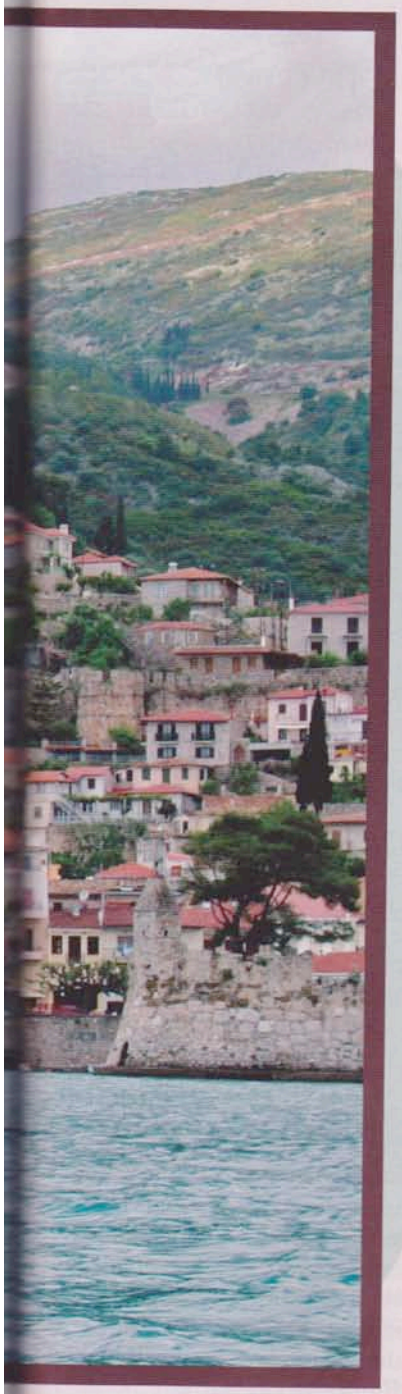
STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAPTAIN PAT RAINS



Cruising The MED With The Masons

How *PMM* Inspired A Dream

Like many of us, Larry and Mary Mason had toyed with the idea of buying a cruising boat to enjoy during their retirement. But their tipping point occurred when they picked up a copy of *PMM* in the Atlanta airport before boarding a flight to Europe. Thus far, their only boating experience was aboard a Hobie Cat a few decades ago.

"On that flight, we poured over every single article in *PMM* and every ad, too," said Mary Mason. "The information we found in the magazine allowed us to discuss our dreams for retirement seriously, in rocks-and-sticks details," she said.

By the time the couple landed in London, they were not only convinced it was possible, they were determined to do it.

Now, only five years later, my husband and I are in Malta aboard the Masons' 57-foot Nordhavn trawler, *No Plans*. Mary is stowing a cartload of fresh veggies and local cheeses, while Larry is laying out the next legs of our course—to Sicily and Greece, then back to northwest Italy by way of Sardinia and Corsica. We'll be stopping overnight in picturesque and historic anchorages, finding marinas and port berths as we get there. This is the Masons' third season cruising the Mediterranean. They have both bloomed into expert cruisers, absolutely loving their boat and the impromptu lifestyle they have developed aboard it.

Robert Cronan

BACKTRACK

I first met the Masons 7,000 miles west of here, in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, where they attended a seminar I presented for southbound cruisers at the Banderas Bay Regatta. When they invited my husband, John, and me aboard *No Plans,* right away Mary said they were novices. They had bought this trawler—their first boat—less than a year ago as a retirement project, and had just arrived in Mexico on their first foreign voyage, en route from California to the Mediterranean.

"Oh my God," was my first thought, "This is a lot of boat for a first boat."

Yes, they knew that. As their story unfolded, I realized the Masons had done their homework thoroughly and had benefited by hiring expert teachers. They'd found this boat, brand new, at Nordhavn's headquarters in Dana Point, California, a few days after another couple's dreams had fallen through at the last minute. Larry loved the engine room and bridge, Mary loved the whole layout, and they wouldn't have to wait months for a similar hull to arrive from Asia. Even better, this boat hadn't yet been commissioned, so Nordhavn installed the Masons' whole dream list of electronics, appliances, decor, you name it.

What about experience? The Masons' corporate careers had been intense, demanding they fly all over the world and "make it happen." But before *No Plans,* they knew little about boats and nothing about oceans. Neither Nordhavn nor their insurance company would let them leave the dock without weeks of excellent hands-on training. First the Nordhavn people in Dana Point taught both Mary and Larry how to drive, use all the gear, and perform regular maintenance. Later the Masons hired professional teaching skippers to accompany them up to the San Juan Islands in the Pacific Northwest and back down the U.S. West Coast.

