

The Turkey trip

May / June 2021



Here is breakfast

Government restrictions on travel were due to ease on the 17th May and I was feeling the need for some sun on my skin. Where to go ? Not on my wish list really were Tristan da Cunha, St. Helena nor South Georgia or the Falkland Islands, all on the green spectrum. As I had £300 credit with Turkish Airlines (who had messed me around a year previously), research was showing that a room at the 5* Movenpick Izmir was £45 a night including breakfast and taxes plus there were masses of early Christian sites nearby, notably the 7 churches of Revelation chapters 1-3, it became a no brainer. I booked a two week break 18th May to 1st June through the initially efficient Turkish Airlines office in Istanbul and the Movenpick through hotels.com.

Trustedhousesitters.com came to the rescue with Hannah happy to look after Benny the lurcher for the duration, even extending her stay should I be required to quarantine for 10

days on my return. Somewhat optimistically I hoped that Turkey would be moved off the red list before I returned.

Bag, 23kg allowed, packed with Aldi freeze-dried coffee (cheaper than but indistinguishable from the Sainsbury's version), a few sandwiches, long-life milk cartons, my music CD player, enough books and medication to last 24 days and off I trot early on the Tuesday to Heathrow via bus and bus, parking my little Toyota free in Witney. No questions asked at the airport as to why I am travelling to somewhere Boris doesn't want me to go, although a small paragraph on the gov.uk website said I could travel and Turkey were keen to welcome visitors again.

Outbound via Istanbul to Izmir went smoothly but the food on Turkish Airlines was pale by comparison with its fare in years past; on the second leg we got just a cup of water. On arrival at Izmir airport it was frustrating to discover that my bag had gone to the International Arrivals area not the Domestic where we had been unloaded, necessitating a long walk there and back. Lonely Planet had talked about a bus but it was nowhere to be found so I took a taxi the 45 minutes into town which cost just £8.30 including tip. All prices I shall express in £ and pence – there were 12 Turkish lira to a pound.

Now I hadn't been in Turkey for 42 years. Back then I didn't like it – it seemed very alien to a youngish Englishman, my first time in a Muslim country where everyone appeared to rip you off. The loos were holes in the ground with footplates, indeed some still are but few now. From Ankara to the Iranian border I travelled with a friendly group of Afghans transporting second-hand Mercedes buses eastwards whenever Turkish bureaucracy and petrol availability allowed. Our last

night together was in a scrubby smelly hotel in Dogubayazit, my worst night ever, and this was followed by the worst loo ever (don't ask !) on the Turkish side of the border with Iran.

Well, the Movenpick was a different kettle of fish entirely.- It turned out its swimming pool was an indoor one and even the neighbouring Swissotel had closed its outdoor one because of Covid but there were sun-loungers to use on the grass lawns of its well-tended gardens. I spent the first couple of days acclimatizing to Izmir, Turkey's third largest city . Everyone wore masks all the time outside and inside, the stray cats and dogs were all fed and watered at pavement stations and guys pulled canvas rubbish containers keeping the streets clean. There were plenty of elegant shops, small supermarkets and a well ordered city landscape. I saw just one lady in a burqa, some with hijabs but overwhelmingly Turkey showed its secular colours. No muezzin calls for prayers either – it seemed my concerns over the autocratic , nigh despotic Islamic tendencies of the President Mr Erdogan were overplayed, at least here in Izmir. In comparison with 1979 people were friendly polite and helpful.

Economically, Turkey appeared to be doing well – the choice in shops was plentiful, there were many shopping malls in the suburbs and scores of expensive cars. We would do well to strike a post-Brexit trade deal with them – I know Beko supplies us with many fridges and washing machines but they make all sorts of other domestic appliances too. More of their fruit and vegetables could be imported – sadly I saw only 4 Minis (one in a showroom), 4 Jaguars, 30 Range Rovers but quite a few Massey Ferguson tractors so I am sure we could increase our exports with lower import duties. With Erdogan at the helm Turkey is turning towards Russia and China for trade; let's persuade him to buy British !

My quest to visit all 7 churches of Revelation began in Izmir, Smyrna as was back two millenia. I got close to the Agora, the Roman ruins which would have housed the first Christian basilica and was kindly allowed inside the Catholic church of St. Polycarp even though it was officially closed.

