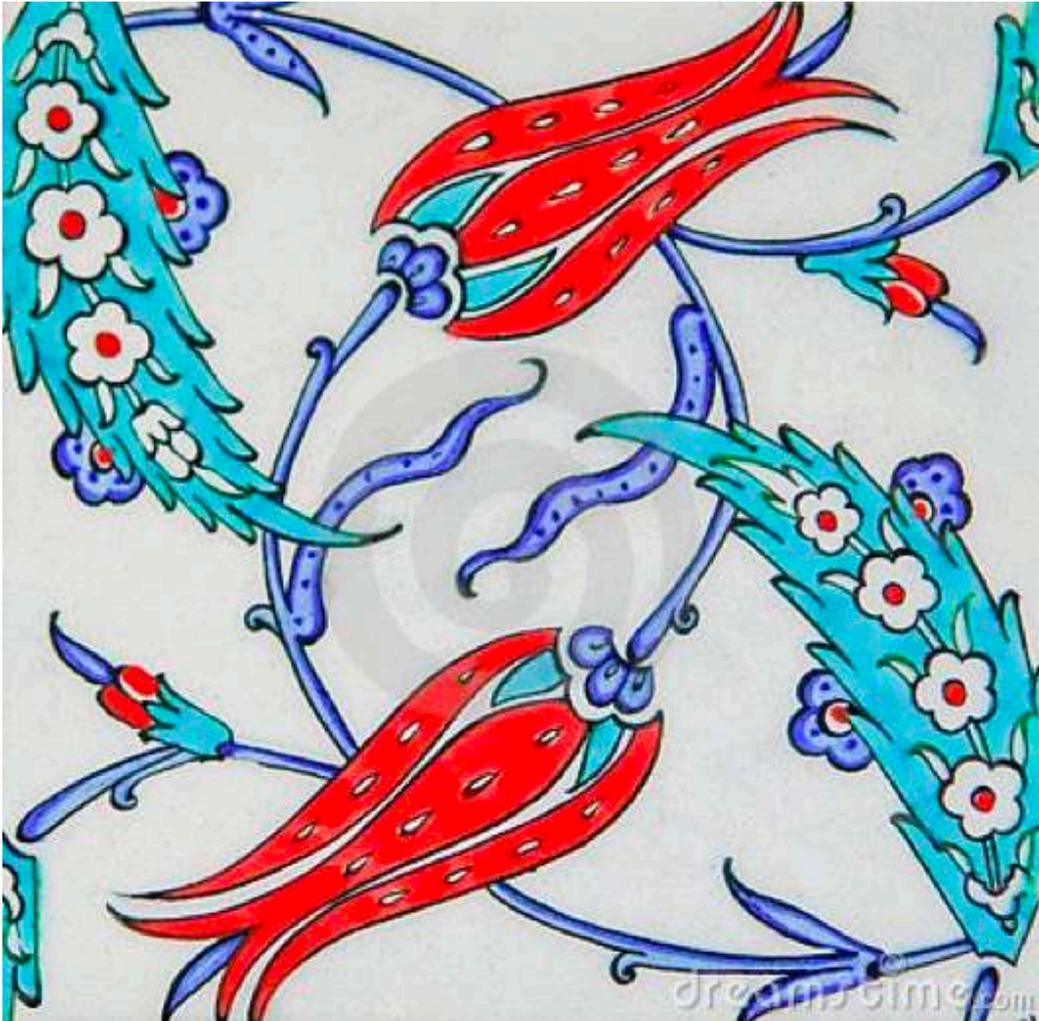


# Teşekkür Ederim Turkey

## Travelling in Trust



By Lucie de Gentile

In gratitude to the Roger Short Memorial Fund  
and University College, University of Oxford

