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Cruising The COASTLINE Of The GODS

By David Fromkin

SATURDAY. BODRUM. "Let it happen": elsewhere merely an attitude, here on the seacoast of Turkey, a way of life. "Actually, I prefer not to have lunch," says the ship owner when a sign on the door of the restaurant I had chosen says that it's closed. "In this heat..." he says, gesturing towards the quay, bathed in midsummer midday sunshine. We board Durukos V, the yacht I've chartered from him effective tomorrow morning, and sit in the shade of an awning covering the aft deck. A breeze coming off the sea cools us.

"I brought this from Istanbul," says the ship owner, producing a tin of fresh caviar-evidence of the flourishing Turkish barter trade with neighboring Iran and Russia. The ship owner-his name is Demir Duru- piles mounds of the large grained caviar on crackers, and we munch intently. Soon, big though the tin of caviar is, we've emptied it. We turn to watch the passing scene. Tourists of all nations crowd the docks, the open-air restaurants, the cafes and the covered Oriental market where the members of my charter party are now on a shopping expedition.

The ship owner finds tall glasses and puts ice cubes in them. From a cupboard he takes a bottle of *raki*, the anise flavoured Turkish spirit. "I never drink during the day," he says. "This isn't drinking; it's saying welcome aboard."

We watch the ice transform the clear liquid into a milky fluid. Raki here, anis in Spain and France, pastis in France, ouzo in Greece, cousins all; not identical but the same in essence. Communion: a sailor at a Marseilles bar, a fisherman in a Greek island cafe, a fashion model in a millionaire's villa in Sardinia-around the Mediterranean, in a shared moment we lift the same drink to our lips. Cheers, everybody.

The crew brings us bowls of ripe figs and slabs of goat cheese. The richness of the fruit and the pungency of the cheese are bound together by the licorice of the raki. "Eating during the day makes me feel heavy," says the ship owner, "it's better that we didn't have lunch."

From below deck, steaming bowls emerge. The captain, a restaurateur in earlier days, does the cooking aboard; and remembering my tastes, has made *melemen*, fresh eggs scrambled with onions, peppers and tomatoes. The ship owner opens a chilled bottle of the flinty local white wine. Later he and I each have a second bowl of the melemen, he asks. "Eating and drinking... in this heat?"

"I found these in the market," he says, putting lush peaches in front of us. "But there's no more wine on ice. Will you mind Champagne?" A bottle of Bollinger emerges from the icebox and pops. We drench ourselves in Champagne fizz and peach juice.

Over aromatic Turkish coffee , our conversation turns to the dry nut cakes in the bazaar. We could send the crew to buy some, and some pine honey from the hills to pour over them, which we could have with the next bottle of Champagne...

It's the middle of the afternoon when the others come aboard. We hear tales of their shopping in the covered market: the *pazar* . Turkish rugs. Brass tables. Bargains so great they practically paid for the trip. ("Why, in New York the leather would have cost six times as much!") Smells, sounds and sights of the Moslem East, the kneeling camels above all. "And how about you?" they ask. "Where did you have lunch?"

"We didn't," I say. "The restaurant was closed, so Demir and I skipped lunch."

WE TOUR DURUKOS V. SHE IS A TWO-MASTED MOTOR-sailer, though the sails are used only occasionally. She cruises at 11-12 knots, and has been known to go up to 14-15. Wide (21 feet) and riding high out of the water, she is 83 feet long. She is built of the local yellow pine and gleams in the sunshine. Her deck is enclosed by a wooden balustrade. An outdoor dining table with chairs, under the awning, dominates the aft deck.

The typical Bodrum-built boat is called a *gulet* . Its aft deck is rounded and encloses foam mattresses, forming an enormous playpen for the lolling passengers. To increase space below deck, Durukos V is built differently: the rounded rear has been sliced off, so that there is a flat high wall in back, making it look like a galleon in a pirate film.

You see the difference when you go below. A typical gulet of this size has six "double" cabins for passengers (roomy enough only for single occupancy, in my view) each with a cubicle for shower and w.c., and here's the point each identical. No problems of one person having a better cabin than another.

Durukos V has four such cabins -but in the rear, assigned to me, is a fifth cabin: a master stateroom such as you might find on an ocean liner. The w.c. is like a real toilet. There's a dressing room, a table and chairs, benches on which to lounge. Shall I feel guilty about having a room more luxurious than the others? No.

SPEND TONIGHT ABOARD, ADVISES THE SHIP OWNER, TO GET an early start in the morning. So the others, with the help of the captain and three-man crew, go to bring bags down from the hotel. Remaining aboard, I survey the harbour scene. Bodrum is a yachting capital of the Asia Minor coast, and in her enormous harbor hundreds of vessels ride at anchor bumper-to-bumper, their thrusting masts forming a forest in the sea. In high season, why are so many in port? Why aren't they sailing away to hidden coves and high adventures?

