



TAKING THE WATERS

The most stress-busting holiday is one where you are surrounded by natural beauty and have no choice but to relax, while your every whim is indulged. Where to find this elusive package? Climb aboard...

By Kate Wilson and Gotlhokwang Angoma

There's nothing as satisfying as getting on a plane in the dead of a wet, cold, dark South African winter and heading towards a balmy coastline. Specifically, to a place where the warm Aegean sea laps against the varnished wooden hulls of so many lovingly-tended Turkish gulets – one of which you'll be staying on.

As mood-altering holidays go, sailing the Turkish coast, with a few excursions to the lesser-known and Eurotrash-free Greek Islands, ranks up there with a month spent meditating at an ashram. Only it's much more fun. Whether you want to chill or need some serious recuperation, these cruises are like the modern-day version of "taking the waters" – a real tonic for the body and soul. The week before we boarded the *Naviga* in Bodrum, a guest had finished her fifth trip of the year. She was recovering from tick-bite fever and her doctors prescribed "the boat".

"Doing the boat" has become a bit of a ritual among some of my friends, many of whom have high-stress jobs and relish the enforced relaxation that comes with being marooned in the middle of a vast expanse of turquoise for a week. There's no negotiating crazy foreign roads, no angst over daily budgets, no harassment by restaurant pimps (which happens a lot in Turkey). It's a holiday in which absolutely no decision-making is required beyond whether to read or swim or just sip an ice-cold Efes (Turkish beer) while watching the crew hoist the sails in their perfectly synchronised ballet of ropes and knots and biceps.

Our ketch, the *Naviga*, is more spacious than a gulet and sleeps 16, including the crew, who over the course of seven days become like family: there's Ali, the child-like chef, who cooks vast quantities of food and teaches us his version of "Old Maid"; Serfet, the senior deckhand, who looks like a Turkish matinee idol; shy Bariç, who is just 16 and takes a shine to my blonde sister; and the dashing Captain Hakkan, who has worked his way up from deckhand and tells us his ambition is "to buy the boat". (He's 25.) Sailing is what they love and, despite the fact that it takes them away from their families for months at a time, their passion is infectious. Fortunately, the company that owns these boats, Sailing Cruises in Comfort (SCIC), prides itself on offering the maximum amount of time under sail (rather than motoring), so the crew gets to indulge their passion.



The island of Symi seen from the boat.

SCIC is owned and run by a Dutch entrepreneur, Loes Douze, who was introduced to sailing on her parents' yacht, aged six. A pastime beloved of the Dutch, she inevitably married a sailor and got into the business herself. Dubbed the "Bikini Queen of Bodrum" by a fellow journalist, Loes has a penchant for matching her bikinis with the crews' bright Polo shirts. When she describes the SCIC experience, she says: "We're not selling boats, we are selling an emotion." She's been on more of these cruises than you've had hot dinners and is well-versed in the group dynamics on board: "There's always an entertainer, someone quiet and someone a little different..." she says diplomatically, whereas I'd say there's always a mother figure, a freak and a know-it-all (that might be me), but as long as everyone fulfils their role, it works and the boat sails on.

Four of the Dutch women on board the *Naviga* with us are friends, but are all from completely different parts of the Netherlands. It turns out they met on a cruise years ago and enjoyed each other's company so much they now book

the same dates every year. I notice they never talk about their jobs or lives off the boat at all; it's as though there's an unspoken pact that while they occupy this space everything else is suspended. But then, my Dutch is non-existent.

The most endearing of their group is Ada, who is 82 and has been booking holidays through Loes since her husband died 10 years ago. The other three women – Ludwien, Karien and Karla – have embraced her with a warmth and respect that is touching to witness. They all clearly adore her for her youthfulness and fearlessness – what the Dutch call "sonderangst" – as she clammers down volcano craters and leaps over my head off the side of the boat as I climb delicately down the ladder. Needless to say, she's in perfect health, quaffing rosé happily over a game of Jenga and waving to the other captains on passing boats. They've all known her since they were teenage deckhands.

