

My Trip to Turkey

World travel is an addiction. I know this because as a postal employee – with limited vacation time and an even shorter budget – I always find the means to pack up and go when the mood strikes me. Recently, I debated a co-worker over this very issue; he argued the act of traveling does not constitute a bona fide addiction. *Oh, really?* I countered. Last year I booked a trip to Peru on the very morning I was beginning a tour of China! *How's that for compulsive?* And when I reached Peru, my fellow travelers suggested I go to Turkey and...well, you're now reading the journal. The fact is, deep down, the true world traveler will go just about anywhere, and sometimes on a moment's notice. *This is clearly an addiction.* So let me tell you about this 'high' called Turkey...

After researching several online travel websites, I decided to visit Turkey in late March to avoid the large European seasonal crowds from mid-April on. The weather is also much cooler during this time of year, usually ranging from 40 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. As for the actual trip costs, I selected a 13-day air inclusive comprehensive package with GATE 1 Travel, which included all of their optional excursions (including a hot air balloon ride in the Cappadocia region) for under \$2,800. My maximum daily budget for international trips is \$250, so this particular tour fit nicely.

I initially booked the trip in mid September. At the time, the situation in Turkey was 'relatively calm'. There *had* been an attack on the U.S. consulate in Istanbul in July of 2011, but considering the volatile nature of the region, the country seemed safe enough for travel. And while the Arab Spring uprisings in nearby Syria were still going strong, the violent tone of the protests had not yet reached civil war proportions. As my trip date loomed nearer, though, parts of Syria plunged into a war zone, with large streams of refugees fleeing across the border into the southeastern parts of Turkey. It seemed as if Bashar al-Assad, Syria's dictator, was determined to crush all opposition to his rule with an iron fist. This prompted strong condemnation from the Turkish government. Several weeks prior to my visit, Turkey abruptly closed its embassy in Syria. Tensions between the two countries were at an all time high, and there was even talk of an impending military conflict between them. In October, a terrorist attack at the Topkapi

Palace (a very popular tourist attraction) in Istanbul was attributed to a Syrian national. On top of this, the Kurdish guerrilla movement in the country was blamed for a suicide bombing in November. My friends at work who follow world news thought I was crazy for going over there. My own brother was worried. But despite these growing tensions there were no travel advisories from the State Department. I always register with them whenever I travel abroad and receive constant travel updates via email, and none of them cautioned against travel to Turkey. On the contrary, all indications were that the country was very safe.

Another troubling aspect of my upcoming trip occurred on October 23rd, 2011, when a 7.2 magnitude earthquake rocked the eastern part of Turkey just north-northeast of the city of Van, rupturing 12.4 miles of earth underground and leveling many buildings in the area. Geographically, Turkey lies on a series of fault lines where two or more tectonic plates can butt heads and cause major problems. In 1999, a 7.6 magnitude quake devastated the city of Izmit, killing 17,000 and leaving more than half a million homeless. Our tour bus would pass this city on our way back to Istanbul. As my trip date got closer, there were earthquakes in Mexico, South America and in the Indian Ocean, as well. I am not a geologist, but if tectonic plates were shifting in one part of the earth... *wouldn't that affect the rest of the planet?*

Well, I needn't have worried. My trip to Turkey was awesome. The weather was cool in the mornings and evenings, and very comfortable throughout the day. I never felt safer walking the streets of a foreign country as I had in Turkey; the people were very friendly and inviting everywhere we went. The countryside and Aegean coastline were spectacular. The food was delicious. The historical ruins were impressive. The lava mountains of Cappadocia alone were worth the trip. And Istanbul instantly became one of my favorite cities of all time!

My journey began on the morning of March 27, 2012...

DAYS ONE AND TWO

Originally, I had booked my round-trip airfare to New York City via American Airlines, but due to their ongoing Chapter 11 bankruptcy they began cancelling and rescheduling domestic flights, including mine. A month prior to departure I had to re-book with Delta. On March 27th, at 5:00 in the morning, I climbed into a taxi for the short ride to the nearby Miami International Airport. My flight to New York City left on time and I arrived at JFK just before 10:00 am. I'm one of those people who have a mortal fear of missing my connecting plane, so when I retrieved my luggage from the carousel I still had *six and a half hours* to kill before my flight to Istanbul (which was also with Delta Airlines). I rolled my suitcase outside the terminal building and walked the short distance to Terminal 2, experiencing a steady blast of Arctic-like winds, and checked my luggage in early. I glanced at my watch: six more hours to go. *Caramba!*

I had breakfast in the food court, read my book – *1491* by Charles C. Mann (a fascinating account of Indian life in the pre-Columbus Americas) – people gazed, window shopped, strolled along the terminal gates. *Still, four hours to go!* Finally, I parked myself in front of a flat screen TV near my departure gate, and spent the next three hours watching a continuous loop of CNN news until they announced the boarding for Flight 072 to Istanbul.

The plane was completely full, taking nearly an hour to get everyone on board and settled in. I have a touch of claustrophobia and always request an aisle seat. At the time I booked my Turkey trip, I was dating a woman I'd met on eHarmony who wanted to visit Turkey, as well, and she was suppose to be sitting next to me on the plane. Our 'relationship' did not last beyond the fall, and I found myself sitting next to what appeared to be the most hen-pecked husband on the planet; his wife stood hovering over the aisle in the next row waiting for the person who had the empty seat next to her husband to arrive. When she saw me, she immediately pounced, asking (although, it somehow felt like a *demand*) if I would be nice enough to switch seats with her. I glanced down at her poor husband, who looked up at me the way a condemned man might look if he were resigned to his fate, and I quickly acquiesced. Besides, his wife also had an aisles seat, albeit in the middle row. *What a mistake this turned out to be!* When the two Turkish men who sat to my immediate right finally showed up, they must have weighed over 500 pounds between them. We were wedged into that middle row like Vienna sausages in a can. Due to the confined space my headset plug kept breaking off and after requesting two additional headphones from the annoyed stewardess I opted to forego the audio altogether. Needless to say,

it was a long flight. We taxied on the tarmac for 45 minutes before take off. The flight lasted approximately nine and a half hours. After dinner was served I popped an Ambien pill and was able to sleep on and off for about four hours.

As soon as we touched down at Istanbul International Airport, though, everything was right as rain. In all my travels (up till then, anyway), I have never experienced an easier in-country passport and customs check than here. I queued up in front of one of several booths selling the tourist visa stamp, handed over my \$20, and was whisking towards the luggage carousel in no time. I met several other GATE 1 tour members while waiting for the luggage to arrive, and we walked through customs together and out into the airport lobby where a GATE 1 representative was holding up a sign, telling us to wait by one of the doors for our transportation vehicle to show up. It was approximately 12:00pm (local time) of Day Two.

The 13-Day Affordable Turkey Tour had been sold out, and the tour members were divided into two separate groups (A and B), each one staying in a different hotel in Istanbul. I belonged to group B, and after dropping off several of the other members at their hotel, our mini-bus driver maneuvered the traffic-filled streets until we arrived at the Istanbul City Holiday Inn in the Topkapi District, less than a block away from the ancient Roman city walls. I met Ed Chin (retired school teacher/administrator from Madison, Wisconsin) and two lovely women, Helene Halperin (retired teacher from California) and Nancy Sherman (magazine editor from New York City). Helene and Nancy knew each other from high school and from what I gathered had done quite a bit of traveling together. Since our orientation meeting wasn't until 7:30 that evening, the four of us decided to do a little sightseeing of our own. After checking into our rooms (I took a quick shower) we gathered in the lobby forty five minutes later and then hit the streets.

Helene and Nancy had added three extra nights in Istanbul to the end of their tour, and were quite prepared to take advantage of this magnificent city. Helene had practically memorized her travel guide book (or so it seemed), and she became our unofficial guide, suggesting we use the tramline that passed in front of our hotel. Ed and I just nodded our heads in the affirmative and went right along with the women. We changed some Turkish liras into tram tokens at the automated booth adjacent to the tramline (cost: 2 liras for one token), and then boarded the incredibly

crowded transportation cars, which arrived every few minutes or so. The city's tramline runs until midnight, and follows a two-way path from Zeytinburnu down to Eminonu (the waterfront area) of the Old City. It continues briefly on the other side of the Galata Bridge, across the Golden Horn, into the ritzier sections of Istanbul (referred to as the Galata District). I found it unusual that no matter what time of day you rode the tram, it was always packed with commuters, *like a never-ending rush hour!*

We rode the tram for about fifteen minutes, getting off at the Sultanahmet stop. The Sultanahmet is the historic peninsula area of the Old City, where you will find most of Istanbul's famous sites, including the Blue Mosque, the Aya Sofya and Topkapi Palace. According to my guide book, most visitors to Istanbul never make it out of the Sultanahmet area or adjoining districts because of the close proximity to so many shops, restaurants, hotels, the Grand Bazaar, museums and historical buildings. When we crossed the street from the tram line, we found ourselves standing in a park overlooking the Hippodrome, a wide open-space adorned with obelisks and other ancient statues, which once served as the arena for Roman chariot races. Today, it is known as Sultanahmet Square. The actual arena (and the areas used for seating spectators) is now a stone-paved walkway stretching over several blocks. Beyond it is the beautiful Blue Mosque. I will talk more about this beautiful structure, and the Sultanahmet district in general, on Day Three, when our entire group visited the area together with our tour guide.

We walked the front length of the Blue Mosque, not certain whether to enter or not. Since we would be visiting the place the following day, we opted instead to head over to the nearby Aya Sofya, a stunning monument of the Byzantine Empire, constructed as a Christian Orthodox church in 537 AD (on the same site where two previous churches had stood centuries earlier). Built during the reign of the Emperor Justinian, this was the grandest Christian church in the world at that time, an unrivaled architectural masterpiece built over a span of five years, employing over 100 master masons and 10,000 laborers and utilizing the best construction materials from all over the Mediterranean. The building also served as the most sacred piece of land during the Byzantine Empire, and has quite a history. For example:

In 843 AD, the Aya Sofya was redecorated with frescoes and mosaics with gold-colored backgrounds following the Iconoclastic Period (when the Church forbade religious pictures). It was looted and badly damaged during

the Crusader invasion of 1204, reverting to a Catholic church until the Crusaders left the city in 1261, becoming an Orthodox church once again. Following several strong earthquakes in the 14th and 15th centuries, the Aya Sofya was badly damaged and fell into neglect. But, all in all, for a span of 916 years this structure was used as a Christian church until the fall of the city to the Ottomans in 1453, when the ruler Fatih Sultan Mehmet ordered the building to be converted into a mosque. To do this, several architectural changes had to be made. The frescoes were covered with green lime, the cross shapes on the walls and doors were either removed or engraved over, the altar was extracted and a prayer niche was installed facing the direction of the Kaaba (Mecca). A brick minaret was built and a madrasah with 12 rooms. A courtyard was added along with a cistern in front of the building. The Aya Sofya remained a mosque until it was restored again and re-opened as a museum in 1935.

We decided to pay the 20 liras and go inside. Ed Chin had suggested we see the nearby archeological museum, instead, which had wonderful artifacts dating as far back as Alexander the Great; in retrospect, perhaps we *should* have done that since we would be re-visiting the Aya Sofya the following day with the rest of the tour group. But we had arrived together and I didn't want to separate from Helene and Nancy. Besides, I had already lost my bearings and wasn't sure I could get back to the hotel on my own without a major panic attack.

Our small group spent the better part of an hour touring the inside and grounds of the Aya Sofya, more commonly known as the Hagia Sophia (which means Divine Wisdom). The construction is remarkable. It was the first 3 nave domed basilica ever built. In fact, its largest dome is the world's fifth tallest. The pendentives (triangular segments or columns used to hold the weight of the domes) were decorated with Cherubim angels during the 14th Century, another first. We entered the building through a fairly large narthex (antechamber) into the expansive main area, taking in the domed features, Christian mosaics and Islamic symbols...a rather odd religious mixture. Later, we walked an inclined thoroughfare to the upper gallery, making our way along the marbled floors, inscribed panels and getting a better view of the mosaics and ceiling artwork. We were also able to take wonderful panoramic photos of the interior of the Aya Sofya from up there.

When we finished our tour of the Aya Sofya we made a brief rest stop in a small café area in the courtyard, purchasing bottled water and freshly-

squeezed pomegranate juice. Afterwards, we walked back to the tramline, stopping to gaze into the windows of restaurants and bakeshops with colorful displays of Turkish delights (rolled sweets, baklava and artfully crafted pudding desserts). As we crossed the Sultanahmet Square Park, Nancy, an avowed animal lover, became enthralled by two large stray cats mating on the grass and stopped to photograph them. *Yes, it was a tad embarrassing.* Although, I must admit, the cats in this country are beautiful.

The tramline back to the hotel was jam-packed. We had to stand the whole while, holding on to overhead straps and railings, swaying back and forth into fellow commuters. When we arrived at the Holiday Inn, Ed and I took a short walk over to the remnants of the ancient Roman wall (overlooking a major thoroughfare) and took photographs of it. This defensive wall once stretched all the way around the Old City, and sections of it can be seen everywhere. Parts of it have been restored or shored up. It was an impressive and formidable structure, which in areas had two walls separating the city from invading armies (combatants would scale the outer wall only to be trapped within the second wall). At night, the section of the wall we visited was beautifully lit.

I took an hour and a half nap before our 7:30pm orientation meeting in the hotel's conference room. Here, I met the rest of our tour group. *All thirty seven of them!* Besides Helene, Nancy, Ed and I, they were:

Alan and Kathy Cunningham from California; Noelani Musicaro from New Jersey; Richard Kent from Connecticut; Digby and Jan Nelson from New Zealand; Marsha Caporaso and Rosanna Ranier from Wisconsin; Muriel and Steven Leonard from Chicago; Constantine and Agathi Glezakos (a Greek couple living in the States); Murtaza and Fakhra Khanduawala from Mumbai, India; Leslie and Laurel Stadford, two sisters from Chicago; Katie R. Milton, Jennifer Dyan Ghoston, Raydell Erin and Ariel Taylor from, I believe, Chicago, as well; Lee Koonce from New York City; Park and Carole Hollenbeck from Illinois; Carol and Bill Ingram from Virginia; cousins Sarah Stephens and Cookie Horne (sorry, don't know their origins); Jonna Brown from California; and Yuan Yao, who was traveling with three fellow Chinese companions whose names I was not able to get (sorry, Yuan and friends!); and lastly, an elderly woman from Chicago whose name I only remember as Cathy (or Catherine?). I hope I jotted all this down correctly. If not, please forgive me, gang!

Our tour guide for the entire trip was Serdar Balin, a middle-aged Turkish man who had studied in England during his youth and had a very good command of the English language. There was some confusion over the pronunciation of his name; some called him ‘say-dar’ and others said ‘sir-dar’. Either way, he didn’t seem to mind, and always answered politely no matter how badly we butchered his name. His knowledge of the sites we visited was outstanding, and he had a very good sense of humor; his lectures on the long bus rides were always entertaining and enlightening. Throughout the trip, Serdar was most accommodating, taking care of everyone’s personal concerns and requests. He was an incredible guide, one of the best I’ve ever had. We began the orientation meeting by introducing ourselves one by one, and then Serdar went over the next day’s itinerary with us. We then broke for a buffet dinner in the hotel’s second floor restaurant.

After dinner, I debated whether to take an evening stroll with Helene and Nancy, but I was feeling very tired from the plane ride and opted to take an Ambien and go to bed. Besides, it was very cold outside!

DAY THREE

We had a 7:00am wake-up call, but I had set my traveling alarm clock for an hour earlier. Neither one, though, actually got me out of bed. That honor belonged to the nameless voice blaring out of the loud speaker of the nearby minaret calling Muslims to prayer at approximately 5:40am. I nearly fell off the bed when I heard it. Unable to go back to sleep, I made several cups of coffee (I always bring along a stash of instant coffee and creamer packets when I travel), shaved and took a long hot shower. At breakfast, I sat with Ed, Richard, Murtaza and Fakhera. Like most guided tours the breakfast buffet was very good. I hoarded a piece of fruit and bread for later.

Today was a free day in Istanbul, but I had signed up for the full day sightseeing excursion of the Old City. At 8:00am, 26 of us gathered in the lobby and then boarded the bus together with Serdar. Our bus driver throughout the entire trip was a Turk named Ugur (pronounced *Urr*), whose head was shaved clean and rarely spoke. This man was, without a doubt, the best bus driver I have ever seen. He could back up our enormous coach

within seconds from the tightest of spots and maneuvered the crowded streets of Istanbul (and elsewhere!) with an ease that left many of us in awe. We were not able to leave exactly on time because some of my fellow travelers had a difficult time adhering to our trip's tight schedule. In their defense, we had several women who needed the assistance of walkers, and I pitied poor Serdar who had to make sure everybody kept pace on the walking tours. Often times, our group got scattered.

The city of Istanbul is unique in that it is the only metropolis located on two continents: Europe and Asia. This geopolitical diversity has made Istanbul one of the truly cosmopolitan centers throughout history, an unusual crossroads uniting and exposing ancient cultures to constant waves of migrating or invading peoples. In general, there are three parts to this great city. The *Historical Peninsula* to the south of the Golden Horn (referred to as the Old City) and the *Galata District* to the north, which includes the trade and business centers, are both on the European side. The *New City* district is located on the Asian side, and is more of a residential area. Istanbul is divided by the Bosphorus, a strait connecting the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, separating Asia and Europe. Furthermore, a 7 kilometer-long narrow inlet known as The Golden Horn further divides the European side of the city into its two districts, the Old City and the Galata District.

This wonderful city was once called Constantinople, after the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, and was the seat of the Byzantine Empire until the Ottoman ruler Mehmet II -- who later became known as Fatih (the 'conqueror') -- defeated the last remnants of the Holy Roman Empire and established the city of Istanbul in 1453. Over the succeeding centuries, the Ottoman Empire would expand to control the Middle East, North Africa and half of Eastern Europe, with Istanbul becoming a melting pot of nationalities. By the end of the 19th Century the Ottoman Empire was in decline and eventually gave rise to the Republic founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal (known as Ataturk), who established Ankara as the new seat of government. This led to a steady erosion of Istanbul's influence and the city fell into disrepair.

Turkey remained a poor country during its first five decades as a Republic, but in the 1980s, new government policies enabled the economy to grow rapidly and the country soon developed a large international manufacturing base. I spotted Ford, Toyota, Hyundai, John Deere and

Caterpillar plants throughout the tour. They even assemble F-16 fighter jets here. In the 1990s, a renaissance took place in Istanbul. Urged on by their desire to join the European Union, the city has been transformed back to its glory days. Transportation continues to improve; parks have been added along the waterfront. The once seedy dives of Beyoglu have been replaced with funky cafes, chic bars and studios. Newly opened art galleries and the live-music scene have created an artistic East-West hub in the city.

