

Should I go?

Turkey might be hitting the headlines for the wrong reasons, but there's no reason to cancel your holiday. Isabel Choat reports from the Turquoise coast

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This time last year, Turkey was being tipped as a holiday hotspot, up there with Mozambique, Puglia and north-east Brazil. Its reputation for only providing grotty bucket-shop deals was on the wane. Instead, new art galleries, trendy restaurants and a slew of boutique hotels, like Hillside Su with its disco balls and dazzling all-white rooms, were appealing to style-conscious funseekers who wouldn't have been seen dead on a Turkish Airlines flight a few years ago. It ticked all the boxes: exotic, fashionable and affordable.

Any destination branded "in" by the fashion crowd will inevitably lose its spot in the limelight, but Turkey's moment was briefer than most. Before it even had a chance to revel in its new-found cool, the glossy images of hip hotels were replaced by pictures of men in white jumpsuits throwing dead chickens into pits. As the number of cases of bird flu rises, the outlook for the Turkish tourist industry this summer looks bleak.

Operators say few clients have cancelled but I can't imagine many people rushing to book either. Which is a shame because I for one would go back this year without hesitation. Turkey is a big country and the affected areas (the capital Ankara and villages in the east) are hundreds of miles from the tourist resorts, which are all clustered along the "Turquoise coast" in the south west. The answer to the "Is Turkey safe for holidays?" headline in the Daily Mail last week is, "yes, of course it is".

"Assuming you're not going bird culling or spending time in an abattoir, there is absolutely no risk to individual travellers. It is no more dangerous than China or Vietnam where there are still cases reported," says Dr Richard Dawood of the Fleet Street Travel Clinic. "Imagine there was an outbreak among birds in the Scottish Highlands and French tourists started cancelling trips to the Isle of Wight - that would be as illogical."

Far from being a risk, I'd say Turkey is positively good for your health - especially if you happen to stay on the unspoilt Datca peninsula, where the oxygen-rich air is said to be the secret of the locals' longevity. That, and the rugged pine-covered hills, olive groves and almond trees, the gorgeous aquamarine sea, the organic honey, fresh fish, pomegranates, figs and red wine - all good stuff for body and soul.

"Two glasses of wine a day are good for you. Three are probably a sin," declared Nihat Akkaraca, a local historian and our guide for the day, on the terrace of his mountainside retreat. Seventy-year-old Nihat had been recommended as the best person to show us round the ancient ruins of Knidos at the tip of the peninsula, a finger of land pointing towards the Greek island of Kos. Luckily, Nihat turned out to be just as interested in the peninsula's natural assets as he was its history, and what should have been a 40-minute drive from our hotel to the ruins morphed into a day-long pootle along the snaking coastal road, with regular stops at secluded coves, the peninsula's only vineyard (run by a George Clooney lookalike crossed with Robinson Crusoe), a seafood restaurant and his own house for a sneaky mid-morning tipple. Beer didn't figure in Nihat's drinking philosophy - an hour after knocking back the red wine at his place, we were sitting outside a restaurant ordering fish kebabs and bottles of Efes Pilsen. The smell of freshly baked bread wafted over from the corner where a bare-chested man was shovelling patties of dough into an oven on great wooden palettes.

By the time we made it to Knidos at the end of the day, we were floppy from the mix of food, booze and sitting in the back of the car. While Nihat scrambled over the ruins, his shirt still neatly tucked in and not a drop of sweat on him, we ambled behind, like two droopy teenagers. Nihat was hazy on dates and details but we were happy to forgo the history lesson in the blistering afternoon heat and simply enjoy the dramatic setting. Built in 400BC at the tip of the peninsula, Knidos was once a

magnificent city, home to thousands of people. These days, you can wander the remnants of an ancient temple, a Byzantine church and amphitheatre without bumping into a soul.

Seventy kilometres away, Marmaris is heaving with sunburnt Brits ordering pints of Stella to wash down the all-day English breakfasts. The road to Marmaris continues west, following the spine of the Datca peninsula, offering fantastic views of the Mediterranean one side and the Aegean the other, and access to empty pebble beaches and sleepy villages, but few tourists venture this far. Which may explain why we were given such an enthusiastic welcome wherever we went. Beyond the main town (New Datca) tourists, at least foreign ones, are still a novelty. On our first night, we wandered out of our hotel straight into a 300-strong wedding party in the village square. Within minutes, glasses of whisky were shoved into our hands and we were dragged into the circle of dancers.

