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Turkey, ancient and modern

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From 3,000-year-old cities to brand new luxury resorts, the Antalya region of Turkey is full of attractions. Nick Elvin samples just a few of them

IF there was a visitor's book for the Antalya region - and it would by now be thoroughly dog-eared and browned by its millennia of use - it would contain some famous names.

Emperors, kings and saints are among those who have made their way to this strip of coastal plain nestled between the Mediterranean and the oft snow-capped Taurus Mountains. That is little surprise, given Turkey's status as a bridge between Europe and Asia.

These ancient visitors have left their mark, and there are historic sites everywhere. However, modern travellers looking for the latest developments in luxury are spoilt for choice, especially in this part of the country.

The city of Antalya is an ideal place to begin exploration. From the outskirts, it looks like many other large cities on the Med, with its wide boulevards of apartment blocks and traffic. Yet closer to the sea it takes on a very different personality.

Emperor Hadrian came to the city in AD130. You can breach the city walls through the gate that was built to honour his visit and bears his name, and head into Kaleiçi, the old part of town.

Charming Kaleiçi has narrow, quiet streets, stalls selling everything from oranges to carpets, minarets rising above the rooftops and crumbling buildings dating from the latter days of the Ottoman Empire. There are also new accommodation, shopping and eating options.

Kaleiçi was once a busy trading centre, but walk down to the old port and you'll discover that the present day sea captains are gulet owners, the merchants are souvenir sellers, and the hostelrys of old have been replaced by cafés, bars and boutique hotels.

As you pass the souvenir shops and stalls in the main streets leading down to the port, inevitably you'll be told: "You can spend your money here." It's a reasonable idea if you're looking for gifts, but head into the smaller, shaded back roads if you want a more peaceful experience.

Out of town, there are highly impressive ancient sites to explore, including the cities of Aspendos and Perge (Perga).

The first settlement at Aspendos may have been founded as far back as 1,000BC. It was certainly an important centre around the 5th Century BC, and it is said that in 333BC the city paid Alexander the Great a levy not to garrison his army there, although Aspendos later surrendered to the Romans. Their legacy includes the stunning theatre – still used today for performances.

Not far away are the ruins of Perge, an important city that was founded around 1,000BC. In 334BC it surrendered to Alexander, while in the 2nd Century BC, it came under Roman rule – much of what remains today dates from this period.

St Paul the Apostle visited the city on his first journey (AD46 to 48), on which he preached the word of God across the region.

Among the ruins (which are undergoing restoration) are the bath house and necropolis, as well as a waterway that was built to help keep the town cool. Close to the main city site is the magnificent Roman stadium, which hosted sports including athletics and wrestling.

Perge and Aspendos each charge 15TL (about £6) entry, and it is well worth it.

Time moves on, and the sword-and-sandal heroes who shaped this region have been replaced by those wielding other implements – including golf clubs.

The area has many first-rate golf resorts with new courses designed by the likes of Nick Faldo and Colin Montgomerie. If golf is not your thing but you are looking for luxury, there are plenty of options – indeed, some have dubbed Antalya the new Dubai.

One example is Calista, 35km from Antalya. It consists of circular hotel blocks and private villas, and features a wide range of restaurants and bars (use of which is included in the price).

There's a massive spa offering a multitude of treatments, while activities on offer at the resort include tennis lessons, tenpin bowling and water sports. You can swim in one of several pools, or head down to the perfectly manicured beach. There's even a cinema, and also regular concerts.

The fact that Turkey is outside the Euro zone makes this a tempting country if you're looking for affordable luxury, with rooms at Calista starting at around £125 per night. If you own a significant portion of the world's oil reserves, you may prefer to opt for a VIP villa, complete with private pool, spa, solid gold sinks and anything else you might need.

The Antalya region has so much more to offer, like waterfalls, pine forest, caves and ancient sites, not to mention beach resorts, islands and diving centres.

Plus it's sunny for 300 days of the year.

It's a corner of Turkey that can keep you fascinated for weeks – and it's only a small corner of the country.

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