

*By Ihab Zaki (Oct'2020)*

This is one country that surely never ceases to amaze and delight the visitor and it never stops pulling you towards it. Its amazing ancient sites are some of the most spectacular in the world, many of its small quaint towns are to fall in love with; its hotels are wonderful, its food is like none other, its road system is impeccable and its people are so hospitable. Nature has bestowed generously on it in terms of natural beauty: lovely shorelines, majestic mountains, verdant green forests and valleys, gushing rivers and turquoise-colored lakes are so abundant.



The East is different from the West in many ways. For instance, the culture and dress are much more conservative and alcoholic drinks are harder to locate. But also, there are fewer tourists and more genuine encounters with “real” Turks and Kurds who have not been spoiled by mass tourism. The experience of villages and small towns and even cities of the East are so different than the west: they are more authentic and genuine and less tainted by western world’s modernity. My group’s first stop in Eastern Turkey was Trabzon, located on the coast of the Black Sea, it’s been a major harbor for centuries, and there are many stories of rough storms, shipwrecks, and lost sailors that have been told throughout the centuries.

The city is home to a Hagia Sofia Church. Modeled after the larger church in Istanbul with the same name (which sadly the dogmatic Erdogan opted to convert it once again this year into a mosque to spite the west and make Ataturk turn in his grave). It was built in the 13th century when Trabzon was an autonomous state. Silver is an important export of the region, which is known for the unique way the silver is transformed into thin strings, and then woven into intricate patterns to produce many types of jewelry.



Tea is constantly being offered to you in Eastern Turkey and comes with it is their legendary hospitality. Aside from tea and silver, hazelnuts are also a popular item, and residents of this region eat these nuts by the handful. Turkey is the biggest producer in the world for hazelnuts.

Driving south from Trabzon, the tour went to the 4th century Sumela Monastery. This incredible structure, which includes housing for the monks, sanctuaries, chapels, a library, meeting halls, and reception areas, was built into the side of a cliff. Recently, a road has been constructed that allows tourists to get relatively close to the monastery, though one still has to climb a steep stairway to access the building. Because the site was open for many years with no protection by the government from either people or the elements, quite a few of the frescoes were marked with graffiti. Today, however, the monastery and many of the frescoes have been restored, and it remains a great example of Byzantine era Christian art.



This trip incorporates many one-nighter stays in some towns with a two-nighter here and there, and hence one learns to travel light and pack little and unpack only the essentials, so as to be able to move efficiently every morning. The accommodations ranged in style, but they were all comfortable, with Wi-Fi (though sometimes not in the rooms) and western-style bathrooms. A few had the typical charm of boutique hotels from restored monasteries, caravanserais and mansions.



After leaving the coast, our group of 7 intrepid travelers headed to Erzurum, home of a large number of mosques with many different styles and features. In **Erzurum**, but also throughout the rest of Turkey, many mosques had originally been churches, and had been altered so that their worship centers faced Mecca. We learned that most of these churches that had been converted into mosques predate the spread of Islam into Anatolia.

Although its styles are different from the jewelry of Trabzon, Erzurum is also known for its unique silver crafts. We toured a complex that had once been a caravanserai, which today, the site is known for its shops, including those specialized in silver products. Originally one of many of its kind that dotted the Silk



Road, the caravanserai was a type of roadside inn where travelers (and their animals) could stop for food, shelter, and to rest up and recover from their journey. Typically built every 20 miles – which was about the distance a caravan could travel in one day – these ancient sites can still be visited. We saw a number of caravanserais throughout our tour, some were just ruins, but others had been restored, and one was a modernized hotel that we stayed in.

