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The St.-Tropez of Turkey

By SETH SHERWOOD

LADIES and gentlemen, welcome back to St.-Tropez!" Cued up by a D.J. on an elevated white dais, a sound clip exploded through the warm July night, sending up cheers from the open-air dance floor of the all-white oceanfront nightclub.

As the stars glimmered overhead and illuminated white yachts drifted in the distance, waiters in white shirts bearing the words "Saint-Tropez" threaded among the Philippe Starck chairs and dancing V.I.P.'s, extending cocktails into outstretched arms adorned with designer watches and impeccable tans. Working the other side of the room, a roving photographer popped off a succession of flashbulb bursts as he captured mugging corporate tycoons and fashion models.

Viewed from the translucent orange stools at the long bar, it seemed as if another classic St.-Tropez session of all-night partying and celebrity glad-handing was kicking off with characteristic zeal and excess. There was just one hitch: the real St.-Tropez was well over 1,000 miles away. This was the tiny Turkish village of Turkbuku on the north side of the Bodrum Peninsula.

For the upper-crust Turkish crowd at the club, Bianca, the difference was merely academic. Sitting inside an on-site jewelry boutique doubling as an office, the club's owner, Emre Ergani, stroked his handlebar moustache and boldly declared that the Champagne-drenched, celebrity-draped French Riviera hotspot was a kindred spirit of Turkbuku, a fishing town whose traditional draws have included red mullet and sea bream.

"St.-Tropez is a place for people of A-plus quality, and so is Turkbuku," he said, explaining that the town had lately rocketed from picturesque beachfront backwater to second-home haven and party playground for Turkish celebrities. As a glass case holding \$7,000 Champagne flutes sparkled behind him, he added that international stars were now getting wind of Turkbuku, too.

"People I know from St.-Tropez are buying houses here," Mr. Ergani said. "Turkbuku is taking over St.-Tropez."

On the face of it, this seems an outrageous claim for this hamlet hidden on the Aegean, the body of water that Homer called "the wine-dark sea." Even the most desperate addicts of checkout-aisle literature and live red-carpet reports probably wouldn't recognize the name, which sounds halfway to Timbuktu and might reasonably conjure images of a Turkish answer to Mötley Crüe.

Unlike the storied Côte d'Azur resort, Turkbuku's unusual name isn't a fixture of Page Six and has yet to roll from the tongues of the bikini-clad hosts of "Wild On." Matisse never painted there, Pink Floyd hasn't named a song for it, [Sean Combs](#) hasn't rapped about it, and Pamela Anderson and Kid Rock chose the real St.-Tropez for their wedding last month. You won't find the getaways of Brigitte Bardot or Joan Collins hidden in the olive and lemon groves around the bay's green-brown hills. There is no Turkbuku brand of tanning lotion or alcoholic drink.

In other words, by many barometers of jet-set status, Turkbuku (sometimes called Golturkbuku) is still a good distance down the scale from St.-Tropez. But that distance could be closing fast.

Ask Mr. Ergani to enumerate the boldface names that have visited Bianca in recent years and he produces a list that sounds much more redolent of the south of [France](#) than the southern Aegean: Ivana Trump. Paris Hilton. Michael Douglas. Prince Charles. The Japanese fashion mogul Kenzo Takada, he will tell you, "practically lives here."

Nor are these the only luminaries to drop into Turkbuku's increasingly glittery environs, which nestle a showy spread of music-blasting beach clubs, boutique hotels and moored megayachts. In the never-ending search for new sun-soaked havens beyond the well-trammeled Mediterranean shores, a host of global stars of the boardroom and box office have begun to stake out this nook of the Turkish coast. Some, like the billionaire Jeffrey Steiner, the chief executive of the Fairchild Corporation and a fixture of the St.-Tropez social scene, have bought palatial spreads in the hills. Others, like Tom Hanks, have cruised in during sailing trips.

"It feels like a nightclub on the ocean," said André Balazs, owner of the Chateau Marmont hotel in [Los Angeles](#) and other luxury properties. Mr. Balazs, who is also a longtime regular in St.-Tropez, discovered Turkbuku last summer on vacation with Uma Thurman. He called the town "very popular, very busy, very social."

In a sense, this attractively rugged region of the Turkish coast — the peninsula is a landscape of hills, mesas, craggy coves and windswept beaches — has been producing or seducing celebrities since antiquity.

Herodotus, the so-called Father of History, was from Bodrum; Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, is thought to have been born a handful of miles offshore on the Greek island of Kos. For Antony and Cleopatra, the peninsula was a stop on a voyage to [Rome](#). For Brutus and Cassius, it was a place to plot the murder of Caesar — and to hide out afterward. When Alexander the Great tried to seize Halicarnassus, the ancient capital of the region (now the town of Bodrum), he found it so well defended that he was forced to ask for the only truce of his conquering campaign.

