

Under Bodrum's Spell

Celebrity magnet aside, the Bodrum peninsula has a fascinating history. Explore the ruins but set aside time for authentic cuisine.

By JAMES BAINBRIDGE

THE MOST EXCLUSIVE section of Turkey's southwestern coastline, with its beaches and bays fringing the Aegean and Mediterranean, is undoubtedly the Bodrum peninsula. Unwinding from the mainland towards the Greek islands of Kos and Kalymnos, the peninsula's chichi resorts and retreats are increasingly popular celebrity haunts.

Model Kate Moss was returning from Bodrum in June, having celebrated actress Sadie Frost's 50th at the LifeCo spa, when she caused a fuss on an EasyJet flight, feeding trashy fodder to the British tabloids. Jade Jagger, Mick's designer daughter, lent her talents to the Secret Garden restaurant at the luxurious Halikarnas nightclub, while hotel chains such as Mandarin Oriental are creating high-end havens.

Celeb-spotting aside, Bodrum town has a refined appeal which is a cut above Turkey's many coastal party spots. A warren of whitewashed lanes winds down to two sandy bays, with waterfront bars, fish restaurants on the beach and yachts bobbing in the marina. Dividing the bays, and keeping

watch over the Bodrum good life since the early 15th century, is the imposing Castle of St Peter. The Knights Hospitaller, the Roman Catholic military order, crossed from the island of Rhodes and set up shop here while the Ottomans were distracted by Tamerlane's Mongol invasion. Their tenure lasted a century; the all-conquering sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, took the castle in 1522 and built a celebratory mosque inside. Today, one can easily spend a morning among the venerable structure's battlements, courtyards, dungeons and towers, which house the Museum of Underwater Archaeology, displaying treasures amassed during the castle's renovation. The knights' marble coat of arms above the main gate and their Latin graffiti in the English Tower are historical clues worthy of *The Da Vinci Code*.

Turkey's history is more epic than a night aboard Bodrum's catamaran nightclub, and there are further relics among the whitewashed houses with their blue shutters and window boxes. The Carian king Mausolus' famous mausoleum

was, like the Temple of Artemis at the nearby classical city of Ephesus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Column drums and tomb chambers are all that remain, but a scale model evokes the white-marble structure topped with stepped pyramids, which was completed by Mausolus' wife (and sister) after his death in 353 BC.

A more important figure for contemporary Bodrum is writer Cevat Şakir Kabaağaçlı, nicknamed the 'Fisherman of Halicarnassus' (a reference to the town's name when it was the Carian capital). Kabaağaçlı was exiled to Bodrum in 1925, when it was just a simple fishing village – and a remote dumping ground for dissidents in the newly formed Republic of Turkey. Finding that a spell on the Aegean was hardly punishment, the flamboyant scribe stayed put, and Bodrum became fashionable among Turkish intellectuals, writers and artists. These cultural credentials and the carefully preserved whitewashed Aegean aesthetic – introduced by Cretans, who arrived during the population exchange of the 1920s between

Even in the heady months of July and August, when Euro-house blares 24/7 on Bar Street, there is always a tranquil corner to sip çay tea in the Aegean sunshine.

Turkey and Greece – give Bodrum its refined air. Even in the heady months of July and August, when Euro-house blares 24/7 on Bar Street, there is always a tranquil corner to sip çay tea in the Aegean sunshine.

The delights of eating fresh seafood and meze, the Turkish version of tapas, and schmoozing with the Istanbul glitterati are offered throughout the peninsula. The cerulean bays and fishing villages beneath the hilly hinterland play host to a mix of package resorts and exclusive hotels. As throughout Turkey, development is blighting parts of the coast, but it is still possible to see traditional life and enjoy unspoilt sea views.

The beach town of choice among Turkey's beautiful people is Türkbükü, where Moss et al shivered in the -180°C nitrogen vapour of LifeCo's cryotherapy 'sauna'. Diamond-encrusted sunglasses and high heels are seen on the sands in summer, and the beach's western and eastern halves are jokingly known as the European and Asian sides – a reference to continent-straddling Istanbul. Minimalist décor, infinity pools, and dance floors stretching invitingly over the water are standard offerings at preen palaces such as Maçakızı. Overlooking the action from the cliff-tops, the €600-a-night Kuum Hotel is a hit among the Turkish elite, with its cubic suites on grassy terraces and private beach.

One of the peninsula's pleasantest spots, offering an appealing mix of upmarket fish restaurants and grizzly old-timers sipping çay in the tea garden, is Gümüşlük. The village has been saved from development thanks to the ruins here of Carian harbour town Myndos, which had walls formidable enough to repel Alexander the Great. An 'archaeopark' is set to open, after excavations discovered traces of Myndos, including early Christian churches and Roman temples, on Rabbit Island, which can be reached through the shallows at low tide.

In the hills above Gümüşlük is one of the peninsula's best restaurants for authentic Turkish cuisine, Limon Aile Lokantası, where you can savour olive oil-soaked mezes such as stuffed zucchini flowers. With views of a ruined Roman bath and Byzantine chapel, it is the perfect place to finish a day of history, sunbathing and Turkish culture in this slice of Aegean paradise. □

BEING THERE

A delightful hotel in Bodrum town is the Su ('Water') Otel [bodrumsuhotel.com], independently owned by the charismatic Zafer, whose artworks decorate the white-painted rooms overlooking a pool glinting with silver tiles. My favourite hotel outside Bodrum town is Casa dell'Arte [casadellartebodrum.com] in the village of Torba. Owned by an art-loving Turkish family, its exquisitely decorated interiors are like a contemporary art gallery; there is even a library of cultural tomes and tours of the collection on offer. Turkey has become a great holiday destination for South Africans, with Middle Eastern airlines operating regular flights to Istanbul and Turkish Airlines [turkishairlines.com] offering stopovers en route to Europe. One-month tourist visas are free for South Africans and easy to apply for – at visa.gov.tr/en.

PHOTOGRAPHY: INFINITY POOL, COURTESY OF KEMPINSKI HOTEL, BARBAROS BAY, BODRUM