

Cruising the Turquoise Coast

Classical ruins and uncrowded beaches are just part of the allure of sailing Turkey's southern Mediterranean.

By Amanda Jones, Special to The LATimes

There are few joys to growing older, but one is affording the things that were infinitely beyond our grasp as youngsters. Here's a happy example:

The year is 1986. A 23-year-old girl and her boyfriend are in Fethiye, a seaside town on Turkey's southern Mediterranean, known variously as the Turquoise, or Blue, Coast. The couple are traveling on the proverbial shoestring. One afternoon they watch as a splendid wooden ship cuts through amber sunset waters and enters the harbor. It's a private charter and the guests laugh raucously as their white-shirted crew lowers the gangplank for their descent to the dock.

"Imagine," our young traveler sighs. The boyfriend notes her envy, leans over and quietly says, "That'll be us one day."

That girl was me and I married the boyfriend shortly thereafter, partly for his optimism. Sixteen years and two children later, we fulfilled his promise. Last summer we assembled a group of friends, chartered one of those splendid wooden boats, known as a gulet, and triumphantly returned to the coast of Turkey. It was a time of relative calm before a war with Iraq loomed, and, in any event, our destination was more than 900 miles across Syria and the Mediterranean Sea from the Iraqi border.

One does not go to southern Turkey solely for its lovely beaches, which happen to be less crowded than those of neighboring Greece, but for its ancient history. Stone Age man abandoned the cave and planted the world's first crops here. It is the setting of Homer's *Odyssey*. Alexander the Great conquered it, and legend has it that Cleopatra visited, St. Paul toured, Hadrian traded and St. Nicholas (of Santa Claus fame) was born in the region. The world's earliest historian, Herodotus (5th century BC), wrote that if the gods ever vacated heaven in favor of earth, they would settle on the Turquoise Coast.

To locate the perfect boat, we sifted yachting company Web sites for those whose e-mail responses were legible, whose boats were child-friendly and whose costs best fit our budget. Prices varied greatly, with some exorbitant and others so cheap that it frightened us.

Post 9/11, yacht charter bookings had dropped off in the Turkish Mediterranean. Having been to Turkey, we knew it was a modern Islamic nation and the people were educated and tolerant. We had no safety concerns; in fact we had less than when we traveled through Europe. And our timing meant we benefited from the weak euro, the sparse tourism and the fact that charter companies were willing to negotiate on price.

We settled on a company called Tropical Sails out of El Paso, Texas. The price, when divided by the number of individuals the boat could accommodate, was astonishingly affordable. A week's charter, not including food and drink, was \$850 per person for 12 people. Food was an additional \$175 per person. There was



an eight-cabin, 78-foot boat available in late August. It had a crew of three--a captain, a cook and a deckhand--and it appeared to have the best value for what was considered a luxury cruise

I contacted friends we could tolerate in close quarters for eight days: an unmarried couple from Seattle and friends from London with their 4-year-old daughter and 10-month-old son. They joined my husband and me and our two daughters, Indigo, 4, and Sofia, 3. We had invited one other couple who were forced to cancel at the last moment, which brought the number down to 10 people,



but the charter company gave us the same price of \$850 a person. In the end it worked well, as six adults and four highly active children was plenty. We also added a local nanny booked through Tropical Sails.

We flew into Istanbul, then took a flight to Dalaman, an inland airport between Marmaris and Fethiye, where vans were sent to meet us. We'd arranged to rendezvous with the boat in Gocek, a half-hour drive from Dalaman.

Gocek is a charismatic little harbor. Until recently it was a dormant fishing village, but with a rapid increase in sailing tourism in the last few years it had burgeoned into a town complete with Internet cafes, ice cream parlors, open-air seafood restaurants, discos and, of course, rug shops.

When we finally boarded our gulet, the Orfeus, we felt pure joy. It had a rich, varnished wood saloon, Turkish rugs on the floor, a cavernous galley and deck, and a white-shirted crew with hands outstretched in welcome.

Orfeus had been built in 1996 of Aleppo pine and had teak decks and mahogany interior paneling. The cabins were small but serviceable, each with a bathroom. The boat also featured a 12-foot al fresco dining table and expanses of cushioned decking with movable sunshades. Gulets (pronounced goo-let) first appeared in the southern Mediterranean in the 8th century. While modern sailboats are now largely made of fiberglass, gulets continue to be built of wood in a traditional style. The Turks employed them as warships, cargo carriers and sponge diving boats. About 30 years ago, someone had the clever idea to convert them into cruise ships, and thousands have been built for tourism.

On the first morning aboard, after a breakfast of fruit, spongy bread, olives, feta cheese, tomatoes and fried eggs, we motored to Sarsala, an hour from Gocek. Gulets need strong winds to sail, so the bulk of the time is spent motoring. Because we were traveling with children, we decided to confine our weeklong cruise to the Bay of Fethiye, a sheltered area with many remote bays, a string of lush islands and Classical ruins. The compact geography meant we never motored more than four hours a day.

