

Day 1

I took off from Guernsey with bags packed on the 7 a.m. flight, a bit early given that it resulted in a 5-hour wait at Gatwick. The anticipation of waiting at airports is always a bit grinding especially when you are headed somewhere exciting, but I used the time to look through some maps and try and orientate myself given I was unsure if I would have connection. A fair few green teas later my gate was called and I must commend Turkish Airlines on their excellent movie selection; after the joys of Ryan Air, it was a pleasant surprise to have a screen at all. I was surprised by the length of the flight as distances are always deceiving when we have all spent so long looking at flat maps which tend to be notoriously warped in some way or other. A flight time of 4 hours later in addition to an inconvenient delay, I was descending towards to city. Despite my typical bear fight for a window seat, the view served less than expected as we did not fly over the city, and it was dark by the time we entered Turkish airspace leaving my mind to conjure a landscape of its own and the anticipation of the city lights remaining.

Landing at the airport, we were required to walk a mile to get through, more so than I have done in a while at an airport and I suddenly regretted the decision to bring a duffle backpack as opposed to a roller. This would prove a familiar walk by the end of my trip which I would perform no less than 4 times before I came home. I failed to get on the WIFI and was gutted to discover that Turkey was not included in my O2 travel bolt-on. Luckily as in most cities with a metro, the maps are fairly universal and easy to decipher and after another hike that seemingly went on forever, I found my way to the platform. Annoyingly they seemed to have included unfinished stations and lines on the metro map and I experienced the deflated feeling of realising that I would have to change 3 times to get to my stop; but if only those lines had been complete! No matter, I had been warned against getting in taxis (although by the end of my trip, I had concluded this was not an entirely fair piece of advice) and by this point, it was getting late, and I was exhausted and hungry. Trudging through the changes was a little challenging as, unlike other tube systems, you had to come all the way out to get to a different line which meant more walking around in circles.

I finally made it to my hostel, nestled down a side street near the Galata Tower, grateful to finally be able to put my bag down. By this point all I could think about was food and with a helpful suggestion and some recruitment of other hostel goers, 3 of us trudged up the hill towards their recommendation. As we walked in, I instantly brightened up. The eclectic decoration and hard-to-locate entrance filled me with a sense of conviction that this was to be an excellent choice and it was, so much so that I brought Hamzah again two days later when he arrived. My fellow hostellers were equally as ravenous and we all ordered the same wrap although I have no idea what I ordered or what was in it, it was absolutely delicious. One of the guys sat opposite me was Turkish in origin but lived in Israel teaching English, he was back to visit family although try as I might, I found little else due to his insistence on lecturing the table by repeating things I had just mentioned. The other was Japanese but living in London, I struggled to understand him, and it didn't help the former kept interrupting what he was saying to interject some new piece of his superior intellect. They were heading out to Nardis that night, but I was exhausted and wished them well. In hindsight, it is a shame I didn't make it there as so many people I bumped into along the trip raved about the spot. All the more reason to come back!

Day 2

Despite it being incredibly touristy, one of my favourite things to do when I get to a new city is go on a food tour. There is this company called Culinary Backstreets that I have been on before that runs the most incredible tours. They are always run by locals and the focus is on places that have been there for generations. In a sea of baklava and turkish delight shops, I was keen to be pointed in the right direction. Additionally, this company in particular is brilliant at bringing to life parts of cities that are where people live rather than the touristy centre. Planning my route to Besiktas proved confusing at first as none of metro lines ran to the place I needed. Additionally, I found no information on bus lines and the hour-long walk did not appeal. Suddenly, I had a realisation that the ferry was the only way to go and how right I was. Leaving from Karakoy at 8:50, I would stroll off the Besikas pier a mere 15 minutes later whilst gaining an incredible first view of the city from the water, it was a no-brainer. However, as a person who is always running late I still found myself tearing down Galip Dede Street which had been heaving the night before but now was empty save a few early risers opening up for the day. This meant I could run down the hill although I was certainly not prepared for the gradient and stacked it over a stair. I looked around in embarrassment, but no one saw except an old man sitting in a doorway who burst out laughing once he realised, I was okay. I grinned, waved and continued running down the hill.



Early morning boat ride to Besiktas

At the bottom, I reached an intersection with no visible crossing, it was busy but I was in a rush still and looking at some people trying to navigate the rapid thoroughfare, I decided there was nothing else to do but as they did. Upon later inspection, there is a very convenient pedestrian route under the road whoops! Nevertheless, I made it across and was disproportionately proud of myself. I made it to the boat with 4 minutes to spare and wondered why I had bothered rushing with so much time, especially since I didn't even have to buy a ticket as the transport pass I had loaded up the night before worked on the barriers, result! It is always nice when things work out and I calmly got on the ferry a little hot and sweaty. I was surprised at the heat of 9 am in the morning and therefore grateful for the slight breeze out on the water. The ride was spectacular, and I could see the old city as well as the Asian side as we pulled out. As the boat made its way around the peninsular, the imposing Dolmabahce Palace came into view and after disembarking I made my way to the meeting point at the Royal Naval museum a little gutted that in my short visit, I likely wouldn't have the time to explore either of these places.

A little early, I sat down by the river and read for a bit, staring out over the Bosphorus, feeling grateful for a few moments of peace before what I knew would be a busy day. When the time arrived, I met the rest of the group: an American couple and a group of 4 from the UK as well as the wonderful Esin, our guide. As always, the food came fast, fresh juice to start, then onto a simit before heading to the breakfast street for a full Turkish breakfast. As hungry as we all were, restraint was advised as this was only the 3rd stop of so many, I lost count by



Bakery with massive oven!

Wondering around Besikas was awesome, the busyness of cities I usually find overwhelming was instead intriguing and it was clear from the start that Esin was in love with this place and these people. Starting a rapport with nearly every person we passed and her excitement at being able to share stories with us was so wonderful to be around. She talked about Istanbul the way people talk about New York; a city full of dreams and opportunity. She told us how moving to Istanbul had been her dream since she was little and before she had ever been and had worked hard just to be able to come here. She had got an office job after moving here, done it for a few years and realised she wanted to be on the streets and to feel more connected to the place, became a tour guide and a decade later has never looked back. Ha! It was incredible to hear someone talk about what they do with so much passion even after all that time and I felt her moral victory quite personally after



Family-run baklava shop over 50 years old



A stray cat defeated by too much food

the end. On to doner, baklava, stuffed mussels and much more including tavukögsü which when asked to guess what was inside, we were all a little disturbed to discover it was in fact shredded chicken although couldn't complain as it was delicious. Completely stuffed already, we made our way to the boat and were reminded by Esin that we had in fact only completed one of the three neighbourhoods we were supposed to be visiting.

the drudging discourse at uni of whether you are going to work in finance, law or consulting. How satisfying to be reminded of such an important lesson that there is more to life than that.

Across the river we went, to the very conservative Muslim district of Üsküdar which was a sharp change of pace from the edgy student-dominated area we had just left. As it was nearing noon on a Friday, the market was eerily quiet, and all shut up by the time we got there with everyone off to pray but this was short-lived as we were quickly handed a large pot of pickles and encouraged to drink the juice and all. I have never met someone so excited about pickling every food item you can possibly imagine! We then sat down for a big seafood lunch with the tiniest fried fish that had been completely gutted and prepared by the man at the counter. Given

their size this was truly a labour of love and he proceeded at an incredible pace to keep up with the fact that each fish was a mere mouthful. Next, we loaded up on Turkish delights and I was glad to have discovered the best I have ever had as well as hitting a few other stops.

We then hopped on a short bus to the final neighbourhood; the Armenian district of Kuzguncuk. It was at this point that Turkish coffee appeared, a particular favourite of mine although always new things to learn and a lengthy discussion about coffee etiquette was included. Walking around this area was so calming after the stark, cityscapes of the previous areas. Crawling with greenery, it felt as though it was a few steps away from being completely reclaimed by nature. Hippy boutique shops and artisan coffee shops were dotted up the main street. I was in awe of how different all the districts were in feeling,



Walking around Kuzguncuk

people, architecture, layout, everything. We walked past an overgrown area of allotments that Esin explained developers tried to build over, but this was so vehemently protested by the residents that it is now legally protected as a green space. Then just up the hill was a cat park and as we walked in a lady was wandering around with a massive bag of cat food, carefully laying out individual piles on the benches and walls. This had been a theme of the trip so far, the care and attention paid to the stray cats and dogs was so heartening with pet food in every shop and café window. Esin half joked as an animal ambulance passed that they are better-taken care of than any of the humans here given all you have to do is call if you see a sick or injured animal and it would be taken to the fully funded animal hospital but healthcare for humans comes at a steeper cost. She also partook in this love of the animals that called this city home, feeding and petting every single one that came our way.

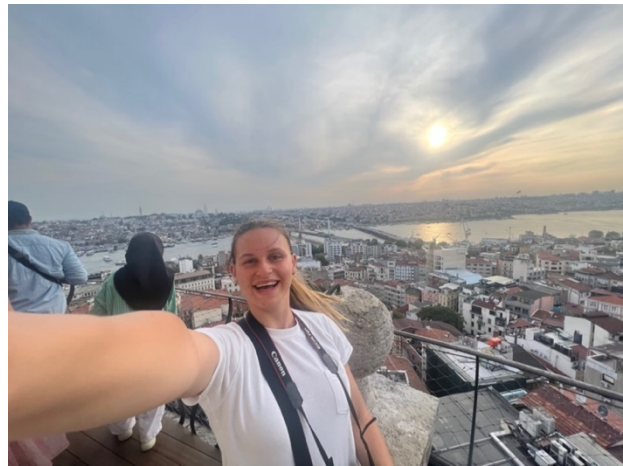


Walking up to Galata tower

The day finished with a spread of Armenian favourites at this secluded place, tucked up a hidden staircase at what felt like someone's house. I can't recall the names of what I ate there but it was all incredible. We all parted ways at the ferry terminal all feeling the substantial food coma. It was around 4 pm and my plan to hightail it to the Princes Islands seemed a little farfetched given the ferry times so I racked my brain as to what I could fill the rest of the evening with. I settled on the Galata tower hoping it would be open at this time and slowly made my way back up the hill this time winding and slowly, taking in all the atmosphere. This was also necessary as I was completely without service and hadn't managed to memorise the route given it was a last-minute plan. My strategy was to walk up the hill and follow the people that looked like tourists. Several

dead ends later, I noticed a sign pointing me in the right direction which was only half appreciated as I was enjoying testing my natural sense of direction. As I strolled up the stairs crossing the big winding roads, I was amused to see a wedding fashion shoot taking place. Women in extravagant white dresses strewn over steps and in doorways, it seemed to be quite the operation.

I finally made it to the tower; it had become clear I was close in the last 100m or so as the shops started selling more and more tourist tat associated with it. To my



30 minutes until sunset



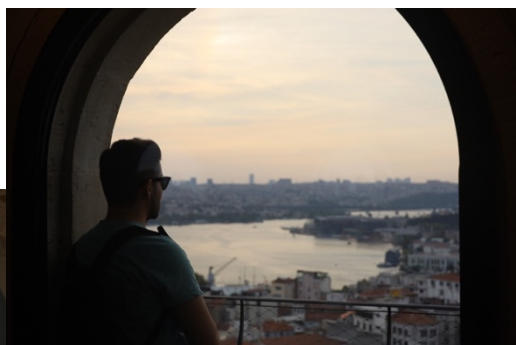
Incredible views from the top of Galata Tower

dismay, there was a large and winding queue, but this was not unexpected, and I had time to wait after relief of seeing that it didn't close for a while. I noticed an information panel which the family behind me were taking turns to duck out and read but sadly I couldn't leave the queue for fear of losing my place. I decided this wouldn't stand and asked the family behind me to save my place. After I returned, I found out they were from Quebec so I asked if I could practice my French. Needless to say, it wasn't

long until we'd switched back to English and I was annoyed that my French had deteriorated quite that far.

By the time I had waited through the queue and made it up to the top, I was surprised to find how well done up it was, a very modern interior refurb had clearly taken place. The view was as incredible as expected. I then realised that it was only around 30 minutes until sunset, what a wonderful coincidence. Whilst I had already seen all around the tower, I was determined to wait. Frustrated I hadn't brought a book, I took to taking photos to pass the time. It is much easier to people watch through a long lens and I am rarely without my trusty Canon. The sunset itself was beautiful and it was calm to sit and watch the dusk set in across all parts of the city.

Photos taken while I waited for sunset



When I got back to the hostel, I was still so stuffed I couldn't consider eating dinner. Despite this, it happened to be one of the guest's birthdays and I couldn't resist taking part in chocolate cake on the roof. It was nice to chat with the other guests but I was still exhausted from travelling so I headed to plan my route for the next day. Since I had no service and therefore very little and unreliable internet connection during the day, I had to plan vaguely what I wanted to see and memorise the routes so that I wouldn't get too lost. I really enjoy doing this as it requires you to keep your head up as you move around rather than having your nose glued to directions on your phone. I also find it requires me to pay attention to the dynamics of cities and visualising the spaces connects you to it in a different way. It also occasionally forces you to interact with people and as an established introvert, I like pushing myself out of my comfort zone in this way.

Day 3

I woke up a little later than I had wanted to due to a combination of two early mornings compounded with jet lag. I wanted to cross over into the old city as soon as possible to get through my packed agenda for the day but I was also on a mission to discover the best fish wrap in town. I was therefore presented with a problem as I was assured that the best fish sandwich in town was in Karaköy, the wrong side of the river, what to do as it was 10:30 am, certainly too early for lunch. I wandered down the winding roads towards the water and happened to notice a queue of people waiting to get into a building. Curiosity piqued, I asked the security guards what it was and was delighted to find out that it was SALT, a modern art museum that I had wanted to see but wasn't sure if I could fit in. And here I had just stumbled on it a mere 5 minutes before it was due to open. It felt like fate as it also solved my fish sandwich dilemma, an hour looking around here and then it would be an appropriate time for lunch.