Today, Istanbul is once again a political and commercial center for the Balkan and Middle Eastern Countries and the Turkic Republics of Central Asia. It is a progressively dynamic and fun place to visit. And clean! Serdar told us they pick up the trash twice a day here. The people on the streets were well dressed, too; men sported suits and ties and young people seem to be wearing the latest fashion jeans and clothing. I must say, these Turks were an attractive bunch of people. And for such a large city, the residents were quite friendly and open. In fact, having visited Egypt just one and a half years earlier, the contrasts were startling. Walking the streets of Istanbul, the only reminders that I was in a predominantly Muslim country were the mosques, which seemed to occupy every other corner. According to Serdar, there are over 3000 mosques in Istanbul alone! But no matter where we went, there was a decidedly European feel about Turkey.

Our bus made its way slowly through traffic to Sultanahmet Square, where we got off and walked to the heart of the Hippodrome. Serdar gave us a brief history on the ancient works lining the middle of the square. Construction of this sportive arena began in 203 AD, shortly after the Roman conquest of the city. It had a seating capacity of 30,000 arranged in forty rows of seats around a 'U' shaped race track, one of the largest of its time. During the Byzantine Period, the Hippodrome had three distinct functions. First, as a sporting arena where chariot races and gladiator fights occurred; secondly, as a political arena; lastly, the center of the arena (known as the *spina*) served as a decorative open-air museum, where the emperors would display artwork and statues from all over the world. Today, the arena is mostly gone save for the statues and obelisks in the *spina*, the entire area a beautiful stone-paved park.

We posed for pictures in front of the Egyptian Obelisk, which was built 3,500 years ago and was brought to the city from the Amon Temple in Karnak (Luxor, Egypt). Made of pink granite and weighing about 300 tons, it has been standing in Istanbul for over 1600 years; inscribed on the sides

are Egyptian Hieroglyphics portraying the bravery of the Pharaoh Thutmose. Not far from this is the Serpentine Column – dated 479 BC – brought from the Apollon Temple in Delphi, Greece by the Emperor Constantine in 326 AD. This column was originally a trophy symbol marking the victory of the Greek States over the Persians in Palatea. The metal used to form the three intertwining snakes (all headless now) that shapes the column was reportedly taken from the armor of the dead Persian soldiers.

The last column standing inside the spina is a brick obelisk called the Column of Constantine, built by Emperor Constantine VII, in loving memory of his grandfather, Basileus. This column was originally covered in embroidered copper and brass plates, which were removed and melted down into coins during the Latin invasion of the 13th Century. The final and most recent work on display inside the Hippodrome Square is the German Fountain, a gift from the German Emperor in 1898, who was very impressed by the great hospitality he received when he first visited Istanbul. The top of the fountain resembles a German military helmet.

From the Hippodrome Square, Serdar took us into the nearby Blue Mosque. We had to enter through the south side entrance used by non-Muslims, and had to remove our shoes before entering. No trip to Istanbul would be complete without visiting this building, the greatest and most splendid mosque in the city. It was constructed between 1601 and 1616, under the rule of Ottoman Sultan Ahmet I, and is considered the last great religious architectural structure made by the Ottomans. To be sure, more mosques were built following this one, but none as impressive!

In addition to the spectacular mosque, several exterior buildings connected to the temple were constructed here, as well (many of which no longer exist), including a madrasah (school), a hospital, a mausoleum, an Arasta Bazaar, a caravanserai (hotel) and a public fountain, all of it along the Hippodrome, which was the center of the city back then. Many Byzantine and earlier Ottoman palaces had to be demolished to make room for this gigantic mosque. The reason this site was selected was because the Sultan lived in the Topkapi Palace not far from here.

Serdar took us on a tour inside the Blue Mosque, enlightening us on its history. The actual name of the building is the Sultan Ahmet Mosque, but is more commonly referred to as the Blue Mosque due to the more than 21,000 tiles lining the inner walls and domes which are mostly blue in color. The

inside of this mosque is spectacular. Besides the beautiful tile work and the spacious domed interior, the floor is covered by enormous silk carpets and hundreds of imported crystal oil lamps are used for illumination. There are six minarets with a combined 16 balconies, the most of any mosque in Turkey. The story of how the six minarets came to be constructed has an interesting legend. Originally, the Sultan asked the famous architect Mehmet Aga for a golden minaret, but because the word 'gold' in Turkish sounds similar to the number 'six', Mehmet Aga misunderstood and had six (very costly) minarets built. This led to a conflict with the Haram Mosque in Mecca, the holiest of all mosques, which also had six minarets. The Sultan eventually sent his architect to Mecca to add a seventh minaret, preserving the 'grandeur' of the Haram Mosque (and avoiding any religious fallout).

We made our way back to the Hippodrome Square and waited for the rest of the group to catch up. While we waited, I purchased a delicious sesame bread pretzel from a street vendor for one lira. Every where we went in the Old City we were surrounded by adorable school kids. It was Culture Week in Istanbul, and apparently, judging from all the students, field trips to the city's historical sites seemed to be a must. Whenever the school kids saw us, they smiled and waved and loved having their pictures taken.

Our next stop was the Topkapi Palace, situated less than half a mile away. For over 400 years this palace served as the living quarters for the sultans and was the seat of the Ottoman Empire until it was abandoned in the 19th Century for the more opulently modern Dolmabahce Palace. Originally, the complex started out as the simple palace residence of Fatih Sultan Mehmet (the conqueror of Istanbul) but later became a sprawling palatial retreat measuring twice the size of the Vatican, as succeeding sultans added more and more structures to the original building. The locals actually coined the name 'topkapi' because of the huge cannons in front of the doors of the palace. It is surrounded by five kilometers of walls, and was protected by 28 defensive towers. Along its Bosphorus coastline, you can also see remnants of the ancient Roman walls.

Approximately 5,000 people lived in the palace, from members of the dynasty, dignitaries, and ruling classes to maidservants and soldiers. We walked through the front entrance, the huge Bab-i Humayun Door, into a large courtyard area. The Topkapi Palace is generally divided into two parts, the *Endurin*, where the Sultan and his family lived, and the *Birun*, where the high ranking civil servants ran the day-to-day affairs of state. Unlike the

splendor of European palaces, the Ottoman rulers – who hailed from a nomadic way of life – wanted to reflect a simpler concept in their living quarters; palace buildings were built around great open gardens, representing the vacant areas where nomads would pitch their tents to eat and have fun. Furniture was also relatively sparse, and sitting around the floor was quite common.

We entered the first courtyard amidst a mass of visiting school children. Along the right side we could see the large ovens of the palace bakery, the dwellings of the servants, and the ruins of a hospital; on the left side, beyond the actual palace, is the Church of St. Irene and the Istanbul Archeological Museum. We followed Serdar, who was holding up a pointer with a GATE 1 flag attached to it, through the Babus Selam Door entrance, into the second courtyard, a long open garden full of cypress and plain trees. At one time, this open space contained many exotic animals roaming freely and cared for by hundreds of gardeners; the purpose was to give the illusion of entering the Garden of Eden. The entire right wing of the second courtyard consisted of the palace kitchen; one can only imagine how busy it was trying to feed thousands of people several times a day.

At this point, Serdar gave us about an hour and a half to see the items in the palace museum rooms (and have lunch) and meet back at the second courtyard. Ed and I got on line to enter the Imperial Treasury, although it was slow-going with hundreds of school children. The beautifully crafted jewels and adornments we saw were truly amazing. We witnessed the covered elegant thrones of various sultans, golden dinnerware, bejeweled handguns, the gem-covered Topkapi Dagger, and the Spoon Makers Diamond, a massive 86-carat stone. With time running short, Ed and I then got on line to see the Holy Relics museum. There were some fascinating items on display here, including several personal items belonging to the Prophet Muhammad. We also saw items that supposedly belonged to the Prophets Joseph and Abraham, and a cane used by Moses. I don't know how one can authenticate such things, but it was intriguing nonetheless. We then entered a room containing a series of old Korans, some huge with elaborate lettering, and others miniscule in size.

We were pretty hungry at this point, and decided to have lunch before we met back with the rest of the group. The restaurant area on the bottom level of the Topkapi Palace, overlooking the Bosphorus, was too crowded. We only had less than half an hour to eat, so we back-tracked to the second

courtyard and had ‘roast beef and cucumber’ sandwiches and bottled water at a small concession store. Not the most memorable meal I had while in Turkey, but at least it was edible. When we rejoined our group, two of the women had vanished. After leaving the Blue Mosque en route to the Topkapi Palace, they must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. When they finally reappeared, Serdar took no chances and made sure everyone kept up with the rest of the group. *Boy, did he earn his tip money!*

From the Topkapi Palace we walked back to the Hippodrome area to visit the Hagia Sophia. Since I had already toured the building the previous day I did not continue with the rest of the group, and instead took photos with Helene and Nancy who had just rejoined us from a morning of independent sightseeing (although, I believe they actually spent the whole time at the Grand Bazaar shopping!). About an hour and a half later, our entire group walked across the street from the Hagia Sophia and entered the Underground (Yerebatan) Cistern, which is the largest of over sixty cisterns built in Istanbul during the Byzantine Period.

Most of the water used by Istanbul during the Byzantine Period came from the Belgrade River about 25 kilometers north of the city. The only problem? The aqueducts that transported this precious water into the city were situated outside the ramparts of the defensive walls, which meant that during times of enemy sieges the ducts were destroyed or the water poisoned, so the Roman Emperors had cisterns constructed beneath the city to store water for emergency purposes. The Yerebatan Cistern was in use until the 16th Century, then later restored during the 19th Century. It has been opened to the public since 1987.

We climbed down the dank staircase into the creepy-looking cistern, much of it dark with only the areas near the wooden walkways lit up. This underground reservoir is 70 meters wide by 140 meters long, and has 336 support columns (one for every 4 meters). At the very back of the cistern we saw two columns resting on top of Medusa statue heads, one of the faces turned sideways and the other upside down. In this poorly lit cavern the statue heads were kind of frightening, which I guess was the idea, to scare off intruders. I’m not certain how much water this underground chamber could hold; the current level wasn’t deep. But there were schools of ghostly-looking carp swimming in it, including the narrower portions, and I wondered how they flourished in such an environment.

From here, we re-boarded our bus and drove the short distance to the Grand Bazaar area in the heart of the Old City. Even if you're new to Istanbul, and didn't know where to go, chances are you'll eventually end up here. This place is the world's first indoor mall. Originally a small masonry covered market (or *bedesten*) built during the time of Fatih Sultan Mehmet, the market continued to grow and expand as shopkeepers put up roofs and porches so their customers could buy goods in all kinds of weather. Over the centuries, this Covered Bazaar (as it is more commonly known) has grown to encompass 64 streets with 16 different entrance gates. The word 'huge' would be an understatement; it's easy to get lost in here.

The Grand Bazaar functions almost like a mini-city, with over 2000 shops selling just about everything under the sun, containing mosques, banks, restaurants, its own police station and workshops. It is a labyrinth of grid-like alleyways and lanes each filled with hawking vendors. The streets are usually set up with like-minded sellers, so you will find jewelers in one section, and leather good sellers in another, and ceramics in another and so on...but this is not a hard and steadfast rule, so if you walk long and far enough, you will find boutiques and shops of every stripe on just about every street.

Ugur maneuvered our enormous Mercedes Benz bus through the crowded streets near the bazaar – amazingly not hitting anything in the process! – and dropped us off in the parking lot area of one of the gated entrances (each gate is numbered). Serdar gave us several hours to shop inside the Grand Bazaar, and told us how to take the tramline back to the hotel in case we either got lost or decided to stay longer. We split up and took off into the shopping maze like rats in some experiment. I tagged along with Ed who was looking to pick up a souvenir cap for his grandson. I wanted to buy some scarves and other trinkets for family and friends back home, and maybe pick up an interesting display item for myself. Even though it was only Thursday, the market was packed, and there was a lot of jostling on the smaller avenues. Serdar warned us to be mindful of our wallets, since this area attracted professional pickpockets.

Ed and I spent the next couple of hours browsing up and down the covered streets, trying not to stray too far from the main avenue where we originally entered. Neither one of us was well versed in the art of bargaining. When I was in Egypt a year and a half earlier the vendors in the market places were merciless, gouging us for all they could get. I was not sure what

kind of mark-up the Turkish sellers started out with, but Serdar recommended we counter-offer at least 30% lower than their initial asking price. Following *that* rule of thumb I made some inquiries into some rather nice-looking scarves made of a material called ‘pashmere’, supposedly 70% silk, 30% cashmere. I was able to bargain the man down to 20 liras, but decided not to buy just yet; after all, we had just walked into the bazaar and were still ascertaining prices on different items. At least I now knew that 20 liras was a price I could pay for a nice scarf. *Perhaps I could get it for less?*

I am not much of a shopper (I guess it’s a guy thing), but I really enjoyed the Grand Bazaar. There was so much to see and ogle over! Many of the vendors offered us *cay* (Turkish tea poured into small glassware and served with cubes of sugar), hoping to get us into their stalls or shops for some hard sell tactics. My guide book suggested avoiding the vendors’ hospitality unless you were really interested in purchasing something. Eventually, I was able to buy several nice pashmere scarves for only 10 liras each.

Ed was not able to find the souvenir cap he wanted, but found some nice embroidered T-shirts. He asked the vendor how much? And what ensued was hilarious. The man originally quoted something ridiculous, like 45 liras. I then said I would purchase two T-shirts myself if he gave us a better price. The haggling began. The shirts went down to 20 liras apiece. No, we countered, we’d only pay 10 liras. This went back and forth, the man pulled out a calculator (something every vendor did) and stated, with some finality, that he could not accept less than 32 liras for the three T-shirts. Ed and I had been going back and forth like a wrestling tag team with this poor man, agreeing and disagreeing, offering and counter-offering, and he was thoroughly exhausted. Finally, the man turned to the vendors in the stall next door and, exasperated, shouted something in Turkish that must have meant: *“These must be the two cheapest Americans in the world!”* The vendors laughed. Ed looked at me and acknowledged we were piddling over 2 liras...*the price of a tram token!* So we agreed to pay 32 liras for the three T-shirts; the vendor couldn’t put the items in a bag fast enough, probably not wanting anything else to do with us! Later, Ed and I laughed when recounting the incident to the other tour members.

The only regret I have about my trip was not buying a handmade decorative ceramic plate I eyed in one of the specialty shops. The vendor went on about how it was made by a local artist (it was signed on both sides of the plate). Even Ed thought the intricate black and yellow design was

beautiful. But the asking price was too high, and although it came down significantly after much haggling, I still was not sure about forking over \$70 for something so fragile that I would have to hand-carry it for the next two weeks. I figured I could always come back on our last day in Istanbul and buy it then. Unfortunately, when I returned ten days later the plate had already been sold. I could have kicked myself!

After our shopping venture, Ed and I made our way back to the parking lot area near the entrance gate and sat down for a glass of *cay* at a small café across from where our bus was parked, waiting for our fellow travelers to arrive. Our next stop was the Spice Market situated in the Eminonu quay, across from the Galata Bridge, not far from where the ferries dock which cruise the Bosphorus strait. It was now rush hour and the traffic was pretty bad along the waterfront area. But this gave all of us time to show each other our Grand Bazaar purchases and exchange bargaining stories. Ugur dropped us off in front of a busy square and we walked to the Spice Market from there.

The Spice Market is better known as the Egyptian Bazaar, because this was originally the trading place for spices brought from Egypt. Built in the 1660's, it has a reverse 'L' shape and is covered with leaded domes. There are six entrances and approximately 80 or so shops, most of them selling spices, healing herbs and different food products like cheese, meats, jam, sweets, dried meats, nuts, etc. Much of this is sold either in pre-packaged form or by weight out of big sacks. Perfumes and scent oils are also sold here. I cannot begin to describe the wonderfully aromatic fragrances and smells I experienced while walking through this rather small market place (small compared to the Grand Bazaar). We gorged ourselves on free samples of Turkish Delights (soft, gooey types of confection sweets which come in a variety of shapes and flavors). I purchased a sample box for 10 liras, hoping to give it to someone as a souvenir. 'Hoping' being the operative word here since I ended up eating the whole box on a late-night binge in my hotel room a few days later! Outside, adjacent to the Spice Market, were even more stalls selling meat products, breakfast foods, fish, fruits and vegetables all arrayed in very appealing displays. Although we did not have enough time to explore it all, further into the backstreets were more peddlers and exhibitions. A fascinating place. I enjoyed it even more than the Grand Bazaar, actually. Its smaller size made it more manageable. Or was it the food samples? *Hmmmmmmmmmm.*

We drove back to the hotel and I had a chance to freshen up before the Arabian Night dinner show excursion. Only nine members of my group opted to take this outing. We gathered in the lobby around 7:00pm and met Serdar and another Gate 1 guide, a young, pretty Tourism student doing her internship. It was already night time when our bus crossed the Galata Bridge into the districts surrounding Taksim Square, in the ritzier European part of Istanbul.

Taksim Square is the large open space at the end of Istiklal Street, and derives its name from the nearby water reservoir. At the center of the square is the famous Republic Monument designed by the Italian Architect Pietro Canonica in 1928, commemorating the founding of the Turkish Republic five years earlier. The main avenue leading northwards from Taksim Square is called Cumhuriyet Street and lined with trendy pubs, restaurants, shops, and five star hotels like the Ritz-Carlton and the InterContinental. You can also see just about every American fast food chain along the way. This area is considered the glitzy, high-end side of Istanbul.

The Arabian Night dinner show was held at the Korvansaray Restaurant and Night Club. Basically, this place catered to tourists, but did serve authentic Turkish cuisine and put on a tremendous show lasting three hours. Well, actually, we *left* after three hours; the dancing was just getting under way! We were seated by individual tour groups at long tables surrounding a stage. There was a live band, which played some rather strange-looking string instruments. The evening commenced with appetizers and the first of four exotic belly dancers, each one prettier and sexier than the last. I had seen an authentic belly dancer on my trip to Egypt, but it was during the month of Ramadan so it was forbidden to show the dancer's belly, which defeated the whole purpose of the *belly* dance, I thought. Thankfully, Turkey is a very modern country, and these belly dancers were worth the price of the show.

In between the belly dancing sets we continued to receive courses of the meal (I don't recall what we ate, only that it was pretty good). There were also intermittent groups of folk dancers, and an acrobatic quartet, and a group of knife-throwers. The belly dancers were the best, though. They would wiggle and maneuver their hips and stomachs to a very interesting percussion beat. The last performer was a comedian singer who could seemingly sing a song from every country on the planet. He would go around the room asking people where they were from, and no sooner than

you could say “Italy”, he was belting out a popular Italian song *in Italian*. The audience tried to stump him, too. People cried out India, Japan, Germany...but this guy could sing a tune in any language. I yelled out, “Cuba!” and damned if he didn’t croon *Guantanamera!* When his set ended, so did the show, and the band started cranking out dance tunes. As the dance floor began filling up with couples, our group decided it was time to head back to the hotel. This had been an exhausting day. We reached the Holiday Inn shortly after 11:00pm. I was snoring twenty minutes later.

