

THE CORN FLAKE TRAVELLER IN TURKEY

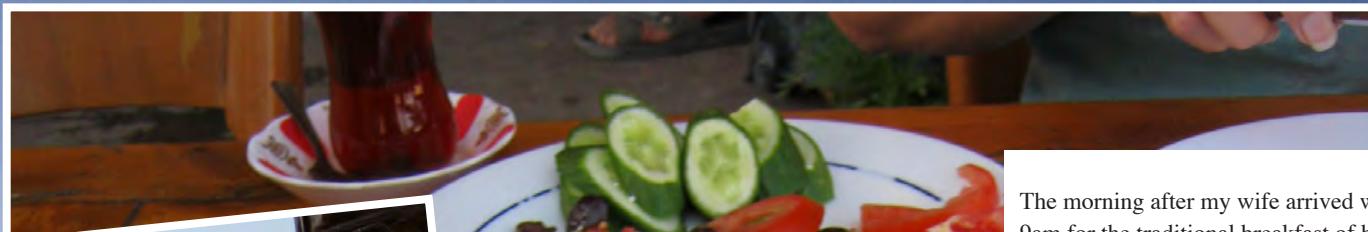
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I wasn't all that excited about visiting Turkey, I simply went to claim it as my 58th country Corn Flakeified but after 6 ½ weeks travelling all over it became one of my favourite countries visited so far.

I was delighted and surprised to discover a country full of amazing things to stimulate the senses of any traveller. There is a fascinating blend of West meets East or Europe meets Asia with huge mosques, tourist resorts and a culture influenced by countries it borders such as Greece, Bulgaria, Iraq and Syria. I lost count of the number of times I was invited for tea, a representation of how warm and hospitable the people were and the scenery was diverse and stunning. The thing that impressed me the most was the history; so many ruins from so many empires stretching back over 10,000 years. I saw ruins from the Romans, the Greeks, the Lycians, the Anatolians, the Thracians, the Ottomans, to name but a few. Cappadocia was the icing on the cake and one of the most amazing places I have visited during my ten years on the road, it had culture, history, lovely people and some of the most amazing scenery.

I arrived in Istanbul and spent 3 weeks cycling roughly 1000 miles to get to Antalya in the South, where my wife met me and we hired a car for 2 weeks to be able to explore some of the far-flung areas of Turkey. During those first 3 weeks cycle touring I camped in a mosque, I saw natural flames coming from the ground, a town abandoned in the 1920's, I received many acts of kindness like people giving me food and stopping in cars to give me water and I saw many ancient sites from various cultures like the ruins of Troy, Ephesus and Myra.





The morning after my wife arrived we were up at 9am for the traditional breakfast of boiled eggs, bread, cheese, olives, cucumber and tea, then we set off to Pamukkale, arriving about 4 hours later. We stopped for lunch at a roadside cafe and had a bit of an argument with the staff as we were told the kebabs were 5 Lira but when we went to pay they were suddenly 15 and the drinks went from 3 to 5. I was having none of it so shouted for a bit then paid our price and gave him an extra 5 Lira before driving off, I thought about getting a T-shirt made that said "I might be a tourist but I'm not rich".

Anyway we got to Pamukkale, which means 'cotton castle' so called because of the minerals, deposited by a calcium rich spring coming out of the hill, have formed rock that looks like snow. The spring flowing down the hill was warm and the formations it made looked great, some shell shaped pools and some layered like shelves or terraces. We walked around, had some Corn Flakes, enjoyed the view and had a quick look at the Roman ruins of Hieropolis.

Over the next couple of days we spent a lot of time in the car passing some light blue lakes, a megalithic site and the boring city of Konya, where we stayed a night in a surreal hotel room with a bed of flowers inside and a chair on top of the wardrobe.

Then we arrived in the simply magical Cappadocia, not really knowing where to start as there's so much to see, but we just went with the flow and started at Uçhisar, a fortress that has been carved out of a pointy hill and now looks like swiss cheese. You can climb to the top for amazing views over the valleys surrounding the area and you can walk through the hill to marvel at how they were created. This was our first taste of how previous tenants of this region used the rock to create buildings but it was not to be our last. We continued on to Goreme, a town with more rock cut houses many of which have been converted for modern day use to create houses and hotels. When we arrived we found there was a



competition in the town centre where dance schools from all over Turkey had come to perform traditional dances. Although the dances were not very exciting to watch, the costumes were fantastic and seeing them perform very emotive dances really helped sense the area's history. Then we had a traditional Turkish meal with a kind of stew baked in clay pots on the fire that they smash open with a hammer to serve the tasty contents.

