

Monday, November 2

Today we began our vacation and I finally get to go to Cappadocia, a place that has been on my bucket list for years. We flew from the domestic terminal at Ataturk Airport. While the international terminal is new and modern and gorgeous, the domestic terminal looks like it is from the 1950's. There was much confusion about the time of the flight. You see, Turkey was supposed to change its clock last week, like the rest of Europe. But because of the upcoming elections, the time change was postponed until Nov 8. But try to tell that to the computers. Nevertheless, the flight did leave, we did not miss it and here we are.

Much to my surprise I just learned that Cappadocia is not a city but rather a region made up of other small cities. I also finally learned how to pronounce it: Kappa Doh Ya. Cappadocia in ancient Persian meant the land of beautiful horses. I don't know about the horses, but it is certainly beautiful land.

I read that Cappadocia is a magnificent jewel with a bewitching and majestic landscape. I read that it is as if Cappadocia was plucked from a whimsical fairytale and set down upon the stark Anatolian plains. Cappadocia is a geological oddity of honeycombed hills and towering boulders of otherworldly beauty. The fantastical topography is matched by the human history here. People have long utilized the region's soft stone, seeking shelter underground and leaving the countryside scattered with fascinating caveman-style architecture.

And all that I read is true and more. It is hard to do justice to this place in words or in pictures. There is an air of mystery surrounding the entire area. Conical rock outcrops called peri bacalan or fairy chimneys are everywhere. And of course that, and the caves, is what Cappadocia is most famous for.

The landscape was created about 30 million years ago. The volcanic ash from Mt. Erciyes, now an extinct volcano which looms over the haunting panorama, solidified to an easily eroded material called tuff which is covered in layers of hard volcanic rock. Over time the tuff wore away from exposure to water, wind and changes in temperature thus creating the distinctive formations including the famous fairy chimneys. They are called fairy chimneys by the way, because the early inhabitants believed fairies lived underground and these were their chimneys. Some of the chimneys are 130 feet tall. It is easy to see how nature changed the shapes. Sometimes the chimneys collapse leaving weirder shapes. Some have footholds carved into where hermits climbed up and carved out caves for themselves to hide away (more on this later).



The mountains are also made of tuff, and sometimes the tuff was so soft it was possible to excavate and create underground cities. Some of the rocks were carved into churches which have frescoes painted on the walls, dating back to the 4th century. More about all this later too.



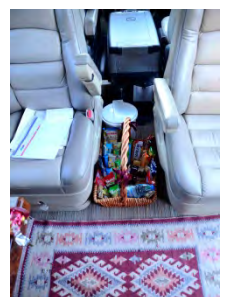
Due to the volcanic soil, the farmers in this area grow grapes, apricots, cherries, potatoes, sugar beets and chickpeas. The grapes vines are not tied up but rather are allowed to grow along the ground. Given the high temperatures in the summer and low temperatures in the winter, the leaves can protect the roots of the vine. Potatoes are stored in large storerooms built into the side of the mountains. There are air shafts in them and thus the potatoes can last for a long time. They also store lemons but do not grow them there because the climate is very cold for it. They transport them from the Mediterranean coast to Cappadocia and store them in the

mountain storehouses. There is also a lot of mining here of zinc, onyx etc. You can see some of the mines from the side of the road.



So, we landed in Kaysira and were picked up by Ramazan, our guide for the next two days. He took our bags and walked us to a mini-bus with plush leather captain seats and room for 16. Since there were just two of us, we had all that space for ourselves. Not only

was there water, there was a basket of cookies and snacks and wifi. Such luxury!

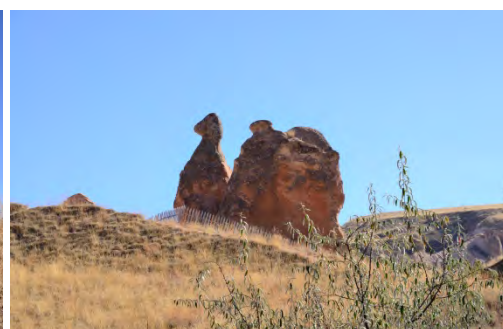


Since it was around noon, we began our sightseeing. The roads in this area are beautiful. We began our drive from the airport on a four lane highway. Eventually we veered off but even then the roads were very well maintained. We were driving on what was once a part of the Silk Road. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the merchants/travelers would leave one Inn in the morning and travel all day and reach the next one by evening. They were spaced exactly right. 200 of these Inns are still standing.

