



Fewer migrants crossing Med, security fears remain

Sailors are less likely to encounter migrants at sea between Turkey and Greece, following a deal between Turkey and the European Union in March. Greek islands that until recently have received daily arrivals of migrants reported that none were reaching their shores within two days of the deal coming into force.

A security briefing by the Cruising Association (CA) explained: 'Since the arrival of Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2), a fleet of vessels from allied nations, there has been a decline in reported migrant crossings. With calmer summer conditions approaching, however, more trips may be attempted.'

The CA also warned of other risks in the Eastern Mediterranean: 'There have been reports of thefts from yachts in Turkey, often when anchored and in the evening while the crew is ashore.'

Warnings

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office issued warnings for tourists in Turkey: 'It's generally safe to travel but you should take additional safety precautions. You should be alert to your surroundings and remain vigilant in crowded places



PHOTO: ALAMY

Since 20 March, the Turkish Coastguard has been turning back migrant boats leaving for Greece

popular with tourists. The threat from terrorism remains high. We advise against all travel to within 10km of the border with Syria and to the city of Diyarbakir.'

The warnings do not reflect some sailors' experiences in the area, however, and increased security is making some areas feel safer.

'This time last year we travelled from Didim in south-west Turkey to Istanbul and then across to Limnos, down through the Greek eastern Sporades and across to the Saronic,' said Mediterranean

pilot book author Rod Heikell. 'We didn't see a single migrant boat and it's probably in the interests of the migrants or people smugglers to avoid traffic. The Turkish coast is much as it always has been and I would not hesitate to visit Turkey this year.'

The perceived risk remains, impacting the yachting industry in Turkey. Marinas in other countries including Cyprus, Montenegro and Croatia are looking to capitalise by offering 'more secure' berthing and have offered discounts to sailors moving their boats from Turkey.

Elsewhere in the Mediterranean, continued vigilance is recommended by the Cruising Association. The closure of the Macedonian border in March means greater scrutiny on leisure vessels in the area, and Italian and Albanian authorities are working together to prevent a new migrant route, while some Albanian ports are known to be used for drug operations, it said.

Croatia also saw more than 410,000 migrants pass through its borders in 2015. Though mainly

land-based, tighter maritime restrictions and closer AIS monitoring are being introduced.

The advice for sailors who encounter a migrant vessel remains the same, said Rod

Heikell: 'Should anyone discover a migrant boat, the procedure is to call the coast radio station on the appropriate channel. A call on Ch16 is less likely to elicit a response. This was certainly our experience when we discovered a

heavily overloaded inflatable in Spanish waters some years ago. Sailing at night near the Greek/Turkish border should probably be avoided.'

The CA added: 'If leisure vessels spot migrant boats, it is important to have a plan to avoid interaction. Migrants have been known to sink their own boats to force a rescue mission.'

Closer to home, two Iranian men were rescued from an inflatable yacht tender in the English Channel just off Dover in March, having crossed from France. The crew of a ship spotted the light of their mobile phone and alerted the coastguard.

'Increased security is making some areas feel safer'



PHOTO: ROD HEIKELL

Rod and Lu Heikell have found the Turkish coast to be barely affected