

Escape from Istanbul

written by Marcus | 3 March, 2015



According to the news reports, last week saw the heaviest snowfall in Istanbul since 1987. So much for letting winter pass on Paros and missing the bad weather. But there are worse places to be stuck.



Hagia Sofia in the snow

The snow did eventually stop and by Thursday afternoon the roads seemed to be clear enough to risk trying to get into the centre. This proved to be no mean feat requiring a bus, a Metro Bus and a tram and taking anywhere between 1-2 hours. Traffic in Istanbul is notoriously bad but chuck in massive piles of snow by the road side and tricky conditions on the smaller side streets and things go from bad to worse. On one particular expedition on the public transport system Kirsty and I were stood right next to the driver with our noses pressed against the windscreen and a jam packed bus behind us. People continued to squeeze on through the back doors at each stop but instead of taking this as an opportunity to skip paying they all diligently passed their travel cards forward down the length of the bus so that they could have them debited. Whether the correct cards made it back to their rightful owners again we'll never know.



Move along the bus



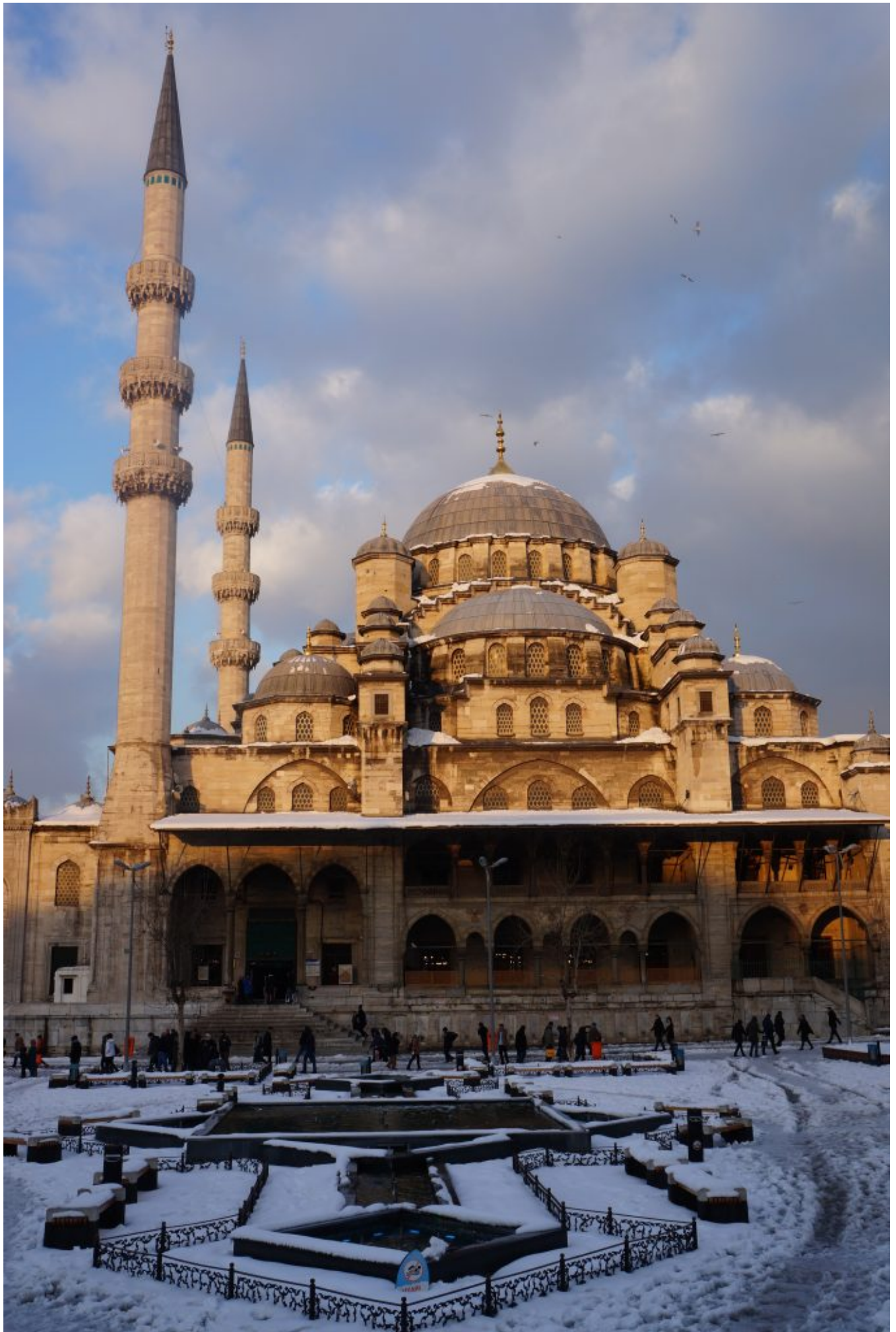
Istanbul Traffic

Once we eventually arrived in the tourist epicentre of Sultanhamet

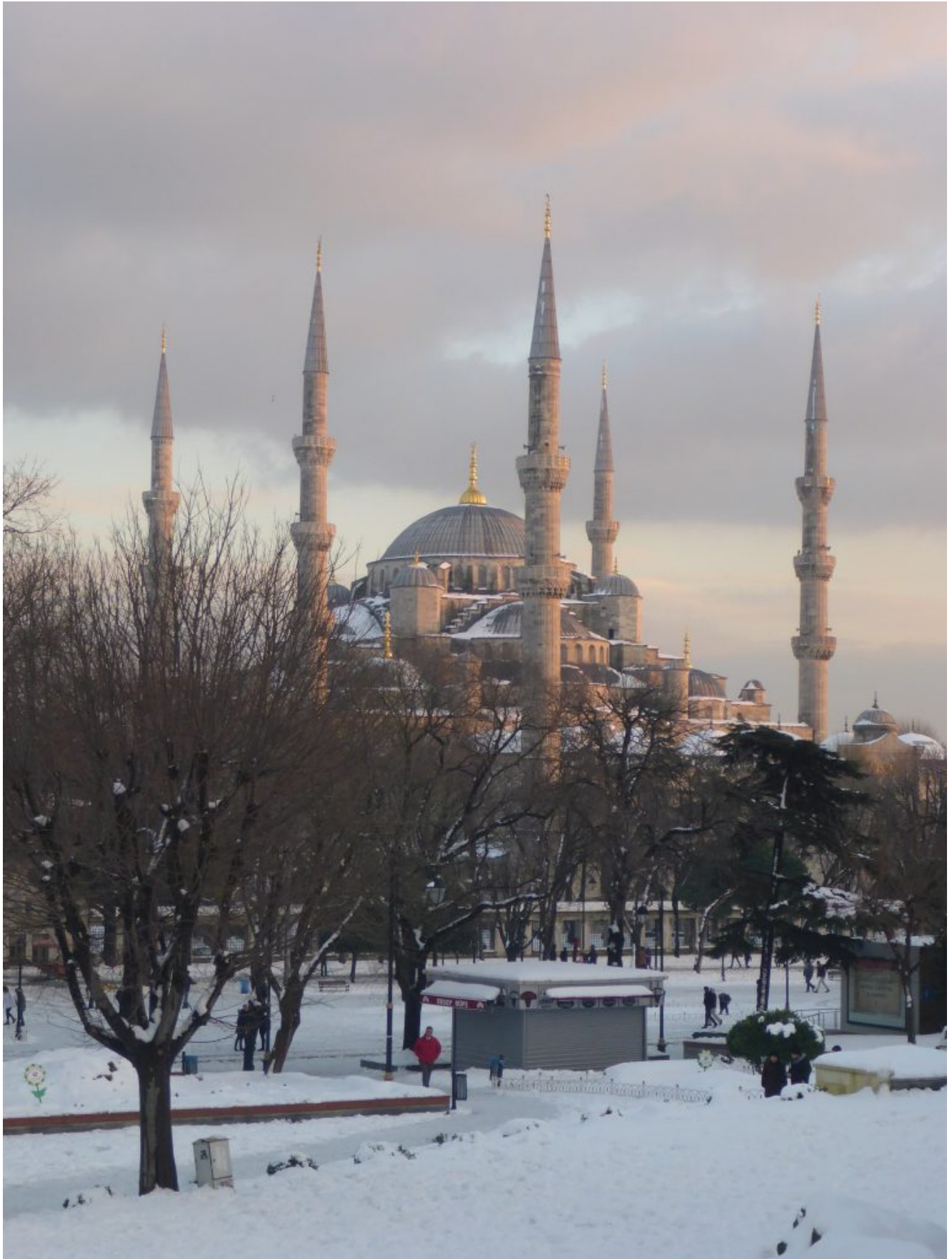
we were treated to the unusual sight of all of the majestic landmarks decorated with snowy white caps and precarious icicles. The street hustlers were kept at bay by the cold and so were a lot of the crowds but it wasn't easy negotiating the streets as the majority of the pavements hadn't been cleared. So for two days we were trudging through ankle deep slush getting cold feet that we tried to defrost by sipping several Turkish coffees in the Bazaars. Plastic bags over our socks helped and looked particularly stylish when we had to remove our shoes to visit the mosques.



