



TRAPPED IN PARADISE

Emperors and sultans once banished noblemen and unwanted family members to the Princes' Islands, near Istanbul. If only we could all be so lucky. By Necee Regis. Photographs by Jan McGready.







Clockwise from left: Riding the ferry to the islands; enjoying the view as the boat departs from Istanbul; docking at Büyükada in the late afternoon; simit bread, a typical breakfast food for sale on the ferry

It's a hot July morning in Istanbul and getting warmer by the minute. The ferryboat that goes to the Princes' Islands rests at the dock in Eminönü, just steps away from the Sirkeci Terminal railway station. The station is a slightly ragged nineteenth-century structure that holds the memory of a grander era, when the city was called Constantinople and the Orient Express provided luxurious transportation between Paris and the Ottoman Empire.



The air is different here at the docks than it is in the center of the bustling city; the heat and humidity are tempered by wisps of a sea breeze and by the scents of flowering trees. Along the waterfront, where the lustrous and metallic Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmara meet at the Golden Horn, the water shimmers like fish scales, reflecting light between the commuter ferries arriving from Üsküdar, Harem, and Basiktas.

I follow the signs for Adalar Iskelesi — the ferry to the Princes' Islands — and for less than \$2, buy a token to Büyükada, which means “large island.”

Büyükada sits 14 miles southeast of Istanbul and is the largest of nine islands in an archipelago known as the Princes' Islands in the Sea of Marmara. The islands get their title not from royal residents (although Edward VIII of England and Wallis Simpson once stayed at the famed Splendid Palace Hotel on Büyükada) but from their use as a place of royal exile. Jealous Byzantine emperors and, later, Ottoman sultans fearing competition for their power banished noblemen and unwanted family members to these outposts in the sea. In the previous century, Russian Marxist Leon Trotsky spent five years in exile in Büyükada after his expulsion from the Stalin-led Soviet Union.

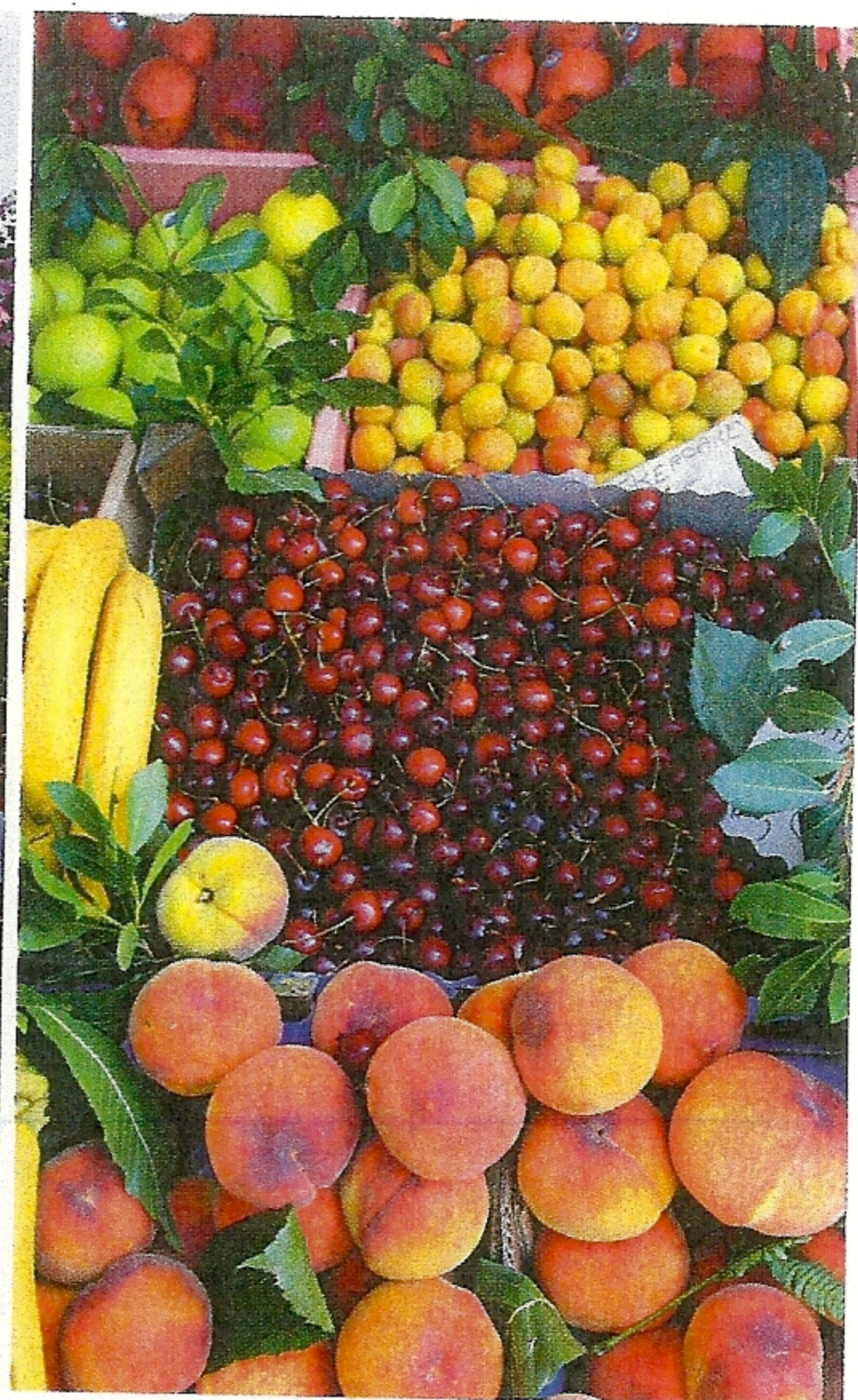
Banishment is not on the minds of my fellow passengers, however, on this perfect summer day. The sky is blue and the mood festive as I join the throng of people who scramble to grab open-air seats on the upper deck.

