The 90-day Schengen visa is a major headache for Mediterranean cruisers. But there are solutions.

If you're a non-EU sailor – you're not an EU citizen, resident or spouse – then one fundamental challenge threatens to derail your dream of cruising long-term in the Med: the Schengen Short-Stay Visa.

In support of the EU principle of "free movement of people", the Schengen Area is a group of 29 European countries which have abolished their internal borders. Travellers may pass from one Schengen country to another by car, train, plane or ferry without any border controls, passport checks or customs inspections.

The map below, with Schengen Area countries highlighted in yellow, illustrates that almost all of the Med's cruisable coastline falls within the Schengen Area.



Non-EU nationals who visit any of the Schengen Area countries are granted a "Schengen Short Stay Visa" upon entry. This entry authorisation covers all of the countries, with border controls applied only at the first entry and last exit points.

So what does the “Short Stay” allow? Herein lies the problem (for non-EU nationals), and one of the biggest challenges facing long-term cruisers in the Med. The Schengen Short Stay is an entry permit for non-EU nationals to spend up to 90 days in any 180-day period to one or more countries in the Schengen area. The 90 days covers *all* of the Schengen countries – you don’t get 90 days in each one. And the clock doesn’t reset if you leave and come back: the 90-day limit applies to the sum of all visits over the previous 180 days.

The 180-day period is a rolling time window. If you arrive on January 1st and stay for 90 days (leaving on April 1st), you cannot return until June 30th (180 days after your first arrival).

If you arrive on January 1st and stay for 60 days, you can return on May 30th for another 30 days (90 days within the 180-day window). Actually, you can return on May 30th and stay for 90 days, because after June 30th, your January days will start to roll off and no longer fall inside the 180-day window.

As you can see, this is a major issue for liveaboard sailors from outside the EU. The cruising season for most people is approximately April to September (roughly 180 days), but the Short Stay only allows you to spend 90 days in Schengen countries. Given that the largest and most popular sailing destinations – Spain, France, Italy, Croatia and Greece – are all in Schengen, this is a major restriction. And it’s getting worse: Gibraltar now issues a Schengen visa to visiting yachtsmen, Cyprus will join in the next few months, and Montenegro is expected to be admitted to the EU in 2028 with Schengen membership to follow soon after.

The 90/180 days rule also means that it is impossible to spend the whole winter aboard your boat in the EU. Even if you leave the boat in a boatyard and head home, any time you spend on maintenance or preparation over the winter will cut into the summer days you have for cruising. For example, if you spend 20 Schengen days preparing your boat in March, you will only have 70 days left for summer cruising, until the March days roll off in September.

The penalties for overstaying are severe. Fines of over €1000 are typical, and you can expect to be banned from re-entry for 3 years or more. Cruisers who find they

need to overstay because of some unforeseen issue, such as a medical or boat mechanical problem, can obtain an extension but report that it is a difficult process, requiring written evidence.

If you were wondering what Mediterranean cruisers talk about when they get together – this is it! Fortunately, there are a few solutions.

Schengen Workarounds

The Schengen Shuffle

The most obvious solution involves jumping between Schengen and non-Schengen countries to stay within the 90-in-180-days rule. As a sailor, that generally means juggling your time between the non-Schengen countries of Albania, Montenegro and Turkey, and the neighbouring Schengen member states of Greece, Italy and Croatia. Morocco and Tunisia could also be considered: they are not conducive to cruising, especially in summer, but they might be conducive to mid-season maintenance. If you wanted to cruise the western Med – Spain, France and the western side of Italy – a Schengen shuffle *must* include Morocco or Tunisia, as there are no alternatives. Of all the non-Schengen countries mentioned, only Turkey, which offers its own 90-day visa, is really conducive to long-term cruising: the others are too small, too hot or too bureaucratic.

Long Stay Visas

All of the Mediterranean EU countries offer long-stay “National” (Category D) visas, with a duration of up to one year. Greece and France are the countries most commonly granting these visas to liveaboard sailors: they recognise *tourism* as an activity worthy of the visa, and *financially independent person* as a valid category of applicant. Most importantly, they recognise your boat as a residential address, although France may require a marina contract. In both cases, you are required to apply in your home country, and provide evidence of sufficient funds or income, and health insurance. Greece additionally requires a health certificate from a doctor and a criminal records check.