Time for coffee



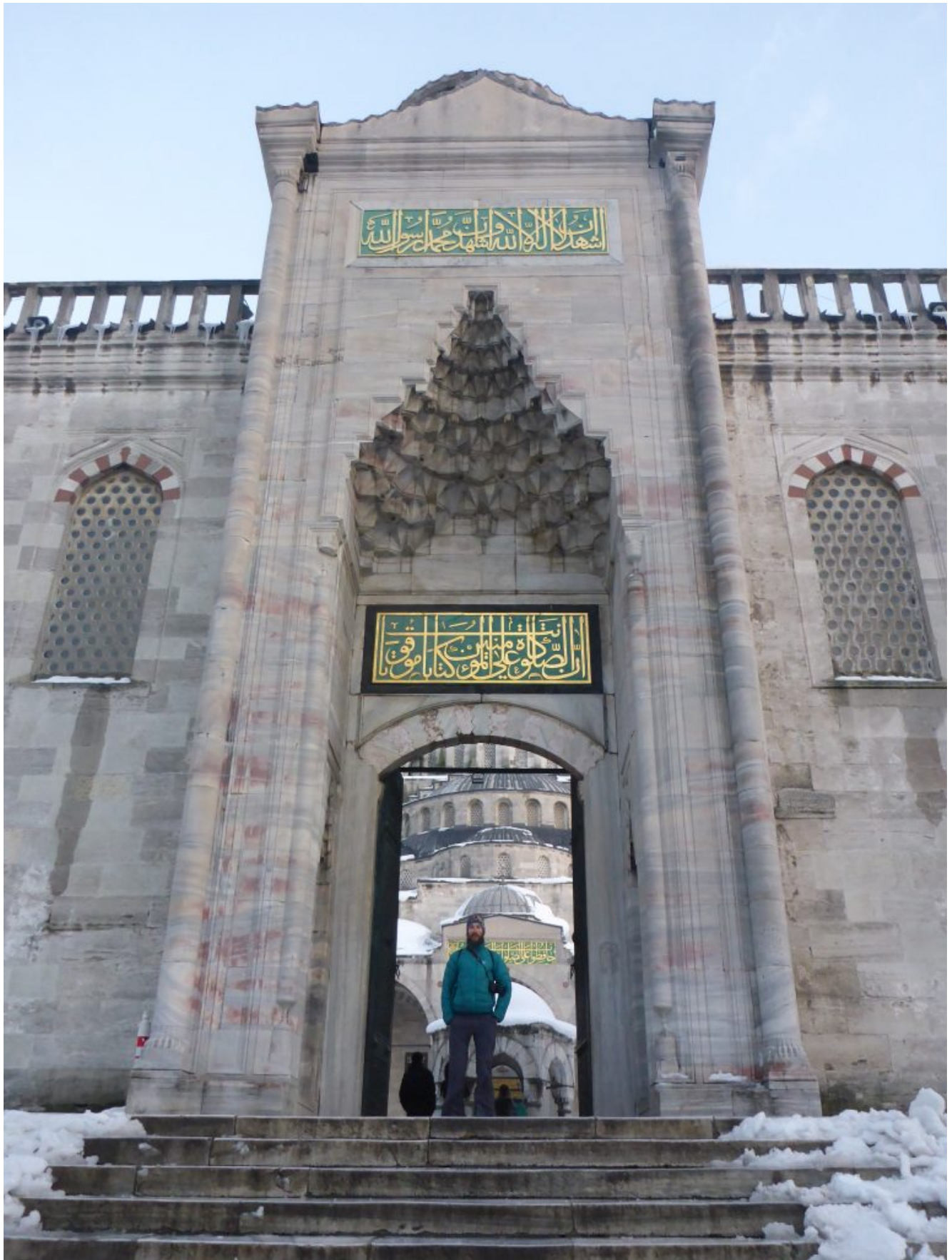
Yeni Mosque



Sultanahmet (Blue) Mosque



