

# The Tangential Traveler

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Istanbul 1, first impressions.

## ”Familiarity Breeds Contempt”

Well, of course the ring-road journey from an major airport into the city is always generically ugly, and Istanbul is no exception. However, it was still astounding to drive by the ruins of parts of the Theodosian city walls (or perhaps they were other ramparts, but ancient walls nonetheless), with the highways and boulevards crashing through them without mercy. Ruins everywhere, mostly Byzantine, from the looks of the brickwork. Some had satellite dishes hanging off of them, some had small houses perched on them, some were stumps standing isolated in the center of vacant, weedy lots, like first-century equivalents of the South Bronx.



And some houses are built right into ancient walls...

Coming from the US, where, aside from some serpentine native American mounds and a couple of buildings in St. Augustine and San Juan, there's nothing really much over 400 years old, the utter provincial that I am was struck here, as I was in China, at how commonplace old, *really* old, is in much of the world, especially here, not too far from the cradle of civilization in neighboring Iraq. Old is nothin' special to the folks around

here. These walls and ruins have been crumbling (and recycled for new construction) for thousands of years, for many generations.

Given this fact, one must ironically thank god for tourism, the monetary engine that now promotes a more proactive attitude towards preservation, and even more development (i.e. archeological digs) in the third world. Our culture in the US young and brash, and we have often torn down our own marvels too, like the late, great Pennsylvania Station in New York, trashed to make way for the hideous Madison Square Garden. This provoked so much outrage that NYC established a Landmarks Preservation Commission. We all – the US and the developing world are all catching on, albeit slowly and belatedly.

I arrived at the hotel shortly after 6pm, after what felt like a lifetime of travel (bus to NY, 2 hours, bus to Newark in dense traffic, 1 hr, wait at the airport, because I am pathologically early, 2 hours, plane to London, 6 hours, plane to Istanbul, 4 hours, time spent spiraling over the airports and waiting on the taxiways? Probably close to 2 more...

Unlike virtually every other trip I've taken, I am in the mega-epicenter of tourist neighborhoods here. You can't go 20 feet without some pseudo-friendly restaurateur or carpet-seller slightly-unctuously inviting you in to partake of their wares. I hear more French, Spanish, English, German, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese and Chinese spoken in this district than I do Turkish.

I generally like to stay on the outskirts, and spend more time in 'real' neighborhoods, but this hotel seemed nice, and the price was decent (50 euros a night – not cheap, but not killer either). I have a very small, quite sweet room on a quiet street. It's too narrow to even have an end table next to the small, very firm mattress (great mattress!), so I went upstairs to the terrace to write this instead. The view up here is insane: this hotel is basically in-between the world-famous Blue Mosque, (which has a lopsided sickle moon smiling as it sets next to it tonight, and I'm just too late to photograph it – maybe tomorrow),



and the equally famous Hagia Sophia, from my hotel's rooftop terrace. Haven't gotten the sign translated yet, but I was told it was put up for Ramadan,

The Hagia Sophia ('Holy Wisdom', as in 'Church of Holy Wisdom') one of the most amazing buildings in all of history.



Hagia Sophia, again from my roof. I have wanted to see this building for at least 20 years!

Famous in particular for its massive dome, the Hagia Sophia is considered the epitome of Byzantine architecture and one of the most beautiful buildings in the world. It was the largest cathedral in the world for nearly a thousand years, until the completion of the Medieval Seville Cathedral in 1520. It's still the 4<sup>th</sup> largest (though technically it ain't a cathedral anymore). Its dome was also the largest dome in the world for over 1000 years (think of that feat of engineering: over one... Thousand... YEARS!), until the completion of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

Speaking of 'Sophia', not only do I own a beat-up convertible named 'Sophia' (after Sophia Loren), but a friend of mine named her vibrator Sophia (perhaps for 'bringer of self-knowledge?') Hmmm.

I'm on this terrace, with the smells of lamb and spices, and the faint 3<sup>rd</sup>-world smell of sewage as well wafting over me, looking at these two spectacular and spectacularly lit buildings. And off to one side, the neighborhood I'm in, which consists of small Ottoman houses and elbow-shaped, crescent-shaped and zig-zagging streets, slopes gradually down to the black open space of the Sea of Marmara.

### **Ramadan's just alright with me and City of Cats**

I arrived tired and hungry, but intent on not eating until the Ramadan fast was ended for the day. Yes, it's Ramadan, and several travel books say it's not a good time to come as a

tourist, because so many restaurants are closed, and because, supposedly, people are grumpy from fasting all day. As for me, can I do it? Is there special dispensation for hypoglycemics in Islam? Or should I just be a normal tourist and eat when I like, which will not be hard in the tourist neighborhoods, but will supposedly be almost impossible (and considered quite rude) elsewhere? From before sunrise (one cannot eat after one can visually discern the ‘difference between a black thread and a white thread’ in the pre-dawn hours), until about 7:20 pm when the sun sets, there is no eating OR drinking (even water!) OR smoking of anything for the devout, for a month! Well, turns out my hotel’s free breakfast is from between 7-10 am, so I’ll at the very least be starting my daily fast late. Hey, during Ramadan, it shouldn’t be called ‘breakfast’ – it should be called ‘break-then-makefast’.

