



Nişanyan Hotel owner
Müjde Tönbekçi (right)
and colleagues

PICTURE: Annapurna Mellor Photography

Women's world

A newly revamped female-led tour with Intrepid Travel shows **Cathy Toogood** a different side to Turkey

People don't start here for the money but to feel good about themselves and to see themselves in a way they never have before," says Tara Hopkins, founder of *çöp(m)adam*, a social enterprise in Turkey that employs women who have never worked for a salary before.

Tara is showing me around her small shop and studio in Ayvalık, a pretty coastal town in the northwest. She is wearing a stylish dress made out of a flour sack and explains how the women employed by the social enterprise make items to sell out of throwaway materials – *çöp(m)adam* translates as "garbage ladies". There are laptop covers fashioned from offcuts of denim, handbags and purses studded with beer bottle tops and cushion covers decorated with cute animals.

Cats lounge around the studio, shelves are crammed with tubs of bottle tops and zips, and there's a reel of Lipton Tea packaging propped up in the corner. Tara introduces Sidika Zincir, her former neighbour who is working in the shop today and who helped her to recruit her first members of staff 15 years ago. "Word just spread," Tara smiles, telling me how she's since employed more than 500 women.

NEW EXPERIENCES

My visit to *çöp(m)adam* is one of the new additions to a Turkey Women's Expedition with Intrepid Travel,

a newly revamped tour with departures starting at the end of October. Intrepid was keen to relaunch this trip to support tourism in Turkey and recovery efforts following the earthquake in February 2023.

"Women are disproportionately affected after a disaster such as an earthquake," Zina Bencheikh, Intrepid's managing director for the EMEA region,

"Our Women's Expeditions allow us to access some things that wouldn't be possible with men in the group

tells me while talking about the operator's range of Women's Expeditions. She explains how these all-female adventures started with a tour in Morocco in 2018 and have become a popular product for the company.

"We like to open people's eyes on both sides," Zina says, referring to how the trips challenge both customers' and guides' perceptions. "They allow us to access some things that wouldn't be possible with men in the group."

One of these activities, and another new addition, is a visit to the home of mother and daughter Seray and Gülcan Ölçer in Istanbul. While we eat and chat around a table that takes up most of the room, Seray tells us about the "golden day" (or gold day) lunches ➤

ASK THE operator



Zina Bencheikh,
managing director EMEA,
Intrepid Travel

"This trip gives travellers the opportunity to meet women in Turkey from all walks of life and learn about their daily lives, traditions and the challenges that face them.

Clients stay at female-owned accommodation, travel with a female-owned transport company and visit social enterprises working to empower women. We created this trip to help support Turkey's recovery efforts from its devastating earthquake. It is vital travellers continue to support the economy by visiting. We know women are often disproportionately impacted by natural disasters, and tourism can be a lifeline for them. This trip helps to create economic and social opportunities for the women we visit and support."

BOOK IT

Intrepid Travel offers a 12-day Turkey: Women's Expedition from £1,995. The price is based on travel on October 28 and includes 11 nights' B&B accommodation, some meals, activities and local transport, but not flights. intrepidtravel.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Zeus Altar, Adatepe; Tara Hopkins,
founder of çöp(m)adam; Seray and
Gülcan Ölçer, organisers of 'golden
day' lunches for local women

PICTURES: Annapurna Mellor Photography

she organises with local women. They're a way of socialising, but also of saving money; everyone in the group gives a gold coin to the day's host and they all take it in turns to organise the lunches. Every host can exchange their gold for something they need.

It's a time for women to come together, and also have fun. "We should change the name," Seray says. "It should be the gossiping day, not the golden day."

CULINARY SKILLS

Women joining forces and earning money through culinary skills is a theme of the tour's new experiences. We also have lunch at Bizim Ev Hanımeli, a restaurant run by Hatice Mercan in Selçuk. Hatice started her business aged 35, making Turkish pancakes called *gözleme* at a roadside stall when her family were experiencing financial difficulty. It was such a success that she opened a restaurant and now employs local women.

Similarly, at female-owned Nişanyan Hotel in the village of Şirince, near Selçuk, owner Müjde Tönbekici tells us how important it is for her to employ women. Alongside her assistant manager Gülay Özkoca, who had never worked before this role, she teaches us how to make Turkish mezze. Gülay proudly wears a necklace with a gold coin attached for every month she's worked.

CHANGING NEIGHBOURHOODS

On a visit to KEDV in Istanbul, a foundation that supports the economic empowerment of low-income women, founder Sengul Akcar explains why the organisation works with local co-operatives to

"You may not call these women feminists but they are – they are changing their neighbourhoods

empower grassroots women rather than individuals. "We bring them together," Sengul says. "You may not call them feminists but they are. They are changing their neighbourhoods and educating their kids."

To complement trips to meet inspiring local women, clients can also visit historical attractions in Turkey such as Topkapı Palace, to learn about what life would have been like for the women living in its harem, and the ancient cities of Ephesus and Hierapolis.

The scenery on the tour is also something to highlight to clients as it covers a lot of ground, including stays in Istanbul, the Cappadocia region, Pamukkale and Adatepe, where a climb to the Altar of Zeus offers fantastic views over the Aegean Sea.

FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

It feels special to meet all of the inspirational women on the tour and to hear their stories alongside a female guide, female driver and all-female group of travelling companions from around the world. This feeling of female empowerment sums up the tour for me. Our driver, Fatma Çelik Karakol, who owns her own transport company, explains that she chose to do a job that's not common for women in Turkey because "it's what I love and how I feel free". **TW**