Aficionados of Classical art will often stray farther to see the remote ruins of the Lycian coast, such as the magnificent Xanthus and Pinara. Spots like Ephesus, on the Aegean coast near Kusadasi, are indeed glorious ancient cities, but they teem with tourists. The beauty of the Mediterranean coast is there are few roads, keeping crowds down.

Approaching Sarsala, we saw a bay encircled by cliffs, with steely mountains in the hazy distance. The pebble beach had a grove of gnarled olive trees nestled around it. The sea was lake-calm and sapphire blue, with not another soul in sight.



Late summer is a marvelous time to visit the Turquoise Coast. Although still considered peak season, the crowds have thinned, the sea is warm and the weather reliable, with temperatures in the low 80s. In Sarsala we plunged in for a swim, the children shrieking with joy, and I marveled at how life rewards us. That night, to escape the airless heat of the cabins, we slept on mattresses above deck.

We were awakened the next morning by the drone of a small boat approaching, a woman crouching over a propane hotplate. She was selling gozleme, a local specialty of hot crepes filled with liquid chocolate, bananas or spices. Gozleme proved highly addictive. We ate them daily on top of our three meals prepared by the chef, and for numerous Turkish coffee breaks. We set forth the following morning to motor four hours to the island of Gemiler, with its fantastic monastic ruins. Here we were to join Orfeus' sister ship, Sultan A, and meet David Price Williams, British archeologist, London University professor, Lycian coast specialist and co-owner of Temple World Ltd. cruises.

Price Williams was on the 91-foot uber-luxe Sultan A to act as historian-guide to scholarly buffs visiting the more obscure ruins along the coast. He had graciously agreed to escort our neophyte group on a tour of Gemiler so we might glimpse life from the Byzantine era. He reminded me of a character from a Kingsley Amis novel: a silver mane, trimmed beard, lanky limbs, impeccably pressed khaki ensemble, haute-society accent, impaling gaze, and that incredible British ability to drop Shakespearean quotes into the most pedestrian of conversations.

Colored by Price Williams' narrative, Gemiler sprang to life. Like those reenactments on PBS, it was possible to imagine the bearded, long-haired monks striding among the three early Christian churches built on this rocky, waterless island between the 4th and 7th centuries. Dedicated to St. Nicholas, patron saint of children, merchants and sailors, the island became so popular with pilgrims that the sect was forced to build grander edifices, with arches, domes, processional corridors and elaborate mosaics, all abandoned with the rise of Islam.

We said farewell to Price Williams and motored back from Gemiler in our dinghy. Approaching Orfeus, we could see the children gyrating wildly on deck. Funda Yeogen, the Turkish nanny, had the girls dressed in the miniature belly-dancing costumes we had bought in the bazaar in Gocek. She was attempting to teach them the Oriental art, spangles flying. The adults were inveigled to join. It seems the bodies of aging Western adults are frozen in the middle, preventing the unhinging of the hips necessary to imitate Funda in her sensual, exhilarating dance.

During our trip 16 years before, we had spent memorable days in a place called Oludeniz. We asked to go again and found the beach was the same long, creamy arc we remembered, but it was now thick with rows of beach umbrellas and hotels.

We turned around and headed to Fethiye, which also had grown and now spilled out along the coastline.

Thankfully, the old town hadn't changed. We made the vertiginous hike to the grandly columned 4th and 5th century BC cliff tombs of Telmessos, then descended and entered the bazaar to eat at Megri, a recommended restaurant.



Here we made the error of allowing the solicitous proprietor to order for us. After a many-course feast of mezes (traditional appetizers such as hummus, a grated-cucumber and yogurt dip called cacik, roasted peppers, eggplant, dolma-stuffed grape leaves), followed by roast lamb, giant prawns, whole grilled fish and white wine, he delivered a bill for \$210. Not bad for six people by American standards, but a frightful gouge by southern Turkish standards.

I'm happy to report, however, that Turkish wine has improved greatly. It can no longer double as paint stripper. After dinner, we asked a local for a bar recommendation and ended up in a harem-themed joint with the rather un-exotic name of the Ottoman Old Cafe and Bar. In fact, it was highly exotic, with paintings of corpulent sultans lounging on silken pillows with Rubenesque concubines splayed below. We sat on ottomans and ordered raki, the anise-tasting national drink, then looked up in fright as they delivered a giant hookah pipe. Taking turns, we inhaled cautiously, watching for signs of odd behavior. Later we discovered that what is smoked in these meerschaum pipes, at least in bars, is a type of jellied fruit paste. It was delicious, with no acrid smoke.