The relationships between these women are fascinating to watch, and more than that, the support they offer Ada is more important than even she realises. She has no family or children, and on these trips she's found a companionship she might otherwise never have known so

late in the game. And it has changed her life, in no small way. Social relationships are far more important than most people realise; in fact, a number of combined US studies have shown that having adequate social support was associated with a 50 percent increased likelihood of survival. Conversely, the health risks associated with poor or inadequate social relationships are comparable to smoking and greater than more well-known factors such as obesity or lack of physical activity.

The Mediterranean diet

Among the many drawcards of a week spent bobbing around in the wild blue yonder with nothing to concern you beyond your next meal, is the next meal. The food on board SCIC's boats is authentic Turkish cuisine, made with seasonal ingredients, in the tiny galley kitchen where Ali is king. It's typical Mediterranean fare: garlic-infused, tomato-based casseroles, bright peppers and striped zucchini stuffed with fragrant rice, Turkish-style couscous with just-picked green beans and spanking fresh sea bream, crisply grilled on a little barbecue attached to the side of the boat.

Every dinner begins with an array of meze plates: lemon-doused samphire or "sea beans", the asparagus-like seaweed that is typical of the Aegean; minted yoghurt; wedges of crimson beetroot and, if you're lucky, some piping hot borek, flaky pastry cigars filled with melting white cheese.

It's a diet based on vegetables, grains, olive oil and seafood, rather than meat, which means that even after a week of three rather large meals a day, you won't necessarily have piled on the kilos (unless you've made a serious dent in the rosé supplies). This is also because the Mediterranean diet is known to be rich in antioxidants, polyphenolic compounds and fibre, all of which allow your body to metabolise carbs and fat more efficiently. It's associated with a lowered risk of heart disease and studies have even shown a link between adherence to this diet and a lowered risk of breast cancer.

After a week, we're addicted to the red pepper "biber" flakes that are sprinkled on everything, and can't imagine breakfast without olives and feta. On the nights when we have dinner on shore, we miss Ali's careful explanation of each dish; his enormous pride at serving us lobster; his bemusement at the Dutch cheering when he's made chips instead of potatoes. Sharing in the Turkish culture is one of the many joys of the trip; drinking tea in one of the traditional little tulip-shaped glasses one day, Ada laughs and admits: "I never drink tea at home!"



From left to right: Why look before you leap?; the Blue Mosque as seen from the roof terrace of the Hotel Ibrahim Pasha in Istanbul; Ali's stuffed peppers on the *Naviga*.

In between soaking up copious amounts of vitamin D and taking flying leaps (eventually) off the side of the boat into the impossibly blue water, we also manage to visit four of the Dodecanese Greek Islands. The combination of wandering the streets of tiny harbour towns, aimlessly admiring the beautiful silver jewellery and leather sandals, and lying on the sundeck watching flying fish darting behind the boat is an incredibly powerful antidote to a year's worth of deadlines. Trust me.

However, if you're one of those people who can't stand to do next to nothing, it needn't be all seven-hours-on-deck with a bodice-ripper either. SCIC offers several themed cruises in addition to the Greek Islands itinerary, and one of the most popular is hosted by Theodore Kyriakou, a celebrated Greek chef from London, who will not only show you how to whip up dolmades while under full sail, but may also reveal some of the islands' hidden gems. A fellow food nerd couple, who have "done the boat" three times, still reminisce about their culinary cruise and the restaurant they were led to by Theodore, way beyond the harbour lights and shops selling sea sponges, where they ate the freshest fish, elephant beans and piles of glistening pink Symi shrimp; a place unsullied by guidebooks and tour groups.

