

Turkey's Aegean Riviera: Backgammon and baklava on the high seas

By [Richard Johnson](#)

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'Hosh geldiniz!' says smiling Captain Nedim as we cross the gangplank to his beautiful yacht, the Grandi 1. 'Welcome!' Our party of seven family and friends board the 85ft gulet, a traditional wooden sailing vessel, after flying from London to Bodrum on Turkey's Aegean Riviera.

As soon as the sleeping arrangements are settled, the crew casts off from the pier and the captain steers the gulet out of port. Once he's cleared the harbour, the Grandi's huge sail is hoisted to catch the late afternoon breeze and we slip gently through the crystal waters --the only sound is the wind singing in the rigging. Chef Omer is already at work in the kitchen, preparing the first of many excellent meals we are to enjoy.

We drop anchor in a small and secluded bay and the guests gather on the spacious upper deck for drinks and a briefing about where we might go during our week aboard.



Richard Johnson aboard Grandi 1

Our gulet is one of the largest operated by Ventus Sailing. It's well-equipped, with eight en suite cabins which, while not particularly spacious, contain beds that are wide and comfortable. Anyway, who's going to want to spend time below, except to sleep?

All the ships in the Ventus fleet are built in Bodrum's own boatyard using traditional methods of construction, with most of the timber coming from renewable forests in the

area. And unlike many other charter companies, the Ventus gulets have a full set of working sails and a crew that knows how to handle them.

The captain's briefing over, we watch the sun sinking beyond the nearby island of Kos. I'm a little surprised that a Greek island should be so near the Turkish coast but Captain Nedim explains that Turkish coastal islands were lost to the Greeks as part of the peace settlement at the end of the First World War. 'We Turks were none too pleased about the deal, either then or now,' he adds.

Dinner starts with a fantastic spread of mezes - fresh local vegetables, olives, thin-cut slices of sausage, cheeses from the nearby farms and crispy battered shrimps. The selection of dishes hardly leaves space on the table for our plates. The main course is chicken casserole and the meal is rounded off with baklava, a sweet pastry oozing with honey.

In addition to a selection of local wines, we are offered a glass of raki, the Turkish version of ouzo, the aniseed-tasting drink common to many southern European countries. My mother used to warn me against this stuff before I set off on my early continental wanderings: more than one glass would make me drunk and a regular intake would make me blind.

We all sleep sweetly that night, the gentle swell in the little bay hardly moving our boat.



Calm seas: Richard moored at Bodrum harbour and soaked up the history of Saint Peter's fortress.

Breakfast is another feast, with just about anything a reasonable person needs to start the day laid out. Turkish coffee is an unfamiliar treat - strong and thick. When the table is cleared, Captain Nedim lays out his charts and suggests we sail across the Gulf of Gokova to the ancient ruined city of Knidos. With luck, we should be anchored in time

for lunch, and then we could spend the afternoon visiting the city's remains. This plan is readily agreed to, sails are hoisted and soon we're running before a stiff north-easterly, the huge yacht leaning eagerly into the wind.

Why is sailing so satisfying, so calming, yet so invigorating? I lie on the cushioned stern looking up at the white canvas straining against the blue of the sky, hearing the soft *plash* as the bow dips into the water, and I think this must be perfect happiness.

But why is it so much more enjoyable than letting the boat's diesel motor propel us? It can't just be because the wind is free and unpolluted. Perhaps it's the quietness of this great power now harnessed to our ship, the feeling that we are being welcomed by the natural world, and that we are part of it.

We're taking our holiday before the summer season has started, and Grandi 1 is the first of the Ventus fleet to take to the water after being refurbished over the winter. It's late March and, though it can be chilly at the beginning and end of the day, the sun is already starting to warm the Aegean waters - the girls are even thinking about taking a dip.

We cruise into the natural harbour that once served as the Knidos haven, where almost the same design of craft as our own sheltered in ancient times. Omer has been quietly at work during the voyage and soon we're sampling more of his tasty food.

Afterwards, a dinghy ferries us to the long jetty and we walk to the entrance of the ruined city, passing a small restaurant and its amusing sign that proclaims: 'The Knidos Restaurant, open all the year along.' I confess I love fractured English signs. I remember a lovely one in Stockholm: 'Why not accompany your meal with an ice-cold bear?' Only one letter wrong, but the effect was hilarious.

Knidos lies at the point where the Aegean meets the Mediterranean and, in its heyday, was a key part of the trade routes of the area. It is also said the city was built 'for the most beautiful of goddesses, Aphrodite, on the most beautiful of peninsulas'.

For hundreds of years Knidos continued to grow in importance and influence but it fell victim to an earthquake in 224 BC. The tremors left hardly anything standing - one of the few amenities of the city that is recognisable and almost intact is the theatre, spectacularly placed on the hillside overlooking the bay where Grandi 1 lies serenely at anchor.

An amazing number of the Greco-Roman theatres have survived and are to be found all over the ancient world. During my acting career, I played in a film version of the tragic story of Oedipus that was set entirely in the beautiful amphitheatre of Ioannina, northern Greece, and many of the other theatres are still used for summer performances and festivals.