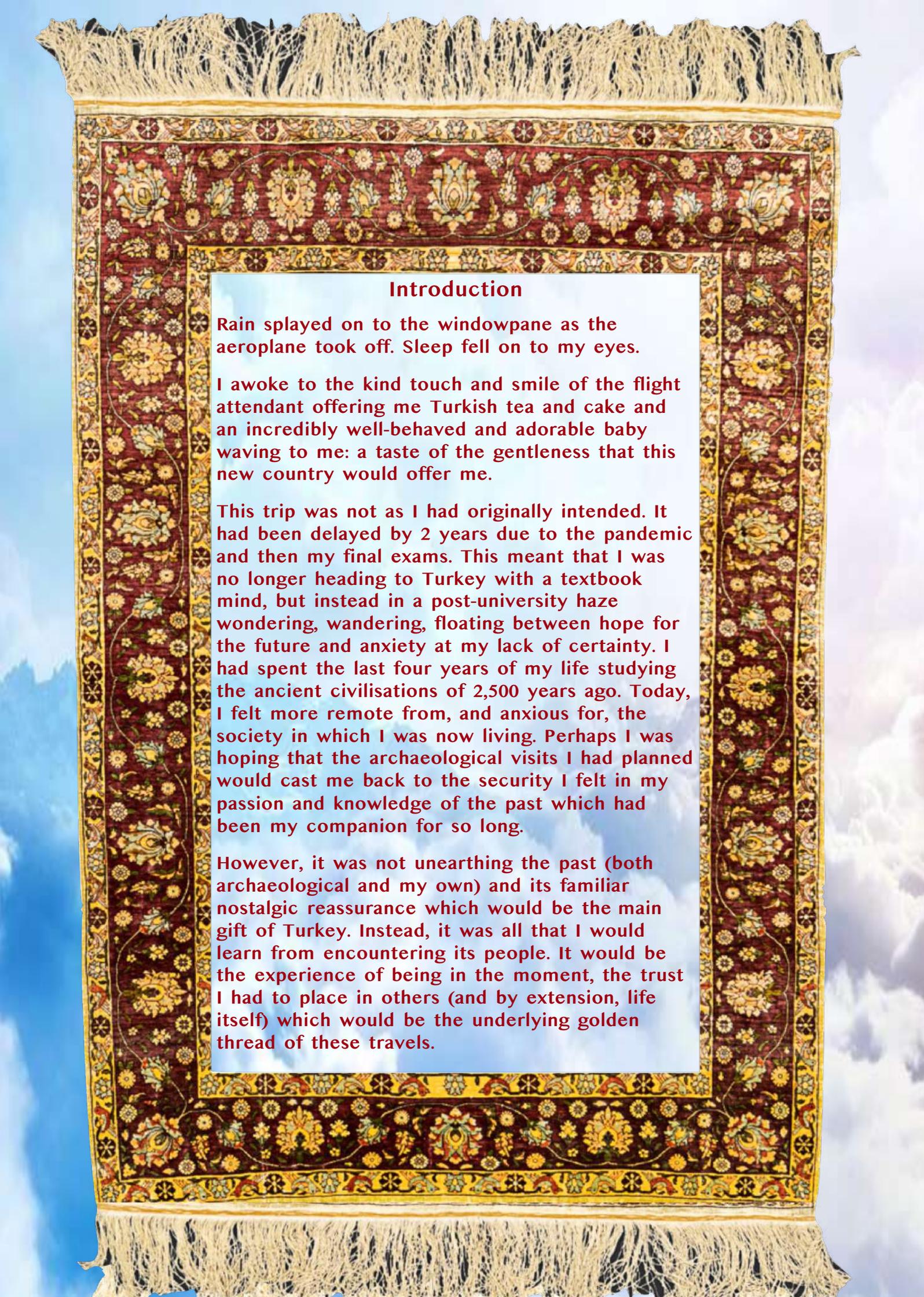
January, 2023



With special thanks  
to Mehmet, Basar,  
Marco and all those  
who made my time  
in Turkey so special.

You offered me  
Xenia worthy of that  
found in epics.



A decorative rug with a central text box. The rug features a complex floral and geometric pattern in shades of red, gold, and brown. The central text is enclosed in a white rectangular box with a thin blue border. The rug has a fringed top and bottom edge. The background is a soft-focus image of a blue sky with white clouds.

## Introduction

Rain splayed on to the windowpane as the aeroplane took off. Sleep fell on to my eyes.

I awoke to the kind touch and smile of the flight attendant offering me Turkish tea and cake and an incredibly well-behaved and adorable baby waving to me: a taste of the gentleness that this new country would offer me.

This trip was not as I had originally intended. It had been delayed by 2 years due to the pandemic and then my final exams. This meant that I was no longer heading to Turkey with a textbook mind, but instead in a post-university haze wondering, wandering, floating between hope for the future and anxiety at my lack of certainty. I had spent the last four years of my life studying the ancient civilisations of 2,500 years ago. Today, I felt more remote from, and anxious for, the society in which I was now living. Perhaps I was hoping that the archaeological visits I had planned would cast me back to the security I felt in my passion and knowledge of the past which had been my companion for so long.

However, it was not unearthing the past (both archaeological and my own) and its familiar nostalgic reassurance which would be the main gift of Turkey. Instead, it was all that I would learn from encountering its people. It would be the experience of being in the moment, the trust I had to place in others (and by extension, life itself) which would be the underlying golden thread of these travels.

## Arrival

I arrived in Istanbul in heavy traffic, torrential rain and with a migraine and “dead” phone - unable to find the address of my hotel. I panickily got off the bus, charmlessly entered a café and asked: “Do you have wifi, a charge point and tea? Can I use them?” The waiter smiled and responded, “We even have toilets too”. I sheepishly apologised. Instead of mocking judgement, he offered me only kindness and patience. And so, in the Faros Café on Taksim Square began my introduction to Turkish hospitality. Recomposed by the kindness I had experienced, I left the café and flagged down a taxi. As we were about to leave, the taxi driver asked if we could take two more passengers and make a short detour to avoid them standing in the rain. A glowing Austrian girl and her mother jumped in. She smiled widely as she told me she had moved to Istanbul two months ago to continue her studies and that the city and the country had seduced her. Her joy and enthusiasm shone.

I arrived at my hotel very wet and very late. I was welcomed with warmth and concern by Talep and Farouk. Talep upgraded me to the hotel suite at no extra cost because it was late and still empty. The hotel restaurant was now closed, but after showing me to my room Farouk offered to go out into the dark wet night to buy me some Turkish food, which he then served on a tray in the hotel’s rooftop restaurant. I dined on unknown delicacies admiring the twinkling lights of Istanbul’s skyline.

## Day 1 - Serene Sights

I awoke to the call to prayer as the sun timidly shone on the autumn leaves outside my window. My first Turkish breakfast was a revelation of tastes and abundance. As I sat there having an unexpected feast, a toddler and his parents came into the breakfast room - and you could sense the joy exuding from the waiters. Suddenly service became slower but only because one waiter was playing with the child, a second was preparing a special meal for him and the third was blowing up a balloon to give him. Soon after, another guest arrived who was ill. The waiter proceeded to bring out the cook, who upon hearing her symptoms, went out into the garden to pick some herbs and make her own home-made remedy. It really felt more like a family than disparate guests. I smiled to myself on realizing what I had just felt - and yet it was probably the first time that I could not even guess what anyone was saying in the conversations around me - the vast majority were speaking Turkish.

I was then treated to my first Turkish coffee; it's history and social meaning explained to me with zeal by my friendly waiter, Seçkin. Now, fueled by my breakfast and coffee, I set out to explore the most famous landmarks of Istanbul: the Blue Mosque and the Hagia Sophia. As I walked towards them, another call to prayer echoed along the streets. I stopped often to take in the beautiful architecture and unexpected sights (such as the Sublime Porte where the Grand Viziers had lived and worked) and to marvel at the incredibly well-behaved and well-groomed stray dogs and cats in the incredibly clean streets. (This remains a mystery to me, I still do not understand how stray animals have been toilet-trained - I saw no "mess" in my whole visit to Turkey!). As I approached the Blue Mosque, I was told by a local that it was closed for another 15 minutes due to Friday prayers - and he invited me to visit his shop. As we walked to his shop, he gave me a personal tour of the hippodrome - explaining for example, that the Serpent Column (built in 478 BC) had a fire-pit at its base which when lit would send smoke up the inside of the serpent-shaped column. The first smoke emerging from the "serpent's mouth" signaled the start of races at the hippodrome. At the shop, I sipped my first apple tea and admired beautifully ornate rugs before leaving to see the Blue Mosque.

Entering the Blue Mosque for the first time, I probably didn't get the full "wow effect" because it was undergoing renovation. However, one could not help but be impressed by this beautiful building. It was my first time inside a mosque. I was struck by how the absence of imagery to distract me, encouraged self-reflection. I found it incredibly peaceful and serene - even with all its visitors and the unexpected scent of feet !



I then proceeded to the Hagia Sophia with its beautiful pink rock and amazing structure. It was truly a feat of wonder. I was also amazed by the huge collection of incredibly well-preserved archaeological vestiges around the outside of the Hagia Sophia - many of which were remains of the Theodosian Hagia Sophia inaugurated in 415. The Hagia Sophia had recently been reconverted into a mosque (after previously serving as a museum), so a lot of the famous Christian mosaics had been covered up. I did however see The Vestibule Mosaic from the 10th century which depicts Mary and Jesus being offered Constantinople by Emperor Constantine and the Hagia Sophia by Emperor Justinian.