DAY FOUR

I awoke at 5:30am, beating the call to prayer by ten minutes! I made my coffee, hopped in the shower, repacked and placed my suitcase in the hallway for the bellhop to pick up, then made my way downstairs for breakfast. That morning I sat with Bill, Carol, Digby and Jan. I was very excited; today was the beginning of a nine-day long *odyssey* through the western half of Turkey, and it was only fitting we would get to visit the actual historic city of Troy (made famous by Homer) before day’s end. As we boarded the bus, Serdar implemented a seat-rotation system that allowed for a more equitable assignment of the limited seating space. Our tour group consisted of thirty-seven members and each day we would rotate back two seats so that everyone got to sit in a different spot throughout the long daily bus rides. I am over six feet tall and require a lot of legroom to prevent cramping; thankfully, I was able to sit by myself for most of the tour (Thanks Ed for moving!). In front of me sat Noelani Musicaro and Richard Kent, and behind me were Arealia Taylor and Raydell Erin.

We headed west, hugging the coastline along the Sea of Marmara, through the European section of Turkey. It took us several hours to reach the Gallipoli peninsula (known as Gelibolu in Turkish), and we made a bathroom stop along the way at a roadside gasoline station/souvenir shop. I think I purchased more gaudy souvenirs during these ‘pit stops’ (which we made every two hours) than in the actual market places! The scenery en route to Gallipoli was beautiful; the city streets of Istanbul gave way to

green valleys and a nice view of the shoreline. Serdar provided a brief lecture on Turkey. Here are some of the random things I jotted down:

- Istanbul is approximately 90 miles wide by 30 miles long. Turkey itself is the size of Texas, and is bordered on the northwest by Bulgaria, the west by Greece, the east by Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran, and on the southeast by Iraq and Syria.
- Turkey has the 16th largest economy in the world; car-making and technology make up 20% of its current economy (most Fords sold in Europe are manufactured here). Agriculture makes up only 10% (which is down from 60% decades ago).
- There are no state or provincial governments in Turkey, just a central government. The political breakdown consists of cities, then towns, followed by villages. The central government has a parliamentary system similar to that of Great Britain
- Turkey has a population of approximately 72 million people, of which a fifth live in Istanbul. In the rural areas, farmers live in villages but own their own plots of land (usually provided by the government) and share the farm labor with their neighbors like in a co-operative. This leads to very close-knit social relationships in the villages; everybody pretty much knows everybody else's business, according to Serdar.
- There are no unemployment benefits in Turkey, so everybody works or tries to sell something to provide for their families. Begging is frowned upon in Islam. They do have a national pension plan that workers pay into, and there is universal health care for all workers. Serdar hinted the health care system could be improved; on the rural level a patient is first seen by medical personnel in a small clinic, who then decide to send the more serious cases to the city hospitals. Apparently, though, services are not always provided by the best physicians available. Often times, more prosperous Turks opt to buy additional coverage.
- There are five original Turkish tribes that make up the world-wide Turkish population, numbering well over 200 million, making Turkish one of the major world languages. Besides Turkey, the following independent states are predominantly Turkish: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. But fairly large Turkish communities can also be found all over Eastern Europe, including Russia and as far as China.

We arrived at the town of Gallipoli shortly after 12:00pm. In order to continue on to the ancient ruins of Troy near Canakkale (pronounced sha-na-ka-lay) we would need to cross the Dardanelles by ferry. The Dardanelles is the narrow strait separating the Sea of Marmara from the Aegean Sea. During World War I, the entire peninsula of Gallipoli was the scene of a disastrous eight-month military campaign waged by the Allies in an attempt to keep Turkey from entering the war on the side of the Germans. Hundreds of thousands of troops were killed or wounded in this region, which many Turks consider to be the birthplace of their Republic; the siege eventually exposed the inadequacies of the sultan system and gave rise to the military man (Mustafa Kemal Ataturk) who would overthrow it. There are national and memorial parks along the entire peninsula. The place is considered a sort of a pilgrimage by Australians and New Zealanders (whose great grand fathers fought and died here).

The ferry that crossed Gallipoli to the town of Lapseki (on the *Asian* side of Turkey) left every half hour. Serdar gave us an hour for lunch, but stressed that we had to be back on the pier before 1:30 pm to catch the ferry. He recommended several restaurants in the wharf area. I took off with Ed in search of some beef or lamb gyros. The only restaurant we found that had kebab (meat grilled on a skewer) was a small eatery filled with young military men. The place only did chicken kebab, though. Dozens of chicken breasts were clumped together and slow-roasted on a heated vertical skewer, making it very juicy and tender. We ordered *doner* sandwiches, the cook carving off thin slices of breast meat from the skewer and placing them inside sections of freshly baked crusty bread. This was topped off with tomato slices and some kind of greens, salt and pepper and your choice of mustard, ketchup or mayo. I ordered a Pepsi, as well. The people in the restaurant barely spoke English, so we had no idea what the meal was going to cost. In Istanbul, most restaurants charged upwards of 15 liras, so we were pleasantly surprised when our bill came to only 3 liras apiece.

After lunch we had about thirty minutes to walk around the wharf area. There was a line of small fishing boats moored to the pier. We took a stroll down some of the town's market streets, most of the shops and grocery stores catering to the locals. The town resembled a New England fishing village. We headed back to the pier and had to board our bus momentarily as Ugur drove it up the ferry's ramp way. Once on the ferry, many of us went to the upper deck to take pictures. It was pretty cold and windy, the waters of the Dardanelles choppy. After fifteen minutes I went back downstairs and

sat on the bus to warm up. Not long after, we were back on the road again heading to Canakkale, to the ancient city of Troy. *I couldn't wait!* The ride from the town of Lapseki to Troy took about 45 minutes. We passed fields with neat rows of olive trees, and as we cleared the Dardanelles, the expanse of the Aegean Sea opened up on our right.

Upon arrival at the ruins of Troy, Serdar gave us 30 minutes to use the bathroom facilities and then instructed us to meet back at the entrance for a guided tour of the site. Many of us wondered aloud why we would need 30 minutes to use the bathroom... *but then we discovered the Trojan horse!* The Ministry of Tourism and Culture built a large wooden horse replica on the grounds near the entrance, and while it doesn't look anything like the one described in Homer's *Iliad*, we couldn't resist climbing inside the thing like kids scaling monkey bars at recess. We took turns photographing one another poking our heads out of the top of the wooden model.

We finally gathered around Serdar, and he took us to the Excavation House near the base of the Trojan horse to show us superimposed pictures of what Troy looked like over its life time. There were actually nine settlements that evolved on this site over a course of 2500 years. Throughout the ruins we saw signs posted that read Troy II or Troy VII, for example, which corresponded to that particular settlement. The Troy of Homer fame is believed to be Troy VI, the city of King Priam, who engaged the Trojans around 1250 BC. Some archaeologists think a powerful earthquake may have breached the defensive walls of the city and hastened its defeat (and not the suspicious-looking enormous horse!). Either way, there were distinct cultures that rose up around this city. The first groups to settle in the area arrived around the time of the early Bronze Age (3000 to 1700 BC) and shared a similar culture, but between 1700-1250 BC, there was a decidedly Mycenaean influence at Troy, as its trade with the region's Greek colonies increased.

Troy VII lasted from around 1250 to 1000 BC when a Balkan peoples moved into the area, falling into disarray for several centuries until it was revived as a Greek city from 700 to 85 BC. Eventually it became a Roman settlement between 85 BC until 500 AD, and did not amount to much during the Byzantine Period that followed. When we actually walked through the ruins, I was disappointed. Much of what remains of this famous ancient site is unimpressive, having been forgotten and overgrown for so many centuries. I think it only exists today as an archaeological tourist attraction

due to its storied past. One has to use a considerable amount of imagination to conjure up the splendor of this former city. Excavated city walls make up the majority of the older ruins, although the more 'recent' Roman structures are still in good shape, like the Odeon, the city's concert theater, and the Bouleuterion, the council chamber. For those of you who wish to visit the ruins in the future, I would recommend down-loading a map of the site beforehand, so you can get a better idea of what you're actually looking at, this will help when you do the walking tour.

From the ruins we boarded our bus and drove for about 30 minutes or so to the Hotel Akol in nearby Canakkale, located across from the beautiful waterfront promenade north of the main ferry pier. Canakkale is a sprawling college town, and is known for its lively nightlife during the summer months. But this was late March, and it was cold and overcast when we finally drove through its now-quiet streets. I was thoroughly exhausted from the long bus ride and sightseeing and I needed to use the bathroom something fierce. The hotel room was small, but adequate. I had two twin beds which I pushed together to make one big one, but soon discovered the springs in the middle of the mattresses were worn; when I slept my body kept sagging into the bed as if I was slowly being devoured by a toothless monster.

Before I went downstairs to the hotel's restaurant for our buffet dinner (at 7:00pm) I set aside the clothes I would be wearing for the next day's outing. We had another early wake-up call and another long bus ride awaiting us tomorrow, so I wanted to have everything ready before I went to bed that night. At dinner I sat with Richard, Noelani and Ed. From this point on, the four of us would always eat together, and spend quite a bit of time in each other's company. I called us The Four Musketeers. I also became very close with Noelani as the trip progressed. We developed a mutual attraction and soon began flirting and making each other laugh like two giddy teenagers throughout the rest of the tour.

After dinner, I thought about going for a walk with Noelani to check out the town, but it was raining pretty steady now and the temperature had also dropped. We decided against it. Back in my room, I popped an Ambien and tried to catch up on my sleep.

DAY FIVE

I was up at 6:00am and had to pry myself out from the middle of my sagging mattress. There was no coffee maker in my room, which led to caffeine jitters. I shaved and showered quickly and went down to the restaurant as soon as they opened for my daily java fix. The native brew tasted like mud, though. I sat with a couple from the other GATE 1 tour group who gave me a packet of Starbuck's instant flavoring powder, but it did not improve the taste one bit. After breakfast, I had to go back upstairs to retrieve my luggage (which I had forgotten to place in the hallway) and inadvertently boarded the service elevator, the confined space nearly triggering an anxiety attack.

Since it was still early, I took the opportunity to walk along the waterfront promenade and took pictures of the view. I ran into Helene who had the same idea. Not far from the hotel was another Trojan horse replica. This one was actually built for the Brad Pitt movie *Troy* and donated to the city of Canakkale after filming. According to Serdar, it is a more realistic version of the Trojan horse (if you believe the *Iliad* tale) than the one at the actual ruins. Nearby was a miniature replica display of what the ancient city of Troy looked like during the time of Homer. In the distance, I could see the famous sign etched into the mountainside commemorating the Battle of Canakkale, the depiction of a soldier proclaiming the importance of the battle area to all visitors.

By 8:45am we were all on the bus and heading further south along the coastline towards the ruins at Pergamum. As we left the city, we got a glimpse of the imposing Canakkale Martyrs' War Memorial erected on Hisarlik Hill across the Dardanelles on the southern end of the Gallipoli peninsula. From this distance, all we could see were three of its massive four columns, which led to a running joke between Noelani and me. When she was unable to photograph the structure from the bus window, I placed three fingers in front of her camera lens to mimic the three columns. Throughout the trip we would flash each other the 'three finger salute' and laugh every time. Eventually, other members of the tour started to do the same thing. Although, it vaguely took on a playful 'screw you' meaning as the trip progressed.

We spent the next two hours on the road before making a pit stop (read: pee break). Along the way we passed farm areas, rolling hills and the beautiful blue waters of the Aegean Sea. To our left was Mount Ida, known in Turkey by its modern name, *Kaz Dagi*. This mountain is where the Gods and Goddesses of Greek Mythology were supposed to have gathered for special events and meetings. During our long bus rides, Serdar continued to lecture us on the history of the region. There were many elderly people on our tour and it must have been disheartening for Serdar to see them falling asleep by the time he finished. But I loved his lectures. I have a degree in history, and listening to him reminded me of my favorite professors back at Rutgers University. This particular morning he talked about the rise of civilizations in the ancient world, a subject I once taught during my Peace Corps days.

I realize not everyone enjoys history, so I will *try* to keep it to a minimum here. Besides, the purpose of my journals is not to write a thesis, but rather a more detailed log of my travels for posterity's sake. I'm assuming the older I get my memory will begin to fail me at some point, and these written words (combined with my pictures) will allow me to *relive* my journeys when I am no longer physically able to take them. So, in fairness to Serdar, I will include a basic summary of what he said in preparation for our visit to the Greek city of Pergamum:

Serdar began by discussing mankind's evolution during pre-historic times in the Paleolithic Period (approximately 2.6 million to 10,000 BC), also referred to as the Old Stone Age, when early humans lived as small bands of cave-dwelling hunters and gatherers. During the Neolithic Period that followed (known as the New Stone Age) the human race settled down into larger communities as a result of the domestication of animals and the introduction of farming. Religious practices began during this period. The wheel was invented; clay pots were made and decorated. Towards the end of this age copper was used; first, as a coloring, then as a metal. Archeologists refer to this late stage Neolithic Period as the *Chalcolithic Period*.

Around 3,000 BC, smiths were able to smelt copper and mix it with tin, creating bronze tools and weapons, introducing the Bronze Age. The war chariot was created. Cities were walled for protection. The earliest writings began to evolve from pictograms. More sophisticated civilizations continued to emerge. Organized religions took hold; artworks and architecture became more elaborate. Warfare was more common as cultures collided. The period

between 1300 and 550 BC is referred to as the Iron Age, when blacksmiths began to smelt iron ore and make iron or steel tools and weapons. This led to more warfare as groups with stronger (iron) weapons were able to conquer those with inferior weapons. More advanced civilizations emerged during this period and expanded their territorial control. It was around this time that large groups of people began migrating and a 'colonization period' took shape, particularly in Asia Minor. The migration primarily went from east to west.

Asia Minor, also referred to as Anatolia, is the peninsula that encompasses the western two-thirds of the Asian part of Turkey. Since this was a commercial gateway between Europe and the rest of Asia, the region was continuously occupied or controlled by invading powers. Starting around 2000 BC an Indo-European people known as the Hittites held sway over Asia Minor for about seven hundred years. They were followed by a *Who's Who* of ancient conquering empires: the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Phrygians (and a host of smaller neo-Hittite kingdoms and regional powers), the Persians, the Greeks, and finally the Romans. Because Turkey was a vital crossroad for the entire ancient world, the wealth of history and historical ruins found here is absolutely amazing. In fact, I am certain there will be even more startling discoveries and excavations made here in the future.

Two hours later we pulled into the parking lot of a roadside eatery called Saglam Restaurant. The proprietor, Mr. Saglam, a gracious man who resembled a young Saddam Hussein with a goatee, met us inside and explained the dishes. I had the beef kebab with veggies and rice (and several pieces of flat bread). Some had the oven-baked Turkish pizza made with cheese and meat toppings. The meal was very good, and afterwards, as we were getting ready to leave, Mr. Saglam came on board the bus and regaled us with two native songs while we clapped and cheered him on.

From here, it took us another 45 minutes to reach the former ancient Greek city of Pergamum, situated 16 miles from the Aegean Sea on a promontory overlooking the north side of the Bakircay River. This was once the capital of the Kingdom of Pergamum during the Hellenistic Period. It was ruled by the Attalid dynasty (281-133 B.C.). The Attalid dynasty emerged from the remnants of the collapsed Kingdom of Thrace and soon allied themselves with Rome in their wars with Macedon. The Attalids were fairly benevolent rulers, allowing the Greek towns under their control to

maintain nominal independence. They were skilled artisans who remodeled their Acropolis after the one in Athens. In 133 B.C., the last Attalid ruler (who died without any heirs) bequeathed the whole of Pergamum to Rome to prevent a civil war. Today, the main ruins of the ancient city lie to the north and west of modern day Bergama.

Another interesting aspect of this city is that it is mentioned in the Book of Revelations as one of the 'seven churches of Asia'. In the bible, churches did not refer to actual buildings, but rather whole communities. Pergamum had a fairly large Christian following; the first bishop of Pergamum, Antipas, is believed to have been martyred here around 92 AD.

The actual ruin that we visited is called the Asclepeion, in the lower valley, several kilometers west of the Acropolis. Serdar informed us the cable cars that take visitors up to the hilltop containing the Acropolis had safety issues, so GATE 1 decided to limit our tour of Pergamum to the Asclepeion. It was considered one of the most important healing temples, or spas, in the ancient world, dedicated to the Greek god of medicine, Asclepius. During Roman times such notable emperors as Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius and Caracalla visited the site. The famous physician Claudius Galen (131 to 201 A.D.) was born in Pergamum and performed some of his research here. He was an expert on anatomy, studying the nervous system and the heart. People came here for 'holistic' treatments ranging from hot and cold baths to mudpacks, potions and herbs, and could immerse themselves in sports and physical exercise, theater and music. This place also served as one of the first hospitals to treat mental health issues.

We entered the Asclepeion through the Roman bazaar street, a monumental marble walkway a kilometer long bordered by columns. As you approach the main square there is a column depicting the symbol of Asclepeion: two snakes facing each other across a wheel (meaning: patients, like snakes shedding their skins to be reborn, will shed their illnesses and regain health). The main square was surrounded by columned galleries known as *stoa*. To the immediate right was the circular Temple of Asclepius. We crossed the square and entered the Sacred Corridor, a vaulted underground passageway with barred holes in the ceiling. It was creepy, and designed to be so we were told. At the end of this corridor is the Temple of Telesphorus (another god of medicine), a two-storied building that served as a hospital, where patients would be observed as they slept and have their dreams interpreted. There are six large niches here once containing statues.

Back in the square, we saw the Sacred Well, the remnants of the Library, and the 5000-seat theater (built by the Emperor Caracalla in gratitude for the services he obtained here). One of the interesting things I've noted about ancient theaters is how well they have stood the passage of time. No matter what sites we visited in Turkey, the most well-preserved structures always seemed to be the theaters. Fellow tour member Constantine Glezakos impressed the heck out of me by translating some of the Greek words on the broken monuments and columns in the main square. Later, as the group started making its way back to the bus, I stayed behind and took several photographs with Arealia Taylor and Raydell Erin among the stoa columns next to the theater. We were the last to leave the site, and almost lost our way back when we stopped to haggle with a vendor selling pine nuts and honey.

We got back on the coastal highway and drove for several more hours (with one additional pit stop). Along the way we passed Izmir, the third largest city in Turkey, and host to NATO's Air Component Command Headquarters. In ancient times, Izmir was known as Smyrna, one of the seven churches of Asia listed in the Book of Revelations. It also has the second largest Jewish population in the country after Istanbul. Homer is believed to have been born here. Serdar told me the road we were traveling on was the same line of travel the Crusaders once used on their way to Jerusalem. In fact, we saw a Crusader fortress, or outpost, atop a hill right outside of Izmir. Along this passage there were many fortresses built to defend the roadway.

We finally arrived at the KoruMar Hotel in Kusadasi just before sunset. This was the nicest hotel we stayed, by far. Nestled on the cliffs overlooking the Aegean Sea, the view of the water and coastline was spectacular. After checking in and squaring away our luggage, most of us immediately went down to the buffet restaurant and were rewarded by a phenomenal view of the sun setting over the Aegean Sea. And as nice as *that* was, it took second place to the spread at the buffet table. I sat with Noelani, Richard, Ed, Digby and Jan. Holy Moly, did we stuff our faces; the soups, the salads, the breads, the main dishes...*and the desserts!* We didn't leave the table for about two hours. Later, Ed and I decided to check out the edge of the water and took the stairs near the enormous swimming pool down to the rocky shore line, but it was so dark and poorly lit we had to turn back. Exhausted, I went up to my room and tried to watch some TV, but soon fell asleep.

