

Turkey Travel Report

Leah Fogarty

I would firstly like to thank the Roger Short Memorial Trust and University College for selecting me for this travel scholarship. As you'll find out, I had the most incredible time in Türkiye and had the privileged opportunity to immerse myself in a culture I haven't been able to before and I am deeply grateful for this.

My journey (with my friend Kalila, a fellow Univ alum) began in Antalya, a stunning town on the Turkish Riviera. After a tough Master's year full of dissertations and conducting MRI scans, I was ready for some culture, sun and sea, and Antalya proved to be the perfect destination. On our first day, we found a secluded spot on the beach and went cliff diving, which was absolutely exhilarating! Unfortunately, the UV 10 sun was strong and despite the constant slathering of sun protection I ended up with sun poisoning on the very first day. However, this gave me the opportunity to experience the kindness of Türkiye's people first-hand. A sweet woman helped me soothe my blistered skin with aloe vera gel while a generous gentleman made me a deliciously fresh mango juice to help rehydrate me. Feeling energised from fructose and the kindness of strangers, I powered through into the evening where we tried local food at a hidden gem near our hostel. As a vegetarian, I cannot comment on the seafood (Antalya's specialty), but Kalila said it was some of the best she'd ever had!



Picture 1: The view from our hostel, Antalya

On the second day, we began by trying the famous Turkish breakfast which was absolutely delicious and full of different things to pick at. Think: salty olives, fresh honeycomb, whipped cream, strong black tea, juicy tomatoes and cucumber, sweet jams, bread, and, of course, eggs. This was the perfect fuel for our day, as after a morning of exploring and getting our bearings of the town, we headed on a long drive through the Western Taurus mountains. The views were absolutely breathtaking, and I was amazed that we were so close to the coast but in what felt like a forest. I have never seen such an intimate juxtaposition of different natural scenery in this way before. Eventually, we reached the Adrasan port with its stunning clear blue waters and mountainous backdrop. We hopped on a boat and headed towards Saluada Island, an uninhabited island colloquially referred to as the ‘Maldives of Türkiye’ to reflect the mesmerising turquoise waters, soft white sandy beaches, and unspoiled natural beauty. We spent hours snorkelling, pointing out the unique fish we saw and exploring the island. The boat trip back to the port was equally memorable as we saw one of the spellbinding sunsets ever witnessed.



Picture 2: The serenity of Saluada Island

Our third day in Antalya was equally as exciting. After an early start, we headed to Köprülü Canyon, an area that was declared a National Park in 1973 and spans 366 km² of rugged landscape. While we were here, we enjoyed panoramic views of the Taurus mountains and the Oluk Bridge. This is an ancient Roman bridge constructed in the 2nd century AD and is surprisingly well-preserved. Afterwards, we went whitewater rafting down the Canyon. This was an exciting afternoon of controlled chaos where we navigated our way through the rapids and soaked up the scenery, before returning the hostel, and packing our bags ready for an early morning full of travels the following day.



Picture 3: The views of the Canyon

The next morning, the blaring of our alarms at 4:30 am did have us questioning everything, but we clambered down to the 24/7 taxi rank. Our taxi driver, Yusuf, was the sweetest man who perfectly exemplified everything Turkish hospitality had to offer. He loaded us up with coffee, water, and humorous jokes to wake us up and talked of his love for both Antalya and London. He even insisted on treating us to a Simit on our way to the airport as we had time, which was incredibly generous of him! After a short two-hour flight, we touched down in Kayseri Erkilet Airport and hitched a ride to the Göreme National Park.

This World Heritage Site is 100 km² and became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985 and is located in a volcanic region. The park is a truly unique area full of cliffs, pillars, and fairy chimneys which were formed due to erosion following volcanic eruptions and the subsequent cooling of solidified lava forming a solid protective 'cap' over a tuff layer. Tuff is caused by the release of ash from volcanoes dating back millions of years. Since the tuff rock is so soft, people living in this area historically used to hollow out underground housing here, typically to escape persecution. However, it is uncommon

for people to live so deeply underground these days due to mounting evidence that living in a cave in the long-term greatly increases the risk of mesothelioma, a very serious form of cancer.

