

# Trabzon to Tbilisi

written by Marcus | 15 April, 2015



Leaving Trabzon behind us we head out east again. To our right the feet of the mountains keep threatening to kick us into the Black Sea and barely leave enough room for the main road and a few coastal towns. From time to time though the hills make it right to the water so we have to brave the infamous Black Sea tunnels that give this stretch of road a bit of a reputation amongst touring cyclists. They range from 200m to nearly 2km and are not for the faint hearted. As we ride through them the noise of the traffic approaching from behind us builds to a deafening roar and we brace ourselves for what sounds like a juggernaut on a collision course, only to then get passed by a small minibus. In fact all the traffic gives us plenty of room as the tunnels have two lanes and our retina-searingly-bright flashing rear light gives them due warning that we're there.



Tunnel. Light at end not shown.

Once back in the daylight we begin passing small tea plantations with terraces cut into the steep hillside. There are pulley systems and zip lines for getting the crop down from the top and then off to the many processing plants that we also begin seeing.





### Views from the Black Sea coast road

Apart from tea and tunnels the most remarkable feature of this part of the journey is the number of green gyms. Here on the Black Sea coast the combined good intentions of the local authority and what must have been a very slick selling pitch from the green gym equipment manufacturer have resulted in dozens of gyms all along the road. We didn't count them all but there must be one every 2 miles or so. And just like all the others we've seen, nobody seems to use them.



Pristine, unused green gym





The tunnels help iron out the road so we get the easy return to riding that we'd hoped for to test our injured bodies. A few niggles aside we both seem to be coping OK and 110 sunny km pass by quickly.

Just after the appropriately named Çayeli we make a u-turn onto a side road that takes us through a narrow tunnel to a small pebbled beach and a very closed cafe. Once the local goat herder has finished staring at us and ushered his flock away we set ourselves up for the night on the cafe floor. It's a beach hut with plastic sheeting for walls that should offer enough protection.



Black Sea Shepherd





Just as we climb under the quilt a van drives right onto the beach and parks within 2m of where we are lying. There's just the plastic sheeting between us and the vehicle. We both hold our breath expecting to be discovered at any second but the driver and his female companion have other things on their minds. The radio gets turned up and if I could see the bumper I'm sure it would have a sticker that said "If the vans rockin' don't come knockin'".



Beach side accommodation, near Cayeli





Two nervous hours pass with the Turkish equivalent of Barry White blaring out of their car stereo and then thankfully they drive away and we're left alone. Well, nearly alone. It turns

out the cafe does already have a resident in the form of a large rat. Kirsty comes nose to whisker with it when it scuttles over to have a look at its new guests and she stifles a scream. I quickly pack away all our food and the rat seems to lose interest. The only thing left out is a large apple that we'd been given in Çayeli and which Kirsty had left in her helmet, suspended from the bars of the bike.

In a Mission Impossible manoeuvre the hungry rat manages to shin up the bike frame, climb into the helmet and nudge the apple out onto the floor where it takes a few bites then leaves it in search of something more tasty. Luckily it's not able to undo the buckles on our rack bag.

The next day we pedal the last few km of Turkey, enjoying a final complimentary cup of çay on the way, and arrive at our 24th border. We've had some of the best of times and the worst of times in Turkey so it's a country that will leave us with plenty of memories and a few scars but now it's time to cross into Georgia.





Georgian border

There's a 1km long queue of trucks waiting to get across but we get waved past them all and have to wheel the bike through

what looks like an airport terminal. Apart from an impatient Georgian woman trying to push us out the way to get her passport checked before ours, unsuccessfully, we get through quickly and easily. We also lose 2 hours in the process as Georgia is in a new time zone.

On the other side a friendly tourist information lady issues us with maps and some information about Adjara, the region of Georgia we're now entering. There are 12 regions in Georgia and each one has its own unique cultural traditions and local delicacies. Some of them have such a strong identity that they function as autonomous states and Adjara is one of those. More controversial are South Ossetia and Abkhazia who are fighting to be entirely independent and as such visiting tourists are strongly dissuaded from going there.

