We are biking up the side of a volcano. As one would expect, it’s steep. Breath-pilfering, leg-cramping steep. Lava boils in my calves with each crank of the pedals. The road switchbacks up the flanks of toasting rock, ever upward.

This is the Greek island of Nisyros, and the road leads to the village of Nikia, a 60-person settlement built on the volcano’s rim, with views directly into the still-hot crater. I’ve been promised that a cold, freshly squeezed lemonade will be waiting for me in the town. Zeus willing. Looking over my shoulder, I’m graced by a view of the Aegean Sea glittering below. A thousand pinpricks of light bounce off the softly undulating blue. Our sailboat, the Kaya Guneri Plus, bobs placidly in the expanse.

Hours from now I will cannonball back down the mountain, whooping wildly as I lean headlong over my bike, volcanic rock and greenery flashing by. There will be cold drinks waiting on board the yacht, too.

Until then, there is only one way to reap either reward: Keep pedaling. Nobody said biking through the Greek Isles would be easy. The Dodecanese Islands are sprinkled throughout the southeastern Aegean and are perhaps best described as high, craggy mountains sunk into the azure waters as if magically dropped there.

Perhaps they were. According to legend, the island of Nisyros was formed during a battle between the god Poseidon and an immortal giant (a not-so-unusual occurrence in mythical
Greece, apparently). The sea god tore off a huge chunk of a nearby island and smashed it atop the giant’s head, pinning him to the bottom of the sea forever. The new land mass became Nisyros, while the giant’s angry subterranean shouts formed the volcano.

Few places have such rich history or grandiose stories as these ancient sea routes, and a sailboat is still the best way to travel among them. If it was good enough for the likes of Hercules and Odysseus, it’s good enough for me. But I doubt even a demigod like Hercules had it so good.

I am a guest of DuVine, the luxury biking outfitter based in Boston, as we take on five islands in eight days. We usually sail between them in the early mornings, and each day includes a ride of up to 30 miles. Haphazard driving styles on these islands can make for tricky biking, but the roads we take are uniformly good, with little traffic. There’s always one biking guide up front, another in the rear, and a sweeper van is available to pick up guests who have had enough for the day—or just want to skip the next big climb. The other guests sit in all-see-a-mix-of-hardcore and more relaxed bikers. One gentleman with the telltale calves of a dedicated cyclist always wants a few more miles and is continually jumping ahead; another is happy to tarry over a Greek coffee at a break spot and van-hop as necessary. The guides accommodate all of these desires.

Yaşar Demiroz is one such guide. An ultramile who grew up in Turkey and is just shy of 30, he’s become my smiling shadow over the last few days, alternately riding alongside or falling back. He realized early on that moderation is not my strong suit. I like to attack the hills to the point of shaky exhaustion—and then fly down the descents fast, sometimes dangerously so.

And so Yaşar and I finally ascend the volcano, which reveals itself as a crater in the center of a rounded mountain, a full two-and-a-half-miles wide and some thousand feet down. Over the eons the volcano collapsed into itself, forming a caldera. It last erupted in the late 1800s.

A village of gleaming white walls and brilliant blue shutters is perched on the very edge of the abyss. It’s a fantastical sight, yet another Greek myth. I’m soon off my bike and being handed a very real
Guneri Plus, a 118-foot Turkish gulet, is an elegant teak-and-mahogany yacht with a proud proven white sail—the kind of vessel that has graced the waters for centuries. It has six guest cabins, each with a private bath and shower, including a throne-side view out the bathroom porthole. With only three couples from the U.S., Canada, and Australia, and myself, there are more staff than guests. The yacht is supremely comfortable and very private.

Our is a happy group with many commonalities, perhaps because any guest who opts for a biking tour is active, fit, and likely a bit competitive. “I took one look at all the hard abs in this group and thought, ‘Uh oh, maybe I should have spent more time on the bike,’” says Mark, a Canadian surgeon, as he takes a sip of beer on deck after a hard-fought ride. “But you know, this is a perfect combination of work and play.”

Over the week the islands come and go in a rippling kaleidoscope of ports, coves, villages, and warm sea waters. While the Greek names run together—Kalymnos, Kos, Nisyros, Symi, Rhodes—the places themselves do not. Each island has a distinct personality, from the sponge diving harbor village of Fyri to Rhodes’s big island battles. The bikes prove a phenomenal way to explore: slow enough to nod at villagers and evade the scrabbling goats, but efficient enough to cover plenty of ground. I’m usually awake with the sunrise, fresh light revealing the remote coves that we anchored in overnight, the ancient city of the inhabited Roman city, or the $30 million yacht docked next to us.

At one point I awake from a nap to find that flies out his kitchen tastes incredible. Our chef is young and shy, but the food that flies out his kitchen takes excellent, and I pull up Google Maps to find out more about this area. It is mythic.

The ride that began at sea level is a nonstop ascent to 1,600 feet. Our aluminum bikes aren’t geared correctly for such intimate hills like this, and I’m cursing the machine. (The company is getting lighter, better bikes next year.)

I’ve abandoned my attack mode. I just want to get up this damn hill. Even a beer and the excellent food aboard the yacht can’t seem very far away.

And then my shadow, Yaşar, appears next to me. He looks over, assessing. Suddenly his cell phone starts playing music. For a moment I think it’s his ring tone—but no, he’s triggered a tune on purpose. It is a single, driving violin “The Kiss,” a song from the Last of the Mohicans soundtrack.

My head picks up. My pedaling falls into cadence with the propulsive music. Faster, determined, ebullient. I look over at Mark and his wife, who own a boat. Private tours can also be booked. DuVine’s (duvine.com) eight-day Greek Isles bike-and-yacht tour starts around $7,000 per person. Private tours can also be booked.

Bak at it again. My head is down, my breath ragged. We are on the island of Symi, a series of humpback mountains that was name-checked in Homer’s Iliad. There are terrific views, but I’m too tired to look at them. The ride that began at sea level is a nonstop ascent to 1,600 feet. Our aluminum bikes aren’t geared correctly for such intimate hills like this, and I’m cursing the machine. (The company is getting lighter, better bikes next year.)

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And so we attack the mountain, ever upward, flying to the top of the world and atop Greece itself. It is mythic.

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