THE TIMES

Saturday September 6 2014

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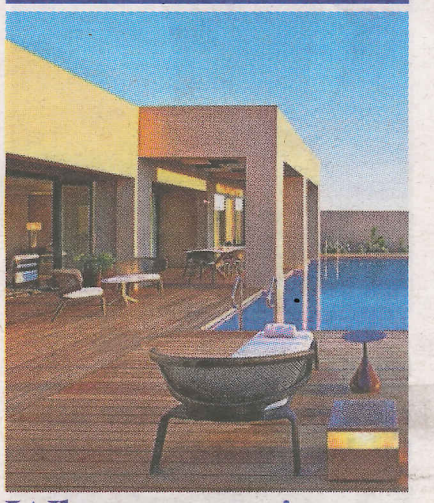
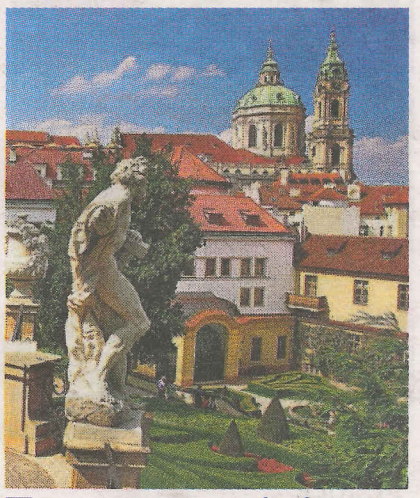
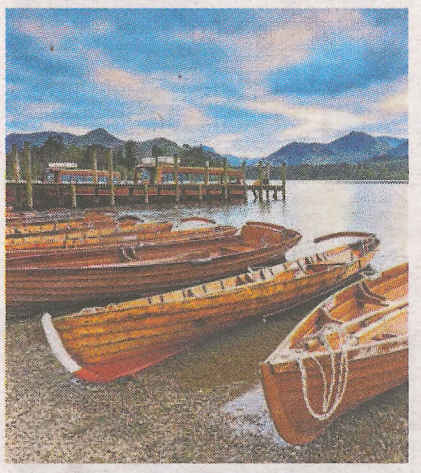
30 great autumn escapes



Where to go in Greece in October



European mini breaks to book now



The best of British country weekends

Aegean

Alacati — Turkey's answer to St Tropez

It has the same vibe as the Riviera resort, but for a fraction of the price, and it's still warm in October, says Tristan Rutherford

The painter Paul Signac discovered St Tropez when he sailed in for shelter during a storm. As the clouds cleared he found a flower-strewn fishing village saturated in sun. My wife and I breezed in to Alacati, Turkey's answer to the Riviera resort, via a 45-minute taxi ride from Izmir airport. We stepped out into a sea of strappy sandals, big shades and pavement cafés. All we needed was Mick'n'Keef to crack a bottle of Krug and we could have been in the south of France.

Having reported from the Riviera for more than a decade, I can safely say that Alacati purveys that same understated chic. It's hippy hedonism, not posy pretension. It's St Tropez, only a tenth of the price.

There's nothing much to "see" in Alacati. Like St Tropez, it's more a sunny state of mind. Cobbled lanes are choked with jasmine. Boutiques sell handprinted sundresses. Blue and white café terraces are casually splashed with throws, like in a *Vogue* fashion shoot. Sip a 30p glass of tea or a £3 glass of local chardonnay. Turks in towns this size treat every guest like a VIP.

Alacati was an impoverished Aegean town just 15 years ago, and big hotel developers deemed it too tumbledown to bother with. How fashions change. Teeny-tiny, terribly cute townhouse hotels now stud the streets. They range from four-room *pansiyons* to the new 35-room Imren Han, where we stay on day one. Each pairs Nuxe face creams and Molton Brown bath products with hammam towels and palm-shaded plunge pools. They're heavenly.

Better still, outside of July and August, you can bed down at many hip hotels for about £100 per night. September and October are sunnier than April and May, with temperatures often topping 25C.

The following morning, we trip across to the Hotel Luce, another new eight-room establishment. The elegant manager, Aysun Lü, explains that scores of sophisticated travellers visit specifically to sample gourmet local flavours. That she makes her point over a 20-platter breakfast — preserved lemons, spinach borek, Izmir "string" cheese, walnut cake — only adds to the charm.

Afterwards, Lü leads us on a walking tour of Alacati's Saturday market. Forget the €40/kg *fromage* on St Tropez's Places des Lices. Here, 200 stalls groan with the abundance of the Izmir peninsula, a fertile crescent as long as the French Riviera. There are pickled plums, radish greens, hand-made pastries, more than 50 varieties of wild herbs, giant artichokes, bee pollen and mandarin orange preserves.

Lü then ushers us to the Ilam fish auction. Restaurateurs and residents planning a blow-out dinner stand around a vast marble slab, then bid for bass, bream and mullet by the kilo. To sample the wares, we're directed to Dutlu Kahve (00 90 534 593 5314; mains from £3), an old man's tea-room turned wi-fi-ready diner that is a typical Alacati eatery. In true Aegean style, the friendly staff line up a dozen meze dishes from fava bean purée topped with red onions to smoky roasted aubergine. In true Giles Coren style, my wife and I order every single one of them. It's a deliciously affordable foodie fantasy.

