

Tuesday – part 3

On our way to our next stop we passed lots of farm land. But mostly we saw lots of pumpkins strewn along the road, and pumpkin seeds (kabak çekirdeği) drying on the ground.



Kaymaklı Underground City

Our next stop was the Kaymaklı Underground City. How do I even begin to explain this? Although all towns and villages in Cappadocia once had safe and secure secret rooms dug out of the soft tuff rock, this was a whole underground city, and not the only one. In fact there are at least 200 of these underground cities that have been found so far, with tunnels connecting one to the other.

Artifacts found here suggest that some of the caves were first built in the 8th-7th century BCE. The city was used in the Byzantine era for protection from Muslim Arabs during the Arab–Byzantine wars (780-1180). Some artifacts discovered in these underground settlements belong to the Middle Byzantine Period, between the 5th and the 10th centuries C.E. These cities continued to be used by the Christian inhabitants as protection from the Mongolian incursions of Timur in the 14th century.

Most of the people living here had been slaves and the Romans were constantly attacking them. So they built these amazing underground cities. The underground cities are intrinsically different from the safe rooms because their size, scale, and evidence of actual underground city planning. Up to 150 feet deep and almost 2 miles wide, as many as 5,000 people were able to hide safely underground out of sight of the enemy, with their store of food that could last for months if necessary.

There are four floors in this city and have been excavated so far (see cross-sectional photo below), and the tunnels leading from one floor to the next are low, narrow, and steep. We had to bend over (yes, even me) to walk through them. Each space is organized around ventilation shafts which make the design of each room or open space dependent on the availability of ventilation.

Life could continue relatively normally in these well-ventilated cities lit by linseed-oil lamps, which had their own water supply, stockpiled food, kitchens, toilets, churches and even graveyards. We saw where they stored food, pressed oil and wine, and cooked. There were reliefs on some of the walls. We saw stables with holes in the walls where the horses were likely tied up. The people could even cook food safely, as multiple chimneys dispersed the smoke imperceptibly so their presence would not be discovered by the enemy

They had enormous circular mill stones which could be rolled into doorways (called mill-stone doors) and only opened from the inside. This kept them safe. I can't even imagine how they moved those mill stones!
Remember, we are talking centuries BCE here. It is almost unfathomable.



