Aegean Arcadia

Learning to sail (for peanuts) along Turkey's stunning Turquoise Coast, **Kathryn Tomasetti** and friends enjoy a carefree summer of leisure...

My apprehensions were confirmed on day four. I watch our speedometer on our sailboat accelerate: clicking up from three knots to five, six-and-a-half, eight, nine. My husband wedges himself against the tiller, gripping it with both hands as he struggles to keep our little tub on course. The wind whips past my face; the rugged shoreline of the Turkish Turquoise Coast little more than a watercolour blur in my peripheral vision.

Along with our two fellow crew members we're frozen. We watch in panicked silence as we race at top speed towards an oncoming sailboat. Turn left out of the wind and we'll flounder across their path. There's no time to pull down the sails. Our only choice is to keep beating a straight line a shade to their right, our sails bursting with Aegean air, our tiller at splintering point.

We whoosh past the other vessel. Their crew smiles and waves as we ease out of the wind. The tension slips from our boat as fast as our sails deflate. It's clear to all that our 'beginners' sailing holiday is turning out to be a little more challenging than we originally anticipated.

Last summer, my husband Tristan and I decided it was time we learned to sail. We'd talked about it for years. I love the idea of a yacht as a glorified backpack: stowing bags and books below deck, going barefoot for a week, stocking the galley with bags of olives, local cheeses and bottles of wine. However, sailing's biggest appeal for me is its watery isolation. I crave holidays away from the crowds that swarm so many coastal resorts. Sunny days snorkelling and reading, followed by starry evenings in lonely coves, are a long-held dream. The thought of diving into a turquoise sea before breakfast is my meditative vision on a cold winter's morning.

But in terms of actual sailing experience? To say my ahoy-matey days were limited is an understatement. A breezy afternoon off the French Riviera. An hour pulling the wrong 'sheet' on a Hobie Cat catamaran. Do cocktails in a Mediterranean marina count?

To lower costs, we formed a crew of four with Liezel and Jesus. These two close friends were equally smitten with coastal sailing's carefree ideal, yet equally inexperienced. We scoured the internet together for potential sailing holidays. A catamaran in Sweden? Weather too unreliable. Intensive immersion off the Sardinian coast? Way too expensive. Then we stumbled upon Turkey's Aegean shores.

LEARNING THE ROPES

A 20-minute taxi ride south of Dalaman Airport, Göcek is a fishing village turned chilled yachting centre. Its main square is dense with restaurants, shops and cafés, and locals flock to its weekly produce market. Best of all, the surrounding bay is littered with quiet inlets and gorgeous coves. The wind is perfect for beginners too: a wooded peninsula wraps an enveloping arm around an Aegean bay, protecting novice sailors from buffeting open-water winds.

Liezel had spent the odd week aboard a sailboat; Jesus, Tristan and I were absolute beginners. The yachting industry's price structure is bizarre to say the least, so we were able find a bargain fairly quickly. Established local outfit Budget Sailing operates out of the same marina as international sailing companies like Sunsail. Both offer virtually identical boats, yet Sunsail's weekly rental fees are 50 per cent higher. Pick up a boat on the islands of Rhodes or Simi in Eurozone Greece and prices double again.

Budget Sailing's affable owners, Hasan Simsek and Wilma de Haan-Simsek, encouraged us to join one of their sailing flotillas. The couple lead weekly groups of ten or so yachts along the coastline around Göcek. The flotilla's leisurely schedule kicks off with a daily brief, during which boat captains chart the day's course to a bay, mooring together for the night. In between, each sailboat chooses their own lazy route there.

But we wavered: surely we didn't have the skills required to sail our own vessel? And the idea of joining other crews for a night-time rendezvous didn't fit with our dreams of isolated chatter and morning skinny dips.

WRITER PROFILE
Raised in Milan, freelance travel journalist Kathryn Tomasetti, 35, lives between Istanbul and the South of France. She is the author of National Geographic's new *Istanbul & Western Turkey* guidebook (published this month).

