



**Kaushik Mitra gets  
nostalgic in Turkey**

# Turkish Delight



It was that time of the year again when the travel bug hits our family. Schools were closed for summer holidays and Gurgaon was unbearably hot. Our last real vacation had been to the Hobbit country down under, but that seemed a long time ago and it was time to submit to our wanderlust again. Weighing several options we decided to head westwards to the enchanting lands of Turkey and Greece. The trip had to be planned meticulously and sharp choices had to be made in view of the time and the budget constraints. The visas took time given the summer rush and the hotel and travel arrangements had to be done quite early. We settled for a 10-day, four-city plan covering Cappadocia and Istanbul in Turkey; and Athens and Mykonos in Greece.

### **Captivating Cappadocia - the land of Fairy Chimneys**

We flew Turkish airlines from Delhi to Istanbul and onward to Cappadocia; a total flying time of nearly eight hours with a two hour stopover in Istanbul. Cappadocia, a historical region in Central Anatolia has a unique volcanic landscape dotted with rock formations called "fairy chimneys". We were transported to the world of the Flintstones as we soaked in the surroundings on the long drive to our cave hotel. Cave hotels are the places to stay in Cappadocia where unique rock formations blend with contemporary living comfort to create a memorable experience. We checked into the quaint Gamirasu cave hotel and enjoyed a wonderful Turkish meal of Kebab and bread. Next morning our guide picked us up at the crack of dawn and drove us to the Goreme valley for our Balloon ride. This is the highlight of Cappadocia. We had opted for a standard one hour flight and it was exhilarating. All pictures



of Cappadocia show balloons flying over a surreal landscape. It has to be seen to be believed. The sight of nearly 100 balloons gently floating over fairy chimneys, pigeon houses built into rock formations, valleys and ravines each with distinctive colours and features in the backdrop





of a breath-taking sunrise transported us to a magical world. At the end of the ride we were left wanting more. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience and a must-do in Turkey.

The next day, we opted for a conducted tour of Cappadocia. The highlights were the Goreme Open-Air Museum and the Kaymakli underground city. The Goreme open air museum is a large monastic complex. It contains exquisite rock-cut churches in which you can find beautiful frescoes (wall paintings). Although these churches were built in the 10th – 12th Century the frescoes retain their original colour and freshness. The historical context is quite intriguing. Cappadocia in the 1st century AD was inhabited by Christians who also carved thousands of cave churches, chapels and monasteries out of rocks. Many of these churches were decorated with frescoes of medieval saints. Today, these ancient churches make some of the most remarkable sights for visitors of which the Goreme Open Air

Museum is the best example. It is also on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1984.

After lunch we headed to the underground city of Kaymakli. Kaymakli is the largest of the 100-odd underground cities in the Cappadocia region. It is estimated that around 3,500 people once lived here to protect themselves from the marauding tribes who regularly passed through the region looking to attack and plunder. It's an amazing maze of low ceiling narrow passageways which go down 8 levels and arranged around ventilation shafts that bring in air. It's easy to lose your way and is challenging for those suffering from claustrophobia. Our guide took us down to the 4th and lowest level open for tourists so far and it was a fascinating experience as we imagined thousands of people living underground for days together. Having said that, I was certainly happy to get back to the surface, as my fear of closed places had started getting the better of me. Finally, after two days in the rustic rural Andalusian landscape of central Turkey, it was time to head to Capital city of Istanbul.

Our guide, Mohammed, was a young Moroccan architecture student and, Arjun, our 14-year-old son, finally found someone he could talk football with. We got dropped off at the Eminönü Pier, which was bustling with activity welcoming locals and tourists alike. We grabbed a quick bite of Shawarma and Baklava at the local café and spent some time shopping for genuine Turkish tea and Turkish delights (sweets) in the Spice Bazaar. It was then time to hop on to our ferry which took us down the Bosphorus. It was a Sunday and we walked along the docks of Eminönü with the teeming multitude of tourists and locals, I was reminded of the Gateway of India in Mumbai. One of the world's most strategic waterways, the Bosphorus strait lies between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara and separates Europe from Asia. There are two suspension bridges over the Bosphorus which connect the European side of Istanbul to the Asian side. A third bridge is being built. Soaking in the late afternoon sun on the side deck, looking at the bevy of striking Ottoman Palaces and castles which dotted the shoreline, I could



## Istanbul: where East meets West

Our flight got us into Istanbul by mid-day. We loaded our bags into the back of a spacious SUV and headed for our half day Bosphorus cruise.







not but be amazed by the rich history and diversity of the region. As our ferry bounced back and forth between continents, I listened to Mohammed and my mind wandered back to the complex history of Istanbul with its numerous rulers and also to its various names like Byzantium, Constantinople, Stamboul, now called Istanbul.

Later in the evening we checked into our hotel, had a quick shower and headed out to Istikbal Street adjacent to Taksim Square for a meal of Turk-

or Sultanahmet Camii, was built in early 17th century during the Ottoman empire. On the outside the most unique feature of the mosque is its six minarets as most mosques have one, two or at best four minarets. On the inside, the high ceiling is lined with thousands of blue tiles that give the mosque its popular name. The mosque

about Shahrukh Khan and Salman Khan. Some were courteous and respectful while others were dismissive and rude. Mohammed informed us that these markets earlier were not safe for tourists but over the past 10 years or so the local government has clamped down on crime and now the city and its markets are quite safe for tourists. The Grand Bazaar with its numerous lanes, exits and meeting points reminded us of our very own New Market in Kolkata, a much bigger and vibrant version though.

The evening was spent at leisure in Taksim square amidst a melee of people and activity. Flower stalls on one side, food stalls on the other, bright red trams cutting across the square and the striking Republic Monument in the centre. People poured into the square from the numerous streets which converged into the square and adjoining park. Sitting there, as we soaked in the sights and sounds of Istanbul it was hard to imagine the violent protests that were held in the same square less than a year back in which several people were killed and seriously injured. On our way back to the hotel we bought a new suitcase to accommodate all the Turkish goodies.



is presently in use for prayers and visiting hours are restricted. Adjacent to the mosque is the Hippodrome which Mohammed explained to us was the place where artists and musicians came from all parts to perform for the emperor. We captured the visit to the Blue mosque and the Hippodrome in an array of digital photographs in our Canon SLR.

Istanbul is a shopper's paradise and no better place than to give in to the shopaholic in you than the Grand bazaar or Kapalıçarşı which is several hundred years old and is the world's original shopping mall! With over 4000 shops selling a wide array of touristy products like high quality garments, scarves, jewellery, leather, rugs, and little knick-knacks, it is near impossible to come out of the Grand Bazaar empty handed. We bought a couple of traditional Turkish carpets or Kilims. As we scouted the market for good bargains we realised that Bollywood is quite popular here. Shop owners greeted us with comments

ish pizzas and kebabs. All of us were ravenous after a long day and the food was so delicious that we came back again to the same eating place the next day for dinner. The following day was spent sightseeing with Mohammed yet again. Travelling around in Istanbul is quite convenient with several modes of transport available i.e. tram, metro, bus, boat, train and taxi. The best way to get a feel of Sultanahmet or the old city is by walking around and that's exactly what we did. Highlight of the day was a visit to the famous Blue Mosque and shopping in the Grand Bazaar. The Blue mosque

## Hoscakal Türkiye

The following day, it was time to say goodbye to Istanbul as we drove down to the Ataturk International airport to board our flight to Athens. From one country steeped in history to another land with a glorious past. Indeed a journey back in time! ■



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