SUNSET. DRINKS ON BOARD. WE ARE OPPOSITE THE MASSIVE 15th-century crusader castle that dominates the skyline. From it, Bodrum spreads out along the sea in both directions. The castle is European and Christian; the port is international; but behind the seafront, as the muezzin's call from the minaret reminds us, lies the Middle East. We enter it after we debark to dine ashore. We wander in the dark through narrow, winding lanes.

The ship owner, our guide and host, finally stops in a dark passage between high walls, and knocks on a wooden door. The door is opened, and to our surprise we are led into a garden restaurant of considerable sophistication, where we dine on a dozen Turkish hors d'oeuvres followed by grilled meats and fresh fruit.

Midnight. We are by the sea at the open-air Halikarnas disco, a fantasy out of Hollywood or Disneyland. A white, marbly temple with columns and balustraded winding staircases to the balconies, lit by moving laser beams flashing on and off, with floats overhead, and the illuminated crusader castle in the background. Family, friends, Cabinet ministers and provincial governors fill the tables and stands above, while the action takes place on the dance floor below. There the young of all Europe, and Turks as well, gyrate, prance, jump and shout to music of the '60s, '70s, and '80s in rites of summer that might seem not unfamiliar to the ancient gods and spirits who once inhabited this coast: Pan, Dionysus, Priapus, Bacchus, and nymphs and fauns too many to mention.

Durukos V anchors just offshore, positioned to carry us away. I see that she isn't alone-and now understand why so many luxury yachts stay in harbour. The wealthy come down from Istanbul to charter them for a ringside seat, anchoring them each night next to Halikarnas, to sit from midnight till dawn, listening to what were once their songs, and watching the writhing bodies of the young.

The Blues Brothers appears on an enormous screen. Young people of all nationalities throw arms around one another, swaying together, singing "Every-BODY NEEDS some - BODY." Rick, one of our passengers, plunges into a crowd of whirling English girls. Everyone is drawn in. It's not my thing, but it's the thing to do; I find myself on the dance floor doing what should be done in the go-with-it spirit of the coast.

At 3a.m. I lead us to the boat. With no moon to guide us, Durukos V slips out of the harbour, cruising for an hour through the inky darkness until we reach a deserted cove. We anchor.

Wearing a robe, I come on deck and head for the ladder. I pass two English girls, seated uncertainly in deck chairs and looking not quite sure why they're here. I say: "I want you to promise me something. I want you to promise that you'll never tell anyone-ANYONE-that I went swimming without clothes." They nod solemnly. They promise. They look away. I throw off my robe and go naked into the sea.

Morning. I'm first on deck for breakfast. From somewhere in the vicinity of Rick's quarters, the English girls emerge draped in impromptu sarongs, the one in a bedspread, the other in a tablecloth. They join me for coffee. I ask whether they're coming on the cruise, but they say they have jobs in Bodrum. If only, they say, they had met us a week before, they could have made arrangements.

After breakfast Durukos V returns to Bodrum harbour. The girls go ashore in a dinghy. They wave to Rick from the pier as we leave.

Sunday. Mersincik. We've crossed from the northern to the southern tip of the Gulf of Kos. The ship handled well, and it was a smooth ride. We hit one patch of rough sea, and rolled side-to-side rather than backwards-and-forwards; so I can see why they unfurl the sail as stabilizers in bad weather. But the turbulence subsided quickly. And now that we've arrived here, the sea has put on a look of wide-eyed innocence, as though denying that it ever could be wild. Water bluer than I've ever seen and vodka-clear to depths of what must be a least 40 or 50 feet.

Winds and waves sometimes dictate the path yachts must follow, but not to us today. We have gentle breezes and a waveless sea: therefore, the luxury of choice. There are three marvellous itineraries along the Turkish coast. From Bodrum, we can do one of two five-to-seven day trips: either a circuit of the Gulf of Kos returning to Bodrum, or else a voyage south along the coast to Marmaris, debarking there. The third itinerary, taking a bit longer perhaps a week to ten days is from Marmaris, heading farther south and east to Antalya.

The sheltered Gulf of Kos is the easiest trip and closest to civilization, but I choose the voyage to Marmaris because of the variety of secluded anchorages along the way, offering the best swimming in the world. Although it's the Marmaris-to-Antalya trip that has so many wild shorelines and ancient sites to see, we will have at least one such experience too: at Knidos.

Monday. We round craggy, windswept Cape Krio, where a mountain range juts out into the sea, and anchor in what 2500 years ago was the commercial harbour of Knidos. Across a narrow bridge of land lies what in those days was the military harbour, and in antiquity there may well have been a canal through the land-bridge enabling ships to pass from one harbour to another, avoiding the perilous rounding of the Cape.

Knidos, rising like an amphitheater from both sides of its double harbor, was one of the major cities of classical antiquity. I was here years ago when the American archaeologist Iris Love was excavating its ruins, and so can guide the others up to the heights where Iris discovered the long-hidden round temple of Aphrodite, goddess of love, whom the Romans called Venus. Here, on a pedestal uncovered by Iris, stood the most beautiful work of art of the ancient world: the first nude female in the history of Greek sculpture, the naked Aphrodite of Praxiteles.

