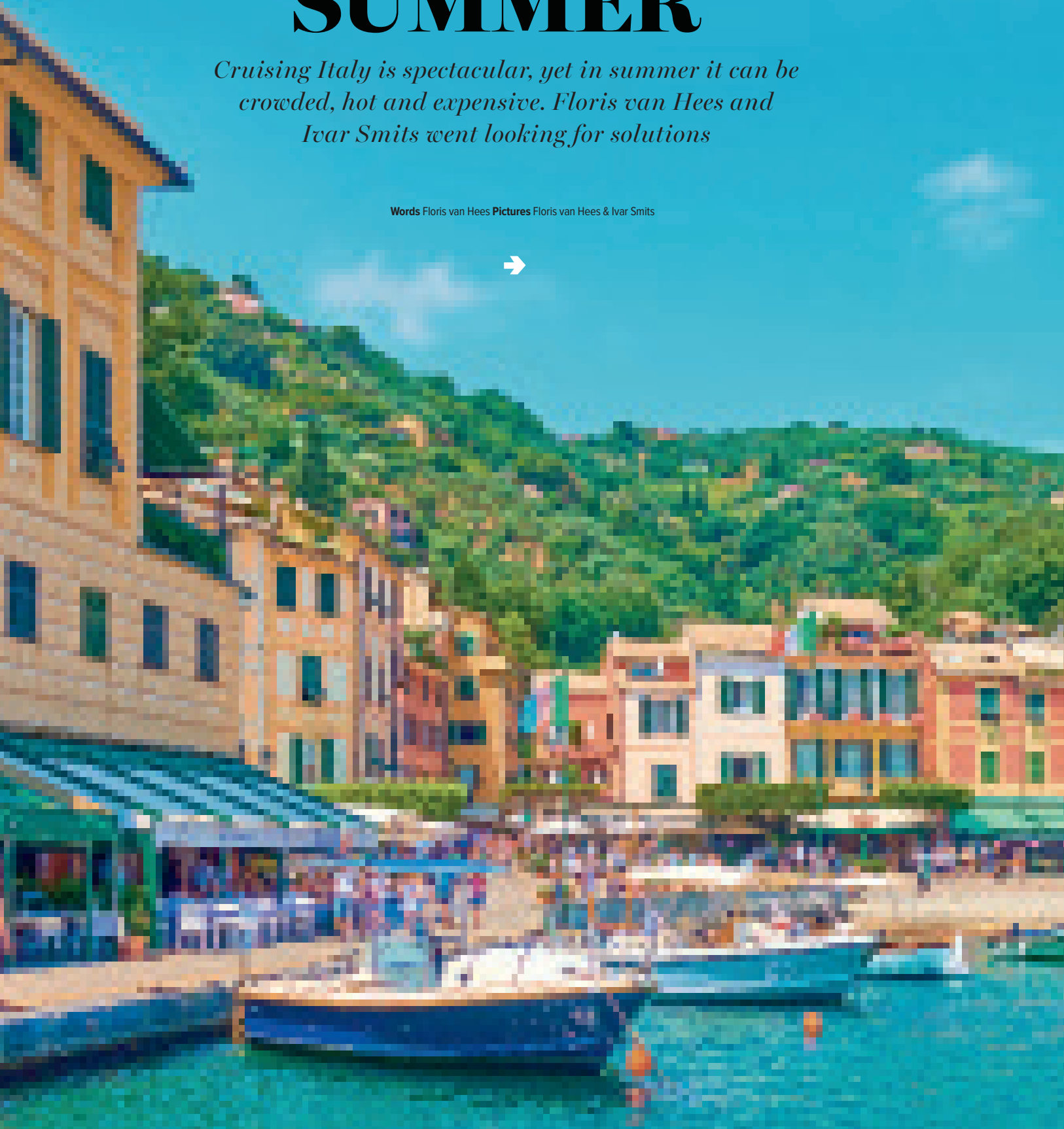


ADVENTURE AN ITALIAN SUMMER

Cruising Italy is spectacular, yet in summer it can be crowded, hot and expensive. Floris van Hees and Ivar Smits went looking for solutions

Words Floris van Hees Pictures Floris van Hees & Ivar Smits





Portofino is one of the most popular resort towns on the Italian Riviera with mooring fees to match



ABOVE: The Buchanan 47 ketch *Lucipara 2* was built in 1965
BELOW: Raising the Italian courtesy flag

Having just walked from the boat's mooring in Paraggi to ritzy Portofino, Ivar drily commented 'I'm glad we're staying around the corner.' From the town's historic church, we looked down on the small natural harbour around which the famous colourful town is built. Superyachts, fishing vessels, and boats ferrying tourists occupied every square inch of water.

