



TURKISH DELIGHT

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Turkey's Turquoise coast yields simple pleasures

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THE LAST THING you want to hear on a sailing cruise is: 'there's not enough wind'.

And the second last thing is: 'there's too much wind!'

So, when I meet a girlfriend in Bodrum, Turkey in mid-September for a week of adventure on a sailing gulet, our faces fall when we hear the latter. We look at each other, then at the captain who delivered the unwelcome news, then at the calm water in the busy harbour. Really ... there's too much wind?

Sure enough, soon after motor-ing past the Castle of St. Peter – the imposing stone structure that has marked the entrance to Bodrum harbour since the 15th century – the red and white Turkish flag snaps in the wind. But the salt water spray lifts our spirits and soon we're smiling again.

Turkey is famous for its Turquoise Coast, an almost 1,000 km stretch of magnificent land and waterscapes punctuated by sleepy fishing villages, ancient ruins and modern resorts along the country's Aegean and Mediterranean Seas.

For my first visit to the region, I wanted to explore some of that scenic coastline and the best way to do so is on a gulet – the traditional, two-masted, wooden ships that have been hand-crafted by generations of Turkish boatbuilders in Bodrum and beyond.

Originally designed for fishing and trading, gulets have evolved into elegant yachts that provide comfortable, even luxurious, interiors and amenities. We're travelling with SCIC Sailing – Sailing Cruises in Comfort – a Dutch/English company that offers a fleet of gulets and more than a dozen

routes in the Aegean Sea (in both Turkey and Greece) from April through October.

Accommodating between eight and 16 guests, each 'comfort' gulet offers cabins with ensuite baths, a stylish wheelhouse and bar, sunbeds on the midship deck and a roomy, shaded aft with padded seating and large table for al fresco dining. (Luxury gulets are also available but for exclusive charter.)

Our cabins are small but typical of sailing yachts, with built-in beds and cabinets, all made from gleaming teak or mahogany. Windows slide open and air conditioning is available, but in mid-September we don't need it. White cotton sheets and dark starry nights ensure we sleep soundly each night.

Each gulet has a small crew of certified sailors, so we also don't need to know knots or tell the difference between a jib and a jibe. One day, Captain Recep proudly shows us several trophies he's won in the Bodrum Cup, a sailing regatta for wooden yachts held annually since 1989.

The title bestowed on the winners – Fisherman of Halikarnassos – refers to the late Turkish author Cevat Sakir Kabaoglu, who lived in Bodrum (known as Halikarnassos in ancient times) in the mid-20th century and famously wrote under that nickname. Kabaoglu single-handedly, and likely unintentionally, made Bodrum a travel destination by writing about it and the other seaside villages that he explored by gulet in the decades he lived here.

Now, every year, thousands of people come to the Turquoise Coast and many of them book a trip just like ours with the romantic notion of sailing on a wooden ship, just like Kabaoglu and the ancients before him. The enduring popularity of gulets is understandable, as life on board is satisfyingly simple. With only a loose itinerary and no pre-arranged ports of call, we live by the wind and by our whims.

Besides my friend and me, only four others signed up for this late-season sailing – a Dutch couple and two Belgians – one of whom did this same cruise a few years ago with his mother and is now back with his partner. We quickly get to know each other and our crew, who do their best to grant our every wish. Coffee on the bow at sunrise? No problem. Beans every day for this primarily plant eater? Of course.

Speaking of food, the variety that comes out of the tiny galley kitchen below deck is remarkable. Tasty mezes, colourful salads and perfectly roasted fish, seafood and meat. It isn't haute cuisine, but it's fresh, healthy and delicious. When a sparkling birthday cake emerges one night for moi, I'm not really surprised – just delighted!

Despite the crew's attentiveness, I'm sorry to say I sometimes mix up their names - Ugur, Omer and Onur – which all sound similar to my ears. But I won't forget their agility and dexterity when it's time to sail on the third day. They leap into action, hauling lines and trimming sails. Soon, the captain kills the engine and an enormous silence washes over us, while Nemesis – our ship – skims lightly over the deep blue sea.

Some days we barely leave the boat, simply sailing from one secluded bay to another where we swim, snorkel, stand-up paddleboard and kayak. The water truly is turquoise and at a pleasant 24C, I can't wait to dive in before breakfast every morning.



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Other days we explore on land, where pine forests cover limestone ridges. On the morning we head to Sedir Island our captain ensures we arrive early to avoid the crowd likely to descend later. The island is famous for its distinctive white sand on a beach named for Cleopatra, once Queen of Egypt. According to legend, Mark Antony imported the sand from Alexandria to please his wife.