The next morning we visited the local baths. Built by Sultan Selim I in the 16th century, the Tarihi Fethiye Hamami resides in the same elegant Ottoman building. We undressed, then wrapped ourselves in lengths of cloth before being led into a luminous domed room lit by star-shaped skylights. We lay, both sexes together, on a fire-heated marble slab. The treatment began with the entrance of a man--giant-bellied, hirsute and naked from the waist up--who exfoliated us with a rough mitt. Another half-naked man entered, filled a muslin bag with soap and flogged our bodies into a crescendo of lather. We then suffered a cold shower before a rose-oil massage.

Feeling marvelous, we reentered the bazaar shining like newborn piglets. That evening we motored toward the headland of A Limani, stopping in yet another empty bay. As if to prove how spoiled we had become, when another gulet anchored nearby and the occupants went swimming, my 3-year-old pointed indignantly, "Look, they're getting into our pool." We were alone again by sunset, anchored beneath mountains with thickly forested skirts.

Late the next day, we went ashore at A Limani and hiked up to the Lydae and Arymaxe ruins. An English-

speaking crew member, Suleyman Gursay, accompanied us to explain the history.

Deciding to go farther, we hiked through verdant pine forests and descended into a wide valley, passing Roman cisterns, stone terracing and tombs en route. At the base of the valley we encountered a family of nomadic Yoruk people--honey gatherers, olive growers and goatherds. They spend the summers here in a small stone shack with a brush roof and a kitchen under an olive tree. An elderly matron, bent and wrinkled, was dressed in roughly sewn floral shirt, pants and gypsy headscarf. She graciously invited us, with Suleyman translating, to stop for apple tea. It was such a lovely setting that when she asked us back for breakfast, we happily accepted. We then walked back through the scented forest, listening to the hollow sound of goat bells and the rueful braying of donkeys.



That night we took the dinghy ashore to nearby Cleopatra Bay Restaurant, which serves calamari and flame-grilled meats. The next morning, leaving the children watching a video (the boat had television, a VCR and CD player), we went off for breakfast with the nomads. There was not another human in sight as we topped the valley, a streak of fiery sunlight illuminating the stone hut below. The elderly woman and her son served fried potatoes, soft pide bread, home-grown tomatoes, olives from the tree under which we sat, and wild honey that they gathered. We bought honey and olives and gave the son \$10 in Turkish lira for the hospitality.

Sadly, the children were too young to hike with us. When we returned, we found them on the beach playing with Funda and Ibo Apak, the captain. All of our pre-departure concerns about their safety on the boat and their being confined had evaporated. The boat was large and safe. Our girls thrilled to the experience. With the dress-up clothes to be had in the markets, the belly-dancing, the attention from the crew and the endless swimming, it was a child's paradise. Having the nanny along allowed the adults to hike freely, explore ruins and eat late at restaurants. We paid Funda \$100 a day for four children.

On our final day, we lunched onboard in Hamam Bay, where the arches and stone blocks of a Roman bath could be seen beneath the surface. Finally the winds grew strong enough that the crew could hoist the mighty sails to take us to Gocek.

That night we finished the trip at a tiny disco, accompanied by the riotous captain of the Sultan A. Although the music was mainly Turkish, there was also the ubiquitous music of Madonna, and the captain brought us back to the modern world by teaching us how to shimmy--Turkish style. The trip was effortless, spectacular, fun and economical. We shall return, having now adapted quite nicely to the world of the private charter.

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Amanda Jones last wrote for the magazine about sailing the islands of Tonga.

Coasting Turkey by Gulet

Telephone numbers and prices: The country code for Turkey is 90. All prices are approximate and computed at an exchange rate of 1,618,500 Turkish lira to one U.S. dollar. Meal prices are for two people without wine.

Getting there: From LAX, Lufthansa, Virgin Atlantic, KLM, United, Air New Zealand and British Airways connect with Turkish Airlines, which offers service to Dalaman Airport. Tropical Sails supplied van service from Dalaman Airport to the boat.

Boat charters: Tropical Sails Corp, 17977 W. Deneen Way, Surprise, Arizona, 85374; (800) 595-1003, cell (623) 760-7177, www.tropicalsails.com. About \$10,500 per week for 10 to 12 people. Full board an additional \$25 per adult per day, children under 12, \$13 per day.

Where to eat: Megri Restaurant, Paspatur Eski Cami Gecidi Likya Sok. 8-9, Fethiye, (252) 612-4046, www.megrirestaurant.com. Specialties include cold seafood salads, seafood casseroles and grilled catch of the day. \$5 to \$10.

What to see: Old Turkish baths at Tarihi Fethiye Hamami, Hamam Sokak No 2, Paspatur Bazaar, Fethiye; (252) 614 9318. About \$12 for full-body scrub, soap and oil massages and access to all facilities.

For more information: Contact the Turkish Tourist offices at 821 United Nations Plaza, New York, N.Y., 10017; (877) 367-8875, (212) 687-2194, www.tourismturkey.org Turkish Visa \$100 USD payable in cash upon arrival in Istanbul.