

To Climber's Paradise and Back

Kalymnos, Greece: July 8-16th, 2018
Seline-Trogir-Omis, Croatia: July 17th-21st, 2018

AC Irvine Travel Report
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We started climbing together in Oxford about 1 year before planning a lengthier trip. The demands of our degrees in economics (Evan) and biochemistry (Theodora) meant that we had been mainly confined to indoor training and one-day outdoor trips. We were itching to spend more time climbing outdoors and the post-graduation freedom beckoned. For our trip, we chose locations with a variety of climbing styles and grades that would push the limits of our sport climbing abilities. What follows is a day-by-day summary of our activities interspersed with photos of the routes and natural beauty we had the privilege of encountering.

GREECE

Day 1 – Sunday, July 8th

An afternoon flight from Birmingham Airport brought us to the island of Kos in Greece at 8.30pm. A short taxi ride to the marina and we discovered that the next, and last, ferry to Kalymnos wasn't until 11.30pm. No matter! We enjoyed a good meal of mussels and gyros at a restaurant and then explored the beach. By the time the ferry departed it was dark and the ride over the large inky waters was bumpy and a little scary. Another taxi brought us to the studio we were renting. The place was small but equipped with a simple kitchen and a balcony with a great view over Telendos, a neighbouring island.



Photo 1 View of Telendos from our studio in Kalymnos.

Day 2 – Monday, July 9th

After a glorious sleep we were excited to start exploring the island. Evan rented a scooter at 10am and soon after we found ourselves at Sector Odyssey – a popular craig that stays in the shadows until about 2pm. Due to the heat in Kalymnos (28-38 °C) we knew to climb only in shaded sectors, preferably in the mornings. Our guide book, *Kalymnos Rock Climbing Guidebook* (2010), very helpfully describes which sectors are in the shade in the summer and which craigs are unclimbable in the heat. The peak climbing time in Kalymnos is in the fall and winter but, with over 70 + sectors on the island, there are still more than enough to explore even in the summer. Furthermore, coming to Kalymnos in the “off-season” meant that we never waited in line at any of the popular craigs or famous routes.

Sector Odyssey had a relatively easy approach (10-15 minute walk) and when we arrived we found a couple of other climbers already on the wall. On Itaca Wall we warmed up with Evan



Photo 2 Theodora swimming near Sector Kasteli for the first time.

leading Lotophagos (5c+, 16m) while Theo seconded, and Theo leading Eurycleia (5b, 16m) with Evan seconding. We then moved to Imia Wall for the 2-pitch Argo Navis route: Evan led the first 4c pitch and Theo led the 6a second pitch (40m in total). The multi-pitch was good preparation for the planned longer multi-pitch of the trip.

After these routes we decided to check out Sector Kasteli which is on a beautiful out-cropping of Kalymnos. Kasteli contains the ruins of a Byzantine castle that was a fortress against Arab raids and remained inhabited until the 10th century. To cool down we swam under the castle and experienced the beautiful warm, clear waters of Greece for the first time!

Day 3 – Tuesday, July 10th

On Tuesday, excitement drove us to an early attempt our big project, Three Stripes, a 6-pitch multi-pitch (175m): 4a (35m), 5a (40m), 5b (30 m), 5c (20 m), 5c (20 m), 5b (30 m).

After waking up at 5.30am we made our lunch, got our equipment together and set off at 6.15am. The route was not in our guidebook but we had good instructions from the internet. After driving to the road at the base of the craig we had about a 45 minute approach. As we set about preparing the rope and getting on our climbing shoes we realised we had forgotten our lunch. Oh well. We decided that we would alternate leading pitches with Theo leading 1,3,5 and Evan leading 2,4,6. We had small rope kerfuffles on the first two pitches which we quickly sorted out. After that we found our groove and enjoyed the climb as the pitches were easy to follow and closely bolted. Pitch 3, 4, 5 worked their way to the left above a cave.

