

Rustic-chic waterfront homes along Alaçati's sun-kissed coast

Alaçati

This picturesque seaside town in Turkey's Aegean region has quietly become a gastronomic force to reckon with, says Kathryn Tomasetti

SHORT
BREAK

POINTING WESTWARDS FROM IZMIR, Turkey's third-largest city, the Çesme Peninsula is trimmed with ancient ruins and white sand beaches. For years its shimmering shores drew day-tripping hedonists – until about a decade ago, when the peninsula's sun-kissed village of Alaçati succeeded in charming visitors into lingering a while.

Stroll the pedestrianised streets of this eco-chic village – with a population of less than 10,000 year-round residents – and it's easy to see why Alaçati has been rated one of the 10 most beautiful towns in Turkey. Before the country's 1923 Greco-Turkish population exchange, the town was home to an ethnically Greek community. Their traditional architecture remains: clusters of limestone buildings are criss-crossed by cobbled streets and splashed with bougainvillea-strewn squares. But these days, it's not just Alaçati's movie-set looks that attract A-listers from Istanbul and beyond. This coastal corner of paradise

has slowly become renowned among discerning foodies for its authentic Aegean cuisine.

The local approach to eating clearly taps into the slow food movement's ethos, which is steadily gaining popularity worldwide. The basic tenets being that all food should be tasty and healthy, as well as produced in an environmentally conscious and ethical way. Traditional ingredients are paired with freshly caught seafood and the wild foraged herbs for which this region is well known. Local dining runs the gamut from family-style to haute cuisine, with both amateur cooks and acclaimed Turkish chefs launching restaurants that have become destinations in their own right. Visitors only need check out Alaçati's annual festivals – **Alaçati Herb Festival** (alacatiodfestivali.com), celebrating its sixth year in April 2015, and the brand-new **Forgotten Delicacies Festival** (kaybolanlezzetler.com), inaugurated in June 2014 – to discover where local passions lie. ▶

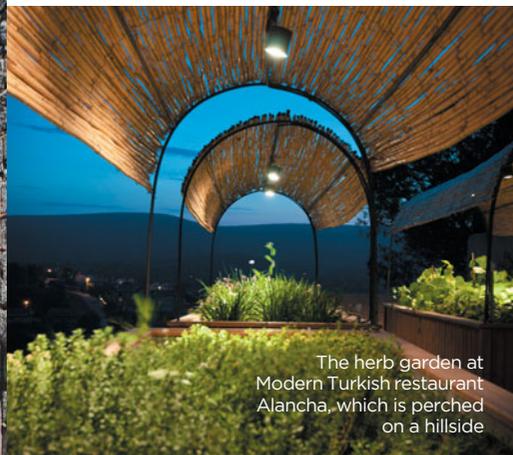
AGENDA

CALENDAR • HESTON BLUMENTHAL • CHINA FOR TEENS

PHOTOS: KATHRYN TOMASETTI, ALAMY

SHORT BREAK

One of Alaçati's famous white-sand beaches. **Right:** A pretty cobbled street in the old town



The herb garden at Modern Turkish restaurant Alancha, which is perched on a hillside

Conditions are ideal for watersports like kite surfing and windsurfing



You'd be forgiven for thinking Alaçati shines through its cuisine alone. But that's hardly the case. A vast sheltered bay makes it an idyllic windsurfing destination – it's Turkey's hipster version of St Tropez



A traditional breakfast spread of local cheeses, marinated olives and dried fruits at Imren Han

Ease into Alaçati's culinary scene with a stop at **Imren Han Kafe** (0090-232-716 8356, imrenhakatatievi.com). This family-run café has been turning out traditional Aegean meals, such as bountiful breakfast spreads (think sesame-studded bread, plump olives, local honey and buffalo's milk clotted cream) since its inception in 1941. Just over the road, sister shop **Imren Alaçati Tatlicisi** is a magnet for visitors with a serious sweet tooth. Sample *firin sütlüç* (baked rice pudding), sweet *tavuk gö sü* (a quirky dessert flecked with chicken breast) and mastic ice cream.

