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Editor's view

As sailors we're lucky – the world is our playground. But so much choice can paradoxically make it hard to decide where and when to go. Should you charter in your old faithful Med spots or dare to go further afield? Is it better to choose your holiday by destination or pick a time of year that suits you and work back from there? We've put together this guide to both inspire and inform you. Now all you have to do is decide, book and enjoy.

Emma Bamford



SUNSAIL

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How to choose a charter

Whether you're after trade winds, scenery or winter sun, there's a way to narrow down your sailing options, says Sam Jefferson





There are so many chartering options out there these days that it can sometimes seem a bit bewildering knowing where to start. A good methodology for breaking things down is to settle on a shortlist of preferred destinations and then to work things through from there.

Where to go

You need to think about what sort of sailing you want to do. A 'top five' of destinations in the chartering world would be Greece (particularly the Ionian), Croatia (with the Dalmatian islands a favourite), Turkey, the British Virgin Islands in the Caribbean and possibly Phuket in Thailand.

There are thousands of other destinations worldwide, but these are the hot favourites and encapsulate the main options at various times of year. The Caribbean offers steady trade winds and guaranteed winter sun, while Greece, Croatia and Turkey provide stunning scenery and beautiful historical towns.

When to go

Deciding according to when you want to go can help narrow down your options nicely. The European charter season is April to October but you can run into some pretty hairy (and often chilly) weather in April and October. Yet there are also heavy discounts to be had at these



INSET, LEFT: PETER EASTLAND/ALAMY

times. Mid July and August in the Mediterranean can also be a difficult period due to the sheer volume of people around and charter costs shoot up.

Midwinter in Europe is peak season in the Caribbean, while by late spring you start getting heavy discounts. Hurricane season runs from July through to October and it gets very hot. Then again, rates also plummet.

Bareboat or flotilla?

Another consideration is what sort of charter you want to do. Scott Farquharson, general manager at Sunsail, explains: "Whether you're new to sailing or an old salt, it's worth considering a flotilla sailing holiday as you'll be able to enjoy the flotilla route, a supporting lead crew and a great social atmosphere with your fellow sailors. If you are a keen bareboat sailor, a flotilla still allows all of the freedoms of a bareboat charter with the bonus of a meet up at the end of the day and all of the social events if you want to attend. However, if you prefer to sail completely independently, you should consider a bareboat charter."

A variation is assisted bareboat, where you spend a day or so with an instructor before being sent out on your own. Another solution is crewed charter, or taking an instructor along, but this is naturally a bit more expensive.

Who to go with?

There are thousands of charter companies out there these days, from the big operators like Sunsail and Dream Yacht Charter to modest outfits with only a handful of boats. A small company can be a good thing, with a more personalised service. On the other hand, the big operators have a wealth of experience and technical support behind them. Sunsail is probably the best known and is an old hand at both bareboat and flotilla work.

Think about what sort of sailing you want to do. Sunsail offers bareboat, skippered bareboat and flotilla operations



Sister company The Moorings tends to err towards bigger, more luxurious yachts.

Dream Yacht Charter is another huge charter company, which boasts more bases than anyone else. Consultant Sue Bedford explains: "We offer charters from 42 bases worldwide, and each base offers a wide choice of yachts from different manufacturers. We offer different layout options of the same yacht/catamaran – so whatever you are looking for, Dream can probably offer it."

There are also companies that are real Mediterranean specialists, with their roots in flotilla sailing in Greece. Kiriacoulis and Seafarer are both excellent examples of this and often their flotillas are run with military precision.

Costs

Costs are pretty consistent across the Mediterranean and you can generally expect to pay from £1,000 to £2,500 a week for a 37ft monohull, depending on which month you charter. The Caribbean tends to be a couple of hundred pounds more, and you have to factor in extra flight costs. Some charter firms offer a complete package with flights.

Other considerations

Don't forget hidden costs such as fuel and pump out. You may also be asked to pay a hefty deposit and some companies are ruthless about deducting for marks and scratches. Check what paperwork they require from you and what sort of insurance they provide.

You will also want to consider what sort of boat suits you and your destination. Many places in the Med are quite crowded and charge extra for a multihull, while catamarans are greatly favoured in the Caribbean where marina space is not at a premium. Yet while these cats offer great sunbathing and entertaining areas, they sometimes sail poorly. Also, do a little prep on the area before you go – if you'll need to moor, don't wait until you are reversing in to work out how to do it.

Aggregate booking sites

Aggregate sites such as sailchecker.com or latesail.com are like the nautical equivalent of confused.com and can trawl through millions of websites for you and also sort out cheap flights. Sometimes they have access to deals that you cannot get hold of at all and will also often help you tailor a charter that meets your needs. ✦

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GREECE

Greece is where the charter industry first really took hold, and there is a good reason for this: quite simply it is a wonderful place to sail. Balmy temperatures, more islands than you can shake a stick at and friendly breezes. Throw in one of the most welcoming and hospitable nations in Europe and you have a recipe for success.

Cruising grounds

To the south you have the Ionian islands, beloved of charterers for generations. In Lefkas, Kefalonia and Ithaca you have a pattern of islands which provides the ideal framework for a cruise. Head east and the Saronic Gulf is all stunning mountains and islands. Carry on south into the Aegean and the landscape hardens up, with stark white villages against hard blue skies. You notice the change: the landscape alters, all blinding blue sea and white light.

