

# Condé Nast Traveller



Forget St-Tropez. This is the next Riviera-fueled by petrodollars, post-Communist tycoons, and more than a little of the local rosé. Along the booming coasts of Turkey, Croatia, and Montenegro, Julia Chaplin finds glamour, barefoot chic, and stunning natural beauty.

Go now: The yachting set is sailing in A tanned woman with a party-thin body prances past for the third time in less than an hour in yet another bathing suit. Instead of the Pucci one-piece, this time it's a pink bikini with retro ruffles that recalls 1960s Capri. The noise of blenders whirling up fresh watermelon spiked with vodka competes with the voice of a bald man in dark glasses on his cell phone ("The princess of Kuwait? She's coming here? The Ferragamos, too?"). And ironically, or perhaps not, another note joins the ambient soundscape-the call to prayer begins to waft from loudspeakers affixed to the village mosques nearby.

I'm on a slab of wood pier at the edge of the saturated-blue Aegean Sea-a perch akin to Monopoly's Boardwalk in terms of prime sun-bathing real estate-on the Bodrum peninsula in Turkey, hailed for five years and running as the next St-Tropez.

My white terry-cloth lounge cushion and the pier belong to the Maçakızı, a small hotel in the chic resort town of Türkbükü. A system of sails that expand and retract electrically cleverly shades the outdoor bar, where a genetically impressive crowd speaking internationally accented English have gathered, gossiping about the latest mega real-estate deals on the Turkish coast. No one but me seems to notice the paparazzi with telescopic lenses on a little Zodiac just beyond the buoys of the swimming area, who are at this moment being shoed away by hotel security.

"You have Russians, Germans, and Turkish companies with venture capital from the Middle East buying up land here," says Alican Ayanlar, a handsome Boston University graduate from Istanbul who recently moved to Kiev to launch a TV station. He is sipping local rosé with an entourage that flew in to celebrate his wedding. "The energy of the world is here now. Can't you feel it?"

Looking out to sea at the mega-yachts with tinted windows and foreign flags, anchored like so many floating billionaire fortresses, I can indeed. In the last few years, the yachting set (including Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, and Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich), which coronates vacation spots like fashion editors endorse hot young designers, have begun to show up in peak weeks of summer. Investors from petrol nations such as Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan and the emerging markets of Dubai and Turkey have been jetting around the eastern Mediterranean coast, from Turkey all the way up to Croatia, checkbooks open, hoping to stake out a patch of this commutable frontier. (How the current economic crisis will affect development remains to be seen.) They have been fashioning lavish resorts with Italian marble, padded vodka bars, and cliff-spilling infinity pools, their own Riviera closer to home. Meanwhile, other prospectors have laid claim to a different aesthetic: corners of natural beauty-increasingly rare within reasonable reach of a major airport-that can provide barefoot chic to the luxury fatigued.

I've come to witness the coming-of-age of this vast coastline, free so far of diesel slicks and Costa del Sol-type concrete high-rises, in July in its peak season. It's a fascinating moment-the area feels as if it's in a sort of leisure puberty, testing its beauty and power, trying on new clothes and fancy imports, all with the music cranked up. There are a few garish spots with too many condos and disco infernos, but mostly I discover places that are stunning in their natural beauty, with the only late-night sound the lapping of a sailboat bow against the current. From Turkey, the country where I find the most varieties of this nouveau leisure, I fly to coast-blessed Croatia-a country that is attempting to upgrade the bargain-seeking backpackers who descended after the end of the Yugoslav wars-and then drive down to two-year-old Montenegro, a little nation of tax havens and lush mountains worthy of Switzerland, construction cranes filling the sky, all overlooking a translucent blue sea. Pressed for time, I skip over Greece, a democracy since the

1970s and a member of the EU, with a leisure life already as developed as Europe's; and Albania, still too poor and lacking in infrastructure to attract much luxury investment. The Bodrum peninsula is chunky, about 250 square miles, and cinched to the mainland by the town of Bodrum, founded by the Dorian Greeks in the seventh century b.c. The south is clogged with concrete hotels, cheap Chinese restaurants, and Irish pubs, mainly leftovers from the first tourist boom in the 1970s and '80s, but the rest of the landmass that nudges west into the Adriatic toward the Greek isles is largely as it always was, covered with fir trees, citrus groves, and rocks, with little fishing villages nestled into protected coves. When my taxi from the airport finally pulls off a narrow lane into the Maçakizi hotel's overgrown driveway, the sight of disorganized bougainvillea bushes and an uneven stone footpath reassure me I'm on the right track. Or at least my track. Glamour exists in Bodrum. It's just not visible from the road.