A few blocks away, **Asma Yapragi** (0090-232-716 0178, asmayapragi.com.tr) occupies an enchanted courtyard. It's upscale but happily down-to-earth. Tables are cloaked in white linens beneath fig trees and grape vines strung with fairy lights. Hearty Aegean *meze* platters are laid out in the restaurant kitchen; sharing portions are served up on owner Ayse Nur Mihçi's kaleidoscopic collection of enamelware. All of the restaurant's ingredients – from walnuts and courgette flowers to goat's cheese and ruby-red pomegranates – are sourced directly from local producers.

Contemporary Turkish eatery **Alancha** (0090-232-716 8307, alancha.com) is perched atop Alaçati's highest hill, offering diners unbeatable panoramas over the town's skyline. It's here that self-taught chef Kemal Demirasal

casts his net of inspiration wide – hardly a stretch for a man who's currently eating his way through San Pellegrino's list of the world's 50 Best Restaurants. Alancha's petite dishes – served via various multi-course set menus – are highly stylised. They draw both on traditional Turkish recipes and cooking techniques garnered from across the globe. Pan-fried sea bass is drizzled in tahini; pickled green almonds are paired with asparagus; lemon *verbena* and thyme create an aromatic base for sorbet. It's Alaçati's top table – for now.

Foodie visitors seeking day trips from Alaçati should drive through the peninsula's vineyards and orchards to Urla. **Yengeç Restaurant** (0090-232-752 1152, yengec-restaurant.com) is a standout among this fishing port's classic seafood eateries. As traditional as they are tasty, Yengeç's meals begin with *meze* like chilled nettle salad married with beetroot and quince, or steamy *güveç* casserole layered with octopus and prawns, followed by mains centred around the catch of the day. Save space for the sublime *sakizli muhallebi*, or mastic pudding, a regional delight.

After all the glorious indulging, you'd be forgiven for thinking Alaçati shines through its cuisine alone. But that's hardly the case. Instead, constant winds and a vast sheltered bay make it an idyllic kite- and windsurfing destination – it's Turkey's hipster version of

St Tropez. Head down to the town's marina for a 10-hour introduction to windsurfing with **Alaçati Surf Paradise Club** (0090-232-716 6611, alacati.info). For those seeking a more intense adrenaline rush, **Kite-Turkey** (0090-538-381 5686, www.kite-turkey.com), certified by the International Kiteboarding Organization, offers an eight-hour beginner's kite-surfing class spread out over three to four days.

Come summertime, visiting Istanbul's swarm in to snap up Alaçati's treasures along these picturesque streets. Try **Bazen** (bazen.com.tr) for silk kaftans and accessories, or **Serap Yurdaer** (0090-232-716 0246, alacaticeramics.com) for delicate ceramic mugs and tiny sculptures. New concept store **Bashaques** (bashaques.com) opened this year, offering high-end clothing, kilim rugs, playful swimwear and contemporary artworks. Over recent years, local vintage and antique shops have also been on the rise. Try **Eskiden** (0090-532-311 1576, eskidenalacati.com) for glass vases, lanterns repurposed from olive baskets and ancient Roman pottery.

No serious shopper should skip out on the region's weekend **markets**. On Saturdays, vendors ply their wares, from wildflower honey and homemade baklava to cotton *pestemal* towels and sparkly jewellery. On Sundays, it's worth heading further afield to Seferihisar. Southwest of Izmir, this petite ▶

SHORT BREAK

town's bustling market is unique in Turkey: all of the items for sale have been homegrown or handcrafted. Look out for crocheted scarves and felt purses hand-woven with the crest of your favourite football team.

Alaçati's town centre may be a few kilometres from the sea, but its nearby beach clubs are just as popular as its boutiques. Istanbul offshoots **Babylon Çesme** (0090-232-712 6339, babylon.com.tr) and **Otto Alaçati** (0090-533-339 0600, ottotr.org) spin from splashing on the sand by day to live DJs by night. Or make a beeline westward to the translucent waters at Altinkum, aka "Golden Sands". The waterside cabanas at **Okan's Place** (0090-532-394 0131, okansplace.com) render it a long-standing favourite; alternatively, seek out your own secluded stretch of sand.

