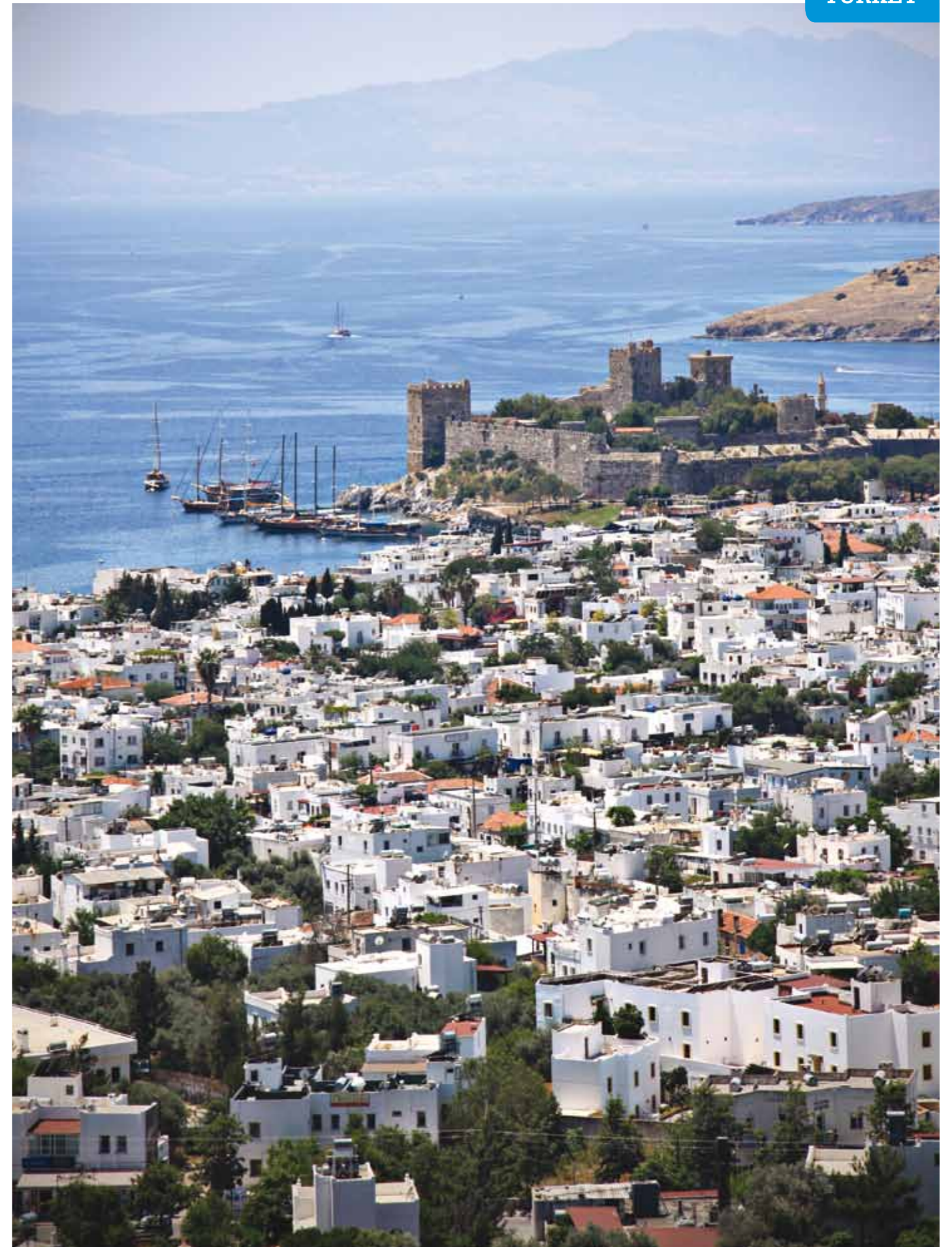


PUTTING WITH elves

If a golf holiday and a spot of sailing in the Mediterranean sounds like your bag, you might want to put Turkey on top of your wish list, reckons **Brandon de Kock**.

