

Travels with Anzie – Athens and Istanbul

June 2016

Athens exudes signs of a trouble economy. Many of the buildings look dingy. Many are covered with graffiti. You'd think we gave this taxi driver a great gift when we hired him to drive us the airport, at a better than market price. "Tourism is way down," he explained.

But, some things are still wonderful.

Food. We were there for Greek Orthodox Easter, which occurs about one month after the Roman Catholic counterpart. Every restaurant had lambs grilling outside. The aroma was fabulous! The roasting continued for three days. Yes, the lamb population took a real hit.



Sightseeing. Every city of any size in Europe, and around the world, has double-decker "On-Off" busses. It's a great way to acclimate to a new town. We stay on the bus for one circuit, listening to the recorded tour guide. Then we continue for another circuit, but this time we hop off at various sites of interest. A ticket is usually good for two days; so, using the bus tour guide map, we use the "On-Off" as our primary means of conveyance.

The **Acropolis**: What a dump! You'd think that, after all these years, the City would have rebuilt it – maybe a nice restaurant, perhaps a disco or an amusement park. In all seriousness, the walk up to and around the Acropolis site is worthwhile, if only for the feeling of extraordinary antiquity. After all, humans were trodding these same steps thousands of years ago. However, to give you a true picture of what the place looked like, the **Acropolis Museum** is a must-see. This modern structure, opened in 2009, not only replicates the dimensions of the original Parthenon, it provides a close-up view of the bas reliefs that decorated the pediments and friezes. Other features give you a better appreciation of this amazing structure, including statuary and findings that go back as far as the Bronze Age.



We stayed in the **Plaka** neighborhood; walking distance to historic sites, parks, restaurants and taverns. We didn't journey far. People recommended that we visit the port city of Pireaus, and Delphi. But, in the short time we had, we decided to concentrate our efforts in the capital city.

Istanbul

Shortly after we made reservations for an apartment in this famous Turkish city, a bomb exploded on a busy pedestrian street about 300 meters from our proposed digs. We e-mailed our landlord, Ali, to express our concern. He acknowledged our concern, but assured us that the government had responded with heightened security. He also said that, if we wished to cancel, he would accept it. During our stay in early May 2016, there were no incidents, nor did we ever feel unsafe. Now, in the early days of 2017, the scene has changed. More incidents of violence have occurred throughout the country, including an attempted military coup. Let us pray that things settle down so that the people of Turkey may live again in peace and so that tourism will experience a safe resurgence.

The contrast to Athens is dramatic. Istanbul is throbbing with activity. So many construction cranes, the crane should be nominated the city bird. Istanbul is the exotic: land of the Arabian Nights, sultans, harems, Topkapi. Istanbul covers two continents – Europe and Asia; population: 19 million! Second largest city in the world after Singapore!

Perhaps it was the VIP treatment that may have colored our opinion. We were met at the airport by a limousine, which whisked us the 45-minute trip into downtown Istanbul. To what do we owe this extraordinary service? Dear friend Manfred in Newburyport has a longstanding business relationship with Denny, who is CEO of a large steel company. He contacted Denny before we left and asked if maybe he could get together with us when we were there. We thought, maybe a drink or something, but Denny's generosity was amazing. It was he who arranged the chauffeur.

His chauffeur met us a few days later to drive us down the Bosphorus to our dinner date with Denny and his wife Pinar. Notwithstanding this formal relationship, by the end of dinner we felt very close to the two of them. Our chauffeur met us the next day to take us to the dock where a private yacht awaited that Denny had booked for us!. We then were treated to a tour of the Bosphorus. An interesting note: Pinar, a tall, attractive

blond, was a professional basketball player and coach for the Turkish national team for 23 years. She is also a sculptor of some renown.

We had the good fortune to meet Pinar and Denny in Newburyport this past June. They were visiting the States because their 16 year-old daughter was representing Turkey at an international youth conference at Harvard, Manfred and wife Cyd, along with ourselves, were able to reciprocate their kindness over dinner.

Back to Istanbul.

We stayed in an apartment located on the top floor overlooking the confluence of the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmora, and the Golden Horn, From our lovely terrace we could look across the Golden Horn to the **Eminonu** peninsula, where is located the famous **Topkapi Palace**, the **Hagia(Aya) Sophia**, the **Basilica Cistern**, the **Blue Mosque**, the **Grand Bazaar** and other important sites. It's a very busy place, but a must-see. More on this later.



When we arrived, we were met by our landlord, Ali, a 30 something graphic designer. After giving us a thorough orientation, Anzie mentioned that our anniversary was the next day. Ali became excited, and recommended his favorite restaurant. He insisted on making the reservation for us.