SALT art museum with the old city in the distance

SALT was quiet and so peaceful to explore. The integration of the modern with the old stately building which was once the headquarters of the Imperial Ottoman Bank was beautifully done. I loved the coloured glass that caused a hue to fall over the whole staircase like a filter in a movie. The space is also a specialised library, and I could just imagine students from universities around here flocking to study here; I know I would. I had a look around the exhibition which was on Reşad Ekrem Koçu and Istanbul Encyclopedia he created that documented the urban landscape of the early 20th century with a particular focus on those termed "lowlives". The exhibit went beyond that, covering the urban history of the area for the extended period from the early 19th century to the mid-20th century with items and photos. Peering into the faces of the past in this building which was also a relic of that era was eerie, especially since I was the only one in the room. Just over a century had passed since the people in these images had existed in the streets where I was now exploring. People with

lives and loves, hopes and dreams and wondering about who they were filled my head as I left and continued on my day.

Result, the time was 11:30 am and I was starving. Trying to navigate my way through the tight streets of Karakoy towards this fish sandwich shop proved quite a taxing task for my deliriously hungry state. I walked to the end of the road and realised I must've walked past it. Back I went, once and then again and still I couldn't see it. After a while of looking around, I finally saw the cracked sign of my destination. On the way here, I had passed streets with fairly upmarket restaurants and even on this street were welcoming shops. This was by far the most run-down place on the street with plants growing through the concrete, cut wires sticking out and flies circling around. There was something about it that felt so permanent like it had been there forever. I ordered a fish wrap and watched the incredible construction with so many ingredients I didn't recognise. I paid, left and stared eating. It was potentially the greatest food I ate on the trip although I think a piece of that might just have been how hungry I was. It was crunchy and just the right blend of spicy but not overpowering with the most delicious grilled unknown fish taking central stage.

I wandered back towards the Galata Bridge and fascinated by the sheer quantity of people fishing, I decided to just stroll across the bridge rather than get on the boat. Just like I had found the day before, the atmosphere shifted while walking between districts and the pseudo-European feel of Beyoglu was replaced with something distinctly more Eastern. As I reached the end of the bridge, I was presented with the second challenge of the day. My strategy for offline navigation essentially boils down to visually locating what I am trying to get to and then no matter how many twists and turns I am pretty good at finding it. I had wanted first to go to the Rustem Pasha Mosque, apparently a quieter and smaller but no less beautiful 'blue mosque' but as I looked at the plethora of domes and minarets in front of me, I realised this was going to be a little harder to find than I had realised.



People fishing off Galata Bridge

After asking a few people and looking at the screenshot of its location, I decided on the dome of choice and set off in that direction. Once I had reached it, I was presented with another question, how to get inside? I walked around what felt like the entire building until I



The inside of Rustem Pasha Mosque

had to strike up a conversation with a host trying to usher me into his restaurant. With a promise to consider coming back to his restaurant, he pointed me in the right direction. A tiny doorway tucked behind his restaurant; he must get this a lot! Sunlight filtered into the stairwell onto the sandy stone of the walls and ceiling. It emerged into a quiet courtyard which was surprising given the proximity to the bazaar below. I love finding little spaces of tranquillity in amongst the bustle.

I sat for a while, trying to take in the space and the beauty of all the tiles and intricate wood and stone carving that made up the aura of it all. Forcing myself to sit with a camera allows me to bypass my restlessness to move on and concentrate on all these small features



Trying to navigate through the bazaar

while trying to get an interesting photo somewhere along the way. This was the first time I had been asked to put on a headscarf on this trip, something I had been stressing about finding an appropriate scarf for aware that this was going to be my permanent reality in less than a week. I love the carpets in mosques and taking off your shoes makes you feel like you're being welcomed into someone's home. I eventually left and walked back down the stone staircase and into the street. The noise and people felt abrasive after the calm of the mosque, but I didn't have too long to dwell on it.

My next aim was the Süleymaniye Mosque right up on the hill that I had been promised had the most amazing views. Trying to navigate on vibes alone through the bazaar proved challenging but fun. Tight winding streets and lack of sight far ahead tricks you into thinking you're going a different direction than you think. I just knew I had a hell of

a hill to climb and figured as long as I was going up, I would get there. Finally, I emerged out of the market and spotted a sign pointing me in the right direction! A few wrong turns were made along the way, but it was nice to get a taste of the bazaar which reminded me of trying to haggle in souks when I was little. Being a cute kid probably got me further than it ever would now, oh well! I finally reached the grand gates of the mosque and could see a graveyard through the gates. This was a sharp change from the humble mosque I had just been at. Large trees and beautiful gardens flanked my approach and walking past the prayer entrances reminded me



The Süleymaniye graveyard through the gates



Me in the Süleymaniye courtyard

of my place as a visitor.

I finally made it to the visitor entrance and into the main courtyard. It was breathtaking walking through those gates, I was taken aback by the sheer size of the space and I could see glimpses of the blue sea through the opposite gate. I was overwhelmed by running to see the view and just taking it all and restrained myself convinced that the anticipation of seeing it was better!

After slowly walking around the entire courtyard and embarrassingly remarking how much it reminded me of Game of Thrones of all things, I made my way inside. Wow! The scale of it was incredible and the light hues and yellow/gold details gave it a warmer feel than the previous one despite its size. I found a little corner and began my usual ritual of trying to absorb all of my surroundings and observing little details through my camera most of the people who breeze through here likely miss. I saw people come in for prayer, some families and some older people by themselves.



Inside Süleymaniye Mosque

We were luckily told the visitors were allowed to stay for prayer but the layout meant that we were in the women's section which must have been a little annoying but as it was Saturday



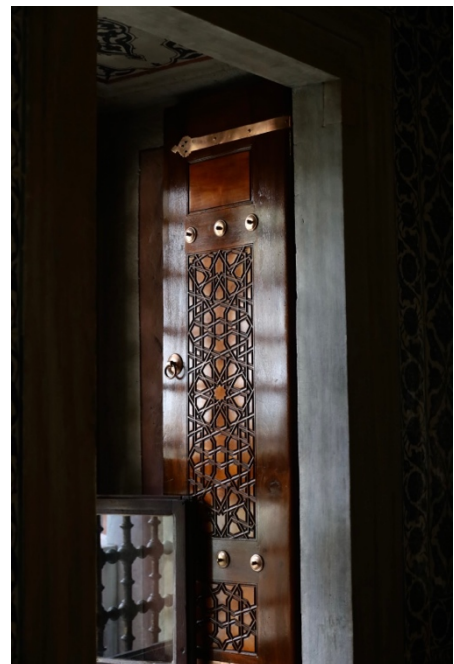
Dhuhr, few women had come for that purpose. After the prayers had finished, I walked over to the other side of the mosque to get a different vantage point and unwittingly sat next to the stand where they were handing out fliers but I was quite enjoying my solitude so decided it was time to head outside.

The view certainly didn't disappoint! I could see over to Galata and the tower as well as across the Bosphorus to where I had been just

yesterday. I sat at the top of some steps looking out over the water and ate a Simit I had bought earlier. I then made my way into the graveyard where there were large tombs that had been erected to the Sultan's family members. After a quick look around these buildings which were surrounded by flowering trees that complemented the brightly coloured roofs, I decided that it was time to try and see what was next.



Suleiman the Magnificent Mausoleum



Shutter details inside the Mausoleum

I headed to the main tourist area and had the enlightened idea to get on a tram there which I always find fun. Whilst I was saving the big attractions for the arrival of Hamzah, there was just enough time in the day for me to wander around the hippodrome and hit the Turkish & Islamic arts museum. This was an excellent way to pass the rest of the day although the incredible detail about all the different tribes and groups that had controlled regions of Turkey even for very short times left me a little overwhelmed. Still quite



View of the Blue Mosque from the museum courtyard

tired and saturated with information, I stayed in the courtyard of the museum which was nearly empty and ordered an overpriced drink from the cafe. I just wanted to sit and read, as the temperature had reached a very nice point and there was a lovely view of just the minarets of the blue mosque rising above the trees.

At this point, I was feeling tired, and it was nearing 5 pm so I decided to head back to the hostel to rest up before Hamzah got in. As it turned out his flight was a little delayed, so it was quite late by the time he got to the hostel. There was another wrap place that I desperately wanted to go to so I dragged him all the way there only to discover it shut at 10 pm, what a disappointment. Nevertheless, there was the trusty wrap place where I had had my first meal that provided an excellent second choice. After deciding that we were both maybe too tired to get up for Fajr at the Hagia Sophia, we went to sleep.

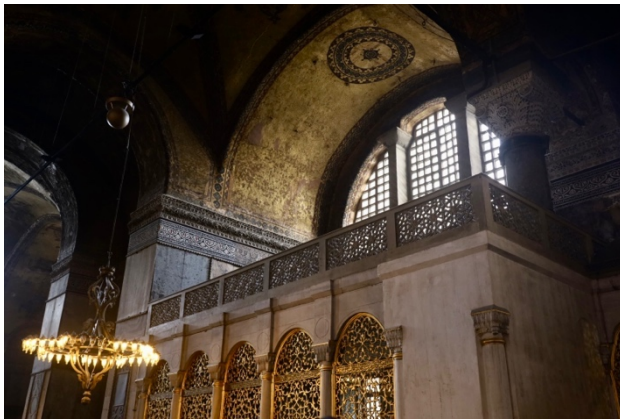
Day 4

Today was the big tourist day and we got out early to try and beat the crowds at the big mosques but became a little distracted by the basque cheesecake at the bottom of the Galata Tower that we had been recommended by a friend. Running later than expected we hightailed it to the tram to get over as quickly as possible. The queue for the Hagia Sofia was visible from a distance but we actually did well as it had almost doubled in size around 10 minutes after we joined. Resigned to waiting, I tried to fully appreciate the exterior, but Hamzah was off on a mission and found a tour guide that promised a queue jump and a guided tour. Whilst the sceptic in me and the discomfort I feel resigning to my place as a tourist quite that fully disagreed with this, we went ahead. After some haggling and the adoption of a very conservative Australian Muslim to pull down the price, we headed inside. I have to give it to Hamzah, it was actually a stroke of genius. The guide was very knowledgeable about the history of the place and offered up a fascinating narration and fun stories about parts we would have certainly missed had we been by ourselves. Additionally, there were no information panels so I would have been sad to have been there without any of the incredible history that makes this place quite so famous.



Basque cheesecake at Galata Tower

Hagia Sofia!!



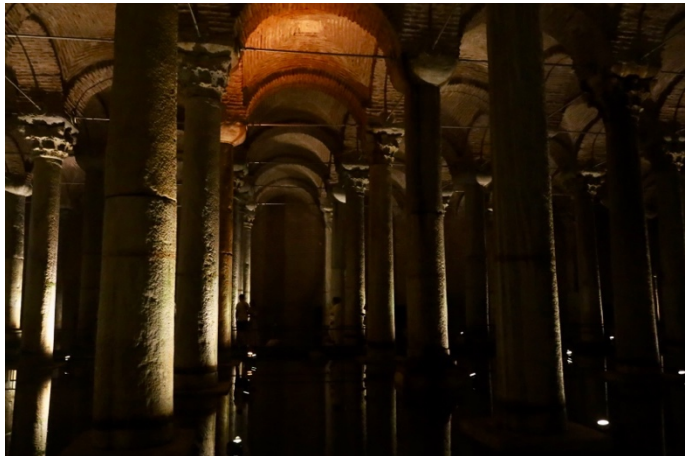
It was as beautiful as you would expect in the inside but certainly different in tone than the other mosques I had been into. It felt dark and dingy, and it was easy to imagine it being a church in this respect. The lightness and openness of the others was gone, and this felt medieval in a way none of the others did. As a geologist and also because it was something we had focused on during my time in Venice, I was most taken with the beautiful, coloured stones and marbles. I kept pointing out the porphyry wherever I saw it driving the others up the wall. We had been told the tales of the Venetians and Ottomans consistently sacking each other and dragging all the precious stone panels, columns, and statues back to their respective cities. There was a column we saw back in Venice that was thought to have been transferred between the cities at least 4 times. I couldn't help but wonder if all the panels here were still in their original positions.

I was quite overwhelmed by the sheer number of people, and I suddenly regretted not coming so early in the morning. It was hard to really sit in the space and appreciate all the incredible details as we were rushed around partly by our guide and partially because it was just so busy. Afterwards, the guide offered us a queue jump for the Basilica Cistern and after a glance at the queue we accepted feeling grateful that it saved us at least an hour if not more.

Equally busy but at least a bit calmer and more peaceful, we strolled around the vast space. The implementation of art around the route and the experimentation with light and water really added to the experience, and I particularly loved a Medusa statue that was lit in a way that the shadow was enlarged and moved around with colours shifting around affecting your whole perception of the space. After this, we headed to find some lunch. Sadly, being right in the middle of the tourist trap we



Basilica Cistern!!



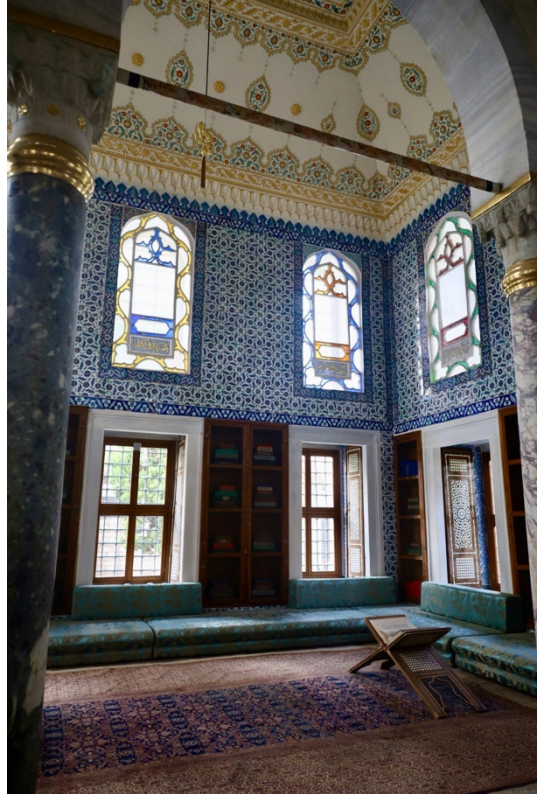
couldn't discover anything particularly original but ate well and the staff were so friendly. Some free extras and an Instagram follow request later we left for Topkapi Palace.

