

Ship to shore

For a mind-enlarging beach holiday with a shot of big-city buzz, book a cruise along Turkey's turquoise Riviera, explore the villages along the Aegean coast and stop over in Istanbul for some Ottoman extravagance
Words Kate Wilson



Clockwise from opposite left Our gulet moored in a Lycian cove; the incredible Les Ottomans hotel on the Bosphorous in Istanbul; the deck of the Queen Ada hotel at sunset; posing at the ruins in Caunos; one of the pools at the designer Hotel Ev in Türbökkü; the King's Road (beneath the water) at Gümüslük



There's a tiny village on the southwest coast of Turkey that might just be the most perfect in the world. You'd never think to go there, even

though the sea is clear and warm and laps at the edges of waterside cafés serving fish so fresh it takes your breath away. You've probably never heard of it, even though it presides over the ruins of the once-mighty city of Myndos, bits of which are still visible beneath the surface of the sea; and if you wade across to Rabbit Island, treading the long-sunken King's Road that dates back to hundreds of years BC, it will look to the world as though you are walking on water.

This tiny village of Byzantine-coin jewellery and half-sunken trees strung with lanterns is Gümüslük, rated by the guidebooks as one of the most charming and unspoilt villages in Turkey, and despite their exposure, it remains just so. It's the kind of place you could so easily pass up in favour of another afternoon idling on the resort deckchair and you'd never know that your life would be forever poorer for it.

This could so easily have happened to us if it weren't for the enigmatic Captain Gürkan Bilginer - who we met aboard the Grandi I, and who, when not tolerating the foibles of the guests tramping about his spotless vessel, lives here, in Gümüslük.

Ten days before the *dolmuş* (taxi) deposited us in this half-submerged idyll, we were boarding the Grandi I, a Turkish *gulet*, at Marmaris on Turkey's Mediterranean coast. Much has been written about the Blue Cruises that can be taken in this area, stopping off to see ruins and shop at bazaars, waited on hand and foot by a crew of able-bodied seamen, but nothing can really prepare you for the sheer bliss of lying back under a yellow-mooned sky and literally counting your lucky stars for days on end.

We sailed along the Lycian coast to Fethiye and back, stopping to snorkel in between the ruins of an ancient bathhouse in Hammam Bay, eat *gozlemes* (thick roti-like pancakes

filled with honey and bananas) in a tent on a tiny island and visit the mud baths of Dalyan for a vain shot at eternal youth. We dropped anchor in little coves with pebbled beaches and hiked into the pine forests looking for the incongruous little restaurants that are set up at the edge of the water with plastic tablecloths and canopies of oleander. Cicadas hummed and goatbells tinkled and we thought, 'So, Christ, this is what the world was like before you were born.'

After an absurdly happy week of being served tomato and aubergine casseroles washed down with a lot of raki (the chalky aniseed-flavoured drink of choice in Turkey), I felt an overwhelming sense of sadness when we had to leave our crew - Captain Gürkan, Tuncay, Cahit and hobbit-like Husseyin, our 23-year-old hairy-ankled chef, who served us the little silver fish he'd caught himself and gutted on the beach so as not to taint his spotless galley. And so, with another week to spend exploring the Bodrum peninsula, we felt obliged to make the pilgrimage to Gümüslük out of respect for our placid, backgammon-playing captain, who has been sailing since he was a boy.

ST TROPEZ IN TURKEY

The beach towns of Bodrum peninsula, of which Gümüslük is one, each have their own distinct character, and our first stop, Türbökkü, north of Bodrum, is the flashiest kid on the block. Dubbed the St Tropez of Turkey, this is the summer playground of well-oiled locals, meaning prices to match and not much in the way of English-speaking hospitality. Most foreign tourists (i.e. the British) tend to gravitate towards personable Bodrum for their fix of Mediterranean sunshine and maybe a visit to the fairy-tale Petronian Castle, while local families avoid the hustle in the quieter villages of Bitez and Torba, leaving the young and high-flying to strut their stuff in Türbökkü.

There is no beach as we know it (the super-rich don't get sand in their thongs), but a strip of restaurants, cafés and bars, all with pontoon-like decks that stretch out into a bay studded with billionaire-

style yachts that are a world away from our humble *gulet*.

Some of the decks are lavishly furnished with canopy-covered daybeds, where glossy-shouldered men suck on hookah pipes between meals and outdoor massages. Women sunbathe topless and flick blonde manes while chatting on cellphones. Imagine Camps Bay without the traffic and the dog poo.

It looks like excess in the daytime, but as the call of the muezzin rises up at sunset, lights come on and candles are lit and the Türkbükkü beachfront turns into a twinkling curve of lights, the seaside restaurants pile spanking-fresh wares into glass cases and we dress up and fit right in.