Previous spread: Cold Water Bay
Above: Prepping the boat
Below: The town of Göcek

No need to worry, assured Hasan. His youngest brother, Aziz, would sail with us for the first three days, providing hands-on, personal tuition for the four of us. After this training period, we should have enough experience to go it alone. We could call in at lunchtime restaurants, have a snorkel or a stop at the sprinkle of Roman ruins that have surround each sheltered anchorage, meeting up with the rest of the flotilla in the evening if we wished. Persuaded, we purchased a copy of DK's *Complete Sailing Manual* and reserved a two-cabin Comet 1050 – Italian-made Karya 8 – for a week on the gentle waves.

A roomy ten and a half metres, Karya 8 couldn't have been cuter. Below deck, two double cabins – one in the bow, one in the stern – flanked her spacious saloon area and galley kitchen, the latter complete with gas stove and refrigerator. She was also kitted out with local maps and miles of wood-panelled cubbyholes, perfect for packing in snorkels, sunglasses, cameras, novels (marine-themed, of course), plus a small but complete bathroom (no slumming it here, girls). Above, customised cushions sat snugly along the deck's two benches. An outdoor table could be slotted between them, ideal for dinners al fresco. Almost immediately upon arrival, we could hardly wait to pack her with provisions and sail off.

Instead we watched as other members of our flotilla trickled in, a cheery mix of British, Dutch and French sailors. Andrew arrives with his three 20-something daughters, close enough in age and with such similar looks as to be mistaken for triplets. On our other side, Ron, his wife, daughter and son-in-law haul their suitcases aboard: it's their second holiday in Göcek. Our sailing guru Aziz stops by to say hello, checking that we're all set to hit the waters tomorrow. His cheeky smile sets us all at ease, despite the fact that we're clearly the most inexperienced members of the harbour.

FROM COVE TO COVE

Chugging slowly to sea early on day two, it's baptism by fire, as we begin three intensive days learning basic sailing techniques under Aziz. There's a consistent afternoon wind in this part of the world, which means we spend a good four hours a day practising simple sailing manoeuvres: dropping anchor near a beach and swimming into shore, sailing between deserted islands and plotting our planned course to an isolated inlet on our map, which has one-line reviews of every secluded bay pencilled onto it.

Each evening's mooring is home to one family-run restaurant. Each night we feast on barbequed seabass and crispy chicken, slowly stewed okra and towers of fresh tomatoes. Most of these secluded spots make their own bread too. Each morning one of us rows or swims ashore to bag a loaf for breakfast.

Our week is peppered with challenges. One blustery day sees us bobbing up and down for close to eight hours, forgetting to eat in the chaos, zigzagging across Fethiye's exposed bay and ducking again and again to avoid the boom as we tack.

But there are moments of hilarity too: a blue cushion sticks to Jesus's bottom during a moment of frantic steering, then pops off and disappears swiftly into the wake behind us. We hear a distress call over the radio and race to assist, only to storm the wrong boat, scaring the unsuspecting couple witless. One lunchtime, a mother and son team pull up beside us, their lime-green wooden boat a magical *gözleme* (Turkish crêpe) station. Later we discover a bay that's home to one small restaurant and an open-air barbershop, where the boys stop in for a quick trim and shave. Dropping anchor offshore, the four of us row to dinner in our tiny tender, gasping for breath as we laugh our way through the moonlight in slow motion.

Each morning, the sea is silent and smooth, mirroring the odd golden puff of cloud on its surface. It's these moments I enjoy the most. I slip on a mask and snorkel and paddle off to my own pebbly beach. Or I don my boots, quietly rousing my crew to join me for a dawn hike, hunting down overgrown ruins silently guarded by a family of tortoises and the odd grass snake.

One day we clamber uphill for close to an hour before reaching Kayaköy. This eerie Greek village has been abandoned since 1923, its church frescoes and sainted window looking down on a long-lost congregation. We encounter only mountain goats, skipping in and out of the empty homes. Our little sailboat gives us access to these wonderful places, a secret passageway that's denied to holidaymakers stuck in traffic, or those competing for a stretch of precious resort sand.