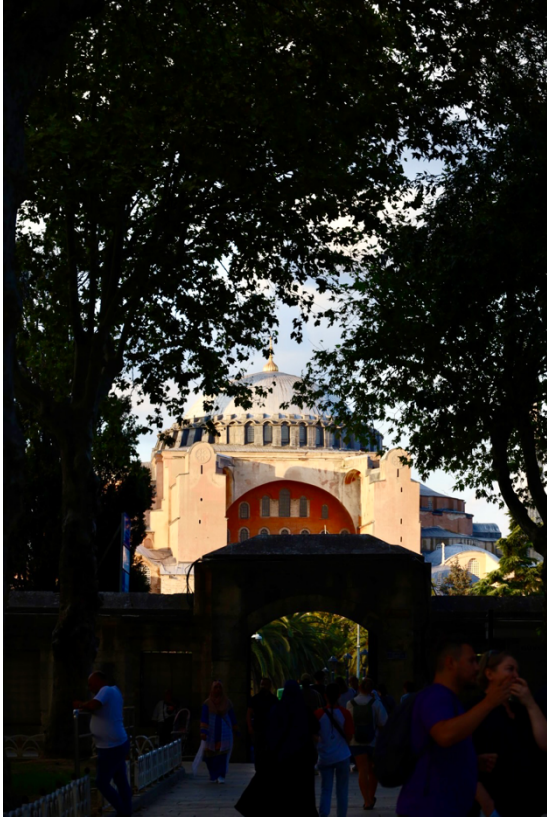
We had to try a pomegranate juice on the way there but sadly it being a little early in the season, it was incredibly sour. Luckily, the back route we ended up taking was a little rest bite of calm and we eventually found our way to the grand entrance of the palace. We bought our tickets but then frustratingly walked past the point where we had to pick up an audio guide and ended up having to beg a security guard to let us out and back in. Once in there was so much to see. We strolled around the leafy courtyard and then into all the adjacent buildings including the dormitories, kitchens, and library and also went around the harem. One thing that stood out for me was the cupboards in every room, still with their wooden doors. In some of the more residential areas they were beautifully inlaid and I don't know why but looking around castles in the UK or Europe, there always seems to be barren rooms or rooms filled with furniture. Any shelves tend to be stand-alone furniture whereas these were built in. It added an interesting dynamic to in this case the otherwise empty rooms or ones filled with an unrelated exhibit. My favourite space was the library in the middle of one of the courtyards. Its place upstairs in the centre meant that all you could see was green foliage out of all the large windows, in all directions. It also allowed a gentle breeze to flow through the space. It would have been a really lovely place to sit and read with all the natural light.

We sadly ran out of time a bit and ended up running about trying to see the last little bits. Also, by this point, we were really hungry but one of the places we had missed was the Treasury as it had sported a massive queue the entire time we were there. We decided to try and wait it out to see if we could get in before closing. We did, which was such a stroke of luck, and I am glad we waited as the jewels were on a level I had never seen before. Not necessarily precious but just the size of the stones and the crazy items they had chosen to encrust.



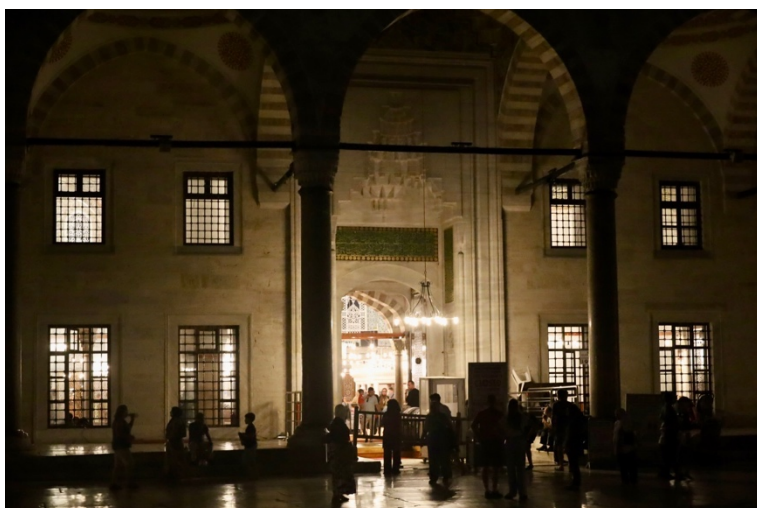
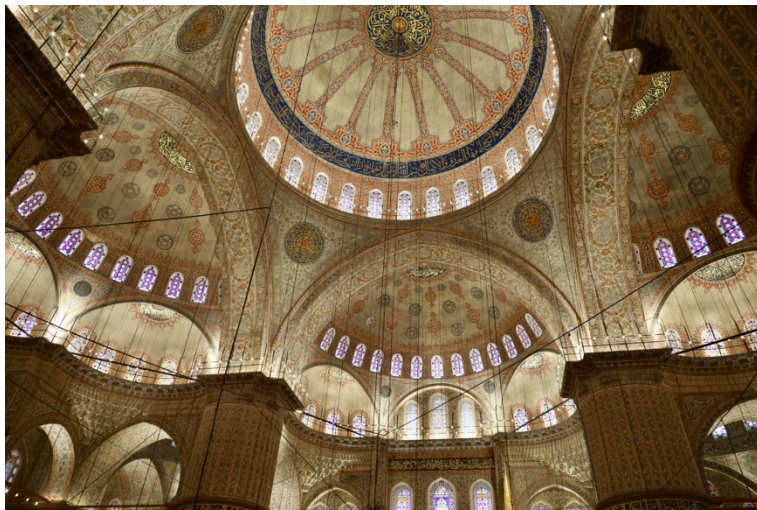
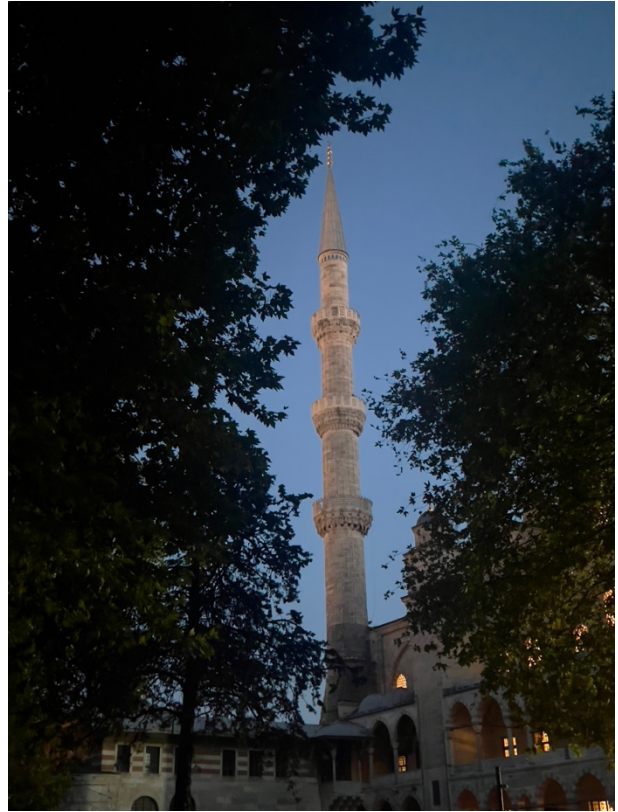
*Topkapi
Palace!!*





Low light afternoon walk over to the Blue Mosque





Shots of the Blue Mosque at dusk/ trying to find ways to frame the minarets in photos!

We then headed over to the Blue Mosque as the sun was lowering as Hamzah wanted to be there in time for Maghrib. It was a stroke of luck as we were the last visitors they ended up letting in and ushered everyone else out before the prayers started. I had planned to leave but Hamzah persuaded me to stay and I like feeling connected to the purpose of places. Whilst not the first time I have partaken in Muslim prayers, I was a little apprehensive at being left in the women's section by myself. Whilst I was waiting for it to start, a lovely Turkish lady tried to start a conversation with me. I think because she was curious as to who I was I must have looked out of place. We didn't get very far as she spoke almost no

English. Then a mother and daughter came over and the daughter spoke some English. She told me they were from Bosnia and had come here just for this. She spoke about school and their trip while translating her conversation back to her mother and the Turkish lady. The prayers then started, and it was hard not to feel a little spiritual about the whole thing. After it had finished, I realised that I was surrounded by very devoted individuals who continued with their own prayers and, scared to offend, I just continued also. I was tucked in the corner and having been reminded that the most important rule was to not walk directly in front of people, I couldn't get out given the small amount of space set aside for women. The Turkish lady smiled, laughed, and shook her head, clearly clued into what had happened. My cover was blown, 'Muslim?' she finally asked. I tried to explain via the Bosnian girl, and they all laughed but I am not sure what was relayed. Hamzah found this whole situation hilarious as he walked over, and I managed to point at him as an explanation and escape.

It was then time for dinner and we headed to the tram as we had decided to head to a Syrian-influenced restaurant that served food from the Hatay region near Turkey's border with the country. Who of all people did we bump into on the platform but the Turkish lady from just before! I smiled, unknown as to why I felt embarrassed now without a head covering in her presence. Worse we ended up having to bundle into the cramped carriage right next to her. As we got off in Fatih, she pointed to her face and gestured to me. I thought she was trying to say goodbye but, in the end, it transpired that I just had something on my face. How embarrassing! Who knows what she thought of me in the end, but I hope I became a funny anecdote. As we headed over to the restaurant, we ended up having to walk down some interestingly dark streets and it was clear we were a long way from the tourist trail, with a lot of funny looks thrown in our direction. When we got there I suddenly realised I had an important job-related phone call that I was supposed to be making and with no internet connection or service, I suddenly realised I had made a big mistake. I ended up feeling very thankful that the restaurant had WIFI. However, the restaurant was noisy, so I ended up speaking just outside the door in a slightly chaotic fashion.

Dinner was delicious with salted lamb, that they set on fire and then künefe for dessert. We were so stuffed we had to take a big portion home. We then bundled into a taxi home as we didn't relish the idea of walking back up the Beyoglu hill.

Salted lamb for dinner at Hatay influenced restaurant Akdeniz Hatay Sofrasi



Day 5

We packed up early as we only had the morning before our flight in the evening and wanted to maximise our time in the Grand Bazaar. We found a rather convoluted entrance and worked our way through the quieter outer streets slowly making our way to the core of the operation. I was on a mission to find suitable clothing for Iran and Hamzah a knock-off Bulgari ring. It was entertaining as everyone thought we were a couple, and he was very frustrated to be continually offered rings that were meant for me instead of himself. I bought myself a beautiful viscose jacquard jacket as well as some



A spot of coffee in the bazaar

modest clothes and scarves. We ate the most incredible lamb kofta for lunch in a tucked-away spot on the recommendation of Esin.



Cats sleeping on books in the bazaar

I was therefore unsurprised at how good it was! We then wandered down through the Spice Bazaar and stopped for a spot of coffee. There was a queue of people down a block for bags of the beans but luckily not just to sit down for a cup. We had smelt it from so far away and knew we had to have some. We then headed to a sweet shop, one of the oldest in the area, which felt more satisfactory than settling for the hundreds of places selling Turkish delights that we had encountered in the bazaars themselves. After procuring large boxes of Turkish delights and headed back to the hostel to make our way to the airport.

On our way to the airport, we couldn't work out which stop to get off at as there were two that said airport. We asked a lady across from us and she didn't know but was clearly more resourceful than the both of us, spotted two people in crew uniforms and asked them. Once we were happy with where we were going, she asked us about our trip. We told her and found out that she was an American living in Russia, and she was going to the airport to see her mother whom she hadn't seen in over 3 years as here in Istanbul was the only place they could both get to. She spoke about living in Russia after the beginning of the war and lamented about being paid in roubles. It was fascinating learning why she stayed and what it is like living there now.

We had lots of extra time at the airport, so we sat down and tucked into our leftover salt lamb after sweet-talking a Burger King employee into heating it up for us. We then flew to Izmir a little delayed and picked up our rental car. The driving was a little touch and go to begin with being in a new car and on the wrong side of the road but we eventually pulled into Bergama. The city was a ghost town with not a single car on the roads or a person walking around. Probably for the best as there was no one to witness my terrible manoeuvring as we got very lost including going down a road that we found out the next day was one way. After getting stuck trying to get down roads that were even too tight for our tiny car we wondered if we would ever make it to the hotel but we finally pulled into the quaint little Hera hotel.

Day 6

We got up to a delicious homemade breakfast on a balcony with a view of the ruins up on the hill and over the town of Bergama which was much larger than I had imagined from looking at the maps before we came. We then hopped in the car and some more winding around tiny roads; we found the signs to Pergamon. Up and up the steep winding bends, I was wondering if our little car was going to make it, but it eventually did. We hopped out and walked past a tent selling tourist tat and an open-air café but other than that and the ticket office, there was nothing else there. We headed in and spent the next few hours walking around the site. The views were incredible in all directions as we were so high up that I could barely believe that they had managed to design a plumbing system to pump water all the way up here. Whilst mostly in ruins or shipped off to the Pergamon museum in Berlin, the theatre still remained intact as did the courtyard of the altar of Pergamon. Here they had reconstructed some of the lines of columns and whilst I know there is much debate as to the practice of this, as a visitor, it was fantastic to get a glimpse of what it might have looked like in its glory days.