On day 3 the holiday began in earnest – I took the ferry (12p) up towards the port area, walked 10 minutes to the main Alsancak railway station and bought an Izbann metro ticket (12p again) out to the airport. First attempt to rent a car with Green Motion failed because they insisted on me paying with a credit card and my MasterCard wasn't being compliant. Even after a long call to the Scottish headquarters it was still no dice but nearby Erboy Car Hire took my Visa debit card and for £116 for a week I was united with a Citroen 4 door manual and set off towards Ephesus in pouring rain. Fill the tank in Celcuk (petrol is 55p a litre) and first visit the Grotto of the Seven Sleepers where 7 Christian martyrs were walled into a cave on the orders of Emperor Decius. Then on up the hill to Meryem Ana (entrance £5.83), the House of the Virgin Mary.

This is where John, commanded by Jesus on the cross to look after her, bought a house for Jesus' mother in AD 42 where she lived until her death in AD 50. As I park up above the house my mobile rings ... it's Michael Gormley, my Catholic doctor who saved my life back in 1992. You'll have to buy my book to discover how ! Anyway, it's an apposite place for a call from a good Catholic. Funnily enough, when I was at the Jordan river at the site of Jesus' baptism 10 years ago my phone rang and it was Anne, my eldest sister with whom I was friends at the time.

Mary's house, rebuilt in 1951 on the foundations of the

original, is set in charming wooded surrounds – the site features a one-roomed shrine and a gift shoppe full of the Lourdes / Knock-type tat that demean venues connected with her.

Last call that day was to the entrance of St. John's Basilica, the so-called Persecution Gate, back down in Selcuk . An information board tells me one of the carved reliefs from the pediment was taken to the Woburn Abbey Gallery in 1812 – more on such 'cultural appropriation' later but couldn't the current Duke of Bedford arrange its return as a nice gesture to Turkey ? Traffic is heavy in downtown Izmir but there is free parking on the road outside the hotel and on all adjoining streets. Take note Oxford !

Day 2 with the car finds me heading north without satnav at 7.20am. I rectified this later downloading a TomTom app to my phone. I went through the town of Thyatira (now Akhisar) but found no trace of Lydia's church and on quieter roads to Pergamum (Bergama). The Acropol (£5) is empty of tourists – it's just me and a tortoise but there are fine views and the region's steepest theatre. Down in the town is the Asklepion (£4.58) which was an early healing centre and features the Serpent Column but its best relic, an ornate altar, is in a Berlin museum. Wouldn't it be nice to return some of these purloined treasures, like the Elgin Marbles back to the Parthenon from the British Museum ?

So that's 2 more of the 7 churches notched up. I am back in Izmir by 2pm and spend the afternoon soaking up the 32 degree rays in the garden of the Swissotel – nobody questions my entry into or my presence within this elegant establishment. Supper is a kebab in French bread from a street stall (£2).

Having made contact with James Buxton via WhatsApp I meet up in his flat the following morning at 11.30am. James is the Anglican vicar of Izmir whose church is close to Alsancak station. We have a mutual friend in Adam Boulter, vicar of Aqaba, the Poitiers region and latterly Dean of Toliara, Madagascar. We chat for an hour or so and he gives me plenty of useful information on sites to see in this corner of Turkey. I set off soon after to Sardis where under strange cliff formations stands a huge restored Roman gymnasium building and synagogue. Nearby is the beautifully situated Temple of Artemis with a small church stuck on to a corner, limpet-like. This is the most special site seen so far. As I am not too far away I drive to and through Philadelphia (Alasehir) and as in Thyatira fail to spot any ancient Christian ruins. I am back in Izmir at 7pm.

Day 4 with the car starts early again and it's an hour plus drive to Ephesus. Entrance at the Upper, Magnesian gate isn't cheap at £18.33 including parking but it is one of the premier Roman cities of their empire. It's a steep down and up on the Sacred Way, exploring the Terraced Houses with their mosaics and murals. The vast 4,000 seater is closed for renovation but Hadrian's Gate is impressive as is the large Christian St. Mary's church close to the Lower gate. One wonders how she got here from her house in the hills. I suppose horses and donkeys were the cars of the day. There are perhaps 20 tourists here whereas pre-Covid there must have hundreds daily.

I discuss tourism woes with the owners of a souvenir shop at the exit from whom I buy a pair of 'Rayban' shades for 7 euros cash to help driving in the sun's glare. James has recommended a village, Kaynarpinar on the Karabunan peninsula for a nice swimming beach and I head that way. But within 12km of Selcuk I spot promising beaches on my left and little Concakoy proves the perfect spot to spend an afternoon on a fine sandy beach

with warmish water – it's a gentle gradient out into the bay and there is grass on which to sunbathe. There are very few fellow bathers on the beach.

