



The waters of the unspoilt Aegean. :: SUR

The Turkish Riviera revisited



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After a crisis with visitor confidence, Turkey's Mediterranean coast has reemerged as a top destination

The rough-hewn table, crafted from thick cedar, was laden with food; a generous breakfast meze so colourful and appealing that it could have enticed even the sleepiest of night owls to embrace the morning. Baskets of Bazlama flat bread were set out, ready to accompany the large bowl of Menemen, a breakfast dish of eggs, peppers and spices. There were also bright, fat tomatoes; plates of cheeses; and scarlet roasted peppers, drenched in olive oil contrast-

ing with freshly chopped cucumbers. Homemade relishes and rich dark local carob syrup filled saucers; sage honey dripped from its golden, waxy comb. The room was filled with the aroma of strong Turkish coffee; and a double tea pot sat steaming on the stove beside bunches of dried sage.

Eat like a local

Baris, my host, had welcomed us into his home, evocatively called The Poet's House (Siir ev Kekova),

to start the day in local Turkish style. It was a bohemian, creative home, with hand-crafted mosaic murals, and colourful plant pots lining the dining terrace, shaded with swathes of crimson bougainvillea. Inside shelves were crammed with books and old vinyl records.

To get here we drove inland from the Byzantine village of Kaleköy, through a rural landscape of olive, carob and fig trees, where the air was aromatic with sage, rosemary, thyme and oregano. Here locals used

to live a subsistence life of harvesting these herbs to sell at regional markets; now many have left for the towns and cities.

To breathe new life into these rural communities, authorities have been supporting an agro-tourism economy. Like my remarkable breakfast offered by Baris, residents now offer rural experiences to visitors: 4x4 safari jeep tours through the pine and cedar forests of the Taurus Mountains; family meals of local produce prepared in their own homes; and B&B accommodation.

Relaxed and friendly

For the past few years Turkey has experienced a crisis in its tourism sector. Many international travellers have skipped favourite Turkish destinations for the past few years, cautious of a country that had suf-

fered political instability and security issues. Yet now I had chosen to return to Turkey; and I was not alone. The country is set to welcome almost a record number of visitors in 2018; and with the present reduced value of the Lira, there are few places in the Mediterranean that can compete with Turkey in terms of quality and price. What's more, the Riviera feels welcoming. The ambience on this stunning stretch of Mediterranean coast is relaxed, tolerant and friendly.

My trip up into the hills overlooking the island of Kekova, to enjoy a generous breakfast with a local, was part of an excursion during a week's sailing cruise of the Aegean. I was aboard Nemesis, an elegant gulet yacht in the ScisSailing fleet, a firm that offers 'blue voyages' along this spectacular part of the Mediterranean coast.

Blue cruise

Taking to the water is a magical way to discover the unspoilt Aegean; a part of the Mediterranean that's so rich in myths and legends. For over a century, blue cruises aboard traditionally built wooden yachts have been a fashionable way to experience the Turkish Riviera. On these chic holidays afloat, you can sail the Aegean in comfort aboard a skippered and crewed yacht - so there's no need to know your jib from your mainsail, or your windward from your leeward. Just kickback, sip a cocktail and enjoy the sights of the Turquoise Coast.

ScisSailing cruises allow for flexible itineraries - even if you don't charter the entire yacht. You can join a scheduled departure, booking a private cabin with ensuite shower room, and let the richness of the coast shape your journey; cruising from hidden bays to lively resort towns.

A night in the upscale port of Kalkan enabled us the next day to join another day trip, an early morning 4x4 jeep safari that took us into the

picturesque countryside. It's a way to experience the coast as a traveller rather than merely as a tourist. Stopping off in a village to sip a refreshing black cherry, or sage tea in the shade of a mulberry tree is the kind of simple, authentic travel experience that is hard to forget.

Dazzling blues

Yachts afford access to places few can reach by land. Earlier we'd sailed past the sunken city of Simena, off the island of Kekova. This ancient Lycian civilisation was destroyed by an earthquake in 200 AD and is now closed to public exploration. Yet as guests aboard Nemesis we were able to slowly cruise past some of the remains, catching glimpses of some of the city's secrets visible both above and below the iridescent water.

This craggy coastline lives up to its moniker of the Turquoise Coast. The translucent water sparkles from the brightest greens, to dazzling blues. It's vibrant with life too - so if you're lucky you might catch sight of dolphins or loggerhead turtles.

Steep, rocky and pine-clad hillsides typically plunge directly into the water meaning there's little real estate development, giving the natural bays a secluded feel. Sometimes we would overnight in these calm anchorages of crystalline azure wa-

ter, swimming and snorkelling around the yacht before indulging in a chef prepared Mediterranean dinner served on the aft deck.