View over Bergama from Pergamon



Our spot for lunch in Bergama

We were making a nasty habit of getting so engrossed in what we were doing that we forgot how hungry we were. And once again as we walked out, we realised how desperately in need of lunch we were. We quickly drove down the hill back into Bergama, and it was so busy, an incredible shift from the previous night when we had driven along these same streets. Some mistakes were made trying to find a courtyard restaurant I had spotted out the car window the night before and decided I wanted to check out. Brushing over my haphazard driving that eventually required the stopping of traffic and with the help of a friendly shop owner, we found a place to park. We wandered over to the courtyard and just as we were about to sit down, the heavens opened and we decided on a more covered option that was just round the corner. After a delicious lunch, we headed back to the car to drive to our next destination.

Rolling in late, we decided to stop on the way for dinner. Having read that this region was famous for wine and farm-to-plate restaurants we decided to get dressed up and treat ourselves to a nice dinner. Cosplaying affluent city types was definitely fun and being cheeky we asked for a tour of the wine cellar at the end. It seemed like the clientele was almost all possibly Turkish as I didn't hear any language I distinctly recognised being spoken. An interesting observation.

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Dinner near Urla



The ruins of Pergamon



Day 7

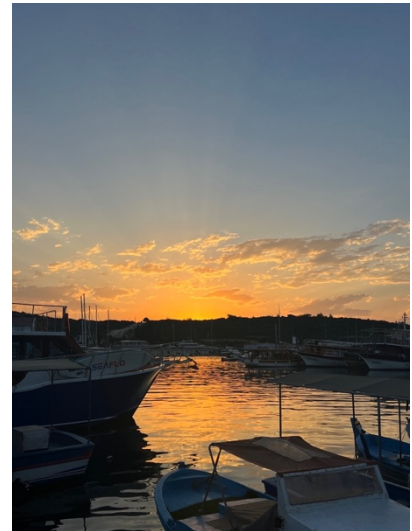
Today was our beach day and we got up early to head to Ilica beach. After parking up, we realised a small issue with our plan was that neither of us had any towels, no matter, we would just have to dry in the sun and accept our sandy states. After so many days moving around and in cities, it was so nice to swim around in the sea. A peaceful morning was spent swimming and reading until we decided to head to the trendy downtown



Walking around Cesme

area of Cesme for some lunch. Clearly a beachy touristy area, the town was full of white walls, blue doors and pink flowers. The cobbled streets made for a great strolling and we looked in all the little beach shops selling clothes and jewellery a little overwhelmed by all the lunch options. We eventually ate and then also tried some Turkish biscuits at another place. We then headed back to the car as I was keen to make a stop for dinner.

After much researching, I had found out about this small fishing village called Sigacik that I wanted to check out as it had won some sustainability award. We pulled in just as the sun was setting and desperately tried to find a place to park so we wouldn't miss it. We ran over to the shore and just saw the last glimpses of sun before it disappeared over the hill. The colours were beautiful reflecting over the calm bay, and we explored the lively seaside town that felt marginally less touristy than places earlier in the day. We explored the deserted castle and strolled along the packed seafront. We eventually settled for one of the restaurants and while it was not the best meal of the trip, it was certainly the best view. We were right next to the water and were able to watch the fishes swimming about below us as darkness set in. After a great dinner, we felt obliged to try some dondurma and then hopped in the car for the drive to Selçuk. Sadly, the evening took a little bit of a sour turn as we arrived at our hotel around 11:30pm to find that our booking didn't exist. Too exhausted to panic, we were very grateful to the night manager who bought us tea and biscuits while we tried to find a solution. In the end, the very kind owner of the hotel managed to find us a room in another hotel less than 50m down the street, so all was well that ended well.

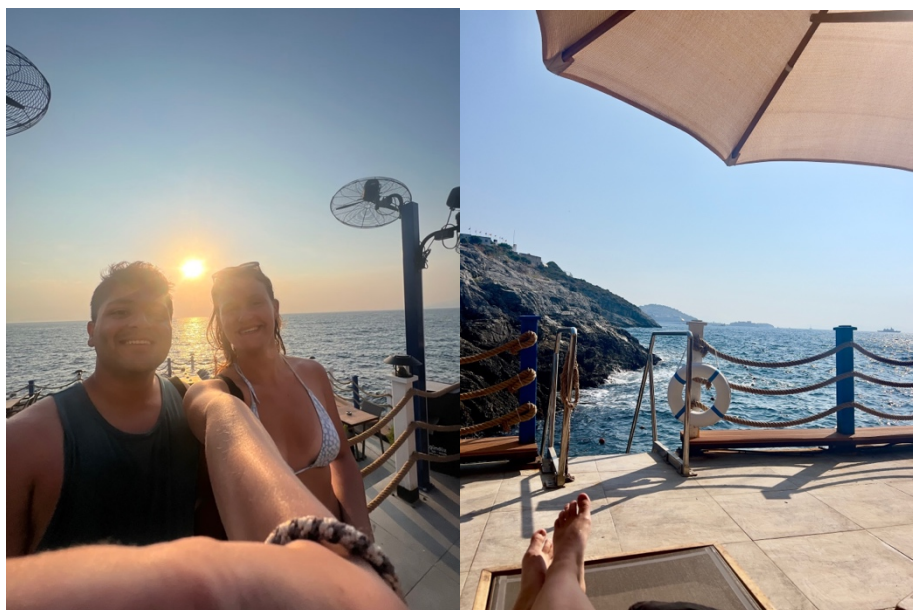


View from our dinner spot in Sigacik

Day 8

We got up to the welcome of a full Turkish breakfast from the substitute hotel before we made our way to Ephesus. Different from Pergamon which felt like the edge of the world, this was industry tourism with large buses transporting huge numbers of people from cruise ships near the coast. Turns out, it's a popular day trip for those cruise routes. We had to queue in the car to even get into the carpark and there was a large, covered area of shops and cafes before the entrance. Swarms of people everywhere, I was a little bit overwhelmed, but it was slightly better once we got inside and everyone spread out. It was truly an incredible site, so well preserved but I also appreciated the reconstruction of parts such as the library. It was incredible walking around a space that many people would have spent their entire lives. There was a particularly hilarious point where they did some emperor enactment with actors in costumes which was so entertaining, especially when they'd repeat it every 30 minutes or so.

After fully exploring, we were very hot having been in the direct sun all day but we wanted to check out the Temple of Artemis before we left. It was a bit sad just seeing a space where something so spectacular had stood and it made me a little sad we hadn't had time to stop at the Asclepieion in Bergama which is better preserved. But



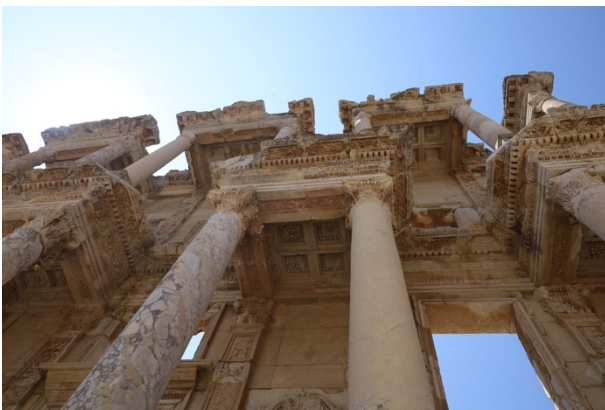
Swim at sunset

still 2 of the seven wonders of the ancient world down! After all this, we both just wanted to head for a swim by the coast but sadly we didn't have enough time to high-tail it to the Buyuk Menderes National Park. After I had expressed my disdain for sandy beaches, I persuaded Hamzah that we should just try and find a beach using satellite images. After almost getting trapped in a gated residential area and sadly discovering that the area was mostly high cliffs and most of the beaches private. I was losing the battle and we were almost about to give up when I spotted a concrete platform on the rocks below. Still sceptical, I promised Hamzah that if this didn't work out, we would head back to the big public beach. We headed down to find that it was a bar and restaurant with ladders into the water, my favourite way of swimming as no sand was involved. After haggling over an entrance fee and promising to buy dinner there. We quickly changed and jumped in straight off the rocks.

We spent the rest of the day here and ate dinner on sun loungers on the cliffs, what a way to finish the day! Sadly, to get the car back in time, we had to leave just before sunset but I am sure it would've been spectacular and this meant that we got an incredible drive back up the coast towards Izmir. We dropped off the car and headed to our hostel in the centre and then we headed out as Hamzah was desperate to have a shisha before we left. We found a great place and ordered lots of sweet tea as well. I said goodbye to Hamzah knowing that he was headed off so early the next morning, I wouldn't get a chance to say goodbye.



Ephesus!!



Day 9

With Hamzah and his phone service gone, I was back to my old methods of memorising directions the night before. I headed in the general direction of the Agora which was my first stop of the day. Walking around the dark and cool basement spaces with few other people around was very calming and it was really possible to imagine what this market would've felt like when it was in use. Sadly, part of the site were shut so it didn't take me very long to get around. Afterwards, in pursuit of lunch, I headed down into the market. Something that had first stuck out in Istanbul was the collection of the same stores together. We had walked down a street that only had shops selling light bulbs and fixtures. Here I entered in the fresh fish section, and I found the smell of fishmongers a bit nostalgic having grown up by the sea.



Agora of Smyrna

This market felt distinctly more authentic than the grand bazaar in Istanbul. It was mostly packed with people doing their shopping rather than tourists which was a welcome change. At this point though all I could think about was food, and I was now in the mood for some fish. I found a place to get a delicious and much-needed fish sandwich and as had been a feature of the trip I was told I must stay for tea which was then procured from someone walking around all the shops with tea on a tray. I then set off to do some shopping and procured some more clothes for Iran, some baklava for my family and then stumbled into the fabric section and knew I was in trouble. I decided I needed to limit myself to one project and after finding some beautiful beaded dark purple lace I figured I could make myself a dress for seeing the Eras Tour next year. I had so much fun running around the shops trying to find the perfect lining and it was all so perfectly laid out. I would then think I needed ribbon and would stumble into the ribbon section and then found a shop that sold only zips just on from there. After enough searching, I found perfectly matched lace, satin, zip, thread and ribbon and was distinctly jealous that I couldn't come back here all the time for all my projects.



Konak Square

I then had to head back to the hostel as I had an important phone call to make which was the review of the internship, I had had all summer. I was very excited to hear that I'd been offered the job which really lifted my mood. After calling my parents, I then headed down to Konak Square where I decided to sit on a beach and read for a bit, and just observe the scene of people moving around. As the sun began to set I suddenly heard this loud noise and looked up to see the Turkish equivalent of the red arrows practising around the bay. This continued for quite a while and they put on a good show. I then headed down to the water's edge to watch the sunset. I was so peaceful just sitting with my legs dangling over the water watching people fishing and families playing in the park behind as the sun lowered in the sky.



Fighter jets flying over Konak Square and sunset over the bay

I then headed back into the market to eat dinner. I ended up getting fish again as I was aware this would be the last time I would probably be eating it for a while. The restaurant owner's kids were playing on a stationary motorbike and kept waving at me, and it made me smile watching them just causing havoc. I had stuffed mussels and another grilled fish sandwich and then headed back to the hostel. Walking back through the now dark and deserted market felt strange given how busy it had been just a few hours earlier.

Day 10

I had an early flight back to Istanbul and landed with a several-hour wait ahead of me. The rest of my family landed and came through after a few hours and then we all tucked into a doner dinner ahead of our flight to Tehran. We eventually got on our late flight, and I won't lie, it hadn't really felt real until now and the nerves began to set in a bit. As we descended towards Tehran, we were instructed to put on headscarves as we needed to leave the plane wearing them. As we disembarked, there was a lady at the front who had yet to do so, standing to the side of the aisle huffing and sighing while making a scene about putting it on just to make a point which made me smile and feel a bit less nervous. We headed towards passport control with all our paperwork ready to go. Myself and my parents got through just fine, not even a second look but my sister was pulled to the side, likely a result of her entering on a US passport due to a failure to renew her British one. My mother and I continued down into the baggage reclaim but could still see up to the balcony where my sister and dad remained. 10 minutes passed and we saw an officer walk my sister over into a room. My mum was really worried but I was pretty convinced it would be fine. More waiting and worrying, the time seemed to move so slowly especially since we didn't know what was going on. Watching her walk back and forth to different officers, we didn't know what to think. Finally, we saw my dad lean over and give us a big thumbs-up! It was just a paperwork issue apparently. Also, the officer had evidently seen my sister's itinerary at the front of her pack of paperwork and was outraged that she was not visiting his hometown. As she came to join us she produced a small piece of paper where he had written the name of the town, that we should stay for 2 days and other recommendations.

We finally got our bags and rolled out to the arrival hall. We met our guide and she helped us get local sim cards so that we would be able to connect to the internet, something I had been prepared to live without for the 10 days we were here so wasn't too fussed. We then got picked up by our driver in the most chaotic fashion with him driving by and us all quickly bundling in the side in the middle of the street. We drove to our hotel and by this point, it was early in the morning, so we went straight to sleep without really seeing our surroundings.