Out on our first Georgian road the change compared to Turkey is immediate. We're no longer on a smooth dual carriageway and instead have pot holes, Ladas and herds of cattle to negotiate.





Georgian welcoming committee





Georgian welcome commitee



## Entering the Caucasus

Approaching Batumi we get some fantastic views of the lesser Caucasus mountains but the sights in Batumi are even more extraordinary. We pedal along the sea front boulevard where there seems to be a competition to see who can build the most ridiculous looking hotel. The one that looks like half of the Colosseum wins in my mind but it's a close run thing. Further up the boulevard there's a tall skyscraper with an enormous TV screen wrapped around it and a small Ferris wheel hanging off the side. Then at the far end we see the Alphabet Tower, an enormous ball perched on top of a twisted structure that shows the unique Georgian alphabet running around it in a spiral.



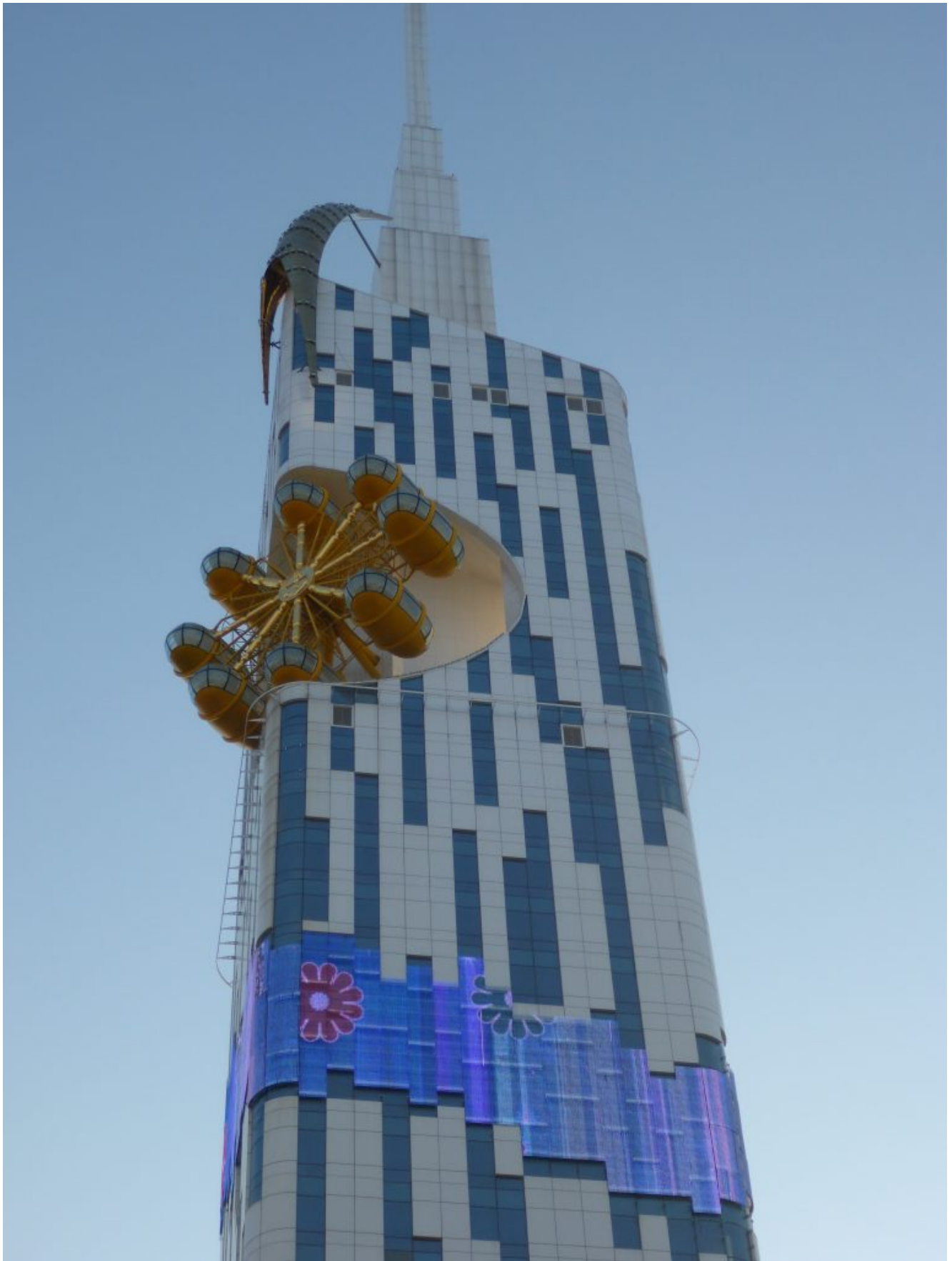


Batumi Boulevard





Alphabet tower, Batumi



The Shard vs the London Eye





The architect should have put his pencil down much sooner.  
It reminds us of Las Vegas and like its Nevada big brother,  
Batumi has lots of casinos to draw in visitors from Turkey,



where gambling is illegal, and wealthy Russians. But underneath the glitzy façade the skyscraper is completely empty and the restaurant planned for the top of the Alphabet Tower was never finished. It seems there is still some work to do to bring in the crowds to support the prosperous image that the town is trying to portray.



Alphabet tower by night



Love sculpture

After a bite to eat we head off to find somewhere to camp and find ourselves alongside a big lake where a huge dancing fountain display is taking place, in time to various classic rock ballads. Another hint at Vegas and it's almost like standing in front of the Bellagio.





### Batumi fountain display

At the end of the lake is a derelict Chinese restaurant on its own island so we set ourselves up amongst the pagodas and watch the end of the fountain display from the tent.

If we'd read the booklet we'd picked up from the tourist information we'd have found out that one of the fountains on the boulevard spouts the local tippie ChaCha at 7 every evening.

After a morning looking round the town we set off up the coast, past bamboo plantations and stalls selling bamboo ladders. It's hillier than we expected and as we grind up a particularly steep gradient the cars and trucks come a bit too close for comfort. Drivers in Georgia are appalling and every other car has a bumper missing or a cracked windscreen. There's a Lada with a wheel off or a bonnet open on most street corners and always with a crowd of men in leather