I decided to return to the hippodrome to take a more leisurely walk around it. I re-appreciated the Serpent Column - knowing from my studies that it was an offering to Apollo from the Greek city states who had united to triumph over the Persians at the Battle of Plataea in 479BC (The name of each city state is inscribed on the coils of the serpent). I also admired the Obelisk of Thutmose III which is the oldest visible monument in Istanbul dating from 1479-1425BC.

Curiosity propelled me into the beautiful Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts. I was initially surprised to see stray cats and kittens roaming around the museum, but I soon became absorbed by the museum's collection. I admired ancient Qurans and book covers, pots, doors, rugs and Ottoman clothes and was fascinated by the associated explanations of their significance. What was even more amazing was how serene and quiet the place was, as I silently went from room to room. I found it interesting that in these rooms, Turkish fireplaces were smaller and triangular in shape, apparently to help facilitate the preparation of coffee. Walking through the museum's courtyard, I was lucky to see the sun setting over the Blue Mosque making her seem like a blue jewel in a pink sky.

As the museum closed, I left having enjoyed both the cultural experience and its tranquility. I decided to have a cup of tea at the Seven Hills restaurant which offered impressive panoramic views, but planned to eat at another restaurant. Urged by my hunger, I left and walked until I arrived in a more « popular » neighbourhood. Although I was initially wary, people only tried to give me good directions as I got myself lost in the winding dark alleyways. I finally found the restaurant I was seeking and enjoyed traditional mezze in a quaint courtyard. I walked back to my hotel in the late evening, feeling completely safe (except for a group of Spanish men who abruptly appeared from around a corner and brusquely asked me for directions).

I tucked myself into bed, smiling at the abundance of beauty and peace I had experienced on my first day in Istanbul.



## Day 2 - Relaxed Grandeur



I woke up early, excited to visit the Topkapi Palace. I entered Gülhane Park and walked to its peak to find the expansive Topkapi Palace complex. I ventured first into the 6th century church of Hagia Irene. I thought it very interesting that the Muslim Ottomans had kept a vestige of the faith of the previous rulers in their own grounds and had not converted it into a mosque. I then entered the imposing palace gates which reminded me of Disney-style castles. After admiring the courtyards and rose gardens, I learnt about the day-to-day life of the Sultan and his entourage - whether it be how their coffee was prepared, which perfumes they wore or the living-quarters of the cooks. I wondered at the display of military artefacts and the impressive collection of clocks. However, what I found particularly striking was the Palace's Harem and Throne Room, both elaborately decorated and giving a sense of relaxed grandeur. Topkapi delighted with treasures at every turn - however because it is so huge, it is easy to feel a bit overwhelmed. As I neared the extremity of the Palace grounds, I was struck by the spectacular view of the Bosphorous that greeted me and which helped me to fully appreciate the strategic and beautiful setting for this Palace.

After leaving the Topkapi Palace complex I walked for about 15 minutes to find a tiny cafe in a peaceful courtyard behind the Hagia Sophia. I ate delicious mezze at very affordable prices in a very tranquil environment - it was hard to imagine I was in the centre of such an enormous city.

I then proceeded to the Grand Bazaar which I somehow struggled to find due, I think, to its numerous discreet entrances. I was surprised to discover how clean and beautifully decorated it was inside. It was indeed an experience for all the senses. After exiting the labyrinth of the Grand Bazaar, I arrived at the tranquil Suleymaniye Mosque - whose white and blue tones created a harmonious and gentle energy.

For dinner, I opted for the healthy choice of baklavas and tea at the Hafiz Mustafa Café with locals who seemed to come in after Friday night prayers at the mosque. Later, I experienced my first Hamman - I really appreciated it for the pleasurable physical bodily experience for so many of my senses (the perfumes and music were so relaxing and beautiful) but also for the feeling it engendered of being bathed like a child - with love and gentleness. It was an experience which necessitated so much trust. I went to sleep with baby skin.





## Day 3: Coffee with the Ruins and the Parrots

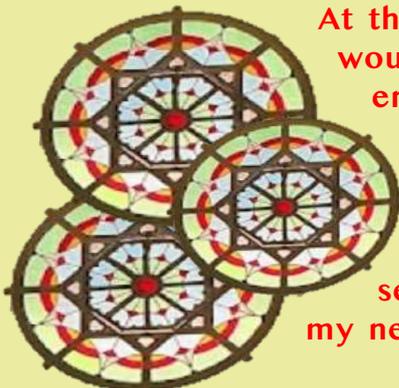
I walked up the hill of Gülhane Park again, but today I was going to visit the Archaeological Museum. Before commencing my visit of the museum, I decided to get a coffee and sit outside in the haven of its tranquil courtyard which was scattered with ruins. I soaked up the sunshine, the ambience and the peace. Cats tumbled over the ruins and parrots flew among the overhead trees and from the courtyard terrace spectacular views extended across Gülhane Park and the city beyond.

I was particularly excited about the prospect of seeing The Alexander Sarcophagus (which I had studied in detail, and which had even appeared in one of my exams). I was unprepared however for just how much more I would see and feel and by just how great the museology would be.

In each room I marvelled that there were atleast 5 objects, which in most national museum collections would have been considered treasures worthy of central display. I admired the well-preserved ancient artifacts - many still coloured with paint - which is a rarity. Exploring the gravestone exhibits was especially touching. The grief transmitted in word and image by those who had so desperately tried to keep their loved one's memory alive could still be felt - more than 2,000 years later - their names and deeds still in this world. In contrast, others chose to focus not on the grief and loss, but to instead celebrate the fleeting joys and frivolities of life: with tombs decorated with kissing cherubs and parading drunk cupids.

For me however, The Alexander Sarcophagus was the star of the show and the sublime museum lighting only enhanced it further. The carved images depicting battle scenes between Greeks and Persians and humans and beasts were beautifully preserved and exquisite. The image of Alexander clear - as was the use of its imagery to transmit the political message that the Greeks were stronger than the Persians, but if united they could be stronger than any "beast". Such imagery did not require a huge leap of the imagination to interpret the animal "beasts" depicted in the scenes as illustrative of all evil, strong and unknown foes.

