

**Mia Muxlow**

**Roger Short Grant**

It would be wrong to start this journal without the greatest possible thanks to the benefactors and organisers of the Roger Short Travel Scholarship. The extreme generosity of these individuals enabled me to travel and explore Turkey in a way that would have not been feasible without the grant. My trip was truly one of the greatest experiences of my life and has gifted me a deep appreciation for Turkey, its people and its culture. It will forever hold a special place in my heart, and I hope that this travel diary does justice to the memories I have and my immense gratitude.

When applying to the grant I wanted to find a purpose of my trip to Turkey beyond a holiday and go there with the dual intention of enjoying and learning about Turkey and its culture but also to take this incredible opportunity to develop a personal area of interest, religion, in a unique way. Why people believe what they believe and how that affects the cultures and societies that stem from these beliefs. It is these sort of questions that compelled me to elevate my ambitions to go to Turkey and not just savour and celebrate the culture, but with the dual intention of invigorating and curating a personal area of interest, religion, in a truly unique way. I saw Turkey as an incredible opportunity to investigate these areas of interest, a fascinating country to observe religion within, and I am happy to report that I was not wrong.

During my trip to Turkey, I stayed in four places, Istanbul, Uçhisar (Cappadocia), Konya and Antalya. Each was fascinating, welcoming and helped to provide a new perspective on Turkey as a whole, alongside building a rich tapestry of the religious history of the country. Istanbul was an incredible start to the trip. The city was loud and vibrant, filled with incredible sites and culture. There was constant commotion, a frenetic energy, with the call to prayer echoing through the streets, people ushering you into their shops and the smell of grilled corn. It was a perfect example of the layers within Turkey, from the pandemonium of the Grand Bazaar, the calm of the Bosphorus at sunset, and the sheer scale of the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia. Victoria's neighbour Emir stated that the best way to see Istanbul was to wander, and I did just that, exploring diverse neighbourhoods sandwiched between two continents. I often found myself sitting with a cup of tea, simply watching the city exist; chaotic, beautiful, and alive. It was the perfect place to begin understanding Turkey and its people.

After five days in Istanbul, I flew to a comically small airport in Cappadocia, in the middle of what felt like a dessert, with one small baggage claim in the single hallway and nothing else. I got a transfer to my hotel, which despite being the cheapest room I could find was an incredible cave hotel with views all across the valley. My hotel wasn't the only cave around, as it was close to Pigeon Valley, named as it was home for thousands of pigeons, their houses carved into the stone. I'd already been struck by the uniqueness of this new place, and I'd barely left my hotel. Venturing out, the town Uçhisar was quiet and seemed to have a slow pace of life, especially in comparison to the chaos of Istanbul. Nevertheless, it felt like a space recently touched by the heavy hand of tourism. It seemed on the cusp of its commercial peak, as it maintained a balance of local life against the foreigner focused businesses. Yet, the construction

sites seemed to suggest that a tourist hay day was laying ahead of it. The town sat beautifully close to Göreme National Park, giving unmatched panoramas of the surrounding valley. Uçhisar has recently graduated into a town, starting life as a village centred around a huge rock cone. The old village is commanded by the 60-metre-high 'castle' which is actually a visible rock formation that peeks out at you from all corners of the town. The Valley is truly a sight to behold. Sweeping views of fairy chimneys with the iconic Uçhisar Castle perched at the edge. The area was truly unlike anything I've ever seen before, and alongside its gorgeous vistas there was fascinating history deeply connected to the land, from the underground caves, complete with a labyrinthine of subterranean mazes and tunnels, to the churches carved out of rock. It was strikingly beautiful, and the peace the still quiet town had permitted me a few days to enjoy the rich surroundings and history that Turkey had to offer.

