

Commentary... Lost in Istanbul

By Chris Morin
Columnist

The occasional sound of car tires ambling across the one-lane cobbled street during the night reverberates up densely packed three- and four-story walls of old stone buildings, but this noise fails to rouse us. We're deep within a substantial jet-lag slumber. High-pitched citywide bullhorns suddenly trumpeting an old man's pleading sing-song voice, imploring the faithful to come pray at the nearby mosque at 6 a.m. absolutely rousts us.

Two floors above our room, upon the glass-walled terrace, a cafeteria breakfast will soon await. Along with standard Western fare — egg omelet, fried potato wedges, and white bread, we'll find Turkish morning cuisine — *simit*, *kasseri*, *sucuk*, *borek*, and *meze*. A thick carrot-dill yogurt sauce on a bagel-like sesame seed twist becomes the a.m. favorite.

Sitting at one of the solid wood tables and waking up with Turkish coffee, we'll look east across the Bosphorus, the narrow strait that separates the Sea of Marmara from the Black Sea, and gaze into the urban hill-sides of Eastern Istanbul. That portion of the city is the terminus of the Asian continent, on its western flank. Where we sit in Western Istanbul, it's the boundary for Eastern Europe.

Turning 180 degrees, we'll be visually stunned looking upward into the towering minarets, the expansive dome of the Blue Mosque just 200 yards away, one of the most ornately decorated and sumptuously gorgeous religious sites on Earth. Just a day and a half ago, we walked out the front door of our home near Sisters.

Now we're planning the

first day's self-designed tour — The Mosque of Suleiman the Magnificent, the Muslim world's equivalent to Alexander the Great but viewed as the great scourge of the 1500s by southern European Christianity; the 800-year-old Grand Bazaar with its 3,852 shops; the Spice Market, lying at the foot of the Golden Horn-spanning Galata Bridge.

Istanbul is where the Orient Express concludes or starts, depending on one's perspective. For nearly 2,500 years, this city either welcomed or unsuccessfully fought to resist multitudes of humanity from throughout the Eastern Hemisphere — Vikings made up a portion of the Imperial Guard, the Sultan's Harem Eunuchs typically came from Africa, and Mongol hordes mixed with the whole shebang during 13th-century campaigns in this region.

Known first as Byzantium, later as Constantinople and now by its present name, Istanbul became the melting pot of the world a full millennium before Europeans first settled New York City. At 15 million people, it continues to be a destination for the masses.

While this sort of travel vacation might sound terribly exotic, expensive, and fearless, in fact it represents only the first of those qualities. Arriving in early November, during the shoulder season, the cost of a round-trip ticket from the Redmond Airport to Istanbul's new Ataturk Airport cost \$750, without any travel deal.

The boutique, family hotel with daily homemade brunch-sized breakfast included is less expensive than a budget motel in Oregon. Exceptional five-star, fresh-fish restaurants price out at less than a sit-down chain in the U.S.



PHOTO COURTESY CHRIS MORIN

The Blue Mosque dominates the ancient Istanbul skyline.

Some family and friends were fairly aghast when we told them about this portion of our six-week trip, given the political atmosphere that has transpired over the past few months. While reservations were made last winter, the idea of not going wasn't even entertained.

Granted, we didn't come in waving the American flag, nor were we seeking to engage in discussions involving political drama, despite being encouraged to do so by a couple of the taxi drivers. The immediate border with Syria, a place that should be avoided, offers little for travelers anyway.

Turkey certainly does have political, cultural, and wartime issues, but the Turkish people will be the ones to address them, not us. In the meantime, the local citizenry welcomes Western visitors — provided we don't find a need to stick our noses into the sectarian strife.

Now a few days into our trip, what we have found in Istanbul is a repeat of previous travels over the past 15 years. The perspectives, policy-making, and official positions taken by the upper crust of power within a nation — government leaders, business tycoons, the highest-ranking of military brass, a few notable clergy — makes up the bulk of what all media portrays a nation's attitude to be.

It ain't necessarily true, nor does it have much to do with the matters that the majority of a society are concerned about.

We've found the peoples of Zimbabwe, India, Nicaragua, Morocco, Vietnam, along with those in the cities of Helsinki, London, and Madrid to be absorbed by the day-to-day demands and small joys in life, same as what occurs in our United States. Most people in this world are endeavoring to make their lives as good as they might be, given the circumstances in which they find themselves.

As a whole, people we've met everywhere have been kind, curious, and helpful. It's incredibly reassuring, considering that we're led to believe otherwise.

So we've traveled across

the globe to Turkey, to Istanbul, because it has been one of the great cities of the world since the beginning of "great cities of the world." We've once again suspended our egos and judgments because our understanding of what existence is or can be just never quite fits how another culture has come to understand it.

I'd like to think that my American forebears and the ancestors of people everywhere, in part, endeavored, fought, and sacrificed to the extent that they did so one day there could be this opportunity — to sit down beside others around the world without sensing a need to fear or dominate each other. Bread could be broken, tales of

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