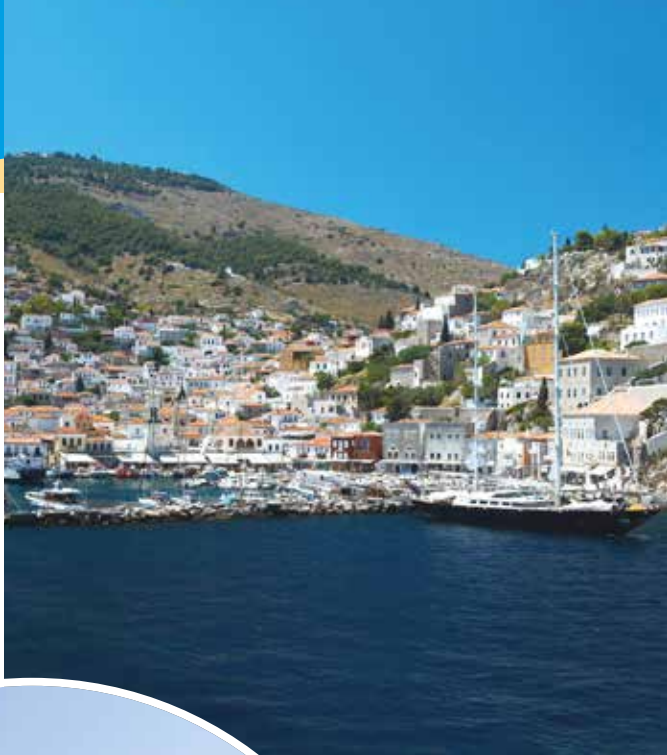


WHEN TO GO

You can gamble on an April or October charter in Greece, but you can get caught out. May to September are still the safe options. Bear in mind that, while the Ionian and Saronic Gulf are usually gentle, forgiving cruising grounds, the Meltemi (afternoon breeze) in some areas of the Aegean is not for the faint-hearted. August can also be very busy and fiendishly hot.



Further reading
Greek Waters Pilot
 Rod Heikell
 imray.com



CREATIVE COMMONS/UCAGIX

Don't miss...



The island of Ithaca

Almost too many options to choose from, but the island of Ithaca takes some beating. Steeped in mythology, this mountainous island features a range of picture perfect ports, with no airport, and remains sufficiently off the beaten track to retain a sleepy, provincial air.

SAM JEFFERSON

Go see...



SAM JEFFERSON

Hippocrates Festival, Kos

July is the big month for celebrations and there are hundreds to choose from, but Kos's Hippocrates Festival is a fine example of Greek celebration at its most exuberant, the streets filled with outdoor concerts, Greek dancing, contemporary art exhibitions and theatre. Food is healthy and wholesome. For Ionian cruisers, a visit to the New Mill restaurant in the Palairos is a must. Delia Smith, Rick Stein and Jamie Oliver are all fans of this unpretentious little taverna.

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 alpineelements.co.uk
 hdmsailing.co.uk
 kiriacoulis.com
 medsailors.com
 moorings.co.uk
 nautilusyachting.com
 nisosyachtcharter.com
 sailionian.com
 sailingholidays.com
 seafarersailing.co.uk
 sunsail.co.uk
 sunscapeyachting.co.uk

TURKEY

Turkey bridges the gap between Europe and Asia, East and West, and it makes for a fascinating place to visit and gives you a real insight into Muslim culture. Turkey is friendly, welcoming and inclusive of visitors. What is more, the country possesses many miles of stunning coastline just begging to be explored.

Cruising grounds

The most popular cruising grounds are generally acknowledged to be down south around Marmaris and Bodrum. Here you enter a charterer's heaven with an endless succession of inviting coves and intriguing islets. Everywhere you look there are also signs of the area's rich history, with a veritable torrent of Roman and Byzantine ruins.

Extending the cruising season

If you are looking to extend your cruising season to the absolute maximum, this is probably the place to go, as you are so far south that you generally get a couple more weeks of reliable sunshine compared with Greece.

Knidos

Knidos sums up what Turkey is all about. A mere daysail from Marmaris, this peaceful anchorage is overlooked by the ruins of an ancient Greek colony.

Some of the remnants have even tumbled into the water, meaning you are actually anchoring in a piece of history.

Book with

activityyachting.com
kiriacoulis.com
medsailors.com
moorings.co.uk
nautilusyachting.com
seafarersailing.co.uk
sunsail.co.uk
sunscapeyachting.co.uk



CREATIVE COMMONS/MICHAL OSMANDA



WHEN TO GO

Despite being a long way south, winter can still get pretty tough, but you can sneak in a charter in early November or March and with any luck enjoy decent conditions. Things can get a bit difficult here in August if you don't like excessive heat. Summer sailing is characterised by sea breezes in the afternoon, but generally things are not as boisterous as the Aegean, with Bodrum the most placid area.



Further reading
Turkish Waters
 Pilot
 Rod Heikell
imray.com



Turkish Gulets

I suspect most of us have never actually seen a Turkish Gulet under sail. They usually seem to be hurrying along under motor; the mast and sails seem purely decorative. For those who would actually like to see them in action, the Bodrum Cup is held every October and is a race strictly for the traditional boats. The event marks the end of the season and is largely an excuse for a big party.

CREATIVE COMMONS/ALVO ARDETTI

ITALY

Fine food, a fine climate and miles of stunning coastline: Italy has plenty to commend it to the cruising sailor and there are many treasures to discover. Even if you already know Italy well, exploring the country from the sea opens up whole new vistas and the mix of incredible history combined with glorious scenery makes for a truly seductive package.

Cruising grounds

The west coast in particular boasts a number of stunning cruising grounds. The Amalfi Coast has long been fashionable but remains an absolute treasure with its rugged coastline and beautiful little towns. Just to the south, Sicily, dominated by the volcanic Mount Etna, has its own unique charm. To the north, Sardinia with its glittering Costa Smeralda is another obvious attraction, while the Tuscan archipelago is often overlooked but is very beautiful. The east coast is less spectacular and it is only really when you get up to Venice that things start to get interesting again.



WHEN TO GO

Although the weather is pretty settled from May through to October, things can still get pretty hairy in the Straits of Messina and Bonifacio. On the whole, however, the summer months are often typified by too little breeze. The main hazard in this area in summer is simply the summer crowds, while mooring fees can also be rather on the steep side. On the west coast, you need to keep a weather eye out for the Bora.



Further reading

Italian Waters Pilot

Rod Heikell
imray.com

Don't miss...



CANONAUT7

Maddalena Archipelago

Everyone knows about Sardinia's opulent and beautiful Costa Smeralda, but venture a short distance offshore and you'll discover this beautiful archipelago consisting of azure bays, pink sandy beaches and blue cliffs.

Go see...



VENEZIA.NET

Festa della Sensa, Venice

The centrepiece of this event, on 19 and 20 May, translates as the 'Wedding with the Sea'. Beautifully decorated traditional Venetian boats sail in formation out to sea, starting from the bay at St Mark's square.

