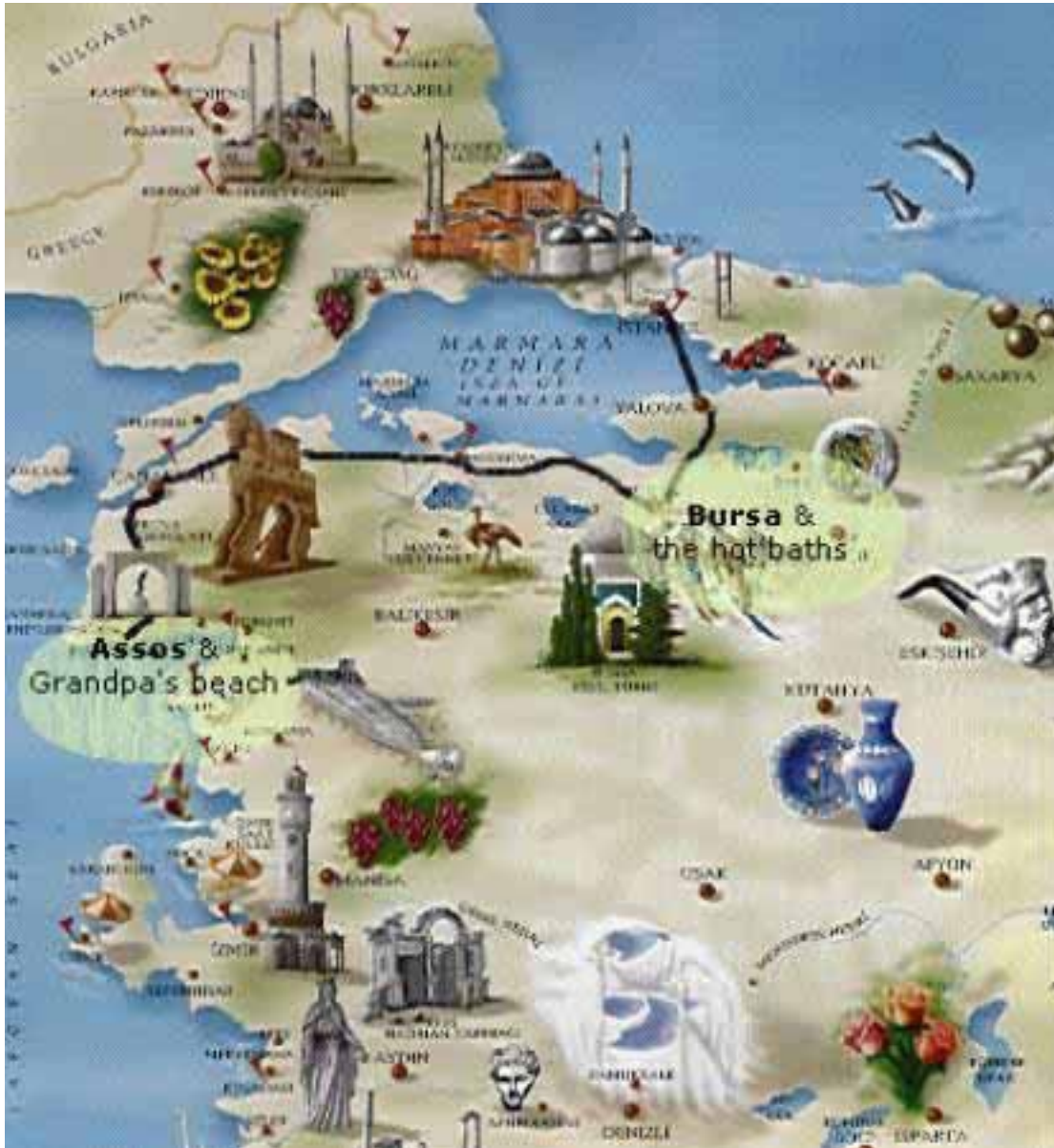


Anja and Søren backpacking in Turkey - July 2000

It was a meeting with the modern Orient and an exciting glimpse into the grand past of the Ottoman Empire. It was also Turkish baths, crystal seawaters, tea garden atmosphere and of course the perpetual bazaars.



