

16th August 2018

The First Deputy Chief of the Greek Coast Guard
Vice Admiral Raptis Stamatios
Vassiliadis
Piraeus
AK 185 10
Greece

Dear Mr Stamatios,

RE: Impounded boat in Symi, Rhodos.

I am writing to make a formal complaint.

Recently, we were sailing our yacht from Symi to Kos since the forecast was for excellent winds to take us there. However, the wind died completely and we decided to motor. Immediately, there was a noise coming from the engine.

After an inspection, it was clear that we had somehow damaged our sail drive which enables the gears to engage and so drive us forward. We tried to sail again but the wind had gone and the swell was against us. As the rocks were getting nearer we decided we had no option but to call the coastguard for assistance to get us out of a potentially dangerous situation as we would do in any other European country

The coastguard boat in Symi was despatched very rapidly. We were told that we could only be taken to the nearest safe harbour, which was Symi. At this stage, we already knew that it would be impossible to have the sail drive fixed there as the boat would need to be hauled out in order to make a repair.

However, we were grateful to be taken to safety. A fishing boat in the area came to tow us in which they did very competently and kindly.

The next day, and following a visit to the Port Police, it became clear that leaving Symi was going to prove extremely frustrating.

After lengthy conversations with officials we were told that the boat was impounded until repairs could be made. Our Registration documents, insurance papers and DEKPA were taken.

Two different mechanics in Symi were approached and both categorically stated that the only option for repair was for us to go to Rhodes **BUT** The Port Authority would not release us to go to Rhodes. We found ourselves in a catch 22.

Our strong feeling is that the Port Authority would not/could not, release us due to an absolute inability of the organisation to apply a simple, logical solution to this predicament with a view to helping all parties.

Surely, we thought, wouldn't it be sensible to let us sail to Rhodes? Or let us be towed by the same fishing vessel that had towed us in? We could then be in Rhodes to get repaired. Since completing paperwork is seen as very important couldn't our papers be sent on to the Port Police there so they could complete the paper chain? Surely, everyone would be happy with that simple, effective, and logical eventuality? BUT, NO.

We were beginning to feel that the Port Authority would not release the yacht because of a strongly ingrained 'covering my back' institutional culture and mentality and an underlying organisational fear of making a decision that might be wrong or back fire. This is in addition to, arcane, unnecessary laws and ridiculously onerous paperwork

Two local boats offered to tow us to Rhodes. We consulted the police who told us that if we could obtain a surveyor to produce a towage certificate/licence, then it would be possible for us to leave for Rhodes.

We found a surveyor in Rhodes who was happy to prepare the documentation and make the appropriate calculations required. He stated that a boat with at least 240HP, on presentation of their paperwork, would be able to tow us effectively.

The very next day this solution was suddenly **Un**acceptable. Now, we were told that actually only a professional tug could tow us to Rhodes.

This is an incredibly expensive undertaking. The quote for the job was an eye-watering Euros 930 **an hour**. The job was estimated to take 10 hours.

When the towage certificate came through we saw, to our horror, that the tug that would be towing our small, 13m, 13Tonne sailing yacht was 31m long, 11m wide and weighing 400T, with a 4500HP engine. The operators may be professional but what experience have they got in towing little sailing boats? This is a tug designed for pulling massive cargo ships around. We really felt that being towed by such a beast was a potentially unsafe, dangerous and frightening prospect for us.

Ironically, in order to begin the tow, we would have to make our own way out of Symi harbour (ditto at the Rhodes end of the tow) in order to meet the tug at almost the exact point from which it would be feasible for us to sail - all because the tug is too big to manoeuvre safely in the harbour in Symi.

We tried another tack. Perhaps, if we could temporarily fix the engine then we could be allowed to leave to sail to Rhodes.

We successfully made a temporary repair.

Now, we had two means of propulsion, an engine, and a 15HP outboard motor; working sails and mast.

I **know** that Greek law states that this is satisfactory.

Despite this, we cannot get a surveyor to 'sign off' a certificate to say that we are seaworthy. More back covering, I suppose!

As a British registered boat we understood that it was up to us to say whether our vessel is seaworthy and to take responsibility for sailing it.

Now, we are in a situation where we are completely **hijacked**. We can only get to Rhodes for repairs by using the tug boat. Remember, this is going to cost us around Euros 9300. An amount that is completely prohibitive to us, BUT because we have no other options we are being impelled, forced and coerced into agreeing to the tow. We have been trapped and feel like hostages. I am sure you will appreciate that this experience has bitterly tainted our impression of Greece, Greek institutions and, in particular, the Hellenic Coast Guard.

Accountability is what needs to be tackled. Let me explain.

The surveyor has worked out a calculation based on a centrally provided formula.
He passed that to the Port Authority.
The Port Authority issues the Licence.
The tug boat can then do the job.

In this way, if something goes wrong, there is NO accountability.

The tug boat says, 'I was given a licence to go in winds up to 21Knts; therefore it's not my fault.'

The Port Authority says, 'I was given calculations by a Professional Surveyor; therefore it's not my fault.'

The Surveyor says, 'I was working out a calculation based on a centrally provided standard formula; therefore it's not my fault.'

On top of all this, the parameters mentioned in the documents provided to us (see attached) take NO account of our type of boat, the effects of swell on a sail boat that can't put up its sail to stabilise it, the strength of our boat furniture to deal with the forces involved in towing.

In this scenario, the only people who have experience and knowledge of a small sailing yacht would appear to be us. The only people concerned about the safety of our boat and our personal safety would appear to be us. For example, yesterday we checked the weather prior to a planned departure in the morning and saw that the wind was forecast to be 20Kts, therefore within the parameters of the licence, but we consider that it would have been too dangerous. We called off the tow.

So, what do we want?

I believe that a serious review of accountability within the HCG is necessary. There needs to be a review of the endemic back-covering culture. Individual Harbour Masters should be able to confidently make decisions using their own initiative depending on the situation in the port in which they work. Why does Symi not automatically tow yachts in distress to Rhodes where they can be repaired? Why on earth is Symi Port Authority bound by the same regulations as Pireaus? Why are small sailing vessels bound by the same rules as massive container ships? There needs to be room for applying a logical solution without fearing recriminations. The best organisations in the world

Google, Amazon, 3M, have become so successful because they have allowed and supported their employees to think for themselves, to make suggestions for improvement, to think outside the box.

In English we have an expression, 'A sledgehammer to crack a nut!' It means that excessive force is being used to do something simple and easy. In this case, the solution of using the tug is completely over the top, unnecessary and faintly ridiculous.

We have been in Symi for two weeks and intend to leave on Monday. In all our dealings with the Port Police they have been unfailingly polite. Our over-riding impression, though, is that they are profoundly embarrassed to be bound by the petty rules and the rubber-stamping culture that prevails.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Sarah Hill

SY Linea