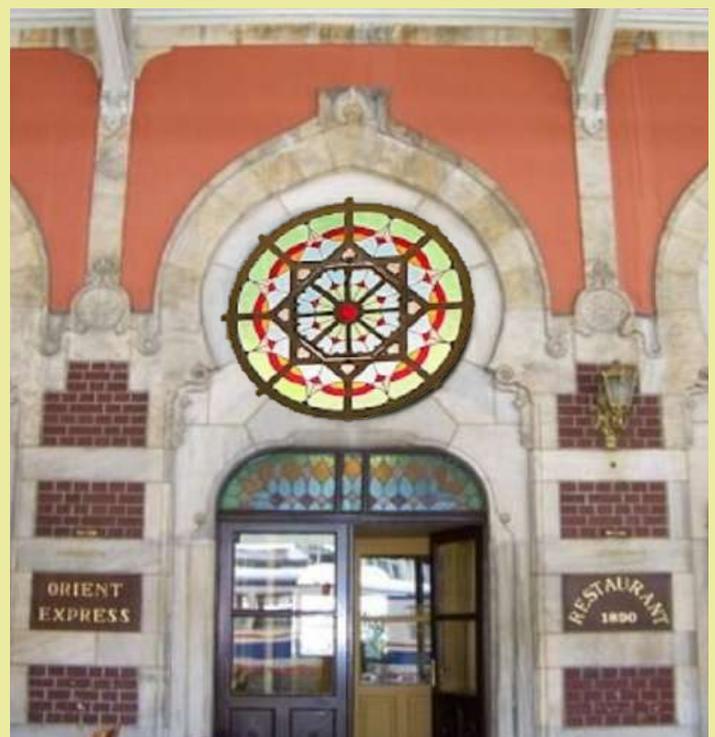
At the second level of the museum was a coin collection which would have surely made the Ashmolean jealous. There was also an enormous display of ancient gold jewellery which was astonishing in its detail, sophistication and craftsmanship. Sadly, despite spending my whole day here I still had to rush through the ancient Greek section (which was very well thematically explained) so that I could linger in the Troy section (because in two days' time, this ancient city would be my next destination).





The Troy display was highly educational. It clearly showed the significance of this settlement in the unveiling of so much information on various historical time periods due to Troy being inhabited over such a long period. Furthermore, the story of Troy and the Iliad was communicated in newspaper-styled panels, giving a sense of vivacity and relevance to the stories and societies which were from so long ago. Even for someone like myself, who has studied this time period and the Iliad in detail, it was still a very useful exhibit - and I could see the wonder in the eyes of the children who were just discovering it. Once again, I was impressed, not just by the astonishing number of amazing artefacts on display but by their aesthetic presentation and the effective communication of information and ideas. Additionally, the thematic organisation of the museum was excellent - as was its use of lighting. I had had another wonderful Turkish museum experience!

I was one of the last to leave this museum as it closed its doors for the day. I contentedly strolled through Gülhane Park towards my next destination - the restaurant I had chosen for my last dinner in Istanbul before leaving early the next morning. It was a very special one: I was going to eat at the Orient Express Restaurant! This restaurant was built in 1890 within Sirkeci train station to welcome travellers on the Orient Express to Istanbul. It was unchanged and to be very honest - almost deserted. Inside, there were some tasteful memorabilia, some beautiful stained glass and a 1930s atmosphere. Surprisingly, there were only a handful of locals seemingly on date nights. I relaxed and enjoyed the ambiance and the food for a few hours before returning one last time to the hotel, admiring the moon over the minarets.

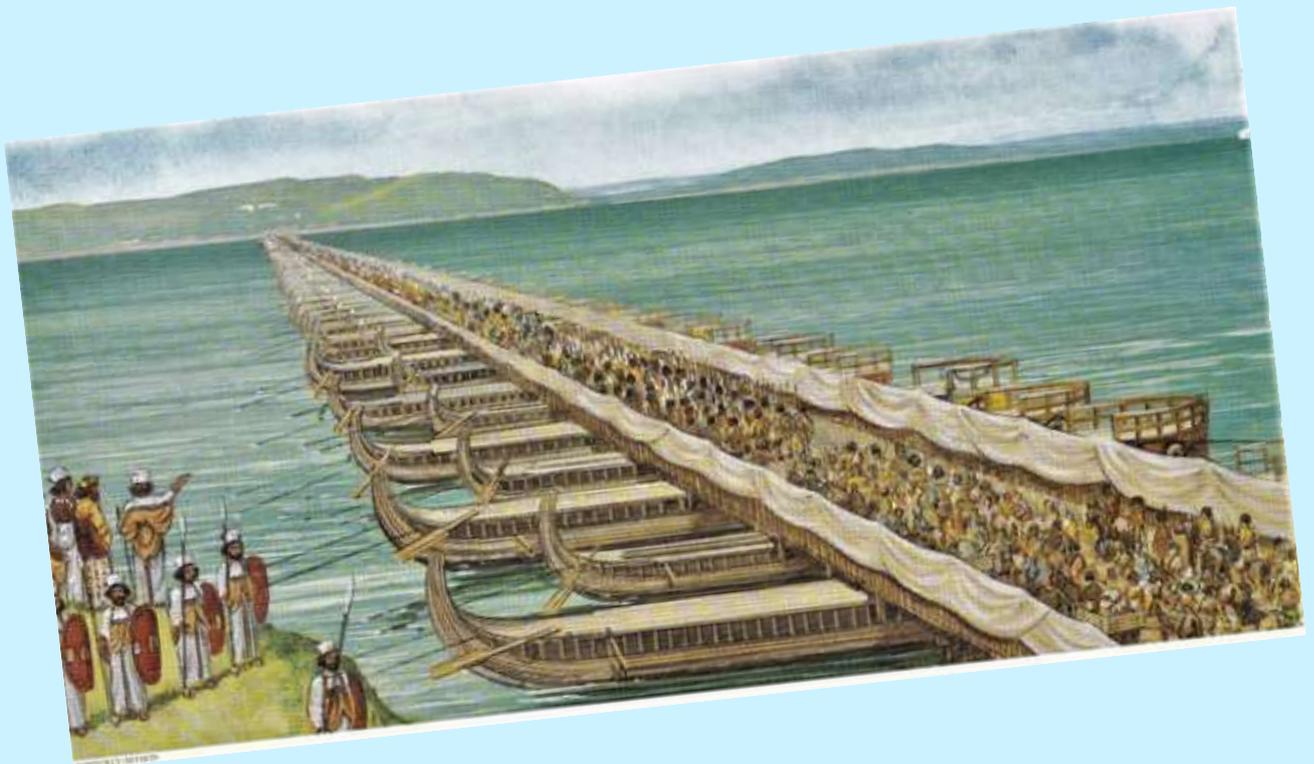


## Day 4 - Amazing Turkish Transport

When I woke up I admit I was nervous - even very nervous: I needed to travel from Istanbul to Behram Kale. Behram Kale was a place that even the guidebooks said was “very hard to get to” and a “challenge by public transport”. I had planned to go to Cannakale by bus (across the Dardanelles), and then, from there, find a type of public transport called a dolmush (which had no timetables available online) to Ayvacik and from there a taxi to Behram Kale.

