

Turkish delight

TEN DAYS ON A HANDMADE, WOODEN GULET REVEALS A NEW GREEK ISLAND OR BEAUTIFUL STRETCH OF TURKISH COASTLINE EACH DAY. CRUISING THE DODECANESE WITH ONLY A VAGUE SCHEDULE AND A VERY RELAXED PACE, WE DISCOVER PLEASURES THAT ARE AS NATURAL, DELICIOUS AND ANCIENT AS ODYSSEUS' LEGENDARY JOURNEY FROM TROY TO ITHACA.





MAGIC IS ONE OF THOSE intangible, indefinable things, but everyone on our Turkish gulet agreed that our night in the ancient harbour of Knidos was, indeed, magical. After snorkeling above amphoras and other shipwreck artifacts more than 2,000 years old, hiking up to a lighthouse overlooking the Aegean for a sunset accompanied by the sweet red wine we brought along in a box, and a dinner of delicious Turkish delights (aubergine salad, fried hellim, assorted local seafood), we headed back to the ship. Overhead, we watched the longest lunar eclipse in more than a decade, and below, a rare occurrence—the water had become phosphorescent, the plankton in our calm harbour sparkling a neon green in the shadow of the moon. Swimming around the gulet, two women in our group became like snow angels, the water glittering and flashing an outline as they kicked and stroked the water. In the background, someone had tuned in a romantic pop song about *yakamoz*—the Turkish term for phosphorescence—on their iPhone. Although I couldn't understand the lyrics, which were in Turkish, the melody was haunting, and I later learned what the singer was saying. “My lover is like *yakamoz*, she disappears in the moonlight,” the crooner had crooned. “So I want the moon to go, and her to stay.”

While that night was certainly special, it was just one of many extraordinary experiences onboard the Zeus during a 10-day cruise along the coast of southeast Turkey and the Dodecanese Islands of Greece. We sailed from Bodrum, Turkey, a seaside resort which teems with visitors in the summer months and serves as the launch point for most gulet

cruises, which take advantage of Bodrum's close proximity to many of the most picturesque Greek islands (which, by comparison, would take hours and hours to reach from Athens). Although just three years old, the Zeus, a twin-masted, 100-foot ship hand-built of mahogany and teak in Bodrum's shipyards, was constructed in a style that dates back to the ancients and follows traditional trade routes—which may or may not have been detailed in Homer's *Odyssey* (depending on your interpretation)—using its small size to navigate into tiny harbours and little bays all along the way.

Gulet (pronounced “*goo-let*”) cruises are usually small operations, and this one was especially so. Skippered and owned by an eccentric, experienced and extremely self-reliant captain named Selahattin Cura, who drew the plans for the Zeus himself (making sure that they did not include any navigational tools, not even a simple compass), the ship was chartered by Istanbul-based Avanti Tourism, which runs only a handful of these cruises each year. The owner of Avanti, a gregarious Turk named Sidar Duman, served as our personal guide, and most of the eight guests who filled the ship's five available staterooms had a personal connection to him or had learned about the cruise by word of mouth.

Despite a schedule that introduced a new island or village each day, life was luxuriously slow onboard the Zeus. Days typically began with a late breakfast, followed a couple hours of sailing, a Mediterranean lunch and a leisurely swim in a crystal-clear aquamarine bay – usually surrounded by nothing but soaring mountains and the goats that inhabited their lower flanks. Shoes were verboten.



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Afternoon naps became routine. Raki, the anise-flavoured alcohol of Turkey, flowed freely in the evenings. Friendships came fast among guests and with the small crew of four (“To us!” became a common mealtime toast). And although the staterooms are much larger than on most gulets—each featuring a nice armoire, with room to move on both sides of the full-sized beds and an ensuite bathroom—almost everyone opted to spend nights sleeping on deck, under a wide open sky of twinkling stars.

But while the pace was slow, this cruise was quite different than the beach and bay itineraries that gulets generally follow, which focus on relaxation and little more. Cura and Duman are both history buffs – to the point that Duman is involved in an organization that builds ships that appear in legendary texts and sails them to see if they actually work – and they included much of the region’s rich history on our trip. And that started with the ship itself, whose design, while popularized in Bodrum in the 1970s, derives from a style that hasn’t changed very much over several millennia. “The design is special, custom made to handle the Aegean waves, which have a 10-foot gap between them,” says Duman as we sit together with the mutton-chopped, wild-haired Salo on one of the last days of the trip. Duman adds that building and sailing of wooden boats in the modern world is something both rare and extraordinary. “This boat, it’s something alive, not like steel and fiberglass. At night, you can hear the wood settling. We put up the sails today, like our ancestors have been doing since 2,000 BC. They’re not far from us.”

And just like in days long past, our itinerary made room for a measure of flexibility, in part because we sought to use our sails as much as possible. While we had originally planned a round-trip from Bodrum to Santorini, a spot of bad weather further west kept us amongst the calmer waters of the Dodecanese,





Zeus' captain Selahttin Cura (left) and the owner of Avanti, Sidar Duman (right) with their guests.

with Patmos, the island where the Apostle John wrote the Biblical book of Revelation (also known as the Apocalypse), being one of our first stops. "Saint John came to Patmos using the exact same route that we did, with the same speed, anchored probably somewhere near us, and followed the mule path that we walked up to reach his cave," says Duman.

But we certainly had a lot more fun than the ancients, something aided by Duman's easygoing nature—his response to almost all requests (from simple queries like, "Can we stop here for a coffee?" to fairly major adjustments to our daily schedule)

was an enthusiastic "Why not?!", often followed up with an equally ebullient "Let's go for it!" On the island of Leros, we climbed hundreds of steps to the ruins of a Byzantine fortress and the windmills that overlook its main harbour, then dined on souvlaki and saganaki (washed down with ouzo) at Zorba's, a small seaside taverna where our table sat just inches from gentle, lapping waves. On the volcanic island of Nisyros we drove on winding roads, up and over the edge of its caldera, then strode down into the crater, still steaming, left by a number of eruptions, stopping along the way to visit a natural sauna and explore charming villages, some clinging to the hillside, others along the sea. And those who chose to sleep outside after an evening strolling around the tiny, quirky island of Arki (population 54) were awakened at dawn by the clanging of hundreds of goat bells, clanging noisily as their shepherd, with great whoops and whistles, moved the herd to the far side of the island.

Our small group also learned about the region's culture and a bit about sailing. On Kalymnos, we chatted with fishermen and sponge divers, the latter of which recalled the heyday of that industry, when young men flocked here and dove into dangerously deep waters in search of a (then) valuable prize. At Palionisos—a tiny, remote inlet surrounded by a small handful of buildings—we dined at a four-table taverna owned by Duman's friend Niko, who played us Greek folk songs on his lute. And onboard, those who were willing helped raise the sails and learned from Duman and Cura how to read navigational charts, triangulate a position, and tie a simple bowline knot—a deceptively difficult task that easily foiled the educated bunch of teachers, bankers and lawyers in our group.

Back in Bodrum harbour for our farewell meal, our last on board, Duman took a sip of Raki and offered his own interpretation of *The Odyssey*—one that fit well with our own experiences over the past ten days. "Can you see now how it took Odysseus ten years to get from Troy to Ithaca? He could have trimmed his sails and been there in a few days," Duman posited, then voiced a revisionist theory: that the man was simply enjoying himself far too much on the islands we'd visited to make a speedy return home. "Can't you just see him? I'll bet he said, 'Maybe we should spend an extra year here! Why not?!'" 🍷

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