Nonetheless, for a full cultural experience, we opted to stay in one of the cave hotels. As a student, I have rarely had the opportunity to stay somewhere so lavish yet so affordable. The day we arrived was incredibly hot at around 37°C (please remember I still had sun poisoning at this point...) so we decided to make the most of the indoors and enjoy a spa day, where I felt the stress of four years at Oxford slowly being massaged out of me by a talented Turkish masseuse. Since Göreme National Park experiences so many Chinese tourists in particular, this is a surprisingly incredible spot to try some of the best authentic Chinese food you can have, which we enjoyed before having an early night since we had another 4am start the following day.

My advice for anyone travelling to the Göreme National Park to do a Cappadocia hot air balloon trip would be to give yourself a couple of days in the area as the trips are frequently cancelled due to adverse weather conditions, which led to many of the other people we met staying in the area having to reschedule flights in order to stay and do a hot air balloon ride.

Our first scheduled ride did indeed end up being cancelled due to unfavourable wind conditions, and I commend the dedication of everyone involved, because it was clear that our safety was their utmost priority. In the end, a local artist invited us to his pottery studio and gave us a lesson before inviting us to dinner. While my dyspraxia did somewhat limit the quality of what I was able to produce, I thoroughly enjoyed learning about Mehmet's dedication to his craft and family-run business (we also met his young nephew who was learning to be a potter!) and I am so grateful for the kindness he showed us that day and his eagerness for us to have an enjoyable day despite our balloon cancellation.



Picture 4: Mehmet's at-home pottery studio

Fortunately, it was second time-lucky for us and the following day the skies were dry and clear while the winds were light and breezy. After much anticipation, we bundled into the basket and at around 430am we were up-up-and away! It's hard to describe the sensation of being in a hot air balloon. I was expecting the turbulent nature of an airplane going over jet streams but instead found myself weightlessly drifting over the Love Valley. I felt a total sense of tranquillity and serenity, an almost motionless suspension in the sky, as if time had come to a total halt. While we floated above the clouds, the only sound was the occasional hiss of the burner, punctuating an otherwise profound silence. The cool air, in stark contrast to the blistering heat we had been experiencing the previous day in Göreme, tingled against my skin while the ground below me seemed impossibly far away, shrinking into a green and beige patchwork of valleys and villages. Then, the morning skies greeted us with a perfect sunrise: warm hues splayed across the horizon like a lovingly curated watercolour painting, gradually deepening into a burning fiery red. It felt like I was seeing in technicolour for the first time. All I could feel was utter bliss.