After multiple days in Uçhisar I caught a coach to Konya to learn about Sufism. The coach ride, while long, provided unprecedeted views of the Turkish landscape, as we wound around valleys and careened through mountains. When arriving in Konya I got the feeling that this was unlike the other places I'd visited, it was one not catered to tourists. The main square, by the tomb of Rumi, was neat and rather empty. The few rows of uniform streets were not fighting to get your attention, unlike Istanbul. I had a delicious, and very cheap, meal establishing a new favourite food of mine, an Iskender kebab. Despite the lack of volume, it didn't make this new location any less interesting. As I walked around the city it did not take long to feel the sense of life thrumming from every alley or corner. Kids playing outside, street vendors selling fruits. I enjoyed the chance to catch a glimpse of everyday Turkish life, especially the sense of community together in action. What was fascinating about Konya was seeing the deep intertwining between religion and daily life. Faith wasn't confined to the Mosques or tombs but rather shaped the city itself, its presence stamped into the streets, reflecting the spiritual introspection that Sufism teaches, a stark contrast to the grandeur and hustle of Istanbul. My time there reminded me that religion, in its most genuine and pure form, manifests not through spectacle but through the simple and consistent ways that people live their lives.

After Konya I got a coach to Antalya, drinking up the lush landscapes along the way. Antalya was bustling and busy and, to be frank, felt like a 'Brits abroad' location, complete with a strip awash with neon lights. I was staying in the old town which transformed from day to night. The buildings were buttery stone, the colour softer in the daylight matching the slower pace of life before the sunset. In the daylight, you could skip around the crowds with ease while at night the old town was bursting at the seams, roads full of clubs and bars pumping music. With this dichotomy it was still possible to have an educational time, as I scurried in the peaceful daylight hours between the many archaeological sites the area is home too. However, as I previously stated, I wanted to use this grant, not only to explore Turkey but also to look into religion within the area. Making the most of my time in Antalya, I was able to dive headfirst into the religious history in Turkey both new and old, by exploring as the ancient city of Perge in Antalya.

To understand Perge is to first understand more of Turkey. Turkey as a geographical location, plays host to some of the most important and crucial developments within religious history and it's why it has always stood out to me as a place to visit. It's proximity to the Holy Land and its bridge between the Middle East and Europe ensures a rich spiritual history, merely through its location. Turkey was the stage to much of the expansion of Christianity, specifically towards Europe. One of the most crucial of these being the missionary work of St Paul. St Paul is one of the most important figures within Christianity. He was born Saul, a Jewish man hired to persecute the original Christians immediately after the death of Jesus, however, after having visions of Jesus became arguably the most crucial missionary in the spread of Christianity. Paul was born in modern day Turkey and is famous for making four main missionary journeys that were over ten thousand miles, proclaiming the Gospel. Much of St Paul's travels were within Turkey, establishing Churches and converts. Both Konya and Atalaya have a history with this missionary work, both having been visited by St Paul. During my stay in Antalya, I visited the ancient Greco-Roman city of Perge, where St. Paul delivered his first speech on Christianity in the region. According to the New Testament Paul and Barnabas visited Perge twice, using it as a base for their missionary journeys. Stepping into Perge was like stepping back in time, the buzzing thrall of modern Antalya falling away, where ancient ruins and columns stood tall, steeped in history. You could imagine the whispers through the ancient walls, seeping into neighbouring cities, spreading ideas that would later transform entire civilisations and life as we know it today. Seeing the remnants of such antiquity in the same landscape that now hosts grand mosques and sprawling cities was fascinating, offering a throughline through time. It really emphasises how Turkey's land holds layers of history and beliefs that overlap and grow from each other. Perge felt like a physical embodiment of the coexistence, and ancient city from where Christianity grew in a now Islamic nation.