Book with

kiriacoulis.com
moorings.co.uk

nautilusyachting.com
sunsail.co.uk

CROATIA

With well over 1,000 individual islands and islets, Croatia's coastline is a galaxy of stunning, limpid anchorages and sleepy, sun-scorched villages. The coastline is also peppered with stunning examples of Venetian architecture. The conflicts of the 1990s left their scars on many of the historical towns and cities along the coast, but somehow that just makes the beauty all the more haunting and poignant.

Cruising grounds

The northern end of Croatia is characterised by the towering mountains of the Velebit and rugged, barren low lying islands offshore. This can be a challenging, wild and incredibly beautiful cruising ground. Below this you get into the Kornati islands, little more than teardrops in the sea. Further south again and you are into the famous Dalmatian coast, with larger islands such as Hvar and Vis, not to mention spectacular cities such as Split and Dubrovnik.



WHEN TO GO

May and September can be a bit cool, but you can get better breezes. August can be insanely busy on the Dalmatian coast. Even in summer you can get a Bora come through with NW winds and a fairly chunky swell. The Velebit channel can be dangerous. Further south, keep an eye out as it can render some anchorages untenable. Croatians are not afraid to charge high prices for anchorages.



Further reading

Croatia Cruising Companion

Jane Cody
eu.wiley.com

Don't miss...



Dubrovnik

A truly stunning fortified city situated at the southern tip of Croatia. This is a popular stopover with cruise ships and can get stupidly busy, but head into town early enough and you can pad along paving stones worn smooth by centuries of wear and gaze at the beautiful old buildings in peace. Be quick to book a mooring in peak season.

Go see...



CROATIA TOURIST BOARD

Hvar – the party town

The pretty Venetian town becomes a party focus in the summer. Head down to Hula Hula bar around sunset. Foodwise, try the local speciality of *peka*, a stew that is cooked for hours in a pot buried in hot ashes.

Book with

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nautilusyachting.com
seafarersailing.co.uk
sunsail.co.uk
sunscapeyachting.co.uk

GIBRALTAR

Gibraltar marks the gateway to the Mediterranean and has been bickered over by nations for centuries. Given its long history of occupation by the British, it is unsurprising that the mighty rock offers something of a change of pace from anywhere else in the Med. From the red telephone boxes through to the lively pubs, many aspects of Gibraltar are as English as a willow cricket bat. Yet this dramatic rock, with its commanding views out to Africa, also speaks of an altogether more exotic world.

Cruising grounds

With Africa only nine miles distant, this is the ideal starting point for adventure. Many cruisers make a beeline for the Spanish enclave of Ceuta on the African coast. Beyond that, Morocco itself has a number of excellent marinas these days with Marina Smir, to the east of Ceuta, providing thoroughly modern facilities.



WHEN TO GO

Gibraltar is a long way south so the weather can remain extremely favourable until very late into the autumn. By November, however, you are taking a real gamble on conditions and things really start to warm up again in March/April. The main thing to watch out for is the wind, which can be boisterous as you approach the bottleneck of the Gibraltar Straits.



Further reading
Atlantic Spain and Portugal
Walker/Buchanan
imray.com



Approaching Gibraltar

There is something truly magical about simply approaching Gibraltar from the sea, and that in itself is something that should not be missed. Once ashore a trek up the Mediterranean Steps to the ape colony that occupies the top of the rock is also a must.

CREATIVE COMMONS/MOSHIANAHORI



CREATIVE COMMONS/RUSSAVIA

Spanish English!

Although the official language of Gibraltar is English many Gibraltarians speak a mix of Spanish and English known as *Llanito*. Gibraltarians are extremely proud of their links with Britain and their big celebration is Gibraltar National Day (10 September).

SPAIN & BALEARIC ISLANDS

From the near wall-to-wall sunshine and bars of the Costa del Sol in the south, the metropolitan buzz of Barcelona and Valencia, through to the rugged Basque ports on the French Border, Spain offers a wildly diverse range of attractions. And that's not forgetting the Balearic islands – Mallorca, Ibiza, Minorca and Formentera as well as outliers Cabrera, Dragonera and S'Espalmador.

Cruising grounds

Spain offers 750 miles of Mediterranean coastline, split into distinct areas: the Costa del Sol in the south, moving northeast down the coast to the Costa Blanca, followed by the Costa del Azahar, Costa Dorada and Costa Brava. There are marinas aplenty and pretty anchorages once you reach the Costa Brava. Each Balearic has its own charms, from buzzy Ibiza and Mallorca to secluded Formentera.



WHEN TO GO

The best weather is to be found on the Costa del Sol, where things warm up in March, get very hot in midsummer and remain pleasant until well into November. Sailing conditions here are moderate. In early spring the Mistral can howl across the Gulf of Lyon. By and large the coast is not challenging, offering laid back if rather unspectacular coastal hopping with plentiful marinas along the way.



Further reading
Islas Baleares,
Graham Hutt
imray.com

BARCELONA TOURIST BOARD



Barcelona

This is a long coastline with diverse attractions, but there is something truly magical about sailing into the heart of the city of Barcelona. Few major cities in the world have marinas that feel so connected with the city centre.



CREATIVE COMMONS/ANDRES NIETO PARRAS

Fiesta

Although partying goes on right through the summer in the Balearics, particularly in Ibiza, September is the real fiesta time. One of the most notable events is the Fiestas del Rei en Jaume at Santa Ponsa. This festival takes place on September 12 and 13.

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latesail.com sailchecker.com
medboat.com sailing.gi (Allabroad Sailing Academy)

Book with

nautilusyachting.com sunsail.co.uk
seafarersailing.co.uk sunscapeyachting.co.uk

MALTA

Right in the middle of the Mediterranean, Malta is an interesting mix of ancient history, varied cultures, and typical Med bays and islands for sailing around. There are also three other islands, in descending order of size Gozo, Comino and Cominotto, and all have different feels – Malta's towns are buzzing with narrow lanes and European café culture, Gozo is a typical fishing island, Comino is largely uninhabited and Cominotto is home to the famous Blue Grotto.