After settling in, we climbed the VERY steep lane in the Karakoy district up for a walk along the level pedestrian-only Istiklal Street. Istanbul is built on seven hills like Rome and most of the streets are steep. During our stay we spent a lot of time exploring Istiklal. So much to see! Lovely old buildings, some showing wear, and many embassies or former ones. This side of the Bosphorus was called Pera and was home to the diplomatic and foreign community before the capitol moved to Ankara. Istikal was the Champs-Elysee of Istanbul in the late 18th and early 19th centuries – much more European than Turkish. Much of it's still filled with high end shops.

You must visit a Turkish ice cream shop. You don't just get ice cream; you get a show. The shop is actually a raised booth. The vendor is dressed in traditional Turkish attire: fez, vest, sash and pantaloons. He puts on a magic show, especially if the customer is a child.

Just about every fifth store is a sweet shop. You've heard of "Turkish Delight"? It's a gummy, nougat-like candy that comes in a hundred different flavors, from fruit to nut. That's the mainstay, but they offer endless varieties candies, many made with nuts and pistachios. Street vendors specialize in *Simit*, a kind of sesame seed coated soft pretzel that can be split in half, and coated with a chocolate and nut flavored Nutella-like spread.



Many restaurants offer "to-go" foods from counters. Of course the "Doner" is popular: sliced spiced meat in a wrap.

We did treat ourselves to the occasional sit-down meal. Our anniversary dinner was remarkable. The restaurant, **FicCin**, is located on a narrow walking street off Istiklal. The owners, two sisters, own four tiny restaurants along the street. When Ali made our reservation, he must have given them specific instructions, because the staff made a real fuss over us. The maître d' showed us to our table. The white linen tablecloth was sprinkled with red rose petals. The owner, a blond woman, introduced herself. Our dinner was exquisite! Appetizers, dessert and dessert wine were complementary. After dinner we gathered for photos with our waiter and the owner. (see photos) We returned on our last night for our final meal. Thank you, Ali!

The most extraordinary thing about Istanbul is that points of exotic history lie around every corner. Of course the same may be said of Athens, Rome and other cities around the world; however, the "otherness", the exoticism of Byzantium sets Istanbul apart. Listed below are just a few sites that we found special.

Basilica Cistern: We descended steps about 50 ft. below street level to find ourselves in a dimly lit subterranean structure that was built in 532 AD to supply water to the Grand Palace. Water was delivered by 20 km. of aqueducts from a reservoir near the Black Sea. It measures larger than a football field, supported by 336 columns. The many styles give evidence that the columns came from other ruined temples. It's amazing to realize the sophisticated engineering that went into this design so long ago. The dim lighting gives dramatic affect. You can make out hundreds of large carp swimming in the depths.

What we found fascinating was that the Cistern was closed and forgotten when the Byzantine emperors moved to a new palace centuries ago. It wasn't re-discovered until 1535 when a scholar named Petrus Gyllius heard that residents could obtain water by

lowering buckets through the dark space their basement. Some talked of catching fish the same way. Gyllius finally entered the Cistern through one of those basement holes. Even after his discovery the Ottomans did nothing about it. It became a dumping ground for garbage and even corpses.

Finally in 1985 the municipal government cleaned and renovated it. It was opened as a museum in 1987. In any case, the Cistern offers a cool, tranquil and enchanting respite from the bustling city streets above. By the way, the Cistern was featured in a James Bond movie, From Russia with Love, and several novels, including Dan Brown's Inferno.

Istanbul is an ecumenical city. Along with over 3000 mosques, one finds Christian churches and synagogues. Five times each day one hears the competing voices of thousands of "muezzins" with their electronically amplified calls to prayer.

Aya Sofya: The exterior is impressive because of its massiveness. However the interior is sublimely beautiful. The dome just soars. Built as a Christian church in 537AD, it was converted into a mosque in 1453. Ataturk declared it a museum in 1935. The dome used to be covered with gilded mosaic tiles featuring representations of Jesus, Mother Mary and the saints. The Muslims deemed these images inappropriate, and plastered them over. Since it became a museum, a number of the original images have been uncovered. The mix of Christian and Muslim images is fascinating.

Then there's the **imperial loge**, a screened-in area where the Sultan could view the services unseen.

Then there's the **Weeping Column**. It has a worn copper facing with a hole in it. Legend has it that putting one's thumb into the hole can lead to ailments being healed if the finger comes out moist. Anzie put her thumb in it, and it came out dry. Shortly after we returned home she came down with plantar fasciitis. Go figure.

The Blue Mosque

This was Anzie's favorite place in the city. While Aya Sofia is a museum, this is still an active mosque. Built between 1606 and 1616 by Sultan Ahmet I, the symmetry of its domes and minarets make it the icon of Istanbul. The abundance of beautiful blue tiles that decorate the interior give the structure its unofficial but commonly used name. The Sultan died one year after his favorite project was completed, at the age of 27.