Today, it's permitted to swim at Cleopatra Beach, but the sand above the water's edge is roped off so you can't sit or lie on it and many signs warn you not to take any sand with you. The lifeguard is also a 'sand guard' and when a young woman hops over the rope to snap a selfie, the guard is quick to blow his whistle!

Hanging out at this beach is a humorous highlight, but we're enthralled with the rest of the island too, especially the well preserved Roman amphitheatre where a team of archaeologists is at work. When I ask archaeologist Selim Yildiz about the legend of the origin of the sand, he says it's just that – a legend.

"We did some chemical analysis, and we've learned that the sand here is actually 1,000 years earlier than the one in Alexandria...so the truth is, the sand is originally made here from the natural process."

Perhaps my favourite excursion is to the village of Oren for the weekly market. A market reveals so much about a place – its climate, of course, and the tastes of local people.



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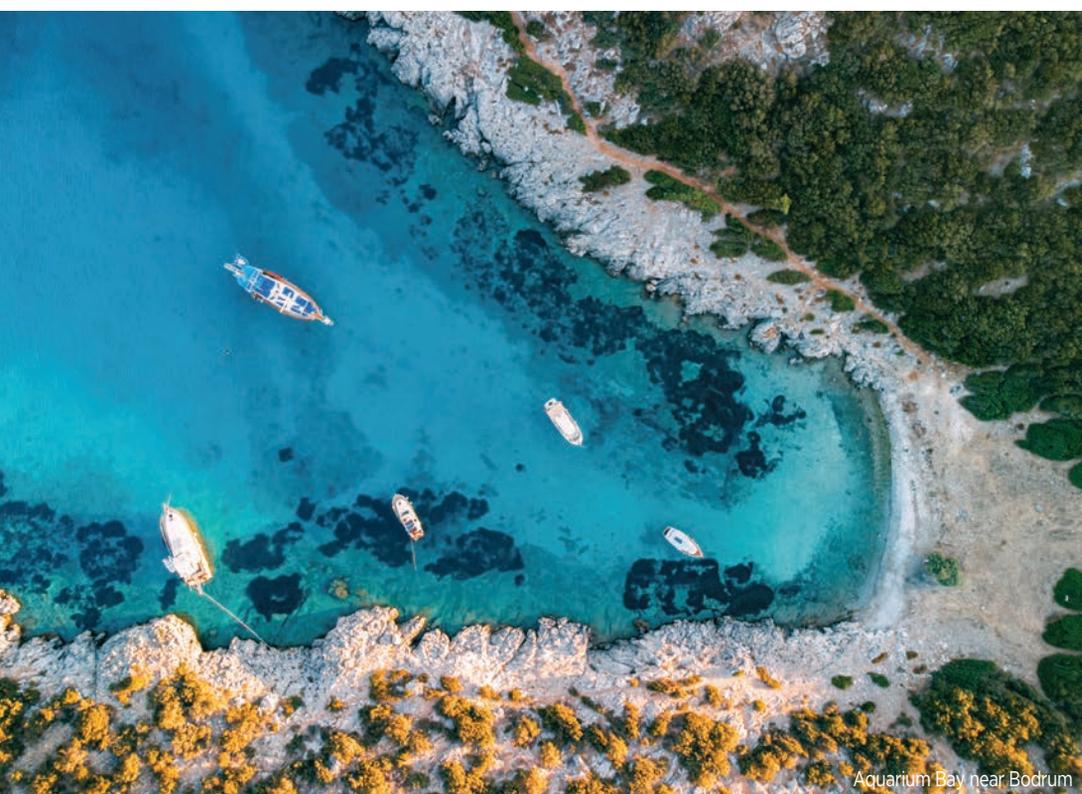
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Bodrum harbour



Aquarium Bay near Bodrum

But the act of selling also reveals something fundamental. It sounds cliché, but in Oren, we meet genuinely friendly locals. They smile, they offer samples of their crispy baklava and their multi-coloured olives without any pressure to buy. One family welcomes us into their yard to watch them prepare red peppers for canning. And instead of raising their hands and saying ‘no photos’, which is understandable when everyone carries a camera these days, more than one person asks us to take their picture, then poses with grace and humility.

Yes, I’ll remember many things about this cruise, but what I’ll miss most is the water. That striking blue-green colour isn’t unique to Turkey of course, but it’s especially fitting here since ‘turquoise’ means Turkish in French. Floating on my back on our last day, I marvel at how colour can transform a place, even putting it on the map. ■