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Turkey: Old and New / AT CROSSROADS OF ASIA AND EUROPE, THIS RAPIDLY MODERNIZING NATION RETAINS PLENTY OF OLD WORLD CHARM; [Run Of Paper Edition]

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Abstract (Summary)

There was a time in Turkey when the marriage of a young man and woman would begin with a clay vase. Traditionally, when a Turkish girl reached 15 or 16 years old, a clay vase would be perched on the roof of her family's home to signal that there was a marriageable female within. If a man was interested in the young woman, he'd shoot the vase off the roof, and the marriage negotiations would begin.

All of this building, my husband and I were told during a recent trip, does not mean streams of new people are moving to Turkey. Rather, one guide explained, the people who already live there are abandoning their old homes and ways in favor of more modern conveniences, as Turkey clamors to become a member of the European Union. The result is a constant balancing act between maintaining the country's historic past -- which attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists each year -- and accommodating the citizens' drive toward modernization.

Our trip began in Istanbul, the country's largest city, on a cobblestone street lined with a row of 19th-century, pastel-painted Ottoman houses that are now the guest houses of the Ayasofia Pension. Tucked on a narrow street just behind the massive Ayasofia Mosque (or Hagia Sophia), which was built as a Catholic church in the 6th century, and in front of the romantic, 3,000-year-old Topkapi palace, the pension is one way to step closer to Turkey's historic past.

Full Text (2664 words)

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There was a time in Turkey when the marriage of a young man and woman would begin with a clay vase. Traditionally, when a Turkish girl reached 15 or 16 years old, a clay vase would be perched on the roof of her family's home to signal that there was a marriageable female within. If a man was interested in the young woman, he'd shoot the vase off the roof, and the marriage negotiations would begin.

Today, amid Turkey's shining new office towers and high-rise apartments, it is difficult to spy many clay vases awaiting a shooter.

Turkey is a rapidly modernizing country where traditions are being pushed aside by new stores, new apartments, new office buildings and new houses. There is construction going on nearly everywhere -- from the bustling metropolis of Istanbul to the rural Cappadocia region in the country's heartland.

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In this setting, spying the clay vases takes a little work. But they're there.

This is a country that boasts more than 2,000 archaeological sites dating back as much as 10,000 years. It is a land marked with the religious monuments and footsteps of all faiths. Once a haven for persecuted Christians who carved churches in remote mountains and canyons, Turkey's skylines today are dotted with minarets from which the Muslim

call to prayer is issued.

Located between Iran and Greece, Turkey remains the crossroads of Asia and Europe. It was the starting place of the fabled silk road, the land of sultans and harems, and it is still the gateway to a shining Mediterranean playground where sunken ruins and Cleopatra's islands provide diversion for yachters.

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The quaint, inexpensive lodgings are in three-story Turkish houses that were restored by a conservationist group. Each house has a sitting room and dining room on the first floor and three or four bedrooms on the second. The houses are decorated with antique furniture and hand-woven kilim rugs.

The area surrounding the pension is virtually abandoned at night by the tourists, who head back across the Golden Horn, a five-mile-long body of water separating old Istanbul from the city's glitzier European section, with its Hiltons, Hyatts and lots of traffic.

The only traffic on the tiny street in front of the pension is foot traffic. Often we slept with our windows open and listened to the soft voices of people talking as they passed below. Only occasionally would the voice of an English-speaking tourist break the exotic rhythm and sounds of the Turkish language.

Each morning we awoke around 5 a.m. and sat on our window sill, listening to the hauntingly beautiful call to prayer coming from the minarets of dozens of mosques. A five-minute walk down the cobblestone street in front of the pension is the more than 300-year-old Blue Mosque. This massive structure, officially called the mosque of Sultan Ahmet (Turkey's ruler from 1603-1617), dominates the old city with its six minarets and dozens of domes and half domes.

Through the lush, shady park behind the Ayasofia Pension is the Istanbul Archeological Museum. About one block away from the Hagia Sophia are the steps descending into the old city's underground cistern. From the street, the entrance looks like a subway terminal, not the pathway to a network of waterways built in fourth century for use during long sieges on the city.

At the bottom of the stairs is the beginning of a series of wooden walkways that weave in and out of 336 marble columns partly submerged in water. The bases of some of the columns were carved in the form of Greek gods and goddesses, which peer eerily up at passersby from their watery graves.

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It was in Istanbul's old city that we first encountered the tradition of the Turkish blue-eye.

As we were walking to dinner one evening, a young Turkish boy approached and introduced himself as an employee of a local carpet shop. After a short, friendly conversation, he pinned a tiny, glass, blue eye on me as a gift.

A tour guide later explained the significance of this age-old Turkish tradition.