This narrative continued as I ventured on, and in Cappadocia I could see the historic work and reminisce of Christian missionaries and communities travelling through Turkey. I visited the famous Monk's Valley, a UNESCO world heritage site famous for its fairy chimneys which are distinct cone topped rock pillars, some featuring distinctive multiple headed formations, reminiscent of ant nests. The valley gets its name from the Christian monks who historically used it both as a refuge and as a missionary point. Throughout the valley of Cappadocia there are estimated to be around a thousand churches, though the estimates greatly vary due to the swathes of hidden treasures and constant discovery still rife within the valley. While the number is contested, there is no argument that there is a vast amount of churches. These can be attributed to the Christian missionaries moving through the region. Despite the large number of churches, the area wasn't always overly populated with Christians. Instead, it was busy with traders. Resultantly, many churches were painted with local saints and religious stories, in attempt to spread the message of Christianity and convert those traders who passed through the area. Beyond advertising, the old town was a much needed home to some Christian monks including St Simeon. St Simeon was one of the many monks to take refuge in Cappadocia, attracted by the solitude and isolation of the region. St Simeon built his home fifteen meters above the ground in one the fairy chimneys, descending only to collect the food and water that his followers brought to him. By the 4th Century, Cappadocia was largely inhabited by monks with many of their excavated

homes being found in the valley, with more being discovered. The monks were able to hollow out the soft volcanic tuff inside the pillars and create narrow staircases leading up to the cone-shaped shelters which they used as living quarters, utilising incredible natural architecture that you can visit to this day. One of my favourite experiences of the trip was visiting Özkonak, an antiquated underground city built into the rock, with rooms connected to each other by tunnels, containing a unique pipe communication system. The exact timings are unknown, but it was likely that these buried cities were both defensive and militarized by Byzantines against Arab invaders. You could still see remanence of militaristic tactics including holes which were theorised to be placed such that spears could be stuck through to strike enemies, and large boulders positioned so that they could be pushed into doorways as a defensive tactic against intruders. The site extends down eleven floors, though only four floors are open to the public. The site is unique with small holes above passageways, likely used for communication. Overall, the sites in Cappadocia were a distinctive experience, entrenched with a vast history deeply connected to the region.

Nonetheless, Turkey in the present is an obviously Muslim country, and naturally it has history to reflect that. One of the cities I visited, as previously mentioned, was Konya, the home of Sufism. When in Konya I visited the tomb of Rumi, their final resting place in the centre of the city. You could feel, even without any prior knowledge, that you were in a holy place of pilgrimage. The tomb itself was grand, in fact containing more tombs within of Rumi's devoted defenders, with exquisite tiles defining the ultimate tomb of Rumi. There was a plethora of memorabilia but amongst all the artifacts were people deep in prayer reminding you of the holiness of the place in which you were standing. In Konya I was able to learn more about Sufism, a mystic order of Islam, specifically the Mevlevi Order which was founded in the city by Rumi. The order is famous for the whirling dervishes, a famous set of dancers who perform a religious ceremony aimed at achieving spiritual ecstasy and closeness to God. The whirling act of the dance is intended to symbolise people's inner journey towards realizing oneness with God. Rumi is memorialised for his poetry in which he notes his profound teachings on love, spiritual connection, and the journey to the divine. His work is considered central to the Sufism school of love, a central theme in Sufism that emphasizes divine love as the ultimate spiritual goal, where the self dissolves in the passion for God. It was an incredible opportunity to go to a lesser-known pilgrimage site for another religion besides what I have grown up with. It gave me the profound opportunity to experience devotion to Islam first hand, seeing people who had travelled far and wide to visit Konya, and witness the tomb of someone who they so deeply revered and pray before it. It was as though I was visiting the heart of a religion, a rare experience when not a follower, and it allowed me to be truly present in such an influential place.