'Even if there was space, we couldn't afford it,' I pointed out. A mooring here for our 47ft classic Buchanan ketch *Lucipara 2* would cost £300 a night.

But the joy of our first and free Italian anchorage was short-lived. Early the next morning, the coastguard paid us a visit. In firm Italian, they explained that we were not allowed to anchor close to the beach and told us to move immediately. We complied and sailed to neighbouring Santa Margherita Ligure, a charming town that oozes Italian flair. The marina charged £65 per night.

'If the rest of Italy is like this, we should skip it!' scoffed Ivar. But we vowed not to give up so fast. This cruising area promised to be spectacular. Instead, we managed to anchor next to the marina, which proved to be an ideal base for exploring the area.



This corner of the Mediterranean is not blessed with wind, which was an issue for us. We are quite serious about being a sailing boat, and try to avoid emissions and fuel costs whenever possible. We don't motor unless it's absolutely necessary.

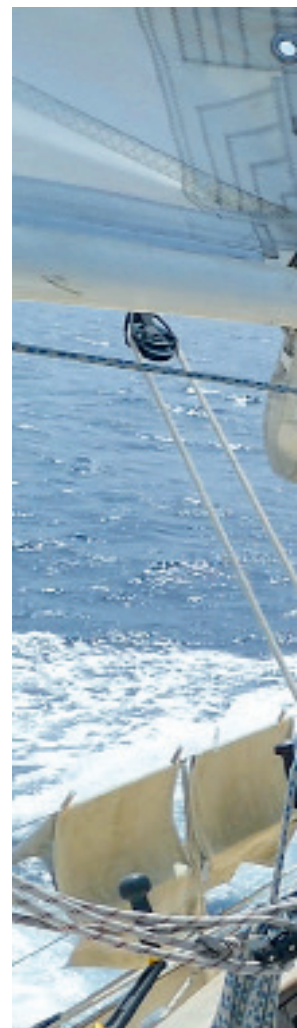
The weather forecast was for no wind at all for the next 10 days, so we stayed put and explored the many paths to be hiked in Portofino's national park and the culture of nearby Genoa.

After waiting for more than two weeks, a light breeze finally picked up. The beam-reach course is ideal for hoisting our gennaker. Without this 105m² secret weapon, our 25-ton heavy steel ketch would not be able to sail in such conditions.

The apparent wind barely reached 5 knots, but the light sail filled easily and pulled us forward at a slow but steady 2-3 knots.

'Herbie', our windvane, is not sensitive enough to steer under these light winds, but our electric autopilot took its place and handled the conditions just fine. It took most of the day to sail the 25 miles to nearby Le Grazie, but we were happy to be sailing and managed to drop anchor with the last of the daylight.

From this well-protected bay near La Spezia, we visited the five coastal villages collectively known as Cinque Terre. Although overrun by tourists, the impressive architecture of these villages built on steep cliffs gave them a unique charm.



ABOVE: Westerly and easterly winds are channelled through the Bonifacio Strait, causing strong gusts. Reef early

BELOW RIGHT: Paraggi Bay is a cheaper alternative to mooring at Portofino, although you must anchor at least 300m from the beach in the summer.

As we arrived in Caprera our jaws droppped: white sand, smooth rocks and azure blue water



CROSSING BONIFACIO

Next, we sailed south to enchanting Elba and then west to rugged Corsica. From the ancient walls of historic Bonifacio, we could already see Sardinia. To get there we needed to cross the notorious passage between the two islands: the Strait of Bonifacio.

The prevailing westerly winds were ideal for our course due south. But our pilot book warned that the high mountain ranges on both islands funnel the wind here, causing strong gusts. We reefed before we sailed out of the lee of the shore.

As we approached Sardinia, the wind got stronger and stronger, reaching more than 30 knots. The sea state was rough, but *Lucipara 2* took the waves gently. With speeds of more than 8 knots and sunshine, she crossed the strait in just a few hours of enjoyable sailing.

As we sailed into the lee of the Maddalena archipelago, conditions didn't get any calmer. Instead, the wind became gusty and stayed that way until we were deep into the bay of Cannigione. We sought shelter in the lee of a hill and dropped anchor.

It turned out to be an excellent spot with good holding, even with gusts over 40 knots. *Lucipara 2* was pulling hard on the anchor chain, but our reliable Rocna was firmly set and didn't give an inch. From our anchorage we had a view of Caprera, an island in the Maddalena archipelago, and decided to head there as soon as the weather abated.