My hotel in Istanbul had been in the compact historic centre, close to most of the historic sites I had visited. Journeying out of Istanbul made me appreciate just how huge is modern Istanbul - and how it is still growing - with huge investments evident in new roads and many new buildings being constructed in the zone around Istanbul.

Five hours later I crossed the Dardanelles. I imagined the Persian King Xerxes building his bridge of boats to cross these expansive straits to battle the Greeks. I also visualized Alexander the Great leaving Europe for the last time across these waters to begin his amazing conquest of the Persian Empire and beyond. The battles of these ancients which I had read about in class came to life as I could now more fully comprehend their physical feats.



When I eventually arrived at the otogar in Cannakale, I was obviously not looking confident because a man kindly asked me where I needed to go. I told him Ayvacik and he kindly led me to a dolmush and explained that it would be leaving in half an hour. I entered my first dolmush, which is basically a minibus which serves as a communal taxi. This was another new experience for me: people jumped in and out of the dolmush at apparently random and personalised places along the route, sitting and standing wherever they could in the van. I finally arrived at the otogar in Ayvacik and began to understand the cleverness of Turkish otogars: they are essentially transportation hubs uniting bus, dolmush and taxi stations, which facilitate movement from one mode of transport to the other. Additionally, they are often located in the centre of towns making them convenient and safer to access. In consequence, I immediately found a taxi to Behram Kale.

The taxi ride to Behram Kale was however another experience. Vertiginous cliffs falling directly into the Aegean Sea below needed to be navigated with a fading sun by a young driver. Once again, I had to put a lot of trust in another human! I arrived at dusk with the sun kissing the sea over traditional fishing boats.

Welcomed by Mehmet, I was immediately offered dinner - delicious mezze and freshly caught sea bass. This was the first time I had eaten a whole seabass and it was delicious! The meal was enhanced by the company of Basar, who worked at the hotel and who talked with me about an array of personal and political topics late into the night. Despite going to bed and realising I was the only guest in the hotel with an exclusively male staff, I feel asleep soundly to the sound of waves stroking the harbour.

## Day 5 - An Epic Day: Face to Face with Troy

I woke to a delicious and copious breakfast with views on Lesbos, and began planning my day trip to Troy: it was going to be a long indirect journey by public transport to get there. Looking around the hotel restaurant I noticed a selection of very old photographs showing the excavation party and site at Assos in 1883. Assos is the ancient city and archaeological site on the cliff above Behram Kale that had brought me to this village. Excavation of Assos in the early 1880s had been spurred by the discovery in 1873 of Troy (a neighbouring city). Explaining my plans for the day to Mehmet, he offered to call a friend to ask if he could take me by car as an informal taxi arrangement. His friend agreed for a very reasonable price. So very conveniently and surprisingly, I had my transport sorted - this was especially lucky because heavy rain began falling as we headed off. My taxi driver (a very smart man in a suit and polished shoes) did not speak any English, so when we arrived at an Ethno-village, I thought there had been a misunderstanding. In fact, he had made a deliberate detour because he wanted to show me how beautiful this village was since a Muslim charity had funded improvements so that the village had a new school and each house had been decorated with a particular flower. It had been the village where the original archaeologists of Troy had stayed.



I arrived at Troy in heavy rain, so decided to first go to its cube-like museum in the hope that the rain would ease by the time I was ready to explore the archaeological site outside. The museum was deserted: just me, the shop workers, and cleaners. The museum was modern and effectively displayed the archaeological findings of Troy and other sites in the region (including the site of Assos at Behram Kale). I was particularly struck by the copy of Aphrodite of Knidos which had been redecorated in the Roman taste of the day. I also saw small Roman glass jars that were labelled as “tear holders” (which might have been used by mourners to store their tears). Indeed, as an indication of how rich a collection the museum held, the Troy display only began on the second level. Although many of the most impressive objects were in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul, the whole museum was incredibly interesting and well explained.



Although rain was still falling, I decided to brave the weather fuelled by my passion to see the actual site of Troy. To say I was fangirling was an understatement: I have 8 different copies of the Iliad and have been reading the Iliad since I was 14 and have cried each time Patroclus and Hector died. The weather had left the site almost empty - allowing me to fully embrace its atmosphere and energy as I stepped for the first time onto the soil of Troy with windswept hair and raindrops on my face. I pictured battles over the plains and women looking on from the citadel. I fully felt this place.

I returned to another good night of food and company at Behram Kale; my stomach full with another delicious fish.



## Day 6 - Sarcophagi and Snakes

I woke up early to catch the blue sky reflected upon the waves. It was a beautiful, hot, sunny day. Before exploring Assos, I decided to take a morning stroll along the stone jetty. After saying good-morning to the local fishermen, I sat at its end appreciating the natural beauty and peace. As I walked back to the hotel, I glanced down at my feet - trying to work out from what the jetty was made. To my surprise, I was looking at what appeared to be a sarcophagi lid. Bemused, I explored with more intent, and found another similar object on the other side of the jetty. Excited, I rushed back to the hotel to ask Mehmet if he knew when the jetty was built. He did not know but assumed locals had made it from the local rocks. Remembering the photos I had seen in the hotel's restaurant I returned for a coffee to study them more. Sure enough, the jetty was in a photograph dated 1883. The jetty must therefore have been built before any archaeological interest had been given to this area. I therefore hypothesized that the numerous landslides that took place could have transported the sarcophagi lid (and probably other artifacts) down the cliff into the harbour of Behram Kale where they either remained or had been used as construction materials by locals. I was excited by my hypothesis because I imagined the excavation efforts of the early 1880s had been concentrated on the ancient site at the top of the cliff - yet there could be so many undiscovered treasures here around the harbour - waiting to be discovered.

Buoyed by potential discovery, and by the surreptitious fact that a landslide had recently happened and that today was the day that a new road to Behram Kale was being constructed, I decided to venture up the hillside - ready to find any treasures that may have been uncovered by the landslide. Before leaving, I told Mehmet where I was going. Mehmet told me there was a short cut to Assos through an old garden restaurant. Inspired, I began walking up the steep hill, cheese sandwich in hand. I climbed ancient stone steps into the abandoned garden restaurant and began following a beaten path. Suddenly, a big (bigger than me) black (the blackest I had ever seen) shiny snake jumped out from the overgrown grass to my right and stood up completely vertical on its tail directly in front of me, barring my path. Without thinking and dropping my sandwich, I turned and ran without stopping all the way down the hill to my hotel, too scared to even turn to check if it was following me.

