

Turkish Delight



Soar in a hot air balloon, explore ancient underground cave cities (and stay in a boutique cave hotel), feast like a sultan, swim in turquoise seas, gape at glittering palaces and soak in a steamy hammam. Turkey offers a dazzling array of exotic delights.

JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV



Surrounded by rock formations called fairy chimneys, a hot air balloon prepares to lift off for a flight over Cappadocia.

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HOOSH! BRIGHT ORANGE FLAMES above our heads blast more hot air into the giant balloon. (Check hair. Singed? No.) We float up, up, up into the yellowing dawn sky. Our chest-high basket, holding just four of us and our balloon pilot, is but a dot gliding over a surreal lunar landscape. We drift over “fairy chimneys” – fantastic rock pinnacles, some 150 feet high, that look like toadstools. And we descend into a red-baked gorge where centuries-old cave houses and churches, cut high up into the rock sides, are clearly visible. At one point, we get so close we see a fox scampering along a plateau, before we gently rise again.

Clockwise from top left:

Sunset on the Golden Horn, with the Yavuz Selim mosque in the skyline.

Intricate blue tiles adorn the walls of the Harem of Topkapi Palace.

A traditional Turkish bath at the luxuriously restored Aya Sofya hammam.

Luxury sunbathing at a Bodrum resort.

Crew inflate a hot air balloon in preparation for a flight over Cappadocia.

This is Cappadocia. Up to 100 balloons take off each day for a bird’s eye view of Cappadocia’s extraordinary terrain, said to be the set location for the original Star Wars movie. Despite being woken up at 4:00 a.m. (simultaneously by a wake-up call and the reverberating Muslim call to prayer outside), our Royal Balloon ride is worth every thrilling moment – from gaping at the deflated balloon first being filled with air on the ground (a spectacle of fire) to the traditional champagne toast after touchdown.

But Cappadocia is just one highlight of a visit to Turkey. The whole country makes for an epic trip. Turkey is a fascinating mix of East-meets-West, with an exotic history, mind-blowing scenery, amazing ancient ruins and some of the tastiest food you’ll ever bite into. From beaches to balloon rides to bazaars, Turkey dazzles with its array of beguiling experiences.



Starting in Istanbul, we tour the Topkapi Palace. Home to sultans of the former Ottoman empire, its most famous exhibits are the emerald-encrusted Topkapi dagger and glittering 86-carat Spoonmaker’s diamond. In the imperial harem, your imagination is apt to run wild but a new exhibit aims to squelch any misperceptions about the juicier aspects of harem life. We learn the harem was also a center of education for concubines, making them suitable marriage partners for courtiers and elite soldiers.

It’s fitting that we follow our palace visit with a traditional Turkish bath at Roxelana’s old bathing temple. Originally built in 1556, the Aya Sofya hammam reopened in 2008 after a multi-million dollar restoration; men and women each have their own sections. Wrapped in a silk loincloth, you pour warm water over yourself from a gold bowl while lounging in a luxurious, steaming, white marble room. An attendant then scrubs you down with a rough goatskin mitt until your skin is baby smooth. This is followed by a massage with soap and water on a heated marble bench. It’s all quite dreamy and beats the quick utilitarian showers we take back home.

One day, we book a 90-minute cruise up the Bosphorus Canal in a local passenger ferry. Onboard, vendors hawk hot black tea in tulip-shaped glasses as we putter past grand villas. Other days, we visit the opulent 19th century Dolmabahce Palace (14 tons of gold gild its ceilings), the Blue Mosque (named for its blue-tiled interior) and the historic Grand Bazaar (one of the world’s oldest and largest markets).

We also taste our first mezes (small shared appetizers) in Istanbul. At Meze by Lemon Tree, we sample delectable eggplant rolled with braised escargot, plums and mustard.



GEORGE MITCALOV



GEORGE HULCA/OLIVIERO TOSCANI; SHUTTERSTOCK; MARSHALL IKONOGRAPHY / ALAMY

Kofte (meatballs) and kebabs are also rightly famous in Turkey. At Hamdi Restaurant's romantic rooftop terrace, overlooking the night-lit New Mosque and Bosphorus Canal, our favorite is a delicious grilled minced lamb, cumin, pistachio and onion creation. For distinctive Ottoman cuisine, where elaborate dishes are flavored with dried fruits, we head to Nar.

