

As wild as you like



As Wildwind's name suggests, this holiday centre has a reputation for providing excitement, but it also has a relaxing side. **Gael Pawson** and Boards' **Claire Greeno** went to find out more...

It had been a long summer; plenty of sailing but some long hours in the office and my laptop a constant companion... when my back locked up with so much tension that a physio struggled to loosen it, I knew I needed a break. A late season trip to Wildwind's legendary centre in Vassiliki seemed just the right medicine. The promise of a taste of the centre's new 'healthy options' package was an added attraction – although I fully expected to spend most of the week enjoying Vassiliki's famous breeze.

Wildwind is a small independent company, with two centres in Greece; the lighter wind destination of Afissos on the Pelion Peninsula, and Vassiliki on the island of Lefkas. Our Gatwick flight landed at Preveza, a small military airport just an hour and a half from Vassiliki.

The transfer is a pleasant journey through the Greek countryside. A briefing and welcome drinks greeted us and we were soon settled in.

Our accommodation was very much at the basic end of the standard offered by most sailing holiday centres today, but it was due to be refurbished, and let's face it, if the sailing and social side is good, you don't exactly spend much time in your room anyway.

The accommodation is organised around two restaurants owned by related Greek families. Our room was part of a small accommodation block facing the centre's pool, just a small hop from the bar. It all made for a very friendly, relaxed feel – almost as though you were staying in someone's house rather than a hotel. Both bars operate a tab system, and as the barman soon knew our names, there was no need to even give our room number as we enjoyed the odd ice cream or cool beer by the pool.

The sailing

Situated in a large bay, Wildwind shares its sailing waters with the Club Vass windsurfing centre, situated right next door. The two centres have a great arrangement which means guests can combine windsurfing and sailing, or in our case – Claire being a keen windsurfer and myself a sailor



Above (from top) Racing in the end of week regatta; Brigitte guiding us on the herbal walk.

Left The herbal walk was followed by Maria's delicious organic meal.

– we could each do our own thing.

Wildwind has a reputation as one of the best breezy sailing locations – it must have been a fantastic venue when the Hobie Europeans were held here in 2001. It is also an excellent place to learn, while the big breeze (known as 'Eric') tends to spice up the afternoons, the morning is generally lighter, a nice 5-10 knots providing an ideal. Even in the legendary afternoon wind no-one is left on the beach as the instructors organise 'joy rides' for those not confident of handling the conditions themselves. So much of Wildwind's ethos is about having fun and enjoying your sailing, that I soon found out why people rave about this as a sailing holiday destination... it's impossible not to enjoy yourself.

Vassiliki's fleet includes over 40 of the latest dinghies and catamarans covering the full spectrum from beginner's boats to the top end. As we were visiting at the end of the season, the fleet had seen quite a bit of action, but it really didn't matter, with regular big breeze afternoons new sails would have been a waste! Vassiliki is unrivalled in its wide selection of catamarans, which include the Hobie Fox, Tiger, Pacific, FX1, 16, 15, 14, Dagoon and Teddy. For cat sailors you really can't get closer to heaven when it comes to a sailing holiday! The dinghy fleet is a little



Above Emily (right) led daily T'ai Chi sessions.



Left Wildwind shares the bay with windsurfing centre Club Vass.



Above right Introducing the watersports team.



Right Howard runs through the sailing area and card tally system.



Right Tom talks through some race tactics.

Below A coaching session on trapezing – delivered in typical Wildwind style – relaxed but thorough and professional.



Right Wildwind's weekly barbeque is legendary with the instructors providing the musical entertainment – including centre owner Simon Morgan on bass.

Below Vassiliki's Zeus bar provides the ideal setting for the end of week prizegiving.



less extensive, but there is a wide range of toys to play on including a 49er, RS800, RS400, Laser 5000, 4000, 3000, 2000, Lasers (standard and 4.7) and Picos.

So many choices

I was completely torn as to what I should do; part of me wanted to crack my windsurfing, but as Wildwind's chilled atmosphere had already started to permeate that seemed rather too much like hard work!

I could dip my toe into cat sailing... After all, as my cat career so far consisted of a brief outing in a Tornado, a sail on 'Club Med' and a few races on a VX40, I really should give this branch of the sport a proper try. However, I'm afraid the lure of the dinghies was just too much and I found myself taking an 800 out for a spin. 49er sailor Tom Smedley was a good example of the calibre of instructors which Wildwind manages to attract. The promise of high wind sailing on their days off attracts the really keen sailors, while there is a relaxed, friendly approach with the instructors working very much as a team.

The next step from the 800 had to be the 49er. To begin with I was rather keener to simply crew for Tom, but he was most insistent on my taking the helm, and the results were a lot of fun.

Faced with the prospect of the regatta day, I persuaded Tom that the RS400 would be a much more manageable steed for me, but after a couple of practice races I could see his point – in Vass's early morning light breezes I was easily capable of taking the 49er out, and it would be much more of a challenge.