We are staying at Hotel Ev, a cluster of villas set on the steep hillside overlooking the town that is the subject of much local acclaim - not to mention Wallpaper reviews. Designed by Turkey's rock 'n' roll architect Eren Talu, this ode to minimalism is the Turkish elite's idea of the ultimate holiday crash pad. Each pristine, all-white apartment comprises a bedroom and bathroom, state-of-the-art open-plan kitchen and large lounge-dining area that opens onto a balcony overlooking either the mountainside or the twinkling Aegean Sea.

Popular with Istanbul city slickers and frequented by the singles crowd and families alike (there are two-bedroom villas as well), the suites have all the trappings of modernist luxury - plasma TVs, DVD players, wireless Internet and slick bathroom accessories. There's also a fitness centre and a spa, and access to a 24-hour butler and grocery service, so you never have to leave the resort except to sample the delights of Türkbükkü nightlife. While we were there the hotel was in the process of constructing its own private wooden-deck 'beach' along the waterfront, for the exclusive use of Ev residents - who can now join the hookah-puffing, kaftan-swishing jet-set in style.

QUEEN OF HEARTS

Between Türkbükkü and Bodrum is the tiny bay of Torba, another blink-



TALKING TURKEY

Clockwise from above Captain Gürkan and Chef Husseyin at dusk; Zeki and unnamed sea bass at Ali Gonca in Torba Bay; tourists walking on water to Rabbit Island in Gümüslük; a view of the Queen Ada and its private beach. **Opposite page, top to bottom** Painted plates, buckets of olives and Turkish Delight



and-you'll-miss-it jewel in the peninsula's crown and home of the Queen Ada hotel. Sandwiched between the slick excess of Türkbükkü and the package tourism of Bodrum, the Queen Ada is happily secluded from the rabble and has been voted the most romantic hotel in Turkey. It is built in the authentic style of the area by the wine-making-engineer-owner, and if you swim out past the private wooden deck that stretches helpfully into the Aegean, and look back at the other hotels lining the little bay, the effortlessly elegant Queen Ada makes the rest look like cheap pretenders.

The inhabitants of the Bodrum peninsula are as proud and distinguished as the Mediterranean locals are humble and self-effacing, and the difference between the Aegean coastline and the Lycian coast is marked. The ultra-stylish manager of the Queen Ada, Deniz, points out the difference between Aegean cuisine (less oil, fewer pulses, more fish) and Mediterranean cooking (more oil, more starch, more meat) and is careful to stress that the Bodrum peninsula was, in fact, never part of Greece, but belonged to Macedonia.

WHERE TO STAY

* On a *gulet*, Tussock Cruising

For prices and to book a one or two-week 'blue cruise': +44-020-8510-9292 or www.tussockcruising.com.

* **Hotel Ev, Türkbükkü** From about R2 000 per room per night. Book via Design Hotels: +90-252-367-1598 or www.designhotels.com.

* **Queen Ada Hotel, Torba** From about R1 300 per room per night. For reservations, call +90-252-367-1598 or visit www.queenadahotel.com.tr.

* **Les Ottomans, Istanbul** From about R9 300 per room per night. Call +90-212-359-1500 or visit www.lesottomans.com.

Meals at the Queen Ada support Deniz's lectures on the local cuisine and are unforgettably delicious (although I will always cherish the memory of Husseyin's moussaka and garlicky meatballs eaten under the stars on the Grandi I). At the Queen Ada we eat samphire (sea asparagus) with walnuts in olive oil, bunches of braised sweet beans and artichoke hearts in lemon juice.

There are three kinds of squid - crisply fried and grilled calamari, plus a wedge of real octopus tentacle, fat and succulent, its thumbnail-sized suckers blackened and caramelised in olive oil. Breakfast is an extravaganza of home-baked bread (the breakfast chef is up at 3am filling pastries with cheese and spinach and kneading dough for olive loaves), nine kinds of cheese, huge jars of olives and the *pièce de résistance* - a variety of incredible homemade jams (rose-petal, green fig, lemony bergamot, apricot and almond) for which the Queen Ada is justly acclaimed.

Afternoons are spent swimming and dozing on the private stretch of beach that is literally metres from our room. A man with a tin bucket of hot mielies



DON'T LEAVE TURKEY WITHOUT...

- * Getting a leather bag in Bodrum Square (or any reputable bazaar.) Leather goods in Turkey are excellent quality.
- * Sampling Turkish *cay* (tea), which is made with great care and usually served in beautiful tulip-shaped glasses. The famous sediment-heavy coffee is only ever drunk after meals.
- * Shopping for the beautiful bowls and platters decorated with whirling dervishes and the like - but haggle over prices and invest in bubble wrap, as they are not as hardy as they look.
- * Sampling a lot of Turkish delight. Don't buy the first box you see - shop around. The real deal should be meltingly soft, not chewy. The Spice Market in Istanbul has the best selection.
- * Visiting at least one set of ancient ruins. They are all awe-inspiring - even the littler ones - and some have jewellery stalls set up inside. Look for artist Cem Özakman's work - he sells out of Bodrum's Petronium Castle, but his work has won awards and is now even on offer in Gümüslük.
- * Searching for the perfect *dolma* (dolmades). These are made differently depending on the area so don't settle for vine leaves when you can have sweet peppers or a whole courgette flower stuffed with nutty, cinnamon-spiced rice.



