

Birgi, a mountaintop idyll of deities and decoration, an hour or so's drive from Anatolia's coastal riviera of Izmir, is a place lost in the past. Wooden shutters, carved with hearts and crescent moons, swing in the breeze of the stone houses while floral-bloused women sit on benches under an old oak tree outside the mosque and watch the sun sink into the ravines below while pitting fruit and chattering. Once a stronghold of the Lydian Kingdom said to be the first minters of gold coins and people of the famed King Croesus, Birgi thrived like a fattened calf under the Persians, Alexander The Great, and the Romans. Wreathed in sacred mists, she was a center for the cult of Zeus worship before evolving into a place of pilgrimage in the East Roman (Byzantine) Period, called *Khristoupolis* (literally, "the city of Christ") and then *Pyrgion* (from which came its modern name Birgi). A trade stop for silks, leather, and sack weaving, she was seized by Sasa Bey in the 14th century and folded into the Ottoman Empire. A scene described by the traveler-writer Ibn Battuta, who visited the local Sultan, conjures the opulence of life there under the pashas. "On our arrival at the palace, we found about twenty of his servants, of surpassingly beautiful appearance, wearing robes of silk, with their hair parted and hanging loose, and in color of a resplendent whiteness tinged with red. I asked, 'What are these beautiful figures?' and he replied, 'These are Greek pages.'" Relics of this courtly time survive in a trio of elegant mosques and a cloistered madrasa that schooled the revered Mehmed II The Conquerer, preserved to this day.

Behind a high wall on a sloping street next to a dry riverbed lined with fruit trees is set an intact treasure of the Aegean region, the 18th-century Çakırağa Mansion, one of the most vividly decorated Ottoman wooden houses still in existence. One might walk by the gates, utterly unaware of the glories within exactly as its wily builder intended. A leather baron named Çakıroğlu Mehmet Bey, having made his fortune with local tanneries, built the three-storied mansion in 1761 as a mark of his new social standing. Reached through a flower-filled garden, the house is strikingly open to the elements, having no outer façade but a series of pillared open-front halls (*oricans*) atop each other, looking out onto the pine-frosted Bozdağ Mountains. Designed in an almost u-shaped fashion and cleverly adapted to the seasons, the timber-framed first floor is shaded but open to the rippling breezes, while the second floor, clad in stone, is more sheltered against the biting winter blizzards. The upper floors are also given an im-

posing touch with the addition of projecting balconies on brackets colloquially known as *eliböğünde*. With a typically 18th-century *folie de grandeur*, the leather baron ordered an intoxicating blend of European Empire and Baroque-Rococo decorative fandango to be entwined with the Ottoman frescoes and stenciled wall paintings. The verandas, once filled with diwans and oriental sofas in embroidered velvets, are home to strikingly rich timber ceilings, each one an embarrassment of lozenge, square, and triangle-shaped panels fashioned with laths and painted with motifs of fruits, basketwork, flowers, crescents, and stars. The interior decoration, sensitively restored under the watchful eye of the General Directorate of Monuments and Museums, sets the house apart as extraordinary—even in this part of Western Anatolia that boasts many fine mansions. Across walls, fireplaces, and window frames, a panoply of paintings create a theatrical spectacle, each detail notable for its quality and finesse. The highlights of the two main chambers in the family quarters (*haremlik*) are fanciful panoramas of two major city ports, Istanbul and Izmir. Known in local lore as the man 'of love,' owner Şerif Aliğa brought home two wives to his freshly-minted manse and, romantically, had scenes painted of their two native birthplaces to keep inevitable homesickness at bay in this provincial setting. To stand in the Izmir Chamber after passing through a door inscribed with Arabic calligraphy proclaiming *ya mufattiha al-abwab* (*Oh Ye, the Opener of doors!*) and gaze up at the frieze, flanked by gaily painted columns is to become lost in a miniature world of mosques, sailboats, ornamented piers and windmills, crowned with a depiction of the Kadifekale citadel, known as 'the Velvet Castle,' as seen from Karşıyaka on the other shore of the bay.

The Istanbul panorama, while less realistic, is equally splendid and unexpected, the sea seeping into the Golden Horn, Bosphorus, and Marmara, dividing the cityscape, which bristles with minarets and majestic galleons. This room, used in the summer, is bedecked with windows, some with crisply stained glass, allowing the ripples of colored light to prance along the paintings of classical urns, sprays of Ottoman tulips and roses framed with delicate garlands and painted swags, so evoking of silken drapes. Here is a house decorated for pleasure, for sensuality, and for astonishing guests at first sight—a culmination of the high taste and exuberant mingling of styles that so prevailed in the late Ottoman period, its remote setting making the refined bombast all the more memorable. Long may it stand in its beauty.

Çakırağa Mansion

Baroque-Rococo and Ottoman Opulence

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