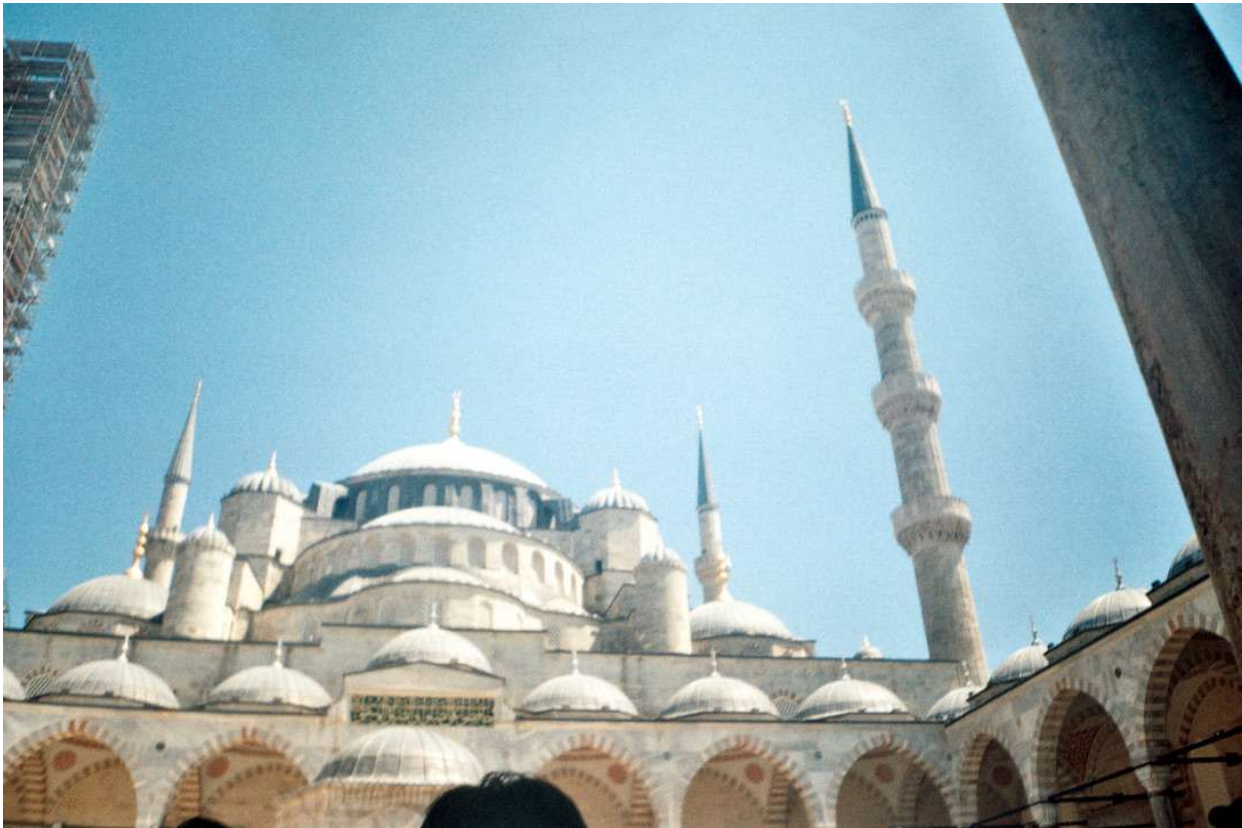
This hot air balloon ride truly was a bucket-list moment for me, and something I have been dreaming of for years. I would really like to reiterate my gratitude for the Roger Short Memorial Trust for granting me this possibility of experiencing a true wonder of the world. The views were out of this world and a truly once-in-a-lifetime experience that words could never do justice, but please do look at the pictures attached. I really would encourage anyone reading this to experience the Cappadocia hot air balloons for themselves if they ever have the chance.



Picture 5: Floating over the valleys, Cappadocia

Grateful to have a long sleep after 4 days in a row of waking up before 5am, the next day we headed to Istanbul, the economic, cultural, and historical heart of Türkiye. This is the only city where two continents collide, and is a fascinating blend of heritage, modernity, and religion, and I am so grateful that I visited this city which is truly like no other. From the moment we stepped onto the bustling streets, I was struck by the sheer energy surrounding me. For this leg of the journey, we rented a flat next to the Galata Tower in the Beyoğlu district. We began by exploring the local area, which of course meant going up the tower. This medieval Genoese tower used to be a lookout for fires in the 18th century before the roof was destroyed by a storm in 1875 and remained roof-less for the rest of the Ottoman period. After years of construction, the tower opened in 2020 as a tourist attraction and now provides a 360-degree view of Istanbul, with the Bosphorus glittering on one side and the sprawl of domes and minarets on the other, a sight I thoroughly enjoyed.

We packed in as much culture in Istanbul as we could, which was a difficult feat since we only had 72 hours! First, we went to the Blue Mosque, an iconic Islamic building, with architecture typical for that of the Ottoman Era. This mosque was built under the Rule of Ahmed I. Work began in 1609 and finished in 1617, shortly before Ahmed I's death. The interior of this mosque was simply stunning, and I felt a deep appreciation for the meticulous work and effort that must have gone into the designing and erection of this mosque. I especially loved looking at the intricate Iznik tilework.



