

A Riviera Runs **THROUGH IT**

The Bodrum Peninsula is busily reinventing itself as Turkey's answer to the Côte d'Azur, though without losing its distinctly Eastern aura

By **CHRISTA D'SOUZA**





snapshot from Bodrum: it is around eight o'clock in the evening and I am sitting in the bougainvillea-ed bar of the Maçakizi Hotel in Göltürkbükü, or the St Tropez of

Turkey, as this fishing town on the northern side of the Bodrum Peninsula is sometimes called. While tiny swallows dart overhead and the sun sets over the violet-coloured Aegean, plates of feta pide and cubes of local goats cheese drizzled in honey are set out on the bar, the perfect accompaniment to a glass or four of chilled Gülpembe rosé. As the light fades and the sky becomes more cobalt, guests from the hotel above wander down: a beautiful young Azeri girl in leopard-print and fluoro flip-flops; the textile-industry scion of one of Turkey's four most prominent families; the Istanbul set decorator who made the big red-velvet throne for Jennifer Lopez's last world tour, with his new banker wife.

The Greek island of Kos may be only three miles away, but as the call to prayer mingles with what sounds like the Turkish answer to Lana Del Ray, the vibe feels invigoratingly Eastern.

The last time I came to this south-west corner of Turkey was back in the mid-1980s, when it was saturated mostly with German backpackers, had muzzled bears in the market squares and was just beginning to get discovered by us Brits. Judging by the embarras of tattooed flesh and shaved pates on my Monarch Air charter flight out of Luton, there will always be a place in "Bod-room" (emphasis on the second syllable) for the good old British package holidaymaker. (Take note: if it is pubs and Alicante-style fish'n' chips you are in the mood for, head for Gumbet.)

But if ever the Turkish Riviera (as the travel industry has hopefully been calling it for years) is having a moment, that moment is definitely now. In tandem with the rest of Turkey's explosive economic growth (thanks in no small part to its increasingly erratic prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan), Bodrum, with its easily navigable marinas and glittering azure coastline is literally booming. Everywhere you look there is another branded resort springing up. The Mandarin Oriental, Four Seasons, Canyon Ranch—you name it, they're here.

For all you Aman junkies, there is the splendid Ottoman-style Amanruya atop Mandalya Bay with a pool so long you could spend the whole morning swimming one lap. Then there is the grand "old" Kempinski on Barbaros Bay, the Carlton of

the Turkish Riviera if you like, with its seven restaurants, "silent" beach and spoiling Six Senses Spa.

The Maçakizi, though, founded in 1977 by Ayla Emiroglu, aka the Régine of Bodrum, and now run by her gregarious cigar-chomping son Sahir Erozan (Cities, the hot democratic hang-out in Georgetown, Washington—that was his), is something else. Nikki Beach may be coming to Bodrum (of course it is!), but for now, as Kate Moss, Chelsy Davy, Chelsea Clinton, Milla Jovovich, Roman Abramovich and Bar Refaeli would tell you, this is the place to hang.

The Bodrum Peninsula (shaped, at an imaginative pinch, like a baby dolphin) is located in Mugla province, a ragged mountainous edge of Anatolia rich with pine barrens, olive groves and mandarin orchards, which sits sort of where the Aegean and Mediterranean meet. The birthplace of Herodotus, Bodrum—or Helicarnassus as it was then called—was the ancient capital of Caria and the location of King Mausolus's tomb (yes, hence the word "mausoleum"), one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Residents joke about the eighth: the sparkling new rose-stoned marina at Yalikavak, in which Turkey's richest man, Ferit Sahenk of Dogus Holding (Zuma in Knightsbridge is one of its subsidiaries), has a hefty stake. Complete with Cipriani, Flavio Briatore's Billionaire Club and docking for up to 450 yachts, it was designed as the perfect playground for that rising demographic: the Turkish tycoon.

A stroll round the marina at sunset reveals some impressive examples of boat-building. One of the prettier, less ostentatious models, the 37.7-metre *Caressa K*, belongs to Mustafa Koç, president of Koç Holding, the largest conglomerate in Turkey. In the contained mall you will find Haremliq, the designer homewares label founded by his glamorous blonde wife Caroline. Come here for original pestemal bath sheets (the thin cotton type traditionally used in the hammam), graphic "Bodrum stripe" beach towels and wafty Hasbahçe tunics in divine Turkish-style toile. No Chanel or Vuitton here yet, but there's plenty to keep shoppers happy with the presence of Vakko, the Turkish answer to Harvey Nichols, the Mayfair jeweller Stephen Webster and an Eres boutique.