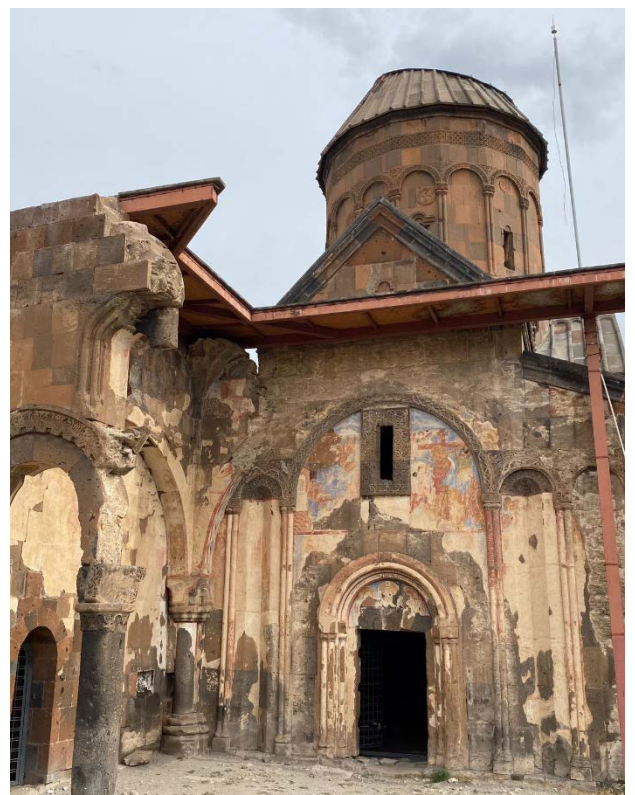
The archaeological museum in Erzurum was fascinating. Exhibits were shown as life-size dioramas, with mannequins clothed in traditional costumes posed in scenes from everyday life and surrounded by genuine artifacts. One scene shows a family in their home, while another depicts a teacher and students.

The countryside was stunning, and even the long drives were enjoyable because of the lovely scenery. The variety of the landscapes was breathtaking. From snow-capped mountains, to turquoise lakes, to deep valleys, and miles of grasslands, there was never a boring scene along the way. Also, because our group was small, we were all able to have our own window seat to admire the surroundings and take photos from.

The group stopped for some sightseeing and pictures at the Cobandede Arch Bridge as we made our way to **Kars**. Built between 1295 and 1304, the bridge is impressive, and, legend has it that this centuries-old structure is actually the boundary of the Garden of Eden.

Next was the visit of the ruins of **Ani**, an ancient city that at one time rivaled Cairo and Baghdad. A city along a major caravan route, Ani became the capital of the Armenian Empire, surviving even after the empire fell. By the mid-10th century, it was larger than any city in Europe, reaching a population of 200,000. In 1319, an earthquake, Mongol raids, and a coup destroyed the once-great Ani and left it as this eerie-looking vast deserted metropolis that reflects how glorious it was one day centuries ago.

Famous for the remnants of the city walls, where dozens of towers once stood, the ruins of the churches



were the true gem of Ani. About 14 churches that remain, with many of them dating to almost 1000 years ago; although each of these holy sites are worth seeing, most of the frescoes in the churches have disappeared over time, but St. Gregory's Church still holds a number of frescoes (though faded) depicting biblical stories and scenes. Because Ani is situated right on the border between Turkey and Armenia, you could see Armenia from across a creek.



One of the must-see sites in Kars is the Church of the Apostles. Built in 935, the church's façade has incredible reliefs of biblical figures. Today, the church is a museum that the tour was able to visit.

While driving to [Dogubeyazit](#), the major thrill was that eager anticipation of reaching Mount Ararat, allegedly where Noah's Ark landed. Aysel, our guide informed the participants that the mountain is typically covered with clouds, but to have their cameras ready just in case. At first sight, the mountain was surrounded by clouds, but as they approached, the clouds lifted a bit and they got some beautiful shots of the mythical Mount Ararat and later, few more magical photos of the mountain at sunset.



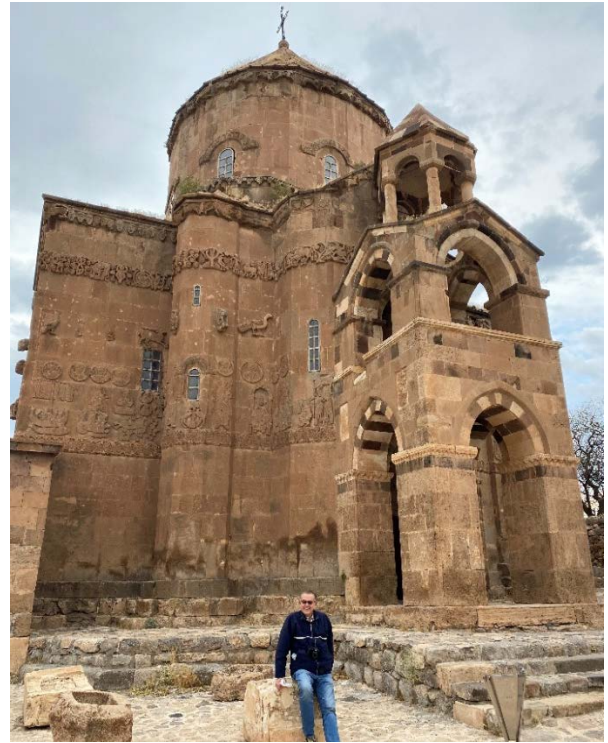
The next day they visited the Ishak Pasha Palace on the way to [Lake Van](#). This palace built in Seljuk style of architecture is very impressive. Containing the palace, admiring the chapel, library, banquet hall, the harem living quarters, and even the dungeon was a treat despite the cool breeze that day! Some of the rooms were not furnished, allowing you to focus the attention on the elaborate architecture. The palace sits on a mountain, providing many terrific views of the countryside below.