Picture 6: The Blue Mosque, Istanbul

Of course, we also visited the Hagia Sophia mosque. Hagia Sophia is particularly interesting because it used to be a church, highlighting the different religious influences on Istanbul. The Hagia Sophia is much older than the Blue Mosque, having been erected in 537 AD, as the church most recently built by the Byzantine Empire. Contrastingly to the Blue Mosque, the Hagia Sophia's architecture is typical for the Byzantine period and was a cathedral until the 1453 fall of Constantinople, where it was seized by the Ottoman Empire. To transform the building into a mosque, so as to reflect the Islamic faith of the Ottoman Empire, minarets (small towers used to project the call to prayer) were added. In 1935, the Hagia Sophia became a museum, but was made to be a mosque again back in 2020. However, when I visited, the upper gallery of the mosque acted as a museum again and gave me the opportunity to learn all about the history of this grand building.

Additionally, encountering the mosques and former churches side-by-side in a way I never really have before allowed me to reflect on how I think about religious heritage and identity. Previously, I had always thought of religious buildings as static monuments to faith; the only time they would change was if and when they were knocked down. And yet, here in Istanbul, I saw how religious buildings evolved with changing empires and rulers. This is perfectly exemplified by the Hagia Sophia's history as a church, a mosque, and a museum. The walls of the Hagia Sophia carry the imprints of so many people with so many identities- whether they be cultural or religious. Perhaps I was feeling nostalgic as my graduation was due to be the next week, but this forced me to reflect on my own sense of identity and how we are all also shaped by overlapping influences, and like history, we should focus less on preserving a singular truth to define ourselves and should embrace the complexity of what it means to be human.

Having been inside and in awe of the unique and impressive mosque, I now understand how it has such a large influence on subsequent architecture. The erection of the Hagia Sophia influenced other Byzantine churches such as Thessaloniki's Hagia Sophia and the Hagia Irene, which we managed to see the exterior of since it is also in Istanbul. The Hagia Sophia's influence stretches far and wide with its influence being seen from the Cathedral Metropolitana Ortodoxa in São Paulo, Brazil to the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Louis in Missouri, USA to St Sophia's Cathedral in London, here in the UK.

When visiting the mosques, I would definitely recommend getting a headscarf from a local shop rather than at the mosque itself. This is because they are much better quality so can actually be kept as a souvenir, and this also supports local custom.

Next door to the Hagia Sophia is Topkapi Palace, so naturally we also had to visit here too. This building was constructed following the fall of Constantinople, where it served as the primary residence for many sultans. However, as time went on, Topkapi started to fade in significance because the sultans preferred the palaces on the Bosphorus Strait. Following the end of the Ottoman Empire, Topkapi Palace was transformed into a museum. I particularly enjoyed seeing the treasury room where a beautifully dangerous dagger was displayed, and I learned lots about ancient Ottoman weapons which was fascinating!

We also visited the buzzing Grand Bazaar. This market consists of over 61 streets and 4,000 shops and, with up to 400,000 visitors daily, the experience can be somewhat overwhelming. I would recommend going to the Bazaar when you are in the right headspace and feeling extroverted as so many friendly people will try and talk to you! The Grand Bazaar is widely considered to be one of the world's first shopping malls, and it certainly feels that way! When I walked into the throng of the covered market I felt as though I had been transported into an ancient city. I threw myself into the hustle and bustle and enjoyed looking round the various shops selling everything from jewellery to clothes to spices before eventually treating myself to a deliciously sweet baklava.

To contrast with the buzz of the Bazaar, we opted for a slightly calmer afternoon and took the boat along the Bosphorus strait to the Anatolian side of Istanbul. From here, we got a great view of the Dolmabahçe Palace. Interestingly, I also learned that ‘Bosphorus’ means the same as ‘Oxford’, with both place names essentially meaning cow-passage!

The Anatolian side was much calmer than the European side of Istanbul, and here we enjoyed exploring the vibrant yet peaceful neighbourhoods around here. We admired the street art in Kadıköy, a charming area full of local hidden gems. Here we tried a mezze platter, which had some of the best food I have ever tasted and is where I discovered my unwavering love for stuffed vine leaves. We also visited Kuzguncuk not only to see the brightly coloured houses but also to learn more about the Jewish history in Istanbul.