Our route - we took the same way back with a stopover in Bursa

By the end of June Anja had finished her one-year job as au pair with a great family of 5 living on a farm with a small zoo of animals. She thought that now she deserved a holiday, and dad was easily convinced to help her finding a new destination. Encouraged by my own backpack trip to Thailand last winter we decided to go exploring - and from here Turkey is the nearest exotic country.

We flew to Istanbul - and because the arrival was around midnight we had reserved a hotel for the first night. On the other hand we had not decided what to do and where to go when in Turkey. The Black Sea was one possibility, but we found out that the interesting areas are in the remote part towards

Georgia, which is a distance of about 1.600 km each way. That would mean too much time wasted on transport, so we decided instead to go south.



However first we would like to absorb the atmosphere of Istanbul. We did not have to wait long as the first of five daily calls for prayer from the nearby minaret woke us around 4.30 am.

In the old part of the city where we lived the mosques are found in almost every street, and with very efficient loudspeakers the words of Allah could be clearly heard in every house. For us however the sounds seemed to gradually decrease and the third night we did not even wake up to put on our yellow foam earplugs.

Actually we kind of enjoyed those calls for prayer when in the evening we had our cay (Turkish tea) in one of the numerous tea gardens while playing a game of the traditional Turkish tavla (backgammon). On a warm evening sitting on a bench covered by a hand-woven carpet, with a relaxed atmosphere, the friendly Turks - and the sweet smell from the neighbour's water pipe - we truly sensed being in another world.

A little history:

Turkish civilisation goes back almost 10.000 years. When the Stone Age prevailed here in Northern Europe the world's oldest city with arts and architecture was established in Turkey. The origin of Istanbul dates back to year 657 BC, when it first became a Greek city and later as Constantinople (330 - 1453 AD) became the capital of the great Eastern Roman empire.

However Istanbul reached the height of its glory as capital of the Ottoman Empire. During almost 6 centuries (1453 - 1922) the Turkish Sultans ruled the entire Middle East as well as much of Northern Africa and Eastern Europe. Trade, cultures and customs from this vast domain came together in Istanbul - it is still felt today and surely makes Istanbul one of the world's most fascinating cities.

The Blue Mosque

All those rulers have left for posterity monuments to their eternal glory. This is what I heard at the Sound & Light Show:

When in 1609 the young Sultan Ahmet the First wished to surpass his predecessors he asked his chief architect Sedefkar to create an even larger mosque. Sedefkar answered his Sultan that it is not the size but the beauty, grace and the nobility of the prayers that will flow out to heaven, that is how the new mosque should outshine all others.

Ahmet paid 30.000 bags of gold for the choice hilltop piece of land from where the Blue Mosque seven years later would command the skyline of Istanbul - and still does.



Entering Istanbul from the sea - the Blue Mosque is easily recognisable to the left on the 6 slim minarets

To get inside, Anja had to accept wearing the scarf offered to cover her hair and naked shoulders. When that had been arranged and our shoes put into plastic bags we could enter the holy building on bare feet. Like in most other mosques the floor is covered by wall-to-wall hand woven carpets, which are wonderfully warm and soft to walk on and which muffles the sounds and so create a special solemn atmosphere. Unlike in a Christian church the mosque has no seating or altar, and scattered around in the enormous room worshippers were praying on their knees. Infidels are not allowed into the mosque during regular praying times.

Impressive each time we saw it the Blue Mosque became our point of focus when walking and driving in Istanbul or even more magnificently when we left and returned by boat.



The Sultan Palace - Topkapi Sarayi

The Palace buildings and gardens occupy the entire tip of the Istanbul peninsula on the European side, which during four centuries (1453 - 1839) served as the residence for the ruler of the world's superpower at that time, the Ottoman Empire.

This is not a postcard from Taj Mahal but the Blue Mosque reflecting in the pond during a break in the cascading fountain. Anja is resting on the bench.

The Harem with more than 300 rooms was our first destination. As the private quarter for the Sultan and his family it used to accommodate around 500 persons made up by up to 300 concubines, the children as well as black eunuchs who were entrusted the security and looking after the women.

The wives and concubines were all foreigners as Islam forbids enslaving Moslems, Christians and Jews. They were often prisoners of war or slaves bought in especially Balkan and Caucasus - and girls often not yet in their teens were commonly received as gifts from nobles and others who wanted to ingratiate themselves with the Sultan.