"The Turkish people believe that a person with blue or green eyes can wish something and it has a very high probability of coming true, because blue is the color of the sea, and the sea is life," said Emek Evin, a young Turkish woman who splits her time between tourism and teaching English at a Turkish university.

"If you wear a blue eye and there is a person who has bad intentions for you, this eye will reflect the same thing back on him or her."

When a Turkish baby is born, a gift is bought for the baby and given to the parents, and a blue eye is attached to the baby's clothing. Ceramic blue eyes of all sizes are sold at nearly every tourist shop. They are also distributed by roving carpet salesmen to start a conversation with someone on the street -- or to end a conversation that went

particularly well, almost like a business card.

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Our guide in the rural and picturesque Cappadocia region, Ozgur Saygi, promised this portion of the country would be the most memorable. He was right.

Here, we were invited into the home of Selma and Sebahat Ariz, two women whose farming way of life has remained unchanged for decades.

It was also here that we saw landscapes which looked like they were shipped direct from another planet and churches that were carved into the mountainsides during the 4th century.

Cappadocia is often referred to as Turkey's fantasy land and as the Idaho of Turkey. It is a region that has remained largely unchanged for centuries.

The countryside is a mixture of terrains. For miles the land will be awash in swaths of mustard-colored patches of wheat, fields of sunflowers and squares of brown, tilled soil. This patchwork is broken occasionally by thin lines of green trees and shrubs.

Suddenly the scene changes, as if you had been transported to the Southwestern United States, and the horizon is filled with red and brown clay buttes. In other places, where the effects of local volcanoes are most evident, the landscape is something you've not quite seen the likes of before.

About 10 million years ago, the mountains in this area were active volcanoes. Over thousands of years, these looming giants dumped mounds of lava, mud and ash on the area. This material, combined with rain, snow and wind created Cappadocia's striking rock formations which resemble towering, wavy cones or larger-than-life anthills.

For thousands of years Turkish people lived in houses carved out of the conical lava tuff. In this century however, it was discovered that prolonged exposure to the material causes cancer. Throughout the 1950s and '60s, the Turkish government moved people out of these dwellings and into simple villages built nearby. Now, modern two and three-story are homes being constructed next to the older, government-built houses.

Persecuted Christians arrived here more than 1,500 years ago. Hidden in the hillsides, mountains and valleys of Cappadocia are hundreds of primitive, one- and two-room chapels carved out of the rock. Exploring these mysterious churches is a big part of the attraction of the region.

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On the way to visit one of the more remote mountain churches, we came across Selma and Sebahat Ariz, sitting on the side of a dusty dirt road with a sheet full of colorful, handmade dolls spread before them. The dolls are made to look like traditional Turkish women -- head wrapped in a scarf, wearing a long, colorful skirt, with a water jug or yarn in their hands.

Selma and Sebahat, sisters by marriage, said they make about five dolls every two days. The money from them helps support the Ariz family, which subsists mostly by farming a nearby plot of land.

The two women buy the velvet and cotton fabric to make the dolls' clothing at a local market, wash it and then let the sun dry it. Meanwhile, they stitch together the dolls' soft bodies and fill them with stuffing.

Drawing the doll's almond-shaped eyes and other facial features with markers takes only a matter of minutes. The finishing touches include attaching miniature, brown clay water jugs to the doll's hands or yarn and a tiny loom.

As we were inspecting the dolls, Selma invited us into their house to experience yet another Turkish tradition -- a mug of aryan. Aryan, a mixture of water and yogurt, is an age-old Turkish drink that is somewhat bitter; it is said to be very good for your health.

Selma and Sebahat live in a very simple, mud brick home which they share with their husbands and children. The

home had two neat, whitewashed rooms that we were left to explore while the drinks were being prepared.

The rooms were side by side, opening off a main entrance hallway. One room was for sleeping and living. Its floor was covered with dark, earthen-colored, hand-made kilims, and a stack of neatly folded blankets filled a corner. Against the wall, a single bed doubled as a couch.

In the light, airy kitchen next door, the smooth clay floor was swept spotless. The pale walls were brightened by shelves lined with a variety of clear, plastic containers filled with olive oil, fresh black and green olives, grape leaves and honey.

Sunlight flowed into both tiny rooms through rear windows that overlooked a picturesque pale green valley behind the house. A haphazard array of apricots lay across the wide windowsill, drying in the sun.

Later that day, having explored the church in a nearby hillside, we started back toward the hotel. Not far down the road, Selma Ariz popped out from behind a tree and flagged down our car.

We noticed that her white apron was bundled up and she was clutching its ends in one hand. When the car came to a stop, she lowered her apron to reveal a bundle of the bright green cucumbers from her garden that she had been waiting anxiously to share. After passing them through the open window, she grinned broadly and gave us a final wave goodbye.

