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WHAT JOY FOR EVERY GIRL AND BOY...

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When Nick Trend took his family to Cephalonia, he found it difficult to rouse them from their poolside idyll. But there was one local whose house was worth a visit.

'Hey!' shouted Jamie across the waves. "Come and see! It's an octopus's garden."

I relayed the call to the other snorkellers and dipped my mask back beneath the waves. And there it was, a neat dome of stones, each about the size of half a football, and a roughly circular arrangement of pebbles scattered on the sand around it.

I watched as Jamie took a gulp of air and duck-dived towards it, clutching a plastic bottle of strong saline solution. One squirt of the salty water and the octopus shot out of its den, aiming directly at him. He headed straight for the surface and emerged with eight tentacles strapped around his chest and a big smile on his face.



This was nothing new for Jamie Stirling, a young British marine biologist who has fallen in love with summer on the Greek island of Cephalonia and set up a small business there. This, he says as he gently prises off the suckers and carefully puts the animal in a string bag, is the usual way to collect an octopus for observation.

Almost every day in season he takes a boat out of the harbour to explore the coves and islands. Unlike many of the caique owners who offer such such trips, he has a unique selling point. He knows just how to use his wide-ranging knowledge of marine life to fascinate both children and adults.

On our day out we collected an amazing variety of creatures, examined them in the on-board tank and returned them unharmed to the sea. The octopus was the most fascinating, but we also held sea urchins (the ones with the poisonous spines) and - nervously at first - let them shuffle across our palms. There was no pressure on the spines, explained Jamie, so there was no risk of our skin being punctured.

We looked at sea cucumbers, examined the strange, five-toothed mouths of different types of starfish, and learned how they disgorge their stomachs in order to digest their prey. We snorkelled over a mysterious wreck, spotted mines left over from the Second World War, stuffed ourselves with Greek salad at lunchtime and sprawled on the deck to recover. And once, during our last afternoon snorkel, I thought for a moment I spotted, far off in the watery shade, the canary-coloured nose cone of a small submarine... but no, it can't have been.

The octopus expedition was a bit of a one-off during our week on Cephalonia. The rest of the time we have done virtually nothing. After a day or two of that, I feel restless. I'm not very good at relaxing and lying by the pool all day. The rest of the family, however, are happy. A

day out on the boat was quite enough; now they want to enjoy the rest of the week in idleness.

Our daughter is floating about the pool on a makeshift raft composed of a lilo and rubber ring, eyes tight shut, dabbling her fingers in the water like Ratty in a hot climate. An occasional puff of warm breeze sends her revolving in gentle circles. Every now and again she calls out "villa" or "tree" or "sea". As she spins with her eyes shut, she is trying to guess which direction she is now facing. Her brother spent 10 minutes adjusting sun lounger, towels and pillows in such a way as to balance his prostrate body and turn the pages of his novel with as little effort as possible.

As for their mother, she appears to be lost in meditation. Put it this way - she hasn't moved a muscle for 30 minutes, and there is a regularity to her breathing suggestive of a deeply relaxed state.

It wasn't so peaceful an hour ago. The lilo and the rubber ring - on which I had been forced to fork out €14 on the first evening - were converted to jousting horses. Most of the contents of the pool were distributed over the terrace and even the wasps - which had been plaguing us a little - took cover.

And that - apart from our underwater adventure - has been the pattern of the days. A regular alternation between wild, jubilant activity in the pool, and soporific indolence in the warm bath of the Mediterranean sunshine.

What we should be doing, in my book, is setting out each morning to tour the island: digging out the best beaches; heading into the forested mountains to find some of the rare indigenous white pines; negotiating the hairpins down to the ruins of a Venetian castle. But, each morning, when I try to suggest some worthy activity, I am voted down and forced to sit on a sun lounger and contemplate the view instead.

I shouldn't really complain. It's a stunning outlook. We are at the northern tip of the island in a villa overlooking the narrow strait that separates us from Ithaca. I can see the three long high ridges that make up the island's silhouette, the occasional cluster of buildings, and a clear white scar where the road has been scored into the limestone of the lower slopes. But the outline of the island, clad in grey-green maquis, hazy in the brilliant sunshine, can't have looked too much different to Odysseus when he returned home from the Trojan wars more than 3,000 years ago.

Our villa is a couple of hundred feet up the hillside with nothing but scrubland between it and the sea. The drama of the location has not been lost on Cephalonia's canny developers. We are part of a hamlet of half-a-dozen tumbledown stone cottages, and the same number of tasteful modern holiday houses, each enjoying a prime spot. Five years ago there were no new buildings, no electricity and no mains water here.

Now each villa has a terrace and pool - and the water is still brought in by tankers. That's the way Cephalonia is going, at least in the north - mainly small scale, but steadily growing developments that capitalise on locations such as this. It's a very British island. The expat community is about 3,000-strong, and almost all the accents you hear come from home. The Germans tend to stay away: anyone who has read Captain Corelli's Mandolin will know that the occupation during the Second World War was not a happy time. But more Italians and Dutch visitors are diluting the British feel.

Driving down to Fiscardo, the local port some 10 minutes from our villa, you can see why the island's popularity is growing with both holidaymakers and residents. I've seen dozens of Greek island harbours, and none is prettier.

Given our torpor, the thought of cooking supper has been too much for us. At lunchtime, we manage to dice tomatoes, chop up feta cheese, slice some bread, pour out the local olive oil

and pull the cork on a bottle of Robola (Cephalonia's excellent white wine) without much difficulty.

But come the evening we drive down to Fiscardo and try out a different sea-front taverna each day. It hasn't been entirely painless. Greece has got noticeably more expensive since the introduction of the euro and, to make matters worse, our rep reckons that Fiscardo is the most expensive resort on the island. We found ourselves choosing carefully from the menus to keep the bill for four below £50 a time.

But I can hardly complain. We aren't spending money on anything else. And if I really have to do nothing all week, there is nowhere else I'd like to be. Except, perhaps, under the sea, in an octopus's garden....

□ Nick Trend travelled with Meon Villas (0870 850 8551, www.meonvillas.co.uk). He stayed in Villa Astria, which sleeps six. A week's rental costs from £949 in May and £2,729 in peak season, excluding flights. Meon clients can book day trips with Jamie Stirling through the local rep, or see www.ioniandiscoveries.com. They cost about £50 per adult and £35 per child including lunch.

Octopus basics

Eight things you didn't know about octopuses

- **His home is his castle:** they really do build a little house of stones - properly known as a den - and keep the "garden" around it clear of debris. Each octopus may build several dens.
- **Top of the class:** they have the largest brain of any marine invertebrate and, in the laboratory, have learnt to find their way through mazes, and to unscrew the lid off a jam jar to get at food.
- **It's all in the mind:** sex for an octopus is, well, unconventional. The male places his sperm sack inside the female's head and she then ensures the eggs are fertilised before hanging them in strings from the roof of her den. She walls herself in, and stays there until they hatch, almost starving in the process.
- **Eyeball to eyeball:** those spooky eyes are constructed in a similar way to ours, though octopuses are colour blind
- **Ringo was wrong:** these are solitary animals, and they don't like parties. Come into his garden and an octopus will assume that you want either to mate or to fight
- **Make a leg:** damaged tentacles can be regrown
- **Karma chameleon:** an octopus will change colour to match its surroundings, and can adapt its shape to fit through the tiniest of apertures
- **One bite and it's over:** that's how Greek fishermen traditionally kill their catch, severing a crucial nerve with their teeth. Personally, having made friends with one, I'm not sure I shall be eating octopus again