

TRAVEL + LEISURE

BODRUM HEATS UP



Braving never-ending switchbacks and sizzling summer sun on the Bodrum Peninsula, **PETER JON LINDBERG** encounters an abundance of Turkish delights: crumbling castles, rugged beaches, sublime meze, and a seaside hideaway where the living is easy. PHOTOGRAPHED BY **CEDRIC ANGELES**
MAP & GUIDE ▶ PAGE 105

Touring Turkey's Bodrum Peninsula

T+L encounters an abundance of Turkish delights: crumbling castles, rugged beaches, sublime meze, and a seaside highway where the living is easy.

From [April 2010](#) By [Peter Jon Lindberg](#)

I mean, if you're going to lounge around on throw pillows at a beach club, sipping chilled raki or rosé while being serenaded by seabirds and Cesária Évora, there's arguably no finer place to do it. And if, like any normal person, your holiday agenda is to sit still—lifting your head now and then to admire a passing sailboat, or the genetic spectacle of some raven-haired Central European heiress—you could hardly do better than the Bodrum Peninsula, a swath of rock, sand, cypress, and cedar that reaches from Turkey's southwest coast into the stained-glass blue of the Aegean. ("Bodrum" refers to the largest town and to the peninsula as a whole.) Though the region has a wealth of historical and architectural heritage, the majority of its visitors—2.9 million of them a year, mostly Turks, Brits, and other Europeans—come to relax on the beach, to relax somewhere

near the beach, or to relax at cliff-top resorts with stunning views of the beach.

They do not, in other words, come to spend their waking hours sweltering in a rented 4 x 4, driving every last dusty road in search of something more interesting than a beach. I, however, have a problem sitting still. Cursed with restless legs, I can never simply enjoy where I am, even if where I am is a splendid Aegean summer resort. (This drives my wife, Nilou, a little crazy, but she indulges me.) Europeans might be jaded by ancient ruins, Crusades-era castles, and centuries-old fishing villages, but we didn't fly all this way to lie on a beach. Let others laze around sipping rosé: I wanted to see the real Bodrum. From the moment Nilou and I checked into our hotel—Maçakızı, in the north-coast town of Türkbükü, 30 minutes from Bodrum—I was ready to turn around and hit the road. On a peninsula with its share of opulent villas and over-the-top resorts, Maçakızı (pronounced mahcha-kiz-uh) is a standout, the sexiest hotel in all of Bodrum. That it's hardly a traditional hotel is one reason: it feels more like the shoreside estate of some globe-trotting Turkish family blessed with considerable wealth but also the good sense to keep things simple. The property unfolds along a hillside studded with olive trees, tangerine groves, and bursts of bougainvillea. Eighty-one guest rooms are minimally but tastefully furnished and swathed in creamy white, punctuated by the bold abstract canvases of Turkish painter Suat Akdemir. Balconies offer knockout views of Türkbükü Harbor.

In July and August that harbor fills up with yachts and impossibly tall sailing ships, their masts piercing the sky like minarets. All day and night, launches glide to and fro across the water, delivering their owners to shore. Many of them alight at Maçakızı, whose beach club is a landmark in Türkbükü: a series of wooden decks over the water, strewn with white cushions and pillows, shaded by sailcloth canopies and twig-roofed pavilions. The water is clear and generally calm, sheltered within a semiprivate cove. Most guests spend their daylight hours—and much of the evening—at the beach. Every so often the muezzin's call to prayer drifts across the water from the town mosque, a trebly counterpoint to the languid jazz playing at the bar.

Maçakızı is, in fact, owned by a globe-trotting Turkish family. Ayla Emiroglu, who moved here from Istanbul in 1977, runs the hotel with her son, Sahir Erozan, a former restaurateur who spent two decades in the power-dining rooms of Washington, D.C. At Maçakızı, the guest list alone is intriguing: Caroline Kennedy, Chelsea Clinton, Antonin Scalia, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg have all vacationed here, along with the requisite Turkish music and film stars. During the summer,

paparazzi float in Zodiacs just offshore, training telephoto lenses on Maçakizi's decks.