Cruising grounds

On a week-long charter you can circumnavigate Malta, Gozo and Comino, stopping in at the 'grand' – in appearance as well as in name – harbours of Valetta and Mdina, and at the picture-perfect fishing harbours of Marsaxlokk on Malta and Mgarr in Gozo. Mix things up by also anchoring off pretty beaches on your way round each island. A two-week charter will give you enough time to make the 60nM



WHEN TO GO

As with the rest of the Med, peak season is May to September, although temperatures can be very hot on land in August, reaching 40 deg C, albeit tempered a bit by the afternoon sea breeze. When the Scirocco wind blows out of Africa it brings high temperatures and humidity and, in spring months, gales. Stick to the slightly cooler months of June, September and October.



Further reading

Mediterranean Almanac 2015-16, Lucinda and Rod Heikell



Don't miss...

Blue Grotto at Cominotto

A swim in the Blue Grotto at Cominotto. This is a system of caverns that glows different shades of iridescent blue. The colour variations are due to a mix of the underwater flora, the sunlight and the reflections back from the rock. Go early and beat the crowds.

SAM JEFFERSON



Go see...

Megalithic Temples

Malta lays claim to having the oldest known human structures in the world – the prehistoric limestone Megalithic Temples, the oldest of which date back to 3,600BC. They are a protected UNESCO world heritage site. Local folklore has it that they were built by giants.

CREATIVE COMMONS/CHRIS BROWN

SOUTHERN FRANCE

From Cerbere on the rugged Catalan coast through to Menton on the Italian border, the French Mediterranean offers immense variety, be it the honeyed luxury of St Tropez and the Cote d'Azur or the great flat stretches of wilderness of the Camargue.

Cruising grounds

The Cote d'Azur has to be one of the most famous cruising grounds in the world, but fame has also brought crowds and often exorbitant mooring fees. Just to the west lies another excellent cruising ground with the Île d'Hyères as its focal point. Add the islands of Porquerolles, Port Cros and Île de Levant into the equation and you have a great sailing ground. From here, you are only a few hours' sail from the stunning island of Corsica. East of Marseille you are into the windblown marshlands and salt pans of the Camargue and the Rhone valley which are not typically chartering territory.



When to go

The whole of this section of the Med is dominated by the Mistral howling down the Rhone valley and this can keep things chilly – and blustery – until well into May. Thereafter is pleasant sailing until October. Marinas can get crowded and a catamaran can be a real handicap when it comes to finding a space, plus be prepared to splash the cash on the Cote d'Azur.



Further reading

Mediterranean France and Corsica Pilot, Rod Heikell
imray.com

St Tropez

Some might say this is definitely to be missed given the crowds and general congestion, but you can't sail the Cote d'Azur and not go to St Tropez and the best way to see it in many ways is from the sea.

CREATIVE COMMONS/STARUS



Don't miss...



Go see...

CREATIVE COMMONS/BAPTISTE ROSSI

Cannes Film Festival

The region's big event is the Cannes film festival in May. A more obscure event is the Festival of Saint Louis in the port of Sete in the Camargue. This features a weird form of nautical jousting, whereby rivals try to knock each other off rival boats with, well, a lance.

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nautilusyachting.com
sailchecker.com

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nautilusyachting.com

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Cruising grounds

With 11,000 miles of varied coastline, countless unspoilt harbours and coves, not to mention the general feeling of antiquity that draws people towards this group of islands in the north Atlantic, the United Kingdom is an interesting proposition. It's very tidal and has a reputation for bad weather that is only partly warranted – at least in summer. But with some of the best cruising grounds on earth it has a draw more powerful than guaranteed sun and flat, sandy beaches.

CREATIVE COMMONS/GRASSROOTSGROUNDWELL

Durdle Door, a limestone arch on Dorset's Jurassic coast



Reeds Nautical Almanac 2016
Rob Buttress and Perrin Towler
reedsalmanacs.co.uk

EAST COAST

The lonely flatlands and slow rivers of England's east coast, 50 miles and a galaxy away from London, are a magical area completely transformed by the tide every day. Here you will find big skies, solitude, forgotten villages with weatherboard houses, wonderful river sailing and a high concentration of traditional vessels, like the smacks in Brightlingsea and the Thames sailing barges that ply the Thames estuary.

Oh – and mud. Lots of it. It might be the land that inspired Maurice Griffiths and Arthur Ransome, but that doesn't keep locals from their motto that "We don't muck about in boats here – we boat about in muck."

East Coast Rivers Cruising Companion
by Janet Harber

STEFFAN MEYRIC HUGHES



THE BROADS

The spiritual home of the British charter holiday is not in fact at sea, but in a national park: Britain's largest protected wetlands, a navigable network of lakes and rivers, virtually tide-free, and a haven for abundant birdlife and charter boats of all hues.

Expect hassle-free cruising under sail or power, modern or classic, with little navigation, negligible danger and easy moorings. The fierce competition for your custom makes prices attractive, particularly out of season.

Hamilton's Navigations by Jamie Campbell





WEST COAST OF SCOTLAND

The west coast of Scotland is a step up for many cruising sailors in terms of beauty, remoteness and solitude. Scotland's jagged west coast of islands and bays is regarded as among the best cruising in the world. Here you will find flawless anchorages, pristine beaches and all the solitude you could wish for.

The weather, sadly, is a step down from English destinations, and although seldom cold in the summer months, the area is notoriously rainy.

Cruising Scotland by Mike Balmforth and Edward Mason in conjunction with Clyde Cruising Club's *Sailing Directions*

ISLE OF SKYE YACHTS

Don't miss...



EMMA BAMFORD

WEST COUNTRY

The westernmost counties of England, Devon and Cornwall, which form a thick peninsula jutting out of England's bottom left, are surely the most beautiful in the country, with grassy moorlands, tumbling rivers and impossibly beautiful villages that edge a coast of rocks and golden sands, as well as world-class cultural treasures such as St Ives, the Eden Project and the Minack Theatre. The weather here is changeable, and the feeling is more oceanic than in some parts of the country, with the blue Atlantic swell coming in to feed the surfers on the north of the southwest peninsula, and sailors on the south. Not to worry – the boltholes are plentiful and beautiful. The more adventurous might want to tackle the crossing to the stunning Isles of Scilly (pictured).

