



Into the blue

**Turkey's
Turquoise Coast
has a rich and
vibrant history,
writes Kathryn
Tomasetti**

Tucked into Turkey's westernmost tip, the Turquoise Coast – an evocative but accurate metaphor – stretches along the Aegean Sea. From Dalaman on the banks of the Dalyan River to Antalya's eastern shores, the coastline is scattered with enchanting villages, pristine beaches and aquamarine bays.

Two thousand years ago this slice of mountain-meets-water was the autonomous state of Lycia. Alexander the Great and the Roman empire both set their sights – and armies – upon the land. Today the area is full of ancient coastal paths, sunken harbours and ruins to rival any found in Athens or Rome.

Off the beaten track, and outside the pricey euro zone, the Turquoise Coast is set to be this summer's destination du jour.

Friends in Istanbul advised my husband and I to kick off our travels in Bodrum. This port city, the Turquoise Coast's northern gateway, is one of Turkey's hottest escapes. It has expanded steadily since the 1970s with new beachside restaurants and all-night discos.

Yet the town also has vine-covered alleys and French-style courtyard cafes. It also hosts the remains of the Mausoleum of Mausolus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Between the town's two half-moon bays sits the 15th-century Bodrum Castle, home to the Museum of Underwater Archaeology. An afternoon spent in its shady gardens and teashop makes clear how local history is interwoven with the surrounding sea. Thick walkways along the castle ramparts offer views over Bodrum.

Following in the wake of many visitors over the millennia, we sail into Bodrum's inviting waters. Our voyage is aboard one of the town's popular day-long gulet cruises, in the traditional wooden boats that bob along the coastline. An afternoon of splashing around and lying on plush sun loungers, with a lunch of barbecued sea bream, is an idyllic – and practical – way to see the area's secluded inlets and bubbling thermal springs.

The following morning we explore the coast using another open-air option. For a few dollars we



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hire a zippy 50cc scooter and set out circumnavigating the Bodrum Peninsula, home to more than 150 stretches of sand. It's quickly apparent that all visitors – history buffs, nature lovers, penny-pinchers or celebrity obsessed – are catered for here. In the sleepy seaside village of Gumusluk, we snorkel over submerged Roman mosaics, then sit in the sun sipping tulip-shaped glasses of strong Turkish tea.

Off the peninsula's pine-shaded roads, we join local road workers lunching on *gozleme*, savoury pastries stuffed with potatoes, spinach and feta-like cheese, at an open-air kiosk under the trees. And at Turkbuku, nicknamed Turkey's St-Tropez, it's impossible not to ogle the continuous parade of affluent residents strutting along the resort's waterfront; little surprise a 60-hectare Mandarin Oriental is due to open here next year.

Having had our fill of the crowds, we decide to make a beeline for the remote Datca Peninsula. This barely inhabited spit of land stretches out for 80 kilometres into sea just south of Bodrum. Daily ferries connect Bodrum and Datca

Sailing a gulet in the Gulf of Gokova.



Clockwise from left: taking a dip off a boat in Bodrum Harbour; view of Gocek Bay and its islands; the unspoiled Datca Peninsula; a rock-cut tomb near Fethiye; Lagoon Beach in Oludeniz, a resort near Fethiye. Photos: Corbis



during the summer months, allowing passengers to savour the salty sea air, as well as the views over some of Turkey's most unspoiled shores. Millennia-old archaeological sites paired with areas of outstanding beauty mean that construction all along the Turquoise Coast – and particularly on untouched Datca – is severely restricted. The area remains a land of wild walks, almond orchards, yoga retreats and citrus groves.

Datca town, the main settlement, makes a convivial base. Its natural beauty and laissez-faire spirit is akin to the French Riviera 30 years ago. Blessed with two arc-shaped, sandy beaches, its shores are littered with lively bars and seafood restaurants, ideal for a couple of days of relaxation. But it's the Greek ruins of Knidos that are next on our itinerary.

Up until a decade ago, the road to these 2,400-year-old ruins was little more than a dirt track. Although the road was paved recently, the ruins remain perched on the peninsula's westernmost point where the Mediterranean and Aegean meet. The 35-kilometre trip

from Datca town now takes little over an hour, yet tourists are still few and far between.