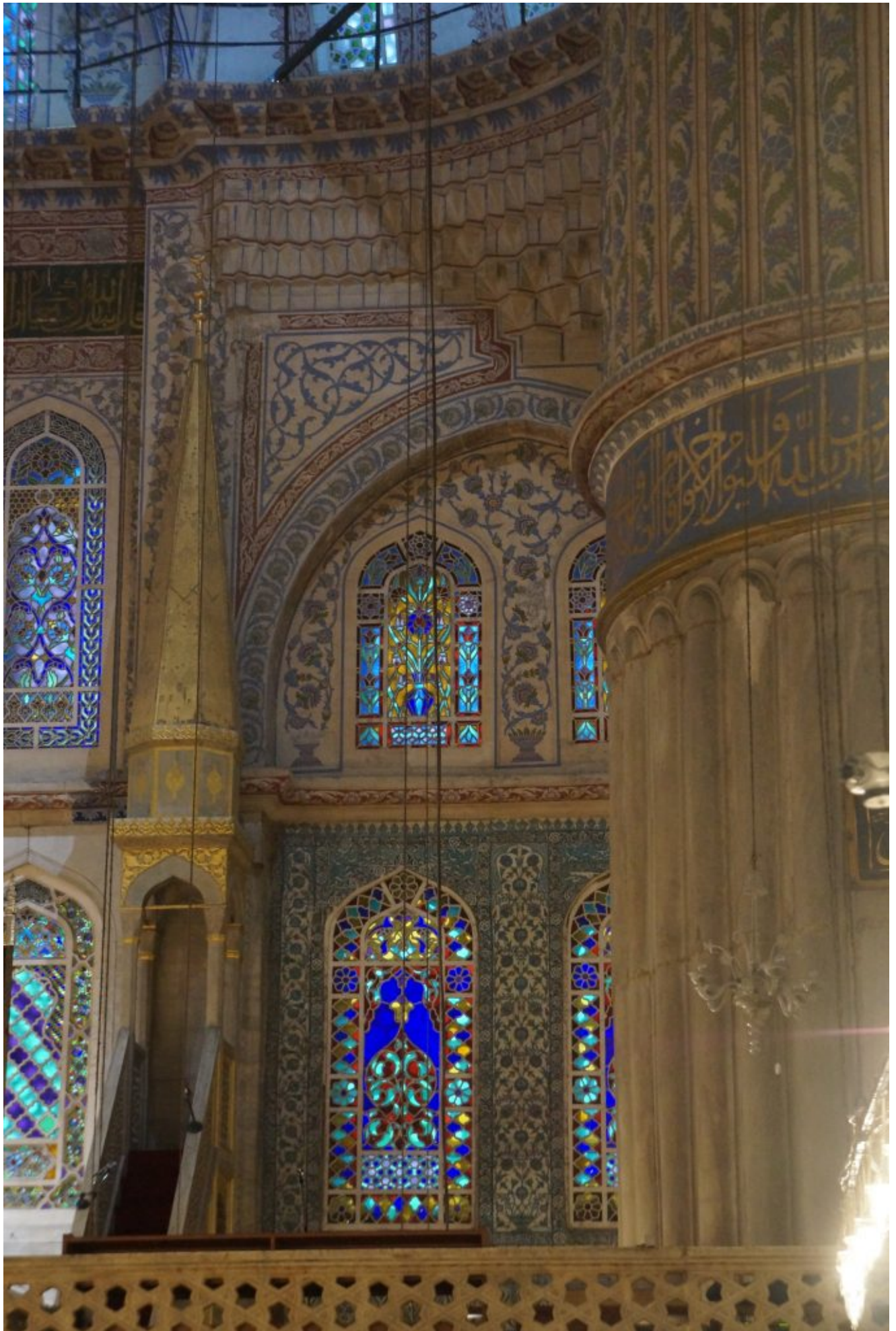
Blue Mosque



Sultanahmet (Blue Mosque)