We happened to meet a German born Turkish guide, who could tell us a lot about the life in the harem:

When girls entered the Harem they would be schooled in Islam and Turkish culture and language, in the arts of make-up, dressing, manners, music, reading, writing and dancing. Then they became a kind of servants or assistants to the sultan's concubines and children, then to the sultan-mother and eventually the best of them to the sultan himself. Thus the more talented and intelligent could rise in the palace service to hold offices in the administration.

The Sultan-mother had a very important role and as she could give orders directly to the Grand Vizier (Prime Minister) she had a profound influence on the matters of state and on the selection of the Sultan's wives. She would also choose the most beautiful and intelligent of the Harem girls to be her personal servants and thus introduce them to her son the sultan.

Legend and romance usually picture the Harem as a place of half naked belly-dancing girls with the attending men watching and waiting on soft carpets. In fact Harem means private quarters and the life was strictly governed by tradition, obligation and ceremony.

Even the sultan was a man though, and we saw one of the sleeping rooms which was furnished with a fountain in the wall to give the sound of cascading water making it difficult to eavesdrop on the sultan's conversations. Upon the death of a sultan the entire population of the harem would be changed. The concubines were given their freedom and with their supreme education, intelligence and connections they often got married to powerful men. The mother of the new sultan would then start the same procedure once again. Other parts of the Palace are now museum packed with collections of the treasures of the Sultanate. It would become boring to detail those riches.

However in the most holy of the holy rooms, which could only be entered by the chosen of the chosen and only at special ceremonial occasions, are some truly unique objects. To the live sound of an Imam who from the corner was chanting passages from the Koran we saw the cloak of the Prophet Mohammed, a letter written by Mohammed to the Governor of the now disputed El Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, a hair from the Prophet's beard as well as a print in clay of his foot (size 45). As believers of the Old Testament this Islamic collection also includes Moses' walking stick!

That was a day, which got maximum marks on our evaluation of events.



*The harem-women bathing, watched by the eunuch
Same pool today with Anja and a view in the opposite direction to the city*

Who wants to be a millionaire?

Last year in Romania paying 1/2 million ley for a tank of gasoline amazed us. In Turkey that amount would not even buy us one liter. The present rate of exchange gave us 630.000 lira for 1 US\$, so we had to get used to prices being quoted by the millions. Actually 1 million lira was kind of standard price whether it was a Versace T-shirt, 1 kg of cherries, a tourist-trap ice cream, 5 small bottles of perfume, a silk scarf or tea for two with freshly baked cookies.

The haircut event

The warm weather reminded me of the need to have a haircut, so one day on the way to the bazaar we went into a small barber's shop. The master ordered tea for me while he sent for someone to translate. When we had agreed on the cut, which they called American style, the interpreter took Anja off to show her his uncle's jeweler shop next door. For the next half hour I got the Imperial treat. The barber called the boy about ten times to bring the mirror and although I repeatedly praised his skills he continued to find a hair that needed

another fractional cut. He also trimmed my beard and applied three types of lotion onto my face. The most surprising moment though was when the boy brought the cigarette lighter and he burned away the hair in my ears. I gave a jump in the chair, but saw later that other customers were subjected to the same treatment. The smell reminded me of chicken slaughtering when we lived on the farm, where I always got the job to clean the birds and burn the small hair remaining after plucking them.

Eventually I thought we were through, but then the boy started to massage my arms. When blood and muscles had been warmed up the barber took over and extended the massage to neck, shoulders and quite deeply down my back. Thus a simple haircut can be made into an event and the barber definitely deserved the payment of 8 million lira.



Turkish bath in Bursa

After 2 days in Istanbul we took a boat crossing the Marmara Sea to the Asian part of Turkey. We continued by bus to the old Ottoman-capital of Bursa, which grew to importance because of its thermal baths and as a center for silk production and trade. After having explored the dusty bazaars all day we felt that we deserved (and definitely needed) a bath. The hamami's (Turkish baths) are usually situated near a mosque so that people can clean themselves before turning to God. So it was not difficult to find a hamami and we went straight in.