We spent 5 days exploring the beautiful area and it became one of my favourite places on the planet, with underground cities and thousands of rock-cut spaces forming temples, churches and villages. The landscape was spectacular, sprinkled with caves, canyons, 'fairy chimney' rock formations and all sorts of shapes jutting from the ground, the forces of erosion acting on the volcanic rock to create natural sculptures. Words don't do it justice really so I'll leave the spectacular scenery at that.

The visit to the Underground City of Kaymakli was fascinating, one of forty underground cities in the area that can house between 20 – 60,000 people. Inside was like a multi-layered warren of tunnels, rooms and areas, that we were told were stables, storage containers, kitchens and one was a church. I thought the most impressive things were the massive circular doors (only closable from the inside) and the extensive ventilation system, which would waft cold air through the tunnels. We walked around without a guide for about 45 minutes then when leaving I bumped straight in to Dr Robert Schoch, who was touring with a group of American 'Ancient Civilization' enthusiasts. We followed them to some of the lower levels, where the tunnels became pretty small and it was quite claustrophobic. The site was amazing, a huge labyrinth of tunnels clearly intended to live and hide in and I think it is a very significant piece of the puzzle that shows us the truth about human history. On our last day in Cappadocia we stayed in a town in the Ilhara Valley where they had restaurants with tables in the middle of the river. We ate a lovely breakfast there then drove all day to the top of Mount Nemrut to see some massive stone heads, we arrived about 10:30pm and slept in the car under a really clear starry night, so clear that the Milky Way looked like a cloud.

At 4:30am we were awake and I was freezing, as I naturally let my wife have the sleeping bag last night. I put loads of thermals and jumpers on, then we walked up to the site of the huge, metre tall heads and joined another 80 – 100 tourists already up there to enjoy the sunrise. There were 5 big bodies and 8 heads, 2 eagles, 1 lion and 5 human heads, 2 of which were pointy. The official story is that King Antiochus built them to show off about his tiny little kingdom but I think in a country with this much history there could easily be a more interesting story behind them.

The sunrise was nice, as they always are, there was an ‘oooooooh’ from the crowd as it happened and the sun lit up the planet to show us a fantastic view, I would guess you could see 90 – 100 miles. Shortly after the sunrise we started going down the mountain, using gravity as much as possible because we were short on petrol. We were a bit nervous towards the end as the needle seemed to be several inches past the Empty mark but we eventually made it to a petrol station. The petrol pump attendant was very nice and invited us for tea, so we sat communicating with him using hands, maps and the leaflet sized phrasebook. Lovely people the Turkish.

We then drove for 3 hours, passed Malatya and some really pretty turquoise lakes, before arriving in Sanliurfa (Urfa to the locals). I was instantly unimpressed by the shops, the traffic, all the adverts etc and also the heat, the wind was literally like a hair drier. We spent hours looking for a hotel, including a drive through the really old part of town, with tiny streets that were a nightmare for our huge car. We turned down one street and there was a huge piece of pipe blocking the road and then down another street the road came to a stop at a 10m high cliff edge; there were a few 10 point turns and plenty of swear words.

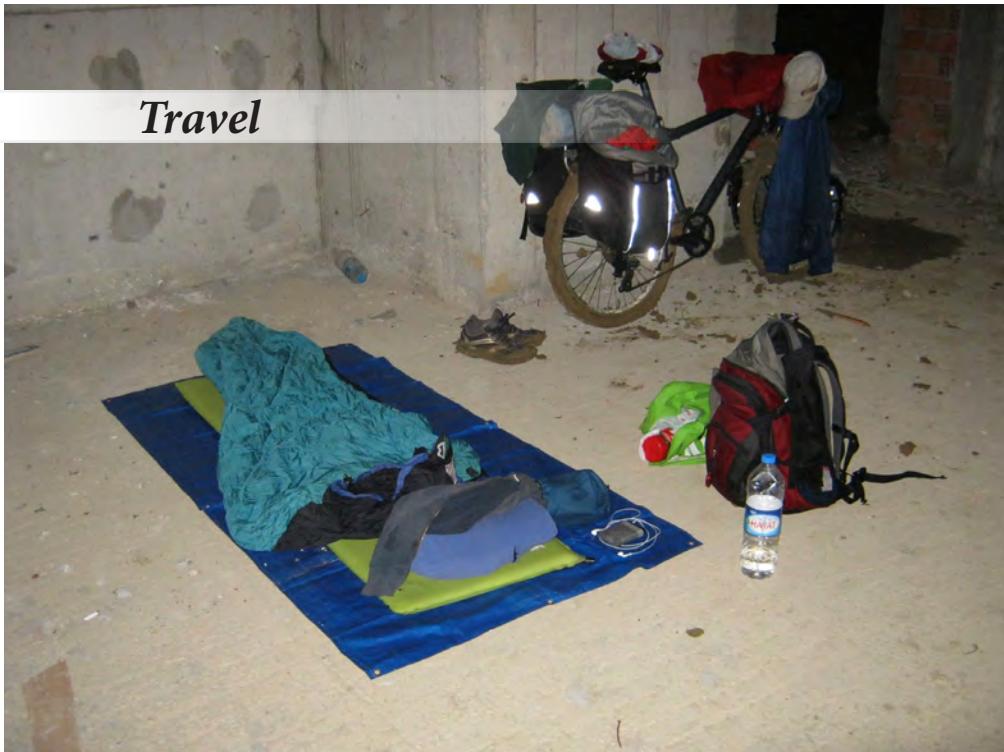
We eventually found a cheap place that had the essential A.C, we showered and chilled before going for a walk in the town. In the bazaar we met a nice young stall owner who was selling all sorts of fabric and Islamic items of clothing, he invited us for tea so he could practice his English then he dressed us up for a photo.

