The still-distant cliffs of Amorgos rose and fell behind dark grey swells as a 20-knot NE wind blew hard across our course. Fifty kilometres downwind lay the volcanic island of Santorini; upwind, nothing save a few scattered Greek islets until the Turkish mainland. With forty kilometres under our kayaks already today, mostly upwind, we were tired. The sun fell in the sky behind us, perhaps another couple of hours before we lost the light.

Departing the sheltering mid-crossing islets of Antikaros, we paddled into the waves, blades snatching in the wind as our bows crashed from crest to trough. Pete began to diverge from the group, taking a more comfortable line through the heaving sea that obscured our target. In less than a minute Pete was fifty metres away.

“Nick! Where the hell’s Pete off to?” yelled Rod over the wind.
“You’ve been keeping an eye on him this week. Go get him back!”

I paddled to join Pete and looked back for the others. Already they were hidden among the swells. As I cajoled Pete to take a more downwind course, I considered the challenge of the crossing ahead. Eight days into our planned transit of the Aegean Sea, a combination of commitment and fatigue was creating an uncertain situation. With no land to leeward, we could ill afford any deterioration in the conditions. I longed for the next two hours to pass unevenly, for the chance to regroup on Amorgos.

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The next morning, still beautifully calm, saw us reach Attica’s south tip. Our departure from the sheltered beach, visit to the 2500-year-old cliff-top ruins of Poseidon’s Temple, an essential place of worship for early mariners and a fitting lunch stop for us before venturing on towards the island-dotted Aegean islands. Offshore at last, a 6km crossing in calm waters to the seemingly deserted island of Kea made us suitably peaceful and to our second day.

Rod also envisioned the day with a demonstration of mid-paddle comfort breaks, hopping into the bays to thrill the fishes before scrambling abroad again, cowboy-style, over the rear of his kayak. The next day, the team, clearly accustomed to colder waters, resorted to trusty “pee bottles” rather than taking the dip. Our concerts at the jagged edges of Justin’s hastily improvised Evan bottle were forgotten once Jon revealed, some days later, that the mug from which he enjoyed his evening beer served a double purpose throughout the day. For some reason this revelation particularly unsettled the Aussies. Perhaps the sight of him drinking his Chocolate Bourbon into the steering lead was too much for them.

The days slid by as we paddled south, deeper into the Cyclades chain. Kea, Kythnos, Serifos, Sikinos, Antiparos – each day brought a new crossing and a new island experience. The bay conditions of the early days gave way to unrested,autumn weather – an increasing NE breeze created choppy crossings between the islands with mussy reflected waters greating our arrival off each headland.

Day four, as we surfed downward before an afternoon headwind, saw us Kafto’s sleepy hamlet on Serifos east coast. Team Australia suffered the first casualty, clearly new to such conditions. Suddenly he realized the elements as a wave lurched unexpectedly under his boat. Swiflty rescued, he determinedly battled into calmer waters as we offered varying support observations and suggestions. Canoers suffering that evening in our armpits in the hatchwells of a borrowed sea boat, I was unable to gain any clearer picture of my paddling mates before bringing the water up to our knees. Tiredness had not been kind to Pete’s delicate skin. The nylon fabric pressed against my face offered an early reminder that the wind had, if anything, gained strength during the night. It was clearly under the cosh and had a must-make decision to be made that night.

Daybreak arrived with news from Rod that the windshift, if anything, gained strength during the night. The irony was not lost on us as we grew more expertly these Aegean gale. A restless night gave way to a 5am start, afloat in the Dodecanese group and our final stepping-stones before finally reaching the sheltering inlet on the south tip of Amorgos as the last rays of light illuminated the water ahead. Wary from a twelve-hour day battling headwinds through the Little Cyclades, we beached our kayaks with relief and pitched camp on windward gravel at the head of the beach. Too tired to discuss plans, sleep came quickly.

The final kilometre of protected water. House-sized swell, had taken us to this distant edge of the Cyclades chain. 80km beyond the island of Kalymnos, still 35km distant. Eight days of Aegean exposure had not been kind to Pete’s delicate skin. The last rays of light illuminated the water ahead. Wary from a twelve-hour day battling headwinds through the Little Cyclades, we beached our kayaks with relief and pitched camp on windward gravel at the head of the beach. The next day, we figured, would be an easy paddle to Amorgos...

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as we sought to avoid a collision on the otherwise empty ocean. Finally, we watched our would-be pursuer pass 100m astern, with not a sign of life anywhere on deck.

Kalymnos continued to play cat and mouse among the clouds; distant hills gradually took detailed shape, white smudges became villages and inshore boat traffic began to cross our course. Eight weary hours after departing Leros, we finally beached our kayaks and set off in search of the nearest celebratory drink. Nothing could stop us reaching Turkey now.

Two days later, our final day afloat, such confidence was but a memory as Rod sat alongside the Greek naval vessel that had just intercepted our course. Departing the final stepping-stone of Pserimos, our beeline route for the Turkish mainland – tantalisingly visible only 10km distant – had taken us past a Greek military outpost. The sight of a sentry racing from his observation post was alarming enough; before we could discuss a plan, the roar of diesel engines brought our challengers into view. No grasp of the language was necessary to understand the outcome of Rod’s discussion: shaken heads and arms pointed in the direction of Kos told their own story. Deflated, we turned our kayaks and headed back towards Greece.

Ashore in Kos town, it seemed that we had reached the end of the road. Turkey was a one-hour paddle across the Skandari strait; it might have been the dark side of the Moon so far as the Greek military was concerned. The game was up; or so I thought, not reckoning on the “never say die” Aussie spirit. Pete and Justin triumphantly returned from their meeting with the harbour police, clutching permission papers for the crossing. We raced around the harbour to the customs’ office, stamped our passports and charged back to the beach on a wave of euphoria. An hour later, we were disbelievingly sipping Turkish beer, our quest to cross the Aegean complete.

That evening, we began our farewells. Pete and Justin remained in Kos, en route to Istanbul, while the rest of us boarded the overnight ferry back to Athens. It seemed strange to be cruising, in fifteen hours, what had taken the previous two weeks to paddle. As I reflected on our adventures, I realised how little I had known of the Aegean before I began the trip. With no expectations upon arriving in Athens, my impressions of the islands, and the kayaking between them, had been hugely impressive. Rod’s imaginative plan and excellent leadership, combined with the fine company of my team members made the entire experience unforgettable. I will return to paddle the Aegean again one day.

Nick Cunliffe spent two weeks crossing the Aegean Sea in November 2005 with Rod Feldtmann, Peter Roscoe, Jon Hunter, Peter Avery and Justin Gallager.

Rod is the owner of Sea Kayak Milos, specialising in sea kayaking holidays to this magnificent island in the Greek Cyclades.

Nick runs Surf-Lines, an outdoor activity business in Llanberis, Snowdonia. Courses include a wide range of sea kayak training programmes.