

Let's talk Turkey

The country once known for its mass tourism and cheap developments is moving upmarket

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Kalkan, on the Mediterranean coast, is a hub for British buyers

With its Venetian-style bridges that arch across canals as clear as bottled Evian, Portville is a picture of relaxing holiday perfection. The gin-and-tonic terraces in front of the elegant waterfront houses catch the evening sun over the mountains and the daytime sparkle from the bay where Demi Moore and Bill Gates recently pitched up in their yachts.

The canals may hint at Italy, but this genteel new gated Swissotel development, with its large pastel-coloured, shuttered houses, is more reminiscent of Venice, Florida. One thing is certain – as you peer across Portville, a thought springs to mind: “I can’t believe it’s Turkey.”

Turkey, after all, is all about cheap, isn’t it? Cheap holidays (never more so than now, as Brits clamour to escape the eurozone) and cheap (and occasionally nasty) holiday homes. Both have been made more appealing by the relative weakness of the Turkish lira, which has remained fairly steady against the pound over the past year, while the euro has surged.

The cheap developments are still there, of course – in Altinkum, the Benidorm of the Aegean coast, you can still buy a new flat for as little as £25,000, although strong domestic demand has meant the country has avoided a Spanish-style collapse. Slowly but surely, however, high-quality properties with real architectural appeal are cropping up along the coastlines, particularly the southwest stretch from Bodrum to Kas, where most of the 21,000 British property owners in Turkey have bought.

“Turkey is definitely moving upmarket, with foreign buyers discovering new developments that were originally designed for wealthy Turkish individuals,” says **Murat Ergin**, managing

director of the estate agents **Savills** in Istanbul. "In the most desirable areas, such as Bodrum or Gocek, or new hidden gems such as the hilltop Aegean towns of Urla or Milas, prices are £1,350-£2,700 per square metre, and the quality is definitely at upper western standards."

If you want some eyewatering prices to go with your wow factor, you can certainly find them. The Bodrum peninsula is a favoured holiday spot for wealthy Istanbulites. In Yalikavak, the Beverly Hills of Bodrum, Engel & Völkers is selling 21 strikingly modern houses, designed by Richard Meier, the architect behind the Getty Center in Los Angeles. Prices start at £1.78m. Also in Yalikavak, Savills is selling a newly built 1,250 square metre hilltop mansion for £6.8m, with indoor and outdoor pools, a hammam and three vast reception rooms.

"Turkey is very interesting to Middle Eastern buyers as a sort of halfway house that is a secular state, but predominantly Islamic. It offers tremendous value for money and is appealing to people who love eastern art and style," says Charles Weston Baker, the agency's head of international sales. "Prices are 30%-50% cheaper than the Côte d'Azur, for example, and Bodrum has a stunningly beautiful coast-line whose colours are out of this world, and with better weather than Europe."

Good design can also be found at far more palatable prices in Turkey, if you know where to look. In Gundogan, still in Bodrum, which has direct EasyJet flights from the UK (although not in winter, when you must fly via Istanbul), Seaview Regency is a new boutique development of three-bedroom, two-and three-storey villas, costing from £175,000. The villas overlook private gardens, a communal pool and a valley planted with citrus orchards, which leads down to one of the peninsula's only sandy beaches. They are available direct through the Anglo-Turkish developer Cumberland Properties.

"We saw properties at all price points and areas around Bodrum, but nothing compared in terms of quality, design, location and value for money," says Mike Thresh, 44, a telecoms manager from Basingstoke. He and his wife, Fran, 43, an events organiser, bought their off-plan villa at Seaview Regency for £165,000. "It's a small development of 19 villas, so it feels exclusive, and with the garden, pool and beach, it's great for our sons, George and James, who are 14 and 13. There are bars and restaurants in the nearby village, and Bodrum, for livelier nights out, is just across the peninsula. We're thrilled to bits."

If you are looking for an investment buy, then follow the locals, says Eric Kaya, director of Cumberland. "Turks don't buy in Fethiye or Kalkan, but they do buy in Bodrum, so the market there doesn't see bubbles, as it is not inflated by purely international clients," he says. "EasyJet is now bringing more people to Bodrum and putting it on the map, but there are also four national airlines that fly there from the main Turkish cities, so Bodrum town has year-round life."

Gocek, near Dalaman airport, also served by EasyJet, is attracting Turkish holiday-home buyers, too, with half of the houses at Portville having sold quickly to the local market. "In Gocek, you can live seconds from the water's edge, a minute's walk from restaurants in the main square and you are 20 minutes from Dalaman airport, yet all you hear are lapping waves and you never feel crowded," says Julian Walker, director of Spot Blue, which is selling houses at Portville, where prices start at £540,000. "Turkey is an enormous country, so if you want to escape noise, stress and other people, you've got a pretty good chance of doing it here."

Fethiye, a large coastal town an hour's drive from Dalaman, has its fair share of costa-style enclaves and a sizeable British community. The surrounding hills and islands, however, are home to some impressive new properties with unbeatable views – none more so than on Sovalye, a tiny boomerang-shaped island with only a handful of properties, a short ferry ride from Fethiye.

You are five minutes' sail away from downtown Fethiye, but you're in the middle of nowhere here. There are no cars, just jungle," says Tolga Sevinc, a local developer. He renovated one of the rundown villas and then put it up for sale for £990,300.

It's being sold by Spot the Blue. The three-storey house has five bedrooms, and a walled garden leading to the water's edge. "A few years ago, developers could get away with low standards because anything would sell. Now the legality and quality of properties are crucial, and I'm trying to bring international standards to my villas," Sevinc says. "British buyers now expect similar standards in Turkish properties to what they see in Europe and they want something that is more suited to living in all year round."

Kalkan is another hub for British buyers, and the steep hills leading to the old harbour are rapidly sprouting new villas, typically costing from about £175,000. Concealed among the terraced hillsides five minutes from the town is something quite different, however. The eight, four-bedroom villas in Mountain Village, starting at £399,000, again through Spot Blue, merge traditional touches such as dry-stone walls with contemporary design elements including open-plan living areas, floor-to-ceiling glass walls and private infinity pools.

One of the most desirable areas on the Turkish coast, with its unspoilt old town set on a rocky peninsula, is Kas, where a four-bedroom villa with double-height vaulted ceilings and a private path leading to the sea, is on sale for £450,000 through Buying in Turkey. Other British buyers have found similar luxury at affordable prices by heading into the nearby hills. Ian MacPherson, a production team leader from Potto in North Yorkshire, bought his three-bedroom house, in the mountain village of Cukurbag, for just under £100,000 four years ago, and rents it out for up to £500 a week through Owners Direct (property ref: TK598).

"The area is unspoilt, and the countryside is spectacular and has lots of history," says MacPherson, 59. "I cycle, run and walk on the Lycian Way, voted one of the world's top long-distance footpaths by The Sunday Times. And the people are friendly – I often get a knock on the door and am given fresh milk, fruit and homemade food by my Turkish neighbours."

Jenny Wormser, an investment manager from Putney, says the four-bedroom villa she built in Kas 10 years ago for £90,000 is now worth £720,000, because of the scarcity of large plots for single houses. She rents out her property, with a cook, a maid and a driver, for £1,750 a week through Owners Direct (ref: TK1109).

"The cost of living is manageable. I can run a large house with live-in staff and grow everything in my garden," says Wormser, 60. "Kas has always been considered exclusive because of restrictions on where you can buy, what you can build and the lack of sandy beaches, which means there are no big all-inclusive hotels."

Welcome to Turkey – but not as we think we know it.