

The Great Train Journey - Week 2 Istanbul (sent May 2nd 2009)

These points refer to the photos you can see at http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/helen.and.john.go.travelling/WeekTwoIstanbul?authkey=Gv1sRgCM_I4OGN5_3vEA&feat=directlink

1. The Tintin in Istanbul T-shirt stared out cheerfully at us in the Grand Bazaar, one of the symbols of adventure, crime, (some good crime novels centred on Istanbul) and the exotic. The Grand Bazaar is great fun, with its carpets, fabrics, lamps, “antiques”, slippers etc. till it suddenly becomes overwhelmingly hot and claustrophobic, and you wonder which gate you are at..
2. We arrived at Sirkeci railway station on the European side, with all its Orient Express nostalgia, and we leave from the Asian side of the Bosphorous from Haydarpasa Station, the magnificent building “given” by the Kaiser, and standing right on the edge of the water. We take a ferry to there later today, and start our travels eastwards almost to the Iraq border. One of the most exciting things yesterday at the archaeological museum, surpassing even the Assyrian, Hittite, Greek and Roman monumental items amassed in the past, were the exhibits from the excavations which are slowing down the new underground and under water railway link between the European and Asian sides of Istanbul. For they were about to dig down through what turned out to be the old harbour of Constantinople, with old wrecked and sunken boats full of pots and other trade goods.
3. Before breakfast one morning we walked down to an old Byzantine church near our Alp Hotel, dedicated to two little known saints (Roman centurions martyred after converting), and known more affectionately as the Little Haghia Sofia. Like most of the churches, it became a mosque, and when we arrived the old man tending it was chanting his morning prayers serenely and beautifully in the doorway. It has recently been renovated and is a lovely peaceful place.
4. The real Haghia Sofia, is a dusty unkempt wreck of its former glory, with scaffolding up the centre of its allegedly light and airy space. I only hope they do a good job of restoration. In the meantime a bit of polish might help the ailing woodwork.
5. One afternoon we walked round the back of the university and traced the line of an old aqueduct, which turned from a ruined wall into a magnificent span over a four-lane carriageway.
5b) We sat with others in a park and admired its grandeur. The next day, when we went in search of the Byzantine Church of Chora, near the old walls, our bus from the harbour trundled under the aqueduct, which towered above us.
6. The mosaics and frescoes at the church at Chora were merely covered over when it became a mosque, so careful restoration has meant there are far more beautiful golden mosaics to be seen than the few traces at Haghia Sofia. It was interesting to see all these telling of Bible stories,

many from Gospels from the Apocrypha like that of James which we are no longer familiar with in the west, especially after seeing the painted Bible stories in the Orthodox monasteries and churches of Romania. We spent the whole morning there.

7. After an elegant "Ottoman" style lunch near the church, we walked up to the wall, then down towards the sea and up hill again till we came (accidentally) upon another church we had wanted to see. The main part is still used as a mosque, but the remains of the Christian mosaics in the side chapel have been restored. By then we were footsore and glad to take the ferry back to the main harbour.
8. The tile work everywhere is so lovely. After the archaeology museum, we walked among the tulips below the Topkapi Palace, and looking up saw these.
9. It was a hot and sunny morning and the café on the headland overlooking the Bosphorus (and near the Sirkeci excavations, with trains rumbling below) was most welcome.
10. And some more beautiful tiles at a small mosque (Rustem Pasa) near the harbour and the spice market, perched on the first floor over the tiny shops. Although we'd waited till after prayer time, men were still popping in to perform their prayers. And then the threatened thunderstorm broke.
11. and 12 So we lingered in the Spice Market on the way back. Our current hotel (for the past 2 days) is standard international grotty - lime green walls and orange lampshades, a great come-down after our "Ottoman boutique" style Alp Hotel, but alas that was fully booked over the long weekend. However, after an overnight train journey we should arrive tomorrow afternoon at Kayseri, take the bus on to Uchisar and stay in Sisik's tiny pension, before exploring the Goreme volcanic and eroded rock formations and houses. Sadly rain is forecast. Still we have our mac capes and walking boots. (And in answer to concerned enquiries, John is making do with his old sandals and his walking boots, having ditched the defective shoes). And then on ever eastwards, with nothing booked.

More anon.