jackets gathered round trying to assess the problem.



Lada graveyard

I'm keen to take my last chance for a dip in the Black Sea so



we camp behind some hotels overlooking a long beach in Kobuleti. In the summer the water temperature averages 25 degC but in late March it's a bit cooler so its a case of splash and dash. Despite being over 30km away across the bay, we can still see the bright lights of the TV screen attached to the skyscraper in Batumi.



A swim in the shiny Black Sea

Our road turns away from the sea the next day and we ride a roller coaster of small hills through quiet villages, slaloming around various animals in the road. By lunchtime we arrive in Ozurgeti. There are rows of tiny shops most of whom are selling bales of hay and cattle food but in amongst them are a few small windows behind which are bakers and grocers so we stock up for lunch and find a park to have a picnic.



Up into the hills towards Ozurgeti





## Ozurgeti

Just as we get everything unpacked a man wanders over and invites us into his café so we chuck our provisions back in the bag and follow him. We thought the offer was just for a coffee but he brings out a number of plates and bowls loaded with bread, cheese, spring onions and a traditional bean hot pot. Our picnic will have to wait until dinner time! We try to pay but he refuses to accept our cash making a gesture to indicate it was his pleasure. This is our first example of the famous and generous Georgian hospitality. Here they have a saying that a guest is a gift from God.



Generous and delicious Georgian hospitality





### Ozurgeti moped

As we ride out of town a police car drives up behind us and sounds its siren. Unless the speed limit is less than 15kph I'm not sure what we've done wrong but I pull over anyway. The policeman then tries to tell us we should be riding on the pavement on the other side of the road. Given half the paving slabs are missing and the kerbs are 30cm high at each junction we don't really think this is such a good idea. I tell the policeman as such so he then suggests we just ride on the other side of the road, against the traffic. Also not good so I smile and try to tell him we'll just ride carefully on this side thanks and begin to ride off. He then follows us very slowly for at least 3km until we're beyond the town limits and presumably out of his jurisdiction.