But the area's greatest claim to global fame has long been the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus. Constructed in the fourth century B.C. as the burial chamber of a local ruler, it became one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It remains one of only two (with the Pyramids of Giza) that

have not been completely effaced by time.

The Bodrum Peninsula temporarily slipped into obscurity, passing much of the 20th century as a disconnected scattering of fishing settlements and sponge-diving villages.

“When I first came here, 30 years ago, I had a small Italian car, a Fiat,” said Sinan Ozer, owner of the locally based Aegean Yacht Services. “It was the only car in Bodrum.”

Now, he added: “Everybody wants to come here. It’s like Ibiza, or Antibes in France.”

On a July afternoon along Turkbuku’s buzzing seaside boardwalk, the village’s rustic past and glamorous present rubbed sun-tanned shoulders.

As house and R & B music pulsed from open-air bars, moneyed couples in Chanel double-C sunglasses and young women in gold bikinis poked into swimwear and jewelry boutiques, pausing occasionally to eat boiled mussels from scruffy fellows operating makeshift sidewalk stands. Fishermen hustled through the crowd carrying dripping plastic bags of freshly caught sea bass to restaurants where white-haired men rattled backgammon dice and sipped milky-hued raki, the lightning-strong, anise-flavored national drink.

From a slender mosque minaret — its tip sharpened like an arrow pointing to heaven — the call to prayer resounded through the warm afternoon. But Allah was losing the popularity contest to the sun worshipers trodding onto the long docks that extend like spokes into the bay.

There is no sand on this part of the coast, only these elaborate wood-plank beach clubs. Each is outfitted with ranks of plush white mattresses, fluttering white canopy beds, gauzy Arabesque tents and amply stocked bars. Some tanners arrive on motorboats from ships out in the bay; the more extravagant swoop in on seaplanes, sending up ostentatious splashes.

Like a seaside sorority row, each club draws its own distinct crowd. At Seen, a laid-back scattering of middle-aged doctors, lawyers and other professionals lounged under sun hats, occasionally checking the time on thick gold watches. At People, the assemblage is as encompassing as the name. College-age women, unshaven Turkish hipsters, patrician older men and vacationing families lay side by side.

But nothing compares to the bacchanal at Mio Beach and the adjacent Na Na beach club, the epicenters of Turkbuku’s gilded youthquake. As a D.J. spun deafening Turkish house and dance music at Mio, a young crowd in long board shorts and Diesel bikinis gyrated to the exotic Middle Eastern polyrhythms, swirling in a blur of tattoos and navel rings. A bleach-blonde woman mounted a white banquette and started to shimmy like a snake as a phalanx of bare-chested guys lounged like Ottoman pashas on colorful neo-sultanic cushions nearby. Rows of red Turkish flags displaying the star and crescent moon fluttered in the breeze.

“Normally,” said Eren Talu, sipping a Scotch and gesturing at the half-filled bay from the hillside terrace of his futuristic Ev Turkbuku hotel, “you can’t see the sea because there are so many yachts and they are so big.”

Speaking in English and French, the sound of dance music pulsating in the background, Mr. Talu, an architect as well as a hotelier, recalled when [Paul Allen](#) of Microsoft pulled his 414-foot yacht Octopus into the port, dropping jaws all around.

Mr. Talu held up the front pages of the Turkish daily newspapers Posta and Cumhuriyet, each of which glowed with color photos of celebrities cavorting in the clubs just down the hill.

“It’s like this until 4 a.m. every day of the week from June to September,” he said. “The whole peninsula comes here to party.”

The Ev opened two years ago, the latest of Turkbuku’s growing crop of boutique crash pads aimed at the globe-trotting elite. It includes Maca Kizi, which is owned by Sahir Erozan, a habitué of Washington high society who was behind such trendy restaurants in the capital as Cities and Leftbank, and which offers its own tranquil private beach club.

Visitors seeking a refuge somewhat removed from the party scene hole up at the Ada Hotel. Tastefully outfitted with Ottoman and European antiques, the hotel is the only one in [Turkey](#) to be part of the prestigious Relais & Chateaux marketing group. A favorite of Turkish elites for years, the stone, castlelike compound last year won over Mr. Balazs, who called it “a beautifully appointed place” stocked with “great historical pieces.”