Day 11

We woke up quite exhausted but to an incredible breakfast spread. The hotel was full of business types, and we were quite clearly the only tourists in the room. We headed out to our first stop of the day which was Golestan Palace which required walking past some scary-looking government buildings, which were strictly told cameras away. The palace itself was beautiful and I had done little research before as I wanted to be surprised by what I saw and I certainly was. I have never seen mirror work before and the incredible adornments of rooms with complex mirrored mosaics were unlike anything else I have ever seen. It was distinctly different in style than anywhere else I have ever been in the Middle East. We walked around the garden as well and I am sad we were all so tired from travelling so we couldn't spend longer here. We then headed to the Tehran Grand Bazaar which was so



Tehran Grand Bazaar



overwhelming but in a really exciting way. It was nearly impossible to keep track of each other and it was absolutely packed with people, we could barely move. I really wanted to stay but the rest of my family was too tired to deal with the chaos, but it was still great to see such a space that was entirely practical and just a facet of everyday life. We bought some clothes for my



Restaurant for lunch including sharbat with basil seeds

sister and some fresh juice, the currency was so confusing and thank goodness our guide was there to help us figure it out.

We then headed to lunch at the most incredible place to have what I now think was our best meal of the trip. We arrived at the most



Golestan Palace

incredible wooden doors and were welcomed in off the busy street. We dined on sour pomegranate chicken kabab and some sour cherry rice dish. We had our first taste of doogh, a salty yoghurt drink with mint and other herbs, sharbat, a sickly-sweet colourful drink with saturated basil seeds, and sekanjabin, a sweet cucumber drink with vinegar. Flavour combinations I had never tried before. One thing that we learned very quickly is that Iranians really love sugar, something I was not prepared for and found myself desperately trying to avoid the sickly sweet sharbats we were frequently offered by the end of the trip.

We then headed to the National Museum of Iran which was a fascinating journey through the region's history stretching far back into the prehistoric. A fairly run-down, draughty building, it was fascinating then walking a few metres across to the beautiful building that houses the Islamic Museum next door. I love Islamic art and so it was amazing

to be walked through the history of art created in Iran. Something that had stuck with me was an exhibit I had seen in Topkapi Palace of different forms of Islamic script, and it was really interesting applying what I had learned there to the different scripts that were presented in this museum. I was also surprised although I don't know why by the intersection between Islamic and more indo-leaning styles that in hindsight were just distinctly Persian.

Something my mum wanted to see in particular was the American Embassy given its infamy and the graffiti that is always used as the cover image on news articles. We found that that famous image had been replaced by new but no less powerful graffiti and it was certainly strange standing on a fairly quiet street, with the knowledge of what had happened here. We then continued as the sun was setting towards the Tabiat Bridge, an incredible structure designed by female architects. Given how much of a narrative there is about the subjugation of women in places such as Iran, I was surprised by this fact but as I met more and more incredible Iranian women throughout our journey, I became embarrassed by the stark inaccuracy of my preconceptions. Sadly, it was completely dark by the time that we arrived at the bridge, but it was lit up in incredible colours that still allowed us to appreciate its tree-like design.



Graffiti outside the American Embassy



Driving at sunset



Tabiat Bridge and the view

Day 12

We set off early as we had a long drive to Kashan but couldn't leave without stopping at the Azadi Tower. Originally commissioned by Mohammad Reza to celebrate the fated 2,500 anniversary of the Persian Empire but like everything else in Tehran in particular, had been renamed to erase this relation in



Azadi Tower



the aftermath of the revolution. Whilst distinctly modern, we were told how it was constructed using classical Achaemenid and Sassanian building principles. We then continued on our long journey into the desert.

After hours of reading and staring out the window at the barren, rocky landscape, we arrived at a service station just north of Qom. This was no ordinary service station and was more like an elegant mall with escalators, water features and large glass windows. There were shops selling dried fruit and local sweet pastry treats similar to baklava. There was also another Iranian sweet shop with a kitchen that you could walk in and watch them making the products. It was clearly set up for tourists with beautiful gift packages to take back as presents. We tried all the different things that they were making including sohan, a local candy made with saffron, pistachios, cardamon and rose water, a classic roster of flavours we would see throughout the trip. We also tried the famous Parsi coffee at the Saedinia Café which was infused with saffron and cardamon which was delicious and a nice snack.



Parsi coffee at Saedinia Cafe



Drive through the desert to Kashan

We then got back in the van and continued onto Kashan. By the time we arrived, it was lunchtime, and we were delivered to another beautiful restaurant in a hotel. As we waited for food, I decided to go out to the courtyard to take some photos. A lady I recognised from the table next to us was also wandering around the gardens and came over to ask where I was from. I told her and she was so excited to hear



Garden at Saraye Ameriha restaurant

about our trip. She said she was headed back to Tehran from Qeshm Island (which by the end of the trip, I am desperate to come back and visit at some point because it sounds incredible) where she has spent the summer holiday with her family. One of her sons then appeared and I tried to ask him about whether he was excited to be headed home but as every child, he seemed somewhat disgruntled to be headed back to school after what sounded like a great summer holiday. He was quite shy, hiding behind his mum but I eventually got him to talk about what he had been up to by the beach.



The lunch spread with plum lamb and Tahdig

I then headed back in as our food was ready and I noticed that the boy had a twin brother, but they were also travelling as an extended family with at least 8 people there most of whom were adults. I've always been a little jealous of big close families like this and I noticed over the whole trip that this was really common here. The food was as incredible as expected, and I was still getting used to the sweetness in every dish, even those that were supposed to be savoury with plums and cherries being used to sweeten meat

dishes. We also got our first taste of Tahdig, an Iranian classic where they essentially just crisp up the bottom of the rice.

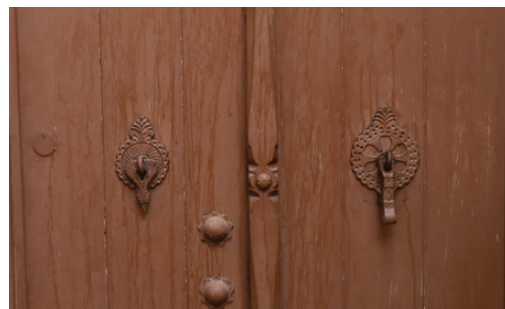
We then headed to two houses nearby that were owned by affluent families and built during the Qajar dynasty. It was fascinating learning about typical Persian architectural features and the struggles of building in the desert. The courtyard was a floor below street level to try and keep it cooler along with the rooms all around. The mirror work was incredible and brought to life all the textural designs on the walls. The light through the coloured glass windows cast colourful light throughout all the rooms. We wandered around the now empty rooms imagining what it would've been like to live in places like these. They also both represented classic examples of Persian gardens with the symmetry, fruit trees and water features.



Tabatabaei House and Borujerdi House

We then headed to a Safavid-era bathhouse that was covered in incredible tiling in bright colours. We also got special permission to go up onto the roof and see the strange domes with glass holes that allow light to filter down into the baths below. After we continued to wander along the sleepy streets of Kashan and found a shop making rose water and other infused waters. They showed us their distillery tanks and we tried some of the different waters. They were all so clear, it was incredible the flavour they packed. We bought some dried rose buds to take home which we had become accustomed to dropping in our tea.

By this point, the sun was beginning to set, and we headed to the Agha Bozorg Mosque. Our guide had such a knack for finding the most incredible places to be for sunset. It was empty when we headed in my mum glad that we weren't going to be forced into a chador. But after a quick peak, the



Door knockers different for men or women so that the people inside know who should go to answer the door.



Fit check outside the baths

lady manning the door came back and keen to see the rest of the mosque we donned the big floral pieces of fabric and headed in with my mum staying behind. This was my first time wearing one and it was certainly an interesting experience. I cannot imagine living like this all the time although floating around was quite exciting for the 10 minutes we were there giving a strange sense of



The Agha Bozorg Mosque before we were asked to put on chadors

anonymity. There was a big religious festival coming up so many of the mosques we saw had scaffold stages set up and throughout the towns, there were big black flags everywhere. The space was all open with no doors needed in the desert climate. After a look around the now-empty mosque, we headed back to the hotel for dinner. It was a beautiful house with a pool of water in the courtyard and very quiet. We ate dinner by candlelight there and then exhausted we headed to bed.

Day 13

We were back up early to get on the road to Isfahan but as we were driving out of Kashan, I couldn't help but notice the disparity in buildings. Affluent mansions were the norm for the route we were on, but these ranged from neoclassical to very modern and everything in between. All dusty desert colours, they were all strangely separate as if no effort had been made to ensure cohesion even along the road with built-up gated buildings standing completely by themselves.



Watermelon vendor in Kashan



Homes on the way out of Kashan

Before we left Kashan, we had one important final spot which one of the items I was most excited for: the UNESCO world heritage Fin Garden, one of the best examples of a Persian garden. Built in 1590, it is the oldest Persian garden that still exists and one of the most beautiful and it didn't disappoint. The walled garden was filled with cypress trees connected by streams and ponds of water. Also, part of the complex is the infamous Fin baths where Qajarid chancellor Amir Kabir was assassinated in 1852. It was incredible how quiet it was and how cool due to the shady trees and water.



Fin Garden

We then headed back onto the road and after several hours, the building began to increase in frequency until I looked out of the window and a large city loomed ahead of us. Due to the sanctions, we were unable to use credit cards the entire time we were there, which meant we had to rely entirely on cash we had brought into the country for the whole visit. This meant my dad was incredibly stressed that we were running out of money the entire trip and we were constantly trying to find places to get cash. Most of the locals operated with cards as the paper cash was worth so little per note making it a nightmare to deal with. The biggest notes we had were only worth €2 and this went down to less than 1p. Everywhere we went we tried to exchange euros for rials as most exchanges only had small amounts of cash available to swap. As



My sister with around €300 worth of rials

there had been no exchange shops in the whole of Kashan, we were now running very low, and the first order of business was to try and find some money. We finally found an exchange and my dad returned with a satchel full of cash that was only worth around €300 as that was all that he had been able to swap. We couldn't quite believe how many notes that translated too, and it meant keeping track of it incredibly difficult and carrying it around very nerve-racking.

First, we headed to the Chehel Sotoun, the "Forty Columns" palace which was the Safavid royal palace as Isfahan was their capital. The palace was surrounded by another incredible example of a Persian garden with large pools of water reflecting the palace balcony. The 40 columns is a reference to the reflection of the 20 balcony columns in this large pool. The interior was covered in murals and the woodwork on the balcony and mirrored rooms were amazing with detailing so intricate you could barely distinguish.



Forty columns palace



Armenian lunch spot

We then headed to an Armenian restaurant for lunch and our guide told us about the history of the quarter. We then headed off to the Vank Cathedral in the heart of the quarter. It felt strange to see a bastion of Christianity after all the mosques I had visited but it also felt so important to be there and understand how this city had been a collection of different people from all over. The frescos inside were breath-taking and certainly rivalled much of what I have seen in the churches in Italy but with a decidedly more Persian bent, even just in the sheer overwhelming nature of the whole place. I had never seen Armenian writing before, and I'm always struck by all the different ways people conceive of writing. There was also an exhibit on Armenian history in the area and it also covered the Armenian genocide. I was struck by how little I knew about such a harrowing event, especially given its extent over a multitude of countries and the continued denial of its occurrence.

We then continued to walk around the area before being picked up and taken to an empty mall. We were told we were going to a music museum as my dad had wanted to hear some traditional music. It was really eerie walking around the empty, dusty space but we eventually made it to the museum which was just a small space that could have been one of the shops. We were walked through all the traditional Iranian instruments with different ones for each region, and beautiful examples of each. We were then lucky enough to catch a



Persian Társ

concert and happened to be the only ones there at the time. It was meditative to listen to and it is always great to appreciate things that people are passionate about which the proprietors of the museum certainly were. It was so lovely to hear about how they all grew up playing music with their families, how they fell in love with music and learned to play these instruments.



A slice of home in Isfahan



The Vank Armenian Cathedral



Day 14

The first stop of the day was the saffron shop. As always, we got served tea although this time infused with saffron and rose. We were there with a Chinese couple who seemed decidedly uninterested in the whole thing and left as soon as the guy was finished speaking. Our guide rolled her eyes and repeated the comment that she had made before that all they want is to take photos and they don't come here to find out new things. Nevertheless, we were captivated. The man was so excited about what he did and loved all our questions. He talked us through how the saffron is sent off to the lab and carefully graded based on its crocin concentration and produced a box of saffron from the back to show us the lab report with the highest concentrations he had ever seen. He talked through how some grades are the best for cooking whereas the best



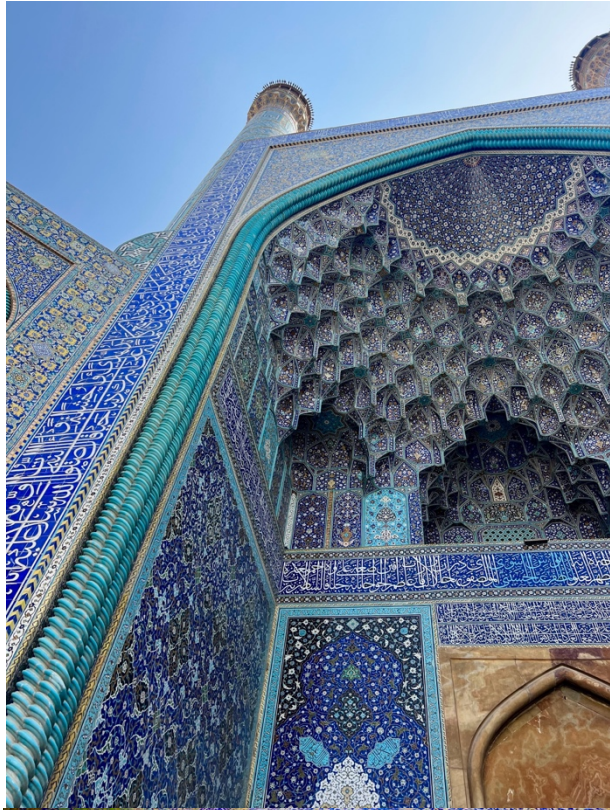
The Saffron Shop



Our hotel in Isfahan

grades are reserved for medicinal purposes. Queue my sister trying to persuade my parents that she needed medicinal grade saffron at €10 a gram because it would certainly solve all her problems. We bought some for gifts and I had said that I would pay Hamzah back the residual of our splitwise in saffron so that was also procured. We then noticed that he was collecting notes from all around the world on the tables including an elusive \$2 note and decided that he must have a £1 Guernsey note to add to his collection which we dropped off the following day.