Out of breath and red, I burst through the hotel doors into its reception. I'd been gone about 20 minutes. Mehmet was surprised by my early and emotional return and asked what had happened. You didn't tell me about the snakes! I gasped. At first, I don't think he believed me (he told me no snakes had been seen by the villagers for ten years). A few minutes of "googling" later and I discovered that what I had encountered was a very rare and elusive black cobra! It is a highly poisonous species (it's poison

can kill in 30 minutes and its spit can blind). I realised that if anything had happened to me on that hillside, it was highly unlikely I could have been saved in remote Behram Kale! Shaken, I decided to stay and drink sweet Turkish tea at the hotel until Mehmet's "taxi" friend could drive me up the hill to see Assos.

The site of Assos was closed because of the landslide, however it was still possible to easily see inside. An impressive theatre could be seen from the road. Also clearly visible was an impressive entrance gate and an ancient paved road leading through it which was still lined with sarcophagi. Surprisingly (and probably a bit illegally), Mehmet's friend walked with me and showed me a route to the top of the hill where I could see the Temple of Athena. Unsure of the legality, I stood at the boundary and took in the majestic views - imagining Aristotle wandering this city where he lived for several years and founded an Academy. Then, to my surprise once again, Mehmet's friend took me on another detour - but this time to the part of Assos which was still inhabited. I was amused to notice that broken amphoras and other pottery had been used as construction materials for many of the old houses. After taking in once more the scenic views of the landscape, I sadly had to leave behind Behram Kale, and take another long bus journey to my next stop at Ayvalik.



## Day 7 - Silence and Discoveries in Pergamon

After an early rise in Ayvalik, I jumped upon an hour and half bus ride to Bergama - the modern city which holds within it the archaeological site of Pergamon. Arriving in this city I took a taxi up the steep and seemingly never-ending hill to the acropolis. When I arrived at the ticket office, it was deserted apart from its stray cats. I had another ancient site almost to myself!

Pergamon was an incredibly rich archaeological site with impressive structures in every direction. However, only olive trees now stand on the ground where the Great Altar of Zeus should have stood - it was taken to Germany to be displayed in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. Goats wandered across the grass, the air was fresh and the views breath-taking.

I was excited at being able to touch the columns, to feel the stone statues, to marvel at the pipes that comprised their early plumbing system. Glancing down at the stones and debris of Athena's Temple, I saw a circular outline just below the soil. I put down my backpack and started to scratch away the soil to discover the full intact outline of a huge amphora! I was excited to think about what it might contain - after all it was within Athena's Temple where people had once left offerings - perhaps it was food - or perhaps gold! I recovered the outline of the amphora with soil and continued my exploring. Venturing through the tunnel under Dionysus' Temple I came to the huge semi-circular Theatre of Dionysus. Incredibly, as I sat in this theatre, admiring my view, I realised I could clearly hear distant dogs barking in one village and children playing in a school playground in another village at the bottom of the hill. The sound system of this theatre worked as well today as it did for the Romans!

I walked to the top of the site, with spectacular views across lakes (and tobacco fields) and appreciated the enormity of Trajan's Temple. I think the fact that the site was deserted, only seemed to enhance the size and impressiveness of Pergamon's architecture. After a few more hours of wondering amazement, I left and tasted for the first-time fresh pomegranate juice as I waited for a ride down the hill.

When I returned to the centre of Bergama, I stopped for a coffee. The locals were extremely hospitable, even offering me extra cushions for my chair. It was probably the humblest place I had been to so far (with coffee half the price of that in Istanbul), yet the warmth and hospitality I felt here was no different. After my short rest, I ventured into the Bergama Archaeological Museum. This was both an archaeological and an ethnographic museum. There was an interesting statue of an hermaphrodite (which I had studied in my sex and gender course) and a few fragments of the Great Altar of Zeus. In the ethnographic section, I saw local dress, dance and rugs. A local educationalist was also celebrated with a short, but moving biographical account of his life and his contribution to documenting the local ethnography. Most strikingly however, was a very emotional and detailed text recounting the significance of

Atatürk's visit to Bergama. I found in both cases the acknowledgement and gratitude expressed for the contribution an individual made to the community very touching in this museum.

When the museum closed it was time for me to make my way back to Ayvalik. It would be tight timing for the last bus back to Ayvalik, so I needed to get a taxi to take me to the otogar. I thought I had found a taxi rank, so asked the men who I thought were taxi drivers sitting outside how much it would cost to get to the otogar because I needed to get the bus to Ayvalik. It turned out that they were not taxi drivers, nor did they speak any English. After a very confusing exchange, one of the men handed me his mobile telephone - a man's voice on the other end asked me if I was a young girl alone? I paused; this was a question which made a young girl travelling alone weary. But it was clear I was, so he simply said - "We will be waiting for you". I honestly thought that if there was any criminal intent - it was extremely polite. I somehow got a taxi and when I got to the otogar, I discovered that the person on the telephone was the man in the ticket office who had held the last bus for me! Once again, Turkish transport and people amazed me!



## Day 8 - Goodbye Rainy Ayvalik and Hello Good Vibes Selçuk

I had chosen to stay in Ayvalik because it had been the setting for the only Turkish television series I had seen; a drama which had focused on healing, releasing past trauma and finding your way - all things that appealed to a slightly lost graduate. However, it turned out that Ayvalik was a place better experienced in the sun, if possible serenaded by a handsome Turkish rock singer (as in the series), but not in the pouring rain with no troubled rock singers in sight. Instead of my fantasy, I avoided puddles, imagined a sea town which I am sure is glorious in the sun, saw the start of a market and then decided to cut short my time in Ayvalik by a few hours and instead travel in the rain.

To get to Selçuk was another adventure. I first had to get a bus to Izmir (one of the three biggest cities in Turkey) and then a dolmush from there. Once I arrived in Izmir, I found the dolmush times - and luckily for me, I got there just in time for the last one! Waiting for the dolmush, I made conversation with a Turkish man who had just left Selçuk and was traveling to Greece to add some stamps to his passport so he could be better considered for visas to other European countries (a practice other men I had spoken with explained). The dolmush arrived and we made our slow advance through torrential rain, and rush hour traffic. When I arrived at the Selçuk otogar I immediately felt a peaceful, kind energy. It took a while to wake the dozing taxi driver, but to my surprise, the dolmush driver who had brought me to Selçuk had not left, he waited 10 minutes at the otogar to make sure I got a taxi to my hotel. When I finally unpacked at the Ibri hotel, I was ravenous.

