

The Great Train Journey - Week 3 From Istanbul to the eastern border (sent 10 May 2009)

photos mentioned in parentheses are at

<http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/helen.and.john.go.travelling/FromIstanbulToTheEasternBorder?authkey=Gv1sRgCN6JiOD3y6eUlQE&feat=directlink>

As we set out on the next stage of our great train journey, the section from Istanbul to the eastern borders of Turkey with Iran and then Armenia, I was still hoping to experience the glamour of the Orient Express. But the day started inauspiciously with pouring rain. Both John and I slipped on the wet cobbles near the quay, John hurting his wrist again and me my knee. As for our last morning of tourism, the Pera Palace Hotel, where Agatha Christie used to stay, is closed during renovations, and an art nouveau patisserie has turned into a fast food joint. Alas for former glories. The rain was cascading through the awning of the ferry boat which took us over to the landing stage (1) at Haydarpasa, the railway terminal on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. And to add insult to injury, the sleeping car conductor announced that the restaurant car on our train, the twice-a-week Vangolu Express, was not part of the train. Another dream (of elegant train dining) shattered! So as the train pulled slowly out of the station, we watched the sun set over the water, and then retired to our shabby bunk beds, as the "express" rattled slowly through the countryside all night, losing time.

The following afternoon, we got off the train at Kayseri, in the beautiful central region of Cappadocia, and headed for the small village of Uchisar. We had reserved a room at the charming pension of Sisik (a burly man, much like Farmer Duhaut) and his father (who did some of the cooking). It was a traditional house, with a sitting area with low floor cushions, but the nine rooms all had modern bathrooms to suit today's (discerning French) traveller. From the rooftop there were great views across the strange rock formations. A popular way of seeing the amazing volcanic rocks which have been eroded into strange mushroom shapes is from hot air balloons. But we miserable penny-pinchers put on our walking boots and set off down Pigeon Valley (2). The narrow footpath wound down between escarpments pitted with special holes to attract pigeons and their prized droppings. It was a pretty walk down, through the wild flowers. At the bottom of the valley lay Goreme, with all its old orthodox churches which had been cut into the rocks and covered in beautiful paintings of Bible stories and the lives of Orthodox saints. The tiny churches got pretty crowded with visitors (3), especially as the rain had started again, but over lunch time it was much easier to spend time gazing at the details of the scenes and taking photographs (4).

As the Vangolu Express from Istanbul to Van only runs twice a week, we had timed our visit to the rock churches so that we could get on the next train, two days later. Again it was a sleeper with no restaurant car. Somehow it was 90 minutes late arriving at Kayseri, and got later and later as it followed one of the tributaries of the Euphrates (5), and reached the high fields with their scarlet tulips and deep blue grape hyacinths. It should have arrived at the rail terminus on the edge of Lake Van the following day at 13.41, leaving ample

time for the 4 hour ferry trip across the lake to the town of Van. As it was, we got on the rusting old railway ferry (for container trucks and stray passengers) just as the sun was setting, and crossed the huge lake in the dark (6). It was nearly midnight before we reached the deserted docks at Van, and we were glad of a (paying) lift into town from some passing musicians..

However, the next day we saw the lake in its full glory when we took a small boat out to an island to see an old Armenian monastery church (8). As well as frescoes on the inside of New Testament stories, it had attractive friezes on the outside telling Old Testament stories like David (with his sling) confronting Goliath (8).

Back in Van, we enjoyed a coffee and sticky baklava, the archaeological museum showing all the finds from the Urartian (Ararat area) kingdom, and wandering round the streets. The cafés and parks seemed full of men sipping glasses of tea and passing the time of day (9).

From Van, the railway line (and no doubt the unloaded container wagons) headed on eastwards to the Iranian border. But that's another journey and we abandoned the train for a bus north-eastwards to Kars. The buses are in fact the more modern and efficient way to travel, despite the roads that are badly potholed after the severe winter. The railways seem neglected and dingy by comparison. All along the route, we were aware of large army bases and army checkpoints (though our bus was never stopped). We also talked to a couple visiting their son stationed on the border with Armenia, and to a young man doing his national service on the border (and finding his first month very tough).

In Kars there is a huge army base, much of the architecture is Russian (from their period in power here till after the first world war) and there are bitter memories of whole villages wiped out by the retreating Armenians in 1918 (but no mention of reverse atrocities). You no longer need to get military permission to visit the remote ruins of Ani, right on the Armenian border, but it is guarded by soldiers and parts of it are out of bounds. Massive walls (10) protect this old town on the Silk Route. Entering through the Lion Gate, a vast ruined site spreads out before your eyes, with isolated churches, piles of rubble from unexcavated buildings, a mosque, the bases of rows of shops, 4 columns possibly from a Zoroastrian fire temple, a church which was converted into a caravanserai... It's an amazing site to explore (11), huge, desolate, rain clouds and mist threatening in a rather Scottish way. And dominating the scene, the snow capped mountains. It is situated immediately above the river which now divides Turkey and Armenia at this point. You can see the old Silk Route bridge below (12) which has long been in ruins, but you cannot approach it or the nearby church/monastery of the maidens.

And after this desolate grandeur we felt the need of coffee and baklava back in Kars. The patisserie we chose also seemed to do rather magnificent cakes (13). I suppose we could have bought one for my birthday, but I had already decided to celebrate it in Erzurum.

Erzurum represented the turning point from the border area of Kars, - a return

from the turf-roofed homesteads on the high plain, with their cows and small black-soiled fields, towards the imperial splendours of Istanbul. From Kars we caught the Erzurum Express. My heart lifted, as here at last was a proper restaurant car, with white tablecloths and a fat chef in white jacket and chef's tall hat. We strolled down for morning coffee, and surveyed the lunch-time menu. Outside we were climbing up a dramatic river valley, and fresh snow had fallen all around since we had made the bus journey down the valley two days earlier. It was the most dramatic scenery so far. But alas, lunch was not to be. We had noticed two armed uniformed railway officials conferring with the conductor. Then a loud Turkish announcement, led to us all dismounting from the train at a small station near (14) and piling into a small bus for the remainder of the journey to Erzurum. We never found out whether it was just a problem on the single-track line or something more sinister.

In Erzurum we joined the Sunday afternoon crowds strolling through the streets, shopping, buying ice creams, gazing at the old Seljuk seminaries (15) and the massive 5th century citadel. Noisy processions (possibly political) with much hooting of cars and drumming were being largely ignored. As the army and police weren't in evidence, it couldn't have been as incendiary as it sounded, or related to the mysterious train incident (which could have just been Sunday works on the line, after all). The highly recommended restaurant in the evening was a dismal one with a soviet-era feel lingering, so that didn't feel like an early birthday celebration. It will have to be something pretty special (like egg and chips) in the restaurant car on tomorrow's 2 day journey from Erzurum to Istanbul!