Some of the moves in the crux pitches (4 and 5) were very exposed since they were just above



Photo 3 Start of Three Stripes.

the lip of an overhang. Pitch 4 had bulging overhangs and thin slabby sections that left Evan with some bloody hands. We alternated carrying a backpack with water and our shoes. For Theo, carrying the extra weight was a new experience.

We got to the top at 10.30am (3h earlier than our estimates!) and we were happy and sweaty! We did not dally at the top however, as we had heard that the hike down could be quite tricky and was not to be underestimated. Since the route was sponsored by Adidas, sets of three blue dots on the rocks marked the way down (Photo 5). More useful than the paint were the large cairns left behind by other climbers. A steep gully opened to a path that led past sector Jurassic Park and eventually brought us to fixed lines that helped our descent immensely. In the end, we arrived back at our scooter about 6.5 h after we started – tired, but happy, and very ready for a swim and an ice-cream sandwich.

We bought snorkels and drove to Vlichadia (a famous snorkelling beach) for a refreshing swim in the water. Later that evening we joined tourists and locals for the French-Belgium Semi-Final.



Photo 5 Steep descents along fixed lines brought us to the bottom of the valley.



Photo 4 Blue paint on the rocks marked the way down from the top of route.

Day 4 – Wednesday, July 11th

On Wednesday our goal was to climb in Grande Grotta – an extremely impressive and famous sector which houses Aegialis (7c, 30m), the most photographed sport climbing route in the WORLD! Grande Grotta is home to tufa climbing – one of the things that makes Kalymnos famous. Tufa's are limestone formations, often in crazy shapes, formed from the dripping of water. Tufa climbing requires you to climb in 3D – often doing moves that are completely different from any other type of climbing or bouldering. We warmed up on Happy Girlfriend (15m, 5c+) and Elefanten Himmel I (5a, 15m). Then, we went around to Afternoon sector and Evan led Swiss Baby (25m, 6a). When Theo seconded the route, she was convinced the crux move was a stiff 6a, if not a 6a+. Happily, a group came by with an updated guide book that had the route listed as a 6a+. Sweet vindication!!

We then rushed to Kefala Cave, one of the most famous caves on the island, which we had heard was only open until 2pm. The cave contains evidence of prehistoric humans and a rumoured pirate hideout. After a very hot and grueling hike it turned out the cave was permanently closed. A quick snorkel and lunch revived us at a nearby beach in Vlichadia, after which we returned home for a nap.



Photo 6 Theodora on Happy Girlfriend (5c+, 15m) in Grande Grotta.



Photo 7 Snorkelling at Vlichadia.

After waking up at 6.45pm we headed to Sector Kasteli for a sunset climb. Theo led a North facing route Gyzis (5b+, 15m) and Evan led Scarabeus (5b, 20m) just as the sun was setting. A quick scooter brought us to the pub to catch Croatia - England in the Semi-Final. The atmosphere was great as there were many locals and British tourists all cheering for England!



Photo 8 Evan climbing in Sector Kasteli as the sun sets.

harbour and had a well-earned freshly squeezed orange juice. In the evening, we cooked an early dinner and then went to sleep to recuperate for the next day of climbing!

Day 6 – Friday, July 13th

An early start (but not as horrendously early as some this week) had us leave the house at 7.30am to go to Skalia Cave – an interesting sector that we knew had a rugged 6 km approach but the reward of a private beach. The day was already very hot by the time we started hiking but we had the company of goats and sheep along the way! The hilly terrain eventually gave way to the cave which had a sketchy 20 m vertical entrance descent along a frayed fixed rope. We had hoped to climb potentially 4-5 routes but found that many of them did not have suitable anchors. In the end, Theo led Abraxis (5c+, 20m), a steep route, and Evan led B69 (5b+, 15m) which we co-opted as an exit route.