The West Country Cruising Companion by Mark Fishwick

Go see...



WHEN TO GO

Obviously summer is the best time but if you wear the right kit and keep to more sheltered areas you can sail year-round. In Scotland May and June tend to be better than the later summer months, but there is no strict pattern. You will also be less bedevilled by the midges that form such irritation there later in the summer.

SOUTH COAST

The Solent waters that separate the Isle of Wight from England's southern shoreline are Britain's sailing capital. Marina charges are correspondingly high and the waters lively with all sort of vessels, sailing and commercial. The Isle of Wight is the mecca among meccas, with more sailing clubs per square mile than is really feasible. The south coast is not without its charms, from the island itself, the emerald green Solent, the feeling of sailing history all around, and the beautiful natural harbours of Chichester and Poole, and on to the Jurassic Coast.

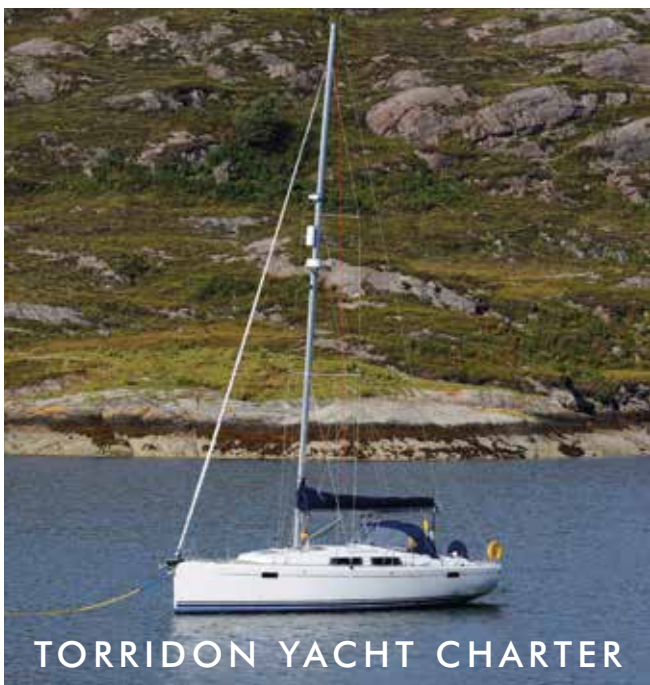
The Shell Channel Pilot by Tom Cunliffe

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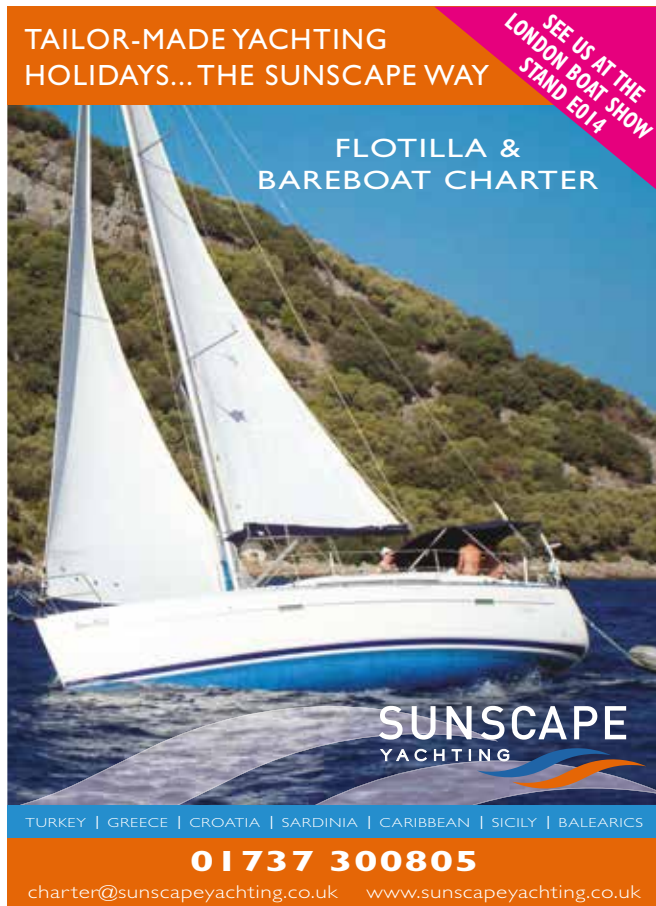
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Cruising grounds

Magnificent fjords, ancient castles with stunning vistas of the North or Baltic Seas, secluded cruising grounds, stunning views and a vast variety of countries. The northern parts of Europe may not be the first spots that spring to mind when you think of a charter holiday but they can certainly offer some of the finest memories and stunning sails – whether a summer cruise in Sweden, a ski and sail experience in Norway or a visit to Helsinki.



WHEN TO GO

Typically the season runs from July to September, with the longest daylight hours from July. Those looking for a sail and ski holiday will obviously want to go in the winter months, and those looking to see the Northern Lights are best advised to go in January or February.



Maarstrand

Maarstrand, an island in Sweden (pictured), is accessible only by boat. Views are classically Swedish with rock covered in pine trees.

Northwest Baltic

Norway's rugged coastline comprises deep ravines with plenty of hiking, fishing, glacier walks and kayaking adventures to keep you occupied. Head off on a charter around the summer solstice and you could see the midnight sun. Or go during the early part of the year and catch the northern lights from the deck of a yacht moored at sea. Islands formed from glacial erosion, stunning coastlines and distinctive sailing all are part of the experience in Sweden. The city of Stockholm is flourishing, boasting a cosmopolitan atmosphere to rival some of the world's most luxurious settings.

Southeast Baltic

The southeast shorelines are completely different and more familiar for anyone from the UK: low lying, quiet, cheap, with some lovely, if crumbling, old towns in eastern Germany and an array of other interesting countries recovering from the yoke of the former Soviet Union.

Across the Channel

Accessible Belgium and France offer a host of cruising grounds. Whether you charter in France and sail around the beautiful ports on the northwest coast, or charter at home and add a long weekend in Belgium into your itinerary, possibilities abound.

