

The Tangential Traveler

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9/18/2007 – first full day.

The Muzzein's voice woke me at 5:12 today. I don't know if he was singing to tell everyone that the first prayer, and hence the fast, had begun, or to hurry up and finish eating, but that same tingle came into me; an odd familiarity.

We have church bells in the West, a far more impersonal, if equally musical call to faith and teller of time. But they are naturally loud. How did the Muzzein's accomplish their task before the advent loudspeakers? Were there corps of them throughout the city, shouting from rooftop to rooftop? Even in an age without internal combustion, I doubt I could have heard an unamplified voice from the Blue Mosque, only some 4 blocks away.

Of course, maybe they did in those days what I did on long summer afternoons with my best friend Freddy when we were about 8 years old: we'd stolen two huge rubber traffic cones, and we'd sit, for hours on my fire escape singing 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' and other songs through our megaphones, droning off key, and doubtless pissing off the neighbors as we pretended to be rock stars...

First day...

I walked my Ass off this morning. I got back to my neighborhood at, what I thought was afternoon, late afternoon, to find it was really 11:40 am. I'd only been walking 4 hours, and man were my dogs tired. No matter, snag some lunch and... and fall asleep – this torpor came over my poor jet-lagged body, so I stumbled to back to the hotel for a few hours of dreamless sleep, only awake, too tired for much of anything but... dinner. Oh man, am I gonna get fat on this regimen!

But it was a fine walk indeed. I started on a charming little street behind the Hagia Sophia. Although I'm sure Istanbul is brutal in Summer, and has even been a bit hot today there are many shady tree-lined cobblestone streets with Wisteria-like vines and other plants crawling all over the buildings.



This is Sogukcesme Sokagi, a street right behind the Hagia Sophia.

I threaded my way through a throng of sleepy-yet-curious cats. Sometimes it was like something out of a children's book – 'The kingdom of Cats' or something. I mean, I'd look up and there'd be cats hanging out on steps, sleeping on branches, kittens suckling their moms in bushes, even one big striped tom sharpening his claws by climbing with gusto up the wooden side of a ramshackle Ottoman house!



3, count 'em, 3 cats in this picture... and about 10 more just out of view.

My mother dearly loved cats, and she often stopped to 'talk' with them on the street, a habit I've picked up. I doubt she ever would have made it to any of the sights in Istanbul, not with so many charming and friendly cats to distract her. God knows, they charmed me.

I'll talk about the other things that happened today soon, but I want to write about the here and now. I'm sitting on the shore of the Sea of Marmara, as the sun sets. Like so much of the shoreline in NY, this little strip of walkway and park is semi-cut-off from the

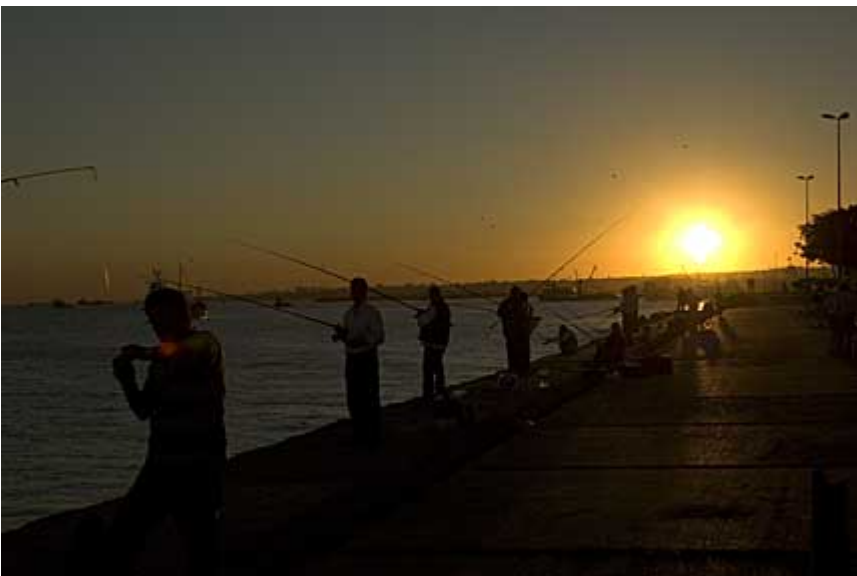
rest of Istanbul by a highway. It reminds me, strikingly, of the section of the Belt Parkway near the Verrazano bridge. It's a place for fishing, hanging out (but curiously, given the stiff wind, not kite flying) and a homemade shooting gallery consisting of an air-rifle and strings of balloons and cans on the rocks of the breakwater., 4 shots for one Turkish Lira. I hit two balloons easily, but the cans eluded me for some odd reason. Homemade Coney Island shooting gallery!



