

The great trip to Turkey September 2006



For your consideration: herewith are the chronicles of the intrepid adventurers, Barbara and Dana and their amazing trip to the land of the Sultans, Turkey.

OK enough of that highbrow stuff. We were fortunate enough last September to travel halfway round the globe to go to someplace really exotic, Istanbul and other parts of Turkey and a couple of Greek islands thrown in there too. What follows are my diaries, my impressions what we saw, what we did and of course what we ate. Like Napoleons' army, we run on our stomach so there is a lot in here about what we ate. After all, you can tell a lot about a culture from what they eat, and we ate like monarchs.

You may ask yourself, why Turkey of all places? Of course there is a story involved....

We were set to visit Israel with members of our synagogue, but as things often do, the trip did not happen. We thought, OK, we will go to Paris, someplace Barbara had visited many times and wanted to show me. In the midst of these deliberations, we went to see a concert by a traditional Turkish musician named Latif Bolat (www.latifbolat.com). It was a fine concert (in a Buddhist temple, go figure) and afterward there was a presentation on life in Turkey, and about the trips that Latif mounts every year to his home country.

To put it mildly we were entranced, especially since this trip would be to eastern Turkey, some place that few western travelers ever would venture to. In addition, there was to be lots of music events on this trip, and that really sold it for me.

We are in, sent in the money, and had lots of fun, I guess you could call it, getting our non-refundable tickets to Turkey from Turkish airlines. It seemed like everything was all set, but they say timing is everything and as bad luck would have it, Hezbollah started a war with Israel. You are aware perhaps how close eastern Turkey is to Iran and the rest of the middle east?

Sufficiently close to where the rest of the travelers that were scheduled all panicked and cancelled their reservations. Sure, its good to be cautious, but we were really worried, we would still have gone, but such was not to be. What to do? Here we were, a month away from our vacation, with non-refundable tickets and no guide to Turkey! We thought about re-routing to Paris as the original plan, but it would have been very expensive. So my wonderful and resourceful wife ended up spending endless hours on internet researching and planning where we could go and what we would do. I should mention that www.tripadvisor.com is invaluable for this. In short, Barbara managed to get our entire trip together, without help from a travel agent or anything, and that is no mean feat. My wife is in fact amazing. So now that you know the background, lets start a few days before we actually get to Istanbul, in a small airport outside of New York City known as JFK.

Tuesday August 29th 2006

Here we are at JFK waiting to leave for Istanbul. Stops and starts, that seems to be the essence of this trip so far, with long periods of idle sitting. I am starting this journal so that at some distant point I can look back and remember, maybe even with some exactitude, what went on.

I am much calmer today than I was in the days leading up to the departure. It is always disturbing to break up the normal rhythm of life to get in the mode to travel, even for me since Barbara did most of the planning for the trip.

My body and mind were not helped with the adventure of the bees a couple of days before we left. I was up early watering the garden since it had been hot for days with no sign of cooling off.

I had just planted something and went to get a shovel of bark mulch from the pile when I felt a prick against my skin. At first I thought it was from the rose bush that was at hand, but then I was stung many times in many places all over my neck, arms and back. I had disturbed a nest of bees and boy were they pissed!

I ran into and then back out of the garden screaming. I charged up to the deck, tore off my clothes still screaming, and ran straight into the shower. Of course Barbara woke up and was very concerned. As I took my shower, she picked up some of my clothing and a bee flew out and stung her on the arm. For myself, the pain was intense for several hours since I had been stung so many times.

I laid down and tried to sleep. This was *not* the way I wanted to start my vacation!

For many hours after this, we were busy with last minute preparations. I was sore all over, and itchy too. Worse yet, it was hot and muggy, something that would be pretty much a constant in Istanbul, not that I was aware of that yet. For now I could hardly think straight from the heat, the pain from the bee stings, and my (literally) aching back, which I had managed to injure the week before.

As we packed and packed, it got later in the day, and late in the evening, then early in the morning. I managed to get a few hours sleep, but Barbara didn't get a wink.

Finally we are picked up by the cab and arrive at the Portland airport for our six AM flight.

The less said about this flight the better. Terrible seats, ridiculous "snacks" and for the life of me I couldn't get comfortable at all. Of course the flight was delayed, and we arrive in New York in a heavy, humid rain courtesy of Hurricane Ernesto. Bienvenidos to NYC!

