

The Tangential Traveler

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2nd day (9/19).

Damn, it's getting hot, and I'm sweating profusely. I took off early from the hotel to go see the real Suleymaniye mosque that I missed yesterday, and to cross the Golden Horn on the Galata bridge and explore the other 'half' of the European side. Istanbul, the only city in the world that straddles two continents, has essentially three parts: two on the European side, which are bisected by a large, horn-shaped body of water called the Golden Horn – which doesn't 'go' anywhere; think of it as a very skinny bay - and one third on the Asian side, which is separated from the other two by the wider and deeper Bosphorus Strait – which is a crucial (and crowded) shipping channel, equal in importance to the Suez and Panama Canals. I plan on walking over one of the large suspension bridges that traverse the Bosphorous later in the trip, and so walk from Europe to Asia, but that'll have to wait...

So, the Suleymaniye mosque is indeed impressive, and all the more so in that it was built in 7 years. It's much, much (like 1000 years!) younger than the sweet 'little Hagia Sophia', having been built 1550-1557, and it's indeed grand.



Like the best cathedrals, it soars.



I don't know if Christian and Muslim religious architecture influenced each other, or there's some other, more universal force at work, but the similarities between this great mosque and the great cathedrals I've seen far outweigh the differences: both are lofty, soaring structures, lit with stained glass, Both consist of side galleries around a massive central space where the altars etc. are. And both are ornamented up-the-wazoo, of course:



If I could only READ all of that amazing calligraphy! I wanna know what it says!

Both seem to use space and light to evoke heaven, obviously, and both tend to be ornately adorned in many of the same materials: cut stone, metalwork, glasswork etc, and in approximately the same ratios (the Mosques are a bit more stone-heavy) – but... Synagogues, at least the ones I've seen, don't approach this level of grandeur, nor do Shinto shrines. And the Buddhist temples I've seen in China, though certainly well-ornamented to say the least, don't soar either. These cultures didn't get into the 'space race' of height. Why do I say space race? Historians have estimated that at the height of their gothic cathedral construction boom, the French were spending more of their GDP on building higher, more daring and audacious cathedrals, essentially super-thin, super-tall 'bubbles' of stone and glass, than the US spent during the race with the Soviets to the moon. And for *hundreds of years on end!* Just think of the long-term view the people had.

Of course there are differences as well. While the Gothic Christians went for this ever more daringly insubstantial 'shell' (not my photos, by the way...):



St. Pierre Cathedral – Beauvais, France (which fell down twice during construction!)
The Islamic aesthetic was more massive, solid; Daring, yes, but not extreme.

Yet even here, there are parallels in the Christian world. I think of the broad, solid old cathedral of Barcelona (not the muy lofty Sagrada Familia) for example, where height is sacrificed somewhat for width and a feeling of fortress-like sturdiness.

But still, even comparing Beauvais to Suleymaniye, I find much more in common – especially the essential upward aspiration, then I find different; Not so with many other culture's shrines and temples.

I guess it's the heaven thing. I mean, in Buddhism and Hinduism, you go 'round the wheel, evolving up (or devolving down) until, if you make the grade, you essentially turn to a beam of light. And I've never really understood in my gut just what the hell the Jewish take on heaven and hell is – so here, some quotes from the electronic Delphi (or Hive Mind), Wikipedia:

“Judaism is largely unconcerned with the problem of death or an afterlife; the Biblical book of [Ecclesiastes](#) states that death is final; the place of the dead is called sheol, which means “the grave.” Aside from the ghostly apparition of Samuel, called up by a witch at King Saul's command, the Hebrew Bible does not mention an afterlife. According to critical scholars, Biblical Jews first believed that God always punished evil, but always during a person's life — or, if the person is repentant, in the life of one of that persons' descendants.”

“There is very little Jewish literature on heaven or hell as human destinations. ‘Heaven’ typically refers to a place where God debates [Talmudic laws](#) with the angels”

“Jewish depictions of heaven as a place where humans go upon death are few, and depict it as a place where Jews spend eternity studying the Written and Oral [Torah](#).”

Oy vey! I live a pious life, die, and no milk and honey, no virgin babes waiting on me hand and foot (believe it or not, that sounds a bit like hell to me anyway, but I know the average guy sees a celestial strip club and smiles), just *more* studying and arguing? I gotta laugh: this is so quintessentially Jewish to me. Do you know the old saying: ‘Two Jews, Three opinions’? – sure was that way in my family...