We could easily spend more time in Istanbul. But then we'd miss Bodrum, both a peninsula and a town, an hour's flight away on the southwest coast of Turkey. And we're keen to see for ourselves what all the buzz is about.

Jutting some 25 miles into the dark blue Aegean, the hilly peninsula is a celebrity hotspot – sightings include Beyoncé, Tom Hanks, Sting and Elizabeth Hurley – as well as a popular summer holiday destination for Brits and Europeans. Bodrum town is also a starting point for a multi-day "blue cruise" in a gulet (traditional Turkish yacht) along Turkey's famed "Turquoise Coast." In July and August, the town throbs with nonstop nightlife. But you can escape the throngs by staying in one of the pretty outlying villages, like Torba or Golturkbuku, favored by the wealthy from Istanbul.

Sandy beaches are few. So instead, the small resorts and boutique hotels have wooden decks on stilts extending over the sea, with ladders for entering the water to swim. We spend the days like sloths, reclining on plump cushioned loungers under shade canopies, rousing every so often to slide into the crystal water for a dip. Occasionally, we catch a dolmus (public mini-bus) into Bodrum – to tour the 15th century St. Peter's Castle and its shipwreck museum, and for dinner at the fish market, where restaurants cook up the fresh seafood you buy from stalls.



ARTFUL HOTEL ON THE BEACH IN BODRUM

CASA DELL'ARTE — This quietly elegant boutique hotel on Turkey's Bodrum Peninsula is also an art gallery. Walls are decorated with exquisite canvasses by artists such as Nese Erdok (Turkey's greatest living female painter). Patrons of the arts, the hotel's owners also offer an artist-in-residency program, hosting ten up-and-coming artists from around the world, whose works, created on location, are also displayed.

The adults-only Residence side of the hotel has 12 individually decorated suites flanking a rectangular lap pool. Ivory walls and blonde wood furniture allow artistic touches to predominate – like huge boat-shaped beds and silver-and-black cow hide rugs. Our Aries suite came with a glass bathroom ceiling lit by tiny twinkling lights at night. Even the air conditioners are minimalist works of art, covered by hologram paintings. Families are welcome to stay in Casa Dell'Arte's neighboring Family Suites, with its own pool and beach area.

Strolling about the hotel is a visual treat. Marble public rooms and breezy stone passageways contain antiques, grand iron chandeliers from the Napoleonic era and outdoor fireplaces from Cappadocia. But always, by design, the eye is eventually drawn to the brilliant turquoise sea just beyond a swathe of manicured lawn. There, the hotel's wooden dock juts out into the water, where the sunbathing is all very civilized (no icky sand in your bikini). Cushioned cocoon chairs invite lounging under the shade of an umbrella, and there are ladders to climb down into the sea for a cool dip. Casa Dell'Arte is about 20 minutes from buzzing Bodrum town. But, really, you may feel no reason to leave.

CAVE HOTEL OFFERS FAIRY-TALE CHARM

ESBELLI EVI — When traveling, you occasionally stumble across a truly special hotel that charms you right down to your soul. Esbelli Evi is such a place. Carved into Cappadocia's white volcanic rock cliffs, Esbelli Evi is a boutique cave hotel with ten suites and four standard rooms. Larger than most city apartments, the suites are cocoons of comfort, with hardwood floors, kilim rugs, king-size brass beds, kitchens, rainshowers and lace curtains made by the owner's mother. Each suite is unique. Our marble bathroom came with a clawfoot tub – plus help-yourself scotch in a crystal decanter next to scented candles on a side-table.

The gracious owner, Suha Ersoz, has thought of everything to make travelers feel like they have a home away from home – a joy to return to after a day out exploring Cappadocia's underground cave cities and rock-cut churches. You're treated to a welcome bottle of wine, free WiFi and in-room laptops, and complimentary fruit and snacks in Esbelli Evi's living room. Niches in the bedroom walls are stuffed with great travel and art books.