The long-stay visas for Italy and Croatia are not generally issued to cruising sailors. The Spanish “Non-Lucrative Visa” is issued to those with sufficient funds and health insurance, but it is intended as a pathway to residency: applicants must commit to spending 183 days in Spain per year, which has implications for tax and numerous other obligations, such as the requirement to obtain a Spanish driving license and boat license.

So Greece and France are the viable options for long-stay visas, and many cruisers take advantage of these. The visas allow a stay in the issuing country of up to 12 months, plus 90 days travel in a 180-days period elsewhere in the Schengen area.

Bilateral Visa Waiver Agreements

These agreements, between individual pairs of countries, existed before the Schengen concept was introduced and they are still in effect. They allow holders of certain passports to obtain an additional period of stay in specific countries after the 90 Schengen days have been used up. Most EU countries have some of these agreements, and you should check the legislation[1] to find out which are available for your nationality. Some of the notable ones among the Mediterranean countries are listed below:

Country	Duration of Visa Extension	For citizens of…
France	90 days	Canada, New Zealand, USA and 6 other countries
Greece	90 days	Canada, New Zealand and 16 other countries
Italy	3 months	Australia, Canada, New Zealand, USA and 22 other countries
Spain	90 days	Canada, New Zealand, USA and 16 other countries
Croatia, Malta, Slovenia, Cyprus	None	

A Sample of Bilateral Visa Waiver Agreements

The agreements are now rarely used in practice, and you may have difficulty finding an immigration officer who is aware of them. The legislation is downloadable in various languages and you should carry printed copies with you. Even then, the rules for actual implementation – for example, whether there is a requirement to leave the country and return, and what are the conditions for repeated use of the visa waiver – are not clear and you may find yourself in a long conversation with officials using Google Translate. But do persevere, as this approach has worked for many cruisers before you.

Digital Nomad Visa

These visas are currently offered in Spain, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Malta, Greece and Cyprus. A Digital Nomad visa typically allows you to reside in the country for a specific term – perhaps two years – which is renewable, and travel throughout the Schengen Area for the usual 90-days-in-180-days. The visa does not give unlimited time in other Schengen countries.

It might sound like anyone who travels and posts on Instagram might qualify as a Digital Nomad, but the rules are a bit tighter than that. Requirements vary between countries, but you generally have to show:

- A specific skill and related qualifications
- A history of working remotely for clients
- A company that you own with some track record, typically 12 months
- Proof of income above minimum requirements

Golden Visas

It is possible to buy your way to residency of a European country, via investment in real estate, business projects or other approved vehicles. These “Golden Visa” programmes are intended as a pathway from temporary residency to permanent residency and eventually to citizenship for wealthy individuals. As a resident, you are entitled to 90-out-of-180-days travel in the Schengen Area in addition to your unlimited stay in your country of residence.

Portugal has long offered the most famous Golden Visa programme. There are minimal requirements for physical presence in Portugal and holders of the visa may travel throughout the rest of the Schengen Area (but only for 90/180 days). However since 2023, in response to surging property prices, the purchase of real estate was removed as an investment option: the remaining options include creating jobs, contributing to scientific research or donating to cultural or arts projects. This may not be for everyone.

Spain’s Golden Visa programme was closed in 2025 due to its contribution to rising property prices. The Investor Visa for Italy requires investment in a business, startup, government bonds, or donation to a public interest project. Greece still offers a pathway to residency through the purchase of property, though it has recently lifted the threshold amount.

Stamping the Crew List

In some countries, depending perhaps on the officer that greets you, you may be processed into the country with a stamp on your crew list rather than a stamp in your passport. You must commit to sleeping aboard your boat and not overnighting on land – you are being treated as a passing mariner who does not really need to be processed through immigration.

Where does this work? Malta is the most reliable, where the crew list has been stamped as a matter of course for anyone arriving from outside the EU. The crew list approach has also been successful, for some crews, in Italy, and to a lesser extent, in Greece. Some crews report a higher success rate if you use an agent.

Once inside the Schengen Area, with your crew list stamped, you could theoretically take advantage of the open borders to move around the Schengen Area indefinitely. But if you have a non-EU flag on your boat, you still need to complete a check-in process (at least in Italy and Greece) so you may get questioned about your immigration status. It’s a risky approach, but it has paid off for some crews in the past.