Whatever it is, the Jewish afterlife sure ain't like what your average priest, minister or imam is preaching to the faithful. All of them see paradise as more fun, and much more leisurely. Clearly the Islamic vision of paradise and the Christian one have more in common – a final, perfect place ‘up there’ somewhere; a place you end up in, a kind of stasis – like a return to the womb perhaps, with serenity and security (OK, the Islamic version apparently also has those babes for pious men to think about. Hey, what do pious Muslim women get in the afterlife? Someone who actually washes his dishes and doesn't leave his socks on the floor? I've no idea.)

So, the heavenward pull is not universal. Not even Judeo-Christian. Perhaps it's only a Christian/Muslim thing? Ah those crafty young religions, upping the ante with a Club-Med afterlife to pack 'em in and fill those coffers – no wonder they're taking over.

At any rate, to me the carved stones, the intricate Faïence screens, the barrel arches, domes and double vaults all seem more similar than different. Perhaps the younger Muslim religion ‘learned’ it from the Christian lands they conquered? Perhaps that's where this shared aesthetic originated. Certainly the Muslim conquests are replete with

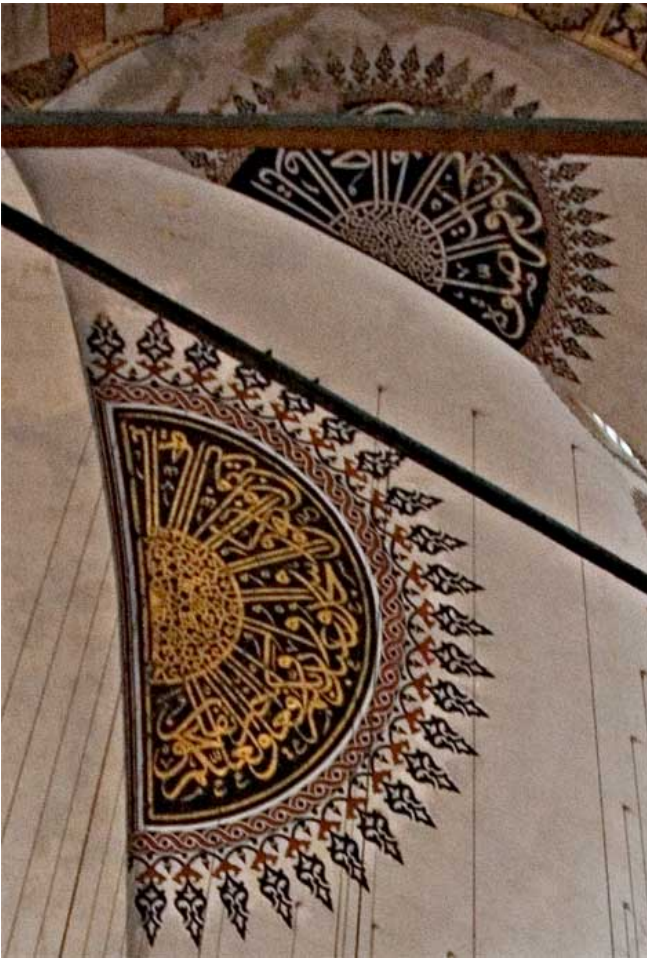
the conversion of churches. I can't personally think of one church that is a converted mosque, but half of the mosques in Istanbul seem to have been churches at one point. What about France, Spain etc. – are any of their churches converted mosques? I gotta look that one up.

Though it's often the sweet little churches (St. Chapelle vs. Notre Dame) that win my heart, I will say this: the engineering/architecture freak in me appreciates the biggies for their structural brilliance (here's my favorite shot of the interior of Suleymaniye):



Radical dude, that Sinan! Look at the rhythm of this space!

Now, look at a detail from that shot:



All of those calligraphic half-rounds are *saying something*. They're not just for ornamentation, and it's maddening to me that I haven't the slightest idea what.

But as I said: I often find the more human-scaled buildings more appealing... And I'll show you what I mean when I get my ass back to the Little Hagia Sophia.