A boisterous group of men fills benches in the center aisle; they sing and clap like they're at a sporting event. Hearing shouts from aft, I twist around and observe seagulls hovering above the deck, waiting for scraps of food to be tossed upward. People whoop and cheer as





Clockwise from left: A phaeton driver; Büyükada's main square, located in the center of town; a fruit market; pointing the way to the phaeotons, one of the best ways to get around the islands



the birds swoosh down and catch the morsels in midair.

Soon a family of four squeezes into my row, and I'm knee to knee with a woman in a long blue coat and a brightly patterned headscarf. Her husband, in casual attire, wraps his arms protectively around their two small children. A boy who's maybe three years old and in shorts and a girl no more than five and wearing Barbie sandals fidget and sneak shy glances my way. When the ship sounds its horn, one loud bellow, we turn and collectively watch Istanbul recede as the ferry moves out into the harbor.

Istanbul dazzles from the sea. Thin minarets and graceful curved domes pierce the sky, enlivening the horizon, where a myriad of shapes press against each other, stacked tightly, from the hilltops to the water's edge. As the vessel veers south around Seraglio Point, we pass the lush green outcrop where the Topkapi Palace walls glow sandy pink in the morning light.

I had been told that the voyage was half the fun of going to the islands, and I'm not disappointed. Before we reach the first island, a crowd gathers around two young



men in T-shirts and torn jeans who are playing guitars and singing. Soon onlookers are clapping, and several young women and children begin to dance. Behind me, eight teenage girls from Lebanon, half of whom are wearing modest headscarves and half of whom are in more revealing attire, begin their own performance, singing pop tunes complete with trilling and much laughter.

It's officially a party.