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Waking up on the bow of a wooden sailboat called a gulet as a pink gauzy mist slowly rises from the turquoise Mediterranean was another truly special experience.

Gulets are traditional Turkish boats outfitted to accommodate groups of between eight to 20 people. They can be hired for a trip of from three days to several weeks along Turkey's Mediterranean coast, which is full of countless submerged ruins.

We spent four days cruising in and out of tiny coves with Captain Sukru Balkas and his crew on the Asil 4, a shiny gulet with seven cabins.

Days on the boat were spent dozing on deck, snorkeling or swimming and hiking to nearby mountains to climb and explore ruins.

Often during these lazy days, the captain and his crew would head off for several hours to fish and would then cook their catch for our evening meal. On their lucky days, dinner included a freshly caught octopus or a variety of fish.

Every so often, a Turkish family on a tiny outboard motorboat, covered by a cloth awning, would come by, selling fresh-made pancakes similar to crepes. Depending on your appetite, the pancakes could be filled with vegetables, sweet fruits or jellies.

But a touch of Turkey's modern spirit has found its way to the tranquil Mediterranean, too. Roaring by the slow-moving pancake sellers, were speedboats with tall white coolers on them, from which were sold an array of ice creams.

These ice cream hucksters would weave in and out of vacation boats like fireflies. As they approached the deck of a boat, one ice cream salesman would stand up and flip a large colorful board up onto your boat, so you could view pictures of the ice cream available and the prices. After all, what would a day in Turkey's Mediterranean be without a Nutty Buddy or Creamsicle.

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Our final days were based in Izmir, a bustling, smog-filled, coastal city of about 5 million. The city serves as a base for some of the country's most spectacular ruins, such as Pergamum -- a city that was one of the ancient world's major powers -- and Ephesus -- the largest and best preserved ancient city in Turkey.

From Izmir we also visited Sirince, a tiny village perched high atop a windy mountain road near Ephesus.

Sirince is not listed in many tour books, because there's not a lot to see there in the way of ruins or cultural attractions.

The main thing to see is the people and their simple, unaffected way of life. Sirince was one of the few places we discovered that wasn't rushing to modernize or change its ways.

The first thing you notice as you arrive in the town's dusty main square is the many cafes occupied entirely by groups of men. They are busy talking or playing cards, and they scarcely give visitors a passing glance. Women in Sirince still wrap their heads in scarves, and they shy away from cameras and peering eyes.

The town's one or two main, cobblestone streets are filled with tiny shops selling antiques, hand-made tablecloths, curtains, fabrics, fruits, vegetables and a limited array of glass blue-eyes and postcards.

After poking around the shops, we followed a donkey that was wandering up a steep, cobblestone side street just off the main square. Before long, we encountered the donkey's elderly male owner.

After offering a ride on his donkey, he, too, invited us in to see his house and sample some homemade wine. After spending about a half hour in the sunlit, whitewashed courtyard of the villager's home, we parted.

As we left, we knew it wasn't his wine that had made us feel so cheerful, but another of our many encounters with Turkish hospitality.

MAP: Associated Press - Turkey

[Illustration]

MIA TAYLOR PHOTOS/THE PATRIOT LEDGER - AT TOP, THE BOSPORUS BRIDGE CROSSES THE STRAITS AT ISTANBUL, TURKEY'S HISTORIC AND LARGEST CITY. IN THE LEFT FOREGROUND IS A MOSQUE. ABOVE, SELMA ARIZ STITCHES A DOLL AS HER FAMILY LOOKS ON IN THE RURAL CAPPADOCIA REGION IN TURKEY'S HEARTLAND. AT LEFT, A SHOESHINE MAN PLIES HIS TRADE NEAR THE RUINS OF THE ANCIENT CITY OF PERGAMUM NEAR THE MODERN COASTAL CITY OF IZMIR. BELOW, YASAR EROGLI, 69, TAKES A BREAK FROM CHOPPING WOOD IN THE VILLAGE OF URGUP IN CAPPADOCIA. HE HAS LIVED IN THE TINY VILLAGE ALL HIS LIFE.; MIA TAYLOR PHOTOS/THE PATRIOT LEDGER - HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO, INHABITANTS OF CAPPADOCIA IN CENTRAL TURKEY CARVED HOMES IN THE CONICAL SPIRES OF VOLCANIC TUFF THAT DOT THE REGION. TODAY, THE HOMES HAVE BEEN ABANDONED FOR HEALTH REASONS.; AT TOP, AYASOFIA MOSQUE SITS BEHIND A LUSH GARDEN IN THE OLD SECTION OF ISTANBUL. ABOVE, MAP SHOWS TURKEY'S STRATEGIC LOCATION AT THE INTERSECTION OF LAND AND WATER ROUTES BETWEEN EUROPE AND ASIA.

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