Descending to the sea, I enter the little cafe by the beach and bargain for a Knidian specialty: the succulent lobster-like but clawless *cigales de mer* that are found only in these waters, and a few others. After much bargaining I buy two of them and a langouste. I start back toward the boat but am stopped by one of the guards at the site who remembers me from Iris Love days. He has a gift for me, he says. He takes me back up the road about a hundred feet to a stone furnace, where his wife is cooking bread over a wood fire. He gives me a bread out of the furnace. I carry it on board, and we chew hot, grainy bread on deck as we motor out of the harbour. A gift lovingly given; a gift from the city of love.

Tuesday. Bencik. We're now at the eastern end of the Dorian peninsula, of which Knidos is the western tip. It's the peninsula's narrowest point; from here it's only a few miles over the hills to the Gulf of Kos on the far side.

This is the scenic highlight of our voyage. Rick says it's like cruising through the Alps: as though Switzerland were flooded and only the peaks of the highest mountains remained above water level, with us sailing the high waters between them. So twisting and indented is the coastline that from many points I don't see the way out, and it's as though we were on a lake surrounded by mountain peaks. The number and variety of anchorages confuse; a distinctive rock formation off Bencik is all that orients me.

Our captain is a master at discovering coves that we can have to ourselves. To remember: the most important thing in selecting a boat to charter is the captain, who must know the coast intimately, be likable, and speak English. Yet there is nothing in the brochure the yacht charterer sends you that tells you about him- so ask the charterer. You might even want to call and interview the captain over the telephone- I've found the phone connections between New York and Bodrum to be excellent. But in the end you're essentially betting on the reliability of your charterer.

Wednesday. A deserted cove near Selimiye. It's 8 a.m. and, while the others still sleep, I swim around the tip, out of sight of the boat, where there is nothing of man to be seen: no houses, no boats, only sea, cliffs, and sunlit, untroubled sky. The sea is still, and there is no breeze. I hear something extraordinary: silence. It strikes me that even when staying overnight in isolated countryside, I've heard donkeys braying or cocks crowing. Here there's only the occasional tinkle of a ripple in the water. When, I wonder, have I last heard absolute quiet-not the silence of emptiness, but that of peace and contentment? It's as though I'm alone in the sea in the morning of the world.

Thursday. Dirsek, a full bay empty of people.

Friday. Bozburun. An agreeable place, but not strong on character. We dine on shore.

Saturday. The ancient Loryma. A colony and trading post established on the mainland by ancient Rhodians on the site closest to the island of Rhodes. Fortified walls on the heights: Hellenistic, about 2300 years old. Good snorkeling: I find no treasure (though others have here, from ancient shipwrecks at the bottom) but am happy enough as is, delighted to transform myself into a marine creature, however briefly.

Sunday. Marmaris. Our port of debarkation. The others spill into taxis on the quai to be taken to Dalaman airport. I am staying on for a few days in Marmaris, a sprawling port town that rivals Bodrum.

The ship owner arrives by car from Bodrum. We sit together under a yellow awning in a sun-flooded bar on the dock and sip ice-cold draught beer. He is happy; he and his wife have just had their second child. She and the children are with her parents in Istanbul. Durukos V is to meet her next charter party in Antalya in a week. He hasn't had a vacation in years, so will take one now by cruising from Marmaris to Antalya. We discuss the route. Strange and marvelous Caunus, hidden in its forest of marsh weeds; the ruins of Xanthus, with its long sweep of sand beach; the charming port towns of Kas and Kalkan; Kekova, a sailor's paradise with its dozens of islets, and snorkeler's dream with its sunken tombs and the remains of an underwater city; unexcavated Olympos, ruins hidden in a tangled forest;

Phaselis, where one walks the main street as the Emperor Hadrian did; and Antalya itself, the splendid beach resort so close to the great sites of Perge, Side and Aspendos.

For scenery, swimming and sailing, Asia Minor offers the outstanding coastline in the Mediterranean-indeed, in the world- but it's more than landscape: it's a voyage in time. Our civilization comes from this coast and its offshore islands. Here lived Homer; here philosophy, history, mathematics and medicine were invented; here (the English travel writer Freya Stark somewhere remarks) people first discovered happiness. An encounter with the Turkish seacoast can offer more than the surface pleasures, and I envy the ship owner his voyage south.

"Why don't you come along ?" he asks. "Of course it won't be like a charter; we can't linger too long ; we must arrive in Antalya on time."

I start to say that I can't: reservations would have to be changed and appointments broken . But the point of coming to this part of the world is to escape, however briefly, from the tyranny of jobs and obligations. I don't want to be like the girls who waved goodbye in Bodrum. The joy is in being able to say yes to the unplanned and unexpected. I down my beer and say : "Yes"

So I bring my bags on board Durukos V. From shops and the open market at the edge of town, the crew members have brought back a rainbow of colorful fruits, melons, cheeses, fresh breads, imported sausages, wines ... As we motor out of the harbor and head out to sea, I sink down into a chair on deck. It's past midday.

"Demir" I say. "I'm hungry. Let's skip lunch again."

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