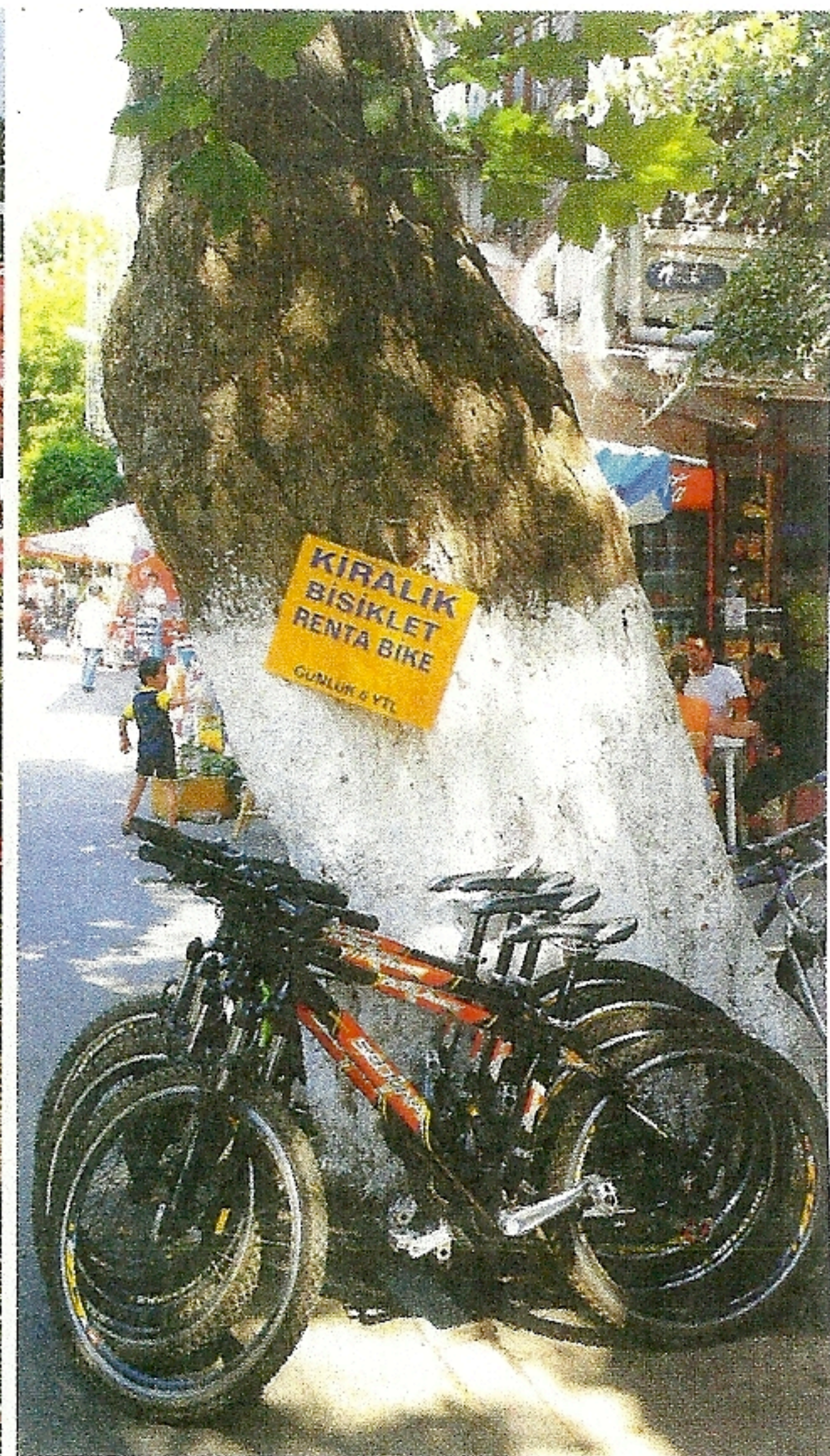
THE FERRY STOPS at four islands, though most people stay on until Büyükada, which makes for a 90-minute journey. (Only five islands are open to tourism, and two have no residents.) Ferry service didn't begin until the mid-1800s, and before then, the residents here were mainly farmers, fishermen, nuns, and monks. Their scattered small cottages, churches, and Byzantine-era monasteries can be seen throughout the islands.

Kinaliada, named for the reddish color of its soil, is the first stop and the smallest island on the route. A few restaurants line the path along the beach, where a 20-minute stroll will take you from one end of the island to the other. My five-year-old seatmate waves to swimmers in the surf.

As we head back out to sea, new arrivals onboard, the singing and dancing resume. In the midst of the hubbub, Chinese tourists dart between the competing groups, cameras clicking, while agile waiters circulate, balancing coffee, orange juice, pretzels, and tea in tulip-shaped glasses on their trays. Another man hawks visors and hats, protection against the relentless sun. We take photos with people whom we've never met, whose language we don't speak. It's like a party at the UN, but without any translators. The little girl across from me smiles.



Clockwise from left: The seafront promenade close to the ferry port in Büyükada; bicycles for rent; setting up for breakfast on the front terrace of the Splendid Palace Hotel; shaded café tables near St. George's Monastery



Next stop: Burgazada. The harbor is active with small yachts, pleasure boats, restaurants, and shops. Known as the home of the Turkish poet Sait Faik Abasiyanik, this quieter island is preferred to the more commercial Büyükada by many Istanbul residents. Hikers like the vista from the monastery ruins on Hiristo Hill, which are a 40-minute uphill trek away.

I'm tempted to hop off at the third stop on our route when I see the green slopes — twin hills of pine groves — of Heybeliada, which means "Saddlebag Island." The second largest of the islands, Heybeliada is home to the Turkish Naval Academy, founded in 1773, an impressive white edifice adjacent to the ferry dock. In the hills, the theological seminary of the Greek Orthodox Church is set within the Monastery of the Holy Trinity.

The onboard party subsides as the ferry approaches Büyükada. The crowd, most of whom are on a day trip from Istanbul, gather their belongings and disembark. During my island sojourn, whenever I cross paths with my upper-deck mates, we exchange a nod and a smile, like a secret handshake among members of a private club.