While at the Suleymaniye complex, I also took some shots of his tomb, where he, his daughters, and the two guys who succeeded him are buried – the Tomb of Suleyman the Magnificent:



There were some graves of VIPS nearby. I learned that while the men get the fez-taper headstones, the women get ones topped with stylized feathers. I am amazed that this headstone, which contains nothing overtly figurative, is still vibrating with feminine energy. I over-sharpened it a bit to try and get the detail, which makes it less pretty but hopefully makes my point. My point? To me, it's like a smoke-drawing of what I see in a woman, what a woman embodies energetically – magically wrought in stone. Some type of archetype got tapped into here... No, no mind altering substances, no chemical enhancement was consumed by yours truly. If you don't see it, then... then I'm just a lonely bastard with women on the brain lookin' at gravestones. Sue me.



Hey, here's a ship's captain, probably:



I also took an exterior shot of the mosque, which shows two arched galleries, each with symmetrical longitudinal and horizontal arches, at right angles to each other and of equal depth (deep on the lower gallery, shallow on the upper one). You'll also notice that these lovely slender arches have been reinforced with iron bars, no doubt because of earthquakes and the like. Must have been even lovelier without them. I saw a lot of this kind of reinforcement throughout the city's historical structures. An unavoidable pity.

This mosque also has 4 minarets (spires), with a total of 10 filigreed stone balconies.

I bitch and whine about digital photography, but Photoshop allowed me to work wonders with this photo – keeping the sky and minaret detail while pulling out a lot of detail in the arches. A standard analog slide would have given me one or the other, most probably, but a RAW format digital image has an incredible amount of range and detail embedded in all that data. . The highlights in the minarets are still blown out, but they probably would have been with analog film too, and at least I was able to pull out the balcony filigree.



The Galata bridge isn't very long, but it is fun. It's got two levels: the lower deck is full of restaurants and clubs (and fishing tackle shops – these people are insane for fishing!),

and the upper level holds cars and pedestrian ways lined with fishermen. And, yes, every ten feet or so, there's a guy selling rods, live and dead bait, hooks, lines, floats, sinkers, and home-made removable braces that attach to the bridge railings with bungee cords, to hold the angler's rods.



Hey, looks like he's caught something and doesn't even know it yet!



Looking towards Byoglu, with the Galata Tower up the hill.



The other side, looking towards the Bosphorus, where the mongo cruise ships dock.

At mid channel, the lower deck ends, and you have to walk upstairs to get across, this is to provide clearance for the ferries that ply the local waters in great numbers:



Ferry insanity near Eminou, the main ferry landing – I think it was three coming in for a landing (look how close the two in the foreground are!) and one pulling out. A game of chicken with 300 ton boats!

But it's a pretty low bridge; nothing much taller than a ferry can pass. The bridges over the Bosphorus, on the other hand, are long tall suspension bridges that even the largest supertanker (or cruise liner, as I guess those are taller these days) can clear with ease.

After I crossed the bridge, I visited the bustling fish market, where the fish are displayed gills-out to show freshness. They're splayed out in artistic fans and the merchants chant their freshness, their selection, and their prices, from what little I got. No cats here, just lots of seagulls. Don't know how they keep the felines away – it's the only place I haven't seen them.



Look at dem red, red gills! Means they're really fresh.

I walked up the steep hills toward the Galata tower, originally one of the city's fortifications, later a prison, and a fire watchtower. As usual, when I got up there, the height messed with my head. You'd think after jumping out of a plane I'd be used to it, but you'd be wrong. From up here, it was much easier to grasp the tripartite geography of Istanbul, and also to see what a megalopolis it is – I mean, it's huge, stretching off in all directions as far as the eye can see in chaotic jumbles of terracotta roofs.



Megalopolis.

Mr. Tower himself:



It's also a city with LOTS of hills, and as I toiled up one, still feeling tired (jetlag?), I began to sweat... and sweat... and sweat some more. I think I frightened people, I was so damn sweaty. Don't know why, don't know when – sometimes I'm like that, sometimes I'm not.

I toiled further up the hill to Tunel, the upper terminus of the world's 3rd oldest underground train line (with London first and NY Second – but that does NOT include the underground line under Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, which may even predate

London). Technically, I think the one-stop, French-built Tunel line is actually a funicular. I planned on taking it back downhill later in the day, but I found it was closed for renovations. Damn. I really wanted to try that puppy...

The area around Tunel Square is really nice, though, with lots of antique stores and cafes tucked into tiny, green-arborescences between classical-facaded old buildings. A nice place to drift into a cup of tea for awhile, which I did.