St Tropez makes do without a beach, although it does have a shockingly licentious curve of white sand, Plage Pampelonne, near by. While Alacati is about a mile from the coast, it possesses something similar with Altinkum Beach (which translates as "Golden Sands"), although without the nudity and a shade less champagne. Boho locals turn up here on scooters, wearing Tod's and aviator shades. We too zip beachward on a hired 50cc through fields of olives and citrus.

There's a reassuring display of cosmetic surgery at Okan's Place. An Altinkum stalwart since the 1980s, Okan Kızıldag recently added linen-shaded cabanas to his array of beach mats and palm parasols. Platters of grilled turbot and chips go for a song, as do the log cabins around the back. The glittering Aegean is swimmable from April to November.

This part of Turkey couldn't compete with the Côte d'Azur if it wasn't fuelled by rosé. Fortunately, the region was first colonised by vine-loving Ionian Greeks 3,000 years ago. Romans then continued the vino love-in. (The Roman amphitheatre of Ildırı is slowly being uncovered 11 miles from Alacati — it's now a delicious tangle of ivy, wild herbs and billowing wheat.) Researchers claim the lush peninsula once produced 72m litres of wine a year, with Herodotus complaining there were so many vines that there wasn't even a tree to shade under. (Turkey now bottles a total of 69m litres per year.) But tragedy ravaged the vines in 1923. Enforced population exchanges swapped Muslims living in Greece and Christians living in mostly Aegean Turkish towns such as Alacati. Local wine production stammered to a halt. Until now.

This year, five local wineries offer vineyard visits and tastings. That's up from zero a few years ago. We hit Urla Domain, where the passionate owner, Can Ortabas, produces nine astounding wines. The wine critic Jancis Robinson rated the result highly last year, and his cuvées are knocking the socks off French vintages in blind tastings.

Urla is a shockingly modern vision of contemporary winemaking. Heat-loving grapes, such as local bogazkere and Sicilian nero d'avola, are harvested in August's early mornings, then squished just yards from their source to maintain the local vigour. The tasting part at Urla winery is — quite naturally, as it involves free alcohol — fabulous fun. The Sommelier Wine Awards winner Vourla sits in the mouth like a fat ripe strawberry. *Decanter* magazine-commended Tempus is all fire and earth.

The flavours are almost as refined as Turkey's smallest boutique hotel, 2Rooms, which sits above the winery. Think floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the vineyards, a 200 sq m private garden and a library of wine literature. We can't believe it's only £130 per night, including breakfast, tour and wine-tasting.

On our final day we have one last treat. We've been assured that no single establishment marries Alacati's culinary, wine and hippy-chic culture like Restaurant Alancha (00 90 232 716 8307, alancha.com). In a former windmill overlooking the town, head chef Kemal Demirasal has channelled every local herb and seasonal recipe into his glass cube kitchen.

Demirasal taught himself to cook by eating his way through San Pellegrino's list of Top 50 restaurants for inspiration, most recently in Sweden and the Basque country. His locally inspired eight-course tasting menu costs £43. It's something you won't find anywhere else on earth.

Michelin doesn't award stars in Turkey yet. But if it did, Demirasal's handmade beef jerky, pea-stuffed nasturtium flowers and pistachio cream on toast would be first in line for a gong. Dishes are variously served in a marble bowl, on a clay tablet and on olive wood platters. Other regional classics include sweetbreads with quince jam, seaweed in strawberry vinegar and smoked chickpeas with pickled almonds. The Alacati-sourced main course of earth-baked lamb came draped over a pine branch. I kid you not. Order that in St Tropez and you'd be dining out on the story for weeks.

Main picture: the cobbled streets of Alacati. Below left: Restaurant Alancha. Above: the 2Rooms hotel, Turkey's smallest boutique hotel

Need to know

Tristan Rutherford travelled as a guest of Explore Alacati (explorealacati.com), whose website offers online booking for all 28 boutique hotels in town. Visit the official portal (gototurkey.co.uk) for details of Turkey's new eVisa entry scheme.

All hotels in Alacati can organise airport pickups for about £30 per vehicle. They can also organise day trips to Ephesus, a 90-minute drive away.

How to get there

EasyJet (0843 1045000, easyjet.com) flies from Gatwick to Izmir from £31.74 one way.

Pegasus (0845 0848980, flypgs.com) flies from Stansted to Izmir from £49 one way.

Thomas Cook Airlines (0844 8798880, flythomascook.com) flies to Izmir from Gatwick, Stansted, Birmingham and Manchester from £51 return.

Where to stay

Imren Han
The central Imren Han boasts a big pool and leafy gardens. It costs from £70 per double room including breakfast (00 90 232 716 6002, alacatiimrenhanotel.com)

Luce Design Hotel
The Luce Design Hotel, above, is home of the Aegean mega-breakfast. B&B doubles cost from £83 (00 90 232 716 6441, lucealacati.com)

2Rooms
Above Turkey's most modern vineyard, 2Rooms charges from £130 per double room including breakfast (00 90 232 759 0111, 2roomshotel.com)

Alavya
Alavya is Alacati's newest, coolest boutique hotel and offers St Tropez levels of sophistication and service. B&B doubles cost from £152 (00 90 232 716 6632, alavya.com.tr)

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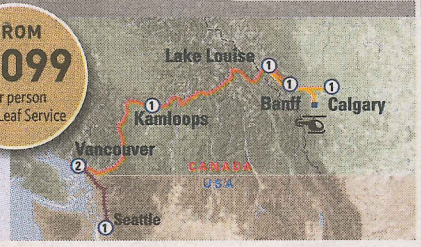

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