone

and heaved it sideways at full motor power. This tipped our boat (with worrisome groans from the rigging) lifting the keel from the mud. The three lads used their little yacht to turn us into the channel and then bravely took on the job of towing us all the way back up the creek. Our trip down the Italian Adriatic had not started well.

Exactly one month later we started again with a new Nani 4.40 engine. Although

We visited some splendid medieval cities and seemed to be the only cruising boat

the primary problem had been a burnt-out starter motor, we were actually rather relieved for the excuse to fit a new engine as the original 34-year-old Perkins 4108 had developed a horrible oil

leak (as they do) which no one seemed able to cure. Our now-revised plan was to sail gently down the Italian coast to Otranto then directly east to Corfu. Some might take three to four days for the 500-mile direct trip; we took 45 days, visiting 24 harbours and seven anchorages. The upper half of the Adriatic, including the gulfs of Trieste and Venice and the Po Delta, is flat but from Ancona down, taking in the eastern slopes of the Apennines and Tremiti islands, it is more rugged.

We visited some splendid medieval cities, from Chioggia and Ravenna in the north, to Brindisi and Otranto in the south, with some gems such as Rimini and Pesaro in between. We never had problems finding moorings or anchorage space. Italian Adriatic sailors, we discovered,

had left en masse for the Croatian islands, leaving plenty of room for us. We were often the only cruising boat.

In the dreams of most Mediterranean sailors must

be a visit to the Venice lagoon and the Bosphorus (yes!). While waiting for the engine, we visited Venice in mid-May for the Vogalonga – a festival of 2,000 rowing craft following a 30-mile route round the lagoon and canals from which all motor vessels are banned, including the vaporetto, to the bemusement of unaware tourists.

Sailing into the lagoon, one is immediately aware of the shallow waters and multitude of routes. Although these are marked by poles, we were grateful for the GPS and depth sounder (and an enthusiastic police launch) as it is remarkably hard to tell which

poles belong to which route, a process made more difficult by the local motorboats taking shallow shortcuts at speed. There are two acceptable marinas close to Venice island but we continued along the Spirito Santo canal to anchor off Poveglia island. Next day we continued by motor and half-furled genoa along the narrow routes inside of the Lido, lined with gaudy houses and rickety fishing shacks. Chioggia, at the west end of the lagoon, is hailed as a little Venice: lesser it certainly was, apart from the stench.

The northern 100 miles of our route was slightly disappointing, the sailing marred by rows of fishing floats up to three miles offshore. Finding an anchorage in the Po Delta took several



Vieste lies at the tip of a 20-mile peninsula and National Park

attempts and sailing by night is not recommended. People weren't as welcoming as we would expect in the Med, an exception being at Cesenatico Sailing Club, which had us at high table for their prize-giving lunch. Often there is a choice between a club (€30 per night) and a commercial

marina (€50). Walks around the picturesque towns more than compensated for the sailing, as did the drink of the year – Aperol and prosecco. The local authorities maintain the waterfronts carefully, with many harbours adorned by painting or sculpting competitions.

A peaceful anchorage at Pergola, south of Vieste. A large stern platform becomes a second sitting room



Leaving Chioggia from the large club marina to the right



Old, new and retired fishing boats moored at Cesenatico Maritime Museum

Christopher Smith and Cocky Taanman

As a young girl, Cocky sailed with her father in a 10m Friese Zeeschouw on the Dutch lakes. Christopher was born on a Thames boatyard and rowed skiffs with his brother, trying to terrorise the more sedate motor boats. They met six years ago in Molly's Bar, Lesbos, and have been sailing the Med and Black Sea each summer since in *Scube*, a beamy 1982 Jeanneau Espace 1000. It's great being retired...



We were also impressed with the museum of fishing boats at Cesenatico.

Further south, the large headland at Vieste provides great scenery and there are good anchorages near Peschici, between the Tremiti islands and Pergola bay 11 nautical miles to the south of Vieste – great places to enjoy a near absence of wind.

Overall, the winds were gentle, Force 1 to Force 3, and we only met with Force 4 to 5 winds four times, usually (in normal Med style) when entering harbour in late afternoon. From Mola di Bari we took a short train trip to the picturesque cliff village of Polignano A Mare, the nearby marina looking far more suitable for luxury motor boats. Polignano has a renowned restaurant built in a cave on the cliff. We had intended to enjoy a celebration meal there but a look at TripAdvisor led us to an excellent lunch elsewhere. A few miles further on we visited the wonderful medieval town and harbour of Monopoli, where we moored alongside the town walls. At Otranto there was time for one last Aperol before heading for Corfu. ▲