Anja was greeted by a lady and taken to the women's quarters. I got a small locker room where I dressed in a towel around my waist. Then my attendant showed me the toilet and washroom for my private

parts. When ready he took me inside to the steam room - floor and walls in thick marble and the high roof dome shaped. From one wall hot water was running into a row of delicate bowls, and I was asked to sit on the marble bank next to a bowl. With a bucket he then splashed water on me with an amazing speed until I felt like a half boiled lobster (and probably also looked like one).

The attendant then started to wash me: At first he scrubbed with a coarse cloth with the effect that after some time I looked as if I had rolled myself in black dirt. Apparently dead skin and dirt buried deeply in the cells were loosened by this treatment (I had showered in the morning). Then the more pleasurable lathering, rinse and shampooing.

For the next activity I was invited to lie on another marble bank for the massage.

When everything was finished I felt good, but actually it was not pleasant at all to be subjected to his very strong hands and fingers. On my back he seemed to favour my spine muscles and it felt like he was playing bass on them. After another intense cascade of hot water I was left alone to change my loincloth. In the anteroom another attendant came with a stack of towels and started to dry me, leaving with an eloquent gesture that some tips were expected.

While I was relaxing in my changing room he was keeping himself busy in the courtyard with the small fountain cooling the drinks. It took some time before Anja came out - the floor and fountain were by then shining - and baksheesh (tips) were distributed.

It had been an unforgettable experience and we felt like newborn.



Fruit season

We soon found out that the standard breakfast at the hotels were slices of cucumber and tomato with a boiled egg, jam and honey. After a couple of days we replaced that by delicious freshly baked thin bread rolled around different fillings of tomato/chili, cheese or meats.

But our favorite snack meal was fruit. We were lucky to be there in the peak season where the fruit stands were abound with all sorts of sun-ripened delicacies. It became a daily habit to buy 3 kilos of fruits, always

cherries and otherwise peaches, melon, strawberries, figs, grapes, apricots and plums. This diet combined with hours of walking should ensure our goal to loose a few kilos. However this did not happen, so apparently we have had too much of the first courses of marinated aubergine, yogurt with herbs and garlic, olives, cheese and kebabs.

After the meal it was customary that the waiter sprayed some lemon cologne into our hands - and after robbing, the hands should then be hold close to the face for inhaling to clean the air in the nose. A pleasant habit, which will now be transformed to our house - as long supplies last.

The Trojan horse

From Bursa we continued southwards to the narrow point where Ottoman troops during WWI held off the Allies in a 9 month long battle which resulted in more than half a million casualties. The Allied troops were mainly from the British Empire, and the many bars and tour shops in the main town of

Canakkale are clearly catering to the British, Australian and Kiwi visitors.

We used it as base for an excursion to Troy, the 5000-year-old city, which is the location of Homer's Iliad. It was here that Paris kidnapped the beautiful Helen and thus started the Trojan War with famous figures like Agamemnon, Achilles, and Odysseus helping to get her back. Paris knew that Achilles' mother had dipped him in the River Styx to make him invincible. However to do so she hold him in his heel where Paris succeeded to shoot him. Then Odysseus came up with the idea to construct a wooden horse, fill it with soldiers and wheel it inside the walls of the city. It is believed that an earthquake helped them to get inside, but anyway a copy of that horse is now greeting visitors at the entrance of the remaining ruins.



The main street of Assos between the hotel and the restaurant

Grandpa's beach

We have never been eager to follow the tourist trail so we spotted a small and remote village further south along the Mediterranean coast.

After having changed bus once more we arrived to the small main square of Assos. The minibus could hardly turn on the square and to get there it had to drive right through the harbour restaurant of Hotel Assos.

The village is known for its 2500-year old Athena Temple, which is beautifully situated on a mountaintop overlooking the sea.

Between the steep wall of the mountain and the harbour they have only around 20 m to accommodate hotels, restaurants and the lone street. After looking around we settled for a bungalow in a kind of campground (with room for 3 tents). However it was a fine piece of land directly at the beach, and the water was crystal clear and quite warm.

The owner is a dear Turk with a big white chef's hat and a big moustache, and we immediately called him Grandpa. He might not be that old though, because we found out that the children there were actually his, and not grandchildren.

It did not take us long to get into swimsuits and down to the beach. The water

was wonderful and there was a fresh wind so we did not quite feel the strong sun - until in the evening when we showered and saw - and felt - the red thighs and shoulders.

