The Simple Life

Extracts from Easyjet's 'Traveller' Magazine – August 2013

The drive around the Bozburun Peninsula in Lycian Turkey is a loping, looping affair. Beside the 45km of empty roads that wind through craggy mountain landscape, framed with wispy pines, the sea dominates: shimmering and cornflower blue. Beside us, the fields are profuse with fragrant, flowering fruit trees and frankincense. The air is rich and clean.

This stub of a peninsula is a mere one-hour drive from the busy package-holiday brashness of Marmaris, but it's a world apart: one of those special, bling-free spots in Turkey where tourism is still only a fifth wheel. Ancient sites pepper the land, a reminder that today's backwater was yesterday's bustling conurbation. One of these, Amos, a clutch of ruins from the 4th century BC, was once a Hellenic town of around 15,000. It now stands empty, like much of this undiscovered corner of the world.

Today, for example, as we wend our way along the coastline, there's no other car to share this slice of idyllic countryside: weather-beaten timber beehives are piled up outside wooden houses; sleepy horses are tethered under orchard trees, and goats' bells clank and chime as we pass. The only sign of other tourists is in the tiny marinas, where the rigging of a few yachts tings in the breeze.

But all this could be about to change. In a small fishing village called Selimiye, the area's first boutique hotel has just opened. Badem Tatil Evi, built by the son of a local road engineer, is attracting the first international tourists to this sleepy corner of Europe.

It's a sign of the times that Selimiye is now being hailed as 'the 21st century Kalkan', in reference to a town some 200km to the east, in the Antalya province, which was 'discovered' by mainstream tourists in the 1980s. These days it's a well-to-do harbour town with clusters of excellent restaurants. Of course, it's still charming, but it's also now touristy and seriously expensive, its hills of gleaming white villas resembling swish anthills.

Those looking for the Kalkan of old would be well advised to try Selimiye's more authentic vibe. Its twee seafront mosque and pebble beach, deserted except for the occasional tattered and peeling beached dinghy and sunbathing dog, set the scene. There's a 3km-long sea walk, at the beginning of which we find a bored boy selling giant melons. A string of cafés and shops and a marina form the village centre, which includes a waterfront school. There are front-garden restaurants, where gingham tablecloths and seats are set up on the grass. Rustic jetties and shops decorated with Atatürk wall hangings have recently been joined by a few upmarket gift stores. Families nod hospitably from their gardens. Those in the know will spend an evening imbibing the alfresco romance of the Sardunya restaurant, on a jetty next to the dinky marina.

This is Turkey for those who yearn for the sun-speckled, unspoiled Mediterranean of old, where neither identikit package-holiday hotels nor the knowing, groomed boltholes of the upmarket traveller have yet taken root. Selimiye was discovered by the Turkish as a holiday spot some time ago and is already increasingly popular with their elite, including TV actors who elude the paparazzi by hiding out on yachts.

I feel privileged to be able to join them in this part of the world, as I lounge by the pool, enjoying enviable views over the bay. It's not my first visit to Turkey. Indeed, I've stayed at many hotels in coastal Turkey - this country does a line in quietly cosy, unassuming family-run hotels, with amazing views and simple but excellent Turkish breakfasts - but this is the first to have brought in the kind of foreign visitors to this area who are not just dropping anchor from a yacht. It's the kind of place where you might very well choose to just hang out by the infinity pool, taking in the far-reaching views of the shimmering sea and the hazy Taurus Mountains.

Staying in Selimiye, on the other hand, you feel compelled to explore. On our travels, we stop in Bayırköy, a mountain village where old men congregate in the shade of a vast plane tree to play backgammon, and groups of ladies sell honey from stalls infused with thyme, orange blossom and pine, decoratively pickled jars of pistachio, almond and walnut adding to the colourful displays.

At tiny Turgutköy, which makes its livelihood from peanuts and carpet production, we visit the cooperative where local women train to weave for six months and then trade wares with other co-ops throughout the country. They sell 16 main rug varieties here, everything from Konya kilims to the Uşak versions often found in British stately homes. The latter, made near Ephesus, were first popularised in the UK by returning railway engineers. At Sögüt, close to the base of the peninsula, we visit Deniz Kizi restaurant and eat the freshest sea bass I've ever tasted, on a simple wooden deck overhung with vines, as happily dazed holidaymakers slumber on the jetty in front of the restaurant.

While it may resemble the Turkey of days gone by in so many ways, there are notable signs of modernity creeping in. For instance, in the inland village of Orhaniye, we visit Mr Idris and his family. They've been distilling essential oils and flower waters with crude, handmade equipment for many years, focusing on thyme, sage, almond and bay. Sage works wonders on muscle ache, locals say, while almond brings elastic youth to the skin. But Mr Idris and his ilk are a dying breed. His business is one of the last of its kind in Turkey. Like many other traditional cottage industries here, it's being destroyed by a rural exodus, as children of beekeepers and farmers seek more modern professions: Idris's son, for instance, is a chef in a five-star resort in Marmaris.

This may sound like a negative side effect of the onward march of tourism - especially to visitors who come here looking for a more authentic side of Turkey - but, far from being dismayed, the locals are welcoming the advent of overnighting foreign guests.

It's just as well, because more are almost certainly on their way. As mentioned, yachties have been on the scene for a number of years, distinct Sunsail flotillas already in evidence in the water, and where they go others follow.

Of course, the joy of coming here - for the moment at least - is that it's still entirely possible to experience something quite special and undisturbed. Bozburun, a tiny village that gives the peninsula its name, is actually a secondary centre for the building of *gulets*. These traditional two-masted wooden boats, found only in Turkey, are hand-built for the Mediterranean, and you'll find them bobbing and cruising merrily on the water here, providing a romantic way to explore otherwise unreachable coves and secluded beaches.