But it is visible by sea. I am traveling with my friend Ipek Irgit, a Turkish woman who, like me, lives in New York City, and we discovered that the Maçakizi's pier possesses miraculous social powers. Strangers easily become friends: One afternoon, we meet a Turkish man who takes us for a tour in his little outboard. From the water, the bungalows of the Maçakizi stand matte against the shrub-covered hillside on the outer edge of the crescent-shaped bay. The hotel tells the story of the peninsula itself. First opened in downtown Bodrum in the 1970s by Ayla Emiro?lu as a pensione for her bohemian friends, it hopped three more times to different bays to avoid the growing crowds until, nine years ago, it settled in its current perch in Türkbükü. Already, you can see trendy new neighbors muscling in. We speed past a weird Flintstone-esque hotel, Kuum, which had just opened a few days before, its rounded and slightly lopsided concrete buildings punctuated by primitive logs that stick out over the balconies for some sort of conceptual shade. A white daybed-covered dock leads to Bianca, a beach and nightclub, which has thumping body-packed sunset parties, with many of its tipsy revelers zooming back and forth from the hotel via water shuttle. Up in the distant hills we can see the EV Hotel, designed by hyper-contemporary Turkish architect Eren Talu: eight giant white cubes that look like a minimalist art installation by Donald Judd if he'd had a handful of Adderall and a bigger budget. It seems the perfect moment to be in Türkbükü—just enough texture to be interesting but not enough to overwhelm.

We are also invited to Alican's wedding up in the hills, which we happily attend until five a.m. Sometime amid the twelve hours of excessive alcohol, dancing, and feasting on Turkish delicacies, I meet an earthy but fashionable Istanbuli. "You have not been to Gümüslük?" she says, tossing her unruly hair. "Well, that is the real Bodrum." She describes an unspoiled village that is "like Bodrum thirty years ago." After getting her

social dose at the Maçakizi, that's where she goes to rent a villa by the sea for her real vacation.

Ayla Emiro?lu's son, Sahir Erozen, is now running the Maçakizi. He is a classic Dean Martin character, chronically telling jokes while holding court under the sail tarp on the sun pier, attended by a pile of blinking cell phones, girls in bikinis, and buckets of rosé. Ipek and I easily convince him to take us to dinner in Gümüslük. We pick up our fourth—a friend of Sahir's, a Swedish Turk who is spearheading a project with the architect Richard Meier—and then drive past cows and goats lounging in the shade of olive trees and palms, old stone farmhouses among big rocks and stray lilacs. Legend has it that Antony and Cleopatra came ashore in Gümüslük on their sail to Rome, and even though it's dark when we get there, I can still see why. A few pocket-sized bars have their doors open, spilling light that seems to have been refracted through ambers and reds. We wander alongside the small protected harbor, down a narrow sand path, past tangerine trees and several seafood restaurants, till we reach the restaurant MIMOZA. Classical Turkish opera from the 1930s is playing, and the owner, an eccentric Kurd, seats us at a table so close to the sea that if I lean too far to the side I might fall in. The only light comes from beacons on the top of sailboats' masts, the phosphorescence, and the gourd lanterns hanging from the trees.

The conversation turns, as most do in Bodrum these days, to the changing face of the peninsula. "Modern Turkey is only eighty-five years old," says Sahir, referring to when Atatürk abolished the sultanate and remade the faltering country into a secular society. "Being a young nation, Turkey hasn't appreciated the value of its past. It hasn't paid attention to future damages. But now that is changing. Bodrum is no longer an unfound secret with people on donkeys. It has arrived and it is expensive, thank God. You can't build Lego-like houses that sell for thirty or forty thousand dollars anymore." Sahir and his friend run through the laundry list of sexy projects: Singapore-based Banyan Tree is opening a resort in Bodrum; Amanresorts is said to have bought land off a patch of sea between Golkoy and Torba. One of the most ambitious plans is by a Kazakh investment consortium for the seaside between the airport and the fourth-century capital of Milas: Called Kaplankaya, it's a \$1.5 billion mixed-use development with a Mandarin Oriental and Ritz-Carlton and high-profile architects including Norman Foster. (When I later see the glossy prospectus, I notice the map shows flying time to Bodrum: four hours from Moscow and five from London.) As we wrap up the evening with glasses of sweet almond liqueur, Sahir muses on this increasing luxury. "It's a hard balance. You don't want to lose the bohemian vibe, but you have to upgrade and add fancy furniture because that's what guests want."