



Over the last decade, Turkey's Bodrum peninsula has increasingly become the playground of the affluent from



TURKISH RIVIERA

RIPPLES OF TURQUOISE WAVE CATCH THE LIGHT AS A BREEZE DANCES ACROSS THE WATERS OFF THE VILLAGE OF TORBA. ELEGANTLY SCATTERED HARRIET O'BRIEN TESTS THE WARM WATER. PHOTOGRAPHS BY SQUIRE FOX



areas of Kuşadası, to the north, and Marmaris, to the south. Yet although some parts of the peninsula cater to a clubbing, package clientele (the beach town of Gümbet in particular attracts throngs of young Brits in the summer), the more sophisticated areas, such as little whitewashed Torba, have only recently come to the attention of the wider world. With its marinas, clubs and Rolex- and Versace-clad clientele, the feel of the peninsula is French Riviera with an exotic twist. The cuisine, the bazaars, the hammams are inherently oriental, while the culture is Islamic of a very easy-going variety: the intriguing mix of mosques and bikini-lifestyle is, at least for the moment, unabrasively achieved.

Development is carefully monitored, and much of the peninsula retains an intrinsic charm. Inland there are pine-clad hills while many narrow roads are dotted with rustic white-domed cisterns traditionally used for water storage. Coastal towns and villages remain low-rise, the stone-built houses embellished with the bright reds and pinks of flowering bougainvillea. That the peninsula's best beaches are underwhelming and crowded has a backhanded benefit: many of the most exclusive hotels don't try to maintain any sandy stretches and instead line their shores with wooden jetties. Complete with white umbrellas and pots of burgeoning greenery, these look supremely stylish. You laze on loungers or on large Ottoman-like cushions scattered across the decking and sink into the extraordinarily blue Aegean from old-fashioned ladder-like steps on the edge of the platforms. But, of course, not all the top accommodation is beside the sea: across the peninsula there is a dizzying choice of places to stay. Seeking out the real winners in the best locations is a scenic quest and a pleasantly taxing challenge.

BODRUM TOWN

One of Turkey's most highly rated seaside destinations, this historic little town – better known by its Greek name, Halicarnassus – has been zealously preserved. You will find white buildings punctuated only by greenery and by the blue tips of minarets. By day the calls of the muezzin resound while, in curious juxtaposition, at night the town reverberates with the thonk-thonk-thonk of house and techno music from clubs, bars and even a throbbing catamaran that tours the vicinity until the early hours.

Day or night, Bodrum is an attractive town, its cube-shaped houses radiating from twin harbours that are lined with Turkish gulets, the traditional, hand-built wooden yachts that are unique to the area. Set on a promontory above the moorings, presides the Castle of St Peter. Built by the Knights of St John in the 15th and 16th centuries, it is a landmark visible for miles around. Behind it stretch the myriad alleyways of a maze-like market, while to the west, on the main road

RIPPLES OF TURQUOISE catch the light as a breeze dances across the waters off the village of Torba. Elegantly scattered around the outlying bay, a group of chic cityslickers sun themselves on loungers beside large pots of clipped box hedge that decorate the shoreline. Occasionally a pair of Chanel shades looks up towards the horizon where a dreamlike yacht makes graceful progress, its white sails etched against the blues of the sea and sky. The glamour is almost palpable.

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out of town, is the Greco-Roman amphitheatre, today a venue for live music.

The town's most exciting hotel has been sympathetically created around another site of antiquity. Set on a hill commanding superb views over to the castle and the sea beyond, The Marmara Bodrum wryly itemises the ruins of a fourth-century BC watchtower – a stump of historic masonry standing just beyond its panoramic restaurant terrace – on its list of facilities.

One of a chain of nine (eight in Turkey and one in Manhattan), the 96-room hotel opened at the start of 1999, and some eight years on it still looks fresh and contemporary. Created by Turkish architect Ersen Gursel and French designer Christian Allart, it is a visual feast of a place. A central pool is neatly sculpted into the hillside; behind it is an artfully furnished bar and lounge with a creamy, outdoor chill-out area of shaded cushions to the side. Skylights in the restaurant produce an airy quality while the tiled walls are resolutely Turkish. (The Mediterranean cuisine served here has an excellent reputation, although the beef kebab I ordered was a little dry.) Meanwhile corridors are hung with wrought-iron objets, the passageways framing vistas of the gardens and town. The bedrooms, all with terrace

or balcony, are supremely comfortable, their marble bathrooms dramatically punctuated by large picture windows that offer views through the room to the grounds beyond.

Quirky flourishes include a stunning-looking graffiti gallery, a sort of 3D visitors book in which guests write their comments on the paintwork (the reception desk provides pens). You could spend a happy half hour or so reading the walls: 'Bodrum and Turkey are awesome – thank you for being so nice' was scribbled by the TWA Pilots Association; while the no-nonsense Jericho Squash and Beach Club World Tour 2006 commented: 'We came, we played squash, we drank'.

