

November 2006

Our flight from New York to Istanbul landed on a beautiful, clear morning. The slender minarets from countless mosques pierced the sky and sent the message that we were no longer in Kansas. Istanbul straddles the Bosphorus Straits and is the only city in both Europe and Asia. Our hotel was right downtown, and we enjoyed a ride on the public ferry across the busy waterway.

The primary reason to visit Turkey is the incredible history. Turkey has more Greek ruins than Greece. There are more Roman ruins than Italy. We visited 6000-year-old Troy, which is actually in western Turkey. It was ablaze in late fall colors. The ruins at Ephesus are unlike any others that we've encountered.

99% of the Turks are Muslims, but there is no state religion. They respect all beliefs, but not the environment. Most of the roads are lined with litter. There are countless piles of rubble, broken glass and other trash in the fields. The air in the cities is foul with a thick haze, and the smell of burning coal permeated our nostrils. The Turks have about as much respect for their lungs as they do the countryside, and smoking is ubiquitous. The Pope arrived on the day we left. It was said that, in order to prepare for his trip, he was smoking three packs a day.

Based upon our recent trip, it was interesting to contrast Turkey to Croatia. Both are developing economies, but the Croatians are doing so much better. Croatian roads and sidewalks are perfect, but the Turkish highways are an embarrassing patchwork. We were worried before the trip about fundamental Islamic terrorists, but the sidewalks are the biggest danger in Turkey. They are an obstacle course of tripping hazards. There are lots of half-built houses and crooked roofs. Turkey would like to become a member of the European Union, but is meeting some resistance. There are lots of official reasons, but we suspect that "Turkish Craftsmanship" is the primary cause for not welcoming them into the club.

The Turkish economy is weak, but improving. The average monthly above-ground salary is \$400. The underground economy adds more. 45% of the world's jeans are produced here. You would expect prices to be quite low, but the asking prices are about the same as the USA. For a good price, hard bargaining is required most everywhere. When we walked away from a sidewalk cafe selling \$5 beers, the shopkeeper offered to negotiate. Most prices are quite good if you are willing to make an effort. Our land tour with [Gate 1](#) was less than \$40 per person per day and included four-star hotels and transportation on a nice bus with an excellent guide and half of our meals. We never could have done that on our own. The people are generally nice, but we and our traveling companions were frequently shortchanged. Mysterious, unexplainable charges appeared on our restaurant checks. Perhaps "Turkish Gamesmanship" is another reason for the EU snub. The one exception to good prices is gasoline. It was over \$7 per gallon, and we suspect that this is non-negotiable.

Looking past the litter, the countryside is quite beautiful. We drove along stunning coasts, past olive trees and fruit orchards, through fertile fields of cotton and sugar-beets and past gorgeous snow-covered volcanoes. Sections reminded us of Montana. At Pamukkale, the calcite formations are similar to Yellowstone's Mammoth Hot Springs, but several times larger. The highlight for us was the region called Cappadocia. The magical rock formations blend both nature and history in an unforgettable manner. The houses have been carved in stone thousands of years ago, and some are still occupied today. Wooden doors and satellite dishes add to the anachronism. We found ourselves singing the theme song from "The Flintstones." It was unreal.

We drove a total of about 1200 miles on our loop through the western part of the country. The food was OK, but uninspiring. Cheese, bread and olives compose a typical breakfast. There were lots of tempting kabobs, but we avoided the street stalls after being warned about acquiring the "Turkey Trots." The pastry was excellent and rivaled anything the French can produce. We really lucked out on the weather with sunny days and highs in the 50's and 60's.

Our last two days were back in Istanbul. 15,000 policemen were out for the Pope's impending visit, and there was a large, but peaceful, protest less than a mile from our hotel with 25,000 people. Recall that the last guy who took a shot at the Pope was a Turk, and Turkey does not want to be known as "the land of the Pope shooters." We visited several mosques, museums and palaces. One of the palaces holds both an 89 carat diamond and the skull of John the Baptist. The touts were out in full force to get us to visit shops and restaurants in the Spice Market and the Grand Bazaar. We grew annoyed with the extra charges and lying touts. We learned to insist that the waiters write down and sign a note with the prices they had promised us for dinner and drinks before we would even sit down in a restaurant.

The flights home were uneventful with the exception of the security at the Istanbul airport. There were eight separate security checks. At one point all of the men were taken aside and frisked thoroughly. In a scene reminiscent of "Midnight Express", one of the gentlemen in our group was taken to a back room for an even more thorough search where he had to drop his pants. It seems that he had safety-pinned his money-belt to his underwear.

We haven't yet decided whether or not to return some day for more hiking in Cappadocia or a cruise in a traditional "gulet" along the coast. We'll have to weigh the cultural and natural experience against the risk of a sprained ankle on the sidewalks, lung cancer from the air pollution and second hand smoke, and diabetes from eating too much of the sugary Turkish delights.

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