

Learning about myself in Istanbul

Last spring, **Terry Maguire**, a community pharmacist in Belfast, visited Istanbul. His short trip showed him the history, the beauty and the culture of this ancient city. But it also gave him a slightly disturbing personal insight



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Logically, allocation of a seat number obviates the need to join a queue. Yet, en route to a business meeting in Istanbul earlier this year, I did it again. Instead of remaining seated, calm and composed I rush forward to join the queue just as the steward begins: "For passengers' comfort and convenience . . ." I feel annoyed, harassed and a mild hatred for all around me. Once in the queue, I felt strangely content. That is, until the banal conversation of two elderly couples behind began to irritate me. They pushed — gently, but they pushed. From a sideways glance I saw them. They wore identical faded khaki shorts and shirts, Panama hats and overstuffed rucksacks. The couples had just met and were travelling together in search of Troy's ancient ruins. First impressions are important and so they were diligently seeking out commonalities and other little things that might bond them. And all the time one of them, with her rucksack in my back pushed, ever so slightly. My mild irritation grew to anger.

Three hours later after a pleasant flight (helped greatly by a seat as far away as possible from Panama hats), I arrived at Ataturk International Airport. My driver's name was Mujdat but he failed to turn up. Having tele-

phoned my only contact without success, I sat down to consider my options. I was angry again. An hour later I was getting desperate and more angry. But then he appeared, rushed, sweating and with a strong cheesy body odour. He was apologetic in a non-English speaking kind of way. I understood nothing but was so delighted to see him that my anger dissipated and I simply smiled broadly and gave a sigh of relief.

The road from the airport followed the coast along the Sea of Marmara. Just out to sea about 100 ships, tankers, barges, freighters and smaller fishing boats lay at anchor on the glassy water. The first sign of the city was ruins of stout and ancient walls. These, Mujdat explained (or I think he explained), ran for some eight kilometres around the city. The walls dating from the 5th century had remained in good repair until the early 1900s. From that time the Turkish government let them fall down. Some restoration was taking place but I doubt the terracotta, yellow brick and romantic ramparts truly reflects the appearance of ancient Byzantium.

I established from Mujdat, during one of our long, difficult and mostly pointless monosyllabic conversations, that I was staying at a

hotel just off Taksim Square. It struck me, as we struggled for some small comprehension, that I assume people who do not understand me to be stupid. We crossed the Golden Horn and up a dual carriageway towards Taksim square. On the way Mujdat pointed out, up among the trees, the British Consulate where, only weeks before, a bomb had killed 14 including the Consul-General. Over 20 more people had been killed on the same day when the HSBC bank was bombed in another part of the city. And the weekend before, some 20 Jews visiting their synagogue had been murdered, also in a bomb attack. This was the ugly face of intolerance in a city trying to remain secular.

My bedroom at the hotel was small but comfortable and having unpacked my two shirts and toilet-bag I lay on the bed and watched CNN. The big news was the accession of 10 new countries to the EU. Turkey was not included this time but Cyprus, where Turkey has a considerable interest, was holding a referendum in an attempt to undo the partition of the 1974 "land grab". Turkish citizens were in favour of joining the EU; Greek citizens were not. There were insufficient concessions, they felt, "to ease the hurt caused

30 years ago". A disgusted EU spokesman who thought the deal was done, called the Greek Cypriots' attitude intolerable.

Doing business

My hosts picked me up at 6.30pm. Harald was German and Aytuk Turkish. Both spoke excellent English, which made me feel very happy indeed.

"Tomorrow we do business, tonight we eat," Aytuk informed me.

He had a warm, friendly smile and reeked of pungent aftershave. We drove north in Aytuk's car past the high walls and rococo gates of the Dolmabache Palace and under the huge Bosphorus Bridge, its size and grandeur challenging the mighty ancient Bosphorus strait itself.

The turbot, fresh from the tank, was excellent and both Aytuk and Harald drank many glasses of milky-white raki in water while I drank excellent sweet white Turkish wine. We were quite merry when we left the restaurant but, against Harald's wishes, Aytuk drove me to my hotel.

Harald collected me early the next day. The Hilton, our meeting place, was cocooned in a security zone where the green-painted concrete blocks fail to mask their brutality. Security guards manned a tight car entrance with spiking devices to puncture unwelcome wheels. In an intolerant world every city is nervous and Istanbul was on red alert.

A walk along the Bosphorus

Meeting over and business done I planned a solo walking tour of Istanbul in the few hours I had left. I first walked to the Swissotel which is a view with a hotel built around it. From the lobby, before me was the busy ancient Bosphorus, buzzing with small and large ships moving past. In sumptuous surroundings, I drank Earl Grey before reluctantly leaving to walk down the steep hill toward the water, passing the BJM football stadium on the way. The Turkish are passionate about football and Istanbul is host to three major teams. Not being a fan, I only know about Galatassari and, sadly, for the wrong reason — the fatal stabbing of two Leeds United fans during the European championships some years ago.