PACIFIC CRUISE

After meeting in Puerto Vallarta, they invited us to join them on their way south through Mexico and Central America to transit the Panama Canal. So we did.

The Masons soaked up instruction like sponges—anchoring, docking, changing oil, taking on fuel, replacing impellers, provisioning, using radios, and handling port clearance. Mastering every detail of life aboard a nice big boat while touring interesting places became their passion. We had a delightful adventure. After Panama, they cruised with friends to Martinique and had *No Plans* loaded on a Dock Express yacht-transport ship bound for the Med.

The next year, my husband and I met the Masons in Rapallo, northwest Italy, where they'd wintered *No Plans.* We cruised down the boot of Italy and around the heel to Croatia's Dalmatian Islands, and we flew home from Dubrovnik, Croatia. The rest of that season and the next summer, the Masons cruised Croatia and Italy, and then hopped offshore to Malta where they hauled out for the winter.

CATCH UP

Malta is where we are now joining the no-longer-novice Masons on *No Plans.* Our plan is to see a bit of Malta, then cruise the west coast of Sicily and transit the Corinth Canal, which bisects Greece.

No Plans was at Grand Harbour Marina in Valletta, surrounded by cliffs, churches, villas, and historic fortresses. The tiny island of Malta has fallen off the radar for most Americans. But its location smack dab in the middle of the Mediterranean and its large natural harbor earned it critical significance in world history, twice.

The ancient stone ramparts looming 150 feet over our stern had repulsed the protracted siege of Turkish forces against the Christian Knights of St. James in 1565. Had Malta fallen, Western Europe's history would have been very different. During WWII, this tiny rock of an island endured some of the most intense bombing of any European city.

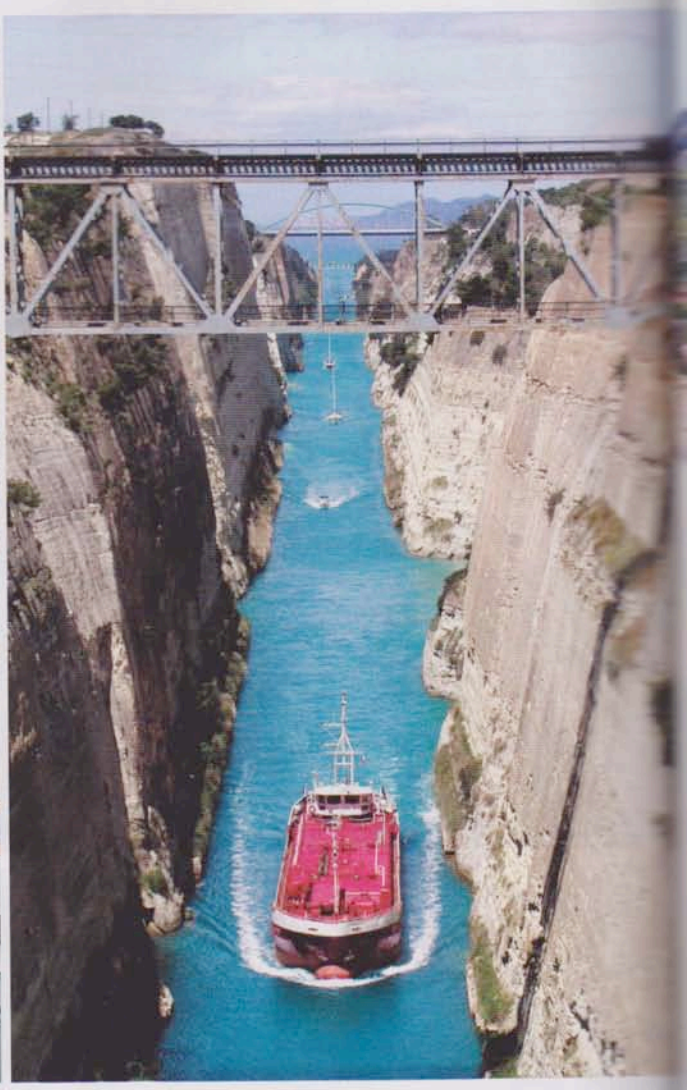
Today Valletta harbor is an excellent winter base for world-cruising yachts, thanks to the big-boat marina and two haulout yards. Although Tunisia in northern Africa is another popular winter haven for cruisers, many stop at Malta on their way down and opt to stay here instead. About a third of the 300 boats in Grand

Top: The five-star Grand Harbour Marina on Malta nestles in the middle of the historic port of Valletta. The marina's modern offices are cloaked within the ancient stone facades. Above left: Mary Mason and Pat Rains relax aboard *No Plans* after walking the cobblestoned streets of Siracusa, Italy. Above right: A rainbow over our marina at Siracusa, Italy, foretold our calm 300-mile passage across the Ionian Sea to western Greece.

