

Turkey offers delightful sights!

Turkish delights

by KRISTINA HERRNDOBLER

Now that I've been to Turkey, I have a confession: It wasn't in my Top 10 list of travel destinations.

But after a 12-day educational tour of the country, I find myself raving about Turkey the way a 6-year-old goes on about her breakfast with Cinderella at Disney World.

The rich history, breathtaking landscapes, hospitable people and amazingly delicious food made for a memorable trip. When you go, and you should, here are nine Turkish delights you simply can't miss:

Antalya

This resort city on Turkey's Mediterranean coast is a favorite for Russians on holiday, and it's no wonder. The crystal clear sea is surrounded by the Taurus Mountains, making for picturesque views from your hotel room window and restaurant patios. The area claims that the sun shines 300 days a year and that if you visit in March or April, you can snow ski in the morning and go swimming in the Mediterranean that same afternoon.

Antalya has a lot to offer — waterfalls, an archaeological museum, a historic old quarter, caves, boat rides, water sports, shopping — but you might never leave your deck chair if your resting spot overlooks the deep, blue sea.

Bosporus cruise

Soak up Istanbul from the deck on one of the many private, for-hire boats or public ferries that cruise the Bosporus Strait daily. This relaxing trip offers marvelous views of many of the landmarks that make Istanbul famous, including the Dolmabahçe Palace, Ortaköy Mosque and Bosporus Bridge, which connects Europe and Asia.

Cappadocia

They call this area in central Turkey the land of fairy chimneys, and indeed the landscape is dreamy. Sculpted by millions of years of erosion and weathering, the volcanic ash that once blanketed the region has become a spectacular panorama of rock formations. The Göreme National Park and rock sites of Cappadocia make up a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The adventurous traveler should consider taking a camel ride through the valley or enjoying the incredible scenery from a hot air balloon. Don't leave without taking a guided tour through the subterranean cities where early Christians hid to escape persecution.

Ephesus

You don't have to be a history buff to appreciate the great ruins of Ephesus. It's easy to imagine this ancient Roman metropolis in its heyday, when residents would read scrolls at the two-story Library of Celsus, cheer gladiator fights in the stadium or hear the Apostle Paul preach in one of the large theaters. Hiring a knowledgeable guide at the entrance will be a big help in understanding the significance of each statue or ruin and putting the experience into context.

For us, Ephesus was just a day trip, but one could stay here for much longer and still not see everything. Nearby is the House of the Virgin Mary, considered to be the last home of the mother of Jesus, and the ruins of the Basilica of St. John, built in the sixth century over the grave of John the Evangelist.

We also enjoyed the scenic drive there, which is dotted with olive and fruit tree farms and breathtaking views of the Aegean Sea.

Shopping

Street vendors may tempt you with inexpensive souvenirs, evil-eye ornaments and colorful scarves. But the best souvenirs are the fine carpets and hand-painted ceramics that you can envision becoming family heirlooms. Even if you don't plan on returning with a timeless treasure, take a few hours to explore Istanbul's Grand Bazaar, where the shopping goes on for blocks, and the Spice Bazaar, which has more to offer than just spices and is a lot easier to manage.

Outside of Istanbul, you'll find smaller markets and shops with local handicrafts and cheaper prices. Hint: Bargain like crazy.

Turkish bath

If lying half-naked (or completely naked) on a large heated marble platform with lots of other women (or men if you are a man) makes you uncomfortable, do it anyway.

At Cemberlitas Hamam in Istanbul, I was given a towel to wrap around my bare body as I made my way to the women's bathing area. A woman who didn't speak a word of English, but was accustomed to foreign clients, motioned me to lay on my towel. "Where?" I asked, looking around at the marble platform already covered with 20 or so women. She scooped over the nearest women, making just enough room for me. Small skylights let sunshine in the large domed room. I told myself to enjoy my session, but it was hot like a sauna and I was nervous by the time she came back to scrub and massage my skin. After washing my hair under an arched alcove, she moved me to an oversize hot tub to soak with other women who had finished their bath. Once was enough for me, to be honest, but it was a unique experience I'm glad I didn't miss.

(My husband recommends male travelers get a Turkish shave by one of the country's storefront barbers. And, yes, you keep your clothes on for that.)

Whirling dervishes

These spiritual dancers, inspired by Sufi mystic Rumi in the 13th century, deliver an otherworldly experience. They spin around and around in full white skirts and conical headdresses while Sufi musicians play and sing verses from the Quran. While one might think their performance is entertainment, it is considered worship. The best place to see the Dervishes is on Saturday night in Konya, Rumi's home and final resting place near central Turkey. You also can buy tickets to evening ceremonies in Istanbul.

Call to prayer

Turkey is filled with spiritual places, such as the home of Abraham in Urfa, near the border with Syria, and Istanbul's Blue Mosque or its magnificent Hagia Sophia, first a Byzantine church, then a mosque, now a museum. See as many of them as you can, but don't underestimate the beauty of the routine Islamic call to prayer. It happens five times a day and can be heard all over Turkey, so you can't miss it. But make sure you take the time to actually listen and be open-minded enough to appreciate its beauty.

Epicurean pleasures

The iconic foods of Turkey are everywhere: sweet Turkish Delights, döner kebabs, baklava and lentil soup. On our trip, every delicious bite had one thing in common: its freshness. The olives burst with flavor and the ruby red tomatoes and plump juicy cherries had to have been picked that day. When I commented on this, a Turkish man replied, "Yes, we've been eating organic all along." Multi-course meals began with hot-out-of-the-oven bread and lentil soup and ended with baklava covered in ground pistachios, then a plate of various fruits, then a cup of tea with sugar cubes.

Worry not about your waistline. With so much to explore, you'll walk off any excess calories.

By KRISTINA HERRNDOBLER Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

for more, please visit

<http://www.chron.com/dispatch/story.mpl/travel/features/6569884.html>

The Institute of Interfaith Dialog (IID) grew out of the need to address the question, "How can citizens of the world live in peace and harmony?" The Institute was established in 2002 as a 501-c-3 non-profit educational organization by Turkish-Americans and their friends. The Institute aims to eliminate or reduce false stereotypes, prejudices and unjustified fears through direct human communication. Toward these goals the Institute organizes academic and grass roots activities such as conferences, panels, symposia, interfaith family dinners and cultural exchange trips. Many participants of the Institute's activities are inspired by the discourse and pioneering dialogue initiatives of the Turkish Muslim scholar, writer and educator Fethullah Gulen . Headquartered in Houston, Texas, the Institute has branch offices in five states and representatives throughout the South-Central United States.