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BLUE STREAK

Bodrum, the jewel of the Turkish Riviera, is booming again with revamped hotels and museums, new wellness offerings, and a host of other Turkish delights. BY MAVIS TEO



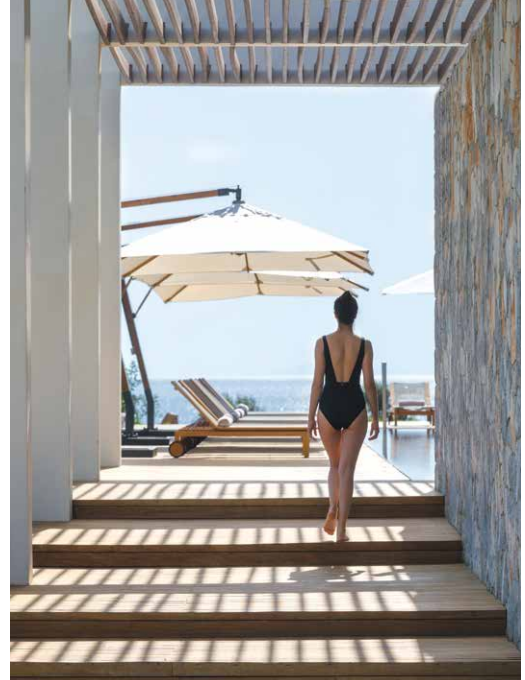
Two-masted *gulets* and other pleasure boats in Bodrum's busy harbor.



Above, from left: Wicker-shaded sun loungers on Bodrum's Karaincir Beach; heading to the pool at the Six Senses Kaplankaya.

Her name is *Karia*. Under billowing sails, she glides across the deep blue of the Aegean while the October sun bounces off her gleaming teak deck. Sitting on ecru cushions near the bow, our party of three tucks into a huge spread of grilled vegetables and seafood. Everything is so astoundingly fresh that the only seasoning required is a touch of sea salt. Midway through our meal, I begin to understand why chartering a *gulet*, or wooden sailing yacht, is such a popular pastime around Turkey's southwest Aegean coast.

From the sea, the Bodrum Peninsula makes a fine sight: a rocky swath of sandy beaches and cypress trees punctuated by whitewashed villages and ancient olive groves. I'm not surprised to learn that it provided the setting for one of the original Seven Wonders of the World—the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, a fourth-century B.C. tomb built for the Persian governor who ruled this corner of Asia Minor. Few traces remain today, though some of its stones and elaborate marble sculptures were reused in the 15th-century Castle of St. Peter (a.k.a. Bodrum Castle), which towers over the harbor.



Bodrum—the name refers to both the largest town and the peninsula as a whole—has been drawing the Istanbul elite ever since the writer Cevat Şakir Kabaağaçlı began publishing his stories in the mid-20th century under the pen name “the Fisherman of Halicarnassus.” He wove together tales of the land and its people—of sponge divers and fishermen, their close relationship with nature, the remnants of civilizations that rose and fell on these shores.

As we pass the Greek island of Kos, Nezvət Kemer, the *Karia*'s cheerful chef, gestures wildly toward the horizon. “If you sail with us for a few days, we could visit Samos and Patmos and so many other beautiful islands.” Like our captain, Dursun Demir, he hails from the fishing village of Mazi, some 30 kilometers down the coast. Prospects of a better future in tourism beckoned them to Bodrum when they were young men, and now, in their fifties, both are clearly in good spirits. Bodrum, it seems, is back in the spotlight.

Things looked very different in 2016, when tourism dried up in the wake of political unrest. British Airways canceled direct flights between London and Bodrum, and Turkey-bound holidaymakers from around the world scrapped their summer plans. But that might as well be ancient history. Bodrum's long-standing appeal is such that travelers cannot stay away for long.

Hüseyin Aydın, who owns the *Karia* and a local travel agency, says that luxury gulets are back in demand; international jet-setters see no problem dropping US\$73,000 to charter a six-cabin vessel for a week. And the flurry of boat-building will only add to the throng of superyachts moored at the 620-berth Yalıkavak Marina on the peninsula's northwest. Meanwhile, five-star hotels have responded to the tourism boom with upgrades of their own.

One such example is Lux* Resorts & Residences Bodrum, which opened in 2017. Its general manager Hakan Oral tells me the resort has overhauled its wellness offerings after just one season. “We discovered a

lot of guests were checking out medical and aesthetic procedures in Bodrum, so we decided to introduce a medical spa and a clean menu option,” he says. The resort now offers detoxes and aesthetic treatments, as well as a restaurant with menus designed by doctors and nutritionists. Another new addition is the hammam, a quintessentially Turkish experience.

For a bit of local culture, Lux* Bodrum can organize an excursion to the village of Etrim, 24 kilometers outside town. My host, Engin Başol, belongs to one of its 45 close-knit families. All are descended from the nomadic Cetmi tribe, who moved here 300 years ago to hide from pirates cruising along the Aegean. Here, deep in the pine forests of the Yarran Mountains and fringed by olive groves, the art of weaving carpets has been passed down through the generations. While visiting the austere stone house where Engin’s 84-year-old grandmother lives and still weaves for leisure, I learn that girls are shown the ropes when they turn six, and villagers make their own dyes from natural ingredients like walnut shells and madder root.