On returning to Izmir I start to make enquiries as to getting the required PCR test for the flight home; a nurse at an Alsancak hospital recommends the airport but it's too soon, apparently, to fill in the online Passenger Locator Form for the UK government. The next day I undertake a long 4 hour journey south to Pamukkale and Hierapolis, more Roman ruins above extraordinary 'terraces' of calcified limestone shimmering white with water coursing over them, once graced by Cleopatra herself. I park the car in a shady spot in the village, enjoy a slightly pricey squeezed orange juice (£1.67) and start the climb. Entrance is £9.17, one has to remove shoes and socks and I tentatively ascend. It is certainly unusual and a mega tourist attraction for locals, young females cavorting in bikinis as they rub the clay over their bodies in the warm shallow pools. Saudi Arabia this ain't ! For a further £8.33 one could swim in the Ancient Pools in apparently mineral-rich waters.

Above the terraces things are quieter in the manicured Roman ruins of Hierapolis and I climb in the afternoon heat above the ubiquitous theatre towards the Martyrium where the disciple Philip was strung upside down, nailed to a tree and was placed in a small mausoleum only recently discovered. The inside of this little building is redolent of Jesus' tomb off the Nablus Road in Jerusalem with slabs for laying out bodies on 3 sides. St. Philip had come up against snake worshipping locals. This site deserves more exploration but I was getting hot and tired so descended and set off to 'do' number 7 of the Revelation churches at Laodicea which is close to the large town of Denizli.

Entry here is £3.08 and it's a huge spread out set of ruins with a sacred Syria street and, for once, an unrestored theatre. But it is also the site of the largest Christian basilica in the area, well restored with mosaic floors and an impressive baptistry for performing full immersion rituals. A house close by even has a chapel within it. So that's mission accomplished – all 7 church locations visited. 4 hour drive back to Izmir, the roads are good, mostly dual carriageway with many miles of motorway. Highlight on the return was a roadside stall where I purchased 1kg of strawberries for 83p – yum yum.

The next day I eschew driving, avail myself of the hotel laundry, purchase 3 peaches, a pound of cherries and a litre of yoghurt drink for £1.75, enjoy more sunbathing and play host in the evening to James at the rooftop bar in the Movenpick where we enjoy Bomonti beers looking out over Izmir bay.

Thursday 27th is my last full day with the car so off we go to Soke beyond Selcuk – three sites in the offing today, the first is a steep one, Priene (£1.46) with wonderful views, a small theatre and adjacent church. The sea used to come right up to Priene but it's 20km distant today. St. Paul may have visited; he certainly spent time at Miletus along the coast towards Didim. Entry here was £2.08 to another huge site rather poorly signposted but good exercise wandering over the acreage. Last port of call was Didymus (£2.50) in the town of Didim, the port nearest to the island of Patmos where the exiled St. John wrote Revelation from AD 81 before returning to Ephesus in AD 95. Didymus is home to a massive temple to Artemis with splendid relief carvings of Zeus and Medusa, for once still on site and not in a European museum.

Friday sees me returning the car without a hitch, sussing out PCR tests at the Medifema unit which will cost less than £21 and be ready in 6 hours – eat your heart out U.K. My Boots test for the outward journey had cost £99 and the result came 24 hours later. Then it's back on the metro train (£1.17), half an hour to Alsancak station and a half hour's stroll back to the Movenpick. Another afternoon is spent agreeably at the Swissotel, sunbathing and reading.

So, I- now have 3 days left to organise all matters to be homeward bound. Quarantine beckons – I had hoped the rules might have changed by now but they haven't. Initially I thought you could make your own choice of hotel for quarantining and had provisionally booked one in Witney and one in Feltham but sadly these cheaper options are not possible and you must select the government's package at £1,750 for the 11 nights, 10 days required – gulp, someone's making a profit here. Done – they have allocated me a room at the Arora Hotel near Gatwick despite my landing at Heathrow; one muses that as the 14 days in Turkey have cost relatively little, 10 extra days at enormous expense sort of levels things out.