THE AREA NEAR the ferry dock at Büyükada is like many seaside tourist resorts in that it has a tangle of streets filled with shops that sell clothes, bathing suits, costume jewelry, film, and postcards, and with fast-food places that offer pizza, ice cream, and local specialty foods. This being Turkey, the local features include izgara köfte (grilled lamb meatballs), iskender kebab (lamb roasted on a vertical spit, piled on flat bread, and topped with tomato and browned butter sauce), and shish kebabs.

A few short blocks from the port, the atmosphere changes from busy commercialism to one of lazy reverie. Part of the islands' mystique is that you have the feeling of stepping back into a quieter era, an illusion aided by the fact that motor vehicles are banned on all the islands. To get around, you must walk, bike, or hire a horse-drawn carriage called a phaeton.

Looking a lot like surreys-with-the-fringe-on-top, phaetons fill the central square and jostle for space on the narrow streets with the skill of seasoned New York cabbies. My vehicle of choice is a bicycle, and I'm told that a person can circumnavigate the island in a few hours. (I manage to see half the island in that time, pedaling lackadaisically and stopping where I please.)

I set off, picnic lunch in basket, but stop barely five minutes later to investigate a handsome white wood structure with twin silver domes and red shuttered windows that open to small balconies facing the sea. In the spacious lobby, which has an elegant carved dark wooden desk, I learn that this is the Splendid Palace Hotel, inaugurated in 1908. In the high-ceilinged dining room, the clink of fine china accompanies several well-dressed elderly women who are lingering over tea, while all is quiet in the parlor, where an elaborate gilded



If You Go

The least expensive and most fun way to reach Büyükada is via a conventional ferry. Look for the Adalar Iskelesi dock in front of the Sirkeci Terminal railway station in Eminönü. Ferry schedules change with the seasons, though at least 10 trips a day run from Sirkeci to the Princes' Islands. You'll need one token each way, and those can be purchased at the dock for \$1.35.

For a current schedule, visit www.ido.com.tr/en/ and click on the "Conventional Ferry Timetables" link.

Where to stay

SPLENDID PALACE HOTEL

Nisan Cad. No. 23
Büyükkada, İstanbul
011-90-216-382-6950
www.splendidhotel.net
Rates: \$70 to \$110

Inaugurated in 1908, this restored hotel with an art nouveau influence has 70 rooms and four suites, some with views of the sea.

BÜYÜKADA PRINCESS HOTEL

Iskele Cad. No. 2
Büyükkada, İstanbul
011-90-216-382-1628
www.buyukadaprincess.com
Rates: \$92 to \$145

Restored in 1988, this three-story hotel has 24 air-conditioned rooms and is centrally located, just steps from the ferry.

Where to eat

MILANO RESTAURANT

Gülistan Cad. No. 20
Büyükkada, İstanbul
011-90-216-382-6352
Prices: \$5 to \$15 for small plates and entrées

Located on the waterfront and within view of the ferry, Milano specializes in seafood, including mullet, sea bream, and calamari, as well as in grilled meats and meatballs.

YILDIZLAR CAFETERIA

Iskele Cad. No. 2
Büyükkada, İstanbul
011-90-216-382-4360
Prices: \$5 to \$10

This place is a 100-year-old tea garden that serves traditional fast foods like *iahmacun* (an Armenian pizza topped with ground meat), *döner kebabs* (spit-roasted meat), and grilled cheese sandwiches.



St. George's Monastery

mirror and chandelier hark back to art nouveau roots.

And so it goes as I pedal around the island, stopping every few minutes to take a picture or simply to appreciate Büyükada's quiet beauty. Another aspect of the Princes' Islands' charm is the well-preserved *yalis* (wooden Ottoman mansions) built in the nineteenth century as summer residences by wealthy Greeks, Armenians, Jews, and members of the Ottoman court. These Victorian-era houses and cottages are different from most architecture in Istanbul. They have elaborate facades, shuttered windows, balconies, decorative columns, and arches, and many have meticulous gardens that in warmer months bloom with raucous honeysuckle, bougainvillea, mimosa, acacia, jasmine, and oleander blossoms.

Büyükkada is a long island with two hills, one north and one south, and a valley in between. As I climb a winding road amid groves of dwarf pines, catching glimpses of the sea below, the only sound I hear — besides my own panting — is the clip-clop of horses as they pass me on their route.

EVENTUALLY, I STOP near a gathering of phaetons in Luna Park and find what I've been searching for: the cobblestoned path to Aya Yorgi hill, the highest spot on the island, home to the Church of Aya Yorgi (Saint George). The islands have more churches than mosques, and some of them, like this one, date back to the tenth century.