PHOTOGRAPHS: TBC ON LAYOUT

and a packet of corn husks appears every day - an odd choice of beach-snack, but not bad when washed down with a glass of *ayran*, a frothy drink of ice-cold water mixed with yoghurt and a little salt, which is said to have rejuvenating properties. I drink copious amounts.

There is only one restaurant that Deniz will recommend in Torba and that is Ali Gonca, which is situated at the opposite end of the bay. It takes us 15 whole minutes to stroll over there. (Ten if you discover the beach path in front of the hotels before we did.) The place is typical of the area - tables along the sea, bougainvillea trellis, a now-familiar glass case of fresh seafood - but it's also in a league of its own. Zeki, another proud Aegean Turk, gives us a tour, pointing out photographs of local cognoscenti, footballers, politicians and, bizarrely, Jeremy Irons.

We select two fat sea bass, which are grilled until the skin is crisp and the flesh buttery, and eat them with a salad of char-grilled aubergines and a dish of yoghurt and watercress. Dessert is baklava - the best we have in Turkey - oozing syrup and made the traditional

way with less pastry and more filling. Fresh watermelon and cherries are on the house and while we eat the sun sinks and a trio of musicians passes by, instruments dangling.

On our last day at the Queen Ada, we catch a *dolmus* to Bodrum and then another to Gümüslük to walk on water and pay our respects to Gürkan's home town. The bus winds through the hills, passing windmills presiding over tiny villages and stray dogs pining for non-existent masters in the baking sun.

In Gümüslük the glass cases at the waterside restaurants are brimming with slippery specimens - gilded bream, red snapper (which the locals favour for its strong smell), ugly, flat-headed monkfish, even uglier John Dory, the poisonously spiky scorpion fish and even a live baby shark swimming in a bucket of water. The manager holds it up for me and squeezes its cheeks humiliatingly: 'You like?' he says. 'We serve on skewer.'

The Turks are an almost disconcertingly hospitable people - warm, respectful and generous. They will take an empty juice box out of your hand in the bazaar to throw it away, reproach youngsters for interrupting adults and are genuinely interested in hearing every tourist's life story. You can't walk past a shop or a restaurant in Turkey without being asked where you are from and 'Cape Town' is consistently greeted with a barrage of questions. At first I think it's just the sales pitch, but towards the end of our stay I realise the Turks are genuinely interested. So interested that progress is slow. We never eat before 9pm. Eventually, when we hear the familiar 'Where you from?', we answer: 'Essex.'

REMEMBER THE OTTOMANS

It would be impossible to try and capture the essence of Istanbul in the space of a few paragraphs and even more unfeasible to attempt its highlights in a day, but that is all we have. It's a city of 15 million people and a brand-new Harvey Nichols; ancient and modern,

Christian and Muslim, Europe and Asia - all cleaved in two by the famous Bosphorous, which connects the Sea of Marmara with the Black Sea.

In the old town of Sultanahmet you can visit Ayasofya (Hagia Sophia) - widely considered 'the most beautiful building in the world', the Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace (home of the 86-carat diamond among other gobsmacking jewels), the Spice Market and, of course, the throbbing, energy-sapping Grand Bazaar.

We are incredibly fortunate to be spending our one precious night in the city at the absurdly luxurious Les Ottomans, which is situated on the Bosphorous and has grand plans to unseat the Çırağan Palace as the residence of choice for visiting dignitaries. The hotel is a refurbished mansion that once belonged to a pasha and his family and the present owner, whose dream it was to create the ultimate luxury experience in Istanbul, has restored the place to its original grandeur to the tune of some R600-million. It shows. There are only 10 suites in total, each with unique decor and lavish frills - butlers, assistants, dieticians (seriously), transport by limo or yacht and spa-like bathrooms. The huge Caudalie Vinotherapy Spa spans the entire bottom floor of the hotel, and is surely where you can indulge in the grandest hammam experience in the Turkey.

The hotel also has an à la carte restaurant and the Q Jazz bar, both of which are open to the public, so even if you aren't staying here, you can still rub shoulders with the A-list and have dinner on the terrace with a twinkling view of the Bosphorous and, well, Asia.

While we are checking in a regular guest is grumbling about his boat not being on the water yet; the concierge commiserates. We spot the same well-heeled guest on the plane the next day, complaining about being bumped from business class - he is apoplectic. I try to picture him in Gümüslük, wading through the water to Rabbit Island, and suddenly feel enormously privileged: I have been to the world's most perfect village. There are some things money cannot buy. ■