



TURKISH TUNNELS

The cave cities of Cappadocia.

There's a reason why St. Basil the Great, his younger brother St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus settled in Cappadocia, carved from living rock, in the fourth century. The special tufa stone of the moonlike lava valleys in this region of Turkey is soft and easy to carve, but hardens when it comes into contact with air. It was ideal for tunnelling out underground cave cities to shelter early Christians escaping persecution, and for carving churches and monasteries into the cliffs from which to spread the Orthodox Christian faith.

Some 150 to 200 underground cities are known to have existed. Some had ventilation shafts, stables for horses and livestock, kitchens, churches, and even graves, and were large enough to lodge 30,000 people for months at a time. Kaymakli Underground City is the widest, with more than 100 tunnels connecting at least eight levels of underground quarters, four of which are open to visitors. You have to bend over to squeeze through its sloping, excavated tunnels 25 metres underground—it's not for the claustrophobic—but you can stand up in the dimly lit cave rooms. Another city, Derinkuyu, has underground floors that are an astounding 65 metres below the surface.

Of the area's estimated 3,000 rock-cut churches and chapels, some of the best preserved are found at Göreme Open-Air Museum, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Most date from the 10th to 12th centuries. The recently restored Dark Church—reached at the end of a winding rock tunnel and so

named because of the minimal sunlight that penetrates inside—is painted with still-vivid wall paintings showing the life of Christ on its multi-domed ceiling and columns. The larger Buckle Church elicits gasps because of the brilliant blue hues from the lapis lazuli background of its wall paintings.

Above ground, erosion continues to sculpt a magical landscape of rose-and-white-coloured gorges, riddled with rock formations. In the summer months, up to 100 hot-air balloons float upward daily at dawn to offer visitors a bird's-eye view of the jaw-dropping scenery.

Hike through Rose Valley, where the air is filled with the song of nightingales, and you can see more churches carved into rock cliffs, and many dovecotes—holes hollowed out of the upper cliff faces that housed pigeons and doves. The birds were essential to the lives of people over the centuries: pigeon droppings fertilized the fields and egg whites helped make the plaster walls, which were later painted.

Today, villagers still live in and around the original hobbit holes. Travellers can also make like troglodytes and stay in boutique cave hotels like Esbelli Evi and Argos. But with polished wood floors, Turkish rugs, Wi-Fi, and spacious deluxe bathrooms, these digs are a lot more comfortable than the ascetic cave dwellings of Cappadocia's old saints. **JANICE MUCALOV**

ABOVE: Cappadocia's natural fortress of Uchisar (left) and a temple in the Ihlara Gorge (right) are both carved out of soft tufa rock.

BIG IN JAPAN

A spirited speakeasy.

Where do urbanites escape to irrigate their thirsty souls? These days, it's in a hidden nook, behind drawn curtains and awash in candlelight. Such is the allure of the Big in Japan bar in Montreal.

A sister establishment to foodie-approved Big in Japan brasserie just down the street, the swank watering hole shares zero design details with her predecessor's Hello Kitty pop sensibility—save the Japanese connection.

In keeping with the bar's down-low vibe, there is no obvious signage except for two small kanji characters painted in gold on the red door that represent “alcohol” and “place”. Upon entering, a brief pitch-black welcome ensues. Candlelight cuts through a narrow split in the curtained entrance ahead.

Inside, designer Bruno Braën crafted a snaking countertop in Lucite and plywood. The boxlike space is gift-wrapped in dull grey floor-to-ceiling curtains, but is otherwise devoid of decorative objects. Down the ceiling's spine hangs a whisky parade of 12-year Suntory Yamazaki single malt or Nikka Taketsuru pure malt bottles, purchased by tippie-happy patrons and waiting to be sampled again on their next visit.

Inspired by the 1930s essay *In Praise of Shadows* by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, which explores Eastern versus Western aesthetics, Braën was moved by the author's perspective on lighting—or lack thereof. The intimate air of Big in Japan bar owes its charm largely to more than 250 tiny tea lights, which emit a yellow glow, like street lamps along a deserted thoroughfare. “Tanizaki saw the value of a table object grow when the light of a candle was reflected in it,” says Braën. “This is what I tried to do—create shadows and showcase the bottles.” A veritable shot in the dark. **PATRICIA GAJO**



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