

MEDITERRANEAN

SIGGY AND HEATHER | TRIP AROUND THE MEDITERRANEAN | FRIDAY, 3 MAY 2013

Istanbul

The jury is still out on what we feel about this place. The masses of people, the traffic, the rubbish. But we have never felt insecure and are amazed at the history. Of course we had heard of the Ottoman Empire, but didn't really appreciate that it lasted twice as long as the Roman Empire!

Today the aim was to see the Blue Mosque, the Hagia Sofia and the Sultan's Palace. The first 1.5 hours were like a piece from a comedy show. Firstly, the mosque was closed for prayer until 2.30. We heard people say that today was a "holiday" - in fact Friday is their "holy" day - ignorant us! After that it was a matter of being in the wrong lines a number of times and then having to start again. Terrible organization, fuzzy signage and thousands of people. We were really quite jaded.

Finally we got into the Topkapi Palace - the home of the sultans for centuries. It is a huge place of large courtyards separating ornate buildings. Every wall is either covered in intricately painted tiles or mosaics or inlaid wood and mother of pearl. There are lots of stained glass windows and beautifully decorated high domes. The trouble with being there was that, even once inside, we had to line up for ages to go into different parts. This happened at the harem and the treasury.



continued on next page



Hair Cut To Remember

It was time to bite the bullet. I desperately needed a hair cut. I selected a barber's shop and sat in the chair. Heather told me not to let the Turkish barber cut too much hair off my head. I gestured and he said something about "a little" - not sure if he meant take a little OFF or leave a little ON.

Then for the next 60 minutes I had the most amazing experience I have ever had - in a barber shop. When it was all finished I was prepared to go through the experience all over again because it was so so enjoyable.

Washing, snipping, cutting, shaving, rubbing, blowing, drying, massaging and then to top everything off, the barber even burned off the hair in my nose and my ears. Then he trimmed my eyebrows!! I marveled at his flamboyant style - a master artist at work. Unbelievable.

And when it was all finished he bowed and looked at Heather to see if she was happy. When he got a great smile he bowed again.

And the fee? A measly A\$7. More please.



FISHING Very popular sport obviously. We rode past this spot early in the morning. Walked passed later in the day and could not believe the rubbish that had been left here.



PREMIUM PARKING SPACE The traffic and the parking are impossible. Had to double take when we saw this example of squeezing in a space that should not be there.



POT SHOT GAME We noticed balloons tied on a string with rows of bottles and glasses placed on the rocks beneath. Pay a fee, receive a gun filled with slugs and shoot at all this for one minute. A great way to get the violence out of your system.

SNAPS



SHEEP HERDERS ON THE MAIN ROAD COMING IN



FIRST VIEW OF ISTANBUL



BLUE MOSQUE COURTYARD



SULTANS PALACE



SOME ANCIENT BUILDING (THERE ARE SO MANY)

The crush of humanity was something we could never get used to.

Even trying to funnel through narrow openings was difficult. Once we were into each inner sanctum we then had to shuffle at the slow pace of the crowd - not really very enjoyable.

The jewels were amazing. We saw emeralds the size of the palm of my hand. The intricate work was dazzling. What wealth they had. The display of finely woven embroidered regal clothing showed us that the many sultans must have been of ample proportion. Most were sumo wrestler size.

We sat down for a brief lunch overlooking the Bosphorus - a narrow strait where Asia meets Europe. The crush of people continued when we finally got outside.

We headed for the Blue Mosque and had to wait for 30 minutes with the throngs of people waiting outside. After lots of shuffling and pushing we were given the signal to enter. Before we could go any further we had to take off our shoes. Once we were inside the mosque the sight nearly blew us away. This building is an absolutely huge space. It is simple in design with a huge central dome 43m from the ground and lots of smaller domes adjoining it - some half domes. All surfaces are quite ornate.

10,000 workers laboured for 6 years to build this World Heritage listed mosque - a very short time indeed. Being so huge I still can't get my head around how they were able to keep the roof up during its construction.

LOOKING ACROSS THE BOSPHORUS AND EYEING ASIA ON THE OTHER SIDE WAS VERY SOBERING - OVER 3000 YEARS OF HISTORY IN BETWEEN.

We sat for some minutes taking all of this in. With all the shoeless feet the floor felt sticky and the air was more than a little pungent. More and more people kept pressing in so we decided that was enough. We walked the short distance back to our van.

We ventured out later in the evening to find the Grand Bazaar. We found instead a really interesting street of shops. It was enjoyable wandering by them but we read later that this was only one of smaller bazaars. Tomorrow we will again tackle the crowds. This time we aim to visit the Grand Bazaar, Basilica Cistern, Hagia Sophia and heaven knows how many other attractions - if we have the time and the energy, that is.





PHOTOS



Looking across to Asia from Europe



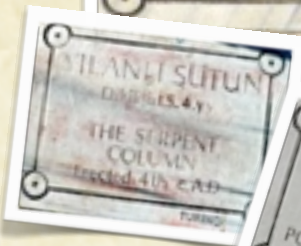
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BAZAAR



WE WERE NOT EXPECTING A BAZAAR TO BE SO WONDERFUL. SHOP AFTER SHOP OF THE MOST GORGEOUS STUFF - CARPETS, JEWELRY, CARVINGS, HAND MADE CLOTHES AND LEATHER GOODS, EXOTIC SPICES, SILVERWARE, HATS AND LOTS OF INTERESTING TRINKETS. A REAL SURPRISE - EXTREMELY WELL DONE. LOTS OF CHARM - NOT AT ALL INTIMIDATING. NO PRICES LISTED THOUGH - YOU ARE EXPECTED TO HAGGLE (SOMETHING WE ARE NOT GOOD AT).

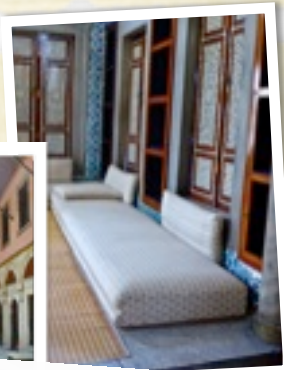
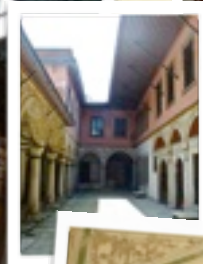
OBELISKS



NOT JUST ANOTHER COLUMN. ALL THREE ARE ANCIENT. THE OLDEST WAS TAKEN FROM THE EGYPTIANS AND ERECTED IN 390 AD. CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT? - 390 AD AND STILL STANDING.

THE AREA WHERE THEY ARE LOCATED IS CALLED THE HIPPODROME. THIS LONG COLONNADE IS WHERE THEY USED TO HAVE CHARIOT RACES.

HAREM



THE SULTAN'S PALACE WAS FAMOUS FOR ITS HAREM. THIS PART OF THE PALACE MUST HAVE BEEN OPULENT IN ITS HEYDAY BECAUSE IT CERTAINLY IS VERY ORNATE AND LAVISH WHEN WE VIEWED IT TODAY. WE NOW KNOW WHERE THE TERM OTTOMAN LOUNGE CAME FROM. EVEN THE BED WAS MAMMOTH. JUDGING FROM THE SULTAN'S CLOTHING ON DISPLAY THE SULTAN MUST HAVE BEEN MAMMOTH TOO.