The point about Bodrum is the sea. Nowhere in the world—perhaps not even in the Caribbean and certainly not in the south of France—will you have swum in water this sparkling, this crystal, this turquoise. No wonder Homer referred to it in *The Iliad* as "the land of the eternal blue".

It begs the question what Cevat Sakir, the Oxford-educated writer and poet who was exiled here in 1925, and whose benign

BAY WATCH
The Castle of St Peter, Bodrum, built during the 15th century by the Knights Hospitaller.

features grace a big blue board just before you descend the hill into Bodrum town, would make of it all. Affectionately known as the Fisherman of Halicarnassus, Sakir, the son of a wealthy Ottoman family, who fell foul of Atatürk's new Turkish Republic with his outspoken political views, was the man who put Bodrum on the modern map, who gave it, as it were, its precious backstory. Never without his trademark black beret, he loved to show off the sleepy fishing and sponge-diving village to all his literary and artistic friends from Istanbul. With modest provisions—cheese, bread and maybe a bottle or two of raki—he would take them sailing round the seal-dense underwater caves and bear-scattered islands around the Gulf of Gökova. These week-long “blue voyages” that he instigated in the late 1950s and 60s were in a sense the beginning of the tourist trade, because it was by watching him that the locals realised they could make a lot more money chartering their wooden gulets to tourists than by using them to fish.

The “real” Bodrum, then, the one Sakir fell in love with (as opposed to the person who won't sit down in her wet Eres bathing suit, shall we say), the one you want to read all about in the definitive literary travelogue (that does not exist yet in Waterstones or Foyles)? Oh yes: if you want it, it's here.

Simply take a stroll down to the harbour in Bodrum town on whose promontory the magnificent Castle of St Peter sits. See the stands selling roasted mussels, mulberry juice and corn (they don't eat doner kebabs in the early hours here), the displays of Elhamra lemon cologne and the museum dedicated to Zeki Müren, Bodrum's beloved late drag queen and chanteuse. Try and get a table at Orfoz, the deceptively simple-looking fish restaurant nestled in the shadow of Halikarnas (the 5,000-capacity nightclub recently overhauled by Jade Jagger). A bit of an insider secret—concierges will probably direct you to the more grown-up Kocadon, further down the harbour—this place has no menus. The two brothers who run it bring out a dainty



BERET NICE
A farmer drinking tea in Çamlık, a historic village in the centre of the peninsula, 25 kilometres from Bodrum.

orgy of smoked eel, sardine sashimi, local crabs and snails in red-wine sauce as and when it is ready. As portions are more nouvelle than taverna-sized, you will have plenty of room for pudding and must not leave until you taste the homemade sour-cherry sorbet and “mother's” after-dinner walnut, cinnamon and raw-cookie-dough biscuits.

Pass the whitewashed summer konak down on the old harbour bought by the late founder of Atlantic Records Ahmet Ertegun and now inhabited during the season by his glamorous wife Mica. Oh, the parties he used to hold for the likes of Mick Jagger and Rudolf Nureyev within its Matisse- and Magritte-covered walls. That was in the late-70s, when there were just two private cars in town, you could only get here by camel or mule and, as Mica recently said, women used to wash their sheep right in front of the house.

Take a basket to Monday-morning market in Türkbükü for tomatoes as big and sweet as apples, Roald Dahl-sized aubergines and lor, a soft unsalted curd cheese used to make the Turkish version of scones. It's hard to miss the strong vein of Easternness that runs through the place: the way in the more traditional cafés the men sit on one side, the women on the other, the mothers

accompanying their mini-skirted daughters through a waterside pasaji wearing headscarves, how the word insha'allah peppers the language (created in its modern incarnation by Atatürk in 1932 and impenetrable to the beginner). If you travel east to the vast rural interiors of Turkey, you will find Erdogan, with his right-wing conservative views and his

TAKE A BASKET TO MONDAY-MORNING MARKET FOR TOMATOES AS BIG AND SWEET AS APPLES AND ROALD DAHL-SIZED AUBERGINES

Do a leisurely tour of the peninsula in the car (it will take you at least six hours), admire its almost Tuscan-like interior, note the white-domed gümbets (cisterns) everywhere, the men carrying bundles of olive branches on their backs, the weathered female labourers in their stylishly clashing floral prints (eat your heart out, Cath Kidston). Check out the Maritime Museum in town, with its 4,000-strong collection of seashells and lovingly curated exhibition dedicated to the life of Cevat Sakir.

disapproval of alcohol, is still very much considered a hero.

