

All aboard a traditional gulet for a sailing and walking tour of Turkey's southwest coast

PETER NEEDHAM

THE Lycian Coast of Turkey is a region of pomegranates, honey bees, sure-footed goats and sheer cliffs plunging into turquoise sea.

The ancient Lycians, mentioned in Homer's *Iliad*, sailed into steep-sided sandy bays that are still accessible only by sea. The ruins of their cities and tombs, carved into solid rock and resembling the dwellings at Petra, draw visitors from across the world.

Other lesser-known attractions are equally compelling. There's swimming in the sunken stone ruins of Cleopatra's bathhouse, or having your face (or legs) shaved with a cut-throat razor by a traditional Turkish barber next to the beach.

There are therapeutic mud baths and vendors in small boats hawking scrumptious fresh-baked gozleme pastries flavoured with lemon and local honey.

The Lycian Way walking trail, which opened in 1999, has been chosen by Britain's *The Sunday Times* as one of the 10 best walks in the world. Shepherds have walked tracks in the same area for millennia. To fully appreciate this Mediterranean paradise for walking and sailing, you need a boat: preferably a Turkish gulet, the graceful two-masted traditional wooden sailing vessel synonymous with these waters.

It's sailing that brings me to Marmaris, a former fishing village on Turkey's southwest coast, now devoted to tourism. Marmaris is gulet central. I am due to meet my gulet guide, Anne, at the Anatolia Cafe, a well-known pick-up and drop-off point for boat trips.

Anatolia Cafe is a diverting place to wait. Suntanned visitors from Britain and Germany scoot along the promenade on little battery-powered tricycles, a cheap version of the Segway. A van bearing the sign "I Prefer Real Turkish Bath" arrives and disgorges beaming folk who have obviously just enjoyed one. A labyrinthine covered bazaar leads off to the left, replete with T-shirts, jewellery, Ottoman rugs and tattoo parlours.

Anne arrives, introduces herself and uses her mobile phone to find our fellow passengers in the crowded cafe; in fact, they are sitting at the table next to us. Our gulet turns out to be a trim, 25m craft with eight ensuite cabins and a crew of three, under the command of Captain Can Yasar, a master carpenter who fitted out the vessel himself. Storage space is not large but more than adequate for walkers travelling light. On deck you can catch the breeze, watch flying fish scudding alongside and look out for the region's renowned sea turtles.

My fellow travellers are three Australian couples and we are soon getting along famously. British and Australian is the usual mix



PICTURES: PETER NEEDHAM

Boats in a pretty bay seen through pale green pines on the Lycian Way walking trail

A taste of honey



Lycian tombs carved into the rocky cliff-face resemble those of Petra in Jordan



A panoramic view along the coastal route

of nationalities on cruises, Anne says, with most participants of active middle age. Originally from Yorkshire, Anne fell in love with Turkey and with the Turkish man she married.

Like most gulets, ours carries back-up sail but uses its diesel engine instead. Our eight-day trip heads from Marmaris, around the Gocek islands and on to the town of Fethiye, with plenty of walking on the way. The concept is simple: breakfast heartily aboard, then set out exploring on foot, catching up with the gulet again in time for lunch or dinner. If the walk takes a full day, a picnic lunch is provided.

Meals are full and healthy, and

the walking counteracts any potential weight gain. A typical breakfast on board consists of boiled eggs, tomatoes, white and yellow cheeses, marinated black and green olives, sausage, cucumber, bread, apricot jam and local honey, tea, coffee and squeezed orange juice.

Anne has devised many of the routes in conjunction with her husband and discussions with local shepherds. The walks take you to places other modes of transport cannot reach and while some tracks are steep, most are reasonably easy; ages in our small group range from 28 to 68, with the oldest definitely one of the fittest.

Views are panoramic and sublime; the sea turns aquamarine around the base of cliffs, deepening to an inky blue. Tracks are fragrant with the smell of pale green pines, dry lavender and sage.

On rocky outcrops, the tall stalks of sea squills bend in the breeze. Our treks take us past rows of pale blue beehives, their residents buzzing industriously. We encounter ancient cylindrical gravestones inscribed in Arabic script and orchards where pomegranates dangle like red lanterns from branches.