On the way to the city of Van, the guide told everyone the sad saga of the earthquake that devastated the area in 2010. Van city has rebuilt since then, restoring older structures and creating new ones. Today, you can hardly tell the city was nearly destroyed just a short decade ago. In Van, I was waiting with a major thrill at a restaurant for the arrival of my group with whom I was going to travel along in the next week. Once they arrived, it was a

heart-warming reunion seeing so many familiar faces that traveled with me on previous trips to other corners of the world and a great pleasure to meet a few new ones of our clients.

On our second day in Van, we took a ferry to Akdamar Island to visit the Holy Cross Church. The church, which sits on a high point, slowly came into view as we moved across the water, appearing grander and more magnificent with each passing moment. The lovely Armenian Church is adorned with a dome and relief carvings on its façade. These intricate carvings include animals, plants, people, Christ, and biblical scenes. One of the scenes depicted is Jonah and the whale. The whale in this carving looks instead like a big fish, and I was reminded that the Bible does in fact say that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish, and not a whale, as is so often told. The inside of the church was just as impressive as the outside, with many wonderful frescoes. The church has undergone extensive restorations for years, so it was a true treat to see it now after it opened.



We took the ferry back to the mainland, and had lunch overlooking the majestic lake. We dined on mullet, a tasty but bony fish, and also the only fish that lives in the soda waters of Lake Van. This was just one of the many fantastic meals of our trip. Not only was the food always delicious, there was sure to be plenty to go around. We would start off with salad, bread, and often soup, and after that we would usually be served yogurt with cucumbers and hummus. Once we ate our appetizers, it was time for the main dish, where we were typically given a choice between beef, chicken, lamb, or fish (all equally good). And of course, we would finish up with famous pastries with pistachios and ice cream and quite frequently also fruits (which many were at the peak season, so they were fantastic) then finally hot tea or Turkish Coffee.



Later that day, we visited the ruins of Van's ancient citadel. The ruins are located near some spectacular cliffs. We drove up as far as the bus would take us, then got out and continued our walk on foot and started taking so many pictures while marveling at one of Sinan's beautiful mosques standing proudly



amidst this deserted area. After that we went to the newly-opened Van museum, and what a surprising place it was. Surely a masterpiece venue displaying in an exquisite way such an array of the region's treasures. One hour there was so little to cover the maze of rooms and their contents.

As is tradition when you take a trip to a country famous for carpet weaving, we paid a visit to a carpet shop. Even though it was a tourist trap as we all felt but given how excited we all were to be on a trip during this hard time of Covid-19 and wanting to suck life out of every minute we are there, we succumbed! We were happy to lay our eyes on so many beautiful colors and designs and of course they made a show for us. We were served hot tea and bottled water and their distilled famous Raki (cousin of the Greek Ouzo), then sat down to enjoy our beverages as the shopkeepers rolled out carpet after fabulous carpet. The sellers were convincing, and their products excellent, but we didn't buy anything. My favorite thing about this stop was the next-door nursery where we saw the local Van cats, pure white animals that often have different colored eyes – one blue, and one yellow or green.

The scenery along the drive from Van to **Mardin** via the southern shores of the lake was incredible. From mountains, to shepherds tending to their flocks, and even a donkey train, there was never a dull moment on the bus. We passed by a dam on the Tigris River and stopped at Malabadi Bridge, an 11th century bridge over the Euphrates. Later, we stopped at a town named **Hasankeyf**, which sadly was inundated after the dam was built by the government to create a reservoir behind it. Some of the few lucky buildings have been dislodged from the ground and moved to a higher elevation that made them look less authentic and appealing. Unfortunately, the remnants of an old Roman bridge and the ancient caves as well as the walls of the old city are all under water now. Our guide told us that the village and its historical sites are at least 10,000 years old, and the opposition to the dam from the Turkish people did not deter the decision of authorities to finish the dam.