### Traditional Georgian bread oven

The police presence in Georgia is very visible with American style police cars everywhere and always with their blue lights flashing. There are also very smart looking police stations in even the smallest villages. Kirsty found a statistic that said that 98% of Georgians think their country is 100% safe and given how heavily it's policed we can see why they might think that. Later that day we see a car pulled over and a handful of cash being offered through the window to the policeman so this security comes at a price.



Every pond we passed was full of noisy frogs

After a lengthy climb at a comfortable gradient we drop into a steep sided, wooded valley and the village of Chakhatauri. Kirsty spots a picnic table next to a small river which looks like a good camping spot so we roll down to investigate. Before we have time to unload we're joined by an old man who seems very excited to meet us. After a short conversation where we point and mime to explain what we're doing he invites us back to his house.





### Georgian road hazard

We stroll up a rough track past free roaming pigs and a half dozen geese to his home where he sits us down at a table outside and disappears inside. There are chickens everywhere and they follow the man up the wooden ramp that leads to his front door and some make it into the house. Shortly after the man emerges, shooing chickens out the door again as he brings us bread and a huge round of home made cheese. While we all tuck in, the occasional chicken hops on to the table to try and steal some bread, sometimes successfully.



Keeping an eye out for chickens





Bread thief





Our host for the night ( the man not the chicken)

After a while it's time to head back and pitch the tent but the man insists we stay with him. He's very persistent so we



thank him and fetch the bike.



Inside the house is very sparse with only two rooms being occupied and the kitchen just having a dirt floor. He lives

there alone but he has told us about his daughter and twin grand daughters who now live in Tbilisi but we don't find out where his wife is. We're sat down in front of a TV and spend the rest of the evening being made made to watch Georgian game shows, which are probably no less bizarre even if we could understand what they were saying.

There are two single beds pushed together in the room and we realise that is where all three of us will be sleeping. It's not a comfortable night with Kirsty and me squeezed into one and the man snoring away right next to us but we have to be grateful for his generosity and the wind and rain that lash at the windows overnight mean we probably wouldn't have got much sleep in the tent either.



Three to a bed

When your house is surrounded by chickens there's no need for an alarm clock so after the first cockerel has crowed we're



all up and get ready to go. There's no running water in the house so we wash from a kettle filled from an outside tap. After several handshakes we say our goodbyes and roll on down the track. A wonderful display of Georgian hospitality again and given how our host is grinning from ear to ear he's obviously enjoyed looking after us.

We quickly drop out of the hills and onto a wide plain that sits with the huge Upper Caucasus mountains to the north and Lesser Caucasus to the south. The two mountain ranges create a natural funnel for a strong wind that blows across the plain, which builds throughout the day and of course blows right into our faces.



Race the train into Kutaisi

By late afternoon we're through Kutaisi, the 2nd biggest city in Georgia and also through with battling the wind so find a sheltered clearing in a wood and hope it's calmed down by

morning.



Confusing Georgian alphabet. Confusing Georgian village name  
It hasn't. In fact it's so strong the next day that holding the handlebars is like wrestling a particularly disgruntled goat. After being blown off the road two or three times the decision is made that it's too dangerous to ride so we begin walking. After 13km, where we occasionally have to stop as the wind is even too strong to be able to stand up, we find shelter in a well stocked cafe. A staple Georgian speciality is Katchapuri. This is a baked cheesy bread with plenty of butter that is perfect fuel for hungry cyclists (and walkers). Each region has it's own version and all of them are deliciously filling.





Too windy to ride

By the time we've washed the Katchapuri down with a coffee the wind has dropped enough for us to actually ride. On the other side of Zestafoni we meet German (prn. Herman) who has ridden from Barcelona and following a similar route to us so we agree to camp together. He's had a rough time in Georgia having had his pans stolen in Batumi by a policeman who he'd asked to look after his kit (a higher bribe may have been required), and then having knee trouble meaning he's been forced to rest in an abandoned house for the last two days. He's glad of some company but needs more rest so the next day we leave him to his morning siesta and hope to see him again later in the trip ([www.monkeyonthebike.com](http://www.monkeyonthebike.com)).



