**Rustic Luxury: From Stone Houses to Stone Hotels**

**İlkay TAŞ GÜRSOY[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Rural is the new cool as the case of tourism development in Alacati shows. Alacati is a small town in the city of Izmir on the western coast of Turkey. By examining the case of Alacati, the paper aims to understand how local architecture is used to transform the image of a place from mundane and inert into impressive and alive. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews with the local actors (enterpreneurs, local people, tourists, local administrators) will be used to understand their point of views. Throughout the history Alacati became home to various groups. Once Greek town, Alacati was inhabited by Turkish refugees due to exchange of minorities between Balkan countries and Turkey after the Lausanne Treaty. Turkish refugees from the Balkan countries settled in the houses emptied by the Greeks. These stone houses still remain in Alaçati and they attract investors from big cities, especially from Istanbul to the town. Outsider investors, who have migrated to Alacati, bought old stone houses from the locals and turned them into tourist attractions.

Alacati is the home of the rural imaginaries scented by nostalgia, and the search for peace. Though it is idealized as authentic, pure and sacred, it becomes the center of showing off, popularity and mass media attention due to celebrities’ influx to the town. Alacati is also called as the Saint Tropez of Turkey by some travel writers. Architecture has played a transformative role in the remaking of Alacati’s destination image. In 1996, an outsider entrepreneur renovated an old tobacco and grape storage in Alacati and transformed it into a café. It was the first modern café of Alacati. However, the course of life in Alacati had not changed until the first hotel was opened. Rebuilt of a hundred years old stone house into a small luxury hotel in 2001 was the turning point for the future of the town. The onset of the first hotel paved the way for the construction of other hotels and restaurants which have amounted to 70 hotels and 45 restaurants as of 2016. While old houses were reconstructed as new hotels, new hotels were built which looked like old houses, blurring the relationship between the real and the dreamed.

The idealized Alacati, to the extent it is seen through the restoration bubble, is small, local and sincere. It offers privacy, space and connection with nature. Here, rural imaginaries become spatialized with hotels offering “the warmth of grandma’s home”[[2]](#footnote-2) accompanied by facilities of a luxury hotel. Besides narratives about Alacati help to reinterpret and reinforce the imaginaries of Alacati. Alacati is presented in the mass media as an inspiring story of creating the Saint Tropez of Turkey from a simple town, a best practice for tourism marketing, a success story of women entrepreneurship (the owners of the first restaurant and hotel are female entrepreneurs and most of the tourism facilities are owned by female enterpreneurs) and an informative case of sustainable rural tourism development. In this context, the paper aims to question how rural imaginaries create built environments for tourism and how rural imaginaries are created through the built environments in Alacati.

**Short biography**

**İlkay TAŞ GÜRSOY**

Assist. Prof. Dr. at the Tourism Management Department, Reha Midilli Foca Faculty of Tourism, Dokuz Eylul University. She completed BA degree in Tourism Administration (2001) and she acquired MA degree (2003) and PhD degree (2010) in European Union Studies at Dokuz Eylül University. Her research and teaching interests include cultural heritage, customer relationship management, organizational communication, recreation, health tourism and tourism policies of the EU. She has taken part in several EU projects and currently she is in the executive team of the Jean Monnet Chair in European Social Policy Project. She is acting as the co-head of the European Union Department at the Graduate School of Social Sciences, Dokuz Eylül University.

1. Assist. Prof. Dr. , Dokuz Eylul University, RMF Faculty of Tourism, Izmir, Turkey

   [ilkay2008@yahoo.com](mailto:ilkay2008@yahoo.com); [ilkay.tas@deu.edu.tr](mailto:ilkay.tas@deu.edu.tr) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This quote is taken from the speech delivered by Zeynep Öziş (owner and manager of the first hotel in Alacati) at the 1st Regional Tourism Congress, organized by the Seferihisar Fevziye Hepkon School of Applied Social Sciences, 24-26 March 2016, Seferihisar, Izmir, Turkey. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)