While a lot of Turkey's religious history feels ancient, remnants of the beginning of religion are scattered everywhere, you can also see the deep scars earned through the country's personal journey through faith. You can look at one building, such as the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, a classic must see stop for a reason but also an emblem of this voyage. The building is overwhelming in its grandeur, easily spotted standing out in the skyline from multiple vantage points. The building is now used as a mosque, however, was built by the Byzantium empire to serve as the Cathedral for then

Christian Constantinople and the home of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, who is regarded as the representative and spiritual leader of the Eastern Orthodox Christians. The building has a history that perseveres to current day. When Constantinople was defeated by the Ottomans in 1453 the building was converted into a mosque and remained one until 1935 when the first Turkish President and founder of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, transformed the building into a museum. During this period the use of the space as a place of religious worship was banned, however in the 2010s calls for the reinstatement of the building as a Mosque increased. As a populist gesture Erdoğan agreed to convert the Hagia Sophia into a Mosque and on 10 July 2020, the decision of the Council of Ministers from 1935 to transform the Hagia Sophia into a museum was annulled, decreeing that Hagia Sophia cannot be used "for any other purpose" than being a mosque, with much international condemnation in response. This made the building even more poignant to visit, its long and tumultuous history far deeper than its beauty. From the museum, which is the upper balcony you could look down upon worshipers using it as a mosque and large decorative signs in Arabic, likely covered some of the old Christian iconography. However, in the museum you can see the remnants of mosaics illustrating Christian symbolism, the Virgin Mary, Jesus along with the emperors of fallen empires. The building is a physical reminder of its own multifaceted past, and also Turkey's history. Byzantine artistry beneath Ottoman calligraphy, Christian hymns once echoing where prayers in Arabic now fill the air. The Hagia Sophia embodies Turkey's complex relationship with its own past, neither erasing nor fully embracing, but continually rewriting it. Within the walls, you were met with the distinct sense of wonder but were pulled away from the beauty to reflection. The grandeur, and the endurance, evokes awe. But one can't help to contemplate on the tension and militarisation of religion within politics.

After this visit I was inspired to go to the current home of the Ecumenical Patriarch. The building was far less central and, besides the security outside, was rather unassuming. After passing security you went into a modest courtyard and then the church. It was beautiful in its ornateness, embossed with gold and rich iconography. However, for the spiritual home of a global religion, it felt underwhelming. The Church, not much bigger than Univ's own chapel, while stunning, bore no signs of housing a deep spirituality. I wondered if I would find enlightenment inside the small gift shop, tucked away in a cupboard. This again shows the intersection between religion and politics. Especially when in comparison to the beautiful mosques that stand out amongst the Istanbul skyline, you can see a clear reminder of the reality of political religious suppression. A religion that once ruled an empire from the city within the grand Hagia Sophia, is now reduced to a modest church and courtyard, unable to host a large service.

Unsurprisingly, I am sure for a trip centred around religion, I visited many more mosques outside of the Hagia Sophia. The Blue Mosque, despite the amount of cruise ship tour groups, still was awe inspiring, the intricate tiles decorating the building a masterpiece. Another personal highlight was the Sultan Alaaddin Camii in Antalya, which was a lot more unassuming, however, this mosque had glass floors showing ancient walls beneath, reminding you of the vast Turkish history beneath your feet. One thing I took away from visiting all these Turkish mosques was the accommodation for

non-Muslim visitors. All mosques, even the smallest and most remote ones, had free information guides and Qurans in several languages, showing the openness of the people within there.

Moreover, despite my investigations, it is worth noting that religious diversity is still present. One of my favourite, and perhaps most exceptional, memories of Turkey is a testament to that. While enjoying drinks on Victoria's rooftop, a view I'm not sure I will ever beat, she invited me and my friend to a choral service at her local church and for a quick chat with the priest. The church is the Crimea Memorial Church, which was once closed down for lack of a congregation but has been reinstated to a thriving community.