Leaping dog





Big tent, little tent with German the Spaniard





German strikes a pose

We have drizzle and a lengthy climb during the morning that culminates in a long tunnel that takes us through the top of



the hill then we drop down into Khashuri. On the way we pick up some sweet bread from one of the many road side bakers and it tastes so good we stop to buy another a couple of hundred metres further on.



Official guard dog of Zestafoni



A big scary tunnel before Khashuri





Sweet, sweet bread

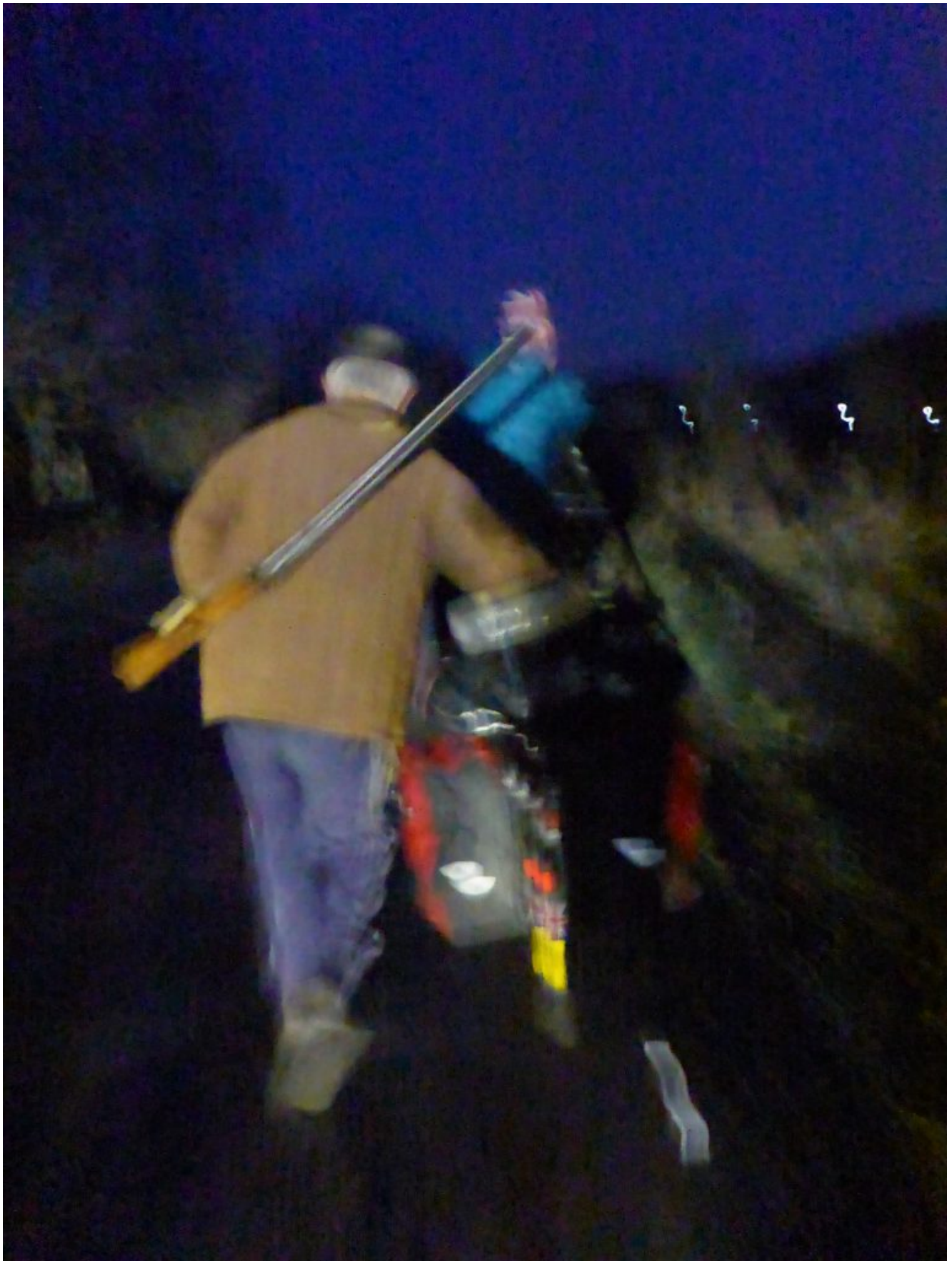
The banks of a small river on the other side of Khashuri provides the perfect setting for the evening but just as we begin preparing dinner a man arrives and he doesn't look happy. He motions for us to pack up and follow him. We're reluctant having just got everything ready but he won't back down. The fact that he has a shotgun on his shoulder and a large knife in his belt make him very persuasive so we eventually concede and dismantle the tent.