Even our hotel, the meticulously restored 200-year-old Mehmet Ali Aga Mansion in the old village of Residaye and one of the new breed of boutique bolt holes, was quiet. At night, when the garden flickered with candles, a few locals would turn up for dinner, but otherwise we had the run of the place - including the original hamman, the library stuffed with antiques and the vaulted wine cellar. Each morning the breakfast table was laid with white linen and silver cutlery under the shade of a pomegranate tree.

After the rustic simplicity of Datca, Kalkan, a couple of hundred kilometres south, came as a bit of a shock. Not least because our home for the second week, a sleek Bond-style villa clinging to a hill just outside the town, was a world away from the traditional Ottoman interiors of Mehmet Ali Aga. It was so spectacular we wanted to make some new holiday friends immediately so we could invite them back and show off the pool, the vast balcony curving round the entire front of the villa and the view across the huge shimmering bay of Kalkan. It was perfectly located - high enough up the hill not to hear the odd motorboat as it whizzed across the bay leaving a criss-cross of white lines but close enough to spot a turtle swimming in the crystal-clear water one morning.

Kalkan is like the Italian Riviera minus the poseurs - instead of sandy beaches, there are beach clubs strung along the bay with sun beds perched atop stone platforms that jut out over the sea. A few miles outside town is Patara beach, a spectacular 18km stretch of golden sand consistently voted one of the best beaches in the world. I lasted about an hour and a half, lying there on the scorching sand, until dizzy with the heat and half-blinded by suntan lotion, I conceded defeat. The beach club at Villa Mahal in Kalkan, a sleek, modern hotel handily located just below our villa, was infinitely more comfortable: a sand-free zone where cheerful waiters ply you with cold drinks. Better still was our private pad. Slipping into the pool after frying at Patara was one of the most delicious moments of the entire holiday.

Leaving the villa at all was a wrench, but after three nights of cooking sea bass and bream on our own barbecue, it was time to venture out. Kalkan is touristy but the winding bougainvillea-filled streets and traditional Ottoman-style houses have enough villagey charm to compensate. At night, it's prettier still - candle-lit roof-terrace restaurants look out across the glowing white dome of the mosque and the tiny harbour full of gulets. The one modern bar was packed with teenagers whose parents were lounging on cushions in tea houses trying to recapture their youth by smoking hookahs, or snapping up fake Mulberry bags in shops that stay open til midnight.

Kalkan itself may be a little oasis of sophistication but you don't have to go far to find traditional Turkey. We drove up into the hills to Islamlar for breakfast - tomatoes and olives, bread and honey and a sizzling pan of eggs and cheese - at Mamut's place, a shady restaurant built above a trout stream. From there - after a spectacularly bad 33-point turn in front of half the village - we headed further inland across a valley floor covered in orchards, in search of the fabled "green lake" in the mountains.

My plan to dive into the lake was dropped when my feet went numb after just dipping my toes in. Quite how it stays that cold in the scorching mid-July heat is a mystery. I've got a photo of the scene at home: the sun is blazing down on the lurid green lake surrounded by rugged hills, a herd of goats is drinking at the water's edge - it could hardly be further from the current grisly images of rural Turkey.

Bird flu - the facts

Is it safe to travel to affected areas?

Yes. According to the Foreign Office (fco.gov.uk), the risk to travellers is very low. The FCO suggests people consult their healthcare provider before travel but does not advise against travel. The World Health Organisation ([who.int.en](http://who.int/en)) describes the risk as "almost non-existent". If there is a threat to public health, the WHO will step up its advice, as it did during the Sars crisis when it warned against travel to China.

Are there any precautions I can take?

Avoid live poultry in markets, wash your hands and do not eat raw or under-cooked poultry or eggs. Dr Richard Dawood, a travel health expert, suggests getting a flu jab before you travel to affected areas; this will not protect against bird flu but it prevents any confusion on your return. One patient who recently returned from an infected area with flu-like symptoms caused a major furore - it turned out he simply had flu.

Should I cancel my holiday?

There is no logical reason to cancel your trip. The affected areas are hundreds of miles from the coastal resorts and if you do cancel you're unlikely to get your money back. Tour operators do not usually offer refunds unless the Foreign Office changes its advice to warn against travel.

Way to go**Getting there**

Exclusive Escapes (020-8605 3500, hiddenturkey.com) offers seven nights' B&B at the Mehmet Ali Aga Mansion in Datca plus seven at Villa Ruya, Kalkan, for £1,125pp including flights, transfers and a week's jeep hire.