We walked with Victoria from her apartment to the church, which was shrouded in greenery and down some steps. It was hard to believe that we were in such a bustling part of Istanbul, as the view down the steps with the church against the verdant foliage, was one that instantly transported me back to England. Although, perhaps without the heat. Nevertheless, it was a nostalgic form of Anglican architecture reminiscent of home. We went to the house in the courtyard and were lucky enough to speak to the priest, Ian. He had recently come out of surgery so was unfortunately rendered virtually bed bound, but we arrived to see him in good spirits and good company, and that wasn't just from some of his thirty-nine cats. We met three young people keeping Ian company and it was their stories that I found captivating. They were all converts, growing up in relatively conservative Muslim households, with one preparing to move to the UK to start his study for priesthood. I asked them about the acceptance they found after their religious conversion, with one individual's story really standing out. He explained how in his teenage years he became more curious about his own religion, and why he should believe the things that he was taught to believe. This curiosity led him to Christianity, largely thanks to the internet. He continued to say how his family were unaware of his conversion and the shift in his belief system. He then stated that he would undeniably be disowned if they ever found out. This shocking statement struck me, the intensity and often uncompromising nature of religion in Turkey and other nations where religion is politicised irrefutable within this tale.

Nonetheless, with the storyteller in such a warm community, it was hard to get lost in the negatives. The conversation was stopped every two minutes with a new person coming to give Ian their best wishes. Ian also talked of the increased regularity of baptisms with two on the upcoming weekend, a far cry from the days in which the church was forced to shut down for lack of a congregation. After the talk we went to the church to prepare for the choral service by a Cambridge college. On the alter there were artworks to commemorate local people involved in the restoration of the church, and in one of the panels, a boat was named Roger Short, a touching reminder of what this grant is about; travelling Turkey in his honour and a tribute to the legacy he left behind in Istanbul. It was an honour to go to an Anglican service, a rarity itself in Turkey, but also one that honours Roger and the community he was cherished by and part of. We listened to the stunning choral service, again reminding me of back home, specifically the choirs of Oxford. At one point during the service, in the background of the choir, you could faintly hear the call to prayer, reminding you of where you are, but also what I hope to be an optimistic sign of religious co-existence. A future, where you can attend

mass within a flourishing Church community whilst inhabiting an increasingly politically Muslim country. That evening encapsulated everything I hoped to learn and understand about Turkey's religious identity, a coexistence alongside tension, faith surviving despite politics, and the persistence of community in unlikely places. In the service, hearing both church service and the distant call to prayer, I felt an immense respect for the resilience of belief. It helped to remind me that religion in Turkey isn't static or a relic of the past, but an ever-changing dialogue and identity between history, politics and personal conviction.

While I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to expand my studies within Turkey, I would also like to note that the trip was not all religious work and no play. There are memories for Turkey that I will treasure always, which is all thanks to this grant. Treasure is the optimum word, as many of my memories defy sufficient articulation to the joy bought me despite how simple some of it may sound. Many hours were spent walking the streets, sampling new foods, stroking cats and savouring the surroundings. True moments of blissful peace that are treasures to me.