Sultanahmet (Blue) Mosque



Blue Mosque



Blue Mosque



Sultans Lodge, Hagia Sofia



Hagia Sofia



Christian Mosaic, Hagia Sofia



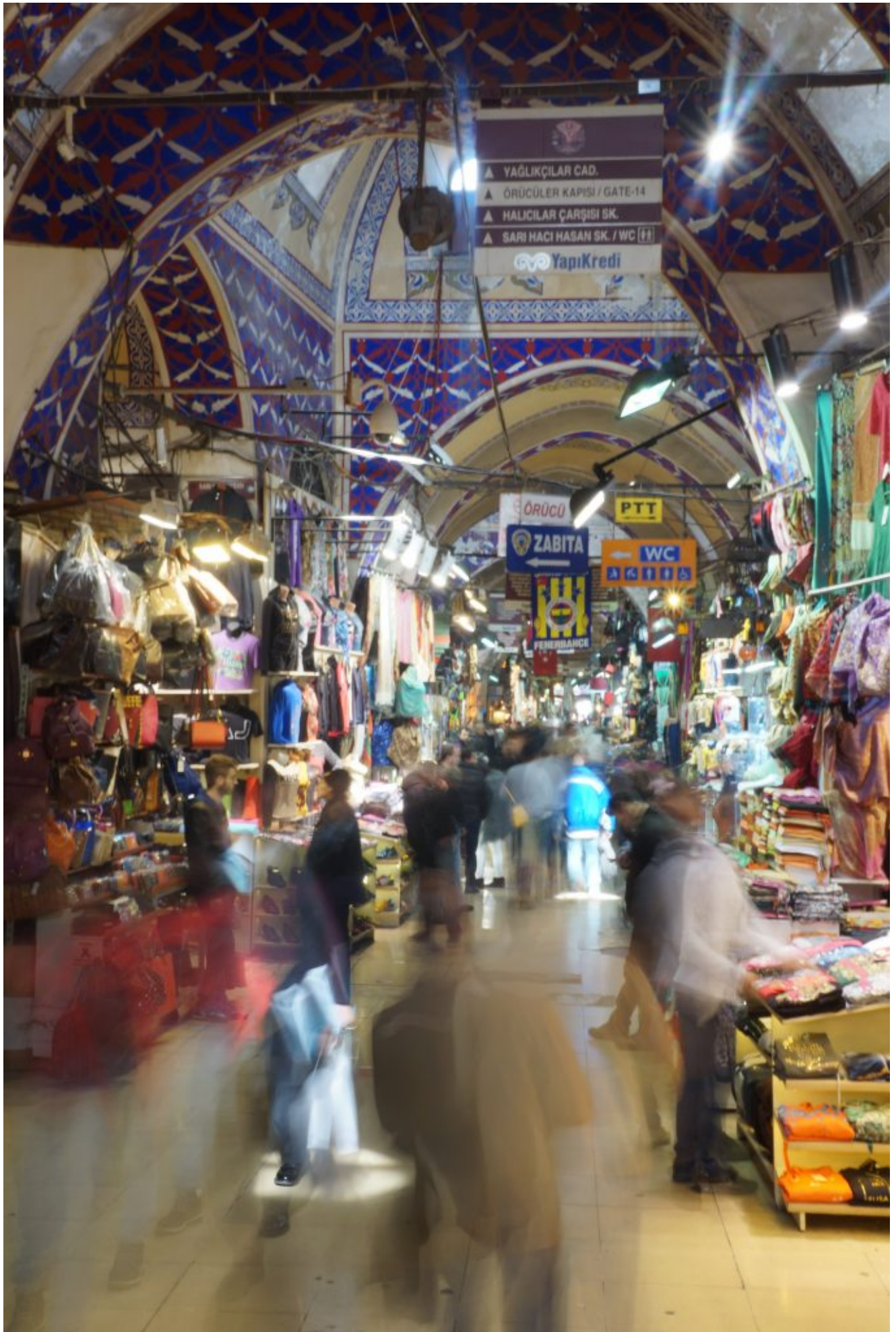
Decorations, Grand Bazaar



Spice Bazaar