We then headed into the Naqsh-e Jahan Square. From right in the corner of the square, we could see across the whole space. It was larger than even I could have envisioned with large spaces of green and pools of water. The Persian garden principles translated into a public space.



The Shah Mosque

We headed straight to the top of the square where we were greeted by the most incredible arch but even this couldn't prepare us for what was inside. There aren't really words to describe the Shah Mosque and I won't try and do it justice but the sheer scale of it was incredible. The bright-coloured tiles covered every inch, and the lofty spaces made me feel like an ant. I took a million photos but none seemed to really capture how amazing it was. The early morning sun was just rising over the entrance and lit up the back wall beautifully. My sister and I took a selfie under the great dome to send to a friend as a joke because her dad wrote a book which has this very image as the cover.



Roof of the Ali Qapu imperial palace balcony

This was certainly a highlight of the entire trip! But we had more to see and next visited the Sheikh Lotf Allah Mosque on another side of the square. We hurried past all the welcoming shops after being promised that we would have time to shop later. This was the private royal mosque and like the previous one was at an angle to the square so that it still faced Mecca. If you look at the square on satellite

images, this really sticks out as a feature. Given how polished this mosque was like many other things we had seen it was hard to remember that it was 4 centuries old. This felt crazy when compared to buildings built in this era in the UK. Here we were told about how these buildings are protected against earthquakes by including wooden bricks every 10 or so in the arches allowing the building to move if the ground quakes. This was just one on a long list of incredible Persian inventions that allowed them to deal with living in this environment.

We spent the rest of the day wandering around the market. We found a side alley that was only full of copper work. There were people hammering pots in the doorways and my mum found a fruit bowl for our kitchen. I also went to the gold shop and got a necklace which was costed by weighing it and I paid the current price of gold at that instant. It was like walking into some finance thing with large monitors displaying the current price of all the metals. We then headed up to a balcony coffee shop at the end of the square and watched the sun set and the lights come on over the square. We had a snack of saffron and rose ice cream and some tea. As the sun went down and the lights came on, the square swelled with people. It had been emptying as we had come up here but now it was packed with large groups of people pulling picnics out and eating over the lawns.



Naqsh-e Jahan Square at sunset



Isfahan market



Day 15

The next day was a big holiday and with many of the tourist attractions closed to visitors we headed to a carpet warehouse to learn more about Persian carpet making. After all the walking about, it was nice to be seated for a morning. We learned about how the different regions had different carpet specialities and the difference between nomad and city carpets. We saw some beautiful examples of very finely knotted silk carpets and even one 'magical' double-sided one that represented the pinnacle of craftsmanship. We drank lots of tea



Carpet Shop

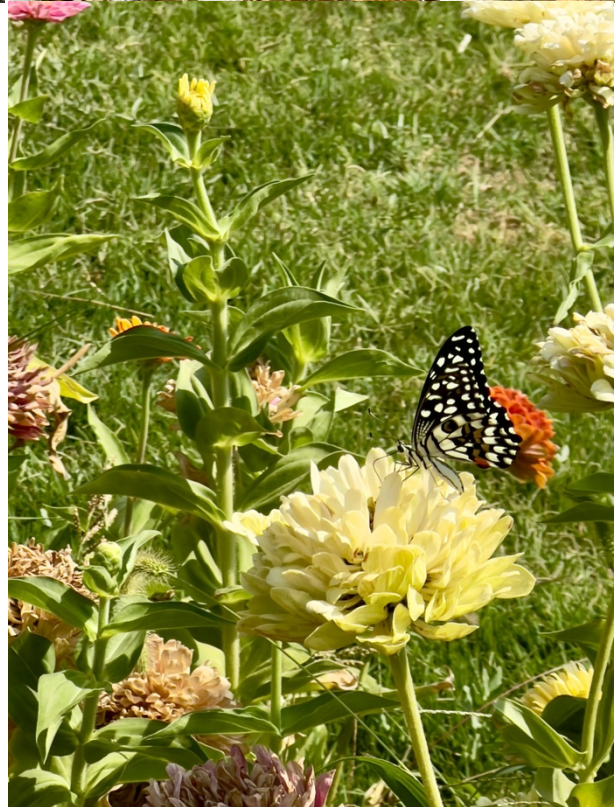


Flower Garden

and chatted to all the people working there and then managed to haggle our way to two carpets.

We then headed to a local flower garden to have a look at some local plant life and as something to do for the rest of the day. Sadly, not as beautiful as it would be in the spring but still green and colourful and there were so many butterflies that I desperately tried to take photos of. Large fish were swimming in the more natural-looking pools and strange trees with cotton candy-like flowers.

We then headed back to the hotel as my sister was desperate to try the Hamman and due to the rules about being a woman in this space the only way for that to be possible and cost-efficient was for us all to go together. It was a beautiful bath house and after seeing the old bath houses empty and barren, it was quite cool to be in on that was operating. We then headed out for dinner which required a bit of a walk. It was quite late, but the street and squares were packed with people just hanging out. Teenagers rammed on the side of a fountain and motorbikes were everywhere. All of them were dressed so beautifully, it could've been a fashion ad. We headed to this restaurant and while waiting for our food, I headed up to an art shop that was next



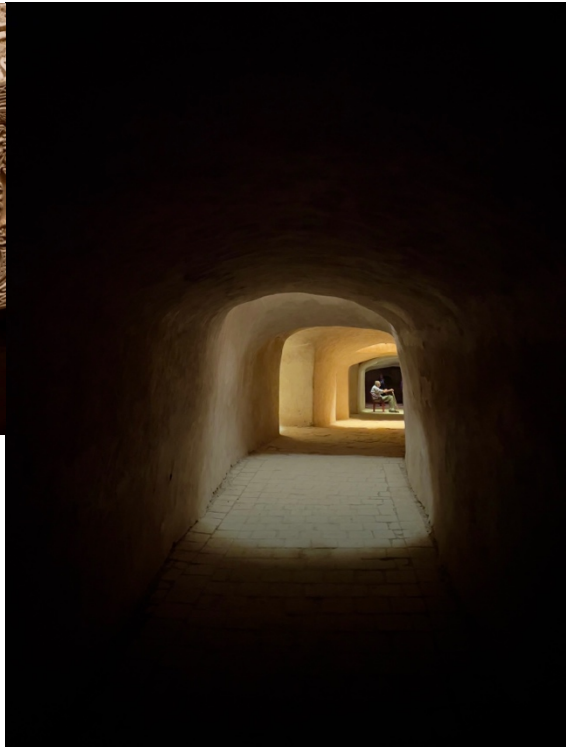
door. The lady in the shop was so excited that we spoke English, telling me that her sister lived in Leicester and asking if we had ever been. She then proceeded to Facetime her sister and give me the phone although I wasn't really sure what she wanted me to say to her but we talked about moving to the UK and she tried to tell me how cool everyone thought the jackets they were selling were back home. I certainly believed her; they were beautiful but sadly very expensive. On the way back to our hotel we stopped at some of the famous Isfahan bridges. As the river was completely dried up this time of year, people had collected under the bridges and were singing and dancing in large groups. By this point, it was past 11 pm but everyone was there from young to old and it was electric and so joyful. The bridges looked incredible all lit up at night, but I would love to come back and see them when the river is flowing. Despite the incredible number of people out, I felt very safe and given it was quite late at night this felt counter-intuitive. This was certainly a consequence of the alcohol ban across the country and was especially noticeable at night with no drunk people roaming about the streets only people meeting up with their community.

As we headed back to the hotel, we were moving so slowly as the traffic was solid. This meant we had to turn the lights on inside the car as our guide told us that as a black van people would assume we were the morality police, and this might put us and the van in danger. This was not the response I expected when my mum asked about it.

Under the Isfahan bridges



Day 16



We headed back on the road, this time towards the desert city of Yazd. On the way we stopped at the Nain Mosque which was first constructed over 1,200 years ago. The handcrafted detailing was exquisite and there was a carved wooden pulpit that was 700 years old. I had always struggled to conceptualise this amount of time given the pristine condition of it all. We were the only ones there apart from a

Nain Mosque

family of two parents, grandparents and a child. The little girl came up to me and asked to practice her English but couldn't manage much so I spoke to her mother discussing why we were here and where we had come from like many other conversations we had had with locals. The little girl had found some more courage after hearing we were from the UK and managed "We love Lewis Hamilton" before continuing to hide behind her parents. Her mother laughed saying how much they loved watching F1 and I heartily agreed professing my



love for Mercedes also! We chatted to them for a while, and then they asked for a photo with us all.



Narin Castle and views over Maybod

Next, we headed to Maybod and looked around the Narin Castle which dates back to the Achaemenid period and is potentially 6,000 years old. The views over the city and desert were incredible and we walked around the mud rooms that would have held whole families. We then headed to a nearby caravanserai for lunch. I was so excited to go to one of these because I was so fascinated by the

concept of the Persian roads that were built with these stations perfectly situated a day's ride apart on the road to improve connections around the empire well before Rome employed a similar technique. There were underwater streams from a water store that fed into a running stream in the centre of the courtyard where the horses would've drunk but now it was just calming to be by running water in the heat. For the meal, the food came out with lit cotton stuffed inside a courgette that took us a second to work out what was actually on fire.

Once we reached Yazd, we were headed straight for one of the sites I was most excited to see: the Zoroastrian fire temple. We walked around as the sun began to dip and headed in to see the flame that had been burning since 470 AD. We then headed to the museum next door that talked about the roots of the religion and its modern practice. It was fascinating learning about this mystical religion that is one of the oldest organized faiths. There was also a photo gallery with beautiful shots of Zoroastrian festivals and gatherings as well as everyday life as a part of this religion.

We got into Yazd quite late and went to watch Pahlavani in an old water cistern. A combination of sport to rhythmic music that dates back to ancient Persia, it is one of the oldest sports in the world. While the adults did a good job of entertaining all of us tourists, it was the little boys who were trying (and failing) to copy what they were doing that stole everyone's hearts. We happened to sit next to a Spanish couple whom we ended up



Yazd fire temple



Yazd

seeing multiple times in the next few days. The lady was dressed to the nines, head to toe in blazing-hot Barbie pink. Everything down to her toenails and lipstick was the same shade and despite speaking no English, it was nice to see a friendly face around and I can only aspire to be that iconic.

Day 17



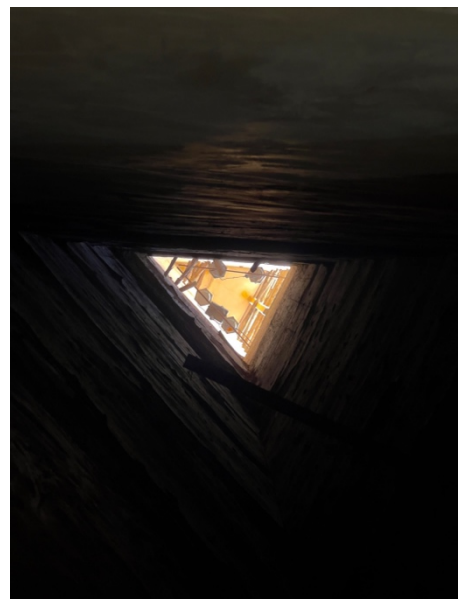
The water museum

The national holiday meant that much was closed again but we headed to the water museum. Living in the desert presents unique challenges that have been tackled here for millennia and people have created some ingenious ways of dealing with the heat and lack of water. We learned about the underground water systems that were tilted to ensure water was run from the snow-capped mountains throughout the entire cities. The construction of Qanats, essentially underground aqueducts before aqueducts were a thing, was a dangerous but incredible process that allowed them to transport water hundreds of kilometres. The running water in the basement of people's houses kept them incredibly cool and these spaces were used to keep food cold.



Dowlat Abad Garden

Next, we went to the Dowlat Abad Garden. With its beautiful long central pool that reflected the tall trees and incredible buildings including the tallest windcatcher in existence. Yazd is known as the city of the windcatchers, and it is easy to see why as we would see later in the day staring over the city skyline. This was another example of Persian ingenuity and ability to adapt to the desert. They concentrate even the slightest puff of wind and channel it down to the underground water streams which cool the air before it is directed back into the buildings as an ancient AC. The buildings also had the most beautiful, coloured glass that flooded what was essentially a study with dappled light.



There was a young girl who came up to me and asked to practice her English and I tried to get her to talk about what she was studying in school and what she had been up to over the holidays. She was so excited to hear about our trip. On our way out another man struck up a conversation with my dad and launched into a tirade against Iranian politics with very limited English. I was surprised how readily he offered up this opinion to complete strangers. We then tried to procure a pomegranate from the gardens, but they were not really ripe yet. After traipsing through the muddy orchard, we settled on a small citrus-looking fruit but I can't remember the name.

We then headed back for a rest at the hotel before heading out just as the sun was setting. After procuring a coffee from an eclectic place and getting side-





tracked by the inviting shop windows we were in a rush against time to reach some unknown place before the sunset. We got asked for directions by a Danish couple and our guide told them where to go but after deciding she probably knew what was up they decided to leave their destination and come with us. We finally found a little door and were ushered inside. After hustling quickly up some steep mud steps, we emerged at this beautiful rooftop café just as the sun was nearing the horizon. We climbed all the way to the highest point and could see all the way to the mountains as well as over the whole city. The littering of windcatchers all over the place was incredible and it was clear to see how the city got its nickname. We sat in the dusty haze and drank pomegranate juice out of handmade ceramic cups that we were allowed to keep. We were joined by some mass Chinese tours, one of which had been staying in the same hotel as us and there must have been 20+ in the group all travelling in a massive coach together.