The Ephesus / Selcuk area merits more of my time and more exploration so back I go – £1.17 takes me all the way on a 2 hour ride, changing trains at Tepekoy. Stomach is loose: was it the soft fruit ? Reach a loo above a tea shop (tea 25p) then buy a pack of Lopermid pills for 42p at an open pharmacy. While Izmir goes very quiet at the weekend, more was happening here in Selcuk. I walk towards the Artemision and spend a fruitful hour in the excellent museum (£2.50). The rooms are well lit, the gold and pottery artefacts remarkably preserved – its shop furnishes me with a stack of postcards (not available anywhere else) and a good book on St. Paul and the 7 churches, all for about £10. It isn't far to the Artemision,

the ruins of the once vast Temple of Artemis, larger than the Parthenon with 128 columns of which just one has been reassembled. Goodness, this place was one of the Seven Wonders of the World – not today it isn't.

Back to town to spend time on what I christen St. John's Hill, not to be confused with the one near Clapham Junction ! I explore the basilica, clamber to the top of the Ayasoluk castle and enjoy the views. A single souvenir shop is open briefly and I buy a couple more postcards and an excellent little booklet on St. John, bartered down to £1.67. I then write up 3 of my postcards sitting astride a Roman slab, inspired by the fact that John wrote his Gospel and his epistles on this very hill.

The journey home starts poorly when jobsworths at the station want to deny me passage because I don't have the Turkish HES card to show my Covid status. Eventually they let me pass after microscopic inspection of my passport. Phew. I get off at the airport to have the PCR test within 72 hours of landing in the U.K. Back in Izmir by 5pm, buying a litre of Kefir live culture yoghurt drink (70p) to help settle the stomach.

Next day it is cloudy and cooler and I walk to the Agora but entry there is denied to me by a pack of snarling dogs – tant pis. I write up all of my cards and spend the rest of the day relaxing. My last day is a Monday so the streets are buzzing again. The main Post Office is right opposite the Movenpick, stamps are 54p each and the 14 cards are duly dispatched. En route to the Agora I purchase a new pair of ordinary glasses for £1.25 as my existing pair were a bit scratched. This time the dogs let me in, £2.08 at the booth, and I wander round the site with its impressive vaulted undercroft.

As recommended by James I then taxi up to the Kadife Kale, Alexander the Great's 'Velvet Castle' overlooking Izmir, £1.67 well spent, stroll around awhile before walking down for a last sit in the Swissotel grounds. Mid-afternoon an email pings in from Turkish Airlines – we have cancelled your flight from Istanbul to Heathrow ... this is at 15 hours notice ! Thanks a bunch. A protracted telephone call at hotel reception eventually secures me an alternative flight to Munich as the best option later in the day and on the Lufthansa website I get, for £308 (!) a one way ticket Munich to Heathrow via Frankfurt – last screen said 'Payment Successful' and it didn't concern me much that no e-ticket was forthcoming.

Hindsight reveals that a better option would have been to cancel Turkish Airlines and rearrange completely with KLM who I discover later fly Izmir to Amsterdam or perhaps go with Pegasus to Stansted. Destined to arrive at Heathrow at 10pm means my PCR test would be invalid so out I go again to the airport for swabbing. Each flight change needs to be logged with a new 'Passenger Location Form'.

At 4am on Tuesday 1st June I take an £8.33 taxi out to Adnan Menderes Airport where I pick up my PCR negative certificate and catch the 5.45 am Anasolu flight to Istanbul. My bag is checked through to Munich and I start to fill out the required Germany entry form.

But, disaster. I present all documents at the gate trying to get on TK 7738 to Munich and am denied my seat on the plane because I can't show them an e-ticket for the onward German flights. Ringing Lufthansa in Germany and then Turkey reveals that my tickets were cancelled – nobody told me ! Lord knows why ... my NatWest Visa card has been working well. Airline staff are reasonably helpful, my bag is retrieved, and finding

a little travel agency called Easyticket who organise KLM flights from the other Istanbul airport (85 km away, taxi £33) via Schiphol to Heathrow. This costs me £528 ! I hope to get reimbursed by somebody but you never know. Turkish Airlines weren't keen to accept any responsibility.

The other airport is swanky and new. Once I have printed off new gov.uk forms, proof of my quarantine payment etc. KLM efficiently transports me home – I even get 2 Heineken beers on board and Schiphol Duty Free has the Niederegger marzipan chocolates that Istanbul Duty Free used to sell.

La di da. UK Border Force let me in with scant queueing: I am escorted by an elderly Sikh with my bag via customs to the holding area downstairs at Terminal 2. Here G4S take over proceedings shambolically and inefficiently – the quarantine ordeal begins and it is poorly run to say the least. But that's another story. Meantime let's just say 'tesekkur Turkey'.

Abyssinia !