

Imagination and faith

Pilgrimage is defined in the dictionary as a journey to a sacred place for religious reasons and/or a journey taken for nostalgic or sentimental reasons. While our tour of a variety of historic sites, both sacred and secular, in Turkey was definitely a holiday, it did make us think about the power certain places have over the imagination.

Our escorted tour took us from Kusadasi in the south, along the west coast and finally to Istanbul.



Our first visit was not to an imposing classical site but to Mary's House, a small chapel set in a garden on a wooded hillside. A humble building was developed following the vision of a 19th century German nun, supported by the area's connection to St John. There is no hard evidence to link the reconstructed building or the site itself with Mary's final years so we were anticipating the possibility of exploitation or vulgarity. However, the charm and tranquillity of the place, revered by Christian and Muslim visitors alike, seems to inspire reflection and a sense of calm, superseding any doubts about authenticity.

The link of the nearby Basilica of St John to the gospel writer has more historical weight despite the peripatetic nature of his supposed arm found at the site [later to be seen in the Topkapi museum] and more than a whiff of the Da Vinci code in the stories of looted treasure.

The Emperor Justinian's huge basilica itself has been destroyed and only a few walls remain on the quiet hilltop but the value of a visit lies, not in venerating an object or a supposed presence sometime in the past, but in providing the opportunity to imagine how that past might have been. From the hilltop you can look down on the 14th century Isa Bey mosque and our guide emphasised how the local community was involved in maintaining and cherishing both sites, seeing them both as expressions of a spiritual tradition.

Although Ephesus was Paul's residence for three years and its people the recipient of one of the epistles, a visit there is an entirely secular experience. However, the extensive remains of buildings and the city's street layout enable one to picture the bustling mercantile centre and maybe better appreciate Paul's emphasis on looking for spiritual rather than worldly rewards.

The Temple of Diana, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, no longer exists but the local museum houses the statue of Diana, whose followers drove Paul from the city. It was very striking that the statue is not in the classical Roman style but pagan in appearance, covered in images from nature, showing that Christianity was not just challenging the Jewish and Roman establishments but spreading into areas with a wide range of religious beliefs.

Our next two visits were made famous by military campaigns, thousands of years apart. The opportunity to visit Troy was one of the main reasons for booking the holiday. We had been warned by guide books and the tour guide not to expect too much and we had resigned ourselves to visiting an anonymous field. However, after the low key approach and entrance and the charming but unconvincing wooden horse, our early morning start [insisted on by our guide to avoid other parties], rewarded us with a very powerful experience. Standing by the remains of the great walls, now with wild flowers growing from the crevasses, the warriors and battles of Homer's Iliad seemed very close.

From the highest point, although the sea has receded due to silting, it is easy to imagine Greek ships drawn up on the shore and how difficult it would have been to attack the city. Whatever the archaeological and historical evidence, visiting this site enhances the poetry of the legends. The historic facts of the Gallipoli campaign are all too real but crossing the Dardanelles made it much easier [especially for those of us not good with battle plans] to understand the logistics of the battles.

We were taken to some of the sites that are still the focus of pilgrimage by relatives of the Anzac troops. The whole area has been preserved as a national park so the visitor can see the steep hillsides covered in brush & flowers that were the battleground between the defenders and the landing troops. Now, full of butterflies, they slope down to empty beaches and the warm clear sea. At Anzac Cove, the contrast of this landscape with the green lawn and white headstones is very moving and offers visitors a place for personal contemplation. The many monuments emphasise the similarities between the young soldiers, now sleeping together at peace, and it is easy to appreciate why the site still draws so many from so far.



Finally the last stage of journey took us to Istanbul to see the actuality of those romantic names, familiar from our reading – The Golden Horn, The Sublime Porte, Topkapi, the shores of the Bosphorus. On our first day we visited two iconic sites in the historic heart of the city. We arrived at the Blue Mosque just before Friday prayers so we only had a short time to admire the beautiful, colourful tile decoration. However the sound of chanting and the busy crowds made it evident that this was a vibrant place of worship, and provided an experience more important than just admiring the art and architecture.

Whereas other sites had often exceeded our expectations Aya Sophia came as a disappointment. Now a dark and gloomy secular museum with only sad remnants of its heyday as the greatest church in Christendom and of its subsequent conversion to a mosque, it seemed entirely lacking in atmosphere, its purpose lost.. This provides a lesson that the fact of something's importance in terms of history or art will not always speak to the visitor, however willing.



In contrast, visiting the Topkapi Palace museum was an exhilarating experience. Thronged with visitors, the beautiful gardens and decorated buildings of the romantic imagination came to life. Maybe we ignored the probable realities of the cruelty of the Ottoman regime in favour of the rustle of silk and gleam of jewels but one could sense the complex as a working centre of power.

The display of holy relics neatly epitomised the dilemma of pilgrimage. Respectfully housed in a special room accompanied by the sound of the Q'uran – not a recording but chanted by a real man dressed in white – are a variety of objects linked to the founding fathers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. How convincing the visitor will find the claims that they are viewing Abraham's cooking pot, David's bow or St John's arm and what value there is in looking at such objects, only each individual can say.

Turkey is now a secular state with a largely Muslim population, providing the bridge between Europe and the Middle East. Its location meant it was a melting pot for a range of religious influences from the fertility cults of pre-history, through Greek and Roman antiquity to Christianity and Islam. All have left their mark on those that follow, but the religious impulse is a constant feature of human existence. A holiday is designed to be a time of physical relaxation and new experiences; it can also provide a chance for new, and enriching, spiritual refreshment.

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