Harbour Marina had wintered there.

April was still a bit early this year: rain and wind. Keeping an eye on the marine forecast, the four of us toured Malta's sights and prepared *No Plans* for the first 60-mile crossing to Sicily through the Malta Strait, one of the windiest straits in the Med. A 48-hour weather window approached, so we opted to scoot.

We topped off and set the alarm clocks. *No Plans* departed Malta at 0130 ("zero dark thirty") in order to make a daytime approach on Siracusa at the southeast corner of Sicily. We crossed in comfort with a 15-knot west wind, 3–4-foot seas from just aft of the beam, and stabilizers on. The island's lee gave us flat conditions and a break in the rain.



Top left: The quaint fishing port of Fiskardo offers wraparound shelter on the north end of Cephalonia on the Ionian Sea. Above left: Mary and Larry Mason tour Fiskardo while exploring the Ionian island of Cephalonia, Greece. Above right: The sea-level Corinth Canal bisects Greece and shaves 150 miles off the run between Italy and Athens.

SIRACUSA SUMMIT

We'd heard Siracusa was hosting part of the G-8 Environmental Summit, but didn't realize how tight the security was going to be. We figured that out when six Italian coast guard patrol boats stopped us from entering the harbor. Big gray warships and speedy interceptors patrolled the approaches, while at least two kinds of helicopters buzzed low over our flybridge. After an inspection party checked us out, a relay of three Guardia Costiera vessels escorted *No Plans* into the tiny port. Not until later did we hear that bomb threats had amped up the security measures.

Due to the summit's extra marine patrols and the renovation of the port's main quay, we were lucky to find a Med-mooring slot on the outer edge of Marina Yachting, a small and run-down marina, soon to be renovated. But this put us on the very desirable island of Ortygia, an ancient walled city within blocks of its cultural treasures.

Siracusa was founded in the eighth century by Greeks from Corinth, and it once rivaled Athens in power. Today, most of its 125,000 inhabitants live in the newer town outside the walls, while beautifully preserved Greek, Roman, and Norman buildings are scattered inside the warren of narrow alleyways. For the 10-day summit, Siracusa was decked in flowers, art shows, festival foods, costume parades—and men in black whispering into their boutonnières.

IONIAN CROSSING

Our next leg would be 285 miles from Sicily across the Ionian Sea to Cephalonia, the closest of Greece's

Above left: The ruins of the ancient Greek city of Corinth are 7 kilometers from the modern port of Corinth, which is located at the western end of the canal. Above right: *No Plans* is anchored outside the ancient Venetian harbor fortifications at Navpaktos, Greece. Right: *No Plans* docks in Nafplion, Greece. As per Homer's *Iliad*, King Agamemnon probably set sail from here to conquer Troy.

western islands. It was still mid-April, windy and raining, so we waited five days for the approach of our next weather break.

Departing Siracusa at dawn, we had a uniformed escort and bid them, "Arrivederci." Ship traffic was quite heavy around the Strait of Messina, but we'd planned it for daylight hours. The farther into the Ionian we traveled, the fewer vessels we saw and the better the weather was, with winds dropping to Force 0 out in the middle. It was so glassy, stars reflected on the sea surface.

As we stood night watch, Larry and Mary described their commissioning process. For years, the Masons had planned a trip to Europe with friends—something that was carved in stone into too many busy schedules; it couldn't be postponed or cancelled. Their purchase of *No Plans* happened so suddenly and fast, they had only one week to select all the equipment before they flew to Europe.

"It's a good thing we already knew what we wanted," said Larry. They practically knew the catalogs by heart.

Three weeks later, when they returned from Europe, it was done. They drove down to Dana Point from their home in Sacramento, California, loaded with household supplies and spent the next two weeks buying tools and spares. After sufficiently sea-trialing the boat, they took offshore delivery—along with their hired captain—and headed non-stop up the West Coast to Anacortes, Washington. The 1,250-mile maiden voyage of *No Plans* was all "to weather."