Below: Vita Park Golf Resort is the first 18-hole course on the Bodrum peninsula, but the area is exploding with tourism – as evidenced by the massive holiday-home cluster developments on the surrounding hills. **Right:** The picturesque town of Bodrum, with its famous castle and massive marina, truly is the gateway to the Aegean.

Maybe it's because it's not part of the EU, or perhaps it's the fact that among its eight neighbours are the likes of Iran, Iraq and Syria, but it seems Turkey's always been a bit under the radar as a holiday destination. The irony is that for centuries before the word tourism existed, Turkey was an extremely important piece of turf – geographically, the crossroads of Europe and Asia; a major trade junction and a very powerful empire. These days, however, the 70-something million Turks roaming free on 780 000 square kilometres on the edge of Europe are closer than any previous generations to being accepted as part of Europe rather than a fringe state – except perhaps by the Greeks who clearly still bear some historical grudges, having fought four major wars against their neighbour!



Against that rather brief and sketchy background, you'd probably be surprised that just two years ago, Turkey was voted the best new golf destination in Europe by the influential travel organisation IACTO. With numerous European countries taking notice of the fact that in topography, climate and lifestyle, the Turkish coast was comparable to places like Spain, holiday-home complexes starting filling with English, Dutch and German accents and the scene was set for a tourism boom. For golfers, it's the south-west corner that's of particular interest, primarily a 4 000-year-old port city called Antalya.

Today there are some 15 golf courses around Antalya and nearby Belek – a region that was once defined by small holiday towns and is still growing at an alarming rate. The courses, by all accounts, are spectacular – some bearing designer labels such as Faldo and Montgomerie, and others that appear as if they should. What's fascinating about this recent explosion of golf, however, is that it seems to be catching on in other areas, like the tip of the Anatolian peninsula that pokes out into the Aegean Sea separating Greece and Turkey. Which is how I found myself applying copious layers of sunscreen on a hotel balcony in a place called Bodrum, waiting for a shuttle to the Vita Park Golf Resort.

It started with an intriguing brochure from Sailing Cruises in Comfort – SCIC for short, pronounced, 'chic'. Having had the pleasure of embarking on an unforgettable seven-day sailing cruise of the Greek isles some years ago, the idea of a 'golf and sailing' option was honey to my inner bee – and after a day of flights and transfers, I was once more looking out over the tip of the Bodrum peninsula and waiting to meet up with the lovely Loes Douze – co-owner of SCIC and a woman who has not only been in the yacht cruise business for decades, but is also the undisputed bikini queen of Bodrum!

For the rich and famous of Istanbul, the hour's flight to



Bodrum GC's Caner Tuna (left) is a proud father to the quaint five-hole course.



The good ketch Nemesis under full sail is a wonderful thing – and the elves like Turgut (right) are expert at sailing her.



"IT'S HARD TO DESCRIBE JUST HOW GOOD LIFE IS ON BOARD THE NEMESIS WITHOUT GETTING ALL GUSHY..."

Bodrum is a quick escape to a seaside paradise that's become an international hotspot for tourism, late-night partying and, above all, sailing. Looking out over the famous old castle of Bodrum, built by the Crusaders in the 15th century, you have a clear view of Kos – and it's the marina's proximity to numerous clusters of Greek isles that attracts travellers wishing to set sail for a week or two and discover for themselves whether the brochures filled with clichéd Greek villages actually do exist. More of that later – let's talk golf.

My first foray was to the outskirts of town where, tucked away behind old walls and paddocks on the slopes of the surrounding hills, the charming Bodrum Golf Club announces itself in badged splendour. The charm comes from the fact that it's not really a 'GC', but rather an overgrown practice range complete with chipping area, bunkers, putting green and a five-hole pitch-and-putt course.