I've just drunk some vastly-overpriced tea from a sly raconteur who served me first and then asked for an exorbitant amount. I bartered him down, but we both knew I still took a beating. Prices vary wildly here: an entire meal for 15 Turkish Lira, or an iced coffee for 7, even in the same neighborhood...

And again, the ever-present cats, basking on the rocks that still have a little of the day's warmth left, being chased by toddlers, searching the remains of campfires (people make a lot of them here to cook their fresh-caught fish) for tidbits.

Speaking of fishing, these people take it seriously! Actually, they are *obsessed* with it! Not only are there scores of guys with poles, but every ten or twenty feet is a large opened suitcase propped open on a chair, full of lures and floats for sale.



Fishing @ sunset, just before the end of the daily Ramadan fast, Sea of Marmara

Actually the point about Istanbul is that everything's for sale all the time, everywhere. A mercantile bent doesn't even begin to describe these people. Today I wandered through the weapons/camo/hunting/fishing/commando-clothing district, several other clothing districts from high-end to really cheap and tacky, and a shoe district in a shabby part of town with rotting abandoned Ottoman houses, rows of them cracked open to the sky like the husks of overripe fruits.



This down-on-its heels beauty is still intact...

I saw entire stores devoted to one type (!) of high-heel, available in many colors and finishes, stores that sold only replacement rubber soles, others that sold only adhesives for shoe soles – maybe ten of those alone!

Oh, and speaking of fishing, and cats of course, I'm now in a sea-side restaurant, just past sunset, along this same strip of land, waiting for a seemingly comatose waiter to notice me before I starve. The fish smells amazing, and only wish I knew what was best to order. Every other table has a cat sitting calmly like an Egyptian statue beside it. Or more

like a porter, perhaps, or a sommelier waiting to give advice on champagne. Of course, they're begging, and with a level of devotion and concentration that I wish the rest of the staff here could emulate. And doing quite well, from what I can see. I'm sure there's a darker side to so many un-spayed un-neutered animals running free, but hey, at least I bet there aren't too many mice or rats in Istanbul, and I'd trade New York's big Norwegian rats for these charmers any day. Then again, most of these guys look about the size of one NY rat (or less!), so maybe they wouldn't stand a chance.

As I walked to this restaurant, the Ramadan fast came to an end, and in a really beautiful fashion. First the muzzein from the Blue Mosque called out over the speakers, then others chimed in, one after the other. It was really beautiful, the overlapping ululations building into a polyrhythmic cacophony as the late-comers joined in. Soon, it seemed the whole city was calling out 'Allah U Akbar' – ('God is Great'), along with wailing devotional phrases. And the different calls beat against each other in this rhythm that gathered force and complexity, until I felt pulled aloft by it. In my hotel neighborhood of tiny streets, I mostly hear just the Blue Mosque muzzein, with a very slight overlap from the others, but here there were several equally-loud ones, and several more at lower and lower volumes echoing here on the flat of the shore of Marmara, many, many voices wafting downhill to me, and it was thrilling.



Moonrise over a trawler, Sea of Marmara

Well, I finally bailed on the sea-side restaurant. I really couldn't tell if the service was merely negligent, or openly hostile. I crossed the railroad tracks into Kumkapi, the famously raffish heart of the south-side fishing district, into a brightly-lit street of 20 or 30 fish restaurants, serving local, imported, and farmed fish, as well as Meze – little platters of hot and cold appetizers, things like yogurt with garlic and mint, eggplant salad, roasted red peppers, marinated mussels etc. Its simply seasoned, simply cooked, simply presented food and it's refreshing to see that there are no words like 'infusion' or

‘reduction’ on the menu – And the main courses are, if anything, even simpler; a lot of very fresh-grilled fish, with lemon, salt and pepper as the only accoutrements.