It took a little effort to find the squash courts where they competed. Along with two tennis courts and a half-size Olympic pool these are all but hidden below the hotel's small herb garden. Doing lengths with a superb outlook, I had the whole impressive complex to myself. Presumably the other guests had fallen prey to the congenially laid-back atmosphere, produced in no small part by staff who combine casual-cool looks with quietly professional efficiency.

There was just one faint cloud on the horizon: on my visit, development had yet to start on land immediately below the hotel that had been

WHERE TO STAY

- **The Marmara Bodrum**, Suluhasan Caddesi 18, Bodrum (00 90 252 313 8130; www.themarmarahotels.com). Doubles from €100
- **Queen Ada Hotel**, Hosgoru Sokak 7, Torba (00 90 252 367 1598; www.queenadahotel.com.tr). Doubles from €170
- **Casa dell'Arte**, Torba (00 90 252 367 1377). Suites from €375
- **Kempinski Hotel Barbaros Bay Bodrum**, Kizilagac Koyu, Gerenkuyu Mevkii Yaliciftlik (00 90 252 311 0303; www.kempinski-bodrum.com). Doubles from €120
- **Maçakizi Hotel**, Kesireburnu Mevkii, Türkbükü (00 90 252 377 6272; www.macakizi.com). Doubles from €95
- **Ada Hotel**, Belediyesi Bagarasi Mahallesi, Türkbükü (00 90 252 377 5915; www.adahotel.com). Doubles from US\$335 ➤

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► GETTING TO THE BODRUM PENINSULA

● From the UK there are no scheduled flights direct to Bodrum. The most convenient option for scheduled services is to fly via Istanbul, where breaking your journey may be an appealing option (see page XXX). **EasyJet** (0905 821 0905; www.easyjet.com) flies from Luton from £58 return in June; **British Airways** (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) from Heathrow from £XXX; and **Turkish Airlines** (020 7766 9300; www.thy.com) from Heathrow, Stansted and Manchester from £XXX. **Turkish Airlines** and **Atlas Jet** (00 90 216 444 3387; www.atlasjet.com) offer onward flights to Bodrum. ● During the summer, a number of charter companies operate direct flights to Bodrum from the UK. These include ►

recently been acquired by a villa company. But I was assured that the properties to be built there would not affect the hotel's outlook and that construction would be sensitively handled.

TORBA

About 10 minutes' drive north of Bodrum town, the old fishing village of Torba lies on a pretty bay surrounded by green hills and cooled by gentle breezes, which at the height of summer are particularly welcome. Perhaps because it is partly enclosed, the water here is dazzlingly blue, especially as you gaze north from the pebbly beaches on the edge of the village. It is a quietly chic place, hardly developed and attracting well-heeled families and life's more contemplative types, although inevitably during July and August there can be more clamorous elements.

Facing the sea on Torba's outer fringes, the Queen Ada Hotel is a tranquil treasure of a hotel and has been receiving a steady flow of repeat visitors since it opened in 1998. Indeed, it has so little need to promote itself that its nameplate at the gateway is concealed under foliage along with a bust of the aforesaid Queen Ada, who ruled the area in the fourth century BC. Like The Marmara Bodrum, the hotel was designed by Ersen Gursel,

but with just 22 bedrooms it is a far more intimate establishment and the architect has concentrated on creating an informal rather than arty feel.

Guests tend to sink into their surroundings, unashamedly idling away their days on the hotel's elegant arrangement of jetties or reading in the hammocks of the small and very verdant garden. The simple but stylish rooms have terraces or balconies and offer such personalised tweaks as a short pillow menu. Meanwhile the limited range of facilities include a small freeform pool, a cosy library and general lounge and an outdoor bar.

Meals are a treat: breakfast, especially, is an epicurean feast. I chose from a buffet with 12 varieties of bottled fig, heaps of fresh fruit, muesli, yogurts, pastries, at least a half dozen homemade breads, honey, olives, eggs cooked to order, and more. Dinners are served under the stars at finely laid tables in the garden or on the jetties. From bananas to beans, much of the food is home-grown on an estate owned by the hotel, from which its owners hope to start producing their own wine soon.

Earlier this year a very ritzy boutique hotel opened just along from the Queen Ada. Casa dell'Arte was being completed when I visited Torba, and it promised jet-set luxury. From the entrance you walk into a courtyard where a central swimming



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pool is flanked by galleries. Your eyes are led from its blue water to the intense colour of the sea, visible through the doorways of the main building ahead. This contains just 12 guest suites, each enormous, swathed in creams, and featuring large plasma TVs and modern artworks. Downstairs an open lobby is decked with wrought-iron chandeliers and antique fireplaces. Through the library, lounge and dining room beyond is a small garden with Jacuzzi and bar which gives on to a stretch of pebble beach and a jetty. The hotel is the owned by art collectors Fatoş and Yunus Büyükkuşoğlu, many of whose paintings are displayed here. They have devised Casa dell'Arte as a supremely exclusive (and supremely expensive) house-party retreat where guests dine together at a long table, choosing their wine from a specially built wine cellar. Should you blench at the company of your fellow guests, you can opt to cook your own meals in a gourmet kitchen and then perhaps retire to the private cinema or fitness area in the basement containing sauna, hammam and treatment rooms.