I did not have time to visit the Dolmabache Palace, but walked across a car park to the shoreline. The strait, perhaps a mile wide, lapped peacefully against the sea wall. It was kingfisher blue and across the flat swelling water was Anatolia.

From the outside, the Dolmabache Palace is an eclectic blend of rococo and baroque, with other classical styles thrown in for good measure. In architectural terms it is a mess. This is where Kemal Ataturk died. Ataturk, the father of modern Turkey, is still a hero, if only officially. His handsome face looks down from large photographs that adorn the sides and fronts of buildings all over the city. Ataturk saved Turkey from the attentions of the British and French during the 1914–18 war. A low ranking officer, he disobeyed or-



Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder and first president of the Turkish Republic

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ders predicting Winston Churchill's plan to land at Gallipoli. He lost most of his men but held out long enough for German support. After the war, he ruthlessly modernised Turkey, routing out the remnants of the corrupt and senile Ottoman Empire and ensured that Turkey became a secular state.

But one person's hero is another person's demon. Perhaps for this reason Ataturk did not feature in the history I was taught at school. The 1914–18 war was fought against the backdrop of a complex European drama about power, dominion and intolerance and it set the scene for the disaster that is the current Middle East conflict. I left the Bosphorus, walking along the front of crumbling city walls, past pistachio nut sellers fighting off persistent pigeons from their barrows. I arrived, out of narrow shaded streets, into sunshine and a busy junction that led onto the Galata Bridge. The bridge was wide and lined with men fishing. I stood for some time on the bridge, taking in the impressive view. In front of me the Golden Horn joined the Bosphorus. At this place in ancient times a large chain stopped attack by ships. Behind me the Golden Horn lapped up against this crowded place, once a cradle, now a sickbed of our modern world.

I continued over the bridge to the ferry port. People thronged, getting off and on these massive boats. The smell of fish and burning wood was everywhere. Small wooden boats bobbed dangerously up and down alongside the ferries. Their owners frying fillets of fresh fish to be sold for about 70p in delicious sandwiches.

An outburst

I continued up the hill from the ferries, turning towards the Aya Sofya, which was distinctly touristy. Beside this ancient mosque,

once a Christian church, parking for coaches attracted touts selling anything and everything. They were assertive and at times aggressive, which was totally out of the character of other parts of the city. A man in his 30s approached me selling guidebooks. After I refused his book, his tactic was to embarrass me by drawing attention to my shirt and tie. He persisted and I responded in anger. As he covered away I realised he understood my retort and I felt bad.

I briskly walked around the mosque with its high arching dome and along the cobbled streets behind to end up at the gates of the Topkapi Palace. From here I tried to walk to the Grand Bazaar, but failed, getting lost in streets full of noisy trading and stressful life.

Another insight

I arrived back at my hotel sore of foot and dry of mouth and retired to the bar. The beer was delightfully cool and refreshing so I had a second. A man in his 60s joined me and asked about the notes I made. Bob was from Australia and in Turkey to attend the Anzac Day ceremony. This dawn service held at Gallipoli on 25 April each year commemorates those who died in the horrific battles of the 1914–18 war. Bob's grandfather and great uncle were killed at Gallipoli and his father, a veteran of the 1939–1945 war, attended the service on many occasions. He had asked Bob to make the journey after he died but until now Bob had not. It was a personal pilgrimage for a family that, long ago, had suffered a painful personal tragedy. Bob talked about his father's hatred of the Turks but Bob found it hard to share that emotion. Too much hatred gets in the way of progress, he mused.

Apology

I awoke dazed at 5.30am. Majdat was waiting for me in the foyer as I checked out and I was grateful that he took me back by the scenic route, so I saw the sun rising over the Bosphorus. The flight home was uneventful. We flew along the course of the Danube for perhaps 100 miles and as we continued over the Balkans, Austria and Germany, I thought of the intolerance between nations and peoples that, in the 20th century, ripped apart the region I was flying over. This intolerance, still there, had its origins in much earlier conflicts over tribalism, nationhood, culture and religion. These were complex problems that once ingrained are difficult, if not impossible, to remove.

Yet it is our individual relationships and a lack of tolerance in these that is core. Intolerance, unchallenged, leads slowly to hatred and is articulated with horrifying consequence: in a terrorist car bomb, a football match stabbing and state-sanctioned carpet-bombing.

I felt deflated. I could not return to the bookseller at the Aya Sofya to make my genuine apology so I hoped that, at Heathrow, I might meet again the elderly couples back from Troy. If I did I would say sorry. Sorry for my intolerant thoughts.