He had a gun, I didn't. He won the argument.

Our armed escort takes to the rear of the bike as we push it up the road into the nearby village, not really knowing what will happen next. But this is Georgian hospitality by force and after parking the bike in his his garage Jimali and his wife Nora treat us to an evening of food, home made wine and much miming and gesticulating in place of conversation before providing a bed for the night.





Armed escort



Jimali was very proud of his portrait of Stalin

Breakfast consists largely of cognac and homemade cha cha with ever more animated toasts with each of his neighbours who come



round to have a look at us. We then pay a visit to the local church and meet an English teacher who is able to explain to us that no self respecting Georgian would allow a visitor to their country to sleep in a tent if they had a bed available. If we'd managed to decline the offer then Jimali would have been very offended. Using a gun to round up guests still seems a bit strong though.



Gamarjus!





Jimali and Nora

We're sent on our way with a huge bottle of Jimali's wine strapped to the panniers and some high strength cha cha and



don't have the heart to tell him they'll be more of a hindrance than a help.





Jimali and Kirsty with the village priest

Next stop is Gori that holds the dubious claim to fame of being the birthplace of one Joseph Stalin. The museum dedicated to one of history's most ruthless leaders seems to treat him as something of a local hero. Although there is very little in English there seems to be some major omissions concerning some of his most brutal acts, with more emphasis on his role in creating the mighty Soviet Union and defending it from the Nazis. History can be interpreted in many different ways.