We entered Mardin at sunset through an old city gate. On the way to our accommodation in this stunning boutique hotel, we passed a pretty minaret all lit up. That night we stayed in an old mansion that had been transformed into a hotel. We climbed up the steep stone stairs to our rooms from some of which we could see Syria to our right and straight ahead, and Iraq to our left and the vast Mesopotamian plains.

The next morning, we visited the “still active” Syriac Monastery of Al-Suffran, one of the seats of Monastery. The monastery is beautiful,



particularly the white stone altar and the fabric hangings in the chapel, which depict scenes from the Last Supper and Jesus' baptism. The entrance is adorned with a golden cross. While we toured the monastery, our guide told us about the theological differences between the Greek Orthodox and the Syrian Orthodox churches. We learned that, while the Greek Church believes that Christ was both fully human and fully divine, as expressed in the statement issued by the Council of Nicea, the Syrian and Armenian churches believe instead the Jesus was absorbed by the divine (known as the monophysite definition). Therefore, the argument between the churches is whether Jesus Christ has one (the Syrian, Coptic and Armenian belief) or two natures (the Greek belief). While this does not seem all that important today, it has been an issue of intense passion in Turkey over the years, and sparked some great debate and conversations within the group.



We left Mardin and headed to [Diyarbakir](#). Along the way, we stopped to check out the "Ten Eyed Bridge." The picturesque bridge is located on the Tigris River and gets its name from its many arches, as the spaces created by the arches are known as the eyes. We took many pictures at this pretty site, sipped on a thick and caffeine-packed coffee.



Diyarbakir was known as "The Black" in the Byzantine Era, and we soon found out why. Coming up on the city that was once a stop along the Silk Road, we were greeted with a big black (now more of a dark gray) basalt wall. Though the wall has faded with time, it remains intact, and is a stark contrast with the bright colors of the rest of the city. We walked along the walls, peering into the old town within, and looking out over where the city has spread on the other side. Diyarbakir has a long history of conflict, and was the site of many battles between Byzantine, Persian, and Arab forces for centuries. More recently, the city has been caught in the middle of the tensions between the Kurdish and Turkish armies in 2015 but has been peaceful since.

The city is home to the Ulu Mosque. One of the oldest mosques in Turkey, it was converted from a Christian church that originated in the year 639. We visited the holy site and the nearby shopping areas, enjoying the energy of the busy town. Aside from mosques, Diyarbakir has a number of wonderful



churches. We toured the 17th Chaldean Catholic Church (the Mar Petyun Church). Our guide told us that the Chaldeans were the first Assyrians to embrace Christianity, though they still like to maintain their own identity. Later, we visited the 3rd century Syriac Virgin Mary Church.

The next day, I sadly bid farewell to my group as I began my trip heading back home while they continued their journey from Diyarbakir to **Malatya**, with a few stops along the way. The first detour was the Hilar Caves, carved out of rock, they were historically used as dwellings, then later as a Roman burial site. The ruins of the graves resemble those used in the Holy Land in ancient times, with large, wheel-like rocks used to close the graves' openings. Eventually the site turned into a rock quarry, with the rocks being used to build a caravanserai for passing travelers.

Later, they stopped at the nearby Canonu Archaeological site. Dating back to the Neolithic Period (7500 BC), archaeologists have discovered signs of communal life here, like stone structures. Evidence of primitive peoples has also been found at this site, including bones with blood still on them.

Malatya claims the title of the apricot capital of the world. And when entering the city, you will be amazed at the statue greeting you of an enormous apricot. It is quite a funny surprise, when you are used to seeing statues of stoic military heroes or royalty along your travels. Malatya boasts thousands of years of history and has been inhabited for at least six millennia. It has gone from being a Hittite city-state nearly 2,000 years ago, to a center of command during the Roman Empire, to a major Armenian city, to a part of the Ottoman Empire in the 1500s. Today, nearly half a million people live in Malatya, now a busy industrial center with a market for agricultural goods such as vegetables, rice, cotton, and (of course) apricots.