I walked into the town centre and quickly met Marco, a very friendly and funny local shopkeeper. One of his first requests of me was to close my eyes and hold out my hands. I was alert but did as he asked. He placed in my hand a stone which I had never seen before - a local stone called Zultanite which changed colours five times depending on the light. I was admiring - but ultimately still very hungry, so he recommended some local restaurants for me to try. I had more mezze and returned to chat with Marco and his nephew about his nomadic past, being a Kurd and travelling around Turkey while sipping apple tea.



## Day 9 - Impressive Ephesus

I walked into the ruins of Ephesus in the rain. I was regretting not bringing an umbrella, but these ruminations evaporated as I admired the Odeon and marvelled at the water fountains and grand pavements. I climbed between columns and jumped over puddles and discovered a small ancient museum of inscriptions (which had been started under the Romans but also contained some Greek inscriptions).

While a rare group of visitors took their photos in front of the Library of Celcus, I decided to go inside the covered area of the terrace houses. I was amazed by the colour, the luxury, the completeness of the mosaics, the paintings, the layout.... So many of the mosaics that I had studied in textbooks were now staring back at me from under my feet beyond the transparent protective flooring. Returning to the library after the group of visitors had left, I gazed at the four statues of the façade, feeling slightly smug and very satisfied that I was able to translate their Greek names.

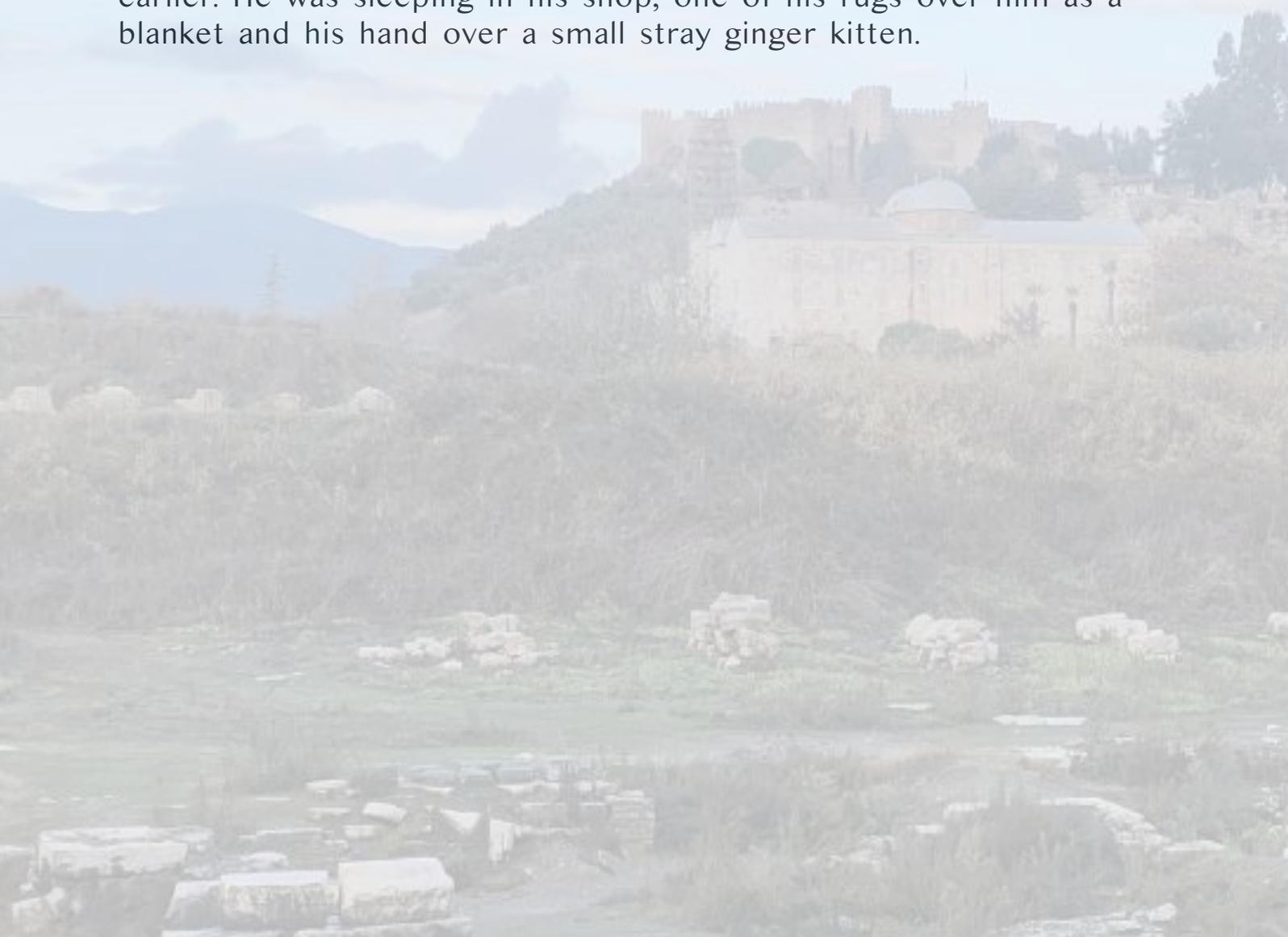
After walking around the agora, viewing the enormous theatre and arriving at the grand avenue which led down to the harbour, I paused to contemplate the vista from this vantage point. Glancing down I noticed a dusty sandalled foot from a Roman statue littering the ground - ruins abounded. I imagined the awe that ancient visitors to this city must have felt - descending a boat in the harbour - walking the statue-lined avenue to be greeted by the impressive size and splendour of the theatre and the spectacular architecture and buildings beyond. It was definitely a city built to impress and it was easy to imagine its visitors, like Cleopatra and Mark Anthony strolling its streets.

After another rainy windy walk, I entered the museum. It was as instructive as the others I had visited. I learnt not only about Ephesus, but also about the Artemesion sanctuary - where a female deity had been worshipped long before even Artemis. After leaving Ephesus, I went to visit the Temple of Artemis at sunset. Once one of the seven wonders of the world, now only a solitary column and scattered ruins remained. I climbed a small hill behind the temple

where I met a small white horse. From this viewpoint, it was apparent that only farm houses and horses inhabited the grounds of what had once been deemed one of the seven wonders of the world.

I then walked to the 14<sup>th</sup> century Isa Bey mosque to catch the very last glimmer of the sun; its pink reflections upon its walls. It was a very tranquil place, the inner courtyard filled with ancient columns. I went inside and met the Iman who was very curious about how Turkey was portrayed in the West and told me how much he loved his wife. Before I left, he gifted me some books on the Quran and a Turkish delight sandwich!