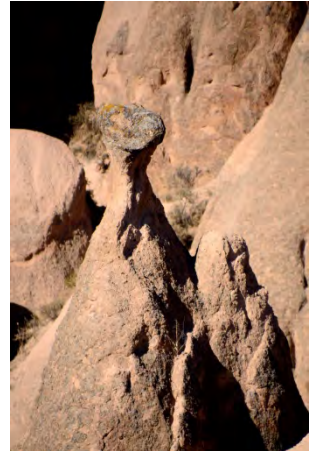
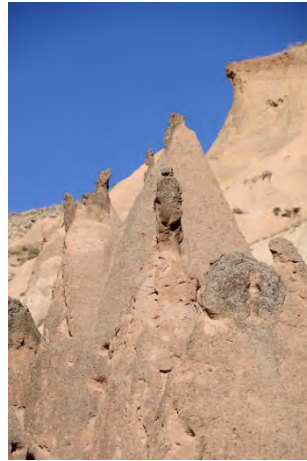
We began with a hike through the Devrent Valley, also known as Imagination Valley or Pink Valley. This is the most surreal-looking landscape making you feel like you are on another planet. These are the fairy chimneys. Here is what Ramazan said: "Thousands of years of wind, rain and extreme temperature changes have worn the beautifully colored rocks into strange and wonderful animal and human shapes that make you think a modern sculptor has been living in the valley. You are wrong! You have just been introduced to the work of nature's greatest artist, Erosion." And he did mean thousands of years ago as the volcano erupted in 2000 BCE.



At first we just stood at the side of the road taking it all in – the view in the picture above. Then we began to hike through the chimneys. So many shapes. It just takes a little imagination to see the camel, a women holding a baby (they say it is Mary holding Jesus), a snake. Some had pointed tops. Some had mushroom tops in a darker color. I didn't want to leave it was so magnificent. As my mother always said – what nature does! And another wonderful thing – we were the only ones there.







Our next stop was Zelve. This is where three canyons of abandoned cave homes and churches converge in the Valley of the Monks. In fact, the rock face at Zelve is honeycombed with cave dwellings and churches. Zelve was a monastic retreat from the 9th to the 13th century. But more recently it housed the largest communities of Muslims and Christians in the region. This was a living village until 1952. Imagine – only 64 years ago people still lived in these cave homes. The cave homes were carved into the rock sides of the valley at ground level. Much higher up were other carved shelters used as dovecotes (housing pigeons whose droppings were used for fertilizer) in normal times and as safe hiding places in times of danger. A high-level tunnel carved into the rocks still connects one valley to the next. Muslims and Christians lived together in relative safety here protected by the steep valley sides and the mountain behind. There was just one mosque in Zelve partly carved into the bedrock. The minaret was not round like we see today, but rather had four columns and a pointed top, as often seen in the early Ottoman period. The person calling for prayer had to climb up and literally call everyone to prayer as opposed to the recordings which are used today. The mosque and church stand side-by-side. There is a lesson in that. Across from the Mosque is the square that was used by all the villagers for feasts and weddings and just gathering. But in 1924 the Christians had to leave the valley because of the exchange of minorities between Greece and Turkey (all Turks had to leave Greece and



move to Turkey and all Greeks had to leave Turkey and move to Greece). The Muslims were forced to evacuate the Valley in 1952 when life became too dangerous, not because of politics, but because of erosion.

Zelve was the religious center of the area from the 9th to the 13th centuries, and the first religious seminars for priests were held in the vicinity. We visited the Church with the Grapes (Uzumlu Kilise) named after the bunches of grapes painted on the wall. It is said the grapes are a symbol of Christ. Then we visited the Church with the Fishes (Balikli Kilise), named for the fish paintings above the apse. We visited some of the homes, where you can see where the kitchens were and where the storage was, where they slept and where they made grapes into wine, where the wheat was milled (the mill stone is still there), where a hammock would be hung from the ceiling and where the horses or cattle would be tied up. All in the caves.