Breakfast is taken on a rooftop terrace overlooking the rolling countryside and traditional village. Order an omelette, and while waiting, help yourself to fresh cucumber, tomatoes, cheese, home-baked breads and preserves. Suha drops by to chat with each guest and check that you're set for the day with tours. For dinner, nearby Ziggy's Café, one of Cappadocia's best restaurants, serves yummy mezes (shared Turkish dishes).

To top it all off, rates (which include breakfast) are extremely affordable. Just one more reason Esbelli Evi ranks right up there on our list of favorite hotels.



VANGUARD TRAVEL SERVICES

Vanguard Travel Services is one of Turkey's top tour and travel agencies. Vanguard specializes in customized tours for individual travelers, small groups and special interest groups – and service is white glove. We found our local guides in Ephesus, Cappadocia and Istanbul to be extremely knowledgeable, our airport and hotel transfers were prompt, and we were transported in deluxe, non-smoking, air-conditioned vans, equipped with complimentary cold bottled water and towelettes. Some of the unique experiences Vanguard has organized for groups include a special Istanbul welcome by the marching Ottoman Military Band (with sabers and full costume) for a Windstar charter cruise; attending 5 pm Islamic prayers live in the Blue Mosque (and being served rosewater and Turkish delight after) for a charter cruise; and meeting Elif Safak, a famous Turkish novelist, for a literary alumni group trip. You can book directly through Vanguard or through your travel agent. www.vanguard-ts.com

FROM BODRUM, we also make a day trip to Ephesus with Vanguard Travel Services. One of Turkey's premier travel agencies, Vanguard seamlessly coordinates our airport transfers and tours throughout our trip. Our driver and guide pick us up early in the morning for the two-hour drive, past pine forests and olive trees, to the marvellously preserved ruins of the ancient Greek/Roman city. We see the prostitute's footprint embedded in a marble street slab that points the way to her house, rows of public marble toilets and the grand Celsus Library façade. In the noblemen's terrace houses, we watch archaeologists piece together the largest jigsaw puzzle in the world – recreating the rooms from marble pieces of floors and walls. Elsewhere, blood-red poppies bloom among the ruins. And if you listen carefully, the breezes carry the imagined laughter and chatter of Romans bartering with shopkeepers on the marble streets.

Cappadocia comes toward the end of our journey. Rivalled only by Africa as the world's best place to soar in a balloon, it's also known for its underground cave cities and fresco-painted, rock-cut churches. Beginning in the 4th century, early Christians escaping persecution tunnelled out underground cave cities in the special "tufa" rock found in the lava valleys here. The rock is soft and easy to cut, only hardening when it comes in contact with air. It's believed there are some 150 to 200 underground cities (housing up to 30,000 people each), though only two are open to the public.

Kaymakli Underground City has over 100 passages connecting eight levels of underground cave bedrooms, storerooms, kitchens and a church. Even though we have to crouch down almost on our knees to squeeze through its cool, dimly lit tunnels, fears of claustrophobia prove unfounded. We can stand up in the cave rooms, and original vertical ventilation shafts circulate fresh air. Still, it's remarkable that people could live underground for up to six months at a time here. To fend off enemy attacks, they could plug tunnel entrances with the large round millstones we see.

To view the finest of Cappadocia's rock-cut churches, we walk about the Goreme Open-Air Museum. The churches in this UNESCO World Heritage Site were carved into the rock walls above-ground between the 10th and 12th centuries, probably as part of a large monastic complex. The Dark Church (so named because little sunlight penetrates inside) has beautifully painted frescoes of Christ's life on the pillars and columns supporting its ceiling domes. A kitchen-cum-refectory is also interesting, with its long stone dining table that could seat 50 monks.

And then there is the treat of hiking through some of the valleys which the balloons glide over. The Ihlara Valley surprises with a lush riverside trail. The cliffs on either side are inlaid with 120 simple rock-cut churches and green river frogs, the size of your fist, belch loudly. But our standout memory is stumbling out of the Pasabag Valley, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, to sip homemade wine with a retired farmer who is proud to show us his orchard and small vineyard. One more wonder, in a land brimming with so many wonders.. ♦

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Cave dwellings and churches carved out of soft volcanic tufa formations, known as fairy chimneys near Pasabag.
Below: Elaborate frescoes adorn the interior of the rock-cut Dark Church in the Goreme Open-Air Museum.