JS in casual pose

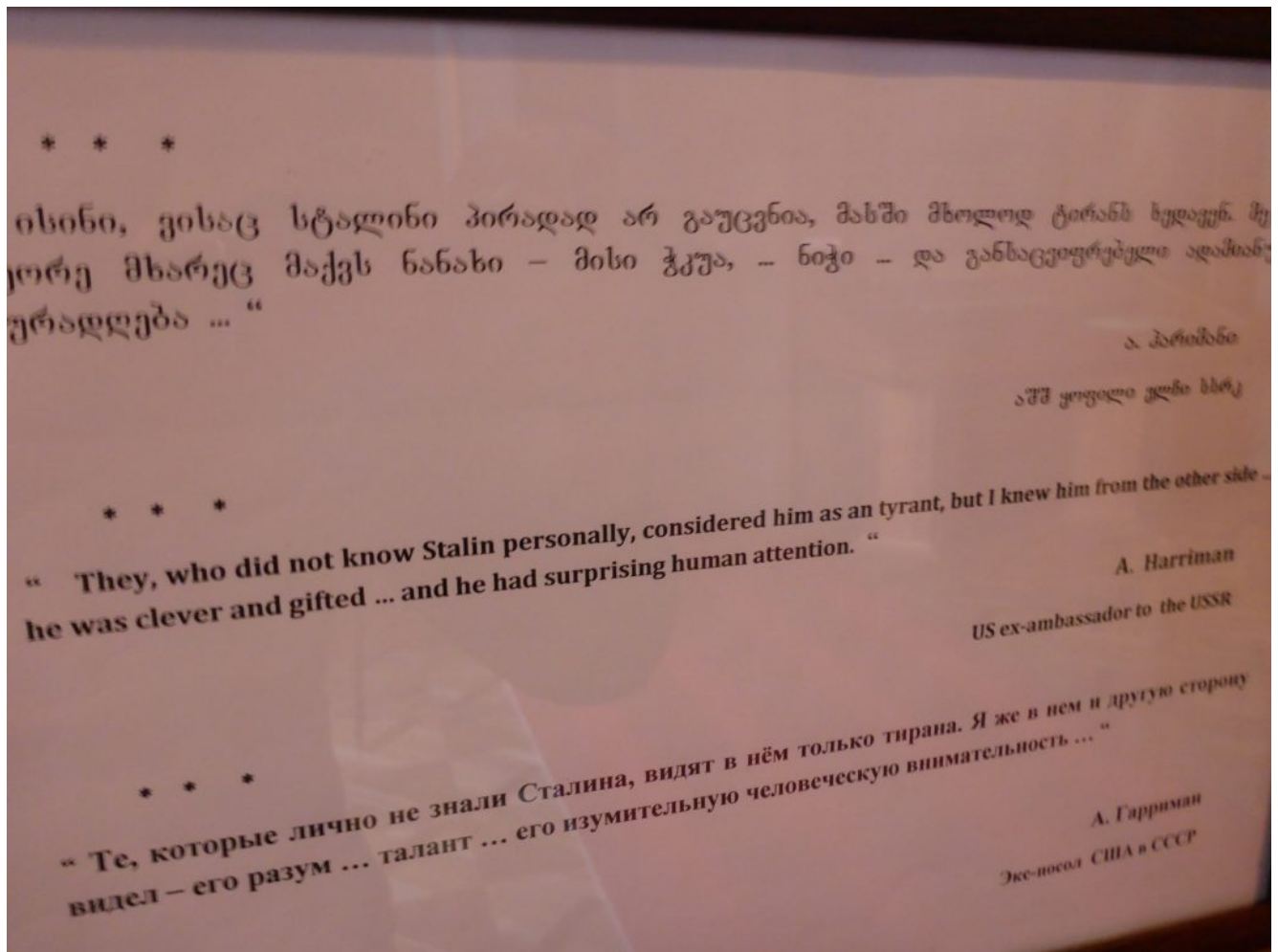


Stalin's birth place, Gori, now housed in its own temple.





## Stalin's personal train carriage



He was actually a nice guy, really he was.

The next day we arrive in Tbilisi under the cover of a large rain cloud and make our way to our host, Zak's flat to make apologies for dragging soggy kit through his living room. Zak is from Dubai and his flatmate Danidu from Sri Lanka, both are studying medicine as the university in Tbilisi offers a very good course for a fraction of the cost of studying in other countries.



Leaving Gori





### Taking a tree for a walk

Our main task in Tbilisi is to apply for our Azerbaijani visas. Once we find the embassy we hand over our passports, completed application and a confirmation of a hotel booking for our first night's stay. Despite what we read online, this isn't good enough and the official tells us we need a hotel confirmation for every night of our stay which is difficult when we plan to stay in our tent. To remedy this I walk up the road and use a travel agents computer to change our hotel booking to 28 nights, print 2 copies of the confirmation and head back to the embassy. This time the official smiles and says that will be perfect, but we now need to pay the fee of \$118 each (nearly three times as much as other EU citizens). To do this we must catch a taxi to the Azerbaijani national bank 10 minutes up the road, handover the fee in Georgian Lari and then take the receipt back to the embassy. We arrive back 10 minutes after they are supposed to have closed but thankfully we're allowed back in and hand everything over.



Within three working days our visas should be ready for collection so we have time to kill.