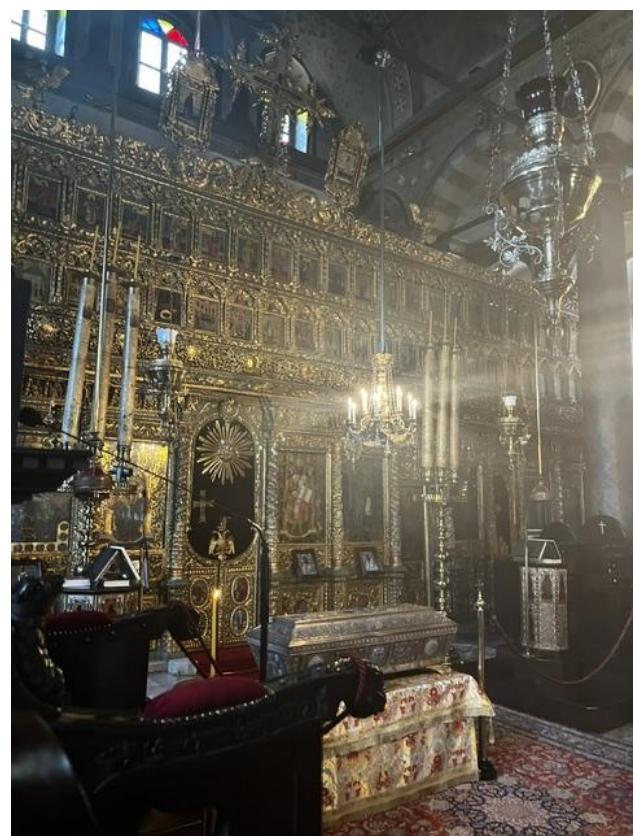
As has been mentioned in perhaps every travel guide, the warmth and hospitality of Turkish people was always incredible. From people stopping to help me when I was looking confused using public transport to an entire restaurant trying to work together with their broken English and my non-existent Turkish to translate a menu, the hospitality went above and beyond. And this wasn't only exclusive to the people, as an animal lover a real highlight was the abundance of friendly cats, journeys often took me twice as long due to all my stops to stroke the cats, but it was undeniably worth it. I was even able to take a traditional lamp making class in Antalya, whilst was lots of fun, it gave me an insight into traditional crafting in Turkey and a personalised gift to try and get through customs. It made it! And is a piece of real treasure to remind me of my time here. Leaving Turkey, I felt I'd only begun to scratch the surface of what the country has to offer, and I look forward to a return. What I planned as a trip to explore religion was something far broader, an insight into how faith, culture, and everyday life constantly shape and reshape one another over and over. Layers make the land around us. I feel more connected humanity, a sense only heightened by a deep appreciation for the beauty and generosity of Turkey. Beyond the mosques and ruins, it was the quiet moments, sharing tea with strangers, watching the sunset over the Bosphorus, hearing the call to prayer blend into city noise, that stayed with me the most. Turkey, with its myriad of sights, sounds, hospitality and amazing food will forever stay with me.

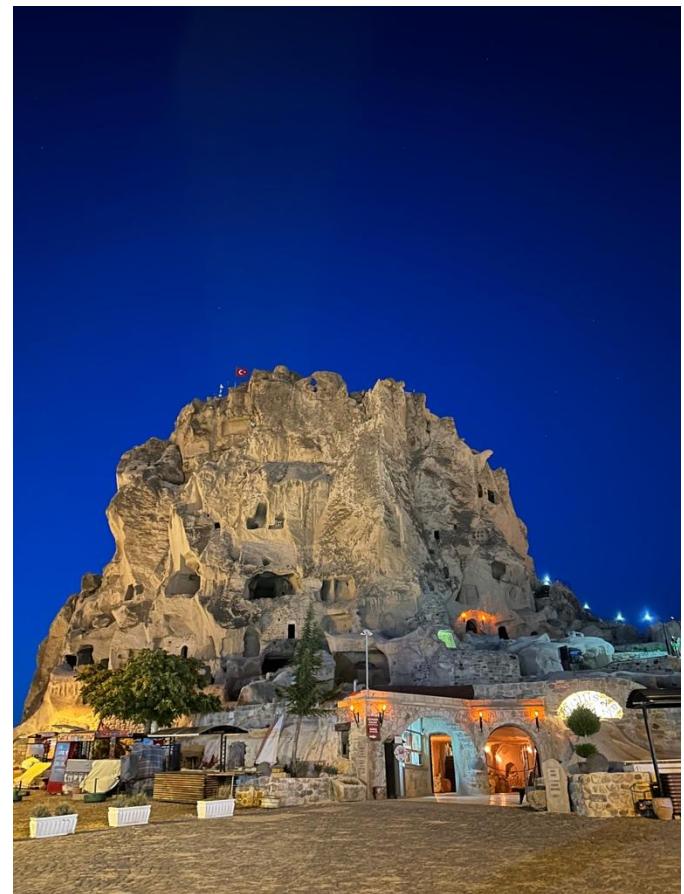
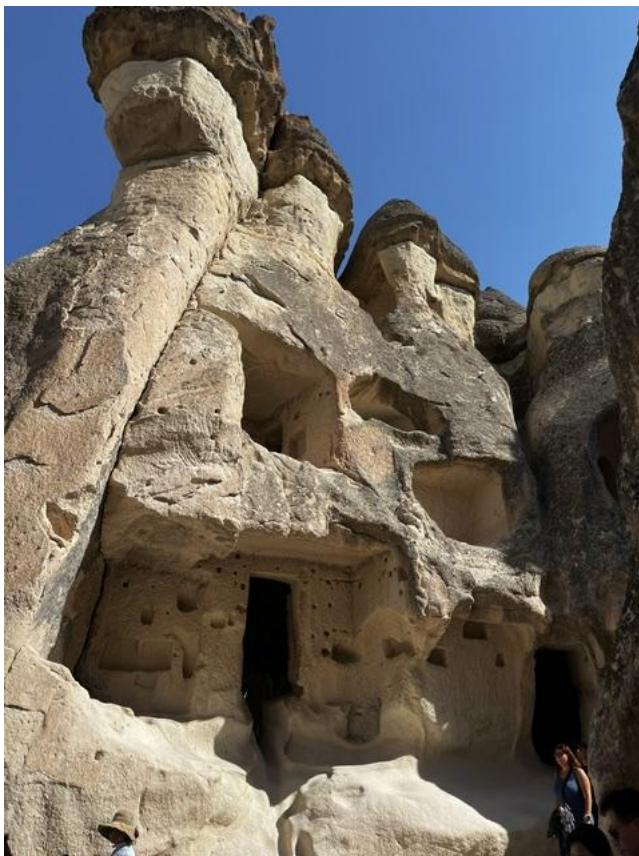
I want to say a final *Teşekkürler* to all the people that helped this grant become a reality and thank you for sharing the beauty of Turkey with me.