There are also cruises for budding photographers and artists, with trained teachers on board, and others that offer golfing, archaeology and, most recently, Pilates, yoga and meditation on the sundeck, so you can perform your sun salutations as they were meant to be done. In fact, a UK study that looked at the effects of exercising in nature on self-esteem and mood showed that natural environments produced significant improvements and that exercise near water was particularly effective. And let's face it, you don't get closer to water than this. >

SAILING CRUISES IN COMFORT

THE PRICE: One-week cruises start at 790 euros (about R7 765) and include all breakfasts, lunches, snacks, alcohol and other drinks and five dinners on board. There's also a single passenger discount for a two-week cruise and a number of special offers. Visit www.scicsailing.eu, email info@scicsailing.eu or call +44 758 300 1766.

THE ROUTE: Fly to Bodrum via Amsterdam on KLM or, preferably, via Istanbul on Turkish Airlines – where you can then spend your first or last few days experiencing one of Europe's most incredible cities.

WHERE TO STAY (ON LAND): When in Istanbul, stay in Sultan Hamet at the charming boutique Hotel Ibrahim Pasha, which is within walking distance of both the Aya Sofia and the Grand Bazaar. A hidden gem in the old part of the city, the hotel's beautiful interiors combine old-world charm with contemporary style; some of the spacious rooms overlook a bougainvillea-filled interior courtyard and there's a mosaic-tiled rooftop terrace that looks directly onto the dome and gilded minarets of the Blue Mosque. It's an unforgettable and inexpensive find in a spectacular city. www.ibrahimpasha.com



PHOTOGRAPHS: SCIC SAILING, KATE WILSON, BRANDON DE KOCK

CRUISE CONTROL

By Gotlhokwang Angoma

I've always loved the sea. In fact, it's one of life's random acts of cruelty that I was born and raised in Joburg. The city of gold, the heart of inland South Africa – where we resort to bringing sand and a bucket of water along to a “beach party”. So, given the chance to fulfil my dream of island-hopping, snorkel in hand, while singing “If you like piña coladas”, I jumped at the opportunity to cruise from Durban to Portuguese Island aboard the luxurious *MSC Sinfonia*.

Contrary to popular belief, cruise ships are not dominated by blue-rinsed old ladies and their bald husbands. In fact, “cruises are popular among families where children up to age 18 cruise free,” says Allan Foggitt, marketing director of Starlight Cruises. But you don't have to be part of the Brady Bunch to enjoy cruising. “They're also popular with students and the younger market who enjoy the party atmosphere,” he adds.

The cruise industry is a booming business, one that served 70 840 South African passengers in the 2009/2010 season. This market is the fastest growing sector of the travel industry worldwide, with new and bigger ships on order by all the cruise lines. But why the increase? Perhaps passengers have discovered the health benefits of these floating holidays: a Harvard study found that people with low levels of vitamin D were twice as likely to suffer heart attacks as those who received higher levels of the sunshine vitamin. Also, studies show that sea air helps balance levels of serotonin, the happy hormone, making you feel relaxed and able to rest more soundly. As if that wasn't enough, the journal *Skin Research and*

Technology found that seawater increases the elasticity of the skin, improving its outer appearance. But perhaps the main reason more South Africans set sail is that cruises are great value. “You pay once and receive accommodation, four meals daily, world-class entertainment and access to facilities one would expect at any top resort,” says Foggitt.

With this in mind, I set off to uncover more radiant skin and a cheerier self – hopefully thanks to the Indian Ocean.

Anchors away

Day one: check-in is not quite the symphony you'd expect. With about 2 000 fellow seafarers queuing for documentation verification, it feels a bit more like Home Affairs than a magical getaway. But all is forgotten as you enter the ship and are greeted by the stylish décor of the main deck. Reception is on deck five, along with all the bars, restaurants and a shopping Mecca of premium branded merchandise. My suite, on the tenth deck,

is unexpectedly spacious, with a balcony overlooking the wide-open sea.

Shortly after boarding, we wave from the top deck as the harbour crowds see us off. As the ship moves smoothly, outward bound, I sit in my crow's nest alongside the pool on deck 11, with time and sea stretched out in front of me and a mojito by my side.

