

After we learned that we had been awarded a grant to travel to Turkey during the Easter break, Sam and I only had just over two weeks to plan before we set off. We had decided to divide the eight days between Istanbul and Ephesus, but our hastily drawn up travel arrangements were admittedly rather sketchy and I wasn't entirely sure what to expect from our trip. I had in fact been to Turkey once before, about ten years ago with my family, to the tiny hamlet of Gumusluk on the South Aegean coast. Yet I had an idea that Istanbul would be entirely different; a sprawling metropolis crammed with people, traffic and noise. Although I was looking forward to the things that we had planned to see there, I did not imagine that the city itself would hold any particular charm for me.

It turned out to be hugely more diverse and actually rather more beautiful than I had anticipated, as exemplified by the wonderfully eclectic skyline visible from our taxi window as we drove along the Bosphorus on our way out of the airport. It is a complete jumble of different architectural styles. High rise flats and modern industrial developments are assembled right next to old stone houses, and the entire view is scattered with minarets from the city's hundreds of mosques

What is also striking is the variation across different districts of the city. Having spent two days in the attractive, but slightly stale tourist district of Sultanahmet, we crossed the Bosphorus to the Asian side of the city on our third day. The dusty Uskadar suburbs felt far less economically developed than the well maintained visitor-friendly streets we had wandered until that point, and all the road signs and shop fronts suddenly appeared in Turkish rather than English. This was again in total contrast to the cosmopolitan and unerringly European Beyoglu district where we made our final stop. It is amazing to find such tangibly different areas within a single city; crossing the river to Uskadar felt almost like travelling to a different city altogether, or even a different country.

Of all the places that we visited in Istanbul, the one that struck the biggest chord with me was the Archaeological Museum, near Topkapi Palace. The permanent display on the ground floor is a collection of Sarcophagi found in Lebanon in 1887. The huge slabs of rock each have a real presence, some of them evidently intended to look as imposing as possible and others much more delicate. Aside from their evident beauty, I found them extraordinary for being so flawlessly preserved, having been shielded underground from exposure to the elements until their discovery. Some of them date from the fourth century BC, and yet the carvings remain intricately detailed and the surface of the stone completely smooth. I had never seen anything so ancient as these in such perfect condition, and apart from the faded colours they appear today almost exactly as they would have when they were first built.

After four days in Istanbul we set off for Selcuk, in the Izmir province, by overnight bus. The journey was something of a trial (it truly seemed never to end) and relatively little sleep was achieved. It was, however, made immeasurably more bearable by the excellent Turkish MTV playing mutely on the coach televisions throughout the night, a real treat. By the time we had found our hostel, extricated ourselves from its mildly over-anxious manager and caught up on sleep it was already mid-afternoon the next day. Our first port of call was the basilica of St John, which is built directly over the believed burial site of John the Apostle. The majority of the other visitors had already left when we arrived, so it was more or less deserted. I was surprised that such a prominent landmark of Christian history was not deluged by a constant flow of tourists, but the fact that it was so quiet was a bonus.

What I found so special about the basilica is the restraint evident in the minimal way in which it has been restored. It is free from the intrusion of artificial scaffolding and imitations of original stonework in newer materials. Much of the rock remains strewn around the site, and there are sections of mosaic that have only been partially uncovered. What has been rebuilt has been done beautifully, without detracting from the serene atmosphere. The basilica was one of my favourite places that we visited; understated in comparison to the impressive monuments of imperial grandeur that we had seen in Istanbul.

Our main purpose for staying in Selcuk was to visit Ephesus, where we spent the following day. It is a remarkable site with a real magic about it, and in hindsight I do think that we would have benefitted from more time there. Quite apart from its rich history, the ruins at Ephesus are simply a beautiful place to wander around in, and it is extraordinary how much still remains. I especially loved the segments of rock with lettering on them in a variety of different scripts. What I couldn't understand though, was how the city had lapsed into crumbling ruin after having once been the second largest city in the world and such a prominent centre of commerce and trade. The guide books sold around the site were numerous, but mostly focussed on the growth of the city and how it was during its height. The next day however, we were able to visit the Crisler library back in Selcuk, which is devoted to the ruins at Ephesus and the Temple of Artemis and housed a wealth of information on its gradual decline. This can be attributed to a succession of earthquakes, invasions, and the failure of the government to silt the harbour properly, leading to endemic malaria. What there is of the ancient site today seems so stripped back, that it is difficult to imagine the illustrious history that it once enjoyed.

Since returning home I have read the brilliant 'Constantinople' by Philip Mansel, which is a comprehensive narration of the city between the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1924. I slightly wish that I had read it sooner, as it has given me a much better impression of the unique culture and historical backdrop underpinning contemporary Istanbul than I had before leaving. It has also made me eager to return to Turkey, and to Istanbul in particular. There are places that I regret not having been able to get to, and others that I would love to revisit with a slightly keener sense of the history. I am extremely grateful to the benefactors of the Roger Short Memorial Fund for the opportunity that we were given to explore a part of the world with which I was previously unfamiliar. It has been a real pleasure to make this foray into Turkish culture, and I look forward to returning in the future.