Topkapi: This grand palace was home to the Sultans, their concubines, eunuchs and intrigues from the 15th through the 19th centuries. In the mid-1800's they moved to the **Dolmabahce Palace**, built along the banks of the Bosphorus. Topkapi was made famous in the '60's by the film of the same name starring Melina Mercouri (Interesting

factoid: Melina went on to become the Minister of Culture for the Greek government. She is memorialized by her bust, which is located on a main street in Athens opposite Hadrian's Tomb.) The movie centered around the theft of jewels from the Imperial Treasury. The Topkapi palace is huge, so plan to spend at least half a day there. It's worth it. Here are just a few of the highlights and legends.

The **Imperial Treasury** contains many objects made or decorated in gold, silver, rubies, emeralds, jade, pearls and diamonds. Most famous among these are the **Topkapi Dagger** and the **Spoonmakers Diamond**. This 86 carat diamond was, according to legend, found in a garbage dump and sold for three spoons to a wily street peddler, who then sold it to the grand vizier for a considerably greater sum. The collection is probably the most popular exhibit. Arrive early or be prepared to stand in line for a long time.

The Kitchens: The cooking staff, that numbered up to 800, were tasked with feeding the 4000 palace personnel. Their workload increased substantially on the days when the Janissaries (the sultan's personal guard) arrived to receive their pay, in silver coins.

The **Sacred Safekeeping Rooms** house many alleged personal possessions of the Prophet Muhammed, including his cloak and sword.

The **Harem** housed up to 300 concubines. Personally I prefer one wife at a time. I can't imagine trying to keep 300 women happy. In reality the concubines were managed by the sultan's mother, the *valide*, and the chief black eunuch. The women were generally from Eastern Europe. They were schooled in Islam, Turkish culture and language, as well as comportment, music, reading, writing and dancing. If they gave the sultan a child, especially a male child, their ranking was enhanced. Sultan Murat III sired 112 children.

Originally the succession of sultans was based upon primogeniture; the first son was the successor. At one point this tradition was abandoned. The death of a sultan led to bloodshed among the male siblings until a solution arose under the reign of Ahmet I. He could not bring himself to kill his brother and, therefore, put him under house arrest. Thus began the tradition of the "cage life". The princes were "imprisoned" in the Harem.

The décor of the buildings give new meaning to the word "opulent". Imagine if our President decided to decorate the White House in the same manner! It could happen in our near future. I would be among the first ranks of those who would rebel against the outrageous expenditure of our tax dollars.

Dolmabahçe Palace: Picture Versailles located on a river with an artful mixture of French and Ottoman architecture. It shows the influence of European architecture on the Turkish rulers. Featuring tonnes of gold and Baccarat crystal (don't miss the crystal stairway), its combination of Baroque, Rococo and Ottoman styles are a bit overwhelming. Built in the 1860's - 90's it signifies the move from the Ottoman customs – pantaloons and turbans – to the beginning influence of western styles. In the early 1900's Kamil Ataturk brought in the fez and western-style clothing. The Dolmabahçe,

surrounded by sprawling gardens and lawns, spreads along the Bosphorus offering spectacular views.

Grand Bazaar: A huge indoor market offering an infinite variety of must-haves or like-to-haves: spices, sweets, wearing apparel, foods, jewelry (the gold vendors and the silver vendors are located in separate areas).

We bought saffron from a spice dealer who taught us the difference between fake saffron and the real stuff. The fake can be just dyed flower petals. He insisted that the best saffron comes from Iran.

These are only a sampling of the many of the other historic sights offer by this magical city. History meets you around every corner.

Hamams: These are the public bath houses. I've always wanted to visit one. I finally got the chance. **Gedikpasa** is probably the oldest in the city (1475), located near the Grand Bazaar. The process is fascinating: 1. Dry Sauna 2. Meet your Bather (Male) 3. Sitting bath with soap and tepid rinse. 4. Full body rub with rough scraper to remove dead skin, while lying on a marble slab. 5. Rinse with buckets of water poured over you. 6. Steam bath. 7. Jump into a pool of cool water 8. Finish off with a hot shower.

Met a fellow from Texas in the waiting room while waiting for Anzie to finish. We both agreed that we had never felt this clean in all our lives.

I could go on and on about the many features of Istanbul, but it's much better if you discover them yourself. Explore and enjoy!

Hasta la proxima vez,

Chuck & Anzie

Photo links: <https://goo.gl/photos/85ejV4Jrfe2xAwAr6> Our first two days

<https://goo.gl/photos/x5CJ2x1VC8hpYp2c9> Blue Mosque

<https://goo.gl/photos/XRPtBjG5CMpmfBow8> Aya Sofia & Cistern

<https://goo.gl/photos/yNHpe7pmNsRbakfF9> Grand Bazaar etc.