DAY SIX

I was up at 6:00am and had my first bidet experience while using the bathroom. I later joked on the bus that I thought I had found my ‘G’ Spot! Feeling very refreshed (ahem), I went down to the restaurant and ate breakfast with Bill and Carol and some people from the other GATE 1 group. Although there were two separate GATE 1 tour groups, we followed the same itinerary and would often run in to each other on the road, or, as in this case, in the dining rooms. Bill and I had an excellent discussion on the issue of Cuba. He is a retired history teacher and quite knowledgeable on many subjects. I discovered that he and his wife had just finished a Kenyan safari prior to coming to Turkey. Um, remember what I said about world travel being an addiction?

By 9:00, most of us gathered in the lobby for an all day excursion to the amazing ruins of this region. We began by visiting the Meryemana, also known as the Virgin Mary House, located in a mountaintop nature park about 9 kilometers from the ancient Greco-Roman city of Ephesus. The belief amongst both Muslims and Christians who pay pilgrimage here is that this was the place where the Virgin Mary lived out her final days on earth before her Assumption. But this is not a universally accepted notion. The argument for the Virgin Mary House lies in the biblical statements in which Jesus entrusted the Apostle John – who later wrote the Book of Revelations – with Mary’s care (John 19:26-27). It is an accepted Catholic belief that John *did* travel to Ephesus following the death of Jesus and later wrote his gospel there. So, logic would dictate that if the Virgin Mary was in his care, then she would have accompanied him to Ephesus. Because it was not safe for Christians to be in the city, John supposedly built a house on a mountaintop near Ephesus for her. Another argument for the authenticity of this place lies in the fact that the Church of Mary was built in the nearby port city of Selcuk. This church – constructed around the time of the Council of Ephesus (also known as the third Ecumenical Council) in 431AD – is the first one ever dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

How the house was discovered is part of its mystique. In the 19th Century, a German nun named Catherina Emmerich had visions of the Virgin Mary at Ephesus. The nun had never been to Ephesus before, but her descriptions of the area were so vivid that clergy from Izmir checked it out and discovered the remains of an old house on the wooded slope of the Bulbul Dagi (a mountain near the famous Roman city) exactly where the nun said it would be. Archeologists later performed tests on the house ruins and concluded they were from the 6th century, but the *underlying* foundation has been carbon-dated to the 1st century, which would put the building in the correct time frame. The last three popes have all been to the site. In 1967, Pope Paul VI paid a visit and unofficially authenticated the house. In 1979, Pope John Paul II dedicated the Shrine of the Virgin Mary here; ever since then, devote followers of Mary have been paying pilgrimage to the house. Actually, the 'house' is a reconstructed two-room stone chapel (built in a familiar Roman style). Along the side of the chapel there is a painted red line; everything beneath it is part of the original foundation.

More than a million people visit the site yearly. Muslims also venerate the Virgin Mary for giving birth to Jesus, who is considered one of their prophets. Although it was the off-season, and early in the morning, we still had to queue up to enter the small T-shaped chapel/house. Several Catholic Sisters clad in blue habits ushered the crowds through the Shrine, and a priest from the Lazarist Fathers (who conduct daily mass here) greeted us as we entered the anteroom. While waiting on line, Noelani and Helene started to make fun of the solemnity of the place, questioning whether any of this was real or not. They were politely rebuked by Sarah. After this, they jokingly referred to themselves as the *Blasphemers*. For Sarah's sake, I tried not to laugh.

Photography is not permitted inside the chapel and because of the long lines the Sisters were hurrying everyone along. Not that there was much to see inside; a bedroom on the right, and a kitchen on the left. A simple and austere interior containing only an altar, images of the Virgin Mary and lit candles. When you exit the chapel there are information panels and photographs of the Shrine in the adjacent courtyard, and a place to light prayer candles. On the lower level of the hill, below the chapel, there is a 'wishing wall' covered with paper, tissues and even rags on which previous visitors jotted down prayers. I wrote a small prayer for my daughter Rachel (who suffered from Bi Polar Disorder) and stuck it on the wall. It was an emotional moment. Nearby is the fountain referred to as 'the water of Mary',

considered sacred and capable of healing the sick (if you believe in such things). At the gift shop, I purchased five small decorative bottles filled with this salty-tasting water as souvenirs.

We piled back on the tour bus and headed for the ruins of Ephesus. This Greco-Roman city was once the greatest capital in Asia Minor, with a population of 250,000. But after visiting the ruins of Troy and Pergamum, where the ruins left much to the imagination, I wasn't sure what to expect. So I was pleasantly surprised (and amazed) at how well preserved Ephesus was. In fact, my guidebook stated this was *the* place to see if you wanted to get a feel of what life was really like in Greco-Roman times. *It really blew me away.* As a major city along the crossroads of Asia and Europe, everything flowed in and out of Ephesus at one point. St. John traveled here and started a Christian community. The worship of the fertility goddess Artemis within the city led to the creation of the Temple of Artemis (in nearby Selcuk) with 127 massive columns, making it the largest temple of its time, earning it a place on the list of Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Originally, Ephesus was built around the natural port area of Selcuk. Its bustling trade and Temple of Artemis attracted a steady flow of visitors...*and the envy of regional powerbrokers.* Around 600 BC, King Croesus of Lydia (the famously wealthy ruler) invaded Ephesus and destroyed it, relocating its citizens to the southern side of the temple. The Persians were the next group to control the city until the arrival of Alexander the Great in 334 BC. Prior to this, the original Temple of Artemis was destroyed in a fire, and a new massive temple was built in its place (making it one of the Seven Wonders). When the port area began filling with silt, shortly after Alexander's death, his succeeding general, Lysimachus, moved the city once again to its current site further inland between two strategic hills. Most of what we see today in Ephesus was actually built by the Romans when they took over the region.

We spent several hours touring the city with Serdar while he gave us the historical low-down. At the entrance of the city are the **Varius Baths**. All Roman cities had baths located near the entrance so visitors could wash away not only the sweat and grime from a long dusty journey, but harmful agents that could spread disease. These were also social centers where friends could lounge, bathe and get massages. From the bath, we walked past the **Upper Agora** – once decorated with polished marble – the legislative section of Ephesus where the politicians would gather and debate issues,

formulate legislative recommendations and listen to the latest gossip. Behind the upper agora was the **Odeon**, a 5000-seat theater with marble seats used primarily for municipal meetings. Next to the theater was the **Prytaneum**, the town hall and city treasury. It once contained a large statue of Artemis. Off to one side, prior to descending into the heart of the city, was the **Asclepion**, or the hospital.

From here, we walked to the main street known as the **Curetes Way**, passing what appeared to be massive fountains and the demolished temple of the cruel Roman ruler Domitian (AD 81-96), who expelled St. John from Ephesus and killed converts to Christianity. We were at an upper angle looking down this wide boulevard, and the grandeur of the city immediately took shape before us. With all the tourists milling about, one could almost envision how crowded the city must have been back then. The Curetes Way was one of the busiest commercial boulevards of Ephesus; along this marbled pathway Roman merchants set up shops and sold incense and silk and other precious items. Horizontal grooves were cut into the marble walkway to prevent slipping during rainy days. We came upon various interesting structures: **Trajan's Fountain**, built for the visiting emperor with a massive statue of Trajan of which only a ball and foot remain, and the **Men's Latrine** (yeah, the public shithouse) and the city's **Brothel**. The second largest attraction in Ephesus (after the library) is the **Temple of Hadrian**; a Corinthian-style structure more famous for its intricately decorated details than its actual size. Every inch of this temple has elaborate patterns, including two arches depicting Tyche, the goddess of chance, and the snake-haired Medusa to ward off evil spirits. Beyond the first arch is a relief of a man hunting a boar, which represents the mythical founding of the city (the spot where the boar was killed became the original site of Ephesus, so the legend goes). Across from the Temple of Hadrian are the **Terraced Houses** where the elite of the Roman world lived. Unfortunately, this section was closed for renovations, but from what I read is worth the extra admission price; these are excellent examples of the opulent living conditions of the higher classes, with lavish frescoes and mosaics covering every flat surface.

The most popular structure in Ephesus is the **Library of Celsus**, built in honor of the Roman Governor Celsus Polemaeanus by his son following the governor's death in 114 AD. This library was the third largest in the ancient world after the ones in Alexandria and Pergamum. It contained over 12,000 scrolls stored in niches around the walls. The building looks bigger than it

really is because it was constructed as part of a larger complex; the architect who designed the structure made the base of the façade convex, and the central columns and capitals larger than the ones at the ends, creating an illusion of height. The niches along the façade contain statues of the Four Virtues: Arete (Goodness), Ennoia (Thought), Episteme (Knowledge) and Sophia (Wisdom). Interesting to note that these are not the original statues, they are currently at the Ephesus Museum in Vienna. The Austrians were the ones who helped restore the library.

Next to the library is the **Lower Agora**, a huge open square. At this point during our tour I had a minor panic attack. For some reason, as I went back to take some additional photos of the Temple of Hadrian, the group vanished from view. They had actually entered the latrine and brothel sections, but I lost eye contact with them. Thinking they had moved further down the next major roadway known as the **Marble Street**, I hurried along to catch up. At the end of Marble Street I came upon the massive 25,000-seat **Great Theater**, and, like a typical tourist, I couldn't stop photographing it, momentarily forgetting my group. In order to accommodate so many spectators, the theater's seating area ascends in a very steep formation, allowing for a better view and an even better acoustic range. Today, the theater is still used for performances, but only for classical music. Several years ago the rocker Sting performed a concert here and the loud vibrations from the speaker system ended up damaging the theater. One important aspect of these larger theaters is that they help archeologists to determine a city's size. The general rule of thumb is to multiply the seating capacity by ten, which then becomes the estimation of an ancient city's population.

When I realized my tour group was still nowhere to be seen, I had to backtrack to the library where I finally ran into them. Inevitably, this always happens to me on my trips. In China, I lost sight of my group on a sightseeing venture outside of Shanghai and nearly freaked when I thought they had taken off without me! Reunited with my group I made sure to stick as close to Serdar as possible. He showed us a funny marble sign that advertised the location of the brothel. It contained a footprint leading the way to the prostitutes. Afterwards, we continued down the Marble Street to the Great Theater. Ed and I took turns climbing up the aisles and taking photos of each other. From here, our group walked down **Harbour Street** (which led, of course, to the harbour area), Ephesus' grandest street at one time, and the first glimpse of the great city for many of its visitors. In the adjacent fields were two dozen or so sarcophaguses aligned in no particular

pattern or purpose. There was also an area known as the **Lower Gate**, which was closed off during our visit. Beyond it was another section of the city with even more ruins. Ephesus was huge!

Our tour of the ancient city concluded, we drove a short distance to a buffet-style restaurant located on the site grounds. It was packed with tourists. From here, we visited the ruins of the Basilica of St. John in Selcuk. It is believed the Apostle John went to Ephesus twice; the first time with Mary, between 37 and 48 AD, and the second time in 95 AD prior to his death, when he is supposed to have written his gospel on Ayasuluk Hill. During the 6th century, Emperor Justinian erected a magnificent church over the area believed to contain St. John's tomb. There is a scale model replica of the Basilica at the back of the church ruins and from the looks of it this was once a truly amazing structure. During medieval times it attracted thousands of pilgrims. Several earthquakes (and continuous bands of marauders) eventually leveled the building over the centuries. What exist today are the church ruins, which have been in a state of restoration for more than a hundred years. But judging from the site, there is quite a bit of work left unfinished.

Serdar took us through the 'inside' of the Basilica. If he wasn't there to explain what we were looking at, it would have been difficult for me to distinguish the nave from the altar. The building itself was cruciform, meaning it was built in the shape of a cross and once had six massive domes. The capitals facing the nave (the central aisle) bear the monograms of the Emperor Justinian and his wife, Theodora. The current entrance into the church leads you to the southern transept, or the cross-piece section of the building. There is evidence of restoration everywhere; as newer bricks have been placed over the older foundation and the marble walls have been repaired (where they still exist). In one section is an empty cross-shaped baptism pool. I couldn't resist sitting inside while Ed took a picture of me. From the back of the church, perched atop Ayasuluk Hill, and standing guard over the city, was a Byzantine citadel built during the 6th century.

Prior to driving back to the hotel we stopped briefly near the last remaining column of the Temple of Artemis, the only thing left of this massive 127-columned temple once proclaimed to be one of the greatest architectural achievements of antiquity. To be honest, it was a tad disappointing. To think, at one time this structure was the largest in the world, eclipsing even the mighty Parthenon at Athens...and now, an

enormous solitary column standing in an open field with a stork's nest on its crown. *Whoa, how the mighty have fallen!*

We arrived at the hotel around 5:30 pm. I went down to the 'beach' area with Noelani and Richard for a photo op. I have no idea how the locals go swimming here in the summer; the shoreline is a jumble of rocky terrain, and the water is usually very deep the moment you dive in. The tide was pretty rough, too, with waves crashing against the rocks. Perhaps it's not like this in the summer. The three of us took turns climbing gingerly down the rocks to pose as close as we could to the Aegean Sea while the others took pictures from above. Later, we made our way down to a small cove where we found Alan and Kathy wading in the cold water. We took off our shoes and socks and the three of us posed for a picture while standing in the Aegean Sea. Kathy took a long time focusing the shot (the sun was behind us) and I quipped: "Please hurry while I can still feel my feet."

Prior to dinner, Noelani and I decided to take a walk along the mountain road near the hotel, looking for an open air café to have some Turkish coffee or *cay*. I thought I had seen one from the bus when we first arrived. We found the place but it was actually closed for renovations. It stood at the top of the hill, and below it, there were three young Turkish men sitting around a table drinking *cay*. At first, we were not sure if the restaurant was really closed, and we called down to them inquiring if it was open. They immediately smiled and beckoned us to come down.

We began descending the wooden stairway down to their level when all of a sudden I realized this place was actually a private residence. We later discovered the owners were in the process of converting the top section into a seafood restaurant. I have to admit, I was a bit uncomfortable when the man who owned the property insisted we stay and then started boiling water on an outside grill for *cay*. It also became clear to me that we were no longer visible from the mountain road. Yes, I know, I'm making a volcano out of a molehill here, but my normally suspicious mind was in overdrive. Further down the mountain, near the water, was the actual home of this man, who I think was named Mehmet, and I could see a small motor boat moored to a private pier. Hell, we could be clonked on the head, trussed into the back of the boat and on our way to a distant Greek Island before anyone knew we were missing. Well, Noelani, *anyway*. I'm sure they weren't interested in middle-aged bald guys like me. But of course my fears were short-lived. These guys turned out to be super friendly. Mehmet had actually lived in

Jacksonville, Florida for several years, his English was very good. He told us life had become too tough financially in the States and he decided to come back home and try his luck in the restaurant business. One of the other men joined us, and we got into a very lively, but friendly, discussion about U.S. politics. From what we gathered, ex-President Bush was not a popular figure. We ended up drinking several glasses of *cay*, and then said our ‘goodbyes’ and headed back to the hotel. It was a great cultural moment for me.

Around 7:00pm, I met Noelani, Ed and Richard for dinner. We sat at a table by ourselves and set a very leisurely dining pace, going back to the buffet line time and time again. The conversation we had that night was quite interesting. We began sharing spiritual or supernatural stories; it was like telling ghost tales around a campfire. I mentioned a ghost-hunting expedition I once took with my daughter in north Florida, and Richard told us a story about meeting a woman at a party whose son had once lived in the very same apartment he was currently renting at the time in New York City. Whoa, what are the odds? This got us talking about coincidences, randomness, the afterlife...*heck, I don't know what they put in those desserts!* Exhausted from a long day of sightseeing, we called it an early night and retired to our rooms by 9:30pm.

DAY SEVEN

I slept poorly that night. Perhaps it was too much food at dinner, but I kept waking up throughout the early morning hours. I finally decided to get out of bed at 5:45am, shave and shower and headed downstairs for breakfast (primarily to get coffee). I sat with Bill and Carol, and once again had a very interesting conversation with Bill about American politics and the sad state of our economy. Afterwards, I went up to my room to repack my suitcase. When I was in China, a fellow traveler taught me a little trick on how to ‘lighten my load’ as the trip progressed. He told me he normally packed his rattiest clothes whenever he traveled and would simply discard them, leaving his suitcase lighter for whatever souvenirs he picked up. This was Day Seven, and I had been throwing away all of my underwear and shirts daily, yet my suitcase felt heavier than ever. I have this habit of purchasing

informational books and pamphlets at the sites we visited (to help me with the writing of my journal later on) and I now had enough materials in my suitcase (or so it felt) to refill the Library of Celsus in Ephesus. I decided to give the poor bellboy a break and hauled my own backbreaking luggage downstairs.

By 8:45am we boarded the bus and were on our way. Our first stop was a leather store thirty minutes away. I do not recall the name of this establishment, but it was very fancy. We were escorted into a private viewing room where the staff put on a fashion show. At one point, Noelani, Nancy, Lee and Constantin were selected to model some of the leatherwear; they did their walk down the runway alongside the actual models, hamming it up as they went. The leatherwear was absolutely stunning, most of it made from sheep or lambskin. After the fashion show we were taken to the artfully decorated showroom and allowed to browse and buy. All the items on display were beautiful, but the prices were exorbitant. Most of the jackets I checked out were upwards of \$1,000. They also had a section with fur coats, the chinchillas selling for half of what I make in a year!

I observed Helene haggling with one of the salesmen over this gorgeous red leather jacket. All the salesmen were dressed in stylish suits and looked as if they had just stepped out of a GQ magazine cover. The coat Helene wanted to buy – which looked *fabulous* on her, by the way – had a price tag of \$800. She seemed on the verge of buying it, too, when she discovered a stain on the inner lining. The salesman became frantic, telling her it was nothing. He took the jacket to one of the counters and applied some kind of cleaning solution to the stain, but the stain got bigger once he started rubbing it. Nancy and I began creating doubts in Helene's mind. She asked for a discount, and the salesman dropped the price to \$600. Helene wanted a bigger discount and then decided she wasn't going to buy it, after all. As we piled onto the bus to continue our journey, I could see the poor salesman, with his perfectly coiffed hair, making a last futile attempt to win Helene over in the parking lot. I couldn't resist and took a photograph of them.

We left the coastline, turning eastward, and drove inland through farmlands and mountain scenery towards the enchanting natural springs of Pamukkale. Along the way we passed the city of Aydin, which is nestled in the lower valley of the ancient Meander River. The Aydin province is very fertile, and many agricultural products are grown here, figs being the most famous. We pulled into a road stop area near Aydin with many vendors

selling Turkish Delights. I'm ashamed to admit that most of us formed an impromptu 'conga' line and went up and down the vendors' tables eating sample after sample of different types of sweets without actually buying any of it. I did order a *cay* from the restaurant, though (um, to wash down all that Turkish Delight...hee-hee-hee). Back on the bus, all those sugary carbs got the better of us, and one by one we began dosing off. Digby took to photographing us as we slept, starting a trend amongst my fellow travelers. Let me tell you, those were not flattering pictures: heads tilted back, eyes closed shut, mouths agape, drool collecting on chins. I pulled my cap down over my face whenever I wanted to nap on the bus.