Day 5 – Thursday, July 12th

Having climbed for three mornings in a row we decided to sleep in on Thursday. We had heard that there was interesting Deep Water Soloing (DWS) in Kalymnos and since neither of us had done any DWS before we were eager to try it. After spending some time reading in bed we scooted to Vathys, a town with a beautiful harbour (Photo 10). Vathys is home to a famous DWS route that traverses out into the bay from the harbour – Socratic Swimming Lessons (250m, 6a+). To spare our climbing shoes we bought water shoes with thick rubber soles. We swam out to the route and started climbing. Many sections were straightforward but we both fell at the crux move 75m in. After the 6a+ section, the route extends for another 100m with a series of overhangs, sharp and awkward moves in the 7a+ -> 7b range. We completed and fell on a few of these moves before ending in a tiny cave. The water was so clear you could see fish swimming all around below us. In a leisurely fashion we then swam the 300m back to



Photo 9 Socratic Swimming Lessons, a DWS route, visible on the right.

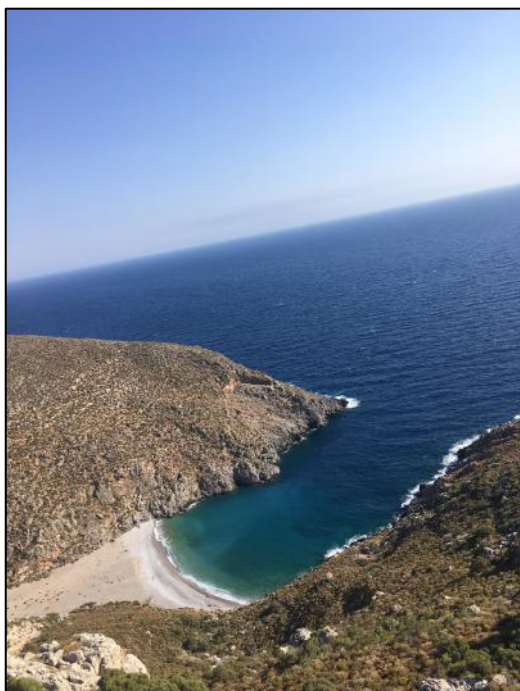


Photo 10 View of the secluded beach as we approached Skalia Cave.

Feeling hot from the hike and the climbing we continued down the hill to a secluded beach where we snorkelled and enjoyed a packed lunch.

Around 1pm we hiked back to the scooter and drove to Palionisos for a snack of octopus balls (a Kalymnos speciality). While sitting at the beachside café Theo had to remember her life-guarding skills and jump in to save a small Australian boy who had been blown out of the harbour on a paddle board and then had fallen in! Later in the evening a light dinner at a local Tavern introduced us to a charismatic former climber who had developed many of the sectors in the area.

Day 7 – Saturday, July 14th

Evan had been very keen to try Monahiki Elia (6a+, 25m) in Grande Grotta so we decided to try and go early before the popular sector became overrun. When we arrived at 8.30am we were happy to see we had the sector to ourselves! It seemed like it was emptier on the island in general so we speculated that since the windy season had

started many climbers had already left. Evan jumped right on to Monahiki Elia, a lengthy overhanging tufa climb among stalactites and wide ribs. He enjoyed the route immensely and found it to be less frightening than he expected. Theo seconded the route but found it a bit more challenging and somewhat polished compared to the rest of the routes.



Photo 12 The view from the top of the route in Grande Grotte.



Photo 11 Theo sitting and resting on a tufa on Monahiki Elia.

Since we had accomplished the tufa goal of the day we moved to Sector Afternoon where we had seen some great slab and crimp climbs. It was in Afternoon that Theo discovered her love of slab climbing! Theo led L'Amico Ralph (5c, 18m) which really played to her strengths as it had tiny delicate footholds and lots of crimps for the hands. It was so enjoyable she claimed it should be downgraded to a 4b! Evan then led Nonno Ringo (5c, 18m), with similar features on the wall. Theo led Blu (6a, 20m) which was a more vertical wall but an enjoyable challenge! The day was a huge success and finished with dinner at a seafood restaurant called Anna's which served the best meal of the trip: mussels in cream sauce and fresh grilled fish.