Anyway we enjoyed the extreme service by Ibrahim constantly bringing tea or cold water. We had agreed to have 1/2 pension and at night we could freely choose from the fridge. The warm evenings on the terrace went with playing tavla with Anja or other Turkish guests, while Anja learned a new card game from the daughters of Grandpa.



On the terrace of Grandpa's beach



<The chef preparing our dinner

Hottest day in 80 years

As usual we stayed for 2 days and since Anja did not want to see any more ruins, which abound in the area, we decided to go back to Bursa. This time we would like to have our own Turkish bath, so we went to the area of the hot springs and found a nice old hotel. Nobody spoke even one word of English or German, but our multilingual sign language helped us through.



On the 3 busses, which brought us to Bursa, we had enjoyed air-condition and the fine service with frequent servings of tea, cake and soft water. We just walked from one bus to the other in this efficient private network of busses, so it was not until we sat in the slow terminal bus in Bursa that we felt rather hot.

<Near the mosques you always find toilets and a spring or tap with drinkable water.

Another purpose is to wash before praying.

You might recognise me on the first seating.

It should be much hotter though, because when we went down to the bathing quarters the room was steaming. In a normal bathtub you can just wait a little until the temperature falls. That is not possible in a Turkish bath, because the hot water is constantly running into the tub and through an overflow onto the floor and into the drain. My legs were still sort of red from the

beach stay, so it was a very slow process to immerse myself into the water.

The next day we saw the big letters in the Turkish papers - which every day had headlines the size of 'Turkey wins the football world cup' - that it had been the warmest day for 80 years, 45°C (115°F). It also carried pictures of a German tourist who had collapsed and who was being taken by helicopter to the hospital.

Hard working women

When in Istanbul we visited the museum for Turkish and Islamic art I noticed that all the constructed scenes of daily life showed women working with carding, spinning and dyeing the wool used for clothes, carpets and tents. Actually only women were shown in the displays. I asked the attendant what the men were doing. Drinking tea, he said, quickly adding that since the last 20 years men were also doing their share of the domestic work.

In the villages we saw that the meeting point was clearly the local open air bar on the market square, shaded by straw mats or big trees, where the men sat playing card, reading papers and drinking tea. Actually it was the same picture in the tea-gardens everywhere and in general women were less visible. Men usually operated even shops selling women underwear or perfume.

One evening during our dinner at a central location in Bursa (1 mill inhabitants) our quick survey showed 30 out of 100 women were wearing scarf. The following day Anja went to a hairdresser for manicure, and the female owner had only contempt for those 'religious fanatics'.



Anja was also wearing a scarf when visiting the beautiful mosques.

In the tea-gardens Anja was always the only female visitors

On the beach the bikinis were absolutely small, and in the daily papers they did not have a page six girl, but at least in some of the papers a girl on every page doing nothing to hide their attributes.

What Anja noticed was the remarkable few couples, although the remote banks in the parks were intimately occupied in the evening. With her fashion eyes the girls' hair was not the latest style and their clothes and colors not well composed.

Living

What I also do not understand is how an owner of a nice tea restaurant with marble floor and cellular phone in the pocket can make a living out of a tea boiler and a fridge with Coke. A cup of tea costs a quarter (2 kroner), the tavla or cards are free to use and the customers definitely talk and smoke more than drinking tea.

Obviously the wave more customers than those in the shop, because when visiting other shops, like the barber or looking on carpets or leather jackets, tea was immediately sent for by pressing a bell. In our favourite tea-shop I noticed such bell ring - and shortly after the boy ran away with the tray hung in 3 metal wires meeting in a finger eye - and even in the bazaar crows I did not see a drop spilled.

My small stock of Arabic words came in handy. The polite Islamic greeting, Salaam Aleikum is well known to and highly appreciated by the Koran-reading

Turks, and sometimes it gave us special privileges when visiting the mosques with Arab speaking Imams.

Our last business in Istanbul Monday morning was walking down to the Egyptian market to buy some of the delicious foods. we ended up with 5 kilos and only a couple of millions lira left, which would not even pay a taxi back to the hotel. So we walked back again - and instead spent the last money on cherries, which lasted all the way to Frankfurt.

We did not see enough of this large and exciting country with so much to offer, but we appreciate what we saw and we thank the many nice people we met for their help and indulgence.