GREEK ISLE

After a tranquil night passage we arrived at Cephalonia and entered the land-locked harbor of Argostoli, the island's capital. Because it was Sunday all port offices were closed, but someone on VHF 16 directed us alongside the public quay. It had big bollards, plenty of depth, was nicely landscaped, and practically unoccupied.

Three guys who eagerly commandeered our docklines all turned out to be competing ship's agents, insisting stridently in patchy Eng-Greek that the quay was very expensive and we would first be required to hire an agent to clear us into Argostoli. Furthermore, they said we couldn't get off the boat until we cleared in, and we needed to buy special Greek insurance from them. This didn't conform to what we'd heard, yet we were tired and unsure what to do about it.

Greek lettering isn't exactly like English, Italian, Maltese, or Spanish. However, the fragrance of fresh-roasted coffee beans was unmistakable in any language. Following our noses we sauntered across the street, hoping to brighten our brains with a rich cup of java after the overnight run and to ponder what to do next.

Leo Kephanonica, the handsome young owner of the waterfront café called Kafe Nion, greeted us in

Top: Provisioning from street vendors and market stalls is a big part of daily life in Greece, and each excursion ashore yields something fresh and unexpected. Above: Sitting atop the Acropolis in the middle of Athens, the Parthenon is visible from the marinas. The large park surrounding these ancient landmarks is a magnet for locals and tourists alike.

English. His wife, Kelly, is from Kent, England. Kafe Nion is not just a coffee shop, it's a yachtie hangout. Leo and Kelly offer laundry service, fuel arrangement, showers, help with provisioning, local drivers, and savvy advice—particularly that agents are not required. After sampling several kinds of coffee, we checked with the port police a block away. Sure, they said, we could get off the boat, enjoy the town, and clear in on Monday.

Clearance into Greece at Argostoli did require us to type up a cruising log, and they did want to see our insurance endorsement, which already covered Greece. Other than that, it was simple and inexpensive. Dockage without shorepower was 16 euros per day, which was extraordinarily cheap for Europe.

To explore Cephalonia, Leo found us an English-speaking driver with a Mercedes big enough for all five of us. We explored the whole island, including the quaint harbor at Fiskardo and the beach where *Corelli's Mandolin* was filmed. We would have car-ferried over to the adjacent island of Ithaca had not the wind picked up and shut down the ferry systems.

It was called a Sirocco, a strong south wind, and it pinned *No Plans* to the pier for two days. Fortunately, Argostoli harbor is well protected and our big fenders prevented damage. We enjoyed the extra time exploring the island, but as the weather broke on the third day, we departed toward the Corinth Canal.

PATRAS GULF

Dodging ship traffic, we entered the 22-mile-wide mouth of the Gulf of Patras. As we meandered eastward, the gulf quickly narrowed down to a bottleneck, the 1-mile-wide Strait of Rion. The commercial port of Patras is on the south shore, and just past it a huge, harp-like bridge links the Peloponnese Peninsula with mainland Greece.

Vessel traffic is controlled as it passes under this bridge, so we slowed to 3 knots and called "Rion Control" in English on VHF 14 to request permission. Fast ferries zoomed across our path, and deep-draft fishing boats chugged in and out of all three center slots between enormous bridge legs. As we were wondering how long we'd have to wait and which slot we should aim for, the Rion controller read our thoughts.

"Proceed at 9 knots by keeping two pylons on the right and one pylon on the left." Five minutes later, we entered the 65-mile-long Gulf of Corinth.

NAVPAKTOS

On the north shore only 3 miles east of the bridge, we saw the crenulated walls and Venetian turrets of a perfectly preserved medieval castle called Navpaktos—formerly called Lepanto. In 1571 the Turkish fleet sheltered off Lepanto, then rowed out to attack the Christian fleet. The Turks lost again, so contemporary mosaics show the sea covered with burning hulls and corpses wearing turbans.

The tiny walled harbor at Navpaktos was too small for a 57-foot Nordhavn and crowded with fishing skiffs, so we anchored in the roadstead and took the dinghy ashore for lunch. By taxi, we mounted the heights to inspect the castle overlooking the harbor. Navpaktos was ideal, so we spent a quiet night at anchor, continuing toward the Corinth Canal in the morning.

We poked our noses into several interesting bays along this north shore, including Galaxidi harbor near the Oracle of Delphi.

CORINTH BLOW

The only marina near Corinth was too small for *No Plans*. Because the wind was picking up, we weren't too keen on anchoring outside the jetties, so instead we got permission to come starboard-side-to in the big commercial harbor.