Actually, the fast seems to be rigorously upheld by almost all of the local people. True, if I hadn’t known it was Ramadan (or ‘Ramazan’, as it’s called here), I might not have noticed, but notice I did on the drive in from the airport: couples walked along the Sea of Marmara, people haggled at the huge fish market, kids played along the quays – and not an ice-cream cone, soda, water bottle, sandwich, or cigarette in sight.

Think of how much worse it can be, though: Ramadan follows a lunar calendar, so it shifts throughout the year over time. Imagine no water at all for those long, sweltering summer days here in Istanbul (or, worse yet, Saudi Arabia, Iraq etc.). Now that’s piety! I think that in terms of hunger pangs, I can handle this, and hopefully in terms of blood sugar too, but seeing as how I plan to be tramping all over this city, walking kilometers a day as I did in Paris, the no-water thing may be more than I care to deal with. Perhaps a discretely hidden water bottle, sipped in a dark corner will not be too offensive.

But regarding Ramadan in general, I had my reservations. Was I coming to visit a country during a dour, Lenten month? Would it all be piety and quiet-reflection and atonement? NO WAY! I left the hotel and wandered over to a main drag, to try and get some money changed. I walked through a huge marketplace of tents and amusements (outdoor coin-operated air-hockey and pool tables, cafes, roast corn and roast chestnut vendors, cotton candy, all kinds of stuff.) It looked a lot like the festive ‘Christmas Markets’ I’ve seen in Germany and France. But no one was buying anything! I was a little too intent on finding the right street, and a little too distracted by my first glimpses of the very close Blue Mosque to notice right away, but I gradually saw it, and felt it: an almost electric anticipation in the crowds.

And then I saw the cats! Oh My God, Istanbul is a city of lanky languorous stray cats. It seemed there were flocks of them, swarms of them. I’ve never seen so many cats, all with slender frames, bright restless eyes, and lively, inquisitive ears that trembled as they wove their way insouciantly underfoot through the masses of people, looking for morsels. And it looked like slim pickin’s indeed for these guys during Ramadan. No scraps for them or for the seagulls that kited amongst the Blue Mosque’s minarets and gossiped from the tops of the streetlights.

No one ate, but as I walked, I noticed that some people sitting at the outside cafes had already been served, but were waiting, just waiting with faint, conspiratorial smiles, to pick up that fork and light that cigarette. Others crowded outside popular restaurants in long lines, smiling with that same anticipation. Then, as I walked on up the street past the crowds, dodging psychotic cabs and jingling trams, the Muzzein's voice came up over of the loudspeakers of several mosques simultaneously. All ears perked up at the sound, and broad smiles appeared, and the bustle of conversation intensified, joined suddenly with the clatter of silverware.

And something odd happened to me. I got misty-eyed. Something in that call to prayer touched me deeply. I'd heard it before, on TV and radio. I think I've even heard it 'live' once, outside the Great Mosque in Xian, China, but it had never touched me this way. I was told by a psychic once that in my happiest past life, I was a Sufi poet. Maybe this call, loud and up close in this land of Sufism, echoing slightly out of synchrony from several mosques, was resonating with a long-lost memory from another life. I don't know. I just found it funny that this die-hard agnostic, who viscerally mistrusts any organized form of faith, was viscerally touched deeply, to the point that I had to work hard prevent myself from crying. And it came out of nowhere and left in a instant.

So, as the crowds joyously tucked into their meals, I found the change shops closed, and doubled back through the 'Christmas Market' which was now bedlam, each tent filled with swarming people, and steaming piles of fresh-baked bread, kebobs, fruits, sweets, puddings, pastries. People smiled, gesticulated with cigarettes, buttonholed suddenly-harried waiters.



My fast is over, so Feed Me Fast! (by the way, the 'houses' you see here are painted canvas facades over the fronts of the food stands). The stands all have huge eating tents behind them, where the light bulbs are).

And as I strolled along, it seemed that the cats weren't having such a tough time of it after all. They may have to fast all day like their human brethren, but I saw many, many people actively feeding them scraps now. There was a generosity for these strays that I've never seen in NY. One of the five pillars of Islam is giving alms to the poor. I wonder if itinerant cats are included in that category, 'cause they were begging, and their prayers were being answered!

I still had no money, and didn't even know the exchange rate, so the chestnuts and puddings and kebabs would have to wait. I started to thread my way back 'home'.

I got lost, totally lost, in the serpentine streets. Later, I found that I'd been within a block of my hotel on 5 separate occasions, only to blunder by it, with it just out of sight. This part of town is like the old town of Barcelona: you're better off with a compass than a street map – there are just too many streets, too many turns!

After witnessing the kindnesses to the cats, I wondered again about the carpet salesmen and restaurant barkers. Oh, yes, they did want to separate me from my money, no doubt – but after I'd sat in a cheap little kebab-house patio and eaten my meal (and had a great conversation with a retired couple from France), I noticed that the guy who'd pulled me in was still talking to me, in the same gentle, smiling tone. I mean, I'd ordered the food, he'd 'got' me, and yet he still seemed to want to make me feel at ease, at home. Was he working me for the tip? I dunno – he just seemed 'nice'.

So far, Turkey seems to have a gentle, friendly vibe. Oh, no doubt, I'm in a highly-commercial district, with trinkets and tourist crap all over, but nonetheless, when I blundered into another hotel to get directions, the guy behind the desk took me outside and pointed the way to direct a non-customer to his competitor's establishment, all with a genuine smile and a deeply caring, neither unctuous nor patronizing manner. I had misjudged these people, I think.