Dried Fruit, Spice Bazaar



Grand Bazaar



Basilica Cistern

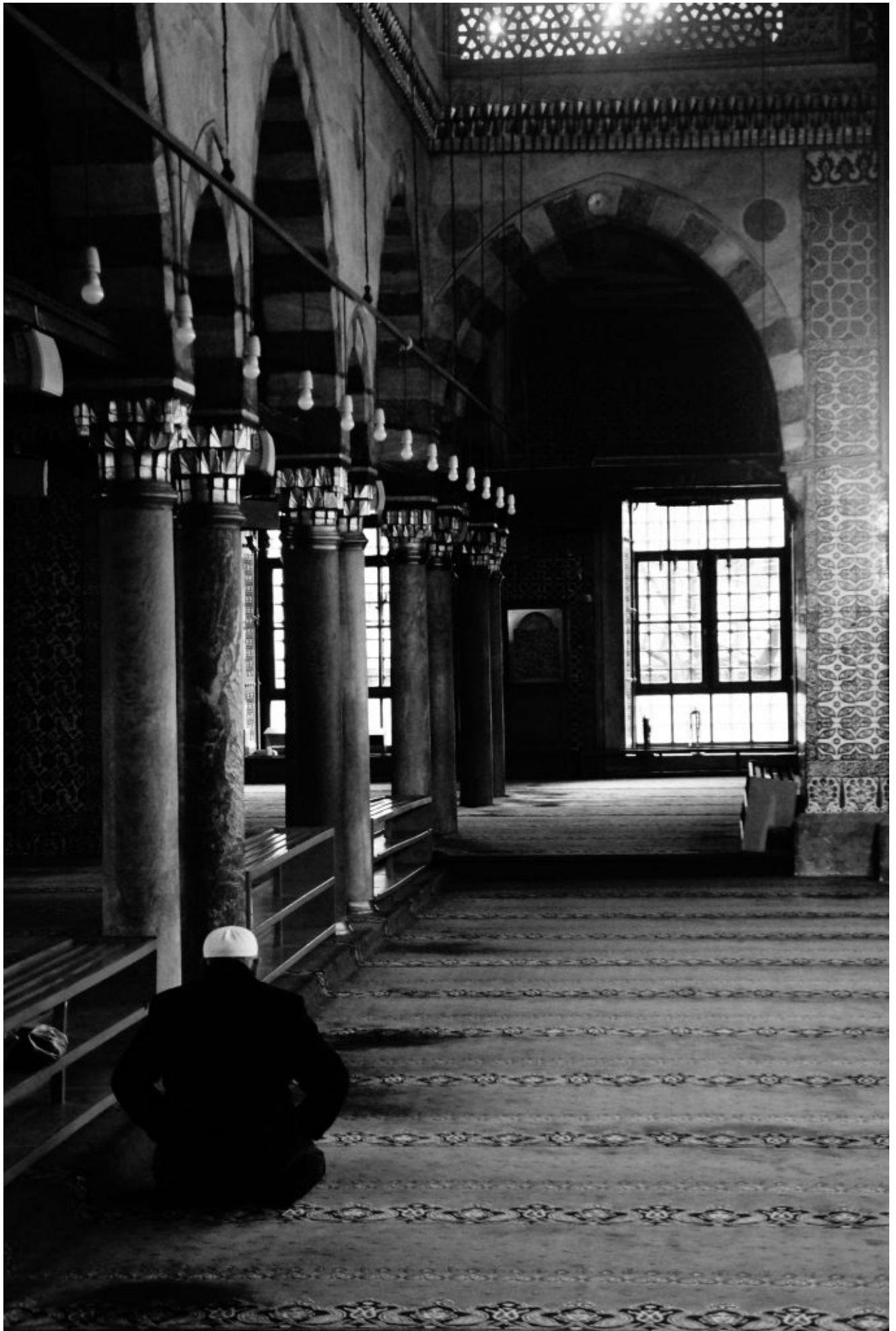


Medusa's Head, Basilica Cistern

After a visit to a photography exhibition we set the cameras

to black and white for the afternoon.







