

THE SECRET ISLANDS OF TURKEY

They were off-limits to foreigners for decades but now, as Tristan Rutherford explains, these gems are all yours

It's hard to imagine now but Cevat Şakir Kabaağaçlı, the poet-traveller who "discovered" Bodrum and its surrounding islands, was sent there as a punishment. That was back in 1925, when Istanbul was a 14-day ride by horse and cart from Turkey's whitewashed Aegean shore.

Little changed in the proceeding decades. The Turkish military declared most of the country's 5,500-mile coast, and especially its politically sensitive islands, off-limits, until the 1990s. Splendid isolation kept their fishing ports, Roman relics and gin-clear waters pristine.

And today? On these five lonely islands it's like the 20th century never happened. Explore them by boat to discover deserted bays, lost ruins and Robinson Crusoe sands.



KEKOVA

Historic treasures lie just below the surface

The island of Kekova, between Kaş and Antalya, is uninhabited today, but in Roman times it was a bustling port – which literally fell into the ocean during an earthquake in AD240, leaving intact tombs and ancient villas, all perfectly preserved under a metre of crystal sea.

Sadly, snorkelling is banned, but by kayak or paddleboard those submerged ruins are a dream-like experience.



BOZCAADA

Uncork a stunning vintage

So strategic is Bozcaada (the Greeks hid behind it before scaring the bejeezus out of Troy)

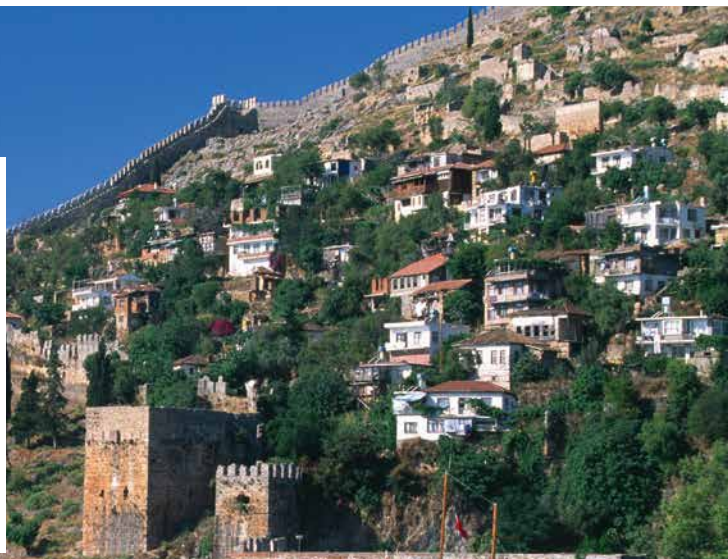
that foreigners were barred entry until 20 years ago, lest they start another invasion of Anatolia. The Mediterranean fashion for cars, bars and high-rise hotels has simply passed it by. The 15-square-mile island is as it was 2,000 years ago: ribboned with white sand beach, ablaze with flowers and guarded by Turkey's best-preserved castle. The best bit? Bozcaada has been producing sun-soaked red wines since Achilles wore a skirt and sandals. Visit the tiny tasting rooms of island producers Corvus and Talay to sample the goods.



TERSANE

A must-see treat for the Göcek set

Tersane is one of the necklace of jewel-like islands that ring the sailing hub of Göcek. The name means shipyard; the Ottoman fleet used the island base as recently as WWI, and the outlines of sunken boats shimmer below the surface. You can even snorkel over the remnants of ancient walls. Look out for the smugglers' neck of an entrance passage on the island's coast. Invisible until close by, it opens into the most perfect circular harbour in the Aegean. The infamous pirate Barbarossa, born just up the coast, would have loved it.

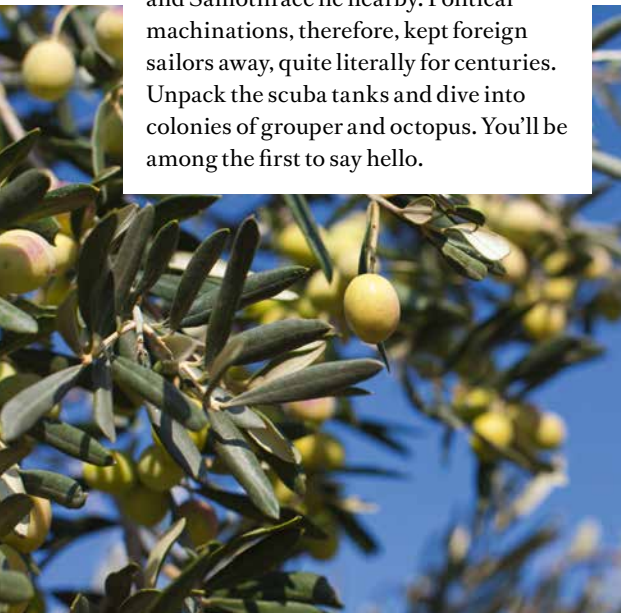


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GOKCEADA

Heavenly Island of perfumed forests

The most stressful time on Gökçeada is the annual olive oil harvest: Piccadilly Circus it most certainly isn't. Instead, Heavenly Island, as the name translates, is 100 square miles of olive groves, unkempt vines and perfumed pine forest. The island's location at the entrance to the Dardanelles is strategically perfect and the Greek islands of Lemnos and Samothrace lie nearby. Political machinations, therefore, kept foreign sailors away, quite literally for centuries. Unpack the scuba tanks and dive into colonies of grouper and octopus. You'll be among the first to say hello.



ST NICHOLAS ISLAND

A historical wonderland in the wilderness

It may feel a million miles from the chilly days of December, but St Nicholas himself was buried on this bucolic island. A dozen half-ruined Byzantine churches, each with haunting frescoes and faded mosaics, can still be wandered around at will.



The rest of the island is a fragrant and feral wilderness that only the Aegean can offer: carob trees, sticky figs and almond blossom. Jacques Cousteau-types can dive off uninhabited sister island Karacaören a mile offshore.