But no one in Turkbuku is doing more to teleport the village into the 21st century than Mr. Talu. His Ev Turkbuku, which he also designed, is a totally angular, totally white, totally sci-fi compound of Zen-smooth pools (eight of them) and plasma-screen TV’s (even in the bathrooms). Hovering like a U.F.O. on its hillside perch, the Ev is a Turkish take on Kubrick, a sort of “2001: An Accommodations Odyssey.” You half expect the voice of HAL 9000 to offer you a gin and tonic as you settle into the low, milky couches.

The opening this summer of the equally white Supper Club, a joint venture between Mr. Talu and the [Netherlands](#)-based nightclub chain, gave Turkbuku a further injection of global chic. This nightspot joins existing branches in [Amsterdam](#), Rome and [San Francisco](#).

Come dusk, the sun beds and V.I.P. tents along the docks are replaced by elegantly set white tables and twinkling candles, as the beach clubs morph into top dinner spots and cocktail lounges. Bartenders put out bowls of red cherries and yellow plums, the Turkish answer to beer nuts.

For the freshly showered and linen-clad masses, the posted menus of the restaurants along the quay beckon with octopus salads, marinated anchovies, chilled yogurt, olive oil-drenched meze dishes and grilled mullet galore — all to be followed by muddy-sweet Turkish coffee, honey-drenched baklava

and gelatinous candy cubes called lokum, or Turkish delight.

Dinner is a mere preamble for Ship Ahoy, a very popular dockside nightclub. In spite of the cheese-baked name and bizarre maritime-chic atmosphere — think “Sex and the City” meets “Gilligan’s Island” — the place draws throngs of Turkish society. Under a gilded scimitar moon in July, there were no pirates with eye patches but plenty of patrons in form-fitting and open-backed white outfits intended to show off the day’s tanning efforts.

As Barry White sang, Turkish guys in suit jackets and Adidas sneakers sipped Miller Genuine Draft stuffed with limes — a ubiquitous local fad — and schmoozed with groups of single women doing their kiz-kiza: girls’ night out.

For the smattering of foreigners, The Aegean Sun, a local newspaper, includes a Turkish phrasebook that seems directly tailored to Turkbuku night life. Given the crowds, a good place to start is “Ayag ima basiryorsun” (“You’re standing on my foot”). Then, to ask a question on everybody’s mind, flash a winning smile and try “I yi para kazaniyor musun?” (“Do you make good money?”). If that results in a piña colada to the trousers, simply apologize and tell the truth: “Sarhos oldum” (“I’m drunk”).

No worries. With the next day’s sunrise, the Turkbuku summer routine repeats. And so, splayed out one afternoon on a luxurious white sun bed at the People beach club, Selin Ozkok Karacehennem, the host of a Turkish television call-in show devoted to marital relationships, summed up Turkbuku’s enticements.

“The sea is clean, and the weather is great,” she said, as a white-clad waiter delivered a round of pink Sex on the Beach shots to her daughter and her daughter’s friends. From the nearby clubs, the music was already mounting, and the excitement was building for another day of partying along Homer’s wine-dark sea.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Establishments on the Turkish Riviera often quote prices in euros and, sometimes, dollars. Euros are commonly accepted, though the Turkish new lira is preferred.

WHERE TO STAY

Try not to spill anything at the all-white Ev Turkbuku (Turkbuku Caddesi Ballidere Mevkii; 90-252-377-6070; www.evturkbuku.com). With its angular furnishings, wireless Internet service and plasma-screen TV’s, the Ev is the most futuristic of Turkbuku’s crash pads. Doubles start at 150 to 350 euros (\$193 to \$450, at \$1.31 to the euro), depending on the season.

For a trip back in time, head to the Ada Hotel (Bagarasi Mahallesi, Tepecik Caddesi 128; 90-252-377-5915; www.adahotel.com). Stocked with Continental and Turkish antiques, the 12-room, castlelike compound has a beautiful hammam and an elegant library. Rates are \$305 to \$725.

At the center of the beachfront scene is Mavi Suite (Koyalti Mevkii; 90-252-377-6260; www.mavisuite.com), a sprawl of white villas with 42 simple but comfortable rooms. The hotel's beach club and bar are key stops on the Turkbuku party circuit. Doubles, with breakfast, run from 100 to 190 euros.

WHERE TO EAT

Prices reflect a three-course meal for two, without wine.

Lighted by candles and torches at night, the elegant waterside restaurant Sea Balik (Keles Harimi Caddesi 26A, 90-252-377-6118) is one of the most romantic spots on the Turkbuku boardwalk. Besides plenty of Turkish meze — appetizer dishes — the menu showcases international seafood dishes like bouillabaisse, shrimp tempura and roasted grouper with fennel. About 120 new liras, \$80 at 1.5 new liras to the dollar.