In its own words, Bodrum GC is designed as a 'social retreat' where interested folk can learn to play the game, enjoy the day spa and make use of the rather excellent restaurant serving a huge variety of 'international' dishes. It's clearly quite a hit with the local wedding

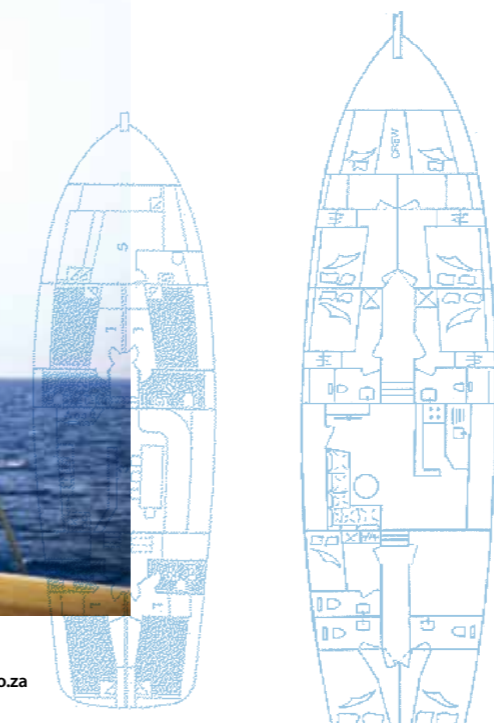
planners too – and for good reason. Sitting on the balcony enjoying a sundowner and a good meal, it's hard to imagine you're just outside a heaving marina town – and the wonderfully named Tuna brothers, Caner (who seems very much hands-on) and Tamer, who own the place are seriously welcoming.

The following day promised an altogether more traditional experience at a brand-new golf resort just 20 minutes outside Bodrum.

Notwithstanding the claims of Bodrum GC, Vita Park Golf Resort is, in fact, the first fully-fledged golf course in the area. It is built on the banks of Tuzla Lake (technically a lagoon) which is famous because, for the summer months, it turns into one of the few natural wildlife sanctuaries in Turkey with thousands of migrating birds taking refuge in its salty waters – including pink flamingoes.

The arrival of golf in the area coincides with a migration of an entirely different sort – namely sun-seeking tourists and holiday homeowners wanting to distance themselves from the hum and buzz of Bodrum.

In many ways then, Vita Park is a groundbreaking development – and looking up at the sprawling

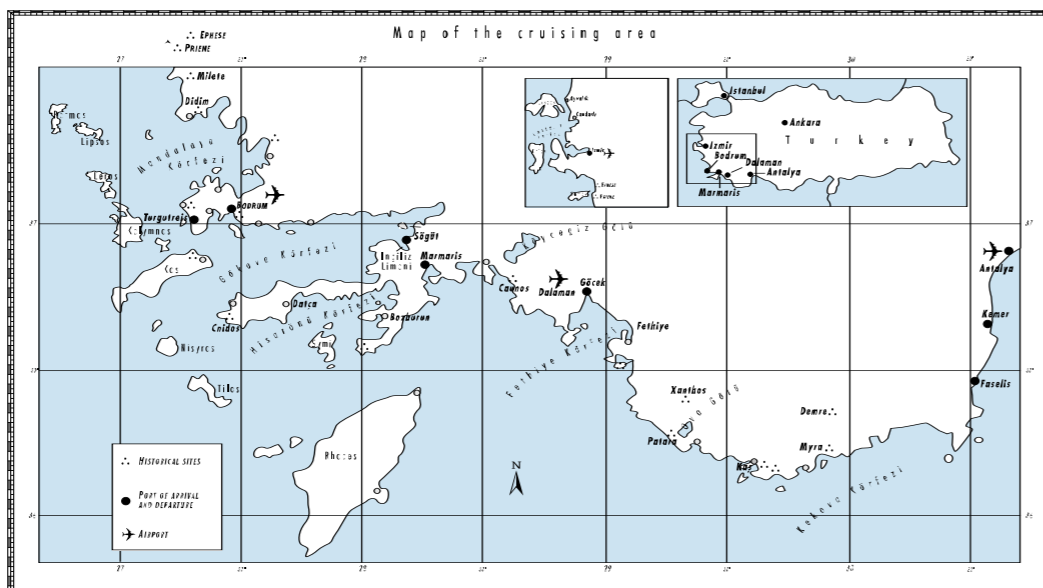


holiday-home complexes draped across the distant hills, I couldn't help feeling as if I were in the maternity ward of Turkey's second great golf destination.