BARBAROS BAY

From this stretch of rocky coast the sea scenery is breathtaking, a deep-azure panorama with Turkish gulets occasionally gracing the view. About 20 minutes' drive south-east of Bodrum, Barbaros Bay is a remote spot. Apart from a Club Med Village fairly nearby, there was no development at all in the area until the Kempinski Barbaros Bay Hotel Bodrum opened in 2005.

Perched on a cliff, it is a wonderfully lavish resort that seems enormous, although there are actually only 173 bedrooms. The sense of space is partly created by the central lobby area, where a stupendous picture window frames the sparkling Aegean over three cut-away floors. Beneath them is the focal point of the hotel: an expansive terrace with a fantastical infinity pool. On one side is a complex of restaurants. Behind and to the other side are the sleek bedrooms, all facing the sea. Beyond is one of the resort's major attractions: its extensive Six Senses spa (also open to non-residents), which includes a majestic, traditional-style hammam. The wide choice of treatments runs from Thai massage and crystal healing to an 'Ultimate spa journey' lasting seven hours. From the spa area lifts and steps lead down to a man-made beach. A desalination plant chugs away nearby, and although it is slightly noisy it clearly adds to the hotel's green credentials.

Much effort has been put into imaginative detail. Thoughtful features include a large and very comfy chill-out area by the pool terrace. At 5pm on the afternoon I was here about half a dozen guests were gently snoozing in hammocks and on scatter cushions, evidently very much at home. The relaxed atmosphere is largely attributable to intuitive service from discreetly attentive staff: on arriving at the apparently empty pool terrace for

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► **Thomson** (0870 165 0079; www.thomsonbeach.co.uk); **Thomas Cook** (0870 750 5711; www.thomascook.com); **First Choice** (0870 850 3999; www.firstchoice.co.uk); **MyTravel** (0870 241 5333; www.mytravel.com); **XL.com** (0870 320 7777; www.xl.com); and **Holidays 4U** (0870 444 3843; www.h4u.co.uk). ● Independent, tailor-made packages from the UK are offered by **Savile Tours** (020 7923 3230; www.saviletours.com).

ISTANBUL

A two-centre, city-and-seaside break taking in Istanbul and Bodrum is an attractive possibility, and the introduction of easyJet services to Istanbul has had a knock-on effect on the pricing of other flights from the UK. But where should you stay in this vibrant and bewilderingly large city? Constantinople, Byzantium, Istanbul: its very names through the ages conjure a sense of romance and magnificence. But on a short stay you can't possibly see it all, so your choice of where to base yourself needs careful consideration. ● **Sultanahmet**, the so-called 'historic centre' (but then so much of the city is drenched in history) contains the most famous

sights. Here the **Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Sultanahmet** (00 90 212 638 8200; www.fourseasons.com/istanbul; doubles from US\$370) is fantastically located in a former prison. The conversion has been beautifully achieved, with 65 elegantly attired rooms set around a now gracious courtyard. Quite apart from its aesthetic merits, the hotel is wonderfully positioned right in the midst of Istanbul's most fabled monuments: stand on the guest terrace (open only to hotel residents) and you get a superb outlook on the Blue Mosque in one direction and Hagia Sophia in another, swivelling your head between the two in amazement. ● On the doorstep of the city's main shopping district of **Taksim**, **The Ritz-Carlton, Istanbul** (00 90 212 334 4444; www.ritzcarlton.com; doubles from €195) offers jaw-dropping views of the Bosphorus Straits. From the enormous picture windows of the lobby lounge and restaurant of this 244-room hotel you look out on a veritable ballet of ferries and cargo boats crossing between Europe and Asia. Its panoramic

water views aside, the hotel has a fabulous spa and an award-winning cocktail bar. ● On the less tourist-trodden Asian side of the Bosphorus, the charming **Sumahan on the Water** (00 90 216 422 8000; www.sumahan.com; doubles from US\$220) is a scenic, quiet retreat near the Ottoman Beylerbeyi Palace. Set right on the waterside and with just 20 rooms, this boutique property has been lovingly created by owner-architects Nedret and Mark Butler, who have transformed a once-derelect distillery that belonged to Nedret's family. A hotel boat offers trips into town several times a day, and in the evenings you can relax by in the shoreside gardens and watch fishermen ply the waters before you eat the fresh catch at the celebrated fish restaurant next door, owned by the same family.

FURTHER INFORMATION

● Local guidance in Bodrum, including Turkish gulet cruises, can be arranged by **Orpel Travel** (00 90 252 313 4077; www.orpeltravel.com) ● **The UK Turkish Tourist Office** is at 29-30 St James's Street, London SW1 (020 7839 7778; www.gototurkey.co.uk)