

TRAVEL

Olives and islands

The southwestern coast of Turkey is rocky enough to dissuade hordes of tourists.

by JEFF KAVANAGH

It's sometimes said the best part of a trip is the journey itself. Navigating three lanes of traffic in two lanes of road in the south-western Turkish city of Antalya, as trucks honked past and buses stopped in the middle of the road to disgorge passengers, I had some difficulty endorsing this sentiment.

The day had started promisingly enough. A smooth flight had been followed by an uncomplicated transaction with an amicable rental-car guy who took cash in exchange for the keys and made no mention of an excess or glass and tyre insurance. But neither had he said anything about the fact that our Fiat Doblo (picture a chillybin with a steering wheel) was nearly out of gas, its fuel light glowing as soon as the engine revved into life.

Thankfully, a petrol station wasn't far away, so half an hour and some dodgy lane-change manoeuvres later, my girlfriend and I and our chillybin had left the city behind and were on a wide motorway heading towards the seaside town of Kas on the Mediterranean coast.

As the city fell behind us, so did the

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Clockwise from top, the white sand beach at Kaputas; a woman fishing in Kas; the bays in Kekova.

stress of driving, and soon we were marvelling at snow-capped mountains that burst up like jagged teeth above a coastline of pebble bays and the shimmering sea. It was late May and the weather was glorious and warm. It was hard to resist pulling over every five minutes for a dip.

A friend who had lived in Turkey had recommended stopping an hour out of Antalya in Phaselis, and it was here, among its Roman ruins, that we pulled on our togs and went for our first swim. The sea hadn't yet lost all of its winter chill, but its crispness was welcome after the heat of the car. Suitably refreshed, and having explored the remnants of Phaselis's

ancient baths and amphitheatre, we jumped back in the Doblo to continue our ever-improving journey to Kas.

Lying at the base of a small peninsula, in a wide bay sheltered by steep hills covered in pines, olive trees and scrub, Kas is laid-back and provincial – a far cry from the package-tourist mecca that is Antalya.

There is not much in the way of public transport from the closest airport: the choice is a four-hour minibus ride or a NZ\$180 taxi fare. The rocky shoreline dissuades tourists who are looking for lazy days on the beach, trips to outlet malls and stays in gigantic, all-inclusive theme hotels.

Built around a small marina, Kas spreads out and upwards from the sea, its narrow streets winding past carpet shops, seafood restaurants

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and small, family-owned hotels. Our accommodation for the week, the Hotel Kale, was such an establishment. A couple of elegant four-storey buildings on top of a hill, a minute's walk up from the harbour, it was tidy and uncomplicated, and our double room had a small balcony and never-want-to-leave views of the Med and of Megisti, a Greek island just off the Turkish mainland.

Once we had settled in, our days in Kas fell into an easy routine of an early plunge from the hotel's "beach" – some wooden terraces with sun-loungers on rocks below the hotel – followed by a breakfast buffet of olives, cheeses, tomatoes, yoghurt, dried fruit and honey back at the hotel. Then it was down to the terraces for a morning spent reading and swimming, followed by fish or lamb for lunch in Kas, or a trip along the coast.

The easiest excursion away from the town was to pay 10 lira (NZ\$6) each and climb aboard a small fishing boat, which ferried us to one of the sandy beaches that lie across the bay for a day of climbing rocks, swimming, and eating in the beach's restaurant. Slightly more exerting was to take the car and drive 25 minutes down the winding coastal road to Kaputas, a stunning cove of white sand and pebbles at the base of a steep cliff, bookended by rocky outcrops perfect for clambering up and diving off. For greater adventure, tour offices in the town offer guided trips on boats and kayaks to the sunken city in Kekova, a magical place full of little islands and blue-water bays, about 45 minutes north of Kas.

Determined to exploit the independence afforded by our rental car, we decided to explore the area ourselves. The end result was a guided tour with an old fisherman with few teeth and even fewer words of English, who nonetheless spent large parts of the trip suggesting to my girlfriend that she should throw me overboard for not having married her yet. In order to protect the area, we weren't allowed to stop above the city, which was destroyed by an earthquake almost 2000 years ago, and so didn't see much beneath the surface beyond the occasional wall. Given the natural beauty of where we were, however, it barely mattered.

Our days in and around Kas were rounded off with nights spent eating and drinking in its many restaurants. After a couple of early misses, we alternated between two places: Uzum Kizi, a few streets up from the town's main square where we sat beneath grapevines and feasted on small dishes of traditional Turkish food such as dolma – vine leaves stuffed with rice – and aubergine dip; or Asmaalti, a hippyish place built around a tree down near the marina, with easygoing staff and a superb seafood casserole. Inevitably, the week came to an end quicker than we would have liked.

If the journey to a destination can be the best part of a holiday, then surely the trip back has the potential to be the worst. It was fortunate, then, that we were able to depart from the main route back to Antalya to spend a hour or so swimming and eating lamb chops in Cirali, a secluded nature reserve where the mountains flow down to the sea and loggerhead sea turtles come to nest, before subjecting ourselves to the stress of the city at rush-hour and the reality of returning home. ■

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