The hill is too steep for the horses and too difficult to pedal, so everyone must walk. Without a way to lock my bicycle, I push it up what feels like a 90 percent gradient, huffing and sweating my way for a solid 20 minutes to the pinnacle of the island, one of two sacred Christian pilgrimage sites in Turkey. (The other is the House of the Virgin Mary, in Ephesus.)



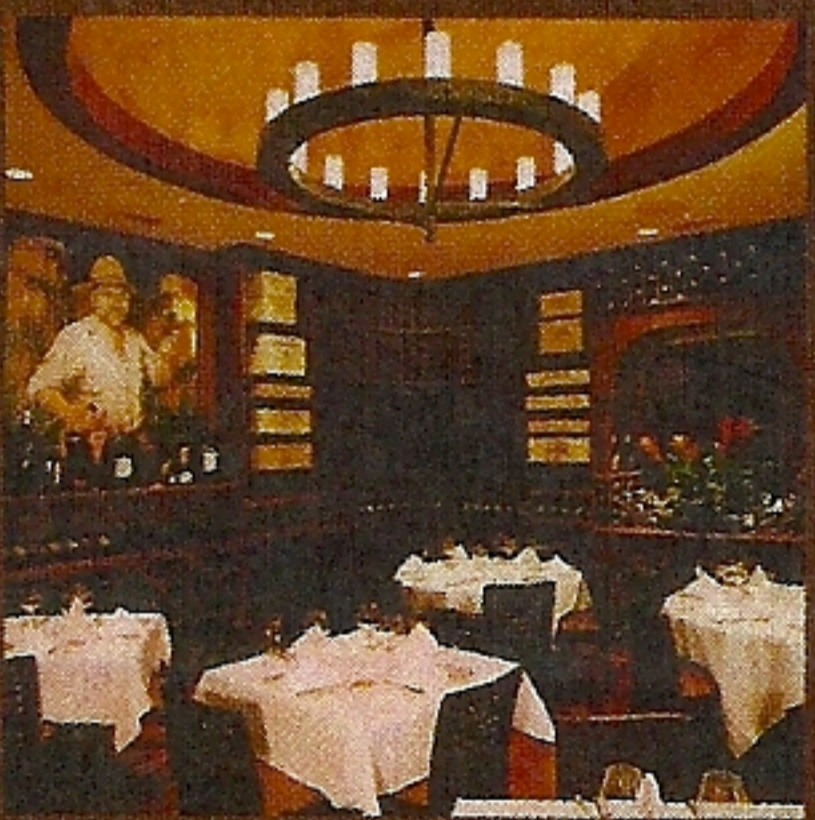
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TURKISH DELIGHT

As I near my goal, I pass small bushes and trees bedecked with bows of twine, colored string, and even plastic bags. I later learn this is a tradition, done to bring luck to the pilgrim.

The rewards of the summit are worth the effort of the climb. The monastery and chapel are modest structures, but the breathtaking views evoke awe in pilgrims and casual tourists alike. From the edge of a bluff, where café tables rest in the shade of a palm frond arbor, you can see the curve of the island as it bends toward the out-of-sight ferry. Below, public beaches and private clubs host sun worshippers and swimmers along the sandy shore. The evergreen hills of nearby islands can be seen, anchored in the brilliant sea, and the outskirts of Istanbul are visible in the distance. I've found a perfect place for a picnic.

Sated in stomach and spirit, I descend the steep incline, reining my bike like it's a bucking stallion, pause to tie a strand of orange yarn on the branch of a spindly pine, and make a wish.

It's an easy ride from the mountains to the road that rims the sea. I bypass the beach and head to town, where a string of restaurants with tented outdoor seating line the waterfront, offering seafood specialties within inches of the ocean's spray.

Enormous rings of fried calamari are light and fresh and accompanied by a tangy tartar sauce and a beer. From where I'm sitting, I can see the ferry moored at the dock. I check the schedule and dash to make the 4:10 p.m. departure. (Two later ferries are scheduled too.)

The return trip is a quiet one, possibly because there's no outdoor upper deck on this ship or because people are plumb worn out. It's a welcome change, this silent voyage on the silvery, white-capped sea. As daylight tips toward evening, I turn to face the sun and breathe in the salt-tinged breeze until Istanbul comes into view in all its energetic, minaret-strewn glory. **AW**

AA provides service to Istanbul via London in conjunction with codeshare and oneworld partner British Airways. Other oneworld members serving Istanbul (but without AA codeshare service) are Iberia, Malév, and Royal Jordanian.

www.americanwaymag.com

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