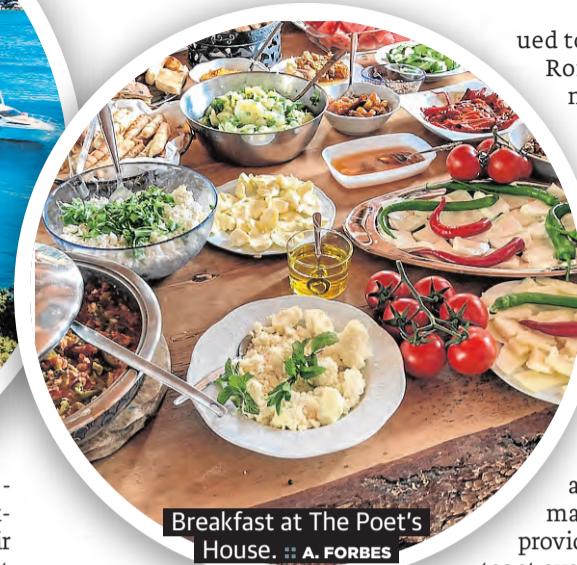
For an evening out onshore, it's fun to visit one of the many coastal port towns that have retained much of their original village charm. Kaş is undeniably developed, with myriad lively bars and restaurants. Yet this port still has many of its old Greek fishermen's cottages and ottoman houses with distinctive first floor oriel windows and timber balconies.

Vines and bougainvillea are everywhere, as are the ubiquitous lanterns fashioned from dried calabash gourds, which when lit add a magical charm to the narrow streets and roof terrace restaurants.

Kaş is also a good place to join the Lycian Way, a long-distance coastal hiking route that takes one from Antalya to Fethiye, on a journey through the history of these ancient Anatolians. One of the Lycian's most



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Breakfast at The Poet's House. :: A. FORBES

visually striking legacies are their stone tombs, typically carved out of solid rock cliffs, crafted to look like elaborate homes or Ionian temples.

Gods and heroes

This is also the land of legends of gods and heroes, celebrated with temples and theatres. It feels as if the coast is littered with ruins from the Greeks, Romans and Byzantines. Some ancient theatres and temples are so well preserved that they are regular venues for summer evening concerts and events.

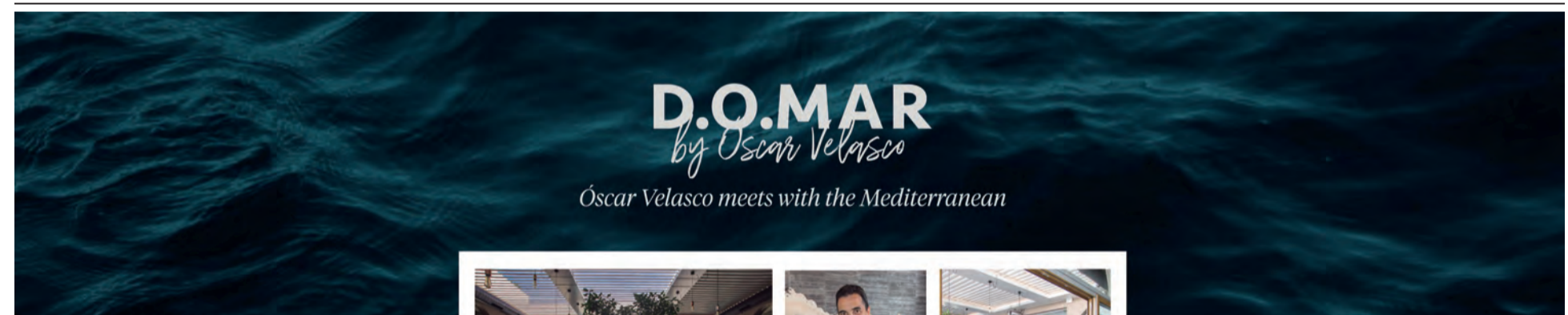
Ephesus must certainly be among the coast's most renowned historical sites; a Greek city that contin-

ued to flourish under the Romans before the nearby river finally silted up completely and trade passed the city by.

Just a few hours' drive north of the lively tourist city of Bodrum, the ruins of Ephesus have been slowly unearthed by British, Austrian and other international archaeologists. It's a remarkable day trip that provides extraordinary vistas at every turn. Expect to be awed by the intricately crafted Library of Celsus; the huge 25,000 seat capacity theatre, said to be the largest in the ancient world; and surprised by ancient graffiti, or the sculpture of the goddess Nike, complete with her 'swoosh'.

From the ultra-luxury resorts of the Bodrum peninsula - the white-washed fishing village ports, the ancient cedar forests, the Greco-Roman ruins - to the simple pleasures of a traditional meal in a local's home, it's understandable why Turkey's Riviera continues to be one of the most compelling Mediterranean destinations.

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