My stepson, who has recently graduated from RADA, and his girlfriend Rebecca, who intends to become an actress, could not resist descending to the stage to give an

impromptu song recital, the perfect acoustics conveying every note to the rest of us listening at the top of the 4,500-seat theatre. Magic!

In the afternoon, there's little wind so we motor round the headland and anchor off the sandy beach of a quiet bay.

After-dinner backgammon contests are beginning to take hold among our group, to the fascination of the crew. I invite one member to take on tonight's competition winner - me, actually - and he beats me soundly. Twice.

Next morning, Captain Nedim hauls in the nets he laid out overnight - he's caught a very nice sea bream, a long barracuda-type fish and a couple of 'pig fish', so called, the Captain says, because of their snouts. 'Too many bones to eat, but they're good for soup.'



Taking the plunge: Richard's wife Linda and stepson's girlfriend Rebecca tried a dip in the Aegean.

After breakfast, the girls take to the water, with much screaming about how cold it is: well, they wouldn't listen to me. In the afternoon we sail out into the Gulf before a fair wind, then jib and tack back to another bay for the night.

The next morning, we anchor for lunch at an inlet known to the locals as English Harbour, the scene of a Second World War battle between a British and a German warship.

In the afternoon we hire a minibus and cross the mountains to Marmaris. It's a sizeable place, entirely given over to tourism, with a large marina and every inch of the seafront occupied by restaurants and souvenir shops.

I love places like this, where proprietors greet you with the standard conversation-opener 'Where you from?' as you stroll past, followed by, 'You like eat in my restaurant?'/ 'take home souvenir plate?' It's all done politely and with smiles.

As we drive back to our gulet in the early evening, the sun is slanting through the pines, illuminating the thousands of beehives that line the road and stretch back into the hills. The organic, slightly sharp forest honey from this area is highly prized throughout the Eastern Mediterranean.

Next day, April 1, is the anniversary of the first date I shared with my wife Lynne. We've been together for 20 years, and what a rich and varied period it has been. We raise a glass with our traditional toast - 'We're extremely lucky people.'

Later, in the village of Oren, we visit the local market. We're the only foreigners there but everyone greets us with a smile, and no one minds us taking photos of their colourful stalls. I buy Lynne a posy of red poppies and we drink tea from glasses in the shade of an old olive grove.

The captain has arranged for us to have dinner that evening at a house in Bozalan, the hill village that has traditionally supplied many of the crews of Ventus's fleet.

After climbing the almost impossibly steep main street, we arrive to find one woman preparing flatbread in her kitchen and her daughter weaving a traditional-design carpet on the loom in the living room. The gentle colours of the wools she uses are derived from local flowers, plants and herbs.

Dinner is taken on the veranda - there are wonderful views across the village to the hills and the glittering sea beyond. As usual, the food is superb, the local wines refreshing and the raki intoxicating. We're glad that our host has succeeded in getting his minibus up the street to collect us.



Natural elegance: Richard's boat the Grandi 1, under full sail

Back at the boat, Captain Nedim has prepared a little surprise of his own for Lynne and me. He's bought a superb chocolate cake from somewhere, decorated it with candles for us to blow out, and serves it with champagne. We're very touched. Tonight I feel I'd like to live on this boat for ever.

As the week starts to draw to a close, the Grandi 1 heads back to Bodrum. While the younger members of our group explore its night-time attractions, Lynne and I have dinner with the directors of Ventus. We thank them for a truly fantastic week and discuss their future plans for the company, including adding more 'green' technology to their next vessel, due to start construction later this year.

On Saturday morning, our captain takes us out for a last sail and a last great lunch. In the evening, Lynne and I visit the Atami Hotel, one of the members of our eco-tourism website, itsagreengreenworld.com. The hotel is a beautiful, family-run place, situated on a long, pine-fringed inlet.

It's been an idyllic odyssey - the only downside was getting to Turkey and back on Thomas Cook Airlines charter flights, which were pretty awful.

The cost seems to rise every time you look at its website, there is inadequate legroom, and there's nothing to eat except expensive snacks and a prepacked 'meal' priced at £13 each.

I paid an extra £60 for two 'extra legroom' seats but they turned out to be situated behind the bulkhead that houses the lavatories, with the constant disruption, noise and malodour that that situation entails.

The flight back to London also leaves at 2.45am and it adds up to an experience I wouldn't care to repeat. Mind you, the journey is only three hours, the staff are lovely and both flights arrive on time. But my advice is to shop around for an alternative.

Still, it's the week on board Grandi 1 that will live long in the memory - it was simply perfect.

Travel facts:

Ventus Sailing (00 31 33 472 7782) (www.ventussailing.nl) offers a one-week all-inclusive voyage (excluding flights and transfers) which costs from €595 (about £515) per person. In the United States call Tropical Sails Corp, 800-595-1003 or 623-444-8195. (www.tropicalsails.com) Private charters also available.

Read more: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/article-1202137/Turkeys-Aegean-Riviera-Soaking-Bodrum-traditional-gulet.html#ixzz0MS9CtnLf>