I was really grateful that he pushed me. We hit the first start with my mind simply on getting round the course without too much embarrassment. Instead we went out and won both morning races – Tom was so at home in the boat, his crew work meant we didn't really have any boathandling issues. I returned ashore on a real high and immediately retired at the top of my 49er career – there's no point in pushing it, so I rewarded myself with an afternoon by the pool!

Healthy options

For non-sailors as well as those wishing to return from holiday leaner and fitter, rather than the more usual half a stone heavier, Wildwind's Healthy Options alternative programme complements the watersports activities brilliantly. We soon found we could opt into some of the Healthy Options activities while still doing some sailing as well.

So often on sailing holidays you can almost forget where you are. But the herbal walk is an ideal way to see some of the island of Lefkas, and German herb expert Brigitte is an enthusiastic guide – even if she does like to talk a bit too much sometimes! The walk visits an old ruined monastery, and finishes up at a small restaurant for lunch – where everything is home-cooked by the welcoming Maria using the freshest ingredients picked from her garden. We returned to Vassiliki clutching herbal teas to cure all our ills and feeling well-filled on the best food of the holiday.

Aside from a number of excursions, the healthy options programme includes regular

yoga sessions run by Karen, which many of the sailing guests also choose to attend, and a relaxing massage. I think the high point of my holiday was falling asleep during my massage – it sort of set the tone for my week!

We were lucky enough to be at the centre during a special Reiki workshop week, run by Emily. As well as running Reiki sessions, there was the chance to learn about doing it yourself, and Emily also ran regular Tai Chi classes. Now you might describe Reiki as a bit 'tree-hugging' – it's all to do with the 'power of the universe', and simply involves hands and crystals being laid parts of your body – but I'm pretty open to anything that will help and I have to admit that after my session I felt so emotional it was hard to hide my tears. I was left feeling very reflective, positive and relaxed and Claire had a similar experience.

The social side

The Healthy Options programme saw us enjoying delicious fruit and vegetable smoothies for breakfast (fortunately my taste was for the vitalising one, it was more embarrassing for those who acquired a taste for the 'sex drive' recipe which the barman always seemed to take great amusement in announcing very loudly!), but it certainly didn't mean a teetotal holiday! Vassiliki is a very social destination, and the instructors soon demonstrated their prowess at cooking (Vassiliki's barbecue is legendary), mixing cocktails (which resulted in some people taking a semi-clothed dip in the pool!) and last, but by no means least, an extraordinary wealth of musical talent – musical turns even including a clever ode to crocodile hunter Steve Irwin who had passed away that weekend.

On the nights that nothing was organised in the centre, the village was just a short walk away, with a wealth of waterside restaurants and the very social Zeus bar, scene of a suitably boisterous final night's prizegiving. Quite simply, you could make your nights as long as you wanted.

A true holiday

The best thing about Vassiliki for me was that I actually relaxed. It sounds silly, but sailing is so linked to my work it can be hard to switch off. In Vassiliki I not only switched off my laptop, I switched off the work part of my brain – so much so that instead of feeling like I had to spend every spare second on the water, I was even spotted reading a book by the pool – very unlike me, but very much needed. I'm not sure whether it was the massage, Reiki, or just Vassiliki's atmosphere, but the stress of a busy life seemed a world away.

I even managed to tempt Claire out for a sail in the RS400 to give her a taste of dinghy sailing – just like me she only managed a few mornings of windsurfing, as we both found ourselves far too busy chilling! ■

Wild windsurfing

Claire Greeno checked out the windsurfing, and the pool!

Wildwind offers windsurfing as part of their 'Free as the wind' package, in conjunction with Club Vass which is a stone's throw away. Club Vass really takes you under their wing even if you're not staying at their centre as they have such a good relationship with Wildwind. Vassiliki is perfect for all levels, particularly beginners as the safety of the bay is ideal and you can really master the basics in the morning's light winds, while in the afternoon, when it picks up, you can put your skills to the test and progress quickly to the next stage. On our trip I focused on waterstarts and harness work which the whole group mastered quickly due to the excellent tuition. When the wind was a bit light for this we tried our luck at some freestyle moves, which mostly ended up with us all in the drink!

I found the freedom of Wildwind one of its best aspects, having never sailed before it gave me the chance to experience so many things, including sailing with Gael in an RS400, being taught by the editor of Y&Y did add a certain pressure not to be really rubbish, but luckily with the excellent tuition I didn't think I was too bad, even if I do say so myself!

The Wildwind experience was not what I expected, having previously been away with the big names of sailing holidays, I found it to be a very intimate and relaxed centre which instantly puts you at ease because of the friendly instructors, easy going atmosphere and lively evenings where the instructors are the entertainment. Even as a non-sailor I can't wait to go back.



Left Young Toby and yoga instructor Karen enjoy the regatta racing in relaxed style.

Below Gael is encouraged by Tom to take on the challenge of the 49er.



Further information

A week's sailing holiday at Wildwind starts at £499 including flights and tuition. The season runs from May to October, see www.wildwind.co.uk for more details.