Our travels take us on to Fethiye, 40 kilometres south of Dalaman. It's also the start of the 500-kilometre Lycian Way, running along the Turquoise Coast from Fethiye almost all the way to Antalya. This ancient footpath was named one of the world's top 10 long-distance walks by Britain's *Sunday Times*. Although close to a month would be required to hike the path in its entirety, we spend an easy day trekking the northernmost nine kilometres of the route, fringed with carob, wild olive and fig trees.

Having worked up an appetite, we head back to Fethiye's vibrant fish market, a vast tree-shaded courtyard crowded with raucous diners. The Ottoman Turks are credited with popularising outside dining – a tradition that remains popular today. Visitors to the market are encouraged to circle the fish kiosks, select a handful of plump sardines or sea bass, then drop them off at the kitchen of the restaurant of their choice. After we indulge in home-cooked meze, a Turkish

variation on tapas that includes octopus salad, our own selection – giant prawns and a sea bream – reappear, grilled to perfection.

Chatting with Enver, our loquacious waiter (Turks are nothing if not friendly) we're quickly brought up to speed on the Turquoise Coast's recent past. Over three decades, the fishing villages dotted along this coastline have become more accessible by road. However, before 1980 the only way to explore these towns' picturesque alleys and markets was to skitter between them by boat. For many of the smaller communities, this still holds true.

This strikes a chord: other than a day-long boat trip and a speedy ferry ride to Datca, we've yet to explore the Turquoise Coast as locals did up until 30 years ago. It's about time we hit the waves.

The sheltered bay of Gocek sits 30 kilometres north of Fethiye. A formerly sleepy seaside town that's been transformed into a lively yacht enclave, Gocek has six marinas, several sailing outfits and scores of boats for hire. With little in the way of experience, we book a three-day

sailing course with Budget Sailing, owned by the knowledgeable Hasan Simsek and his wife Wilma de Haan-Simsek. Their sailing school turns out to be a family affair: Hasan's youngest brother, Aziz, is our tutor.

Infinitely patient despite our amateur errors, Aziz guides us back and forth across Gocek Bay with its 12 deserted islands. We tack, jibe and drop anchor. By three, to our immense delight, Aziz deems us competent enough to tackle the bay alone.

Switching off the motor and going solo under sail, I know I've never been anywhere as enchanting. One evening we spot a sea turtle paddling past our bow; the following morning a pod of dolphins slip silently by.

Every afternoon, a local fisherman chugs around the bay, offering up his morning catch of red mullet, anchovies and octopus.

The snug set-up of our boat complements dinners on deck under the stars. Most of the petite inlets that dot Gocek Bay are home to an isolated enclave, each with a single lip-smacking restaurant. lifestyle@scmp.com

GOING COASTAL

Getting there

There are frequent international and domestic flights to Dalaman Airport (atmairport.aero). A few international carriers serve Bodrum Airport (bodrumairport.com), although most flights connect through Istanbul.

Staying there

- The Aegean Gate Hotel, Akcabuk Mevki, Kumbahce Mh, Guvercin Sokak 2, Bodrum, aegeangatehotel.com. Doubles from €110 (HK\$1,150), minimum two-night stay.
- Hotel Villa Tokur, Iskele Mah, Koru Mevkii, Datca, hoteltokur.com. Doubles from HK\$790.

Eating there

- Berk Balik Restaurant, Cumhuriyet Caddesi 167, Bodrum, berkbalik.com
- Fethiye fish market and restaurants are between Belediye Caddesi and Hükümet Caddesi.

While you're there

- Bodrum Castle and the Bodrum Museum of Underwater Archaeology, bodrum-museum.com
- Knidos Archaeological Site muze.gov.tr/knidos-en
- Lycian Way Hiking Trail culturerroutesinturkey.com
- Budget Sailing (budgetsailingturkey.com). Various sailboats are available for rental from €500 to €5,500 per week. Private tuition €100 per day.

Getting around

- Day-long gulet cruises in Bodrum depart daily between 10.30am and 11.30am from the eastern end of Neyzen Tevfik Caddesi. Reservations are not necessary.
- Scooter rental: Bodrum Ege Rent a Car, bodrumegerentacar.com
- Bodrum-Datca ferries: The Bodrum Ferryboat Association fleet, bodrumferibot.com