Several hours later we arrived in the town of Pamukkale (pronounced pa-mook-ka-lay). Located just north of Denizli, this region is famous for its natural hot springs. The name Pamukkale means 'cotton castle' and refers to a nearby hilly area that is covered in white calcium carbonate deposits. We stopped at the bottom of this hill, in front of a small, sparkling clear spring lake, to take photographs of it. Minerals from the overflow of the hot springs blanket the hillsides and harden, creating terraces, or plateaus, known as travertines. The whole thing resembled a mountain of snow, as if it were winter in the Rockies. I've never seen anything quite like it. The water in the lake had a greenish tinge to it, but was so crystal clear you could see the webbed feet of the ducks as they swam by. We took turns posing in front of the Cotton Castle before driving to the top of the hill to visit the ancient Greco-Roman city of Hierapolis.

The actual origins of Hierapolis are a bit murky. Apparently, very few facts are known about how the city came into existence. It is believed that the Phrygians (who once controlled this entire region under the famous King Midas) built a temple here in the first half of the 3rd century B.C., which later became the center of the city. The Romans gave this area to Eumenes II, the king of Pergamum, around 190 B.C., and its founding is generally attributed to him. The *Hiera* in Hierapolis may actually derive from the wife of Telephus (son of Hercules and grandson of Zeus), the mythical founder of Pergamum. The actual meaning of Hierapolis is 'holy or sacred city', and the ancients believed this site was created by the god Apollo himself. Eventually, the site became a Roman spa center, where citizens would come to take healing baths in the many hot springs. Although, judging by the number of cemeteries at the ruins, I think many more people died here than were cured! The entire city is now a UNESCO World Heritage site.

After entering the grounds we immediately made our way to the edges of the hillside (the Cotton Castle) to take photographs of the spectacular view. Many of us removed our shoes and socks (an official requirement) and trekked to the outer edges of the travertines, wading at times through ankle-deep lukewarm spring water. Noelani and I took turns photographing each other with the Pamukkale valley in the background. But it was rough going. The calcium carbonate deposits felt sharp against my feet and I had to maneuver around gingerly, hoping all the while I didn't drop my camera in the water. From here, we walked to the Sacred Pool entrance.

Before we commenced on the actual tour of Hierapolis, Serdar gave us an hour for lunch. Noelani, Richard, Ed, Nancy, Helene and I purchased *doner* sandwiches at a lunch counter, eating in the lounge area adjacent to the Sacred Pool. Visitors can actually swim in the pool, which was the spiritual center of the ancient city. It has been modernized, and is surrounded by oleanders, palm trees, pines and cypresses. Inside the Sacred Pool are actual artifacts: fluted drums of fallen columns, plinths (the base of a column) and even some capitals from the nearby Temple of Apollo. Although it was overcast and chilly when we visited the site, there were tourists swimming in the hot calcium-laden mineral pool.

We still had about half an hour to go before the tour began, so Richard, Noelani and I wandered up to the city's theater overlooking a hill above the pool area, passing the *nymphaeum*, the monumental fountain that channeled water into the ancient city. Next to this was the foundation and platforms of the Temple of Apollo, dating back to the Hellenistic era, the only things remaining of the great temple. Just to the south was the sealed entrance of the *Plutonium*, the sacred cave leading to the Underworld (the domain of the god Pluto) that still emits poisonous gases (which is why the entrance is sealed). The theater of Hierapolis, like all the ancient theaters we saw while in Turkey, is very well preserved. It had a seating capacity of 20,000, and was constructed around 200 BC. We actually entered the theater from the top section, and climbed our way down the rows to take photographs. Very impressive. Beyond the theater was a stone wall with an arched entrance that rendered a panoramic view of the valley below. We lost track of time and had to hurry down the hill to meet our group, noticing for the first time the lovely fields of daisies springing up to our left.

Serdar led our group down the main thoroughfare, a colonnaded street called the *Plateia*. There were sections of the *Plateia* which still had grooves

in it from the wagon wheels that passed over it thousands of years ago! We passed a ruined church, and the *Martyrium of St. Phillip* (the Apostle who died here in 80 AD), a square building with an octagonal rotunda with crosses and other Christian symbols carved into its arches. We continued walking down the main street until we reached the *North Necropolis* towards the back of the ruins. There are actually several cemeteries in Hierapolis, but this one is the largest in all of Asia Minor, containing over 1,200 tombs of various types, including ancient burial mounds or barrows known as tumuli, and sarcophagi and house-shaped tombs from the Hellenistic, Roman and early Christian periods. Some of these tombs were in remarkably good shape. We saw Jewish symbols on one, and a Roman gladiator's tomb with depictions of his weapons and fighting prizes carved into it. All told, according to Serdar, there are tens of thousands buried in the cemeteries here. He said many Turks – especially those from the countryside – are very superstitious, and avoid going near cemeteries at night when ghosts are supposed to be wandering about. Looking back over this ancient cemetery as we were leaving, I could see his point; this place must be really creepy after dusk.

Exhausted, we gratefully boarded our bus and headed for the Pam Hotel in the town of Pamukkale. The hotel was situated on a hillside surrounded by pines trees and gardens, and featured a spa center, large pool and thermal springs. I had neglected to bring a bathing suit, so I could not avail of the hot natural baths. It was quite chilly at night, but the members who went into the thermal pools said the water varied from hot *to very hot*. Digby later told us at breakfast that it felt as if his testicles were being slowly boiled.

Prior to dinner, I took a walk with Noelani into town looking for souvenirs. A 'tent store' was erected just down the hill from our hotel, which sold local goods at fairly cheap prices. I was able to buy four nice scarves for only 20 liras. We continued into the town square where a huge mushroom-shaped fountain stood in the middle of a round junction, from here several streets radiated out into the small town of Pamukkale. We strolled down one of those streets and found a jewelry shop that had many nice items on display. It turns out Noelani makes jewelry, and quite knowledgeable about semi-precious and precious stones. She not only impressed me with her knowledge, she shocked the two proprietors, who couldn't pull the wool over her eyes! With her by my side, I picked out a nice silver and ruby pendent for a friend back home, paying a decent price for it. We then headed back to the hotel for dinner.

The Pam Hotel reminded me of the Disney resorts in Orlando, Florida, with individual guest buildings spread out over a large area. Most of our group was assigned to the same building. There were dozens of other tour groups using this facility when we arrived and dinner resembled a cattle call. The line was so long at the hot buffet I decided to start with the salads and cold appetizers. After the feast we had in Kusadasi the previous two evenings, the meals here were a real disappointment. At one point, they actually ran out of meat, and put out some kind of mystery protein with the consistency of dried tofu.

After dinner, the hotel offered a free belly dancing show in the lounge, but I had agreed to accompany Helene and Nancy into town, to show them the jewelry store where I had purchased my pendent. It was already dark by the time we reached the town square but the streets were relatively busy with tourists and locals. Helene tried to negotiate for a pendent, but she did not get the price she wanted, and, like the salesman at the leather store earlier that morning, left the proprietor heart-broken. I was beginning to think perhaps Helene secretly enjoyed *teasing* salesmen.

We continued window shopping, enjoying the cool evening air. And then, an unusual thing happened. As we walked by a kebab restaurant, which had an open counter facing the street, I spotted a very sickly-looking puppy whining pitifully and shaking uncontrollably just outside the restaurant's door. I believe I was the first one to see it, and when I mentioned it to Helene, she gave Nancy a quick sidelong glance and then turned to me and suggested we cross the street...*and pronto*. But it was too late. Nancy, as I mentioned earlier in this journal, is an avowed animal lover, and when she spotted the poor puppy she lost it. She began crying at the sight of this little neglected creature, taking umbrage at the poor restaurant owner who probably didn't even realize the dog was outside his place of business. Nancy eventually purchased a portion of *doner* meat and one of the customers in the restaurant laid it out for the puppy to eat. It was very moving. But Nancy kept right on bawling at the sight of this sad little dog shivering in the cold night air, wolfing down his new meal. By now, Helene was sitting on a bench across the street with an "oy vey" expression on her face. Nancy continued to cry, louder and louder, and I felt I had to do *something*. Unfortunately, though, men are rendered useless at the sight of a weeping woman. I mumbled what I thought might be an encouraging word, but I'm certain it sounded ridiculous. Eventually, Helene gave her a big hug

and told her it was okay and we finally moved on. I have to admit, it was both touching and weird at the same time. And, Nancy, honey, if you're reading this, let me just say, I respect you immensely for what you did. Perhaps if everyone responded this way when confronted by another's suffering, the world would be a much better place. *So, kudos!*

When we made it back to the hotel I was, once again, thoroughly exhausted and called it a night.

DAY EIGHT

Once again, I did not sleep well, tossing and turning throughout the night. Lingering jet lag is the bane of travelers! By 5:30am I was up and making coffee in my room. I showered, shaved, and headed downstairs for breakfast an hour and a half later. The morning buffet was every bit as unappealing as the evening one was, but the conversation around the table was lively. Most of those who partook of the thermal baths found it invigorating. After breakfast, I went outside and photographed the outdoor hot pools, steam rising into the cold mountain air. I regretted not bringing my bathing suit. *Drats.*

We were on the road by 9:00am, heading towards the city of Konya, near the central part of the country. Today's bus ride was *exceptionally* long. We drove passed numerous small towns on our way out of the Denizli region: Boszkurt, Cardak, Dazkiri, Dinar. The actual city of Denizli is known for its textile exporting industries, and this region is considered one of Turkey's rapidly emerging economic centers. From the small town of Dinar, we followed the highway northward, through mountainous countryside, towards the city of Afyonkarahisar, which literally means "opium black castle" (this was the opium-producing region of Turkey at one time, and contains an historical fortress or castle built on a black rock which served to defend the city). Although poppy is still grown here, it is strictly regulated. The Afyonkarahisar region is also known for its marble production. Turkey has over one third of all the marble on the planet.

During our first pit stop of the day we were able to sample a delicacy of the Afyon region. Yogurt is an important part of Turkish cuisine, and in this

area they make a dessert with heavy cream yogurt topped with honey and poppy seeds. Delicious!

From Afyonkarahisar we turned south again, stopping in a small town called Cay (like the tea) for lunch. Afterwards, we continued further south, passing two tectonic freshwater lakes (Eber and Aksehir) on our left, and on our right were the snow-capped Sultan Mountains. Along the side of the road we could also see sheep herders tending to their flocks. But eventually, as we drove for several more hours, many of us succumbed to the monotony of the ride by taking short naps. Serdar did his best to entertain us during these long stretches. He told us several jokes, of which I only remember one:

An Imam and a bus driver both die and go to Heaven. The driver is allowed to enter first, which upsets the Imam, a holy man. The Imam asks God why the driver was allowed to go first, and God Replies, “When you preached, you put my people to sleep; but when he drove, *everybody* prayed.”

Serdar also lectured us on Islam, and the social norms and values of present day Turkey. I have to admit, there were times I myself drifted in and out of a sleep on these lulling bus rides, probably due to my continuing jet lag, so I didn't always jot down everything Serdar said for my journal. Oftentimes he was so interesting I would put my pen down and just *listen*. I remember that he talked about the importance of the numbers 3 and 7 in Islam (which are derived from verse structures and stories from the Bible and the Koran). He also mentioned one of the important differences between Christianity and Islam: the concept of Original Sin (the Adam and Eve story). Christians believe that Jesus died for our sins, paving our way into Heaven if we accept Him; Muslims believe we are born *without* sin, and only commit them throughout our lives, so we must be vigilant and live morally in order to get into Paradise.

Another fascinating thing Serdar lectured about as we approached Konya concerned life in the rural Turkish villages, and how neighbors, through their co-operative system of farming, create very close-knit, socially intertwining communities. Privacy, in other words, doesn't really exist here, and everybody pretty much knows what everyone else is doing. As a result, social norms are more strictly maintained, and trying to live outside these norms is not taken lightly. And while Islam is not as pervasive in other more modern sections of the country, the Konya region in itself is much more

religiously conservative. The ‘bible belt’ of Turkey, if you will. The first Turks to conquer Asia Minor were the Seljuk, who made Konya their capital; this city was long regarded as the ‘citadel of Islam’.

We were delighted to finally arrive in Konya. Our stop here was not marked by any significant sightseeing (other than the Mevlana Mausoleum and Museum we would be visiting the following morning). Don’t get me wrong, Konya boasts of a history dating back to the Hittites, but for us it only served as a sleepover en route to Cappadocia. The city itself was fairly large and modern; it has the seventh largest population in Turkey. Also, the largest public university system in the country – Seljuk University, with over 75,000 students – is located here. We could see the campus and many of its dorm buildings as we entered the city. And although the area is relatively conservative, the constant influx of students seems to balance the place out.

As we drove to our hotel in the downtown section we witnessed many examples of early Turkish architecture, where much of the skill and decoration was concentrated in the portal, or entrance, areas. The Seljuk later built larger and larger mosques and structures with bigger domes. There is also a famous Astronomy school here dating back to the Seljuk period with a glass dome and a small reflecting pool used to gaze and map the stars. This ancient city must have been a sight to behold for the merchants who once traveled the Silk Road.

Our hotel was the Ozkaymak Park, which had a nice lobby but rather dull, worn-looking accommodations. On the plus side it was situated in the heart of the shopping district. It took forever to get our luggage up to our rooms since there was only one small functioning service elevator and two very over-worked bellboys. Later, Noelani, Richard, Ed and I took the opportunity before dinner to check out the huge multi-level shopping mall down the street from the hotel. It was very ritzy and had expensive boutique shops. Noelani was looking for a new wristwatch but couldn’t find anything in her price range, so we decided to cruise the big avenues near the hotel (which were lined with stores and cafes) to see if we could locate some inexpensive watches. We didn’t come across any shops selling them (other than a few street vendors) and sat down for a glass of *cay* in an outdoor café. I was impressed with how clean the city was. By early evening the street traffic was pretty intense; when we left the café we had to use a pedestrian crossway above the avenue to make it to the other side of the road.

When I got back to my hotel room I spent thirty minutes setting out my clothes for tomorrow and repacking everything else. This daily chore was beginning to be a major pain in the ass! I then went downstairs for a pleasant dinner with the Four Musketeers (we were joined by Alan and Kathy). Afterwards, Noelani and I took a stroll down one of the major avenues a block away from the hotel. We wanted to check out an art gallery on the corner, but it was obvious some kind of religious gathering was taking place so we continued walking.

It was very chilly. Noelani was wearing sandals and I asked her if she felt cold; she kept insisting she was fine. As we walked down the sidewalk, though, young Turkish women kept staring at her feet and making comments to themselves, which made Noelani a little paranoid. Actually, it was a great night for a stroll. The air was crisp and cool. As we made our way down the avenue we heard the most unusual thing: the evening's call to prayer was being broadcast in a very high shrilly voice. It sounded like a woman under incredible duress. I have no idea if women are permitted to make the call to prayer, but it was the first time I'd ever heard a voice that high...*or that loud*. Quite frankly, it creeped us out.

Noelani and I had a wonderful conversation about politics, current events and spirituality. We must have been walking for well over an hour by the time we made it back to the hotel. Feeling very cold by now, we crossed the street and entered a pizza restaurant and ordered some *cay*. The owners took one look at us and probably felt pity for this poor American woman shivering in her open sandals; they actually gave us – *free of charge* – an entire pizza! We were still full from our buffet dinner but we didn't dare offend these kind people. They kept giving us more *cay*, too, as we sat there slowly munching away. Finally, we asked them for a bag so we could wrap up the remaining pizza (which we ate on the bus the following morning). They didn't want to accept our money until we insisted on at least paying for the tea. It was another wonderful cultural experience like the one we had back at Kusadasi. *These Turks were such nice people!*

Back in my hotel room I decided I didn't want to spend another night tossing and turning, so I popped an Ambien and slept like a baby.

DAY NINE

My Ambien-induced slumber could not insulate me from the loud shrilly voice blaring out of the minaret speakers at 5:30 in the morning. I sprang out of bed as if jolted by a cattle prod. I shaved, showered and went downstairs for breakfast. It was still early, and the only folks I found in the dining room at that hour were Steven and Barbie from the other GATE 1 tour. Later, we were joined by Ed, Park and Carole. At 8:45am a group of us boarded the bus for an optional excursion to visit the Mevlana Mausoleum not far from the hotel.

Konya's Golden Age (under the Seljuk) lasted from about the middle of the 12th century to the first decades of the 13th century. By the 1220's, the city was teeming with refugees fleeing from the Mongol invasions in the east. It was during this turbulent period that the sultan invited a Persian scholar named Bahaeddin Veled and his son, Djalal-ad-din-Rumi, to settle in Konya. In Turkey, Djalal-ad-din-Rumi is more popularly known by the title Mevlana, which means 'master' in Arabic. Although, throughout the English-speaking world he is simply called Rumi (a descriptive name meaning he lived most of his life in the *Sultanate of Rum*). A famous Muslim poet, jurist, theologian and Sufi mystic, he produced all his works in Konya, and died there in 1273. Following his death, his devotees and his son, Sultan Walad, founded the Mevlevi Order, also known as the Order of the Whirling Dervishes, famous for its *Sema* ceremony that includes the Sufi whirling dance. The Mevlana shrine has been a place of pilgrimage ever since, and is one of the biggest attractions in Konya.

Over the centuries, Sufi mysticism (described as the inner, mystical dimensions of Islam) began to spread, and many dervish lodges sprang up under the Ottoman Empire. When the Republic was formed, the Mevlevi Brotherhood was banned, seen as 'reactionaries', but in the early 1950's they were allowed to once again perform their whirling ceremonies without government interruption. In 1927, the original monastery of the whirling dervishes in Konya was converted into a museum and shrine. Our bus pulled into the parking lot and let us off at the entrance. Ugur would be picking us up in about an hour and a half with the rest of the tour members in tow (who'd elected not to take this optional excursion and were back at the hotel) for our long drive to Cappadocia.

The most striking feature of the mausoleum is the tall cylindrical green-tiled dome rising from it. There is another tower and other large domes, but this green one gives the building its character. In fact, it is more commonly referred to as the Green Dome or the Green Mausoleum. When we entered the courtyard area we found a cemetery containing the tombs and gravestones of presumably important members of the Mevlevi Order, the stone replicas of their tall dervish hats lined on top of their graves. We then entered the actual mausoleum.

Serdar took us through the two large wooden doors known as the Tomb Gate, decorated with Seljuk motifs and Persian text from the 1400s. This led to a small chamber known as the Tilavet Room decorated with rare and precious Ottoman calligraphy. From here, we passed a silver door and entered the first part of the Mausoleum, containing the coffins of Rumi's family and descendents and dozens of Mevlevi sheiks. Beyond this, in the section of the mausoleum that actually dates back to the Seljuk, is the sarcophagus of Rumi himself, situated in a corner below the Green Dome and covered with golden brocade. Beside it is the upright tomb of his father, a position that denotes respect.