On our last day my travelling companion and I drive to Gümüşlük (so guttural, so other, this language—at times it sounds almost Danish), a small fishing town on the very tip of the peninsula. On the way we pass the giant Mandarin Oriental compound with its \$6 million residences, Henri Chenot Spa and beaches of virginal white, imported

sand. As we drive along the winding road bordered by pine trees, olive groves and orchards of wild-cherry and almond blossom, we see hills carpeted with clumps of identical white cubes, the summer homes built by companies such as Philip Morris and Colgate Palmolive for their employees back in the 80s and now being sold off for a tidy profit.

Limon, the best bar from which to watch the sunset, feels like it is in the middle of nowhere, perched, as it is, high on a hill overlooking the sea. Dotted around its uneven garden are “found” curlicued stools, rickety wooden chairs and faded, flowery sofas interspersed with colourfully painted pots of local herbs and cacti. After the sun has made its melodramatic descent into the sea and we have downed a couple of rounds of icy Efes

beer, we head back down towards the necklace of market stalls and fish tavernas on the seafront. At the end of the makeshift boardwalk, past the Best Barber Shop in the World (a bright-blue shack the size of a large lavatory cubicle, with just the one seat), is the restaurant Mimoza.

The prettiest and largest of them all, with punctured gourds glowing and swaying in the eaves and even hanging from a piece of driftwood stuck in the sea, this overlooks “Rabbit Island”, where an ancient amphitheatre from around 400 BC has been recently excavated. Underneath us in the lagoon are the shallow remains of the ancient city of Myndos, a magnet for divers and snorkellers during the day. More mezze, more shepherd’s salad (a healthier take on the Greek one), more grilled grouper (a local fish) and gloopy mastic ice-cream. More musings about the “pinched nerve” that is Erdogan, the events in Taksim Square that lowered hotel occupancy rates around 25 percent over the summer, and the dreaded clampdown on alcohol. Although the new edict only means that you cannot buy alcohol in supermarkets between 10pm and 6am (Atatürk, coincidentally, died of cirrhosis of the liver), Erdogan is not popular in these parts, no. But the Turks of today, as they will tell you themselves, are not the Ottomans of the past: they have the capacity to leave things as they are, as long as they broadly work. *Bana Dokunmayan yılan bin yasasın:* long live the snake that does not bite me, as the old Turkish proverb goes.

After dinner we stroll back and the owners of the various fish tavernas are still jockeying for custom. “I am John Dory!” shouts one. “I am Rick Stein!” shouts another. We promise them all we’ll be back. And we will. □



INFINITY AND BEYOND

Top: the pool at Amanruya. Right: a view across the bay at Türkbükü.

VANITY FAIR TRAVELS TO...

BODRUM

WAY TO GO

Original Travel (originaltravel.co.uk) offers six nights in Bodrum, with two nights at Maçakızı Hotel (macakizi.com), two nights at Amanruya (amanresorts.com/amanruya) and two nights at Kempinski Hotel Barbaros Bay (kempinski.com/bodrum), including return flights from London and transfers throughout, from £1,565 per person.

NEED TO KNOW

DO seek out the homemade sour-cherry sorbet and after-dinner biscuits at Orfoz (orfoz.net).

DON'T ask about buying alcohol in a supermarket after 10pm. It's a touchy subject.

DO get out of the resorts and explore the interior of the peninsula by car. Keep your eyes peeled for the typical white-domed gumbets (cisterns) after which the town of Gümbet was named.

DON'T attempt to wash a sheep in the street. They haven't done that here in years.

PS

“Natural beauty” has taken on an additional shade of meaning in this part of the world in recent years. Kate Moss is a regular at the LifeCo spa (thelifeco.com) in nearby Türkbükü—it's a bit like the Mayr Clinic, only with better weather—meanwhile, if it's a discreet nip and tuck you're after, the new state-of-the-art plastic surgery centre built by Acibadem Hospitals Group (acibademinternational.com) in Ortakent, may be just the ticket.