The shuttle to our hotel was tardy also, the final link in a chain of bad transportation. At last we are in our hotel room, hungry and sore. But there was a silver lining to this day.

We got a recommendation from the hotel for an Italian restaurant in Howard Beach. It was an old fashioned place, here the portions were so huge we only ordered half orders for the two of us. A very comfortable, genial place with a classic waiter.

The food was just great, what you would expect to get from an old style NY Italian place. We had our salad and some wine and I finally, finally was able to relax.

After dinner we walked around Howard Beach – I had never been this far out in Queens before. Too bad, we weren't able to get back the next morning to check out the real NY style deli we passed by, but it looked great.

At least now we are on our way. We know the cats are OK, having spoken with the cat sitter, so life can be good. Next stop – Istanbul!

Wednesday-Thursday August 30 and 31st

We spent most of the day at JFK waiting for our flight. We found a good spot to sit, and had some surprisingly OK Chinese food. It never ceases to amaze me just how terrible the American palette is. Why in the world would anyone ever queue up at a McDonalds to eat when there is *any* other food available? We board our plane a bit late, then proceeded, or not proceeded, to sit for two hours waiting in line with 30 other airplanes to get a slot for takeoff.

Thanks again Ernesto.

However, the seats in the Turkish airliner were much better than what we had flown in the day before, and as soon as we were finally up in the air the alcohol started to flow, and soon after that the food.

Unlike our domestic carriers, THY (Turkish airlines) seems to actually care about the food they serve, and they serve it in great quantities. We pretty much ate our way across the Atlantic.

Once we landed, the next day, airport, customs, visa – not bad at all. It was quite strange to me to walk thru the concourse and seeing most men in western clothes, and many women too, but a lot of the women were more covered up than I am used to. Not many in full head to toe burkas, but there were some for sure.

We catch a cab for the very long ride to our hotel. The main road, the Kennedy Cadessi, named after JFK, runs around the outside of Istanbul. We are in Europe and can look across the Marmara sea to Asia. Amazing.

The streets are *tiny* and confusing, even to the cabbie who has to stop and ask his way.

Our room is small too, but very clean, and from the balcony we can see the Blue Mosque, talk about the wow factor.

We are both exhausted and sleep for a bit. I wake up and decide to go to a store and get some bottled water. No, you can't drink it from the tap, and bottles of water pretty much get attached with clamps to your arm in Istanbul.

Once outside I am accosted by a mass of rug merchants. Yeech! Very pushy types indeed.

Back in the hotel I catch some more much needed sleep. Barbara is still out cold, so I decide to go out again for a better look at the neighborhood, and this time I fall in love with it.

I walk a few blocks to the Arasta Bazaar – beautiful! This area used to be the stables for the Blue Mosque so I understand, but what is here now:



small shops, a wonderfully atmospheric open air café with live music and people smoking nargilas (hookas). I talk to several other merchants who are still pushy but actually quite friendly. I begin to realize that the Turks are, as promised an outgoing and social people. Suddenly I am in love with

Istanbul, where an hour before I was wondering if we had made a mistake coming here. I rush back to the hotel and Barbara is awake and off we go exploring.

I have a hard time conveying the feeling I have looking up from the market and seeing the Blue Mosque looming overhead. Totally mind blowing, the most beautiful building I have ever seen.

We wander about and at last decide to eat at the Terrace Café. We had read that the cafes in Istanbul were rip offs, and the food no good. I can tell you that is not completely accurate, at least for this restaurant. The food was wonderful, truly delicious. Barbara has the great idea to take pictures of all the meals we eat – yes, we do run on our stomachs. Check this out:

See the salad? Salads are big over here, lots of fresh vegetables. We both had lamb, Barbara's with tomatoes and some wonderful yogurt sauce while my lamb was on a layer of eggplant béchamel – unbelievably good food. Note the beer, you will see that in many of the pictures of food, since it's always beer weather in Turkey.



We stroll around after our meal, in the soft and beautiful night, picture perfect really. I was thinking, if this is a tourist trap, it has to be the best one in the world.

Sultanamet square runs between the Blue Mosque and Haiga Sofia, with a lovely park in the middle full of late night strollers, kids playing, roasted corn vendors with huge ears of Turkish corn. We were too full to have any, but it looked great.



At last we head to bed, exhausted but very, very happy. Welcome to Istanbul indeed!