Honfleur

Honfleur in northwest France is a well-known spot but with good reason. It is certainly worth a visit, even if it's your second time around.

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Further reading
The Baltic Sea
by RCCPF
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Don't miss...

Los Gigantes, Tenerife

Awe-inspiring basalt cliffs rising sheer from the turbulent Atlantic to over 500m in places. The water here is deep, and pods of whales and dolphins can often be seen. The small local marina provides the only shelter along this bit of coast.

Playa Francesca: On the island of La Graciosa, north of Lanzarote, this beach is a haven – white sand and shallow turquoise water make it a tranquil anchorage.

At around 28 degrees north, the Canary Islands are much closer to Africa than to Europe. And yet as part of Spain they are well developed, safe and stuffed with exciting bars and restaurants. Their position makes the islands a year-round sailing ground, with typically strong, steady winds and warm temperatures. The Canaries is sometimes considered a tougher cruising ground, but with easy navigation and plenty of marinas, the experience can be as simple or as complex as you like.



Go see...

Fiesta de la Naval

Being Spanish, the islands host numerous holy and saints' day festivals. In ports across the islands, the Fiesta de la Naval in October recalls Spain's last major naval victory against the British – in 1595.

Lucha Canaria is a form of wrestling thought to have survived from the Guanches people, who inhabited the islands before the Spanish conquest. Punching, hitting and strangling are not permitted, but any grasp goes.

Cruising grounds

The more developed islands are the easternmost ones: Lanzarote, Gran Canaria, Fuerteventura and Tenerife. They balance mass tourism with astounding natural beauty, including at times lunar landscape, great hiking and Spain's highest peak – El Teide. The smaller islands to the west are a little harder to reach, but well worth the effort – quieter and more beautiful. Prevailing winds are northeasterly.



WHEN TO GO

Temperatures peak in the upper 20s in July and August, with average highs of 19–20 degrees in the winter. Rainfall can be quite high between November and March, but it tends to be focused on the north of the islands, and is concentrated across just a few days in the month. This really is an all-year-round destination.

The chief challenge can be the sea state between the islands and the acceleration zones which funnel the wind along specific areas of the coast. Seamanlike prudence is all that's required...

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Further reading

Atlantic Islands
Anne Hammick,
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Caribbean



SAM JEFFERSON

When it comes to yachting, the Caribbean islands have it all. First and foremost you have those divine trade winds thrumming through your rigging with unerring steadiness. But there is more, much more. This lengthy chain of islands offers such variation from island group to island group that you can be transported to different worlds almost in the space of a single day. All that and we haven't even mentioned the palm trees, golden sands, azure waters and, most importantly, the rum punch.



Weather

One of the greatest attractions of the Caribbean is the extremely reliable trade winds which blow almost constantly from the NE-SE at 20-25kts on average. This can seem quite strong to start with, but you soon adjust and relax. The wind can sometimes pipe up a little around headlands and narrow channels, and die off in the lee of islands, but generally they are easy winds to read and predict.

Don't expect wall-to-wall sunshine. The weather is always warm, but there are plenty of heavy rain squalls along the way, particularly in the more mountainous islands such as St Lucia and Dominica.

When to go

Peak season in the Caribbean is around Christmas. Hurricane season occurs between the months of August and September, so this is dead low season and can be stiflingly hot.

You can also get the occasional hurricane developing in October and November, while a hurricane develops in December about once every ten years.

Cruising grounds

Marinas are becoming more widespread but, with no tides and reliable breezes, it makes sense to anchor off. Space is at far less of a premium than in the Med, with the result that catamarans are often favoured. By day, navigation is extremely simple and can often be done by eye. Polarised sunglasses are a real plus in some of the shallow reef-strewn areas as they make it very easy to con your way through. Anchoring is generally on sand, and the clear waters mean you can usually see exactly where you have dropped your hook. For added peace of mind, you can often swim down and check it is dug in properly. Don't anchor on coral and be aware that in some harbours there will be a lot of junk at the bottom.

Security-wise, use your common sense. If you leave an expensive outboard and its fuel tank unlocked and unattended for a long period of time, it may well get stolen. Don't carry large amounts of cash on the boat or on your person.

Further reading

Chris Doyle's excellent and authoritative cruising guides are excellent for the Caribbean and are available via doyleguides.com, while Don Street's guides – street-iolaire.com – offer a useful counterpoint.



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VIRGIN ISLANDS

The Virgin Islands have been noted for their perfect cruising conditions ever since Sir Francis Drake spent some time exploring them back in the 16th century. Consistent trade winds and a beautiful maze of islands make for a perfect cruising paradise. The archipelago is split between the British Virgin Islands (BVI) and the US Virgin Islands (USVI). As a rule, the BVIs are on the whole less developed while the USVIs have St John as a designated nature reserve.



CREATIVE COMMONS/ROSA G

Don't miss...

Painkillers at Jost van Dyke

Well, you really should have a rum punch somewhere along the way, and perhaps one of the best places to do it is the Soggy Dollar Bar on the little island of Jost Van Dyke. Swim ashore and then dry out in a hammock while you soak up the atmosphere – and alcohol. Welcome to the Caribbean!



ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA

The big selling point with Antigua is that it has 365 beaches – one for every day of the year. Yet it has much more than that and is an excellent and varied cruising ground. Low-lying Barbuda is to the north and offers incredible beaches and a real taste of laid-back Caribbean life.



SAM JEFFERSON

Go see...

Seven Mile Beach

Seven Mile Beach on Barbuda takes some beating. As the name suggests, this is seven miles of absolutely pristine powdery white sand. Given its great length, it is never overcrowded and it's a good place to play Robinson Crusoe – or perhaps Jack Sparrow. You may want to pick your spot relatively close to the only beach bar or you'll face a long stroll.

Antigua Sailing Week

This event in April is of international significance in the sailing calendar and if you want to mix with some serious yachties, this is the time to come. It does also attract the crowds and Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta, which generally follows on, is a slightly more civilised affair.