We tried to avoid them when we could in the small bathhouses and other contained attractions.

After sitting for a while we then went to visit the Jameh Mosque. This was requiring of a chador so floral raincoated up we headed in to see the beautiful tiling and mosaics. I noticed that this was the first mosque we had been to that was carpeted which I thought was interesting given how ubiquitous the carpeting had been in the Sunni mosques I had become used to in Turkey. I am not sure if that is the line, but it was interesting that most of the ones we had seen were simply stone on the floor. We then spent the rest of the evening wandering around the bazaar and despite or maybe because of the late hour it was absolutely buzzing.

Our guide had said earlier that some of her family happened to live in Yazd and some others were visiting them at the moment, so we decided to meet them all at this hotel for drinks. My sister was desperate to try a shisha and was therefore satisfied that she would finally have the chance but the rest of us settled in with our tea. Three of her cousins joined with their husbands and wives as well as her aunt and uncle. They were warm and very engaging; in particular, the women were glamorous and clearly in charge in every pairing. It was fascinating talking to them about their lives, they all seemed to be dentists or plastic surgeons. A funny thing we had noticed was that every second person we seemed to pass sported a nose split or head bandages from a hair transplant. It was so normalised just to walk around with bandages and all and our guide even admitted to having a nose job when she was younger saying that no one wants a Persian nose. They wanted to hear about our trip and joked with us about their cousin. It was a lovely evening and so special to get to see the family dynamics and hear their opinions on their country and the world.

Day 18

We set off early as we had a long day of driving ahead of us. My sister was sad that we had missed the Tower of Silence that we were supposed to visit in Yazd but luckily there was another one on our route out of the city that was less famous and therefore empty. We climbed up the rocky hill in the middle of the desert and the silence was certainly palpable. It was fascinating hearing about how the



The Zoroastrian Tower of Silence

Zoroastrians leave their dead in towers such as these to simply be picked at by vultures and other scavengers.

After several hours in the van, we arrived at our first destination of the day. Today we took a step back in time to the ancient Persian era and our first stop of the day was the mythical Pasargadae; Cyrus the Great's capital and the first of the Achaemenid Empire. There is little left of it now after it was flattened by Alexander the Great save for the tomb of Cyrus himself. It is said that this was left untouched due to the respect of Alexander for a fellow 'Great'. Having seen photos of this place, it looks like the structure is almost like a sarcophagus and therefore humanesque in size so nothing had prepared me for just how massive it was. Nestled in this quiet valley, this structure was easily visible from



far around; a fitting tomb for a man who conquered Asia. We were told some stories of Cyrus and the Achaemenids by our guide which seemed to distinctly differ from the versions that I had read about before coming. I couldn't tell if this was a matter of no one really knowing what

happened or a case of Persian ideology of Cyrus reverence seeping into the tale. My books seemed to take a more middle-line approach, characterising Cyrus as a successful but ruthless leader with some of his now-seeming altruism being attributed in at least equal measure to strategic governance over a vast and disparate empire.

Further along our route, we stopped briefly at the gates of Naqsh-e Rostam, the ancient Persian necropolis. As we were running out of time, we just studied the carvings in the rock faces that held the ancient kings final resting places. Just down the road, the traffic became suddenly full of big coaches, and I knew we were almost at one of the most incredible sites on the planet: Persepolis!



Naqsh-e Rostam

You walk up the long straight road with the Gate of All Nations looming on the plateau. It was more packed than expected given that we had seen not that many tourists at least up until the big buses in Yazd. Walking around the incredibly preserved site is impossible to put into words. Looking at all the carvings and trying to decipher what they were trying to convey and looking up at the incredible columns and bull capitals, I could've spent days just here. As we walked in, we saw all the people that had signed the base of the entrance guarded by the two lamassus as travellers used to do. Now it is part of the history of the place that people trekked from far and wide to see this place. A fun feature was that there were VR stations and so we walked around the site with goggles around our necks ready to see the virtual reconstructions at the given stations. Being transported in this way to what it might have looked like added a whole new dimension to the visit. I was taken aback by how vivid and

colourful it was thought to have looked, it must've been an intimidating site to see for those visiting. We stayed here until sunset and I rushed up to the tombs of Artaxerxes II on the hill just as the sun was setting which gave the most incredible view over the whole valley. As we had entered Fars in the foothills of the Zagros, the landscape had become increasingly green and agricultural, something I certainly hadn't expected.



Signatures carved into the Gate of all Nations



Persepolis!!!





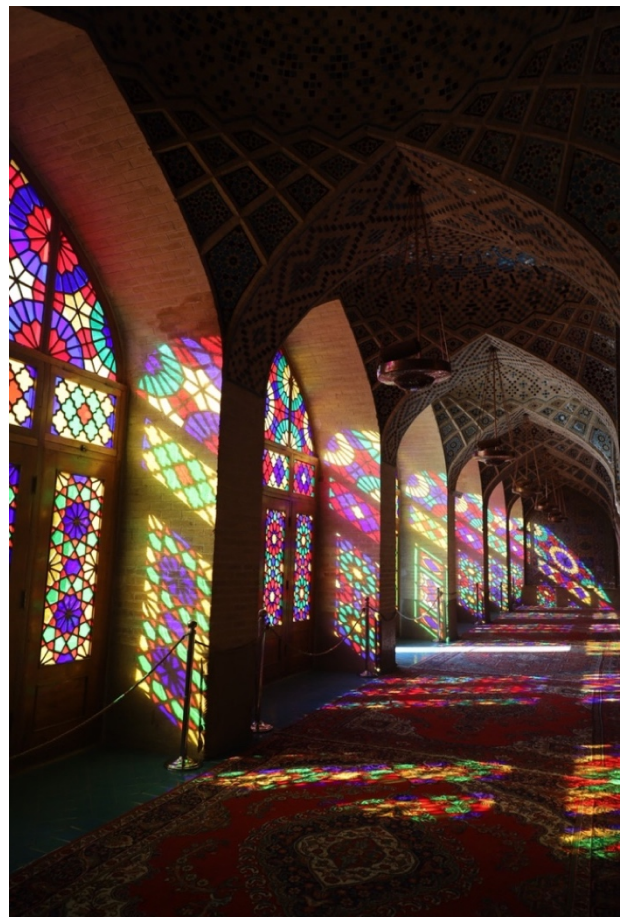


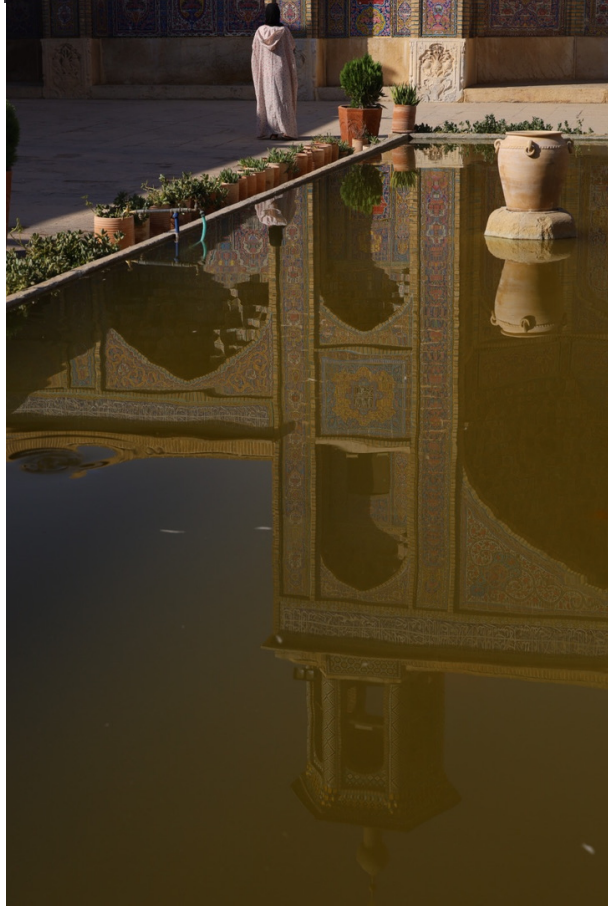
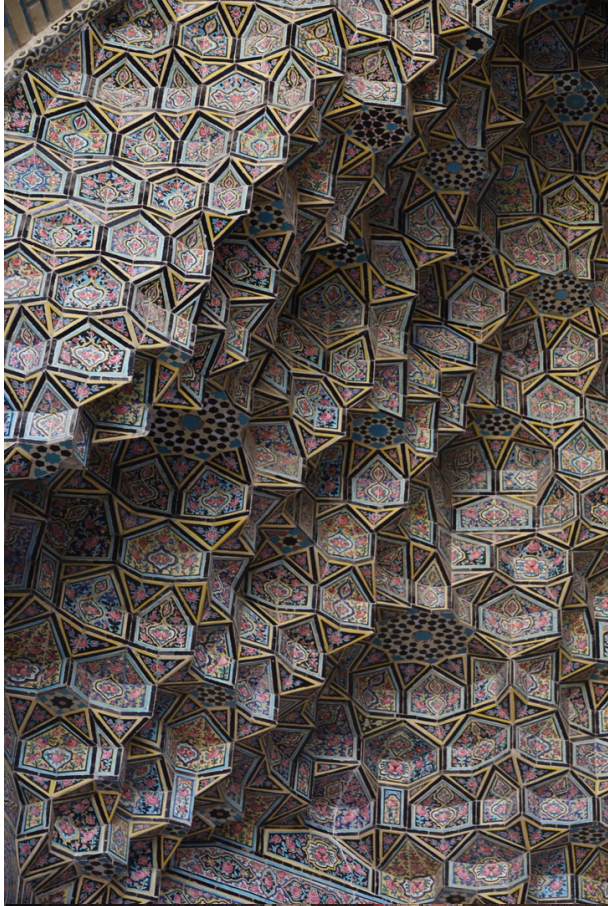
Day 19

After getting into Shiraz late the night before, we still managed to get out very early the next morning as we had a very special stop, the Pink Mosque. Famed for its beautiful stained-glass windows, we were told we had to be here early or the light wouldn't be right, it also allowed us to avoid the big groups of tourists that we saw arriving as we left. We were at the door before opening and it



was an interesting crew waiting to get in. Aside from us there was a couple who were clearly the classic influencer couple of a girl in a ridiculous outfit (it seemed to be a wedding dress from dress-up shop with tulle poof and drawn silk bunching on top) and an Instagram boyfriend with a camera. As we walked inside and were forced into chadors, I saw the girl look incredibly dejected. I rushed and managed to be first in so that just for a second I was the only one in the space. We sat in the light for a while, marvelling at its beauty as the space filled up. Watching the influencer girly try and seductively arrange her chador so that her outfit was visible was mildly entertaining. My dad took a photo of me in a chador against the back wall bathed in the colourful light in possibly one of the most classic tourist shots in all of Iran. He is convinced of his newfound photography skills showing every person we now see this photo but given how beautiful the light was, it would've been hard for the photos to be bad.







My sister getting stuck into nomad life

We then headed back for a quick nap before driving out of the city towards the hills. We entered a small town and were met by the enigmatic Bahman; Qashqai nomad and social media personality. We climbed into his 4x4 as the van couldn't deal with the mountain roads. We headed up up into the mountains and turned off down a small valley. As soon as we turned off, I was shocked at how lush the valley was with fields of bright green and purple flowers around the base of the trees. We arrived at his family's camp and were introduced to his mother, father and uncle. Here we spent the day, learning about life as nomads in modern



Iran. I felt incredibly honoured to be there, weighted with the knowledge that this way of life is likely to vanish within the next few decades. What was clear immediately is that there is no sugarcoating how hard life is as a nomad. Everything was made from scratch, and they were kind enough to let us join in and learn about some of their daily tasks. First, we

helped spin wool string from piles of wool that had come straight from the sheep outside as we sat on carpets woven with string made in the same way.

Next, we sat down for a hearty lunch of goat stew and noticed that the Bahman's father simply had a potato instead. We asked why and he told us that he feels so personally attached to his goats he can't face eating them. I suddenly felt very bad.



Before the meal, we had also helped make my dad's now favourite drink doogh, by slightly fermenting goat's milk and all the various herbs by shaking it inside a cured goat's skin that had been sewn up again. Whilst very good, it did taste a lot like goat.