I then followed the Istiklal Caddesi, the main avenue of this area, from way back when it was a Levantine stronghold. A 'nostalgic tram', from the very early 20th century – something like Istanbul's version of the San Francisco cable cars, also runs along this street:



But I shunned it for more walking – something I would rue by the end of the day. Apparently, the other side of the Golden horn is more European than the part I'm staying in. And I gather that Uskudar, the Asian part of Istanbul, is more exotic. It's like a progression, from familiarity to exoticism and from modern to ancient, and the Istiklal Caddesi certainly was familiar, and ultra-modern. It had resonances for me of the Rambla in Barcelona, and some streets in Prague and Zurich as well. I really haven't traveled a lot, but I guess I've traveled enough that disparate places now resonate more and more with each other – and odd, echoing form of deja-vu ensued as I walked up this broad street with classical European facades, smartly dressed crowds (unlike my 'home away from home' in the Sultanahmet district, there were few veils in sight here in Byoglu, and

lots of shorts and halter tops even among the local women), and fancy art galleries and swanky boutiques too.



It was kind of amazing how ‘un-Turkish’ it felt to me! But it was a very pretty street, with multitudes of little alleyways leading off to still more galleries and boutiques. Unfortunately, I have neither the funds nor the inclination to shop much here, so I mostly just walked and walked, and soaked up the atmosphere.

After awhile, I suddenly found myself feeling a bit lonely. After cultivating the fine art of being comfortable alone, I felt inundated by the happy couples. Everywhere I turned, young lovers, middle-aged tourists, and retired adventurers strolled together. And here I was, twice divorced, and unaccompanied. I suddenly wished that Elise, my ex-girlfriend, still best friend, and finest traveling partner of all were here to share this with me. Or my kids. Or my sister Amanda, who was to have originally have made this trip with me. Or all of them! That would have been a wonderful get-together. We would have sat in the parks and cafes teaching Amanda Chinese Poker (Elise is already among the initiated/addicted) and drinking tea. Ah well. I wished for distraction, and soon God provided one, with his usual perverse sense of humor. (IMHO, He’s a real jokester in the ‘be careful what you wish for’ department).

I’d reached the terminus of the street at the modern, somewhat soul-less Taksim Square, and had branched off to the right, to the alliteratively-named neighborhood of Cukurcuma, home of tiny alleys and antique shops, and decidedly less crowded. I was pleasantly lost, and no-longer worried about it as I had been on the first day – one must let oneself get lost, or more precisely, will oneself to *relax about getting lost*, over and over in Istanbul, *because you will!* First of all, the maps aren’t complete. Secondly, they’re a little, shall we say, lax about street signs here. They’re mounted on the walls of corner buildings, in the European fashion *when* they’re mounted, which ain’t often. And, of course, long, multi-syllabic names with odd accents and vowel combinations often start to look alike after awhile. I tried one of the guided walks in my Eyewitness Istanbul book and continually got off track- first feeling like an idiot, and then eventually just going with it.

So, where was I? Oh yeah, I needed a distraction, and nature called. Called big time, suddenly, loudly, and insistently – and no restaurant to be found. But! A public WC was right ahead. These are city-maintained bathrooms that cost 50 Kuru (1/2 Lira) to use. So, sure, why not. I paid my way, went in, opened the stall and... oh shit, one of those old-style squatting toilets! A ‘trench’ of porcelain, with nice non-slip grooves on either side for your feet, and a seemingly bottomless hole in the middle. I’d never used one before. In fact, in a remarkable feat of mind over body, I’d traveled through a fair swath of China without ever using one. Well, it was obviously time for a new experience, and I’ve been known to do something similar in the woods on my long hikes, after all. Seemed so primitive to my provincial mind, but truly, it’s more hygienic (your butt has no contact with any surface), utilizes a more natural posture (just ask any dog or chimp), and is extremely efficient with water (there’s a pitcher and a spigot, and you use just enough to ‘flush’ your waste from the trough into the hole). Well, things went swimmingly, and I was soon on my way, none the worse for wear. Self-pity had been forgotten with the sense of urgency, and was equally banished by the profound sense of relief. I’ll spare you a photo of the grungy municipal apparatus...