We were not permitted to take photographs inside the mausoleum; what a shame, too. The ceiling was absolutely stunning. The two adjoining rooms – where the Sema whirling ceremonies were once performed – are now lined with glass cases holding Mevlevi historical exhibits, including clothing and conical caps worn by Rumi, his prayer carpet, and a collection of musical instruments used during the Sema ceremony. Most of these items are over seven hundred years old. Included in the displays are valuable antique silk carpets and rare, illustrated Korans. Outside, back in the courtyard, we had some time to check out the 17 dervish cells (small exhibition rooms with domed ceilings), which focus on the daily Mevlevi life, worship and organization. There were some Rumi inscriptions along the outside of the dervish cells, the one that really inspired me was: “Never think the paths to God are hard to pass. Working with Holiness is never difficult.”

Before our bus arrived I spent some time browsing the spiritual souvenir and bookshop. Noelani bought me a kitchen magnet of a tulip that oddly resembled our ‘three finger salute’. It hangs on my refrigerator door till this day (and still gives me a chuckle). By 10:30am we were on the road again, driving through some incredibly flat terrain – passing fields planted with wheat and sugar beets – on our way to Cappadocia. We came upon small

farming communities with dwellings built mostly of dried mud brick, some of the farmers getting about on horse-drawn carts. To the distant right of us were the Taurus Mountains, a range extending all the way to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which divides the Mediterranean coastal region from the central Anatolian Plateau.

Every now and then we saw shepherds in the field with their sheep, alongside them were these massive Kangal dogs, a breed of flock-guarding canines native to central Turkey and believed to be descended from ancient Assyrian mastiffs. We had the opportunity in Cappadocia to see one up close (the dog was chained); it was a huge, menacing-looking creature, with an enormous head and floppy ears and glared quietly at us as we stared from a distance before suddenly charging, its chains holding it back, the deep growling bark making even the most ardent of dog lovers amongst us recoil in fear. According to Serdar, a fully grown Kangal can rip apart a pit bull in minutes. *Thank goodness I'm not a mailman in this area!*

As we drove towards Cappadocia, Serdar launched into a lecture on the various forms of art in the region. Early *Turkish Art* (originating in central Asia Minor) reflected the nomadic way of life. The religion was a shaman one, with a strong connection between Mother Earth and the spiritual world. Symbols were taken from the stars at night, fire, scorpions and other worldly images, and were first incorporated in the use of rugs. *Islamic Art* would later add images to the artwork of a 'Heavenly' or religious nature: the shady trees (Cypress) and flowers like the tulip (representing the Garden), and images symbolic of stories from the holy books, like the spider who supposedly cast a web at the entrance of the cave concealing the Prophet from his pursuers. These works were known as the Tree of Life, the Bird of Paradise, etc, and were used in woodwork, stonework, metalwork, textiles and carpets; they incorporated geometric flowers and stylized birds and other images that completely covered the object being used in colorful detail. *Seljuk Art* combined both aspects of traditional Turkish Art and Islamic Art, and had a heavy Persian influence. A style of miniature painting developed during the Seljuk period, becoming a national art form, with images having 'no perspective' to the things around them (utilizing distorted size or dimensions). This is all I remember from the lecture. I hope it was useful!

Approximately 15 kilometers from Aksaray – where we would take our lunch – we stopped to tour an incredibly well-preserved *caravanserai* in the

small town of Agzikarahan. The caravanserai served as an inn along the land portion of the Silk Road in Asia Minor, a trade route originating in China during the Han Dynasty (around 200 B.C.) with interlinking routes connecting Europe and Africa with Asia. Further more, the Silk Routes were supplemented with sea routes extending from the Red Sea to the coastal cities of India, Southeast Asia and China. Few actually traveled the Silk Road from end-to-end, an arduous journey that would have taken years to complete; for the most part, goods were transported by agents from one section of the route to another, and traded in the bustling cities and towns along the way. Caravanserais were first used during the 10th century. In Seljuk times, trade across Turkey was done by caravans of camel, and these buildings served as temporary lodging for the weary merchants.

The first caravanserais were actually constructed as small fortresses along the Silk Road known as “Ribat”, but were later expanded for religious purposes and to provide accommodations for the steady influx of traders along the land route. Under the Seljuk Sultans Kilicarslan II and Alaaddin Keykubat I, construction of caravanserais increased. Seeing the potential for big revenues, the sultanates guaranteed traders safe passage through their territories, charging them a fee when they first entered their lands, which allowed them to avail of *all* of the caravanserais along the route for lodging purposes (they were permitted to stay up to three days at each location). They even offered the first-ever insurance policy: if a merchant was robbed while traveling through their territories, they would be reimbursed for their losses by the state. The caravanserais were situated every 30 or 40 kilometers along the Silk Road.

The one at Agzikarahan has been officially restored, and is one of the best examples of these ancient inns in Turkey. We parked across the street and walked through the massive wooden gates, the entranceway carved with typical Seljuk designs and containing a fountain. The entire structure was built from hewn volcanic stone, in a square formation, with very thick, high walls to protect against raiders. Guards would be posted along the top of the walls. In the middle of the caravanserai was a huge courtyard; in the center was a “kosk mescid”, an arched based small mosque used for prayer. The courtyard was surrounded by individual chambers used as bedrooms, depots for goods and animals, a bathhouse and bathrooms. This particular area was open air and used during the summer months; further back were cavernous rooms used in the winter (although, it felt very damp and cold when we walked through them). Underground ovens were used to heat the place in

winter, and candles and lamps provided illumination at night. There were rooms on one side of the courtyard which provided everything a weary traveler might need: an infirmary with an attending physician, a blacksmith for your tools and wagon, a vet to tend to the caravan animals, an imam for your spiritual nurturing, a cook to provide meals, even messengers to pass along communiqués. Heck, I've stayed in *modern* hotels that didn't afford these kinds of amenities! In the courtyard was a replica of the type of cart or wagon the traders would have used back then. It was a remarkable place, and made you wonder about the ingenuity of our ancestors.

From here we drove for another thirty minutes or so to the city of Aksaray for lunch. I had a delicious beef kebab with rice and veggies. Afterwards, I joined the gang for some ice cream in one of the shops inside the rest stop area; a two scoop caramel-pistachio cone. We boarded the bus and continued on to Cappadocia. A funny incident occurred when we came in view of the majestic snow-covered peak of Mount Hasan to our right. Everyone in the back of the bus grabbed their cameras and rushed to the right side windows to try and photograph the 10,000 foot peak, bumping into one another and pushing their companions to one side. This led to riotous laughter and eventually everyone began photographing each other *photographing* the mountain! I'm not sure who started it, but I suspect Helene and Noelani, those two *blasphemers*, were responsible for this playful mayhem.

Cappadocia is not a town or city, but rather a triangular region in the Nevsehir province of Central Anatolia (Asia Minor). Its geographical points, or boundaries, lay between Aksaray (west), Kayseri (east) and Nigde (south). The name has Persian origins and means "land of beautiful horses". This was one of the highlights of our trip. Cappadocia is remarkable not just for its early Christian history, but for the natural wonders of its rocky terrain. The region has seemingly endless hills of volcanic tufa, caused by massive eruptions from three different volcanoes millions of years ago, which blanketed the area in volcanic ash, lava and basalt. Throughout the ensuing millennia, as the volcanoes grew dormant, wind and rain erosion, together with earthquake activity, began transforming the terrain into what it has become today; an unusually white, alien landscape of *fairy chimneys* and tower-like cliffs. Fairy chimneys (an actual geological term) are formed when lava covering the tuff – the hard, consolidated volcanic ash – gives way along cracks on its sloping areas, creating isolated pinnacles, some measuring up to ten stories high, with conical shapes that often have a cap of

harder rock resting on the pillars of the softer rock below. The only way to describe it is to imagine a white, very long, thin mushroom...*or a huge, fully erect penis*. If you think I'm being crass here, I'm not. The fairy chimneys are often described as phallic-shaped.

As we approached Urgup, where our hotel for the next two nights was located, we drove to the top of a cliff overlooking the town of Uchisar to take photos of the natural castle of volcanic tufa that towers over the town and was hollowed out and used as a fortress thousands of years ago. Many of the homes in Uchisar (like many of the villages nearby) are actually caves dug into the sides of the volcanic tufa, with the façade of a house constructed on the outside. Lest you think this a primitive set-up, there are even 5-star hotels carved into the hillsides here, lavishly decorated on the inside and costing a mini-ransom for a night's lodging. If you still don't believe me, go online and look up the cave homes and hotels of Cappadocia; the photos will amaze you. From our vantage point up on the cliffs we had a wonderful panoramic view of the entire valley, as well. Of course, this was nothing compared to the view I would get tomorrow morning during our hot air balloon ride. Even still, the scenery was awe-inspiring.

Next, we visited a carpet factory a short distance away. There was a sign over the door that read: Hereke Carpet Weavers Association. I'm not sure if this was the actual name of the establishment, or some kind of collective. We were introduced to a male employer who resembled a Coney Island carnival barker; he was both entertaining and corny at the same time. He took us into a room where several Turkish women were weaving individual carpets and gave us a lecture on the craft. On one wall was a recent picture of Martha Stewart posing with these very same women. The intricate knotting that goes into weaving a carpet is a real labor-intensive task and the salesman (whose name I cannot recall) used this to justify the price of the carpets. He asked us a rhetorical question: if it took you nine months to weave a single carpet, how much would you want for it? It was a good selling point, I'll admit, until we began making inquiries into the price of the carpets. Holy Moly, a silk piece not even big enough to cover my coffee table was \$1,400!

We were also shown a room where silk thread is separated from its cocoon after being soaked in water. From here we were taken to a large showroom where we sat on long cushioned benches along the wall. Our hosts gave us complimentary drinks, telling us to feel free to sample as many

of the different refreshments as we wanted. I just had *cay*, but I think Noelani took one of everything off the server's tray: *cay*, apple tea, Turkish coffee, Ouzo, Turkish wine. She had enough glasses underneath her bench to open a café!

While we sipped our drinks the salesman continued his selling spiel, unfurling carpet after carpet on the wide floor with the help of his staff. We 'oohed' and 'aahed' as the beautifully weaved items unrolled before us, admiring the patterns and colors. When the presentation was over it was time to hit the individual showrooms where the carpets were lined up along walls and floors, a small army of salesmen making their way between us, swooping in whenever anyone showed even the slightest interest in *anything*. The stuff was beautiful, I admit, just completely out of my price range. I tried to buy a tiny, simple kilim (a tapestry-woven rug) for my coffee table, but even this relatively inexpensive item was too much. I later purchased one in town the following day from a street vendor for only 20 liras (about \$8). Several members of our group *did* buy the larger carpets, which were later shipped to them. Lee, for instance, bought two spectacular carpets totaling \$3,200. He told me that when he was in Morocco a few years back he lamented not buying his carpets then, especially after he priced them in New York City (where he lives) and discovered they cost upwards of \$10,000. I guess if you really wanted to have a Turkish rug, then buying it here made fiscal sense.

We reached the Dinler Hotel in Urgup by 6:15pm. This was a beautiful hotel, with nice rooms and an excellent view of the Cappadocia valley. In the parking lot there must have been two dozen tour buses, which spoke volumes about the popularity of this region. After putting my luggage away, I collected Noelani and Richard and we went downstairs to the dining room for another great buffet experience. Ed, Kathy and Alan joined us at our table. The spread was fantastic. Chefs were constantly preparing the main courses and baking different types of bread in ovens situated right behind them. What a feast! At the end of the meal one of the waiters made a beautiful rose out of a napkin, presenting it to Kathy and then we all tried our hand at replicating his feat. The trick seemed to lie in rolling the napkin finely, and then peeling away the edges to form the rose petal. Most of the others were able to make decent-looking paper roses, but, alas, not even my past experiences rolling joints (*ahem, during my college years!*) prepared me for this. My rose looked like a mashed up napkin.

After dinner, we retired to our rooms. Tomorrow was the biggest day of the tour: our early morning balloon ride over the mountains of Cappadocia followed by a very long day of incredible sightseeing in the area. I requested a wake-up call with the front desk for 4:30am, setting my travel alarm clock as a back-up. I watched the ending of a movie on TV, a police drama, and then dozed off.

DAY TEN

I was too excited to sleep fitfully, and was wide-awake by 4:00 am. I have a slight fear of heights and the idea of going on my first-ever hot air balloon ride was starting to wreck havoc with my anxiety levels. I wasn't the only one, either. Most of the 16 members who booked the balloon ride admitted to feeling somewhat nervous over the whole prospect. We skipped breakfast and by 6:15am a white van provided by Kapadokya Balloons, one of the many ballooning companies in the area, picked us up and drove us to a valley about thirty minutes away. We traveled along a narrow, bumpy dirt path, the bushes lining the road scraping the van as we went by. We reached a clearing in between the mountains where dozens of huge, colorful hot air balloons were preparing to launch, and many others were already in the air. Our balloon was yellow with blue stripes. When we pulled up to it we found ten passengers inside the carriage waiting for us. Alarm bells started going off in my head. How many overweight Americans can you possibly fit into one of these things before it's no longer flight-worthy? Well, we were about to find out.

In order to get inside the carriage we had to hoist ourselves over the edges with the help of the crew (there were no doors or hatchways). The carriage was made out of some kind of reinforced wicker and divided into four sections. The idea was to distribute the weight evenly. In my compartment were Noelani, Richard, Raydell and Arealia. It seemed, though, as if the other side of the carriage had more people...and, if I may be so bold, contained, um, *heavier* types than the ones on our side. I momentarily imagined us tipping over. Our pilot was a young New Zealander named Andrew Parker who had 11 years experience flying these contraptions. His brother Kiley is a world famous champion balloonist.

Thankfully, there was something about Mr. Parker's confidence (and accent) that soothed my fears. Forgive me if this sounds racist, but I think if the pilot was a guy named Mehmet wearing a turban I would have shit my pants.

Some of the crew members (who stayed on the ground, only the pilot goes up) took our pictures while we posed and tried *not* to look nervous; but the death grip I had on the carriage railing belied my cool façade. The pilot kept fidgeting with his gas tank, releasing loud bursts of flames into the balloon that scared the bejesus out of me every time he did it. He also went through a safety drill, which included how to brace ourselves during the landing process. Finally, when everything checked out, the crew released the anchor ropes and we began drifting slowly towards the sky. Another balloon next to us was also taking off, and somehow our balloons got stuck together as we started lifting. More alarm bells went off in my head. I mean, wasn't this dangerous? If two planes got stuck together during take-off it would be a disaster! But Mr. Parker didn't seem fazed in the least, telling us this sometimes happens, and then momentarily stopped our ascent while the other balloon disengaged and drifted away.

We spent the next hour or so floating through the mountains of Cappadocia. Contrary to what most people think, there is no feeling of motion on a balloon ride, no up and down sensation in the pit of your stomach to indicate you are moving or rising. In fact, if you closed your eyes and then opened them ten minutes later, you could be a thousand feet higher in the air and not even know it. As the ride continued, I actually lost my sense of fear and concentrated on the view, which was spectacular from this vantage point.

Navigation on a hot air balloon is limited. The pilot can take the balloon up and bring it down, and he can also turn the carriage in a circle to enable the passengers a different view, but steering is done at the mercy of the wind. I'm not sure why most ballooning is accomplished early in the morning here, but I think it has to do with the wind formations in the Cappadocia valley. We were told that if the wind current is stronger than 15 miles an hour the ride is canceled. Basically, the balloons go up and are carried by gentle breezes down the canyon, floating back to an open field on the other side of the valley. At times, Mr. Parker was able to get us very close to the mountain walls where we could see ancient cave dwellings. Supposedly, thousands of years ago, valley settlers once collected the

droppings from birds nesting in these hills in order to fertilize and farm the lands below.

By this time there must have been more than fifty balloons in the air, and seeing all of them (from our new sky-high perspective) was absolutely thrilling. Some were floating really high up; without warning, our pilot brought us to an altitude of about 2,000 feet so we could join them. You can only imagine the view of the entire valley from up there. The volcanic tufa formations dotting the region looked like endless giant swirls of vanilla ice cream. When we descended into the other side of the valley, we saw incredible fairy chimneys and an entire village carved into the mountain face. We drifted so close we could actually see inside some of the cave homes. Unbelievable!

Mr. Parker announced we would be landing soon and proceeded to take us down on an open field, his crew (and our white van) already waiting for us below. The most incredible feat of the entire balloon ride was the landing. After instructing us to perform our safety brace, the pilot gently landed the carriage *on top of a flatbed truck* (albeit with the assistance of his crew who were tugging on the anchor ropes). Everybody was shocked. As we climbed awkwardly out of the carriage, Richard lost his footing and fell backwards into Noelani, who just barely managed to hold onto him.

Once safely on the ground the crew began serving champagne (some of us settled for apple juice) and Mr. Parker made a toast. He told us this is a ballooning tradition, dating back to the first-ever balloon ride in Paris at the end of the 1700's, when the pilot crash-landed in a nervous farmer's field and offered him a bottle of fine French champagne to prove he was not an alien. The crew also served us slices of what looked like pound cake. We were each given a certificate stating we had completed the balloon ride. After saying our "goodbyes" to the pilot and crew, we climbed into the van and drove back to the hotel, excited as ever.

Back at the Dinler Hotel we had less than thirty minutes to wolf down some breakfast in the dining room before boarding our bus for the day-long optional excursion tour of Cappadocia. Our first stop was a photo-op session on top of a cliff overlooking a different portion of the valley with some very large and unusual fairy chimneys. From here we proceeded to the underground city at Kaymakli.

There are about 36 underground cities in Cappadocia. The widest one is in Kaymakli. Cave-cities have been dug here since the times of the Hittites, and expanded over the centuries as marauding armies marched through Central Anatolia in search of captives and plunder. The underground city of Kaymakli was built underneath a rock hill where the citadel (fortress) of the city is located. This subterranean metropolis once housed thousands of Christians, who would flee into the tunnels from their surrounding villages at the first sign of an invading army and take refuge in the eight levels below. Roughly a hundred tunnels leading from nearby village homes still connect to the underground city (many residents use these tunnels for storage purposes).

After passing the entrance gate into Kaymakli we formed a single file and followed Serdar into the underground city. I'm sure the reason this particular site is chosen by GATE 1 (as opposed to the other city-caves) is because it is described as the widest of the underground cities; but I think the term 'wide' is used loosely here. Perhaps this site was *wide* for the skinny Turkish Christians of 600 AD, but not for us, um, *well-proportioned* Americans. My claustrophobia started to kick in the moment we descended the stairway to the first level. Only four of the eight stories are open to the public, and these are connected by narrow tunnels that get lower, steeper and *narrower* the further down you go.

The first floor was once used as a stable. Throughout the levels are rooms that contained chapels with altars and apses (semi-domed or vaulted ceilings) and living quarters. The third floor was the most important one; it had large storage spaces, a winery, an olive press, various kitchens and a huge stone that served to melt copper. According to historians, the size of the storage jars on the fourth floor indicates economic stability, so this must have been a prosperous Christian city. I must be honest; all of what I just wrote is based on research and what Serdar imparted, because the whole while I was inside this 'city' it merely resembled a cave with tunnels, man-made steps and chiseled out chambers. My thoughts were so preoccupied with reaching the surface again that if Serdar had told us a particular room was once used by leprechauns to make gold I would have simply nodded my head and uttered, "*That's interesting*". The underground city was dimly lit, dank-smelling and confining as Hell. I couldn't wait to get out of there!