BAHAMAS TURKS AND CAICOS

With low-lying islands that are little more than glorified coral reefs in some cases, the Bahamas and Turks and Caicos groups offer a distinctly different sort of landscape to islands further south. The mazes of islands, cays and reefs offer up some of the most incredible anchorages and snorkelling spots you can imagine and with so many islands, there is always peace and quiet to be found.

Don't miss...



CREATIVE COMMONS/FROGGERLAURA

Swimming pigs

Pig Beach, Exumas. Not your run-of-the-mill attraction this one, but Big Major Cay is famed for its large colony of wild boars, which spend their days lounging on the beach and swimming. Thankfully these particular porkers aren't particularly wild any more and will generally come and have a friendly chat.



CREATIVE COMMONS/JON WORTH

Junkanoo festival

Head to the Bahamas for Christmas and you can't fail to get tangled up in the Junkanoo festival, a wild, exuberant celebration featuring dancing, colourful costumes and a general air of conviviality which goes back to the days of slavery, when workers were granted three days off around Christmas.

ST MAARTEN ANGUILLA ST KITTS | ST BARTHS

With its international airport and numerous charter bases, St Maarten is a popular starting point for many sailing adventures and although it is somewhat built up, it is a great cruising ground. From the opulence of St Barths, to the more earthy charm of St Kitts and Nevis, this is an area that just begs to be explored properly.

Go see...

Island of Anguilla

Like moths to a flame, many are drawn to the opulent glamour of St Barths and the Island of Anguilla is often overlooked. With its cool vibe and sleepy atmosphere, this peaceful island offers the perfect counterpoint to St Barths, and Road Bay is a great anchorage to

FLICKR/STEFAN KRASNOWSKI

St Maarten regatta and festival

This is an area that is crammed full of attractions for the keen yachting. The

St Maarten Heineken regatta, held on the week beginning 3 March, is a pretty big deal and is about far more than just sailing as this is a full-on festival that takes over the whole island for the week.

ST VINCENT & GRENADINES GRENADA

Picture the Caribbean in your mind's eye and the chances are you will conjure up something akin to the Grenadines. This area really has all the perfect ingredients, including a liberal scattering of sun-splashed desert islands replete with palm trees, stunning reefs and golden beaches. To get there you can either charter from Grenada in the south or St Vincent in the North. Both these islands boast their own fair share of stunning scenery and lush rainforest.

Don't miss....

Tobago Cays

Tobago Cays and the Grenadines as a whole are unmissable. It is worth also seeking out the peripheral gems. The island of Carriacou is one such spot. Situated just adjacent to Grenada, this sleepy island is often overlooked and gives you a taste of the old Caribbean, untarnished by mass tourism.

CREATIVE COMMONS/KP93

Don't miss....

Carriacou boats

The traditional wooden Carriacou sailing boats were introduced by Scottish settlers for fishing and remain a colourful and beautiful sight under sail. The Carriacou regatta in July and August is where these boats spread their wings and racing is fast, furious and unforgettable.

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BELIZE

Many old salts will tell you that the Caribbean islands 'aren't what they were in my day', presumably meaning that they are a little more developed and a little less ramshackle than they used to be. For those wishing for a rather more unvarnished version of the Caribbean, then the coast of Central America can help. Some places – Honduras for example – are not recommended, but others – Belize, Panama, Guyana and even Colombia, offer good, safe cruising.

Don't miss...

Belize barrier reef

Belize barrier reef runs roughly parallel to the coast for a quite astonishing 190 miles. Charles Darwin was here in 1842 and described it as 'the most remarkable reef in the West Indies'. Jacques Cousteau was also a big fan and it remains in a far healthier state than many others in the Caribbean. Perhaps its most distinctive feature is The Great Blue Hole, a spectacular sinkhole that is best described as, well, a great blue hole surrounded by reef.

ERIK PHETERSON

Lobsterfest extravaganza

There are many, many festivals held along the Caribbean coast, but a nice relevant one is Lobsterfest, held at Caye Caulker in Belize in June (lobster season in Belize is June to February). Besides sampling the best of Belizean seafood, there are local arts and crafts to browse, live Belizean music and a beauty pageant.

ST LUCIA | DOMINICA GUADELOUPE MARTINIQUE

St Lucia is famed for its iconic Pitons anchorage beneath two towering volcanic plugs. The island is also an good starting point for a cruising adventure. Adjacent are Martinique and Guadeloupe and this French enclave offers a change of pace. Montserrat – famous for its rather evil volcano – and the lush, paradisaical Dominica should not be overlooked.

Go see...

Iles des Saintes

This small collection of islands just off the coast of Guadeloupe is the perfect tonic for any homesick Frenchman. The main settlement is like a little slice of France in the Caribbean, complete with boulangerie and its own take on French café culture. It can be a bit twee, but it is also very pretty.

Guadeloupe's Creole

A Creole heart still beats strong and no more so than during February when carnival fever grips Guadeloupe. The event occurs the week before Ash Wednesday and culminates in Mardi Gras celebrations featuring music, dancing, parades, and floats.

SAM JEFFERSON

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Situated way down south, the islands of Trinidad and Tobago have a character all of their own. Trinidad is a huge island by Caribbean standards and can feel quite businesslike in parts. Tobago is more peaceful with a holiday island feel as well as plenty of great cruising spots.

Don't miss...

Tobago

Tobago is often overlooked and is an enchanting spot. It is home to the oldest protected rainforest in the Caribbean, and hundreds of species of birds, mammals and insects.

CREATIVE COMMONS/KP93

Go see...

Trinidad carnival

Held in February, the Trinidad carnival is famed for being one of the best outside Brazil. This is an absolute explosion of colour, music, revelry, and creativity. Across the world, others have sought to imitate this riot of revelry.

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Don't miss.

Praslin Island

The choices here are pretty much endless, but to pick out one spot from thousands of options, a trip to the Praslin Islands in the Seychelles is an unforgettable experience.

Drop your anchor on the sandy bottom of the Baie St Anne and enjoy paradise. Keep an eye out for giant land turtles lumbering about this unspoilt slice of paradise.