Speaking of China, there are several similarities between it and Turkey in terms of rational use of water and power. All of the hallways in my hotel have short-term (actually, a little too short-term, as I don’t always get my key in the door in time) motion-activated lights. So most of the time, the halls are dark, illuminated only as needed. In China there were more sound-activated ‘clapper’ types. Similarly, water is individually-heated on-demand for each shower (which also means it’s *instantly* hot). And the power in the room, as in many hotels in Asia and Europe, is controlled by a card you slip into a slot when you enter. This card is attached to your key, so when you pull it out, all power is off. Kind of a drag if you’d like to recharge your computer or Ipod while you’re at dinner, but definitely efficient.

Something unlike China: Cats and Turks. In my experience in China (and among shopkeepers in Chinatown in NY), you ask someone the name of their cat, and they look at you blankly. Cat’s name? It’s a cat. We call it... ‘cat’. It’s here to keep rats out of the rice. They don’t anthropomorphize their animals into pets. Here, there are bowls of food set out all over the place. I even saw a shopkeeper *sharing* a tiny stool (and his lunch!) outside his store with a cat that was bussing up against him fondly when she wasn’t eating. .

In the picture below, this cat has his own lunch hidden in the paper in front of him, and he’s smack in the middle of the display of the stuff this guy’s trying to sell (looks like he’s on the end to you? Well, there are still a lot of goods in front of him – the white table cloth’s too short for the table and so distorts the reality of the situation). And look, he (Mr. Cat) is obviously gloating because he knows who owns the place. And no sooner did I snap this shot then the guy (Mr. Human) started talking to him, picked him up, then indulgently petted and kissed him. A man after my own heart! I’ve seen several variants of this in Istanbul, and it makes me like the Turks very much.



So, I wandered this little neighborhood of steep streets. You think San Francisco's got hills? Istanbul, especially Beyoglu/Cukurcuma way, is mostly stuff like this:



I indolently and superficially checked out a few stores, but mostly just walked – up and down and up and down and... and soon I was sweating furiously, frighteningly, perversely again. Time to find a cool quiet place to chill for a few minutes. In fact, time to do this over and over. Luckily, Istanbul natives create little ‘micro-parks’ all over the place. From the airplane, the whole area looked fairly arid, but here in town, there are potted plants lovingly tended everywhere, and plenty of streets overgrown with canopies of wisteria (or something that looks a whole lot like it). There are green streets, little green squares, green dead ends, all over the place. And unlike Paris, which I re-named ‘urinetown’, I’ve never, ever smelled the reek of piss either. And I’ve only found one street with dog shit on it (there are a fair amount of dogs here too – though not even approaching the cats in number). Parts of Istanbul can be dusty, and there can be broken bricks, rubbish piles even, but for the most part, it’s pretty clean. And it smells better, on the whole, than New York. And the fish markets and vegetable markets, the closest analog that Istanbul has to Chinatown, smell a whole lot better than the corner of Mulberry and Canal streets do in hot weather like this. Everywhere I go, shopkeepers and homeowners seem to be constantly sweeping and washing down their sidewalks as well.

This reminds me. There are fountains all over Istanbul. Some are ornamental, some still used for washing, and some antique ones were for that purpose remain to look at but are now closed. Each mosque complex also has fountains for ritually bathing the feet before entering and each used to have a Hammam (Turkish bath) as well. All in all, I think that Istanbul in the Middle-Ages (and perhaps, the Muslim world as a whole) was much more fastidious than the Christian world, and though Istanbul is disheveled in its own way, I think a cultural echo of this continues to this day.

Wasn’t it true that in feudal England, people bathed once a month or less, and even assumed that bathing was bad for human health, while here even the masses had access to public baths? I know which town I should like to have lived in, way back when...

Oh, and speaking as I was of Canal street – I finally figured out what virtually ALL of Istanbul resembles – the eastern part of Canal street, with the fruit and fishmongers, combined with the western half of Canal street – the part with the stereo stores, hardware and plumbing stores etc. All over Istanbul (and I mean all over – miles and miles!) there are stores with 50 different types of plastic hose on display outside, or wiring, or faucets, or watches, or calculators, or school supplies, or cell phones, or... guns! Yep, guns. Check out this stall (one of about five) which is in an underground arcade under a major street by the Galata Bridge (which *exactly* reminded me of a similar arcade in Trier, Germany – that damn resonance again).