When we reached one of the main lower levels, Serdar made an announcement that the tunnels would now get even more confining and

suggested those with claustrophobia or ‘physical’ issues return to the surface via some steps to our left. He cautioned once we decided to continue there was no turning back, since the tunnel would be filled with tourists behind us. Noelani asked me if I was going to go on. I am a man. And men, when confronted by beautiful women, turn into idiots. *Of course I’ll continue*, I replied, not wanting to look like a wuss by joining the elderly walker-using tour members out of this infernal rat trap. But she took one look at my worried face and was not convinced, telling me to stay close behind her. As we made our way further down into the bowels of the earth, the tunnel we were in became so low that I was on my hands and knees, my face practically in Noelani’s ass (which was not necessarily a bad thing, mind you). Suddenly, the line stopped moving! I had to close my eyes and breathe deeply to prevent a panic attack. I was stuck in this narrow space, almost sixty feet below the ground, praying fervently that an earthquake didn’t strike at this moment. Move... MOVE... **MOVE!** I screamed inwardly, but when Noelani asked me how I was doing, I managed to croak: “Oh, I’m okay.” Gratefully, the line continued its forward (or downward) progression, and we eventually reached the final level. I must have banged my head on the tunnel ceiling several times. Noelani also conked her head, causing a slight abrasion.

As I inched my way through the narrowing tunnels I remembered something Serdar told us about the defense of these underground cities. If their enemies pursued them into the tunnels, the Christians would set traps, using large stone blocks to seal off the entranceways, trapping their pursuers inside. What a horrible way to die! It just made me want to get out of there even quicker.

We finally made it back to the surface following a narrow stairway, but not before a bit of confusion ensued concerning the exit. Serdar had disappeared into the tunnels looking for some of our tour members who hadn’t made it through yet and we momentarily lost our bearings when I Spanish tourist and her daughter came frantically out of a passageway (which we thought Serdar told us to take) stating it was not an exit. The irony of the situation made me laugh; an hour and a half earlier I was floating 2,000 feet *above* a mountain, but now I was actually more terrified being stuck inside of one!

From Kaymakli, we continued driving through the province of Nevsehir, past the town of Uchisar, a large Turkish prison, and fields planted with

potatoes and onions en route to the Open Air Museum of Zelve. The site (which resembled a national park in Arizona) was founded on the steep northern slopes of Aktepe, and consists of three separate valleys with the highest concentration of fairy chimneys in Cappadocia. Although it is not certain when people started carving dwellings into the rock formations at Zelve, what *is* known is that a large Christian community once lived here, and between the 9th and the 13th centuries this became the religious center for the area. There is a monastery complex carved into the rock, the first religious seminars for priests (in Asia Minor) were held here. Throughout the site there are also early Christian churches, homes, a tunnel connecting two of the valleys and even a small mosque. Again, all of these structures cut into the hillsides.

But the unique characteristic of the site lay in the many fairy chimneys, which have thick bases and are topped with pointy tips of hard rock; a desert area with phallic-looking rock formations everywhere. I nicknamed it Dildo Park. Some of the more juvenile among us began taking funny photos of the fairy chimneys. I posed Noelani in a way that made it seem as if she was licking one of these giant, um, well, *you know*. I think the best shot was the one Noelani took of Kathy who stretched her arms in a circle, pretending to be holding a giant fairy chimney. Serdar gave us thirty minutes to walk around the nearby valley and take photographs. Arealia took some really nice pictures of me standing before the entrance of a large cave.

For lunch, we went to Hanedan Restaurant in the town of Avanos, a region known for its beef pastrami, white bean soup and eggplant dishes. The Hanedan Restaurant was constructed as a replica of an ancient caravanserai and we ate in a small dining hall that would have been used as a lodging/stable room back in medieval times. It was pretty cool, actually. The food choices we had to select from included locally made beef pastrami, a pastrami pastry and typical chicken or beef dishes. I ordered the chicken dish, plus the pastrami pastry and a salad. Some of my companions ordered the white bean soup but, unfortunately, they ran out and offered another kind. The food was good. Although, the verdict was still out on the pastrami. Not that it was bad; it just didn't taste like the pastrami back home.

From here we drove to the open air museum in Goreme. Like the site at Zelve, this was an early Christian center. The area was first settled during the Roman period and over several hundred years (until the 12th century) a vast monastic complex was carved into the valley here; eleven refectory

monasteries built side-by-side each with its own rock-cut church. When you enter the site, it resembles another rocky national park, but on closer inspection you can make out the shape of buildings cut into the hillsides, with windows and entrances. We were able to tour three of the cave churches and were amazed at what we discovered inside. The only bad thing about visiting this site is the waiting time. Only so many people are permitted to enter the structures at a time, and then only for a few minutes. Photography is not permitted to protect the delicate drawings and paintings on the walls and ceilings. We had to wait almost thirty minutes to enter the first two sites, wilting under the mid-afternoon sun. *It felt like I was at Disney World!*

The first church we visited was the underground *Apple Church* (Elmali). It was designed as a groined vault structure with four columns and a central dome, everything cut out of the rock. Covering the walls are beautiful frescoes (from the 11th and 12th centuries), narrating the life of Christ, the hospitality of Abraham, and the Three Hebrew Youths of Babylon depicted in the Book of Daniel. The colors were vivid, and in the sections where the frescoes fell off you can see simple red-painted ornaments from the Iconoclastic Period. In front of this church there used to be an apple orchard, hence the name.

Behind the Apple Church, we entered the *St. Barbara Church*. This church has a cruciform design with two columns. The eastern arm of the cruciform is domed, the rest are barrel vaulted. There is a main apse and two smaller side apses. This particular church is a typical example of the Iconoclastic Period, when the church forbade images of people inside religious places. The walls and ceiling were painted in red motifs with geometrical designs, mythological animals and military symbols. This cave church dates back to the second half of the 11th century.

The third church we entered was actually on the road leading to the parking lot where our bus was waiting for us. The *Buckle Church* (Tokali) is a complex made up of 4 main chambers; the first part of the building and the back part were built during different periods. The entrance to the 'new church' has a rectangular plan and connects to the barrel-vaulted single nave (the 'old church') via a longitudinal axis. There are three arches that further divide this cave church. The paintings in this structure are among the most important religious artwork in the region. The frescoes of the 'old church' (from the 10th century) represent scenes from the bible and are painted in

brilliant red and green colors. The indigo blue colors dominating the main chamber frescoes of the 'new church' are absolutely stunning. Of all the rock or cave churches in Cappadocia, the Buckle Church has the best paintings narrating the life of Jesus in the most detail, from his Infancy, to his Ministry, to his Passion cycles.

From Goreme we traveled back to the 'old town' of Avanos, to a pottery and ceramic shop called Firca. The entire establishment was carved into the rock, and as we walked through the tunnel-like entrance towards the pottery workshop it felt as if I was back inside the underground city. Yikes! But once we reached the showrooms it was quite refined and beautiful. Like most of these 'store visits', we were met by a salesperson who spoke excellent English and gave us a presentation on how the products are made. In less than five minutes, a craftsman on a pottery wheel cranked out a round holding pitcher (used to pour wine in ancient times). This pitcher would later be baked, painted and glazed (and sold, no doubt, to unsuspecting tourists for an exorbitant price). Avanos is situated along the Red River (Kizilirmak), and the large deposits of red clay along its banks provide the raw materials for the town's famous pottery industry. Later, in the showroom, we browsed some incredibly beautiful ceramic decorative plates, tiles and pottery. I purchased a blue ceramic tile with the word *Allah* inscribed on it which the salesman told me was a replica of a tile in the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. It cost me 65 liras, including the frame.

We made it back to the hotel by 6:15pm. Having been up since four in the morning I was completely exhausted. After putting away my purchases, I went downstairs and had dinner with Noelani, Richard, Ed, Kathy and Alan. The day had been a long one, but it was not over yet. At 8:15pm a group of us had opted to take an excursion to see a dervish Sema ceremony at a restored caravanserai. In all honesty, if I hadn't already pre-paid for this excursion Stateside, I would probably have skipped it. I was so tired I started falling asleep on the bus.

It was already dark when we arrived at the caravanserai. We had to wait in the courtyard section for the main room to open up. A projector was flashing what looked like psychedelic symbols along one wall. There was Sufi music flowing out of a speaker system. I half-expected to see hippies passing around a bong! Oddly, the psychedelic symbols gave way to a slide show presentation which seemed tailor-made by the Turkish Ministry of Tourism. When this was over, the doors to the main room were opened, and

our tour group went inside and sat around a square section in the middle of the chamber. By now I was struggling to keep my eyes open. Noelani, a very spiritual woman by nature, was really excited, and she tried to keep my mood up, flashing me the ‘three finger salute’. Suddenly, everything got real quiet, and a group of dervish men filed into the square, sitting on the floor around two of its edges. They were dressed in dervish robes and one group had Sema musical instruments in front of them.

The Mevlevi (or Whirling Dervish) Order is based on philosophical teachings focusing on the Love of God, and is not in itself a religion or a sect of Islam. The Sema ceremony includes the whirling meditation which is symbolic of the planets circling the sun (the Light), each palm facing in opposite directions to represent the receiving, and passing on, of God’s blessings. The dervishes who participate in the whirling meditation wear black robes which are slowly discarded during the whirling to reveal the white robes underneath (a grave-to-God connection). This is all I know based on what Serdar told us.

The Sema ceremony began when one of the dervishes got up and recited some kind of long prayer or chant. Actually, he had a sing-songy lilt to his speech, and while he spoke in Turkish (or was it Persian? Arabic?) I found it very pleasant and soothing. When he was done, five of the dervishes stood up and began whirling in circles in the middle of the square while the other men played the musical instruments; some flutes, strings and a percussion device. This went on for...*heck if I know*; I kept falling asleep watching these men twirling around nonstop. It felt like I was being slowly hypnotized and a voice was whispering in my ear: “*Your eyelids are getting heavier, you’re getting sleepier....*” On more than one occasion during the ceremony Noelani had to gently elbow me when I started to snore. In my defense, I looked around the room and discovered that almost half the spectators were nodding off, too. Remember, by this time I’d been awake for more than 17 hours. I’m amazed I didn’t slide out of my chair and onto the floor!

We got back to the hotel around 11:00pm. I collapsed onto my bed fully clothed. I dreamt the room was spinning...*or was it whirling?*

DAY ELEVEN

As tired as I was, I managed to crawl out of bed at 5:00am, but not by choice. We had an early morning departure today; another long bus ride to Ankara. My thigh muscles were really sore from all the crouch-walking I did in the underground city the day before. I showered, shaved and repacked by suitcase. By now, I was an expert repacker; my luggage took all of five minutes to prepare before I deposited it in the hallway for the bellboys to pick up. Shortly after breakfast, by 7:15am, we were on the bus and heading west again, back towards Aksaray. When we took our first roadside break I was able to sample the Turkish coffee with Noelani. She was quite fond of this stuff, but I wasn't enthused; there were more coffee grinds at the bottom of my demitasse cup than I actual use in my coffee maker back home. From Aksaray, we turned north, getting on a major highway leading straight to Ankara, the country's capital.

We passed Lake Tuz (or *Tuz Golu*) on our right, a large salt lake that provides two thirds of all the salt consumed in Turkey. At one time, the central part of Anatolia was a gigantic body of water, but as it dried out, Lake Tuz is what formed in its place. Along its banks we saw several mining companies which process the salt to make many different types of products, ranging from table salt to teeth whiteners. Later on, as we approached the town of Golbasi, on the outskirts of Ankara, we passed the much smaller Golbasi Lake, one of three tectonic lakes in the area situated along a fault line. Serdar told us this lake was full of crabs and leeches, and used for skating in the wintertime.

The landscape from Askaray to Ankara was very flat; we passed many farms and shepherds tending to their flocks along the way...*but not much else*. I was able to catch up on my sleep half way through the drive. As usual, Serdar gave us a lecture on the region:

Ankara is the capital of Turkey and is the second largest city after Istanbul, with a population around four and a half million. This is the center of the Turkish government, housing all the important ministries and all of the foreign embassies. According to Serdar, more than 80% of the city's workers are government employees. Throughout the city you can see large groups of male civil servants walking about in suits and ties, the required attire. Ankara is strategically located in Central Anatolia, and serves as a national crossroad for trade, being in the center of the major highways and railway networks. The city was once called Angora, and is famous for its

Angora goat (and the mohair it produces), its unique breed of Angora cats and rabbits, and for agricultural products like pears, Muscat grapes and honey. This is truly a historic city; besides the Ottoman Empire, archaeological ruins here go back thousands of years, from the Byzantine, Roman, and Hellenistic periods all the way back to the ancient Hittites. The historic center of the city lies atop a rocky hill which rises above the plain on the left bank of a tributary of the Sakarya River. This hill, which overlooks the rest of the city, contains the ruins of Ankara Castle.

The modern history of Ankara can be traced back to 1920, when national movement leader, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, used this city as his resistance headquarters against the Allied occupation following the Ottoman's defeat in World War I. After winning the nationalist War of Independence, and ratifying the Treaty of Lausanne (which settled Turkey's new boundaries with the rest of Europe), Mustafa Kemal Ataturk declared the new Republic of Turkey on October 29, 1923, ending the Ottoman Empire. In order to lessen Istanbul's lingering Ottoman influence over the rest of the country, he made Ankara the new capital. Almost immediately the city was divided into two: an old section, known as *Ulus*, marked by narrow winding streets and ancient buildings from the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman periods, and a new section called *Yenisehir* (today centered in the shopping neighborhood of Kizilay) where all the newly constructed buildings and shopping plazas of the modern city sprang up.

When we arrived in Ankara, we drove directly to the Mausoleum of Kemal Ataturk, one of the most impressive shrines I have ever seen for a political figure. The name Ataturk means 'Father of the Turks', a title bestowed on a man whose singleness of purpose led to the creation of a new nation virtually overnight. Mustafa Kemal Ataturk was a firm believer in the 'ends justifying the means' when it came to social engineering. His vision to carve out a new Turkey in the 'democratic' mold of Western Europe meant that long-held religious and cultural traditions had to be swept aside. He was an absolute ruler who ruled under the guise of a Republic.

A brilliant and well-decorated military leader, Kemal Ataturk was hailed as "Gazi, the destroyer of Christians" after defeating Greek troops in one battle – one of the highest honors for a Muslim military leader – but later, when he founded the Republic, he demonstrated a disdain for most things religious, immediately expelling the Caliph from the country and effectively separating Islam from the State, creating the first truly secular society in the

Muslim world. He granted women the right to vote, and supported equal rights (one of his adopted daughters became the first woman jet pilot), and outlawed the Islamic dress of the time, requiring men and women to dress as they did in Europe. He commissioned a group of foreign linguists and national scholars to create a new written language and then forced it upon his countrymen by law; the rapidity with which this new written text took hold – according to Serdar – was akin to picking up the New York Times overnight and finding it written in a new language. Everything this man did, he did with finality and swiftness; it's almost as if he did so to prevent the public from debating his reforms and stalling his progressive viewpoints.

There is no doubt that Kemal Ataturk forged a new and better nation from the corrupt remnants of the dying Ottoman Empire. Amongst devout Muslims he is generally despised for ending the Caliphate in Turkey and embracing Western secularism. His argument was that he did not see any significant progress under religious regimes; to the contrary, their superstitious nature tended to impede progress. And while Turkey remained a poor country for many decades following the founding of its republic, today the political and social freedoms and economic prosperity that its citizens enjoy can ultimately be traced back to this man. Love him or hate him, just keep your opinions to yourself when traveling inside Turkey, because it is *literally* against the law here to defame Ataturk (or anything Turkish for that matter). These laws are called *lese-majesty*, and will land a foreigner in jail quicker than you can say, “Midnight Express!”

Known as the *Anitkabir* (Monumental Tomb), the mausoleum of Kemal Ataturk sits on a hill just west of Kizilay, smack in the center of Ankara, and can be seen from any direction. The entire mausoleum complex was built over a nine year period (from 1944 to 1953) and is quite an imposing structure. We parked along the roadway adjacent to the site, lining up with dozens of other tour buses. Entering from the front, there are two square kiosks and several stylized statues. One of the kiosks has a scale model of the Anitkabir complex including photos from its construction. From here you walk down a long monumental avenue flanked with neo-Hittite stone lion statues (which seem to be smiling) until you reach an enormous courtyard. The courtyard contains a cenotaph dedicated to General Ismet Inonu, a personal friend of Ataturk and military leader during the War of Independence who went on to become the country's second president. Opposite the cenotaph is the actual Anitkabir, resting atop a marbled staircase. High-stepping military guards patrol the front of the mausoleum,

and are stationed throughout the courtyard in a traditional silent stance. We were able to witness the changing-of-the-guard when we first arrived.

The simple but elegant colonnaded mausoleum has a huge hall (the Hall of Honor) lined in red marble and is decorated with mosaics recalling the various civilizations of Anatolia: Hittite, Hellenic, Roman, Seljuk and Ottoman. On the north side of this hall is a large marble cenotaph carved out of a single block of stone, memorializing Ataturk. His actual body is buried beneath it in an underground tomb compartment. The pyramidal ceiling directly above the cenotaph is beautifully inlaid with Persian gold mosaics. The whole thing was simply amazing, an impressive architectural feat, and not to be missed if traveling through Ankara.

Underneath the actual main hall is a large museum section which chronicles the life of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, from his humble beginnings in Thessalonicki, the only son of a minor government official, to his rise and accomplishments within the Turkish military, and his time as the Republic's founder and first president. No glory or benevolent act was left unturned. There is an entire gallery devoted to his masterful defense of Gallipoli during World War I which made him a national hero, complete with replicas of dying Turkish soldiers and audio recordings of bombs exploding. There are many photographs of him as president, depicting the many social and economic programs he instituted, such as his push to mechanize the country's agricultural system via the use of tractors. Some personal items were on display, as well. The man knew how to live. He was a tall, handsome man with piercing blue eyes rumored to be a bit of a womanizer and drinker. He supposedly died of liver disease. He never had any children with his wife, but supposedly adopted seven daughters and one son, and had two others under his protection.

The man was a true enigma; on the one hand, a brilliant military strategist and often cold and calculating political ruler, yet possessing a soft spot for needy children, whom he championed at every turn. Whatever his shortcomings may have been, I personally believe he was a great leader, who had the foresight to propel his country into the modern era, regardless of the initial social or religious upheavals that may have caused. It would be unfair to judge him by our own political standards. One only has to see where Turkey is today in regards to the rest of the region to understand just how far this Republic has come.

We spent about two hours here and then proceeded to the Barcelo Altinel Hotel in the center of the city. It was a nice hotel, part of a Spanish chain, and walking distance from great shops and restaurants. Thirty minutes after checking in I joined a small group of tour members who had signed on for a trip to the Anatolian Civilization Museum in the Atpazan district of Ankara. The museum is located next to the Ankara Castle in the old section of the city, and we drove by some shanty towns built into the hillside, my first glimpse of urban poverty since arriving in the country. Serdar told us that many of these run-down neighborhoods were being sold, lot by lot, to large land developers who will eventually bulldoze the area and built more hotels or residential buildings and plazas. For the most part, though, Ankara looked like a very charming city, with clean streets and parks and bustling market areas.