Day 8 – Sunday, July 15th

Our last big climbing day on Kalymnos turned out to be one of the most exciting and rewarding days of the entire trip.

We woke up at 7am to drive to Sector Arginonta – a sector that Theo had seen in the guidebook and which had escaped our notice earlier. It turned out to be our favourite sector on the island! It had a huge array of routes, an easy approach, and a beautiful view. You could tell it was popular too – we shared the walls with many very talented climbers. First, Theo on-sighted Now For Something Completely Different (5c+, 18m), an excellent 3D tufa climb with an interesting backwards move near the top. Evan then led Avri (6b, 15m) with almost no difficulty and Theo seconded the route well. With this confidence we moved on to another wall where Theo led Wild Sex (6b, 25m). The route was very sustained and pumpy, and Theo had a long fall at one of the tough moves. However, despite almost giving up at the final bolt she finished the climb and was proud of the effort. She noted afterwards that her forearms felt as if they had molten lead poured into them. Evan then went on to on-sight Pornokini (6a, 28m) which had varied and interesting climbing, some overhang and some slabs, and seemed hard for the grade. To finish on a high-note Theo on-sighted Stock Fish (5b, 20m), a great slab route. We would have liked to climb more but the sun had other plans and the walls quickly lost their protective shade. We decided it was probably a good idea to do laundry for the first time before heading over to a cafe to watch the football finals! What a match. Almost everyone in the place was cheering for Croatia.



Photo 13 Evan on Nonno Ringo (5c, 18m).



Photo 14 The view from Sector Arginonta.

Day 9 – Monday, July 16th

On Monday we needed to have a rest day and recover our sore and aching muscles. We slept in, returned the scooter, packed our things, cleaned the apartment, and took the ferry from Kalymnos to Kos at 1.15pm. We had to return to Kos a day early since our flight was the next morning at 5am. In Kos we enjoyed the beach, had a good meal, and spent some time reading and answering emails we had both been ignoring.

CROATIA

Day 10 – Tuesday, July 17th

A very, very early start brought us to Kos airport where we flew to Athens and then connected to Zadar, Croatia. At the airport we rented a car and drove only about 40 min to Seline, a small town right at the entrance to Paklenika National Park. After dropping off our stuff at our studio apartment we drove to the Park.

We arrived at about 6pm and a friendly park ranger sold us parking and entrance fee tickets. We then realized it wasn't too late to climb! Theo was a bit worse for the wear after having a bad night's sleep and a long travel day and Evan was feeling like he was coming down with something so we just climbed easy routes: Zava (4b, 13m), Zajcek (4c, 12m), and Cuja ti si bog i batina! (5a, 15m). The rock was quite polished which was a change from Kalymnos but had some great crack sections. After climbing we had a quick swim by the coast, cooked a delicious sausage spaghetti, and then fell fast asleep!

Day 11 – Wednesday, July 18th

The morning of our hike dawned! We entered the park around 10am, after packing and checking out from our studio. We hiked about 2.5 h to reach a small mountain hut where we planned to stay the night. Along the way we encountered beautiful natural pools and even had an impromptu swim! The mountain lodging was basic – we were given wooden cots with a mattress in a communal room (but no blanket or pillow). However, there was running water and a kitchen we could use. We rested for a bit and then hiked another few hours to a lookoff point where we could see the entrance canyon, velika Paklenica, as well as Anica Kuk, a large limestone wall with some well-known challenging multi-pitch routes. We then returned to eat our highly anticipated dinner of leftover sausage spaghetti. Exhausted afterwards, we desperately awaited nightfall so that we could go to sleep – at around 9pm we deemed it acceptable to turn in.



Photo 15 Evan getting ready to climb in Paklenika Park, Croatia for the first time!