From Malatya, they traveled to Kahta the next day. The drive there was delightful, and they sat on the bus admiring the picturesque mountains along the way.

That day was a visit to one of the highlights of Eastern Turkey: the peak of **Mount Nemrut**. The mountain is over 7,000 feet high, and reaching the peak is a challenging climb, but everyone from the group pressed on nonetheless, knowing it would be worth their efforts. At the top of the mountain, is the burial tumulus and worship center of the ancient Commagene king Antiochus I Epiphanes. The tomb sanctuary is a very imposing sight, with large stone heads scattered about, as well as carvings of animals. After a couple of hours spent exploring the





peak, they headed back down the steep mountain, catching a glimpse of the glorious sunset.

The next day they continued to Urfa and Harran, stopping along the way at the Ataturk Lake Dam, located on the Euphrates River, it's the world's 4th largest rock fill dam. Here, once again enjoying tea in a nearby restaurant overlooking the pretty blue waters of Ataturk Lake.

Local folklore says that **Urfa** is the birthplace of Abraham. Although there's obviously no way to prove this, there are many age-old stories that tell of Abraham's life here. It is believed that he was born in a cave near Urfa. One legend tells it that Nimrod the Hunter tracked down baby Abraham, propelling him into a furnace at the bottom of the hill. As this happened, the Almighty intervened, turning the furnace into a pool of carp. The fish caught the baby, delivering him safely back to land. Abraham, thankful for his safety, promised that anyone who ate these magical fish would go blind. (This specific version of the legend is from the Holy Mountain, by William Dalrymple, pp. 74-75.) It was delightful to explore the Fishponds of Abraham, named after this tale, and feeding the hungry carp as they wrestled over each other for a taste of the food being thrown to them. The ponds, fed by a large spring, may quite possibly be as old as Abraham himself.



The town of Urfa is a labyrinth of streets, complete with the rich cacophony of a dozen different languages. What was once a Silk Road Town being today a bustling scene, with lots of shops, sellers and buyers talking over each other, and the decadent smell of grilled kebab. The sounds and smells of the city permeate the air and immerse you in the local culture as you wander through the covered alleyways.



Everyone eagerly anticipated visiting Harran because of its biblical importance. The Old Testament tells us that Abraham had lived here with his family for some time. Harran has been inhabited for around 5,000 years, while Abraham was thought to have lived around 4,000 years ago. Part of the city where the buildings are designed in an ancient traditional style, made of mud-brick and shaped like beehives is a very captivating site and gives you the sense that this is what Abraham's house could have looked like. Later, a visit to the remnants of Harran Castle and the remains of an ancient university in the old town portion of the city, after which some shopping, stopping for tea and delightful interactions with the locals and store owners in those beehive-shaped buildings, then headed back to Urfa.

The next morning, the group made their way to **Gobekli Tepe**, stopping along the way to admire the many fantastic works at the **Gaziantep** Mosaic Museum – which houses some of the world’s masterpieces. Gobekli Tepe, an archaeological site with artifacts dating back 12,000 years, is a mysterious site. These artifacts are so old, in fact, that some of the stone carvings would have been done even before metal tools were invented. Gobekli Tepe has at least 4 layers, with newer sanctuaries built on top of each other. The archaeologists told us that this site was probably used for ritual and worship ceremonies, and the most difficult part of excavating it is getting to the older sites while still being able to study the newer ones (which date back to around 8500 B.C.). After this wonderful finale, the group headed to the airport for their flight back to Istanbul for a needed last night before their return home the next day.



Away from touristy beaches and commercial Istanbul, Eastern Turkey is a totally different world with its own traditional culture as well as remote mountain monasteries and ancient Armenian churches; with historic bridges and castles and caravanserais scattered through the vast territory of Anatolia. You will explore historic markets, Seljuk buildings, walled cities and Armenian churches along Syriac Monasteries. This region boasts some of the most spectacular landscapes in the country and a legendary hospitality combined with a delectable cuisine. So if you have already seen the western part of Turkey, you need to see the East now to complete the beautiful mosaic that constitutes this amazing land.

Call us on our toll free at  
1-800-645-3233

Find the itineraries on our website at  
<http://www.mideasttrvl.com>

Follow us: 

Facebook page: [Spiekermanntravel](#)

Or request them via e-mail at [info@mideasttrvl.com](mailto:info@mideasttrvl.com)