PHOTOS:



To the left: Hagia Sophia  
Above: Christian mosaics within the Hagia Sophia  
Below: Inside and outside the home of the Ecumenical Patriarch

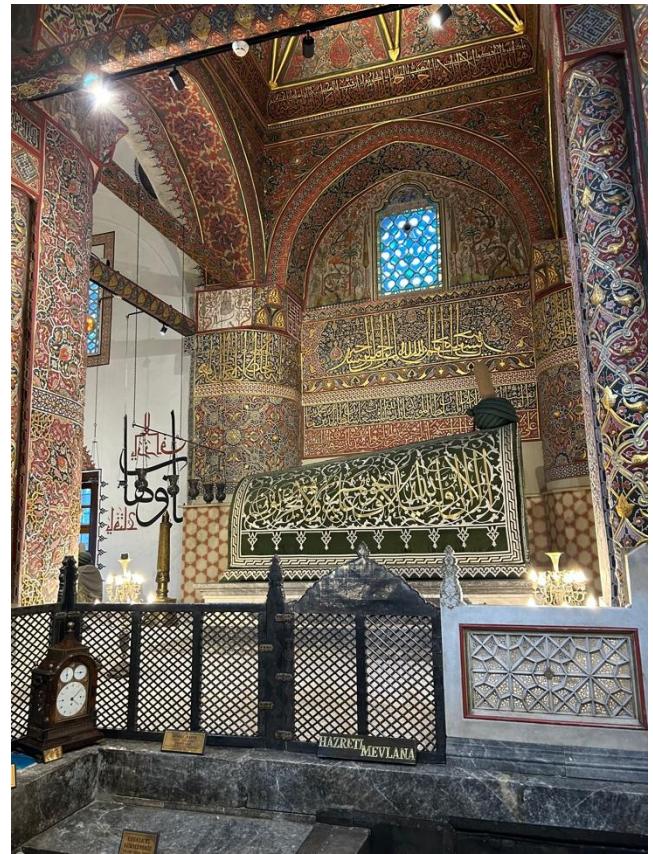




Top left: a house in monks valley

Top right: Uçhisar castle

Bottom: View of pigeon valley



Top left: central square of konya  
Top right: Rumi's tomb  
Bottom left: ancient ruins in Antalya  
Bottom right: some cute cats

