



Turkey's Delights

Istanbul & Cappadocia

By Genevieve Northup

While planning a trip to Istanbul, I read about Cappadocia and just had to see both. The whirlwind getaway with my husband involved lots of flying, driving and navigating, but discovering these dynamic destinations was worth the frantic schedule. Whether you have three days or 10, Turkey's largest city and central countryside deserve checked boxes on your bucket list.

Istanbul

Istanbul was a Neolithic settlement, an ancient Greek colony, the capital of the East Roman and Ottoman empires. Istanbul is one of a few transcontinental cities in the world, with addresses in both Europe and Asia. Even as well-traveled tourists, we were surprised by the unique sites and culture of this spirited metropolis. Here are highlights from our 36-hour stay:

Hagia Sophia: Pronounced "Aya Sophia," the Hagia Sophia is a breathtaking structural engineering achievement and tribute to Byzantine building design. The current monument is the third building at this location since the 4th century. The complex was completed in the 6th century and held the title as the largest church in the world until St. Peter's Basilica was built.

While standing under the dome, awestruck by the enormity of the building, you'll find a unique feature: Christian and Islamic symbols are side by side. Original Christian motifs were dismantled during the fourth crusade or concealed when the church was converted to a mosque. Since becoming a museum in the 1930s, restoration work has revealed important mosaics.

Blue Mosque: Millions of crimson, gold

and lapis tiles compose the garlands, patterns and trims adorning the ceiling of this 17th century mosque. Don't let the long lines discourage you; when you enter, the crowd is silenced, the only sound the clicking of camera shutters.

Basilica Cistern: Journey below ground to another of Istanbul's engineering projects. The Basilica Cistern was built in the 6th century to deliver water to royal buildings. Hundreds of columns were repurposed from buildings across the Roman Empire, many donning curious decorations. The pillars create the illusion of never-ending archways above the dark, placid water.

Topkapi Palace: Devote several hours here, and start in the royal family's private quarters. We spent our short visit in the treasure rooms, gazing in disbelief at the gifts awarded to the rulers of the Ottoman Empire. Everything is gilded and sparkles with a crusting of gemstones.

Galata Bridge & Tower: Take a long walk on the double-decker Galata Bridge crossing the Golden Horn, an offshoot of the Bosphorous Strait. Along the upper story are dozens of fishermen looking for the day's big catch; the lower level has restaurants and concessionaires. When you reach the northern side of Istanbul, notice that the streets become narrower, windier and steeper; it seems as though you're in a dif-

ferent city. Hike the few blocks to the Galata Tower (pictured above), where you can take an elevator to the top to photograph Istanbul's landmarks and see continents converge.

Grand Bazaar: The Kapalıçarşı, or Grand Bazaar, is a maze of 50 indoor streets and 5,000 vendors. Your senses are bombarded by the smells of spices and Turkish food, the conversations between haggling locals and tourists, the jam-packed hodge-podge of merchandise. Don't settle for the listed price on the vibrant Turkish carpet, silk scarf, painted pottery or mosaic lantern you lust after. I hunted and negotiated for hours to find the perfect Ottoman jewelry set at the right price (luckily, I have a patient husband). Whenever I wear my stunning Turkish souvenir, I remember our adventure.

Imbat Restaurant: We wanted a quiet, affordable and memorable dinner to commemorate our one night in Istanbul. We found all three at Imbat, the rooftop restaurant located in the Orient Express hotel. We watched boats glide through the dark waters of the Bosphorous Strait — past glitzy monuments and illuminated mosques — while enjoying traditional *meze* (appetizers), main courses of meatballs and lamb, and a dessert platter of four different sweets.



Turkish delight is a pairing of flavored gel and dates or nuts, often sprinkled with powdered sugar. Snack on it in Istanbul.

Cappadocia

We took a Turkish Airlines flight from Istanbul to Kayseri and rented a car to drive into Cappadocia's otherworldly terrain. Over millions of years, erosion created giant "fairy chimneys," thousands of cone- or tower-shaped rock formations. For more than 1,500 years, people carved shelters in these natural structures, developing fascinating villages, isolated from the rest of civilization.

Göreme Open-Air Museum: We spent hours exploring here with audio guides and umbrellas. Göreme was home to monks between the 10th and 12th centuries. Most of the accessible caves are churches that have frescoes telling stories from the Bible. The Buckle (Tokali) Church is a small-scale cathedral with carved archways, alcoves and brilliant murals. To reach the hidden Dark Church requires a shimmy through a dark passageway. Once inside, you are surrounded by preserved, highly detailed frescoes.

Zelve Open-Air Museum: Visitors walk among several civic, religious and private caves, which were abandoned in the 1950s. Above the parking lot is a ridge providing fantastic views of the landscape.

Kaymakli Underground City: Cappadocia's underground cities are as extraordinary as the cave dwellings. Kaymakli is the largest, eight levels of tunnels and cavities used as shelter for thousands of people during periods of unrest between the 2nd and 10th centuries. I recommend hiring a guide because onsite information is scarce, and it is easy to get lost inside.

Gamirasu Cave Hotel: I envisioned a two-night retreat at a cave hotel emphasizing

authenticity. A quick online search revealed the Gamirasu Cave Hotel, praised by Forbes, Business Week, Budget Travel, the Telegraph, MSN and Frommer's.

Restored as the first hotel in Cappadocia, Gamirasu's caverns were once part of a Christian monastery. The commune's kitchen serves the same purpose today, and guests enjoy meals where the monks broke bread 1,000 years ago.

The hotel has 35 rooms, including a variety of suites and family accommodations. If you reserve through booking.com, you can usually get cheaper rates than those advertised on the hotel's website. Free perks include WiFi, breakfast and shuttle service to the nearby village of Urgup.

We stayed during low season and were upgraded to a king suite that included a Turkish bath and tiled hot tub. The Turkish furnishings, exposed rock walls and grand bathroom provided a glamorized version of Cappadocia's remarkable way of life.

Cuisine: Gamirasu is in a remote area, so we had dinner at the hotel both evenings. The regional products and specialties were delicious and fairly priced. Whether at Gamirasu or elsewhere in Cappadocia, order *Tetsi kebab*, a stew of meat and veggies cooked in a sealed clay pot that is broken for serving. Also sample local wines, dates, honey, jellies and dried apricots.

Turkish Heritage Travel has a number of excursions in Cappadocia. Unfortunately, the weather was uncooperative for their hot air balloon ride over the incredible scenery — it's still on my wish list. ■

Cappadocia



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