A satellite of a popular [Istanbul](#) restaurant, Fidele (Yali Mevkii, 90-252-377-5081) is another candle-lit dockside spot in the heart of the Turkbuku boardwalk. As yachts float past, diners partake of Mediterranean and Continental specialties, including grilled jumbo shrimp, pasta, chops and a highly sought cheesecake. About 80 new liras; a prix fixe menu with unlimited local drinks is 70 new liras.

Well worth the pilgrimage to Bodrum is Yaghane (Neyzen Tevfik Caddesi 170, 90-252-313-4747). Set in a 19th-century stone olive mill, this rustic and romantic place specializes in octopus, sea bream, sea bass, mullet and other local fish, as well as lamb dishes. The large wine list has vintages from [France](#), [Argentina](#), [Israel](#), [Georgia](#) and beyond. About 80 new liras.

Aquarium (Yali Mevkii; 90-252-394-3682; www.aquariumgumusluk.com) is one of the top spots for fish in the old village of Gumusluk. About 70 new liras.

WHERE TO GET A TAN

Typically, there's no charge to use Turkbuku's beach clubs, which line the bay one after another. You are, however, expected to order drinks. Expect to pay about 5 to 10 new liras for a soft drink, 10 to 15 for a beer and 15 to 20 for a cocktail.

Animated by dance parties starting in midafternoon, Na Na (Keles Harimi Mevkii 26; 90-252-377-5025) is for the gilded youth and MTV set.

Maki (Keles Harimi Mevkii; 90-252-377-6105; www.makihotel.com.tr) is equally stylish but targeted more toward an over-30 crowd.

Everybody is welcome at People (Keles Harimi Mevkii 14; 90-252-377-5307), from trust-funders to middle-age couples to bourgeois grandparents.

WHERE TO PARTY

The town of Bodrum is still the premier spot for night life on the peninsula. How much so? Cumhuriyet Caddesi, the town's main drag, is widely known as Bar Street, and teems with bars and clubs for every persuasion, from British-style pubs to sleek designer dens.

The most decadent spots are probably the Catamaran Club (Dr. Alim Bey Caddesi 1025, Sokak 44; 90-252-313-3600; www.clubcatamaran.com), a large boat with a glass dance floor that sails every night around 1 a.m.; and the gargantuan Halikarnas (178 Cumhuriyet Caddesi; 90-252-316-8000; www.halikarnas.com.tr), whose weekly schedule includes Belly Dance Night (Monday), Free Vodka Night (Thursday) and Crazy Foam parties (Friday and Saturday).

Turkbuku night life is more stylish, more see-and-be-seen, and so more haughty. Make your first port of call Ship Ahoy (Yali Mevkii, 90-252-377-5070), a nautical-themed outdoor restaurant and bar that bursts at the seams on summer nights with the Istanbul elite and periodic Turkish celebrities. No cover.

Across the bay in Golkoy is Bianca (Akdeniz Caddesi 35; 90-252-357-7474; www.biancabeach.com). This sleek, multifunction leisure temple (with a beach club, four restaurants, a nightclub and boutiques) oozes Tropezian decadence.

WHAT TO SEE

The Mausoleum of Halicarnassus in Bodrum (www.maussolleion.com) may be reduced to some toppled columns and a bare foundation, but it's one of only two remaining Wonders of the Ancient World (with the Pyramids of Giza). Admission is 5 new liras.

Built by European knights in the 15th century, the massive towers and crenellated walls of Bodrum Castle (Bodrum Harbor; 90-252-316-2516; www.bodrum-museum.com) now shelter the Museum of Underwater Archeology. Filled with once-sunken ships and their treasures, the galleries unfold the physical record of vanished peoples who traveled by sail and oar, navigated by sun and star, and ultimately put their safety in the hands of the gods and the elements. Admission 10 new liras.

GETTING THERE

Turkish Airlines (800-874-8875; www.turkishairlines.com) operates flights from Kennedy Airport in New York to Bodrum-Milas airport with a layover in Istanbul. Recently, round-trip fares for early September started around \$1,100 on the Web site.

GETTING AROUND

The only way from Bodrum-Milas airport to the villages of the Bodrum peninsula is by taxi. Rates, which depend on the precise destination, are posted on a sign next to the airport taxi stand. For most destinations, you'll pay from 40 to 50 euros. Otherwise, taxis cost 1.8 new liras plus 2.5 new liras per

kilometer during the day. After midnight, rates rise to an initial charge of 2.75 liras and 3.5 liras per kilometer. Practically every village has a taxi stand.

You can travel between villages on the peninsula's network of inexpensive public minibuses. The distinctive green and white vehicles operate from dawn until after midnight, about every 20 minutes or so. Rates generally run 2.5 to 3 liras a ride.

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