And the district jumps. Lots of locals, lots of tourists, lots of noise, and lots of Raki (a strong anise-flavored drink that I can’t stand) being consumed.



about ½ hour after I took this, the place was utterly jammed with partying tourists and locals and itinerant bands of gypsy musicians playing for tips.

Oh, by the way, I discovered that not everyone is so devout. I stumbled around the seedy tumbledown train station wherein what looked like cab drivers were smoking cigarettes and drinking tea. They looked at me pointedly, and I got out of there. I thought that maybe they were an ethnic minority, non-Muslim, but throughout the day today, I saw plenty of people smoking and drinking and eating. Lots of school kids I watched in this lovely park were snacking too.



Limani Meydani (Square) Park

All of these people are in the minority, to be sure, with most of the population abstaining, but there were still plenty. One assumption disproved.

Another one was the uniformly warm Turk. I've now met two extremes: the businessman on the quay who walks up to me, asks me where I'm from, and tells me how much he loves America, Colorado Springs in particular, the gatekeeper at the 'Little Hagia Sophia Mosque' who seemed delighted to learn that I, an American, was here to appreciate his culture. And then: the nakedly hostile stares of many blue-collar types in the seedier parts of the Bazaar District., Some cold, stony-faced mothers there, for sure. But I'm from NY, I can do it right back, in spades. And funnily enough, I apparently pass for a Turk! When I'm on the street festooned with guidebooks and cameras, I'm left alone by the locals (unless they're hocking me something). But the few times I've ventured out sans tourist gear, I've been asked directions, and the time, in Turkish by several people. My rudimentary (i.e. virtually non-existent) Turkish is good enough to get the gist, but not usually good enough for a meaningful reply, so it's often a shrug of the shoulders, and 'anlamadum' (I don't understand').

But back to the day... so many things were enjoyable, from the scruffy streets of rundown neighborhoods



Kids sharing treats on a rundown street

To the ultra-clean, befountainated parks and squares in those very same neighborhoods (Limani Square is only about three blocks from here).

Umm, so some semblance of order here... What'd I do today?

Oh yeah, after that nice street-of-cats behind Hagia Sophia, I walked to the 'camera district' near the train station. The cheesy bag I got free with my Nikon is not gonna work, not with all these lenses (more on my camera insanity later). Found a back-pack camera bag, were the bottom zips open and tips open to resemble a more normal camera bag (i.e. easy access, Velcro-adjustable compartments for lenses etc.) and it's got a compartment for my laptop too! Now I can *really* torture my back and schlep this computer along as well (but at least it's got two straps).

After that, I wandered down the main drag, where the tram runs, to see Constantine's Column (too bad, under scaffolding), the tomb of Mahmut II where there were nice, slightly tapered gravestones, the design apparently based on the fez:



I think my biggest sadness being here, as in china, is all of the beautiful calligraphy that I have seen and will see that I can't understand. I remember the 'museum of a thousand stele' in Xian, the absolutely amazing calligraphy that I had no notion of the meaning of.

Here, calligraphic art has hit as high, if not a higher level, partially because of the prohibition of figurative art in Islam that forced amazing development of both repetitive geometric/tessellated art, primarily in mosaics and marquetry, but also in calligraphy (some artists even 'cheated', and made figurative art out of calligraphic messages too – I'm sure I'll find some examples of that to show as well).

After walking among the tombs and yearning to know what the inscriptions meant, I exited and soon saw a sign for the Grand Bazaar. I figured, what the heck, let's get the mega-tourist crap out of the way.

Not particularly interesting architecturally - trust me, it looks *way better* (and brighter – thank you Photoshop and the RAW image format!) in the photo than in reality, and loses some of its implacable tawdriness in translation too.



Full of stuff I neither want nor need (why do people travel halfway around the world to haggle over not-very-good Prada knockoffs?!!)