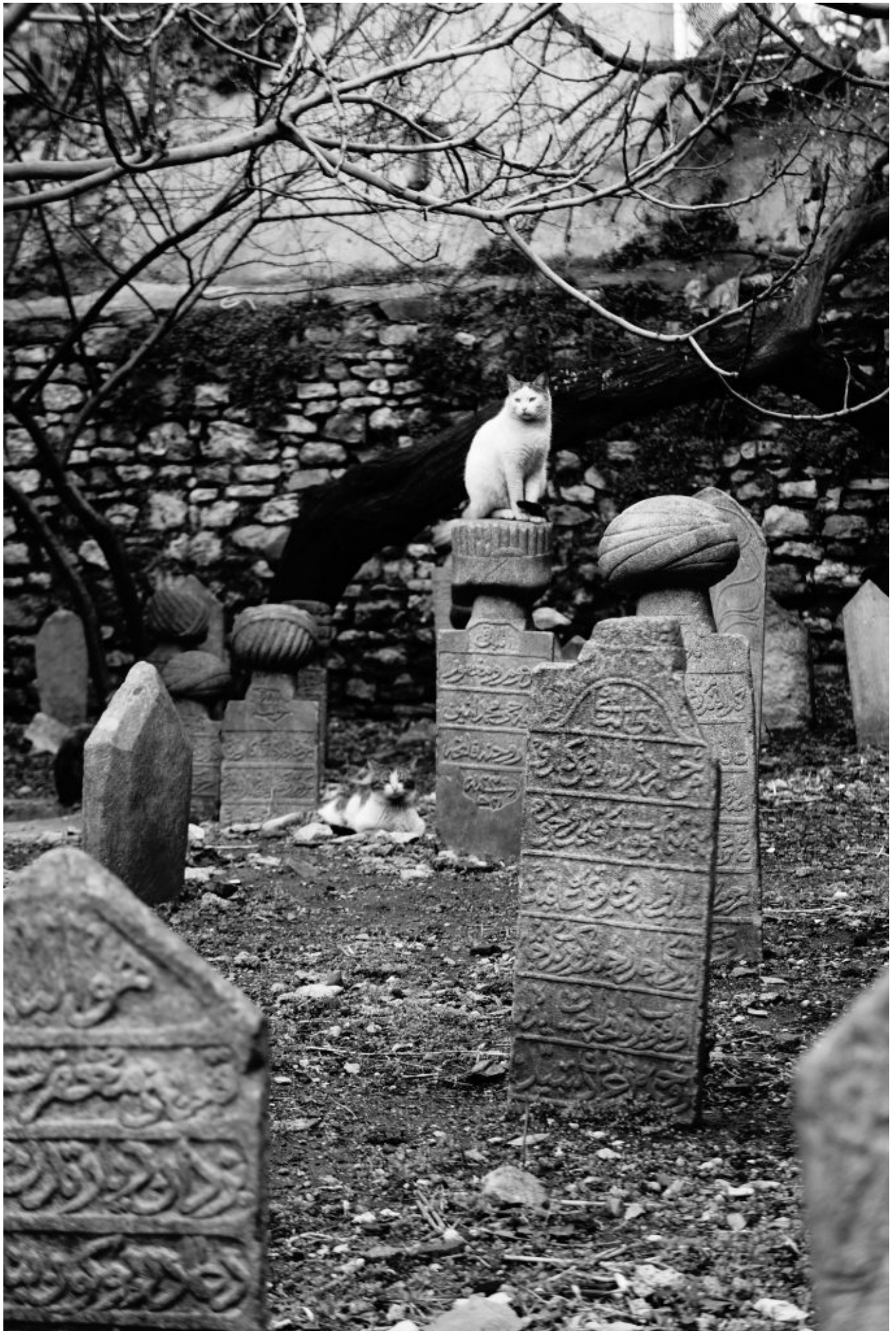








Basilica Cistern



Cemetery Cat

As we had hoped, the temperatures rose again quite quickly so by the weekend everything was thawing out and returning to normal. We'd planned to stay for 3-4 days but as 2 of those had been spent effectively housebound we decided to stay a bit longer. In fact we didn't have much choice as we were also waiting for a parcel to arrive. Although it may be a case of slamming the stable door while the horse has long ago galloped away given winter should now be on the backfoot, we thought it was time to upgrade to a warmer quilt for our nights in the tent. Our route across Turkey takes us onto the central plateau that last week dipped to -16. We've also got some high altitude riding in Central Asia so there should be plenty of opportunity to make good use of it despite the fact that it would also have been useful 3 months ago. We had ordered a super warm yet super light double quilt from Enlightened Equipment in Minnesota who hand make them to each customer's requirements. They had stitched it and stuffed it in record time then handed it over to USPS to try and get it to Istanbul before us.