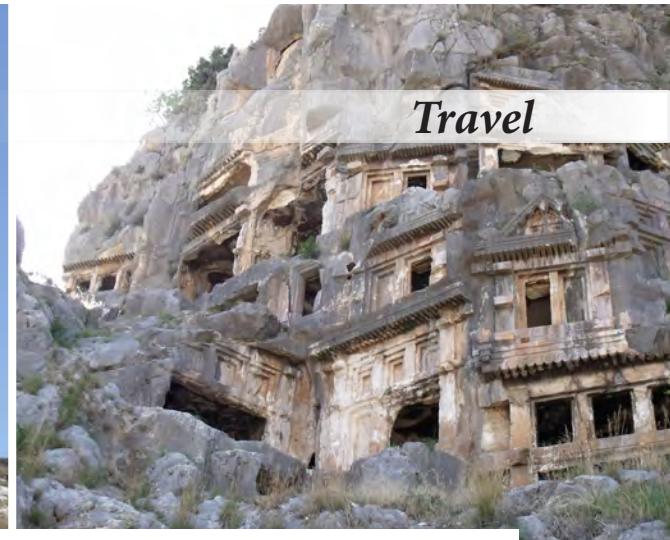
In the morning we went to the Archaeological museum in Urfa, to see some of the artefacts they have removed from Gobekli Tepe. There were some great statues there, one kind of alien looking totem pole giving birth and another humanoid figure with black gemstone eyes, both were 6ft tall and quite amazing considering they estimate they are 10,000 to 11,000 years old. We had some cream, honey and bread for breakfast then left Urfa around 10am to go visit the Gobekli Tepe site approx 21km away. It was out in the dry, arid countryside and it was at least 40°C, there was no entrance fee just a couple of guards and some barb-wire fence surrounding the 4 stone circles that have been uncovered. There were some excellent carvings on them; some that looked like foxes, crocodiles, boars and other animals but most interesting to me, were the ones that looked like dinosaurs and the 4m high columns with human features like arms, hands and a belt. I loved the site, it had such an ancient feel about it and I spent ages walking around.

From Gobekli Tepe we drove East towards Iraq until we arrived in Hasankeyf, driving through some pretty countryside that looked great as the sun was setting. The only hotel in town had shitty rooms and only single beds



Travel





so we asked around and ended up paying less to sleep on the terrace of a restaurant underneath the stars. We spent hours talking to a local guide, a Swiss woman who spoke Turkish, the owner and his lovely family before falling asleep, with a nice breeze while listening to the river flow by. It was the end to a Brilliant, action-packed day and one that reminded me why I love to travel so much.

Hasankeyf is set along the banks of the River Tigris and you can sense the area's history, a local guide said the town is about 11,000 years old. It is a very peaceful town and a beautiful place to sit and admire the view of the remains of a Roman bridge and the old castle on top of a cliff. There are also thousands of caves in the surrounding hills and some people still live in them today. Sadly, if you want to visit you better hurry up as rich people with too much power have decided that they want to build a dam upstream which will cause the town to be flooded in about 2 years time. It's an absolute travesty and to rub salt in their wounds the inhabitants are being moved to a communist style collection of tower blocks and being charged a fortune for the privilege. Awful and unjust.

We eventually returned the hire car in Antalya, then spent a week there chilling before my wife flew home and I took the bike on a bus to Edirne in North Turkey. I spent a month cycling through the Balkans until I reached Bosnia where I participated in a 2 week volunteering program to excavate on the pyramids they claim to have found and to investigate for myself if they are pyramids or not.

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