

Europe's Southeastern Edge: Travels through Greece and Turkey

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I am standing on top of the Acropolis, shielding my face as the hot wind blows across ancient marble. Every guidebook explained the beauty and antiquity of Greece's famous ruins—but no one mentioned the dust. Fine grains of earth, old as the pillars that are scattered upon them, infiltrate my hair and the folds of my clothes. When the wind has subsided and I uncover my eyes, I see that my hands are striped with the same chalky substance as the Parthenon's columns: shockingly white against the cerulean sky. I could be three thousand years old.

The countries of Greece and Turkey provoke a multitude of images: the meeting of Europe and Asia, the thin line between Christianity and Islam, and the juxtaposition of two countries with deeply intertwined histories, yet obvious cultural distinctions. I chose to travel along these Mediterranean nations, in part, to see how they differ from one another. Yet, while contrasting the major cities of Athens and Istanbul, as well as the volcanic Greek island of Santorini, I came to find that a sense of great history is present throughout the region, hidden amongst temples and mosques, in seashells and spice racks.



I started my trip in the ancient capital of Athens, where the many footpaths and steps surrounding its historical monuments are worn down to a slippery reminder of their popularity in the western world. Though tourism dominates La Plaka, the Acropolis's neighborhood, it was easy to slip into the scattered hillsides of the city, full of small cafes with tables and chairs at different heights to accommodate the sloping terrain. Teenaged Greek girls wearing gladiator-style sandals smoked unfiltered cigarettes, an ironic



testament to the history of their region, while their grandfathers argued over a game of chess— the black and white checkered board carved into a park bench. All the while, the ancient white-on-cobalt background lingered as a sense of definite history. For Athenians, there is no question of ancestry or identity; the story of their past lies within walking distance, albeit up a very steep hill.

Though Athens lies on a stunning coastline, its millions of inhabitants and tourists produce a haze of pollution, visible from its highest peaks. As our ferry moved away from the port of Athens, deeper into the Mediterranean and towards the island of Santorini, the smog lifted to reveal, if possible, an even deeper blue. While the more vulnerable open water produced white-capped waves, the sky and ocean fused into a scene almost too bright to look at with the naked eye. The ferry bobbed for five hours, passing various islands, sailboats, and fishermen.

The volcanic eruption near the Sea of Crete that carved Santorini into a crescent-shaped atoll was evident as soon as the island came into view. Giant cliffs plunging straight into the foamy water were a testament to just how violently and quickly the island was formed. Donkeys and 1970s passenger vans shared the steep, narrow roads that zigzagged dangerously up the sides of the cliffs. Tourists and locals sped by on electric scooters, defiant against the sheer gravity of the island, while I sat in a beaten-up Ford, white-knuckling my backpack.

While the beauty of the whitewashed churches on Santorini has become famous in postcards and monthly calendars, the sheer number of domes and crosses cannot be captured in a photograph. Sitting on a bench in the



village of Fira at sunset, my ears were filled with the chimes and echoes of hundreds of bells—calling out for the Monday night service. Carved into the cliffs, or resting on top of the island, the churches were positioned delicately amongst homes, hotels, and restaurants. Their accompanying priests, characterized by flowing black robes and the customary Kamelaukion, tended to the faithful. While the original inhabitants of Santorini were wiped out in the volcano that transformed the island, there is a spiritual side that gives it an undeniable history and indisputable evidence to the power of nature.



After visiting two distinct areas of Greece, I boarded a small prop-plane to venture eastward to Istanbul. While the humming of the propellers filled my ears and we neared the Atatürk Airport, I caught my first sight of the Bosphorus Strait, cutting Istanbul in half and splitting the continents of Europe and Asia from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. While the sights in Istanbul were lavish and stunning, ranging from the serene



Blue Mosque to the Ottoman Empire's exquisite Tokapi Palace, what I found most profound, and representative of the Turkish people, were the smells. At the ancient Spice Market, also known as the Egyptian Bazaar, apple tea leaves and saffron exchanged hands. In the streets, roasting corn on the cob wafted amongst tourists and locals alike. As the call to prayer echoed through the Sultanahmet district, rotting vegetables were swept out of the street, leaving their sickly-sweet smell as a reminder of the market stands that had stood open earlier that day. Much like the history

of Istanbul, characterized by the spice trade from Asia to Europe, its scent was colorful, expansive, and authentic.

Like Santorini, Istanbul's streets were full of their own religious evidence. Jutting minarets from both local and world-famous mosques stretched upwards, while men rolled out prayer rugs and faced east. The modest and sometimes all-covering dress of Muslim



women was a stark contrast from the sandal-wearing teens I saw in Athens, and yet the veracity of shop owners, the respective national pride, and the importance of the ports in each city demonstrated to me the connection between two countries with a turbulent past.

Walking in Gülhane, Istanbul's famous park, on a Sunday afternoon, I see families with picnic lunches spread out on the vibrant grass. In the background, a mosque is calling the faithful to worship, and a palace made with real gold is closing its doors to visitors. To my right, ancient pieces of stone, etched in Greek, Arabic, and Turkish, sit in a gated area, as the nearby museum has overflowed with relics. A young child walks by the stones, just as any child would do, not knowing just how old they really are. I think of the Acropolis, of the volcano, of the spices in the bazaar. This is an important corner of the world, though this child does not yet know it. History is etched in every step, every corner. As I turn and walk out of the park, I think about how very much the past can teach us.