Suffice to say that it was not much of a diversion for me, but that changed when I came out the other side and started searching the labyrinthine streets for the Boyuk Valide Han.

A Han was a sort of inn (or carivanserai) for traveling merchants, a place to stable your horses or camels, warehouse your goods, get room and board, and maybe have dinner with your customers, suppliers and business partners (and maybe wine and dine a local girl or two as well). Needless to say, there were a great many in and around the Grand Bazaar, and the Boyuk Valide Han is the best surviving example. Well, 'surviving' and 'example' may be overstatements...It apparently had three grand courtyards and was quite a sight in its day, but it's now a sad ruin of its former self, occupied by little tiny sweatshops, covered all over with scaling concrete and tangled skeins of phone/electric

lines, and crumbling all around the edges. One of my guidebooks said the view from the roof was amazing. I went looking for egress to the it, only to find a large black dog who was baring teeth and drooling at the prospect of some Jewlatto flesh, so it was no go.

Instead, I roamed the cool, dank, quiet halls, full of rubbish: discarded mannequins and empty thread spools, old busted tools and other detritus. But those of you who know me well know that I love ruined, desolate, abandoned places. I didn't get the greatest shots in the world, but you can get the idea of the current sadness and former grandeur of the place here: a double-arched hallway, with the most amazing domed ceilings made up of concentric rings of thin bricks:



Here's a view from the outside, showing the arches, and all of the vegetation taking over the roofs:



Ruined and decrepit places all seem to have a different vibe. Some, like the Hemp God shrine near Gaoping China, are ‘happy’, which was odd in that case because the place had been *deliberately* ruined, and in modern times too: each and every one of the thousands of Buddha heads carved into the rocks had been carefully chiseled out during the Cultural Revolution. Still it had a vibrant, renascent quality, as if it were a bud opening after a long winter, perhaps because they were indeed rehabilitating it.

This one was very sad. As I roamed the hallways, I heard the quiet ticking noises of sewing machines echoing. A child passed me on a tricycle, barely acknowledging me, as if lost in thought. Doors opened and closed, and the wind sighed through the arches. I thought of the past glory of this place: Probably an astounding array of people passed through here, traders from all over the ancient world, maybe even as far away as Xian, the end of the Silk Road. The smells of fine food, the sounds of singing, bargaining, tall-tale-telling, lovemaking, fighting all filled this place, for generations. And yet now it was sighing into a decrepit old age, beautifully made and laid bricks eroding off silently into the abrasive air, newer concrete stairs failing much more rapidly. A sad end to a once-glorious place.

Needless to say, I liked it a lot. :-)

Then I doubled back through Beyazit square, passed the massive moorish gates to Istanbul University, to what I thought was the Suleymaniye mosque, but later turned out to be the much smaller, Beyazit mosque (reading a map upside down will do that to you).

I was reluctant to enter a mosque – pretty damn funny, huh? I mean, half the tourist sights in Istanbul are mosques! But I realized that I’d never been in one before and I was afraid I’d commit some heinous faux pas. When I finally entered this one, I did! I took my shoes off, but let my feet touch the ground, instead of keeping them on the carpet. Oh well. I only got an exhortation to get my shit together from the old gatekeeper – I was not drawn and quartered, my remains fed to the hungry dog on the Valide Han’s rooftop. As I said, I thought I was in the Suleymaniye mosque, the largest in Istanbul, and was a bit underwhelmed. Not that it wasn’t nice, it was very pretty, but it sure wasn’t Chartres...

and I'd read that Suleymaniye was not only the grandest mosque in Istanbul, but that it was built by the master imperial architect Sinan, the most revered architect in these parts bar none. Oops.

Still, it ain't too shabby, is it?



Love those 'floating' lights...



Mosques have a 'Minbar' (I always think 'minibar'), a sort of ornate inclined stairway to a lofted pulpit where the sermon is given. The Minbar always points towards Mecca, the

direction the faithful must pray to, but just in case someone's a little slow on the uptake, in the photo below, you'll see a large arrow also pointing the way:



After that, I wandered the aforementioned districts, and sat in the lovely Limani Square park to cool off.