In a grove of ancient olive trees, another member of the party and I

sample a glossy black olive direct from the tree. It looks exquisite but proves a bitter experience.

All else is sweet. Some experiences are tranquil, like Nimara Caves on Paradise Island, a cool and serene cavern where ancients worshipped their gods more than 10,000 years ago. No signposts indicate this site; you have to know where to turn off the track. Another walk leads to the ruins of Kaunos, a city founded about 900BC on the border of the Kingdom of Lycia. Gazing down from the amphitheatre, it's easy to visualise how Kaunos might have looked when ships bearing slaves and spices sailed into its harbour, long since silted up. Malaria decimated this thriving metropolis.

A similar, but more recently abandoned, city is Kayakoy, an eerie village deserted in 1924 as the result of a forced population exchange, when the Ottoman Greeks who lived here were repatriated to Greece.

This sad human story is told in Louis de Bernieres's novel *Birds Without Wings*.

Back on board after a day's walking, we relax over a cold Efes dark beer, brewed in Istanbul, 6.1 per cent strength and a creditable drop. Captain Can and his crew prepare a fine repast of whole grilled sea bass, olives, cheese and other delicacies. A Pamukkale Senfoni 2008 shiraz merlot is a welcome discovery.

On calm nights, passengers and crew can choose to sleep on mattresses on the sun deck beneath the stars, a dreamy haven with light breezes. One rougher evening, when the wind blows free and the sea slaps our hull, the captain sets off in a small boat to secure a nearby drifting yacht and prevent it hitting the rocks. He intersperses these maritime duties with squeezing orange juice and keeping the dining table free of crumbs with a battery-operated handheld vacuum cleaner. Versatility is the key to sailing a gulet.

As days flow past, camaraderie builds. "There's an oesophagus in there," exclaims one of our group, peering inside a tomb. "Sarcophagus," his wife insists. At the Dalyan mud bath and thermal baths, we coat ourselves in thick mud and are hosed down with a torrent of cold water at fire-hose strength before plunging into a thermal pool. It's good for you, apparently. We visit the loggerhead sea turtle nesting grounds of Iztuzu beach, saved in 1986 from developers who wanted to build a luxury hotel there. A cruise boat nearby heads through the reed beds at Dalyan, overlooked by the cliff-side Lycian tombs.

Then there's the Turkish barber next to the beach, at an inlet called Bedri Rahmi bay. In anticipation of this experience, the men



in our party have gone without shaving for a couple of days. A skilled barber double-lathers faces, pinches cheeks to get the right angle and wields a cut-throat razor with consummate precision.

The shave is followed by a brush past with a flaming taper to singe away out-of-place hairs, then a neck, shoulder and head massage. We emerge glowing. One of our group is so moved that he instructs the barber to shave off his beard of 36 years. The result astounds his wife.

Waiting at Istanbul airport later for the flight back, I realise the only souvenir I have acquired in Turkey is a jar of Omak Honey Nut, a delicious concoction reputed to have amazing properties. "For everyone who wants to be young with a strong mind and nerves," the label says. "For every old man who dreams to have his youth back." Ingredients are listed as honey, beesmilk, pistachio, almond, hazelnut, caraway, pineseed, walnut, peanut, coconut, radish seed, glucose, black cumin, apricot seed and pollen. When I declare it at Customs at Sydney, the officer smiles, hands it back and waves me through.

If you eat a teaspoon a day, some say, it can transport you back to Turkey.

Peter Needham was a guest of UTracks and Singapore Airlines.

Checklist

Turkey Walk and Sail is arranged by Utracks, a division of World Expeditions. The walking involved is graded introductory to moderate, and suitable for anyone of reasonable fitness. Trips operate from April to June and in September and October, omitting the hottest months. Cost: \$1390, joining in Marmaris or in the opposite direction from Fethiye. More: utricks.com.au. Singapore Airlines' best year-round fares, including taxes, from Australian ports to Istanbul via Singapore start at \$2011. Check for seasonal specials. More: 131 011; singaporeair.com.

