

Barefoot blues

Cruising Turkish style

By Bramwell Ryan

The watery bite in the mountainous southern Turkish coast called Goçek Bay is part of the original order of things. The winds of the nearby Middle East tumble in carrying a whiff of Eden. The waters look like a pool of ink dropped between the hills. There are no waves. Instead, the liquid meets the shore, oozing in and out, more like breathing than the rough thump of dumped water. Like a large pair of old lungs, this bay has pushed the breathe of life into countless generations of people who call this part of the earth home. This is where visitors can start to learn the meaning of the Turkish word, *'keyif'*, meaning the art of quiet relaxation. It's also an area that provides an alternative to Florida in the world of cruising.

While Florida specializes in massive ships with wheelchair ramps and walker-friendly deck surfacing, the waters of Goçek Bay are for the younger. It is tailor-made for those who like the idea of puttering around on the water but aren't willing to buy white shoes, matching pants and a dark blue blazer. It's for the moderately adventurous, people who aren't yet ready to surrender all initiative to tour packagers or cruise ship schedulers.

The *Almila* is a solid, 50-foot (15-metre) wooden boat built in 1990, and extensively overhauled three years ago. On deck are eight blue mattresses, a cramped steerage section and a spacious aft deck with a wooden table, built-in cushioned seating and several plastic chairs. Below deck are four two-person bedrooms, two toilets and a tiny galley that forever banishes the myth that space and taste are connected. The mast rarely holds a sail but is a good spot for anchoring the awning that keeps the sun at bay.

As the boat, called a *gület*, pulls out of the harbour, the low, heartbeat paced thrum of the engine taps out the rhythm of an ancient call. It's a melody of water and movement, exploration and change. It's a tune that has seduced sailors for centuries and it dances over the waters of Fethiye, the friendly town at the epicentre of the booming Turkish *gület* cruise industry. The pulse of the *Almila's* motor is a seductive song, especially heading into the embrace of a forgiving land. Goçek Bay is a small scoop of paradise far from wars, poverty, hurt or bad news. Depending on your beliefs it is a taste of eternity or a glimpse of what money can buy in this womb of earthly contentment.

The pattern of cruising aboard the *Almila* is established quickly: breakfast, lounge, sail, swim, lunch and snooze. This is followed by the hectic schedule of a swim, sail, lounge, evening meal and ample sighs as the sun sets and the mattresses beckon for a wine-inspired nights' sleep under the stars. One of the few boat rules is that shoes are forbidden on

deck, and days are spent barefoot.

The boat putters, meandering into different inlets and anchorages around Goçek Bay. Although the bay has been lived in and picked over for millennia travelers still feel like explorers upon entering new coves. The shore is mostly hilly or mountainous. Hikes after setting anchor allow exploration of the slopes, wandering through lush cedar and pine forests or sun burnt brown land dotted with survivor shrubs and dwarf trees. And all over the land, secrets poke through, hints of lives lived. There are ancient stone fences high on remote hillsides and broken stone baths at the water's edge. Lycian tombs (built by a people who were conquered by Alexander the Great) glower over the bay, silently reminding visitors that the joy of sun and waves is transient.

Keeping the *Almila* afloat and the clients well fed is the job of just two people. Captain Ali Korkmaz and first-mate Serkan Ozkan, both 24 years old, are not the buttoned-up, uniform-wearing staff one expects



on traditional cruise ships. It's unlikely either owns a suit and their working attire is most often just a pair of shorts. But on the water, clothes don't make the man nor do they indicate professional abilities. Ali has worked on the *Almila* for five years and loves the ship with a depth of affection only known to captains. Serkan recently completed university and dreams of becoming a ferryboat captain in his hometown of Izmir, Turkey. Both young men are surprisingly good cooks and the food coming from the galley is filling and delightful.

Cruise season in Goçek Bay stretches from April until November. The weather is warm, clouds infrequent and the water calm. The Bay is on the dividing line between the Mediterranean and the Aegean seas, sheltered from the big sea waves by islands. Another popular cruise route, also starting in Fethiye, travels east toward Olympos, Turkey. Those



four-day, three-night trips are more rigorous sailing, since clocking the miles to complete the distance means less dawdling and less swimming. It's also much choppier since swinging out into the deep waters of the Mediterranean means a bouncier ride.

In Gocek Bay the waters are smooth and the pace is slow. Each day breaks gently but the sun races high and hot; by 8 am it's time to swim or roast. And the swimming is a primary drawing card for these cruises. Near the shore, the bluish-green of the water looks like something created by the marketing department of a Paris haute couture house. Farther out, the sea turns the ultra deep blue of sea monsters and nightmares. The water is warm. In the distance, mountains ripple like waves to the horizon, gentle reminders of a world out there that is mercifully far away for the moment.

A Turkish gulet is the perfect place to learn about the elasticity of time. Minutes and hours mean nothing. The beat is the stroke of water lapping on the hull, the crack and whistle of crickets screeching in the trees. And when another day slips

into the water it stretches its bones, the sinews of minutes and hours flexing back and forth in ways unknown in venues like offices and busy downtown streets.

The Fethiye-based cruise business is well developed and growing. In Gocek Bay, it's so well established that a thriving service trade has grown to ensure shipboard passengers are well tended. Small motorboats approach gulets and the many private yachts anchored in the bay with a wide assortment wares for sale. News junkies can be assuaged with the selection of daily papers, sugar cravings with ice cream or pastries, and water-skiing and tubing are offered daily by the

more muscular powerboats.

It's surprisingly inexpensive to cruise the waters of Gocek Bay and elsewhere on the southern Turkish coast. Prices are often quoted in British pounds but a four day, three night cruise costs between CDN\$200-\$250 per person (US\$155-\$195). Prices include three meals a day, snacks and accommodation under the stars. The only extra expenses are drinks – soft drinks, water and beer or wine - and tips for the crew.

Gulets vary in size from small ones like the Almila, which can comfortably hold eight people, to larger vessels that have room for up to two dozen. For more information on the company that runs the Almila visit www.beforelunch.com. Other Turkish cruise ships operating out of Fethiye include www.bethereyachting.com and www.compassyachting.com.