Learning to sail in Turkey was an amazing – not to mention wallet-friendly – experience. Not only was it a wonderful way to see over 100km of unspoilt coastline, but it also gifted us a longed-for skill that will make future holidays cruising between tranquil coves an attainable possibility.

And next year? Well, we've already mapped out a course from Göcek to Knidos, a set of ancient ruins that blanket the tip of the Datça Peninsula, the Mediterranean's least developed spit of land. Aziz regaled us with tempting stories of sailing along the southern Turkish shores to Syria – not too tricky for a beginner if you hug the coastline. This time we'll be able to simply rent a boat online, fly in – and we're away. ◀

Opposite: A local barbershop
Below: A *gözleme* boat
Below middle: The St Nicolas Island ruins

> "I slip on a mask and snorkel and paddle off to my own pebbly beach"

Dining

Göcek, Fethiye and the surrounding seaside villages are home to a vast array of supermarkets, delis, bakeries and other local shops where you can stock up on food, drinks and ice. Most will deliver to your berth, or will allow you to roll your purchases over to your boat using one of their special shopping trolleys.

If you're sailing with a flotilla, communal dinners (around 40TL (€20) per person, without drinks) are organised at restaurants along your route.

In Göcek's harbour, cheap and cheerful Kebab Hospital (Göcek seafront promenade) dishes up traditional kebabs from southeast Turkey as well as crispy *pide* pizza from the wood-fired oven.

At Fethiye the local mayor has introduced an inspired dining system at the Balık Pazarı (Fethiye's fish market, around Cumhuriyet Mahallesi). Purchase fresh sea bream, shrimp, sardines or turbot from kiosks at the market's centre, then take your goodies to any of the surrounding restaurants where local chefs will grill, fry or sear your dinner for around 5TL (€2.50) a head, with abundant side dishes of dips, chips and salad thrown in for good measure.

Outside major towns there is usually only one restaurant per bay. Alternatively, equipment is available to cook your own meals on board your sailboat.

INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Turkish Airlines (www.turkishairlines.com), Pegasus (www.flypgs.com), easyJet (www.easyjet.com) and Jet2 (www.jet2.com) all offer direct flights from the UK to Dalaman International Airport (www.atmairport.aero). Competition is fierce and prices start from around £100 return.

SAILING

Kathryn and friends went through Budget Sailing Turkey (PK. 1, 48310 Göcek (Fethiye), Turkey; +90 252 645 1323; www.budgetsailingturkey.com). Rental of a two-cabin sailboat costs €975 per week (plus €100 cleaning fee) in June, with sailing tuition an additional €100 per day. Tuition, sailing flotilla and bareboat rental (where you simply rent a yacht and head off on your own) are available from April to December.

ACCOMMODATION

Sailboat rentals usually occur on a weekly basis only, and normally from Saturday to Saturday. If you arrive early, or if flight prices dictate an extra day's stay, book a snug villa at Dalya Life Boutique Hotel (www.gocekotel.com; doubles from €65), a charming little hotel just outside Göcek. Owner Gül dishes up organic homemade breakfasts alongside the property's tumbling stream.

In Fethiye, elegant Yacht Classic Hotel (www.yachtclassichotel.com; doubles from €110) has its own hammam (Turkish bathhouse), outdoor pool and terraced seaside restaurant.

VISAS

British passport holders can purchase a multiple entry visa valid for 90 days at the port of entry for £10, payable in cash.

HEALTH

Vaccinations against hepatitis A+B, rabies, tetanus and typhoid should be considered, depending on the length and nature of your stay. There is a low risk of malaria along the border plain with Syria, around Adana and to the east of Adana from March to November. The rest of Turkey, including most tourist areas, is very low risk.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

Spring, summer and autumn are the best seasons for beach bumming or sailing. Many places close in winter.