

## Trip Report – Mediterranean Monk Seal - Mainland Greece

**Mike Bailey, Hereford, UK** ([mikebailey34@gmail.com](mailto:mikebailey34@gmail.com))

**19-23 March 2018**

### **Intro**

This trip was booked so that my wife and I could escape the late winter snow in the UK and specifically to facilitate a search for Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus*. Unsurprisingly, especially when one considers their rarity, I've missed them in Funchal harbour and around the Desertas islands of Madeira, as well as on numerous trips to various countries/islands in the Med, so I was surprised to find some references during a random search on Trip Advisor to 'seals' being reported by tourists on boat trips off mainland Greece. Some further research suggested that these seals may be semi-resident in the area but consist of perhaps just four individuals. They are apparently one of several groups being studied by MOm <https://www.mom.gr/mom> a Greek-based NGO (please kindly donate to their vital work!) but these four animals roam over a vast area of several hundred square km! After a few emails I was put in touch with a vessel owner, Mr Dimitris, based in Kamena Vourla, just 2.5hrs north of Athens, and arrangements were made to book a series of trips in the vain hope that one of these animals may be present. I didn't have much hope that we would find any seals, but I figured it would be worth the effort to find out if the Trip Advisor reports were just random encounters, miss-identified floating tree stumps, or if the world's rarest seal was present on a more regular basis... The effort was definitely worthwhile... My wife and I were treated to stunning views of a sub-adult seal actively foraging and feeding as we drifted with the tide in a tranquil bay among a small group of offshore islets. We were therefore able to spend the remainder of our holiday visiting the usual tourist sites and enjoying the early spring sunshine. Mission accomplished!

### **Itinerary**

- Mon 19 Mar: Flew BRS 13:00 - ATH 18:50 on Easyjet EZY6061.  
Collected hire car Nissan Micra from 'Drive SA' (15mins off-airport).  
Drove (2.5hr) from Athens to accommodation (Zeus Village, nr Molos) c20mins NW of Kamena Vourla.
- Tues 20 Mar: Confirmed booking arrangements for boat trip on Weds. Drove around area. Visited statue of Leonides, Battlefield of Thermopylae, swam in hot springs (no charge), drove to and walked up to castle at Mendenitsa.  
Eve meal in Kamena Vourla.  
Overnight Zeus Village.
- Weds 21 Mar: Drove to Kamena Vourla. Met Mr Dimitris at Poseidon office 10:00.  
Boat trip with Mr Dimitris 10:30-13:30.  
Afternoon walking and birding around Mendenitsa.  
Eve meal in self-catering at Zeus Village.  
Overnight Zeus Village.
- Thurs 22 Mar: am Drove (1.5hr) to Delphi. Entry €6 pp (off-peak – open 08:00-15:00).  
pm Drove Delphi to Kamena Vourla.

Evening meal Kamena Vourla.  
Overnight Zeus Village.  
Fri 23 Mar: Birding around Zeus Village. Checkout. Drove to Athens (2.5hr) to Acropolis.  
Parking €8 for day. Entry to Acropolis €10 pp.  
Dropped off hire car 16:30.  
Flew ATH 19:30 – BRS 21:35 on Easyjet EZY6062.

### Logistics

**Flights:** booked with Easyjet from Bristol airport to Athens (c£200 pp).

**Car hire:** booked through Holiday Autos <https://www.holidayautos.com/EN/#/searchcars> - an auto Nissan Micra from 'Drive SA'. Cost: £52.60 for unlimited miles for the 5 days. We took our own Garmin satnav which was extremely useful, especially when navigating the streets of Athens!

**Accommodation:** numerous hotels in Kamena Vourla (Greek: Καμένα Βούρλα) all looked good and would be perfectly placed for the bars, restaurants and boat trips from the harbour, although during peak summer months I guess they may become a little noisy. We opted for a wooden chalet in Zeus Village c15km / 20min drive NW of Kamena Vourla up in the mountains:

<https://www.booking.com/hotel/gr/zeus-village-molos.en-gb.html> which is in a lovely picturesque location and surrounded by olive groves, although the numerous barking feral dogs did keep us awake most nights! It was pricey (£250 for the week) and a little 'quirky', but we enjoyed the peace and fresh air.