Our bus had to take a very narrow winding road up to the top of the hill where the Anatolian Civilization Museum was located, affording us a nice view of the city. We could also see the ruins of the ancient defensive wall of the Ankara Citadel before us. The museum is actually situated inside two fully restored Ottoman buildings (which once served as an Inn and a bazaar) from the 15th century. There is a garden in front of the museum containing numerous statues from Turkish antiquity. Inside this large two-chamber exhibition hall is one of the most outstanding collections of artifacts I have ever seen. Beginning in the Paleolithic times (approximately 8,000 years BC) up until the Late or Neo Hittite Age (ending around 700 BC), the museum categorizes – by period – the artifacts of the civilizations that once sprang up in the Anatolian (or Asia Minor) region.

We walked through the front door and were greeted by an enormous Hittite statue (a soldier, I believe). From here we began our tour by heading to the *second* building first, which houses the early periods. In the Paleolithic exhibits, dating back 10,000 years (or more), the artifacts on display were excavated from the Antalya Karain Cave near the Mediterranean coastline, and consist mainly of primitive tools made of stone and animal bones. Next to this are the Neolithic displays (from 8,000 to 5500 BC), which were excavated in the areas of Hacilar and Catalhoyuk (the best-preserved Neolithic site ever found). On display are Mother Goddess sculptures, clay figurines, stamps, bone and obsidian tools, earthenware containers and wall paintings (which were reproduced with plaster from the actual sites) depicting hunting scenes and the volcanic eruption of Mt. Hasan. The Chalcolithic period (5500 to 3000 BC) came

next, known as the copper-stone age, with displays of stone and metal tools, goddess figurines, metal jewelry and seals. And lastly, the Bronze Age exhibits (3000 to about 1500 BC), when civilizations learned how to melt copper and tin and form bronze. The items displayed here are absolutely stunning, many coming from the Hatti tribes: solar discs, thinner versions of female figurines, gold jewelry and deer-shaped statuettes. There is also a section which displays numerous artifacts from the Assyrian trade colonies that flourished from 1950 to 1750 BC, including cuneiform tablets, drinking vessels, all types of tools and jewelry made from various precious metals, ceramic art and tile, and pieces of clothing.

The first building contains incredible statues, mosaics, bas relief carvings, furniture, tools, jewelry, huge storage vases and a wealth of other interesting artifacts covering the Hittites (1750 to 1200 BC), the Late or Neo Hittites (1200 to 700 BC), the Phrygians (1200 to 700 BC), the Urartians and the Lydians (from 1200 to 550 BC).

In the Hittite section there is a famous tablet carved with Akkadian script sent as correspondence from Queen Nefertari (wife of the great Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II) to the Hittite Queen Puduhepa (wife of King Hattusili III) following the Peace Treaty of Kadesh, the first treaty of its kind, dating to about 1250 BC. The Neo-Hittite carvings were big on warfare and war chariots. In the Phrygian section there is a reproduction of King Midas' tomb (from the ancient tumulus or burial mound), and carved and inlaid wooden furniture and hinged dress pins (the first safety pins). None of the artifacts on display are less than 2000 years old. *Amazing!* This is one of the reasons the Anatolian Civilizations Museum has won numerous awards throughout the years. I whole-heartedly recommend it.

On the way back to the hotel we passed the old square and some historical government buildings dating back to the beginning of the Republic. We reached the Barcelo Altinel Hotel around 5:15pm. Forty five minutes later I met Noelani, Ed and Richard in the lobby. We were on our own for dinner tonight, and Serdar recommended a kebab restaurant a ten-minute walk from the hotel. The sky was very overcast and it looked like it would start raining at any moment. In fact, we made it to the restaurant just in time. A very powerful storm, characterized by gusting winds and lightening strikes, began pounding the city as we took our seats.

The meal was excellent. Their specialty was kebabs, including a slow-marinated liver kebab which Noelani tried. She gave me a piece and it was quite tasty; it didn't taste like liver at all. I had the lamb kebab, which came on these really long, hot metal skewers that almost burned my fingers. The waiters came by the table and slid the meat onto our plates for us. It was served with two types of salads (spicy onion and tomatoes) topped with a pomegranate dressing, and a ton of freshly baked bread wraps. We also ordered the delicious strained lentil soup. *What a feast!* The price was very reasonable, too. It came out to about 20 liras apiece (\$8) and we threw in a generous tip to the very grateful staff.

By now, the rain had stopped and we decided to walk further down the main avenue in search of a dessert shop. But no sooner than we made our way along the sidewalk, the clouds started darkening again and we opted to hurry back to the hotel before the next deluge. It began pouring again before Noelani and I could reach the lobby. Ed and Richard were more nimble. The worst part was the lightening bolts crackling through the night sky, lighting up the place like fireworks.

It was still early and Noelani and I sat in the lobby discussing her ideas for a new cable show, about healing and positive spiritual energy, she was thinking of producing for a local station back home. We came up with the title, "The Tracks We Leave Behind", and bounced ideas off each other concerning the show's format. We were later joined by Helene, Nancy, Digby and Jan (and briefly by Kathy and Serdar) and had an amusing time sharing traveling stories and discussing everything from spiritual matters to movies. Judging from the looks we got from the other guests, I think we may have laughed too hard at times. Helene mentioned her fear of flying, and how she always travels with a gold medallion her grandfather gave her when she was eight years old. The medallion has the Hebrew word *Luck* inscribed on it. She wanted to show us this cherished piece of jewelry and reached into her cleavage area and produced it. This cracked me up, and I couldn't resist teasing her a little. I said: "Hold on, Helene. You're telling us that your beloved grand pappa gave you a gold medallion when you were only eight years old.... *and you just pulled it out of your bra?*" We had a great evening, and later joked about heading up to Helene and Nancy's room to get drunk on some kind of liquor they had stashed away up there. In reality, though, it was 10:30pm and we called it a night. Tomorrow we had another early morning drive back to Istanbul.

DAY TWELVE

I was awake by 5:00am and had breakfast an hour later. Today was technically our last 'tour' day since tomorrow most of us would be traveling back home. And like the whirlwind pace of the tour thus far, this would be another long, but satisfying day. We would be traveling back to Istanbul starting at 7:30am. Serdar requested (although it almost sounded like a plea) that we not be late boarding the bus in order to make good time on the road. Many of us had opted to take the Bosphorus afternoon cruise in Istanbul, so Ugur would be driving our bus directly to the pier. The length of time it would take us to arrive in Istanbul coincided with rush hour traffic, and Serdar was hoping that if we left Ankara early enough we might beat the congestion into the city.

Miraculously, everybody was on the bus by 7:30am and we took off on schedule. It would be another long drive, more than five hours. We continued north from Ankara, passing Kizilcahamam, a quiet little market town known for its healing hot springs and mineral water, and the attractive woodland enclave of Camlidere, a popular camping area. About 90 miles into our trip we reached the town of Gerede, in a large area of hill country surrounded by pine-covered mountains, and turned west on the main highway which would take us directly into Istanbul. To our left, near the small countryside village of Dortdivan, we came upon the snow-covered Black Sea Mountains. It was rainy and much colder in this region; heavy blankets of fog kept sliding down from the hillsides. Serdar told us this province was good for skiing, and during the early winter months hunting for Bezoar Ibex and Chamois (two wild goat-antelope species native to this region) is permitted, attracting hunters from all over the world.

The highway went through several small industrial cities, and I lost track of all the vehicle manufacturing plants we passed: Ford, Hyundai, Toyota, Mercedes Benz and several tractor companies. In between the mountainous valleys were stretches of flat farmlands. The highway traversed the middle of a valley that lies on a major fault line. The city of Izmit (which we drove by) was devastated by a major quake in 1999. More than 17,000 were killed and many buildings in the area were toppled. We could see the new government-built housing projects that were later constructed to shelter the

hundreds of thousands left homeless by the disaster. I found it a bit odd that so many manufacturing plants have been built along this earthquake-prone valley.

As we approached Istanbul, Serdar asked us if we had enjoyed our trip to Turkey and then recapped the many things we'd seen and done. As he went down the list, it hadn't occurred to me just how many interesting sites we'd visited in such a short period of time: the old churches and mosques in Istanbul; the ruins of Troy, Pergamum, Ephesus, and Hierapolis; the underground cities and churches of the early Christians; the bountiful beauty of this land, from the Aegean coastline to the enchanting lava hills of Cappadocia. What an amazing journey these past twelve days had been. When Serdar was finished, he fielded questions from us. We wanted to know what changes Turks would like to see in their own country. He mentioned four areas where there could be improvement:

- 1) **Education**- he said the educational system, which is mandatory, should be targeted to the students' aptitude like they do in England. Today, most public schools require completing 15-16 subjects, inspiring less thinking and more rote memorization, which doesn't really prepare the average student for a meaningful career later on.
- 2) **Health Care**- on the rural and small town level, it's mostly junior doctors and recent med grads who attend to the sick, so the quality of the care is sometimes in doubt.
- 3) **Pension Plan**- the minimum pension payment is not enough for most Turks to live on and they usually have to pay for additional coverage.
- 4) **Legal System Reform**- Serdar claimed the judicial system in Turkey is very slow, court cases take a long time to come to trial; meanwhile, there is no bail system in the country, and detainees must often wait in jail very long periods to have their cases heard or tried.

I'm not sure if Serdar was holding back; perhaps these were the issues he felt comfortable talking about openly with a group of foreigners. At any rate, he was a great guide, giving us much insight into Turkish history and culture. And we were lucky to have him, too. I had the opportunity to talk with many of the members from the other GATE 1 group (usually during breakfast), and some of them seemed put off by their guide's demeanor; he was an intelligent man, they all stated, but a bit on the arrogant side.

By 1:30pm we reached the Bosphorus Bridge, one of two suspension bridges crossing the Bosphorus Strait into Istanbul (the other is the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge just to the north and visible from our highway). Once we crossed the strait we were officially in Europe again. Traffic was heavy, but at least everything kept moving and we found ourselves at the Eminonu ferry docks around 2:30pm. No visit to Istanbul is complete without a short cruise up and down the beautiful Bosphorus Strait. There are basically three ways to accomplish this. One, you can take the public ferry, which departs twice daily and basically caters to the people who live along the Bosphorus, stopping at several points along the strait; two, you can hire your own private yacht or charter a boat for a more leisurely in-depth cruise up and down the channel; or three, you can do what we did, which was to take a passenger boat known more commonly as a TurYol boat (a system of ferry boats operated by a co-operative) that provides a pleasant one and a half hour cruise of the Bosphorus Strait.

The passenger boat seemed stripped down to its bare essentials, with an indoor deck lined with wooden benches for sitting and sight-seeing. Most of us stood or sat on the upper or outer decks for a better view. The wind was quite strong depending on what side of the boat you were on, and many of us bundled up. Throughout the cruise, crew members would come around selling snacks and *cay*.

We launched from the pier near the Golden Horn area, staying close to the European side of the strait, and came upon some wonderful sites: the magnificent *Dolmabahce Palace*, the opulent residence of the Ottoman sultans used between 1856 and 1922, and the *Ciragan Palace* (a former Ottoman palace which is now a five-star hotel); some regal-looking government office buildings; the chic suburban village of Ortakoy, Istanbul's trendiest district, packed with waterfront shops, cafes and night clubs, and supporting three temples – a church, a mosque and a synagogue – a symbol of the city's religious tolerance. We passed underneath the Bosphorus Bridge and continued up the strait towards the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge, passing the *Rumeli Fortress* built atop a hill by Fatih Sultan Mehmet II in the early 1450's and first used to assault the city and later to defend it. Beyond the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge we could see very beautiful waterfront homes belonging to Istanbul's elite. According to Serdar, these properties are valued into the millions.

On the way back to the pier, we hugged the Asian side of the strait. We passed the *Beylebeyi Palace*, the Imperial summer retreat of the sultans; the military high school of *Kuleli*, with its two massive towers built in 1861; a smaller fort; and the *Kucuksu Palace* which served as the hunting lodge for the sultans. As our ferryboat approached the docks we were afforded a magnificent view of the Sutanahmet District on the horizon. The Hagia Sofia, the Topkapi Palace and the Blue Mosque all rising from the hill in full splendor. The Bosphorus cruise was a wonderful way to cap our sightseeing in Turkey.

By 4:00pm most of us were heading back to the tour bus, although a few elected to stroll around the Eminonu area and then take the tram to the Holiday Inn on their own. We were staying at the same hotel where we spent the first two nights in Istanbul. Noelani and I wanted to revisit the Grand Bazaar to do some last minute shopping, but I needed to retrieve money from my luggage first, which was stored away in the bowels of our enormous bus. We headed back to the hotel and checked in; afterwards, we proceeded to take the tramline to the Beyazit-Kapali Carsi stop, walking from there to the Bazaar.

Noelani was looking for a glass-paneled hanging lamp she'd seen on our first visit to the Bazaar, and some round copper earrings. My sole purpose here was to locate that decorative ceramic plate I should have purchased eleven days ago! It was a Saturday, and the Bazaar was jam-packed with shoppers. Sticking to the main avenue, and going by memory, I scoured the side streets in search of that ceramic boutique. *Nothing*. I went up and down and sideways along those bustling market alleyways but could not locate the shop. Noelani, meanwhile, merely had to turn her head and she found exactly what she wanted. The special lamp? Why, it was hanging from a corner stall. The copper earrings? Just where she remembered it was. After about an hour I *did* finally come across the ceramic boutique but was heartbroken to discover the actual plate I wanted had already been sold. If I was agile enough, I would have kicked myself in the ass! Noelani helped me pick out several pairs of earrings to dole out to my nieces back home.

We made it back to the Holiday Inn by 6:30 pm, just in time to catch our tour bus for the farewell dinner. Serdar had given all of us instructions to take a cab to the restaurant in case we missed the bus. We drove to the district of Kumkapi, along the shore of the Sea of Marmara not far from the Bazaar, a lively waterfront area known for its seafood restaurants. Kumkapi

is an old Ottoman and Armenian fishermen's district, and is built along a small plaza where six streets intersect. Our restaurant – the *Okyanus* (which means 'ocean', and not, um, *okay-anus*, as some of us jokingly referred to it) was situated along one of the side streets lined with restaurants and cafes. The entire area was lively and crowded with Saturday night revelers.

The restaurant staff put several long tables together end-to-end for our group, and I sat towards the back with the other members of the Four Musketeers, together with Helene, Park, Carole and Jonna. The waiters placed dishes of cold and warm appetizers on the table: salads, sardines, white beans, pastries stuffed with cheese (a common dish served everywhere we went), spicy tomatoes, a yogurt spread with chives and plenty of bread. For the main dish we had our choice of fish, Turkish meatballs or grilled chicken. It's a shame I am not fond of fish, because those who had it said it was very tasty, although with small bones in it. I opted for the chicken. For dessert they served fruit cocktail and some kind of wheat pastry.

Serdar made a toast during the meal, and we took turns cornering him and giving him envelopes stuffed with tip money. I had already tipped Ugur, our driver, prior to leaving the hotel. This was our final night together as a group, so many photographs were taken, as well. And then a quartet of gypsy musicians appeared at our tables and began serenading us with traditional folk music, playing some bizarre instruments (one resembled a triangle with strings). They encouraged the group to get up and dance, but only Noelani and Helene (those adorable *blasphemers!*) volunteered. Later, Kathy, who looked stunning in a beautiful shawl (and plied with a few alcoholic drinks I would imagine) joined them, and started dancing – if a may be so bold – in a very slow seductive manner, swaying her hips and rolling her hands, giving me the impression she'd done this before. *Hmmmmmmmm*. Everyone had a great time.

We returned to the hotel shortly after 9:30pm. Noelani and I took an hour long stroll, stopping to buy some chocolate dessert at a side street bakeshop. It was another chilly night, and getting colder the further we walked, so we turned around and headed back to the hotel. By this time, Noelani and I had grown very close on the trip. I'm not one of those sappy romantics who believe in love-at-first-sight, but we did bond strongly after only a few short days. We shared a kindred spirit in travel and how we viewed the world, and, I have to say, she was a very attractive woman. We were staying on the same floor, and as we were saying our sentimental 'goodbyes' we suddenly

came together and began kissing like we were the last two people on the Titanic. I would like to think I am enough of a gentleman to omit this detail, sparing Noelani any embarrassment, but, darn it, this journal will serve as my future memories...*and this was one moment I definitely wanted to remember*. I can't imagine a better way to cap what was already a wonderful tour. I slept like a baby that night.

DAYS THIRTEEN AND FOURTEEN

I set my alarm clock for 5:00am. I took a long hot shower and made several cups of coffee in my room before repacking for the final time. I was down to my last clean shirt and pair of pants. Downstairs, I had breakfast with Noelani, Lee, and sisters Laurel and Leslie. We had a very nice discussion on American politics, and the current state of our educational system.

By 10:00am a special transportation van arrived to take Ed and myself to the airport. We were on the same flight back to New York City. It was difficult to watch Noelani standing in the hotel driveway waving goodbye, and I remember she took a last photo of me as we pulled away. One of the saddest things about escorted travel is the *finality* of these trips. Oftentimes you never see your fellow traveler again. It is a remarkable transformation, really; a group of strangers – who sometimes share nothing in common other than a love of travel – bond, become good friends throughout the trip and then disappear from each other's lives forever. Oh, don't get me wrong, there is usually a lot of communication within the first few weeks after the return home, but eventually everybody returns to his or her daily life and the relationships tend to vanish. I still occasionally communicate with some of the people I've toured with over the years, mainly to send them a copy of my latest travel journal, but I *do* miss their company, each and every one...okay, let me stop because *now* I'm getting sappy.

Our Delta Flight did not leave until 12:15 pm. After checking in with the help of the GATE 1 guide who accompanied us to the airport, Ed and I spent the next couple of hours in the international gate area, browsing the shops (I

was finally able to buy a decorative ceramic plate with my last remaining liras!) and chatting up politics, world views and life back home over coffee in the food lounge. We did not sit next to each other on the flight home. I took an Ambien pill as soon as lunch was served and slept for much of the ride. After retrieving our luggage at JFK and clearing Customs and Immigration, we said ‘goodbye’ and went our separate ways. Ed was a great traveling companion; I hoped we might meet again on another journey.

Because my Delta flight back to Miami didn’t leave until the following morning, I had to spend the night at one of the nearby airport motels in New York City. As much as I love to travel it’s always great to come home. Fortunately, I had the rest of the week off before returning to work, allowing me time to get over my jet lag and edit my Turkey photos, which numbered (I’m embarrassed to admit) over 2200! Over the next two months I excitedly told family, friends – and anyone else who’d listen – about my Turkey experience. I also began the arduous process of researching and writing my journal. And now that I’m finished, so is my trip. Some might think it a bit excessive to write a journal nearly 80 pages long for such a short tour, but this is a labor of love. And as I do after each one of my trips I am sending my fellow travelers a copy. While the perspective is mine, all of you shared the same experiences. I hope this journal will take you back to those 13 incredible days we spent together. To Serdar, Ugur, Noelani and the entire GATE 1 tour group, thank you for a wonderful time in *Turkiye*.

Richard C. Rodriguez

(My trip to Turkey occurred between March 27th and April 8th 2012)