Hagia Sofia after the snow



Ferry from Europe to Asia



These bread stalls were everywhere



Asia Left, Europe on the right



Egyptian Obelisks



Egyptian Obelisk



Nostalgic Tram, it`s not what it used to be



Fishermen on Galata Bridge



Costume shop



Head scarfs compulsory for Kirsty in the mosques.

I'd read various horror stories of how people had spent countless days wrangling with the Turkish postal system trying to recover what was rightfully theirs and had several fingers crossed that we wouldn't have a similar story to tell. I don't think my fingers were crossed tight enough though.



Airing the carpets

The parcel had arrived in Istanbul on 17th February and from the online tracking I could see that it had passed through customs, the first opportunity for a problem to arise, fairly quickly. Then the snow arrived so nothing happened for 2-3 days. Once the delivery trucks could start moving again they decided to give our parcel a little tour of the city via various depots and sorting offices before it eventually got to a point where they could try to deliver it. Only the delivery driver couldn't find the address so sent it back to the depot. Twice. Add another day when the entire computer system of the Turkish post office went offline.



Wonky door



By now it was 24th February and we'd had to move from Erdiñç's house to a hotel as he had other guests arriving. It was a 30km ride to our new accommodation which included a slight altercation with the side of an impatient car resulting in a broken pannier buckle but thankfully nothing worse. More positively we also found that by walking round with the laden bike we were transformed from someone to try and extract money from by selling us a carpet (several of which were claimed to be 'magic' but the vendor couldn't guarantee he knew the magic words to make it fly) to something of a curiosity that people wanted to help. A brief stop outside a restaurant became a 5 hour meal when the owner beckoned us in and presented us with çay and then the man at the table next to us invited us to join him for lunch and paid the bill.



Erdoğan and his Mum



Uçar bought us lunch and Turkish Whisky to wash it down



Carpet sellers delivering their goods

On the third trip to the parcel depot (an hour each way via a tram and two trains) I finally managed to get myself into the same room as our parcel. There it was, sat by the desk of the girl I'd been trying to convey my predicament to for two days but she wasn't going to give it up without one last fight. Their paperwork only had Erdiñç's name on it so they said only Erdiñç could collect it. I had to point out that the parcel itself actually said Marcus Mumford c/o Erdinc Topcu and showed them my passport to prove that I was in fact Marcus Mumford. She looked at the parcel, then the passport, then at me then back the passport and then the parcel before saying "OK, you can take it". I managed to hold back from diving in for the hug but I think my huge grin probably said enough. There was the small matter of paying the customs charges and then I was free to leave with the box under my arm and a Dick Van Dyke-esque click of the heels. It had taken 7 days from the point of the parcel arriving in Istanbul to us taking possession which by most accounts is actually very good.



Our box!



Murat Paşa Mosque



I had a short back and sides and my beard cut off by mistake
In my excitement to get back to show Kirsty our new
acquisition I managed to get on the wrong train and rode to

the opposite end of the line before realising. But this in itself proved fortuitous as I met Abdu, a student from Yemen who helped me get back in the right direction and also showed me to the finest falafal cafe in the city.



Abdu

We celebrated the prospect of many warm and cosy nights ahead, and the fact that we could now leave Istanbul, with a

couple of drinks. We met up with Charlie, a cyclist from the Highlands of Scotland who is also tackling The Silk Road and discussed the road ahead. It's highly likely that there will be a few more frustrations to come as we cross into Asia but our extended stay in Istanbul has given us a great introduction to how things work (or don't)!



Leaving Istanbul in a more civilised way than how we arrived, by ferry across the Sea of Marmara