The island of Caprera is part of a national park and as we arrived the surroundings made our jaws drop: bays with white sand, smooth rocks, and azure blue water. There were some 20 other yachts, but many left just before the evening. Moments later we found out why: park rangers moored alongside us and made us buy a one-day anchoring permit for a stiff £50. Ouch!

The next morning, we moved a few miles south-west. The bays of Porto Liscia and Porto Pozzo proved to be equally beautiful, less crowded, and free of charge.

When it was time to move on, the forecast promised a Mistral wind. This typical Mediterranean phenomenon is often related to an Atlantic high in



We spent an hour staring in awe at the fountain of fire in Stromboli's crater

ABOVE: Sailing towards Stromboli and Europe's most active volcano

BELOW: The yellow sulphur fumes from Vulcano's active volcano can permeate clothes for days

RIGHT: Vulcano, with its black sand, is at the southernmost end of the seven Aeolian Islands

the Bay of Biscay and a low in the Gulf of Genoa. The resulting airflow gets squeezed through the French Rhône valley, where it gathers strength before it enters the Mediterranean Sea. The winds can be violent and treacherous, and a strong Mistral can stretch to Sardinia and beyond.

The good news is that our forecasted Mistral was expected to be a steady but not too strong north-westerly breeze: ideal to sail the 200-plus miles along Sardinia's western coast and across to Sicily.

Late in the evening of our second day we reached Marettimo, the westernmost of the Egadi islands. While rocks make the western shore inhospitable, the eastern side is sheltered from the swell. Our anchor splashed in a dark sea and we were soon lulled to sleep by the gentle movements of our boat.

With the sun up the next morning we took in our surroundings. Green mountain walls rose from the blue sea. Like a pearl in an oyster, a white village seduced us to come ashore. After kayaking to the beach, we strolled through narrow alleys flanked by limestone houses with light blue shutters.

In spite of the high season, it was pleasantly peaceful. Ice creams in hand, we walked into the mountains and tasted water from its source point along the hiking trail. We later crossed to San Vito lo Capo on the tip of north-west Sicily, anchoring in a packed bay. With temperatures well over 35°C, we spent the next day cooling down in the water. We also moved the anchor line to the stern to allow a fresh breeze to blow through the cockpit.

The westerlies persisted as we sailed further east to Mondello, a popular beach town close to Palermo. Although we were sailing under blue skies, over land the sky was grey. Wildfires, thriving in the hot and windy conditions, were burning all over Sicily. Two firefighting planes repeatedly dived into the bay to fill their bellies with seawater, yet the fires kept burning.

A BIRTHDAY SCARE

We moved to the volcanic islands of Vulcano and Lipari. Lipari's eponymous main town turned out to be charming, with a historic fort atop an impressively steep rock. We anchored in 15m of crystal clear water. Sadly, the water clarity is due to a lack of nutrients; with barely any tides and currents, there is virtually no algae or plankton. We were looking at the sea equivalent of a prairie landscape.

Other marine life forms are faring much better. A snorkelling trip to neighbouring Panarea saw us swimming with colourful fish, and seaweeds and corals covered the underwater rocks and steep cliffs.



Stromboli is the shape of a typical volcano: a cone that descends steeply into the sea. There is only one small plateau with suitable depths for anchoring, so we were happy to find an empty spot.

Under the constant rumbling of the active volcano we paddled ashore to celebrate Ivar's birthday at a pizzeria. I had just taken my fast bite when I looked out towards the sea and froze. *Lucipara 2* was adrift. We rushed down to the beach, jumped into our kayak and paddled as if our lives depended on it.

As we got closer, we saw two men from the local water taxi aboard. 'You are not the first to experience this,' they said calmly as we caught our breath. 'The volcanic sand on the bottom is quite loose.'

We felt like complete idiots for not having tested the holding better. After anchoring again, closer to the beach this time, and making sure the anchor was set firmly, we calmed down over birthday dinner version 2.0: canned soup.