Hey, is that a real submachine gun in the middle? They may have altered it so it won't fire full auto, I don't know, but yeah, it is. They all are, and they're really, *really* cheap, and most come with a 'starter kit' of bullets, and not just regular bullets. No, they come with dum-dum bullets! No wonder the cops at the Grand Bazaar have metal-detector wands – I don't know what the laws are here, but they must be much more lax than ours, 'cause there were a mess-o-guns (literally, hundreds) for sale in this one underground arcade, right next to toys, school supplies, electric shavers and cell phones.

Don't believe me 'bout dem bullets, eh? Hey, Paul C. and Stephano, what do you see in this detail? And dig that crazy crackle finish on that single action auto...



I cannot imagine how this all works –no, I don't mean a million cheap guns, though I can't imagine how that works either, come to think of it.

What I mean is: virtually the whole freakin' megalopolis is one huge, frenetic wholesale/retail district, be it cheesy mass produced rejects (I saw a staggeringly huge pile of 'scream' masks on sale, and ultra-cheezoid knockoff Spiderman knapsacks as well), or high tech (about 30 different configurations of Cat-5 cabling). EVERYWHERE, every place you turn, there are street vendors hocking almost everything, in front of stores selling everything else. How do they sell it all? I guess 16 million people (the current informal population stat) need a lot of stuff!

I backtracked to Tunel, walking down a street that is their music district (quite modest, compared to the selection on 48th street in Manhattan, but some really cool ethnic instruments – I stayed out of these stores on purpose; they're dangerous for my wallet!) I suddenly realized that, Ramadan or no, I was parched, and anyway, in this more European neighborhood, many people were eating, drinking and smoking. I stopped off at a tiny juice stand, where they gave me a cup of fresh-squeezed orange juice for 2 Lira. Then I decided to try a smaller cup of pomegranate juice for another 2 Lira. He pressed halves of pale, unripe-looking pomegranate in a little hand press. No rich dark red kernels, just an anemic pale pink. I was not sanguine (heh heh) about the whole thing, and he caught my eye. He assured me 'no, it is very good', with a thumbs-up and a wink. Oh man, was it! I thought it would be bitter, with the whole husk pressed with the kernels, but it was ambrosia! I loved it so much, I gave him a copy of my CD as a tip. Not to be outdone, he handed me another of the newly-appreciated pale pomegranates for later. I plan to eat it tomorrow!

I walked back over the Galata bridge, this time seeing women in veils and children also angling, and plenty of pails with dinner – some small fish, sardines or sprats or the like. And for those of you who've never had fresh-grilled sardines, they are NOTHING like what you get in a can. They're wonderful.



Dinner, courtesy of patience, elbow grease, and the waters of the Golden Horn.

Then I went through the spice bazaar, which I liked a little more than the grand bazaar, but was still nonplussed. Back in Brooklyn, we've got a store call 'Sahadis', and the spice bazaar is a little like Sahadis on steroids. Well, they've got beluga and ostrova caviar, which a) Sahadis doesn't and b) I love but can no longer eat in good conscience because the sturgeon have almost been wiped out of the sea. And they've got more varieties of baklava and Turkish delight and pastrami (apparently a Turkish invention, by the way) and such, but on the whole, nothin' I ain't seen before. Some folks who looked to be from middle-America seemed wowed, but for this jaded New Yorker...

I wandered back to the sad Valide Han, hoping to find another way to the roof, but to no avail, and that brought me back to the main bazaar. I figured I'd take a shortcut through it on the way home, and as I did, I saw a sign for the 'old bazaar', so I went inside. While still finding the goods on sale uninspiring, the architecture was almost identical to the Valide Han's eroded walls and ceilings, but in perfect repair!



Pretty neat! Virtually the same double-arched, concentric-ring domed construction!

Then it was a long slog home, feeling increasingly tired and sore of foot. I arrived in a sweaty, achy pile, and immediately took a cold shower and started writing to you.

Don't worry, I can't possibly keep up this volume, so you will not be inundated like this every day. Also, this computer is on its last legs, and converting photos is taking *forever!* That's the real bottleneck. Image processing is just taking me too long to keep up a great flow, and I know you don't wanna read this without pictures, so don't worry my friends, things will slow down. Although... if I keep hitting the tourist trail this hard, I'm gonna need a down day soon, and I might just spend it all spiffing up pix and writing more!

Cheers.