

## Restoration in Turkey

### Return to the Belle Epoque

On an island off the coast of Istanbul, one man pursues a vision of the past.

By Mary d'Ambrosio

IT'S A BRIGHT, BLUSTERY DAY IN MAY, AND Çelik Gülersoy has set off to continue his lifelong pursuit of the past. After an hour-long ferry trip from Istanbul, he disembarks on Büyük Ada, largest of Turkey's nine



Princes Islands, and climbs into a horse-drawn carriage that belongs to another time. Rolling away from the restaurants that line the wharf, he passes a series of fanciful, ornately decorated 19th-century wood mansions painted peach, lime, and bone and ringed with tall iron gates that are adorned with blue tile tags bearing such evocative names as "Capri" and "Ischia." Gülersoy, dressed impeccably in a gray suit, dark tie, cashmere muffler, and fedora, smiles mildly and tips his hat left and right to the islanders who call out respectful greetings to him as the carriage

slows, then stops in front of one of the villas, which has been restored and painted a soft golden yellow.

Gülersoy gets down from the carriage slowly, partly because his rheumatism is troubling him and partly so that he can savor the piney air of a place that reminds him of the days of his youth, when he'd visit the island with his parents and his sister and brother. Watching this 70-year-old Turkish historian, tourism official, and patron of the arts walk toward the villa (which, thanks to him, has been transformed into the Büyük Ada Cultural House), I can sense his pride at having resurrected the building, re-creating a small piece of his favorite era – the belle époque, the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Back then, Gülersoy says, well-heeled visitors from all over Europe would take what was then a six-hour steamship ride from Istanbul to Büyük Ada, where they would feast on spit-roasted lambs at elaborate picnics, enjoy moonlight strolls along jasmine-scented paths, and dance at Viennese-style balls in the summer villas of diplomats. Greek immigrants sang in their tavernas, and White Russians introduced the novel practice of bathing in the sea. Jewish, Armenian, and Greek financiers – never entirely welcome in Istanbul – built mansions on the island's



With an eye to his favorite era, Çelik Gülersoy rides in a belle époque carriage (top) en route to the opulent Büyük Ada Cultural House (above).

Zeynep Kızılkaya/Corbis Photo



## Room 490.

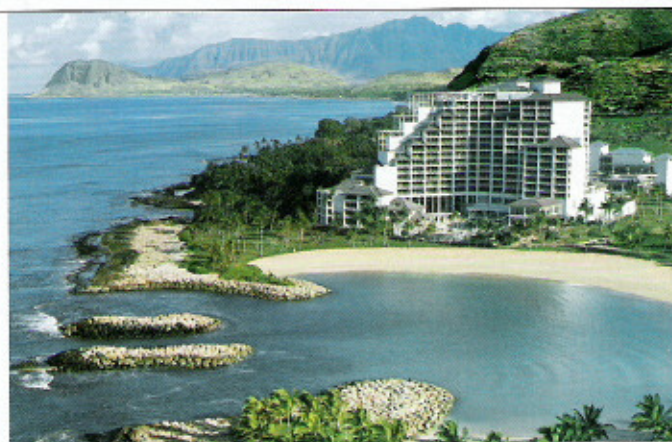
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## Crossroads

rocky promontories; the French and the Italians planted vineyards; island-loving Brits established a yacht club. Later, in 1929, an exiled Leon Trotsky became the island's most famous resident, spending four unhappy but productive years there, writing his *History of the Russian Revolution*.

But by 1996, when Gülersoy began living part-time on the island, its 19th-century charm had long since faded. Wealthy Istanbulites still summered there, but the Europeans had gone elsewhere to frolic, and decades of hostile relations between Turkey and Greece had driven the Greeks away. Big properties had fallen into ruin, and there wasn't a single decent hotel.

For years he promoted  
preservation, fighting  
to retain what remained  
of a gilded age.

The once-fashionable playground for the international rich had become a homogeneous, hermetic backwater.