As part of the experience, I stay for lunch. Engin’s mother, Ümmühan, kneads dough for Turkish *pide* (flatbread with toppings) to bake in a stone oven, while I sit cross-legged on a kilim carpet hand-woven in shades of red. Turkish hospitality here takes the

The close-knit families of Etrim are all descended from the nomadic Cetmi tribe, who moved here 300 years ago to hide from pirates cruising along the Aegean.

form of small plates of smoky roasted eggplant and rolled vine leaf *dolmas* served on a copper tray, and copious amounts of homemade red wine.

At the Six Senses Kaplankaya, a 90-minute drive north of Bodrum proper and a former Canyon Ranch Wellness Resort—which closed in 2016 after just a year of operations—I find another expression of the local hospitality. While the boxy five-storied main structure built for Canyon Ranch has remained, the brand tapped the New York-based star designer Clodagh to give its interiors a makeover befitting its chic yet destination-centric look. Arriving guests step into a lobby softened by Anatolian touches, evident in kilim rugs and animal hides scattered around the space, as well as upholstered ottomans and tables made from local olive trees.

Mahir Kaşıkçı, the sous chef at its Wild Thyme restaurant, beams with pride when I polish off my grilled

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BEST IN SHOW

Asia's largest travel trade fair will return to Singapore for its 12th run this October.

An annual three-day event organized by the Singaporean offshoot of leading trade fair company Messe Berlin, ITB Asia brings together hundreds of travel industry exhibitors from across the Asia-Pacific region, as well as a significant number from as far afield as Africa, Europe, and the Americas. This October 16–18, the show will once again grace the Sands Expo & Convention Centre at Singapore’s iconic Marina Bay Sands.

A record-breaking 11,000 visitors attended last year’s affair, in which over 127 countries were represented. ITB Asia looks to build on that success in the upcoming 2019 edition with the highest number of participating National Tourism Organizations (NTOs) in the event’s 12-year history. So far at least 19 new NTOs have signed up, including Bhutan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Uzbekistan. Outside of Asia, European NTOs such as those from the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Serbia will also be in attendance for the first time.

For more information, visit itb-asia.com



Overlooking Six Senses Kaplankaya at sunset.

fish topped with a sprinkling of sumac. Like his fellow staff members, Mahir is happy now that the tourists are returning. Guests in turn will be happy to discover that the Six Senses has done away with Canyon Ranch's famously spartan and prescriptive wellness style. Children are welcome; I hear peals of laughter over the olive groves and see kids wandering not far from their parents' watchful eye. In the Six Senses' three dining venues, Mediterranean fare caters to a wide range of tastes and diets without compromising on taste. The chefs have more room to flex their creative muscles, and guests are free to eat whatever they want, whether that may be wood-fired pizzas or delicious local mezze or zucchini noodles. And I haven't even mentioned the gin-and-lavender cocktails and biodynamic wine on offer at the Beach Bar.

Still, Six Senses leverages on what Canyon Ranch excels at. Keeping the hardware and technology left behind by its predecessor, the spa at the Kaplankaya resort is now the most comprehensive in the group's portfolio. There's a full-scale medi-clinic and another for anti-aging. Treatments here run the gamut from Ayurvedic to space-age, with screenings done with technology used by NASA. Cocooned within a spa or a seaview villa at Six Senses, it's easy to forget that the property is just one slice of the 500-hectare Kaplankaya estate, a master-planned development taking up a rocky headland clad in Mediterranean pine and wild cypress. Ambitious plans for the area include a marina designed by Foster & Partners and several more hotels (a Cheval Blanc among them) to be built over the next few years.

Back in town, the repositories of Bodrum's colorful past are also playing a part in its future. The Museum of Underwater Archaeology inside Bodrum Castle is currently undergoing a major refurb; when it reopens next year, visitors will once again get to see artifacts salvaged from 3,000-year-old shipwrecks found in the surrounding waters. Meanwhile, just a five-minute stroll from the landmark, the two-story Bodrum Maritime Museum is expanding its footprint. As she walks me through displays of gulet models from the start of the 20th century to the present day, and sponge specimens collected through the ages, museum director Selen Cambazoğlu tells me new wings are being put in to showcase more of Bodrum's impressive maritime history, which dates back to the Stone Age. "Everyone in this town has some sort of connection with seafaring or the sponge diving industry," Selen explains. "Even the woman at the ticketing booth has an uncle who owned a shipyard in the 1950s, when commercial fishing took off."

Then, as now, the fortunes of Bodrum were tied to the sea. I think back to my brief time on the *Karia*, which gave me a glimpse of what Turks dreamily call the Blue Voyage. That describes a weeklong meander up and down the Aegean coast, a journey that beckons with the promise of iridescent waters, secret coves with empty beaches, ocean-fresh seafood in idyllic fishing villages, and revelations of Anatolia's complex, layered history in its Greco-Roman ruins and Byzantine churches. Political crises may come and go, but the allure of this part of the Turquoise Coast is eternal. ☉



Getting There

Bodrum is best reached via Istanbul onboard **Turkish Airlines** (turkishairlines.com), which operates six 75-minute flights each day on the route from May to October.

Where to Stay

Lux* Resort & Residences Bodrum
90-252/311-0505;
luxresorts.com;
doubles from US\$296
Six Senses Kaplankaya
90-252/511-0030;
sixsenses.com;
doubles from US\$254.

What to Do

Charter a *gulet* for day trips or longer cruises through **Blue Cruise Bodrum** (90-252/524-5064; bluecruisebodrum.com).