

THE HIDDEN GEMS OF TURKEY



Ir. Sharifah Azlina Raja Kamal

Ir. Sharifah Azlina Raja Kamal Pasmah has been practising Civil Engineering for almost 3 decades. She enjoys travelling with her family to places they read immensely about - places showcasing evolution of religions, wars and civilisation, medieval and modern structures as well as abodes of Dracula, vampires, fairies and Hobbits.

We had chosen the less-travelled Black Sea and Aegean Sea regions for our vacation in Turkey this time. The Black Sea is home to beautiful coastlines and mountains. Descending into Trabzon's airport is a sight to behold, with the runway parallel to the deep-blue Black Sea on one side and Zigana mountains on the other.

Trabzon is steeped in history, standing along the famous Silk Road where religions and trades once flourished. Its lighthouse was an indispensable reference in navigating the perilous Black Sea waters. 77% of Trabzon is covered with mountains and the rest, plateaus. With abundant water supply, the fertile hilly coastline is ubiquitous with tea and hazelnut plantations. Hazelnut butter was the staple diet during our stay.

With cobblestone streets, ramparts, soaring minarets, hamam and Byzantine churches, Trabzon is a miniature Istanbul, sans the crowds. One attraction is Hagia Sophia, a 13th century church filled with New Testament frescos, ornamental entrances and centuries-old sailors' graffiti. After being closed for 52 years, it is now a museum.

The amazing Sumela Monastery, built into the rock face of Karadağ Mountains by Greek monks, was an Orthodox monastery dedicated to Virgin Mary. The high cavernous chamber of the rock church was industriously dug into the mountains. Founded in 386 AD, it went through numerous expansion and reconstruction until it reached its present-day grandeur in the 18th century. Outside the monastery is a spring, considered sacred by Greeks, and large stone arches form an aqua-duct for water supply.

100 kms south of Trabzon was Uzungöl, a lake town perched at 1,100m above sea level. Uzungöl means "long lake" in Turkish. The 1km-long lake is wedged between lush pine-forest mountains. The once-obscure town is now dotted with restaurants famous for fresh trout. A walk around this lake promises an overdose of oxygen and sceneries equal to the beauty of the Alps.

Rize province is a kaleidoscope of valleys, mountains, plateaus, glacial lakes, flowing streams, ancient bridges and castles. It is also world-famous for Anzer honey. Firtina River, one of the most important rivers meanders for 57 kms and is crossed by numerous historical, arched stone-bridges dating back to the 18th century. The rushing river is perfect for rafting and zip-lining.

Rising majestically above the Firtina Valley is a 14th century medieval Zilkale Castle. Once a garrison outpost,



it offers an exquisite view of the entire valley from its lookout walls. The drive up its winding road skirts along the edge of the clouds, offering endless walking and hiking opportunities within the Kaçkar Mountains.

Hit the road for another 100 kms and we arrived at Ayder Plateau located at 4,000-foot elevation within spruce and beech forests. One can almost hear Julie Andrews singing Sound of Music in the rolling

plateau. In summer, the sound of bagpipers herald the many festivities. It is renowned for its hot springs.

Enroute to Istanbul, 75 kms from Izmir, is Alaçati, a town on the coast of Aegean Sea. During the Ottoman period, Alaçati was a village of cavaliers and infantries. In the 19th century, the Greeks were invited to Alaçati to toil in various tasks including canal constructions, vineyards and olive farming while the local Turks went to war. Although the Greeks were forced to leave Alaçati from 1914, the rest were repatriated in a formal population exchange with Greece in 1923.

Alaçati was declared a historical site in 2005; the traditional bay-windowed stone houses with terracotta roofs and rambling bougainvillea adorning the walls are still beautifully preserved. Walking around Alaçati, we felt like we were on a picture-perfect Greek island. Motorised vehicles, save for scooters and Vespa were prohibited along the streets of the old town. We had to lug our luggage from the point of transport drop-off to the pension within the town. Alaçati, being in a peninsula, is inundated with pristine beaches famous for wind-surfing, swimming and snorkelling. Art galleries, souvenir stores and boutiques offer antiques and local handlooms whilst cafes line its streets offering Turkish-Greek fusion cuisine in relaxed Mediterranean ambience.

Ancient windmills, built to grind wheat, still stand on a hill overlooking the town. Along the highway towards Izmir airport are wind-energy power stations with modern windmills or wind-turbines. Turkey is lauded for its efforts in renewable energy and sustainable technology with the grid-connected wind farms.

Contented at the end of the journey, we zealously advocate these Turkish postcard-perfect regions, remarkable for both modern and ancient monuments as well as azure and pristine coastlines. ■