**Boat trips:** Mr Dimitris of Poseidon Daily Cruises <https://www.facebook.com/Poseidon-Daily-Cruises-Kamena-Vourla-Lihadonisia-1572369179727424/> (tel: +30 2235022913, +30 6977301004) can be found in the Poseidon office (the Greek sign above the door reads: ΠΟΣΕΙΔΩΝ) adjacent to the roundabout at the north end of Kamena Vourla. He does not have an email but can be contacted via Facebook messenger (he speaks only broken English), and he is well-known in the town and any accommodation proprietor will be able to make bookings with him. He has posters dotted around the town with a picture of a seal on it so it is well known locally that the animals are in the area. There are several small boats in the office yard adjacent to the roundabout and there is space for c5 cars in front of the office. He was a very capable and safe operator, was very keen to avoid disturbance to the seal we saw and did not chase or harass it in any way. As soon as the animal appeared he shut off the engine and allowed us to drift with the tide as the seal foraged and fed around us. Apparently, during the summer season, boat taxis take tourists to the offshore islets every hour, depositing them on a beach where there is a small bar. Mr Dimitris told me there are often several hundred people here each day. He also said that the seal is usually present most mornings before the masses arrive. We booked a charter trip (costing €150!) because there were no other options in March, and we were the only vessel offshore, but in the summer the much cheaper taxi boats (€10-20 pp) will be ferrying tourists to the islets all day. It may be worth jumping on the first one of these (tide and wind dependent – see Weather below) and spend the morning watching from the beach bar hoping that the seal is in the area. Or, request a charter trip and try to beat the tourist taxi boats.

### Weather

Torrential rain and thunder storms greeted us on arrival at Athens airport and we drove through continuous heavy rain all the way to our accommodation on the first night. Fortunately all the days

were dry and calm, with temperatures a very pleasant 15-18C, although it rained heavily on our penultimate night.

Wind was mostly light and from the east although I was told that when it swings to a westerly no seals are seen due to lack of shelter in the favoured bay.

### **The seal!**

The half hour crossing from Kamena Vourla to the offshore islets gave us views of yellow-legged, Mediterranean, and black-headed gulls, cormorants, common and sandwich terns, and once we arrived at the islets we slowly cruised around while Mr Dimitris gave us his well-rehearsed tourist spiel on the islets' historical background and place in Greek myth. As we came to the more sheltered western side of the islets and slowly made our way across a small calm bay opposite the summer bar beach, I was gobsmacked when a seal suddenly appeared c20m away! We immediately stopped the engine and drifted with the tide as the seal remained underwater for varying periods of time (between 1-6mins). When it surfaced, sometimes close to our boat, sometimes much further away, it was often munching on medium-sized fish so was clearly foraging successfully. We stayed in the bay for c20mins, then left the seal as we made our way round more islets. We returned c30mins later and the seal was still foraging in the same area so we again drifted with the tide whilst observing the seal for c10mins before we left it in peace and headed back to the mainland.

During the return crossing we were treated to close views of 8 yelkouan shearwater and we were back alongside in the harbour by 13:30.

Although this site is swarming with tourists from May to Sept and the seals have a known presence in the area by appearing on posters and websites, perhaps it is worth taking this opportunity to emphasise how threatened this species is and how susceptible the seals are to anthropogenic disturbance. With this in mind, I'd humbly urge anyone visiting the area to place the animals' welfare first, to encourage skippers to use appropriate marine mammal operating protocols in the presence of seals, and to kindly donate to MOM <https://www.mom.gr/mom> using the obvious button at the top of their website.





### **Birding in the area**

Although this wasn't a birding trip we did see a few birds worthy of note.

Offshore we found yelkouan shearwater, cormorant, yellow-legged gull, Mediterranean gull, black-headed gull, sandwich tern and common tern.

Onshore, freshly arrived eastern sub-alpine warblers were singing around Zeus Village, as were plenty of serins. We saw several hoopoes whilst driving around, many common buzzards, a handful of black redstart and great tit, and just one sombre tit by the roadside to Zeus Village. A great reed warbler was heard singing from the reedbed whilst I was swimming in the thermal springs at Thermopylae.

In Delphi, we had great views of western rock nuthatch, blue rock thrush and a displaying firecrest among the ruins, plenty of serins, blackcaps and blackbirds were singing away, and a peregrine flew over the site.

At the Acropolis in Athens we saw a pair of common kestrel and a hoopoe.

I'm sure many more summer migrants would be arriving in the days and weeks following my visit and the area will no doubt reward further exploration.

### **Copyright**

All photos in this report are copyright of Mike Bailey. © Mike Bailey 2018. These images are the property of Mike Bailey. They may not be copied, reproduced, transmitted, or stored in any form, or by any method including but not limited to print, computer image, flash component, video, streaming and/or animation, for any purpose without the express permission of Mike Bailey. All rights reserved.

Any further info please contact me on [mikebailey34@gmail.com](mailto:mikebailey34@gmail.com)