The Milas course, now only two years old, won't blow your hair back, but it's a perfectly good opening salvo – a short, flat, resort-style course that's surprisingly tricky. Part of that is thanks to a plethora of water hazards and a prevailing wind that whips through the valleys of the surrounding hills. At just 5 850 metres off the tip of the tips, it's not going to stretch the long-hitter too much, but I have to admit feeling rather content playing a course where I couldn't hit any houses! Right now, it's an interesting aesthetic they have on the go: the intent was to create a links-style experience, but between the water hazards and the sudden appearance of red-sand waste bunkers and succulents halfway through the front nine, that description might be a little optimistic. If I were on holiday with mates and we decided to play a quick round, discovering Vita Park would satisfy the golfing urge. But it's fairly clear from the course, the humble clubhouse and the rather extensive golf academy that it's the start of something, rather than the end result.

Indeed, in the clubhouse there is an architect's drawing of phase two in the Vita Park story – a second 18-hole championship course called the Halikarnas which promises staggered fairways and landing targets draped over decidedly more undulating ground and dotted with flowing creeks and waterfalls. The Halikarnas will clearly be the flagship track at Vita Park – and a combination of 6 480 metres and a desert-style course in keeping with the natural terrain will certainly give better players a run for their money. Over a welcome and frosty Effes ale, general manager Umit Arikan told me the new course would be done by 2012 – and it's only one of numerous developments in the area.

Vita Park seems untouched by the primary environmental concern in the region – no, not the lake or



Above: Whether you're capturing quiet moments in a small harbour or listening to Captain Selahattin plot the course for the day, seven days of sailing SCIC-style is the holiday of a lifetime.

the birdlife, but rather the relics of years gone by. When you start digging around on shores where Ulysses once played, chances are you'll hit a ruin – and the Turks take their ruins rather seriously. (Travel tip No 1: don't take stones from the beach home with you as mementos – it will lead to embarrassment at the airport security check.)

Having done the 'golf' part of the brochure trip, it was time to exchange spikes for flops and take up residence for a week on the good ketch *Nemesis*. There are five sailboats in the SCIC fleet, so you can pick the size of your crew – six, eight, 12 or 16 people at a time – and for the non-nautical out there, 'ketch' denotes two

masts. If the word 'yacht' induces insomnia in you, fear not. These beautiful wooden boats are rather large – the *Nemesis* is almost 30 metres and although the cabins do vary in size, they are all ensuite and far more comfortable than you'd imagine.

It's hard to describe just how good life is on board the *Nemesis* without getting gushy, so forgive me if it turns out that way. To begin, what differentiates Loes and her crew at SCIC from other operators in the area is that they actually sail from island to island whenever possible rather than putt-putting around on engine power. And a ketch under full sail is a marvellous thing. Secondly, there are elves on board – and in many ways, it's the crew that really makes the holiday. Generally, there's a captain, a cook and a crewman who effortlessly rig the sails, moor you onto the rocks at night and look after your every need – without making it seem weird or getting in your face.

Third, and quite importantly from a budgeting perspective, once you get on board, you don't have to worry much about what to eat and drink – it's all included in the price. The food alone is worth the trip – and the chefs, like our man Mehmet, manage to produce an endless smorgasbord of dishes each morning, noon and night from the galley below.

We're talking plenty of yoghurt, aubergine, tomato, garlic, pastry rolls, those delicious Turkish meatballs called kofta, lamb and fish – you get the idea. All washed down with a seemingly endless supply of Effes, surprisingly good Turkish white, red and rosé wine and all the usual mixers.

By day two, the elves will have your number and you won't have to actually ask for 'another' – it'll just appear as if by magic. Truly gifted they are.