Picture 7: Kalila petting one of many cats (please forgive the bleached film)

As we sipped on Turkish coffee on the Anatolian side, the owner of the coffee shop taught us the history of Turkish coffee which I wanted to share as I found it so interesting. Firstly, he told us that coffee was at one point forbidden with people sinking ships carrying coffee, and people also used to be thrown into the Bosphorus if they were repeat offenders! However, it is believed that this law was not that well enforced, and we of course know that coffee is widely accepted in present-day Türkiye. He also told us that coffee is very important in wedding planning and that sometimes (although I’m not sure how often this is actually carried out) to test the nature of her partner, the bride-to-be will make both families a coffee. She is to add sugar to all of the coffees except the groom-to-be’s, to which she adds salt. If he is angry about this, it tells the bride-to-be that he is bad-tempered and will not be a good husband, but if he politely drinks the salty coffee then he will be a good husband.

On our last day, we decided to soak up some final rays of sun (me wrapped in two towels because I was still losing a layer of skin a day...) and headed to the beach. We hopped on the bus and went towards Büyükçekmece. Here, we enjoyed the natural

sand beaches and green areas before having a quick dip in the surprisingly deep Sea of Marmara and having one last traditional Turkish dinner.

To conclude, I had 10 glorious days in Türkiye where I discovered three completely different but equally mesmerising areas of the country: Antalya, Cappadocia, and Istanbul. This was the perfect range of locations to give me a small but worthwhile taste of Türkiye's incredible diversity. Antalya felt Mediterranean, shaped by the sea and its beaches, seafood culture, and the opportunity for adventure ready for your taking. Cappadocia, by contrast, felt otherworldly. The landscape of rock formations and cave dwellings caused life to seem slower and more peaceful, with its industry being rooted in tradition and crafts. Then, Istanbul was its own world entirely: dynamic, restless, and a true global hub that manages to straddle two multiple continents. This showed me just how much Türkiye has to offer, and how its identity is formed from the amalgamation of many vibrant and rich stories from millions of people over many years.

While I may have lost my epidermis on this trip, I gained so much more. I learned resilience when pushing through despite second-degree sunburns, I learned bravery when going in a hot air balloon for the first time, and I learned first-hand that Türkiye's reputation for hospitality is everything I hoped it would be and more. The sense of community I saw in Türkiye really showed me what it meant to 'have a village' and to 'be a villager' yourself, something I hope to take back with me and put into action in my friendships, which I already value so much. This trip truly reminded me that travel is about experiencing ways of living that challenge and enrich the way you think and act. Türkiye's hospitality, diversity, and depth of history gave me new ways to think about identity, belonging, and community. These are lessons I will carry with me for a long time after I have returned.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the Roger Short Memorial Trust for enabling me to explore Türkiye's vibrant, rich, and historical heritage. I can't wait to return!

Leah's top tips for Türkiye!

- 1.** Of course, economies vary, but during the time of my travel Türkiye's inflation rate was 32.95%. While this is slightly eased from the 2022 hyperinflation of around 85.5%, I noticed that lots of Turkish people preferred to be paid in Euros rather than Turkish Lira based on this.
- 2.** Talk to people! The local people are so friendly and cannot do enough to help you and will help you find so many hidden gems in each city. The kindness of Turkish people really cannot be overstated.

- 3.** If you want to do the Cappadocia hot air balloons, give yourself at least 2-3 possible days to do it because cancellations are fairly frequent.
- 4.** Taxis from Kayseri airport to Göreme National Park are expensive, and the public transport is quite fiddly. Try to find a ride-share in a van to save money.
- 5.** Buy a headscarf from a local shop rather than at the mosques if you need one.
- 6.** Stroke every cat you see. Literally every single one, please they're all so cute and friendly.
- 7.** If you think you may find the touristy areas in Istanbul overwhelming, such as the Grand Bazaar or the mosques, go early in the morning as it is much quieter.
- 8.** Bring suncream, please learn from my mistakes. While my second-degree burns have healed, I still have scars and did have to take many painkillers throughout this trip.