Good thing. A 20-knot norther sprang up, requiring all our big-ball fenders and constant attention to the chafe gear. As other cruising yachts came in for shelter, we were glad we had this spot. The blow continued for two days, so we rigged the single flopper on *No Plans'* port side, which made our berth more comfortable.

Being so close, we couldn't resist taking a short cab ride to a bridge that crosses the Corinth Canal. Our reward was a spectacular view of other vessels transiting and, gulp, it looked extremely narrow from this cliff-top perspective. At least we knew what to expect when we transited in a couple of days.

About 4 miles inland from the modern city of Corinth are the vast ruins of Ancient Corinth, which once rivaled Athens for supremacy. The Roman army destroyed Corinth in 146 BCE and left an isolated stand of Doric columns here as an undeniable reminder of how far the mighty can fall. About 100 years later the Romans rebuilt the city, so many of the ruins are of the Roman period. The museum is worth a visit, but we didn't hike up to Aphrodite's Temple.

CORINTH CANAL

This sea-level canal cuts straight through a 4-mile-wide isthmus of solid rock. With slave labor, ancient armies began digging this as a dry overland road, so in extreme emergencies they could haul their vessels from the Ionian Sea into the Saronic Sea or vice versa. I wonder if they imagined a sea-level path would someday be cut 4 miles long through solid rock. In the late 19th century, French and Italian engineers brought in the latest excavation technologies, and a Greek company finished the canal in 1892.

Today, the Corinth Canal is 26 feet deep and 82 feet wide. Cliffs to 250 feet rise straight up on both sides, and the height of the stationary highway bridge is 170 feet over sea level. It saved us 150 sea miles and many days of travel, so we didn't have to voyage around the south side of the Peloponnese Peninsula to reach Athens.

Having transited the Panama Canal many times, I believe the Corinth Canal is less demanding on the boat handler and requires way less administrative hassle.

We knew that all boats must travel in single file, because it is so narrow. We knew that traffic flows in one direction for several hours, then the other direction for several hours. We'd read that a signal showed lights at night and flags during the day, telling you if you could enter the canal or not.

But when we approached the breakwater on the Corinth terminus, binoculars revealed no signals, no flags. Instead, a yellow and black striped bridge blocked the opening at water level, and trucks zoomed across.

We hailed the canal master on VHF 16 and said *No Plans* would like to go through, please. Two other yachts had arrived, and we all milled about smartly. The canal master asked each vessel for its dimensions and speed, and if they intended to pay the $200 fee by credit card or cash. Then he explained rather apologetically that he'd open the entrance in about 20 minutes, he was waiting for a megayacht.

As it steamed over the western horizon, the megayacht turned out to be *Camellia,* the 100-foot British-flagged motoryacht we'd said hello to a few days earlier in Fiskardo harbor on Cephalonia. We said hello again, as the canal master instructed us to enter behind *Camellia,* and the two German sailboats followed us.

The yellow and black bridge actually drops straight down to the seabed, providing the 26-foot depth for vessels to sail straight in. *Camellia* had taken a pilot, and I could see why. Even with a 22-foot beam it was hard to keep exactly centered, and rock edges looked ready to rip open the sides of the boat. Larger vessels take tugs fore and aft. In a couple of spots, the current was stronger, but we passed through with no incident.

Just past a similar yellow and black bridge at the west terminus is a small dock where everyone stops a few minutes to pay their toll. Several yachts went by us westbound, and we headed east to the vicinity of Athens.

ATHENS APPROACH

The difference in vessel traffic was like emerging from a quiet countryside directly onto an urban freeway. Yikes!

Despite dodging fast ferries and container ships in the Strait of Salamis, we got our first glimpse of the Acropolis through binoculars. We docked first at Vouliagmeni Marina southeast of Athens, and then moved to Zia Marina right in Piraeus. We spent a few days straightening up the boat and soaking up Athenian culture, while Larry and Mary welcomed more guests.

Before John and I flew home, we asked the Masons if they were still as happy with *No Plans* as when we first met them in Puerto Vallarta, and, if they were outfitting from scratch again, what, if anything, would they do differently.

"We're still very happy with the boat," said Larry, "but I wish we'd taken the option of a second, smaller generator." Because of the European dock-power situation and an American boat electrical system, the Masons found they had to run the generator a lot more than they wanted—in order to keep the batteries up—so the inverters could provide the power.

"A secondary 'night generator,'" said Mary, "would relieve the strain of running the big generator when we want to do something like charge the batteries. Other than that, *No Plans* is perfect."

We left for home and the Masons continue living their dream cruise that all began with an issue of *PMM.*