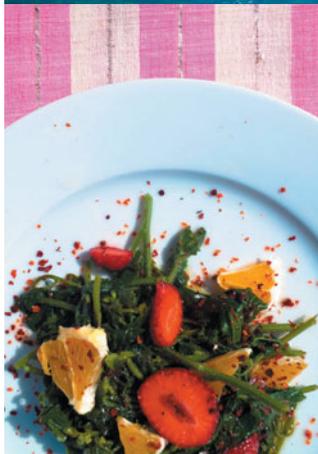
Big hotels are banned in Alaçati – which means visitors have their pick of enchanting places to stay, each with its own unique character. Opened in 2001, elegant **Tas Otel** (doubles from AED 530; 0090-232-716 7772, tasotel.com) was Alaçati's first hip hotel. Romantic rooms spill over the grounds of a 19th-century Greek mansion, and there's a swimming pool trimmed by olive trees plus two self-contained guesthouses on site. Affable owner Zeynep Özis and her staff punctuate lazy afternoons by serving up a rotating selection of Tas' famous homemade cakes. At nearby **Incirliiev** (doubles from AED 1,750; 0090-232-716 0353, incirliiev.com), eight snug guestrooms wrap their way around a central courtyard, which is shaded by the hotel's namesake fig tree. On warm days, an abundant breakfast is served al fresco here. Owner Osman Poshor's dozens of homemade jams are undoubtedly the star, ranging from walnut to kumquat and wild mulberry to lavender.

New on the local scene, **Alavya** (doubles from AED 920; 0090-232-716 6632, alavya.com.tr) is already earning international accolades. Hidden behind an unassuming façade on Alaçati's main street, 25 unique guestrooms, suites and loft spaces are dotted over six buildings. The swimming pool, spa and yoga *shala*, plus bistro Mitu, and Foryu, a summertime-only outdoor restaurant, make it easy for guests to while away days on the self-contained grounds.

Tucked into the rolling countryside east of Alaçati, **2Rooms Hotel** (doubles from AED 910; 0090-232-759 0111, 2roomshotel.com) is not only Turkey's tiniest boutique hotel, boasting – that's right – just two chic bedrooms, it also sits smack at the heart of Urla Sarapçılık, an award-winning vineyard. Guests can enjoy bespoke tastings of the biodynamic grape, or – going back to the town's gastronomic roots – sample grassy-green olive oil, pressed from the fruit of millennia-old olive trees. **CNT**



The pool and gardens at the romantic Tas Otel. **Below:** A typical Aegean salad of wild radish greens, strawberries and orange



GETTING THERE

Alaçati lies 75km west of Izmir. Most carriers in the GCC fly direct to Istanbul, with transfers onward to Izmir



Al fresco dining in one of Alaçati's central, pedestrianised squares

MY ALAÇATI

Kemal Demiral, a former pro surfer, is the founder, owner and head chef of contemporary Turkish restaurant **Alancha**



"Alaçati boasts excellent seasonal ingredients, fair suppliers and a loyal customer base. I am deeply connected to this land: it inspires me to create and get in touch with its roots. I believe Alaçati is the rising star of Turkey's gastronomic scene. The town doesn't have a long list of sights or museums to see. Instead, it is a place to savour life like you're a local. Enjoy the routines of the day. Taste regional delicacies like mastic, melon, *meze* appetizers, Turkish coffee and local grape. Like Alancha, most restaurants are run by chef-owners and they all have stories to tell. Each of these restaurants differentiates

its style of cooking, techniques and menu construction so well that each meal becomes a journey for our visitors. Sample the delicious breakfasts at **Rüzgaralti** (0090-232-716 0297, ruzgaralti.com), for flaky *katmer* pastry and homemade jams. For casual fine dining, head to award-winning **Barbun** (0090-232-716 8308, barbunalacati.com). **Ferdi Baba** (0090-232-716 9001, ferdibababalik.com) is renowned for fresh fish. **Köse Kahve** (0090-232-716 0413, kosekahve.com) is an all-day spot for coffee and delectable desserts. Nibble your way through a totally local *kumru* sandwich (copiously stuffed with sausage, tomato and cheese) at **Kumrucu Erol** (0090-232-716 9191, kumrucuerol.com). And an ice cream at **Veli Usta** (0090-232-716 0880, veliusta.com.tr) is unmissable."