While it's definitely a scene in high season, Erozan does his best to keep the atmosphere refined, the crowd just this side of raucous. And the food—served on a breezy terrace just above the beach—is fabulous, particularly the lunch buffet, with its tantalizing array of Turkish kebabs and meze: flaky spinach börek, stuffed peppers spiked with cloves, and a smoky patlıcan salatası (eggplant purée) that haunts me still. But I couldn't leave well enough alone. After a single day at the resort, I was anxious to explore. And so each morning—forgoing the beach club and that delectable lunch—my wife and I set out in the 4 x 4, armed with a stack of guidebooks and three useless maps. (More on those later.) We were, I think, the only guests who'd rented a car; most had arrived by boat, taxi, or limousine. We were definitely the only guests who took our car back out each day, after a hasty sunrise breakfast. The valets didn't know what to make of us. "You want to go where?" Or, as one guest put it: "Why?" Everyone at Maçakizi seemed happy right where they were. Too bad for them, for there's plenty to see around the peninsula.

The crumbling windmills and stone churches left by Greek Orthodox settlers. The white-domed gümbets, or cisterns, that dot the parched terrain (and inspire the look of so many villa developments). The rustic villages, tumbling down steep hillsides to the sea, with their beguiling, inscrutable names—Gündoğan! Akyarlar! Yalıklar! Not least, the Old Town of Bodrum itself, with its trellised pedestrian lanes and its 15th-century Castle of St. Peter towering over the harbor. Though Europeans tend to treat the Bodrum Peninsula like an Aegean St.-Tropez, in the more rugged corners it better recalls Croatia's Dalmatian Coast: both share that moody, haunting beauty that attends any place where the long-dead outnumber the living. There were quotidian finds as well, mostly of the edible sort. On a commercial strip outside Bodrum town we stumbled upon a kebabçı (kebab house) called Denizhan, and our favorite meal of the trip: skewers of spicy grilled lamb, brick-oven pide (Turkey's improvement on pizza), and ethereal house-baked lavash bread. And at Bodrum's Friday produce market, we were the only travelers in sight, ogling sunset-hued zucchini blossoms, musk-scented melons, and peaches plucked that morning, still dewy from the orchard.

What I hadn't accounted for was the heat. We'd arrived in the

vicious heart of July. That week the thermometer hit 104 degrees. Men slumped, like zombies, in café chairs, scarcely able to hoist their frappés. Dogs cowered in doorways, glassy-eyed and whimpering. In the sunblasted courtyards of St. Peter's Castle—where kids have carved their initials into cacti—we watched one of the resident peacocks trot right up to a Swedish tourist and fan its spectacular plumage, in a vain attempt to cool itself. The Swede just stared blankly at the bird, too hot to bother snapping a photo.

And then there were the maps. At an Istanbul bookshop I'd purchased three Bodrum road maps, so intent was I on missing nothing. By the end of our trip I had torn the first and second to bits and crumpled the third into a tiny, unrecognizable ball. In hindsight, I see my rage was misplaced. It had been my impression that the maps were crudely drawn and poorly labeled. I now realize that Bodrum was crudely drawn and poorly labeled. Street names are nonexistent, road signs a rarity. Endless switchbacks defy spatial logic. Thankfully, locals are willing to help. Driving in from the airport, we stopped to ask three men if they could point the way to kızı. After some confusing back-and-forth, one jumped into his car and led us the remaining six miles to the hotel. "Hard to explain," he said sheepishly, then waved good-bye.

So the heat and the maps put a damper on our explorations. By 3 p.m. we'd usually turn back, exhausted, to Maçakizi, change into our swimsuits, and hit the decks. Here, people had more sense. None of them had broken a sweat. For the beautiful Maçakizians, sightseeing was limited to ogling their own cartoonish bodies: an all-day parade of gazelle-like women and the men who love them, or at least pay for their drinks. The women change bikinis after every dip in the water—seven, eight times in an afternoon, each swimsuit with a corresponding (and wholly ineffective) cover-up.

Suffice it to say, I have trouble picturing Supreme Court Justice Ginsburg here. What does she wear? A long, black terry-cloth robe? Watching the gazelles and their consorts, we felt simultaneously over- and underdressed: overdressed in that our swim suits had more surface area than a cocktail napkin; underdressed in that they weren't encrusted with rhinestones. And my footwear turned out to be all wrong. I'd brought along Havaianas, but in Bodrum the most stylish men wear leather sandals—and the best, we were told, come from Ali Güven.