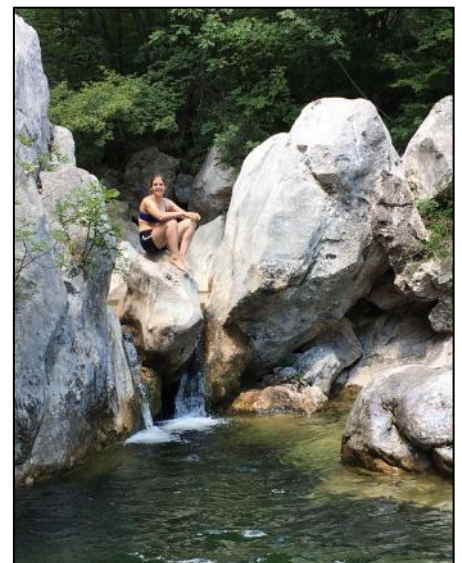


Photo 16 Taking a swim to cool down during the hike to the mountain hut in Paklenica.

Day 12 – Thursday, July 19th

We woke up in the cabin as the daylight hit us, only to find that our intrepid Croatian roommates had already departed – no doubt for another grueling 12 h hike. After a quick breakfast we made our way down the trail to our car at the entrance of the park. On the way down we decided to take a detour to visit the only cave in Paklenica open to the public. The sign indicated a 35 min walk up a side of a cliff. In reality, it was closer to a 90 min steep and demanding hike with no shelter whatsoever from the sun and a scorching 38°C heat. Once we reached the top we had a chance to catch our breaths and it was slightly vindicating to see other red-faced victims struggle up to the top after us. The tour of the cave itself was incredible. The cave contained four chambers that were sunk deep into the mountain and housed thousands of beautiful stalagmites and stalagmites. The refreshing cool of the cave and the incredible rock formations definitely made the hike worth it.



Photo 17 The famous waterfalls in Krka National Park.

After the cave we headed to our car and started to drive to Trogir, a beautiful old town with many buildings from the Renaissance among other well-preserved historic monuments. As we were driving along the coast to Trogir we decided to stop at Krka National Park – a place famous for its waterfalls. A ferry took us into the park where we were excited to swim and cool off from the day's hike. Although the park was full of tourists the water was amazing and we were happy to have gone. A quick stop for ice-cream and groceries and we drove on to find our studio and some rest!

Day 13 – Friday, July 20th

Our last day together in Croatia! We had a hostel booked in Split for the night but we decided to first explore the old town of Trogir, which is located on an island, and then explore the coast. We had been told the stretch of coast near Trogir contained some of the most beautiful parts of Croatia. After spending time on the beach we happened upon a sign advertising for ziplining in Omis. Feeling like we deserved a treat, we took ourselves to Omis and signed up for the course with some other tourists.

The zipline course had 7 different ziplines covering a total of 2100 m which stretched above a canyon and the river Cetina. Fortuitously, one of the zipline instructors was a local climber who told us about some relatively unknown nearby crags! After we finished the zipline we quickly dashed to a nearby crag and climbed the first bolts we saw – there is no guidebook for the region but another climber helped us choose a route he knew would be <30 m. As we finished the first route the light was already waning (it was 8.45 pm) so we had to call it a day. Still, we were happy to have climbed at least one route in a new area!



Photo 18 View of the first zipline which stretches high above the canyon and the river Cetina.

Day 14 – Saturday, July 21st

The alarm clock at 6.45 am awoke us harshly to the reality that it was the end of the trip! A sad moment for the both of us. Theo got on a 10 am flight to Berlin while Evan spent the day by the coast waiting for his 11.30 pm flight that would bring him back to London and back to the real world.

Postscript

Rock-climbing has taught us patience, perseverance, and both physical and mental strength. Through climbing we have seen special parts of the world and met wonderful people. Thank you to the Irvine Fund for helping us embark on this wonderful journey.

Books Consumed During the Trip

Why We Sleep – Matthew Walker

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat – Oliver Sacks

This is Going to Hurt – Adam Kay

Better – Atul Gawande

Basti – Intisar Hussain

American Pastoral – Philip Roth

The Dark Forest – Cixin Liu