Late in the day I found the 'little Hagia Sophia' a small former church (many, many churches were converted to Mosques after the Muslim conquest of Istanbul). It's called a 'secluded little gem' by one of my guidebooks, and I can't do better than that. It's off the beaten path, near the aforementioned shoe district, past blocks of dusty streets that were all being re-bricked, and down near the railroad tracks on the shore of the Sea of Marmara. As I got to it, I heard the most beautiful flute music. The sinuous melody floated on the breeze, rising over the walls, apparently without source, a ghost flute. As I was (am) still punchy from jetlag, I thought for a second that I was dreaming, sleepwalking. But I wasn't. In a cool courtyard covered by wisteria catty-corner to the little mosque itself, an old heavily-bearded man sat meditatively playing a large flute. An audience of seemingly appreciative cats sat raptly at his feet.

I am embarrassed to say that I have no really complete pictures of the flautist, nor of the interior of this charming building. I took those with my 'serious' camera (yes, I'm carrying two cameras – my Nikon digital, whose images you see here, and a rebuilt Leicaflex SL that I traded my old beat-to-hell Leicaflex for. Leica's optics are among the best in the world, and I've spent years collecting their expensive lenses, only to give up analog film for digital about 4 years ago. But in preparing for a show of my work, I fell in love with what that old technology could do, and so I stocked up on slide film, polished up my lenses, and carted the whole thing over – and boy is it all heavy!).

So, I forgot to shoot any large-view pictures of the interior with the Nikon, but here are some details of the exquisite stonework of Greek stonemasons in the 6th century.





If you look closely, you'll notice a 'seam' and some broken places above – obvious repair work. This is a very seismically-active area, and Istanbul has suffered some terrible earthquakes, in ancient and in modern times. It's a miracle these buildings (and more especially the huge domes of the Hagia Sophia, Blue mosque and Seleymaniye mosque) have survived at all (although the Hagia Sophia looks quite different on the outside than its original configuration, having been extensively buttressed by the Turks in the Centuries after the conquest, probably in response to earthquake-induced weakening of the structure).

I plan to go back and shoot some more interiors of the Little Hagia Sophia (known here as 'Kucuk Ayasofya' but known in antiquity as the Church of saints Sergius and Bacchus) – it's such a peaceful place. And the gatekeeper there, who spoke no English, somehow managed to have a pantomimed conversation with me, asking me where I was from ('Americalium' – 'I'm American', I said, and he smiled broadly, genuinely), comic/ironically demonstrating, again in pantomime, the merits of sandals over sneakers when it comes to entering and exiting mosques quickly, and wishing me 'E Goon Lasjh' ('fare well' or 'have a good day' – by the way, I'm making no attempts to spell this stuff

right, just fairly phonetically). I find no anger at Americans here – and no shortage of Americans either, they're everywhere – good thing the local people really seem to separate us as a people from our government.

I also see no examples of anti-Semitism here (in fact, in Kumkapi tonight at dinner, gypsies played Hava Nagila for a group of Israeli tourists). Turkey's mentality is not at all like the Arab mentality I've sometimes (but not always!) come in contact with – suspicious/intolerant of other cultures, repressive of women, and a tendency towards a strident form of victimhood coupled with an entitlement mentality. Despite the obvious religious backbone of the society, Kemal Attaturk ('father of the Turks) did indeed create a pluralistic non-theocratic society. Of course, as Istanbul has been a crossroads of civilizations for over two millennia, and is peopled by a clearly practical culture of merchants, tolerance is probably bred into them – it just makes good business sense.

Well, I'm tuckered out, sitting here nibbling on a piece of 'simit', which the guidebooks call a 'sesame bagel', but of course, a bagel is boiled before it's baked, and this is not. It is merely a ring-shaped piece of sesame-coated bread, and it happens to be one of my favorite things in the world, having grown up eating the same thing, called 'sim-sim' in my neighborhood in Brooklyn, which was primarily Arab.

C U all soon.

P.s. Thought I was kidding about the heel store, eh? Well, believe it or not, this is one I caught later, and has more variety. The other had a selection this large that consisted of only one size and shape, but in different colors and textures and finishes! Now, imagine ten, or thirty, of these stores!