And lastly, there's the sense of adventure in 'discovering' tiny ports where life appears to have been the same for a very, very long time – on seemingly desolate islands inhabited only by hardy folk and their goats.

The morning briefing sees the

captain pulling out a map and dividers, considering the wind and plotting a course around islands that sounds like a World Cup commentary: Kalymnos to Nisyros, on to Tilos, Symi, Fourni, past Arki on the left to Patmos... gooooo! Each has its own charm, a couple of tavernas and a ludicrous number of Greek Orthodox churches. Apparently willing land to the church is a regular occurrence – as is the establishment of a shrine whenever someone experiences an epiphany. There's a sense of peace and serenity about the islands that's irresistible and you'll find yourself jumping at the chance to let the elves ferry you ashore in the ship's Zodiac so you can sit in the shade sipping a beer, downing an ouzo, picking at delicious plates of meze and watching the local fishermen untangle their lines under the watchful eyes of a dozen optimistic island cats.

Yes, people, this is the life – the closest thing you'll see to hustle and bustle is when massive ferries arrive and moor at impossibly small jetties, bringing in the weekly supplies.

By day three, your mind turns to fudge: eat, drink, read, relax, eat, laugh, fall off boat for swim in placid waters of the Aegean – fall asleep in the cool night air on deck under the stars and dream of doing it all over again tomorrow.

One last thing: there's no doubt that chartering a full boat is the way to do this holiday, ie gather some like-minded troops (preferably couples) and take over the whole deck. Apart from being the most economical way of doing it, it'll also ensure that you avoid having any bad apples aboard – even though Loes does her very best to match individual bookings. It also means that you can pretty much tailor-make your trip, ask the captain to return to port to play golf when you want to and be masters of your own destiny on the high seas.

It truly is a holiday where there's not that much to complain about – except of course when they lower the gangplank at the end of the week and tell you it's time to go.



SCIC: Loes and co offer a rather large menu when it comes to cruises – from the different-size boats to themed cruises including cuisine, photography and even naturalist adventures!

There are about 15 different standard routes that take in the Turkish coast and surrounding islands, and then there are specific Greek island cruises. The cruises operate from April to November with July to September being the peak season – remembering that you probably want to avoid the hottest part of the year if you're playing golf. Rates vary seasonally and depending on exactly what you want to do, but to give an idea:

If you chartered an eight person yacht for the week at this year's prices, the total fee would be just under €6 000 – which translates to about R1 000 a day per person. But remember, that's all in – once you're on board, the only out-of-pocket expenses above that would be two dinners on shore and any excursions you want to make on the islands.

SCIC will also arrange pretty much whatever else you need, like airport transfers, but for full details of what's on offer, simply visit their website at www.scicsailing.eu or email info@scicsailing.eu or phone the main London office on +44 (0) 208 510 9292.

VISA: Turkey is one of the few places left in the world where SA citizens are treated like everyone else – and you can get a visa at the airport when you arrive for the princely sum of £10. If you're travelling to the



Greek islands, you will also need a Schengen visa.

CURRENCY: The Turkish lira currently trades at around 2:1 to the euro. Although in Bodrum you can happily get by on euros – money is money! Turkey is not terribly expensive by European standards, and neither are the Greek Isles, and there are plenty of street markets and quaint island vendors who'll flog you all sorts of holiday reminders.

For the beeronomic students out there, a pint of local Mythos lager at the average island tavern is about €2.50 – three more for the road, please!

GETTING THERE: Bodrum is serviced by an international airport, and if you surf the net, you'll be amazed how many different ways there are of getting there. If you don't mind long layovers in Middle Eastern airports at strange hours, Etihad, Qatar and Emirates are often the cheapest options.

And Turkish Airlines, which turned out to be rather good actually, flies ex SA. If you are going to the trouble of getting the Schengen visa, you might as well get a cheap flight to another European capital, like Amsterdam, and spend a night or two there. Connecting flights on budget airlines like EasyJet from most Euro capitals are cheap and frequent.