After dinner of Turkish cheese pastries and pomegranate juice, I met Marco and his nephew again. We drank apple tea and talked for 4 hours and I admit I bought myself a souvenir of the trip, a zultanite bracelet - which I am sure I will always treasure and forever associate with my fond memories of Turkey. Walking back to my hotel late that night, I passed a shopkeeper I had spoken with earlier. He was sleeping in his shop, one of his rugs over him as a blanket and his hand over a small stray ginger kitten.



## Day 10 - Finding a Way to Aphrodisias

According to the travel guide, I had once again chosen to visit a place that was hard to get to by public transport and should not even be attempted out of tourist season. Furthermore, while having breakfast, I met an ex-Turkish tour guide who had moved to Australia and was now on holiday with his family. When I explained my plans to go to Aphrodisias, he shook his head and told me he was not optimistic that I would be able to get there. The truth was I was desperate to go to Aphrodisias - partly because I am romantic and partly because it was one of the sites that far less people visit - and I wanted to experience a site which was not as famous as its counterparts. I knew I would try my best to find a way. After breakfast I texted a local travel agency and a few texts later had found a solution at a reasonable price (although it was by far the most expensive journey I took during the whole trip at 50 euros for a return journey of 2 hours 30 mins each way).

And so I arrived in Aphrodisias. This place was the most inland of all my destinations - so the journey afforded me ample opportunity to traverse and admire more Turkish landscapes and villages and view harvesters eating their lunches together under olive trees.

Aphrodisias was a beautiful place, and even with my determination to see it, it was still even better than my expectations. I saw the most complete amphitheatre and theatre I had ever seen - as well as my first ancient pool! However, what struck me was how holy the place still felt. Once again, I think the beauty of the location and lack of crowds contributed to the effect - but I also found it touching that the ancient people who once came to this sanctuary did so with the vulnerability of sharing their deepest and most emotional wishes. I thought it took a lot of bravery and honesty towards oneself to do so.

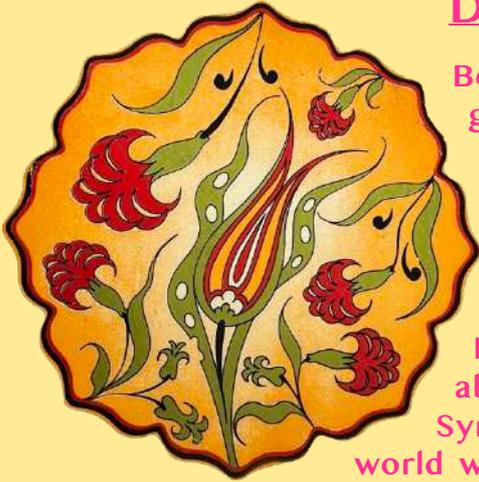
The recent birth of a litter of very cute puppies at the site only added to its atmosphere. One puppy in particular followed me around the site. I was disappointed that I didn't have enough time in the museum - especially when I saw the beauty of the sculptured panels - but I had spent so much time outside in the sun viewing the ruins.

On the journey back to Selçuk, I felt very satisfied that I had seen all the archaeological sites I had planned to see - and very glad that I had found my way to Aphrodisias.

I met my new host for the night because I had needed to change hotels (there had been a technical problem with *booking.com* that had prevented me from reserving another night at the same hotel). I was now on the hill with a magnificent view on the ruins of the Basilica of St John (which contains St John's tomb) and the Ayasuluk citadel fortress above it. My new host was very sociable. He told me he had been in the Turkish military for 28 years patrolling its border with Syria and Iraq and was now seeking a more peaceful life and it had only been a few months since he began his hostel business. He was incredibly hospitable and attentive, and I fell asleep to the sound of his neighbour's wedding being traditionally celebrated with gypsy musicians.



## Day 11 - Slowly Returning to the West



Before leaving Selçuk, I bought some scarves for Christmas gifts from the man who I had seen sleeping in his shop. I also bought the ceramic tiles shown on this page. I thought it interesting when he explained that the main recurring decorative motifs I had noticed everywhere in traditional Turkish artwork - the tulip and the carnation - are symbolically associated with family in Turkish culture. It turned out that he was also a Kurd, and he told me about his hometown, Mardin, which is on the borders with Syria. He was proud to tell me that it is the only town in the world with an avenue of steps which led on one side to the mosque and on the other to a church - and people of both faiths met and socialised in the middle.

As I liked Selçuk so much, I delayed taking my bus to my final destination - and instead spent the day exploring Selçuk further. St John had travelled to Selçuk with the Virgin Mary and wrote his gospel on the hillside where now rests his tomb and stands the ruins of the Basilica of St John. Climbing the hill to visit his tomb, the remains of the Basilica and the Ayasuluk fortress, I appreciated the scenic views offered over the Isa Bey mosque, the city and the biblical landscape beyond. I then visited the house of the Virgin Mary which was about a 10-minute taxi ride out of town.

Although it was a Sunday, I was surprised that this was by far the busiest place I had visited in Turkey. Despite the crowds, it was a very beautiful place - nestled among huge trees at the top of a mountain. I also stopped at the café on the site where my host explained that some people have seen a spiritual door. I didn't see a spiritual door, but I did appreciate the view!



Sadly, I had to leave Selçuk and after making my goodbyes to all the people I had met, I boarded my bus to Bodrum. To my surprise, the man who had driven me to Selçuk in the dolmush and who had waited with me until the taxi driver at the otogar had woken up, was outside the bus waving me off!

I arrived late at night in Bodrum. There was not the same hospitality I had felt during the rest of my trip to Turkey. Bodrum was beautiful, but brash. I recognised the people promenading to be seen, the blatant use of luxury brands to show wealth and the drunken men staring at me. Ironically, I had felt much more comfortable and safe in the places that had initially felt foreign to me than I now did here, being reintroduced into a more western way of life.



## Day 12 - Baklavas in Bodrum

I had decided to come to Bodrum purely because it offered the cheapest flight back home. The timing of the flight gave me one full day in Bodrum. I had hoped it would be sunny so that I could finish on a more conventional holiday feel. I was lucky, the sun was beaming, I sunbathed by the sea and ate ice-cream in December! I sent my postcards, (there were cats in the post office) and ventured to see the outside of the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus but could not enter as it was closed on a Monday. I promenaded along the harbour amazed at the size and beauty of its wooden yachts.

After my decadent morning, I decided to find a café so I could start writing some reflections on my trip. I found MADO which sold baklavas and goats milk ice-cream served with a local flower in a small vase - it was beautiful and delicious! And so began this report of my travels - high on a sugar buzz with a view on palm trees and the Aegean Sea.

### Acknowledgements and Thanks

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This trip to Turkey was transformational for me. It resurrected my trust in myself, in others, and in the world. Thank you for offering me that opportunity - I am truly grateful.

Lucie de Gentile, January, 2023