After lunch, we had to help move the sheep to their afternoon pasture. We



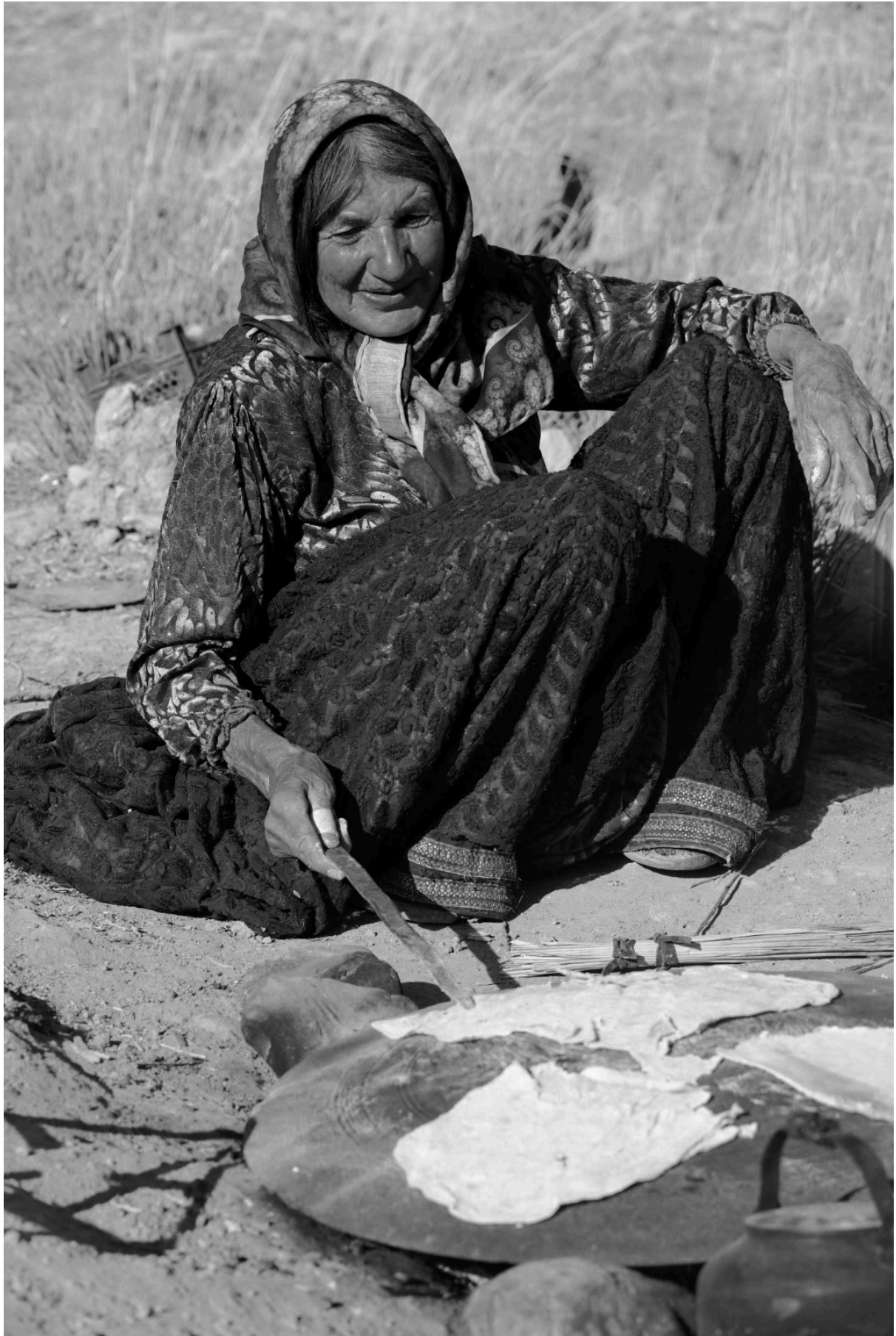


accompanied Bahman and his father, continuing to pester him with questions that he was only too happy to answer. We were given wooden sticks to help guide the sheep and keep them together. We walked over the rocky hills and headed back down towards the lush valley that was maintained by the meandering river. It was cool even now in the afternoon and Bahman told us about how it is getting cold at night, so they are preparing for

their annual migration hundreds of kilometres South for the winter. After dropping the sheep where they needed to be we headed on down to the river to see there were lots of concrete platforms with wooden frames and canvas roofs. As we had learned already, Iranians love a picnic, and this was one of the most popular picnic spots around here. There were a few families, but it was mostly empty. We headed through a wooded glen and came to a point where we had to cross the river. Delighted to get in the river my sister and I hiked up our skirts and crossed easily before turning around to see our guide and our mother struggling with the slipping rocks as their headscarves fell around their shoulders. It all felt a bit redundant now up here in nature anyway, but they were quickly put back as we noticed a family on the other side of the river. As we clambered up onto the bank, were quickly inundated with excited questions about where we were from as we had essentially crashed their picnic. Watermelon slices were thrust into our hands, and I was very grateful for something sweet. We chatted for a while and as we went to leave, they kept trying to give up more watermelon which was very sweet before wishing us on our way.



We headed back to the camp where my dad had stayed and despite not speaking much English, had very well befriended Bahman's mother. We sat back in their tent for some afternoon tea and talked some more. My sister spotted a shisha pipe and quickly it was lit and included in the tea break. We discussed his decision to live between here and the city and the future of nomadic life. His mother then scolded him for getting divorced, but he just shrugged. It transpired that his ex had given him the ultimatum of giving up running nomad tours and he said he loved doing it so wouldn't and that was that. He seemed satisfied with this outcome, but his parents seemed less than impressed. We then got the opportunity to try and make some bread after being shown how to do it so effortlessly, we less than impressed with our own skills. However, bread is bread, and we still ate our efforts. Bahman laughed but then tried himself only to find he was as bad as we were as his mother shook her head.

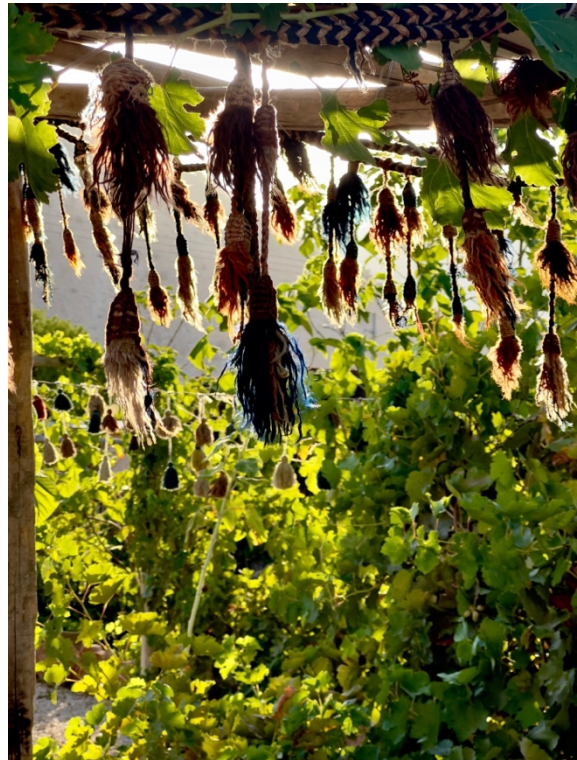








After a wonderful day, we waved goodbye and headed back down the mountain in the Land Rover. We then headed to another nomad encampment only this time right next to the main road. Here they were growing grapes and drying them in the sun. Huge canvas sheets covered in drying grapes were draped over the hills and we tried different ages of raisins. We sat for a cup of tea talking to them about their lifestyle and how it compared to what we had seen earlier in the day. On the way home we stopped at a local ice cream shop for a local delicacy; saffron ice cream and carrot juice float. I have no idea who first conceived of this as an idea, but it was yummy enough if not a bit strange. We said farewell to Bahman after promising to follow him on Instagram where we were shocked to find out he does in fact have almost 100k followers and therefore wasn't joking.



When we got back, we smelled heavily of goat and my mum, and I wanted to go for a swim in the pool. We were lucky to discover that it was women in the evening, so it was a go. We had swum in the hotel in Yazd as well and it was certainly a strange experience. Women and men are allowed in at different times and women are only allowed if the pool is inside. We were also forced to buy fabric bathing hats so that our hair was still covered. My mum is part of a cold water swimming club at home and the group always posts selfies when they are swimming so we couldn't miss this opportunity to contribute to the group. However, as we tried this, we were accosted by the lifeguard who couldn't have been more than 18. She looked confused as to why we would ever want to take a photo and quickly informed us that this was definitely banned despite the fact that there was no one else in the pool. We apologised and laughed at this being an unforeseen quirk of the separation of male and female lives.

Day 20

Today was our final day and our chance to look around Shiraz. By this point, I must admit that I was feeling a little sick and quite overwhelmed by all the things we had seen and the amount we had fit in which was so sad as Shiraz is supposedly one of the most incredible cities in Iran and I don't think I made the most of it, but I was still a fab day! We first headed to the Karim Khan Citadel which was just across the street from our hotel. The whole centre was an orchard of fruit trees, and we

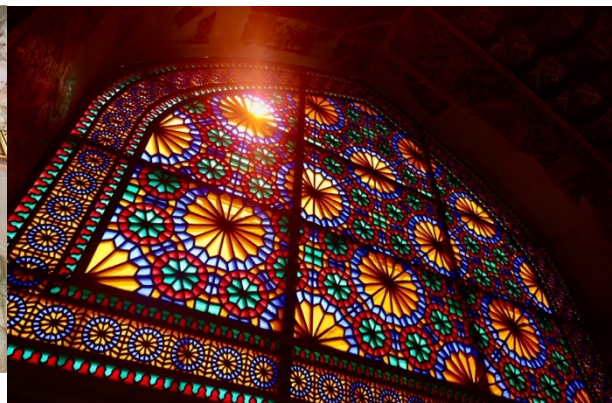


Karim Khan Citadel walls

wandered through the various rooms. Compared to the good condition of many of the sites we had seen, the decoration was patchy as it had been plastered over after the fall of the Qajar dynasty. In one of the towers, they were running a photo shoot where you could dress up in traditional clothes and have your photo taken. We pushed past parents dressing their kids up in Qajari attire and up the stairs behind the dressing room gave a beautiful view over the tower room.



Decor in the Karim Khan Citadel rooms



We then headed to the bazaar where I was on a final mission to get some presents for friends despite feeling quite ill by this point. I bought some Isfahani stamp-printed clothes and other trinkets. My sister got lost in the silver market and my dad and I sat in a square watching the world go by as we waited for her to pick something. This market felt so much more raw and real than the one in Isfahan which was much more geared towards tourists. It felt like we were surrounded by people actually doing their shopping which was a welcome change. Now and then a motorcycle would try and make its way down the narrow streets which were bustling with people. People were busking in the alleyways and the music floated over all the noise. As we headed back out of the market, I happened to spot the fabric section and I knew I couldn't leave without checking it out. About a half hour later I may or may not have walked out with 3 more projects but at least I was suddenly feeling lots better.



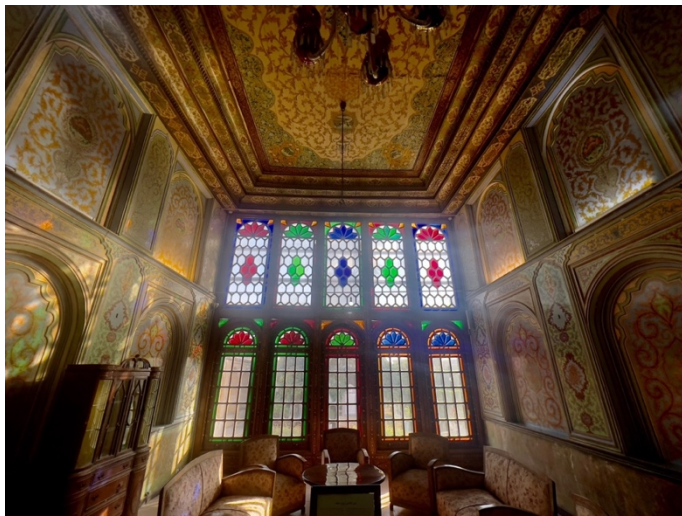
Vakil Mosque



Qavam house exterior



After lunch, we did a whistle-stop tour of Eram Garden and Qavam House, two beautiful examples of Persian gardens. The mirror work in Qavam house was particularly brilliant. We then headed to Vakil Mosque, a Zandieh-era structure of the same age as the citadel we had seen earlier. Our penultimate stop of the day was the Ali ibn Hamzeh Shrine. We were told very little about it and it looked very similar to much that we had seen before from the outside. We stepped over beautifully caved gravestones that made up the floor on the courtyard towards the visitor entrance still curious about what was inside. After we had donned chadors for the final time our guide led us towards the door and told us that we should record this on our phones. We obliged and as the door opened, I was glad I had. The photo below does it no justice at all, but this was by far the most incredible mirror work we had seen. Every surface was covered in mirror mosaics, reflecting light off in all directions. It



Qavam house interior

sparkled everywhere you looked and was blinding as you walked around and different mirror angles caught the light. The eerie green light emanating from the centre of the shrine reflected off all the mirrors as well. As we left, one of the women working in the shrine gave us some tea and asked us to sit and ask any questions about the Quran. It didn't feel like she was trying to convert us although there was certainly an element of that but just genuinely wanted us to ask questions which was a welcome shift. My

Ali Ibn Hamzeh Shrine



preconceptions of highly religious women such as her being meek and submissive quickly had to be rejected. She was chatty and passionate about what she was conveying, and it was interesting to hear what she had to say.

Our final stop of the day was the tomb of the poet Hafez. The sky turned pink as we pulled up and the place was crawling already. As the darkness set in more and more people started to arrive and it seemed to just be locals who congregated in big groups. In most, a person was reading from a book. They were reading Hafez's poetry. I thought this was the most beautiful way to pass an evening and so romantic that people just came to sit in the gardens and read poetry in groups. Many people were looking at the marble coffin of Hafez as well as the other graves in the cemetery. I had gotten used to the busyness at this point and it didn't faze me anymore. We wandered around and watched the sun set lower, why trying to pull up some of the poetry on our phones. We then needed a snack and luckily had one more Persian delicacy we had to try; Faloodeh. It is a sort of ice cream with rice noodles and whilst a very strange texture, quite delicious. As was often the case in busy places, we were asked many times where we were from, wished well and asked for pictures, but I noticed it happened so many times while we were here.



Hafez Tomb

After the sun had set we headed to an Iranian mall as we had some time to kill before our flight back to Tehran. It was fascinating to look around at the teenagers hanging out and the brands that were so similar to what I knew but not quite. We stopped across the road for a final meal of kebabs and there was a band playing live music while we ate. We headed to the airport and said farewell to our driver. In front of us in the check-in queue, there was a group of around 6 men all with hair transplant bandages. Shiraz we were told was the best place to have this procedure done. We hopped on the plane arriving very late and were driven to another airport for 3 hours of sleep before our flight home. Our guide

had to wait around as she was duty-bound by the government to see us right to the gate, a clear condition of our visas. After farewells the next morning we left with no issues, having a nap in the most comfortable of airport chairs before boarding our flight back to Istanbul where we would change to a flight to London.