Gülersoy decided to revive the old-style tourism – and he was a likely person for the job. For years, as director general of the quasi-public Turkish Touring and Automobile Association, he had promoted cultural and architectural preservation, fighting to retain what remained of a gilded age. In his library in Istanbul, Gülersoy keeps a photograph from 1938. It shows his brother and sister as children, sitting in a field of daisies behind the then-presidential residence, Dolmabahçe Palace.

"That's what it was like then," he says sadly. "That's what's gone. A freeway runs through there now."

Determined not to lose all of "it," Gülersoy expanded Touring's traditional role of advising the government on how to improve conditions for drivers. He invested funds to transform tumbledown Ottoman-era houses into boutique hotels (François Mitterand stayed in one of them), turn muddy



flats and overgrown parks along the Bosphorus into linden-shaded tea gardens and vine-covered marble cafés, and put up a crafts center to showcase traditional arts. The prime minister



At the foot of a filigreed stairway, twin alcoves bookend striking stained glass.

once asked Gülersoy to run for the office of mayor of Istanbul. He declined.

"If I were mayor, I'd have to do something," he says wryly.

**G**ÜLERSOY WAS NOT BORN INTO A world of villas and international money; he came from a middle-class family. His father, a military officer, died when Çelik was a child. Educated at free public schools, he took easily to French, German, and English, fell in love with European culture, and, through pictures and books, developed a reverence for the wide, orderly avenues of Paris and the ornate architecture of Rome. He has carried that sensibility with him ever since.

"He's a valuable man who has done unusual works," says Selami Karabrahimgil, director of Turkey's office of tourism in New York. And many in Turkey who think about such things believe that Gülersoy's achievements led to a mini-boom in reviving derelict Ottoman-era properties. But the road has not always been smooth, and along the way his acerbic tongue, maverick nature, and tendency to ram his way through – rather than navigate around – bureaucracy has earned him enemies even among government officials who support the spirit of his efforts. He's exacting – he once sent back dozens of handmade chairs because in his view the backs were not inclined far enough

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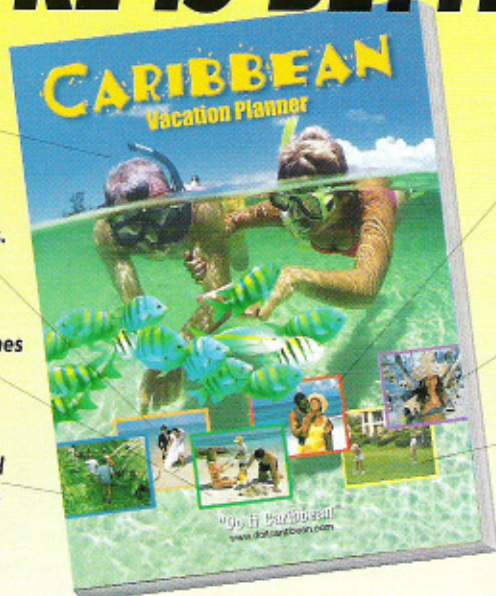
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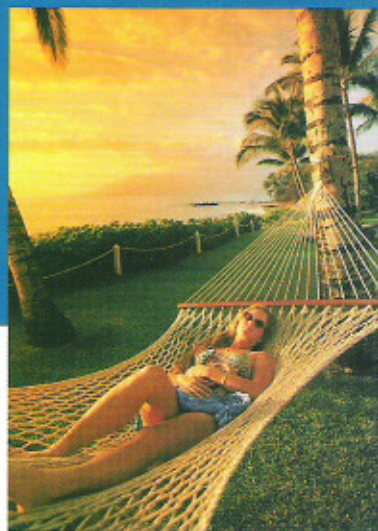
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## Crossroads

to be comfortable – and he doesn't hide his disdain for work he considers historically inaccurate, even though he himself has been known occasionally to get an architectural detail wrong.

When I name the restored 19th-century Ottoman house where I'm staying, he makes a face and says, "That's a very bad hotel," referring not to the service or food but to the building's varnished wood exterior and its gold-plated chandeliers and bed frames, which he finds ostentatious, tasteless. Ottoman-era aristocrats, he contends, always painted their houses in pastel colors.