CREATIVE COMMONS/TOBI87



WHEN TO GO

Throughout this area peak season is between November and February when it is drier and cooler. It stays dry until May. Southeast Asia and the Maldives are dominated by monsoon weather and in May the southwest monsoon kicks in, bringing torrential rainstorms. The opposite is true of the Seychelles and Mauritius which enjoy slightly more rain between November and May, but the variations in the climate are not as pronounced in southeast Asia. Cruising here is generally straightforward, although the South China Sea is subject to strong currents: treat with respect.

Generally in southeast Asia, this is an area strewn with reefs, and many are poorly marked, so sensible eyeball navigation is required.

Cruising grounds

The charms of southeast Asia have been seducing Europeans for many decades, and the cocktail of a warm climate, stunning beaches and a varied coastline have made this area a favourite with charterers. Head south out into the Indian Ocean and the Maldives, Seychelles and Mauritius offer variety and beauty.



Festival of Songkran

Plenty of festivals to choose from in such a broad area, but one of the most picturesque has to be the Thai New Year festival of Songkran which takes place in April and is great fun. It's a spiritual time of contemplation, but also involves throwing a lot of water over each other. The best of both worlds.

CREATIVE COMMONS/JI



Further reading

South East Asia Pilot

Andy Dowden and
Bill O'Leary

southeastasiapilot.com

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Don't miss...

Newport Rhode Island

So many attractions, but a must see for any self-respecting yachting has to be Newport, Rhode Island. Like Cowes, this is one of the great hubs of yachting, having hosted the America's Cup on innumerable occasions. The architecture is quite interesting too with a range of absurdly big houses adorning the waterfront, including Vanderbilt's historical mansion, The Breakers.

CREATIVE COMMONS/MICHAEL KAGGIS



WHEN TO GO

The northern areas of America are just as affected by the seasons as northern Europe, and you have a very defined sailing season running from May through to September. Head far enough south, however, and you find the season extended almost indefinitely. It is for this reason that Florida, in particular Miami, has become a focal point for chartering. In terms of hazards, the north has some pretty fierce tides both on the east and west coasts. As a general rule, North America is more like cruising in the UK with similar factors of weather, tide, and shipping to take into account. This changes as you head further south, however.

Cruising grounds

The continent of North America offers one of the most varied cruising grounds in the world. From the balmy palm-fringed blue waters of Florida Keys to the icy, remote and utterly beautiful north Pacific coast or from thousands of miles of tree-lined wilderness of Canada's west coast to the islets and big tides of Nova Scotia, this continent has it all. It is a continent of extremes, boasting, among other things, the biggest tides in the world at the Bay of Fundy in Canada and the refined pleasures and rich history of Newport. Between these extremes lies a whole plethora of fantastic cruising grounds (for example, Miami's Everglades and Chesapeake Bay are a creek crawler's delight). You name it, North America has it.



TALBOT WILSON

Newport to Bermuda Yacht Race

This is one of the oldest yacht races in the North American calendar and departs from Newport on 17 June. Even if you're not taking part, there is still a real festival feel around this famous yachting venue and what better place to soak up the atmosphere than from the deck of your own yacht?



Further reading

A big area to cover in one book, but Seaworthy Publications produces some excellent area specific guides: seaworthy.com

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latesail.com
moorings.co.uk
nautilusyachting.com
sunsail.co.uk

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Don't miss...

CREATIVE COMMONS / DAMIEN DEMPSEY



WHEN TO GO

Given that we are talking about an area so vast it bisects the equator, the time to visit some of these spots varies. The peak season south of the equator is generally during the summer months between September and March. In New Zealand, winters can be cool, but this is not a problem in the South Seas, where the summer months tend to be more humid. Hurricane season runs from November to April. Reefs and currents are prevalent throughout the South Seas and care must be taken with navigation. Prudence is advisable when swimming – particularly in the Whitsundays which feature a couple of nasty stinging and biting creatures of the deep.

Cruising grounds

From the beautiful, lush haven of the Bay of Islands in New Zealand, way down in the south, to the towering volcanic peaks of Hawaii many thousands of miles to the north, the Pacific holds so many treasures in between that you could fill an entire magazine with their attractions. Needless to say, the potential for chartering is immense. Popular destinations include the Whitsunday Island, New Zealand's North Island, Fiji, Tahiti, Tonga and Hawaii. There are beautiful places to visit all over the South Pacific but many are not within reach of charterers.



Go see...

G ANDERSON

Bay of Islands

Again, the scope of festivals and celebrations throughout the South Seas is frankly mind boggling. Here, however, is a small local knowledge tip. If you're chartering in the Bay of Islands, a trip to the Farmers Market in Kerikeri is rewarding. Good, wholesome,

Whitsundays

Nestled between the Coral Sea and the Great Barrier Reef, the Whitsundays are heaven for anyone with an interest in diving and snorkelling. Situated only a few miles from the main tourist hub of Airlie beach, Bait Reef offers wonderful snorkelling. Put your mask on and prepare to enter a different world, replete with turtles, tropical fish and the mighty manta ray.



Further reading

*South Pacific
Anchorage*
Warwick Clay
imray.com

Book with

latesail.com
moorings.co.uk
nautilusyachting.com
sunsail.co.uk



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Stunning scenery, secluded coves, gentle morning seas and afternoon breezes – perfect for our first family flotilla holiday. After our Sunsail team briefing we set sail with much excitement from Göcek with 11 other boats on a perfect day with temperatures in the 30s. Our grandchildren, aged 18 months, four and 10 years, happily explored our 42ft (13m) catamaran *Carea* while the six adults sailed or looked after the children. We anchored for lunch in a beautiful bay and out came the stand-up boards, snorkels and sea scooter and it was everyone in the water. With a new destination every night, the days flew by. We swam with turtles in the Blue Lagoon, watched dolphins swimming off our bows, saw spectacular sunsets and looked in awe at the stars.

The blindfold dinghy races were a big hit and proved competitive, as did the flotilla regatta. Evenings with the group at rustic restaurants on secluded islands were mixed with evenings in a marina (Fethiye) savouring the local culture. On the final night our lead crew hosted a farewell party with a special prize for each child. As our son said: "It's the best family holiday ever – where are we going next year?" ✨



Sunsail 444 Robertson and Caine Catamaran

LOA: 42ft 7in (13m)

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Draught: 4ft 2in (1.3m)

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