If there's one thing you need to know about cruising, it's this: the dining options are overwhelming, from the infamous midnight buffets and ice cream stations to the late-night pizzerias. And it doesn't take a nutritionist to tell you that some of the options are your heart's worst nightmare. In the morning you're greeted by trembling eggs with crispy bacon strips, juicy sausages and loaves of toast. I choose option B: chilled fruit salad. At lunch you're faced with a cruise-sized buffet. I choose option B: fruit. The buff-looking, protein-hungry guy in front of me helps himself to the vast meat selection. I'm saving myself for dinner – the best of national and regional Italian cuisine. Totally worth the sweat from the in-house gym I'm going to use later.

The man responsible for my getting a real taste of Italy is executive chef Pietro Roccasalvo. A dead-ringer for *Days of our Lives'* Stefano Dimera, he appears to have a stereotypically fiery temperament. But you might be bad-tempered too if you had to turn an order of 2 800kg fish, 14 000kg veg and 17 000kg of fruit into cuisine. His dishes have to be on par with any four- or five-star restaurant. Ingredients have to be fresh. He has to taste every dish he serves – it takes a man with 23 years' experience to handle this kind of pressure.



Sea air helps balance levels of serotonin, the happy hormone, making you feel relaxed and able to rest more soundly

Breakfast on board the *Naviga*.

QUELLING THE QUEASE

Don't let motion sickness put a damper on your travels

“Your sense of balance and equilibrium is affected – so I find plasters behind your ears work.” – Cruise director and comedian Stephen Cloete

“Try acupressure: apply pressure approximately two finger-widths below the inside of the wrist and hold to provide relief.” – Medical advisor to Netcare Travel Clinics Dr Pete Vincent

“You feel less ill if you have dry food such as lightly grilled chicken breast or plain pasta.” – Executive chef Pietro Roccasalvo

“I find having ginger ale and ginger biscuits settles queasiness.” – Assistant chief animator Rebecca Briggs

“You can medicate it with Cinnarizine. Take an hour prior to departure and repeat every six to eight hours.” – Dr Pete Vincent

Perhaps he staves off the stress by rediscovering his inner calm at the MSC Aurea Spa. Another option is the onboard entertainment. Studies conducted at the Loma Linda University found that the anticipation of a positive laughter experience reduces potentially detrimental stress hormones. “Our findings lead us to believe that by seeking out positive experiences that make us laugh we can do a lot with our physiology to stay well,” says lead researcher Dr Lee Berk. Bingo!

Land ahoy!

The highlight of this particular cruise, of course, was the destination. Just off the bay of Maputo, from the comfort of the *Sinfonia*, Portuguese Island looks like an emerald oasis in the middle of the ocean. Cruise members – looking a lot like little Oros men in their life jackets – zoom towards the island via Zodiac boats to embark on their shore excursions: guided beach walks, whale watching, game fishing, sea kayaking and snorkelling. Approaching the two and a half square kilometre protected Portuguese Island reserve, the first thing your eyes register is that the only inhabitants of this piece of land (apart from a handful of locals who themselves

paddled over from the mainland to vend curios and Mozambican beer) are the crew members, setting up for a braai.

With your first step off the Zodiac, you're met by warm sea, then instantly by blistering-hot soft sand – flip-flops are a must. As far as the eye can see there's nothing but the pristine beach, flanked with dense vegetation: a real “desert island” experience. To the far right lies the coastline of the larger island of Inhaca. Strolling along the shore, you encounter lagoons peppered with groups of people taking a cool reprieve from the tropical sun. Another drawback: underwater visibility is *National Geographic*-like, and you're guaranteed sightings of starfish, gigantic crabs, spiky sea urchins and tropical shoals if you choose to snorkel along this vibrant reef – ideal for first-timers.

After exploring the depths, you're whisked back to the mother ship for more cruising – the perfect balance of thrill-seeking and mojito-fuelled relaxation. Arr, indeed.

Sound good? For information, prices and bookings, visit www.msccruises.co.za



From left to right: Bingo! Tlhoki samples the onboard entertainment; the spa on board the *MSC Sinfonia*; Captain Hakkan; a stray bikini; an *MSC Sinfonia* suite.