Seaman’s Book

A Seaman’s Book (also known as a Seaman’s Card or Seafarer’s Identification Document) is a document held by crew of commercial ships (think of cargo vessels, cruise ships and superyachts) which functions like a passport – it allows seafarers to transit ports in different countries without worrying about the visa rules for their particular nationalities. The Seaman’s Book is “sponsored” by the employer (a company) and normally issued by the seafarer’s country of nationality or the flag state of the vessel, and the crew is expected to have appropriate STCW[2] qualifications for the position.



A seaman’s book – like a passport for professional mariners

Some yacht crews have gone down this path, registering their boat in the name of a company, presenting themselves as employees of the company, possibly getting some qualifications to support the designated “position”, and enlisting an on-line agency to issue the book.

There are various web sites offering to issue a seaman's book with few questions asked. The country of issue may not reflect your own nationality, nor the flag of your boat. One cruising couple we know have seaman's books from Belize, another from Burundi. Yes, Burundi!

Now, imagine this scene: a couple of retirees tie up their 30-year-old Bavaria at the customs dock in some new country, silver hair blowing in the wind, and walk inside with their seaman's books. "Hello, I'm the Captain and this is my wife – er, I mean Radio Operator! We're from Burundi". If I were the border guard, I would reach for my handcuffs.

There *are* cases of liveaboard sailors using a Seaman's Book successfully. To avoid the scenario above, it is advisable to use an agent for each check-in and check-out (like the superyachts do), so that face-to-face contact with the authorities is avoided. However, there are reports that the seaman's book has been alternately accepted and rejected by immigration officials *in the same office*! There are also reports of crews getting into trouble. Given that you have to make so many false assertions to get one and use it… well, I wouldn't.

Summary

Even without a Seamans' Book, there are several ways to get around the restrictive 90-day rule. As I write this, my wife and I are cruising through Turkey after spending ten weeks in Greece (the Schengen Shuffle). Last year, we obtained a long-stay visa for Greece and spent most of the summer there before using our Schengen days to sail up the Adriatic to Croatia and Italy. The year before that, we entered Malta and got stamps on our crew list instead of our passports, and then travelled through Italy, Spain, France and Italy again without ever being stamped into the Schengen Area.

Make a careful plan of your cruising itinerary; prepare in advance with visa applications and Seaman's Books; and keep a track of your actual days using a Schengen calculator, and you will be able to cruise the Mediterranean for long periods without worrying about the 90-day limit.

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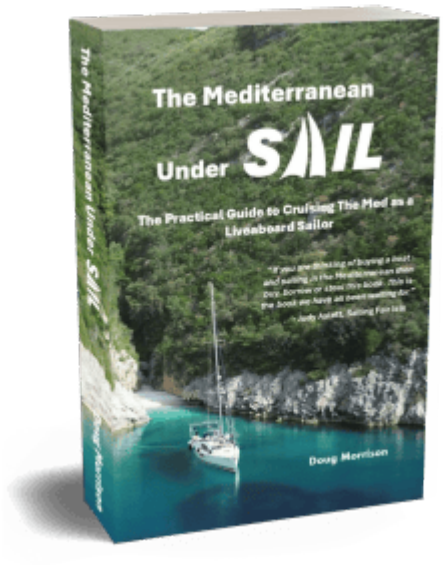
[1] Document 52019XC0408(02), *List of Member States' bilateral visa waiver agreements with third countries allowing for an extension of the period of stay in accordance with Article 20(2), point (b), of the Convention implementing the Schengen Agreement*. Article 20(2), point (b) states that the Schengen law does not invalidate pre-existing bilateral agreements.

[2] The International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW) is a set of global maritime safety rules adopted in 1978 by the International Maritime Organization (IMO)

Doug Morrison is a retired IT consultant and RYA Yachtmaster. Since 2022, together with his wife Malini, he has been cruising the Mediterranean aboard their Jeanneau 45 *Ambiente*, covering over 12,000 miles and twelve countries.

This article is extracted from Doug's book, *The Mediterranean Under Sail: The Practical Guide to Cruising the Med as a Liveaboard Sailor.* The 340-page paperback can be delivered worldwide.

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