MESMERISING STROMBOLI

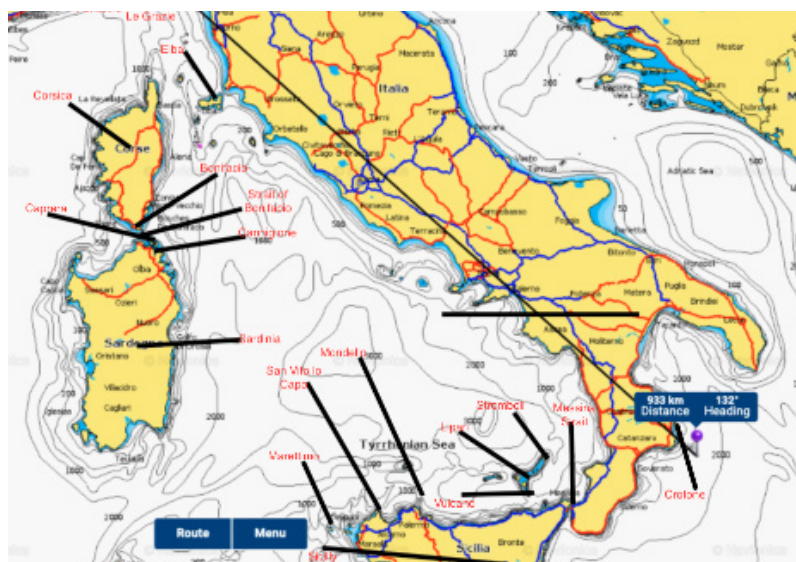
The next evening we climbed Stromboli itself, keeping a watchful eye on the boat. It was dark when we reached the summit. We were just about to sit down and admire the view when a loud roar caught our attention. We spent the next hour staring in awe at the fountain of fire and molted rocks within the crater. We were the last group to descend the volcano and were relieved to find our kayak and our boat patiently waiting for us.

From halfway up Stromboli we had seen the Messina Strait, the narrow passage between Sicily and the 'toe of Italy's boot', our next destination. When wind arrived a few days later, we set sail and managed to make a few knots with our gennaker until we reached the ancient town of Scilla, at the north end of the strait. The passage plan was tight and we were unable to go ashore to explore and instead had to stay aboard. Normally the tides and currents in the Mediterranean are negligible, but here it's a different story; whirlpools that are the stuff of legend can occur.

We left early to benefit from the current that runs south at around 3-4 knots. There was not much wind, but as soon as we reached the strait's entrance, it accelerated into a strong tailwind. We rocketed through the busy Messina Strait in no time, our AIS proving invaluable for dodging the ferries.

Crotone in Calabria was our final Italian stop, where we visited a reforestation project with a Dutch touch. On very dry land, trees are planted in a biodegradable paper donut, called the Cocoon. These protect seedlings from harsh, arid climates boosting their first-year survival rate by an astonishing 80-90%.

Around us, some 2,400 fig, olive and pomegranate trees planted 6-12 months ago were green and healthy, but the smoke of wildfires in the distance reminded us how urgently they were needed.



TIPS FOR CRUISING ITALY

- To enjoy the most beautiful places and avoid busy and expensive marinas, good anchoring equipment is a must. Without our 40kg Rocna we wouldn't have fared so well. We also used navily.com to help select anchorages.
- Our solar panels proved very effective during the long sunny days. We had more than enough energy to power all systems, including the watermaker. This allowed us to be independent of shore power.
- The Egadi Islands (Marettimo, Levanzo and Favignana) are partly surrounded by a protected nature area, which means anchoring is not possible or free everywhere. Flyers are handed out which explain the restrictions and the (paid) moorings are indicated. www.ampisoleegadi.it
- A minimum anchoring distance of 300m from the beach must be maintained throughout Italy in the summer. The enforcement of this rule differs in each area. We were warned (but not fined) in Sardinia, but didn't encounter any enforcers on Stromboli and around Sicily.
- Before crossing the Strait of Messina it is advisable to take a close look at the tidal charts. With an unfavourable current you will make little progress. If you stay out of the traffic separation system (TSS), you will generally have little trouble with freight traffic, but be aware of the many ferries and fishing boats.

PUBLICATIONS AND CHARTS

Italian Waters Pilot by Rod and Lucinda Heikell, 10th edition (Imray, £45)

Corsica & North Sardinia by Madeleine and Stephan Strobel/RCCPF, 4th edition (Imray, £35)

Imray *Pocket Pilot: Corsica* by Lu Heikell, 1st edition (Imray, £14.95) Imray M16, M17, M31, M50, M7, M8, M9, M49, M47



ABOUT SAILORS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Dutch sailors Ivar Smits and Floris van Hees left Amsterdam in June 2016 to sail their Buchanan 47 ketch *Lucipara 2* around the world looking for inspiring and sustainable solutions to social and ecological challenges.

By blogging and vlogging about the positive solutions they discover, they hope to inspire people to make changes. www.sailorsforsustainability.nl/