Since he started living part-time on Büyük Ada, Gülersoy has been working to re-infuse the isle with some of its former belle époque style, grace,

By 1995 the three-story mansion had become a dilapidated wreck and was in state hands.

and life. Some projects have been mundane, such as the construction of public restrooms; others more fanciful: Shuddering at the notion of golf carts being introduced as transportation on this island that prohibits motorized vehicles, Gülersoy funded the renovation of more than 50 horse-drawn carriages. Wanting to see the island celebrated in art, he brought over two Russian-born painters from Istanbul and set up studios for them.

But it is the cultural center that is most emblematic of what he is trying to do here. When he decided to build a center for musical performances, he found a three-story mansion he thought would be perfect. An Armenian family had built it as a hotel in 1878; over the next century it had been owned successively by an Italian painter, a Greek banker, and the Roman Catholic Church. By 1995 the building had become a dilapidated wreck and was in state hands. That interested Gülersoy, for while Tour-

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ing could never have afforded to buy the building, the fact that it was government-owned meant that it could be leased for a reasonable sum. The only problem was that the state wanted to make it a police station. Gülersoy got to work, spending a year lobbying his friends in government to find somewhere else for the

trees he has planted on the grounds, he tosses bread to the pigeons and talks about plans to revive the island as a destination for international travelers.

"We have the infrastructure," he says, "the churches, the carriage transport, the beautiful houses. And we have a mild climate.

## Once Around the Princes Isles

First, the name: Some say it came from the fact that over the centuries so many royals were exiled to the islands, which lie about ten miles off the coast of Istanbul, in the Sea of Marmara. Another version has it that after Justin II built a royal palace on Büyük Ada ("Big Island") in A.D. 569, people started referring to it as Prinkipo or "Island of the Prince." Since Büyük is the largest of the nine islands, the name came to be applied to the others, too. They are also known as the Red Islands or, to Istanbul's residents, simply as Adalar ("The Islands").

Of the five smallest islands, Sivri and Tavsan are uninhabited, Kasik is nearly so, Sedef has a few private residences, and Yassı is a military base. Heybeli (above), the second largest, was home to the Greek Orthodox School of Theology, which was a major center for that religion until closing in 1973. Heybeli is also occupied by some lovely 19th-century villas like those on Büyük Ada. Burgaz and Kınalı are quieter and less developed and are good places to spend a day walking and to enjoy a meal at a waterside restaurant.



Zaher Kibay/Coral Planet

police. The minister of culture helped him win over the prime minister, and soon the building was his.

Eight months and a painstaking \$500,000 restoration later, the cultural center was complete: A marble stairway had been built, the rooms were filled with antiques and musical instruments, rattan chairs lined the long verandas, and Gülersoy had stocked the library with 2,000 of his own books. The center opened in 1998 and now stages summer classical concerts, often by candlelight.

But Gülersoy is far from satisfied. In the rose-bordered garden, over a plate of Turkish *manti* (ravioli), and tea made from the leaves of linden

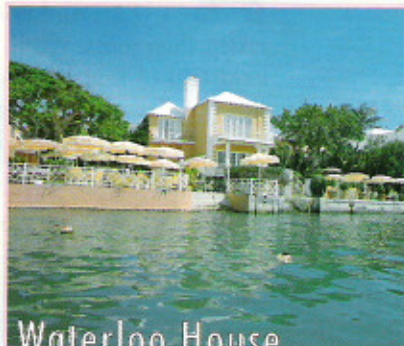
"I've loved Büyük Ada since my childhood days," he adds, then rhapsodizes about the island's abundant fruit and flowers – yellow mimosa and wild strawberries are island specialties – and the summer Thursday produce market, which he describes as being "just like in old Istanbul."

"Istanbul is lost," he says, pulling an ornate pocket watch from his waistcoat to check whether it's time for the return boat. "But for Büyük Ada there is still time." ♦

*Mary d'Ambrosio is a freelance writer and an adjunct professor of journalism at New York University. She travels frequently in Turkey.*

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