View of Tbilisi from the fortress





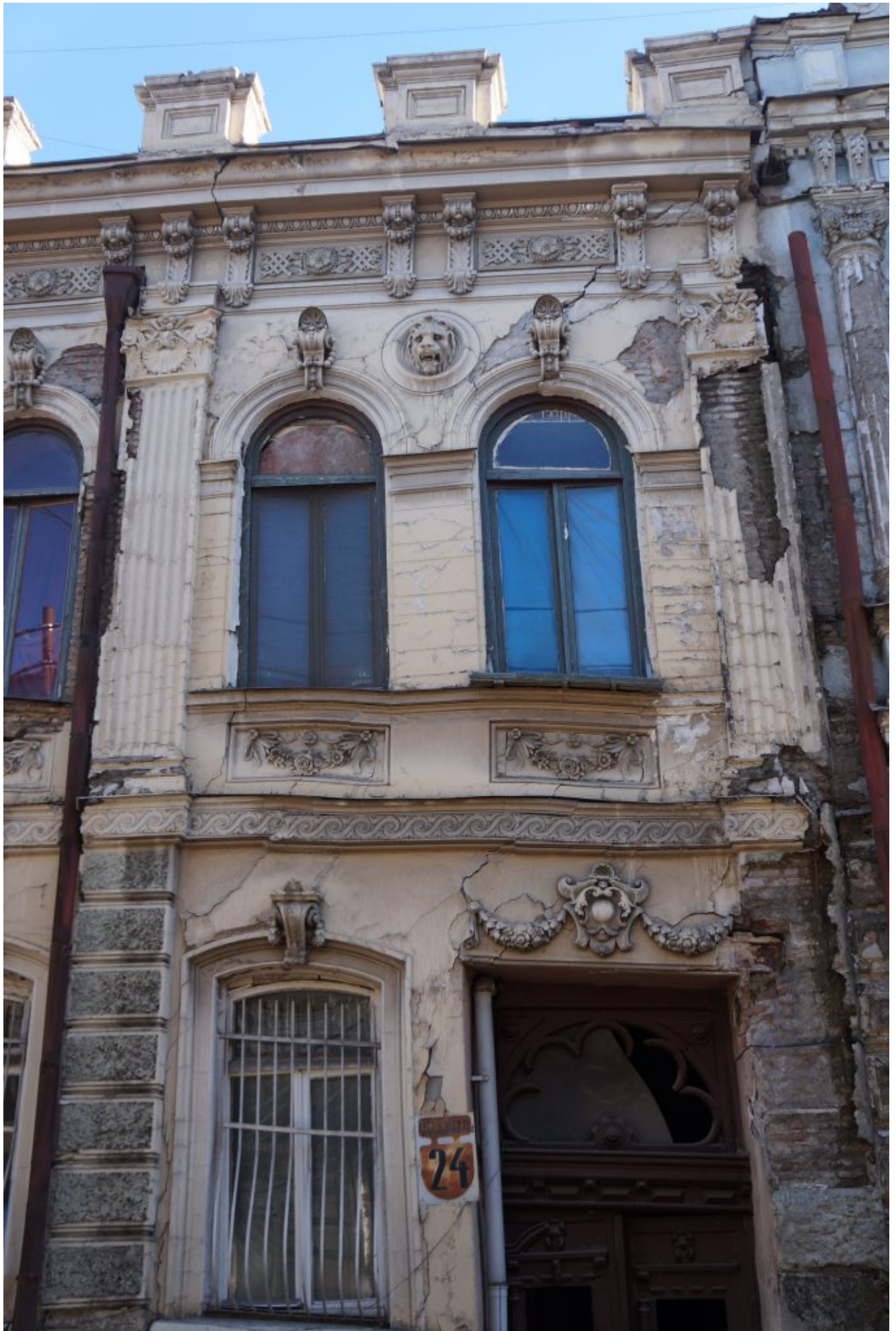


Peace bridge, Tbilisi



Frescoed Orthodox Church





Many buildings in Tbilisi look like they could fall down at any second



Very deep metro station

Luckily this coincides with a special guest who we will be meeting at the airport the next day to join us for a week of riding in the Georgian countryside so we don't mind waiting. My brother, Justin is joining us for his first ever cycle tour and he's been invited over on the pretext that we want to see him but in reality he's being used as a useful kit mule for various bits and pieces that we need from the UK. Hopefully he and his bike will make it into the country safely given he only has a 25 minute transfer in Riga on the way over.



I am selling a good  
house

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# Avanos to Trabzon

written by Marcus | 15 April, 2015



I have to admit I don't make a very good patient; Or more accurately a very patient patient. Injuries are just so inconvenient when there are so many things to do. Last year I broke my wrist and instead of being sensible and taking some time to recover I went out running in the woods in the dark and inevitably fell over. Add another 2 weeks to the recovery time and ramp up the frustration. On the plus side I got a fresh cast put on which pleased Kirsty as the old one was getting quite pungent..

So spending 1-2 weeks on a sofa in Avanos was not an appealing prospect but without being able to bend my left knee there

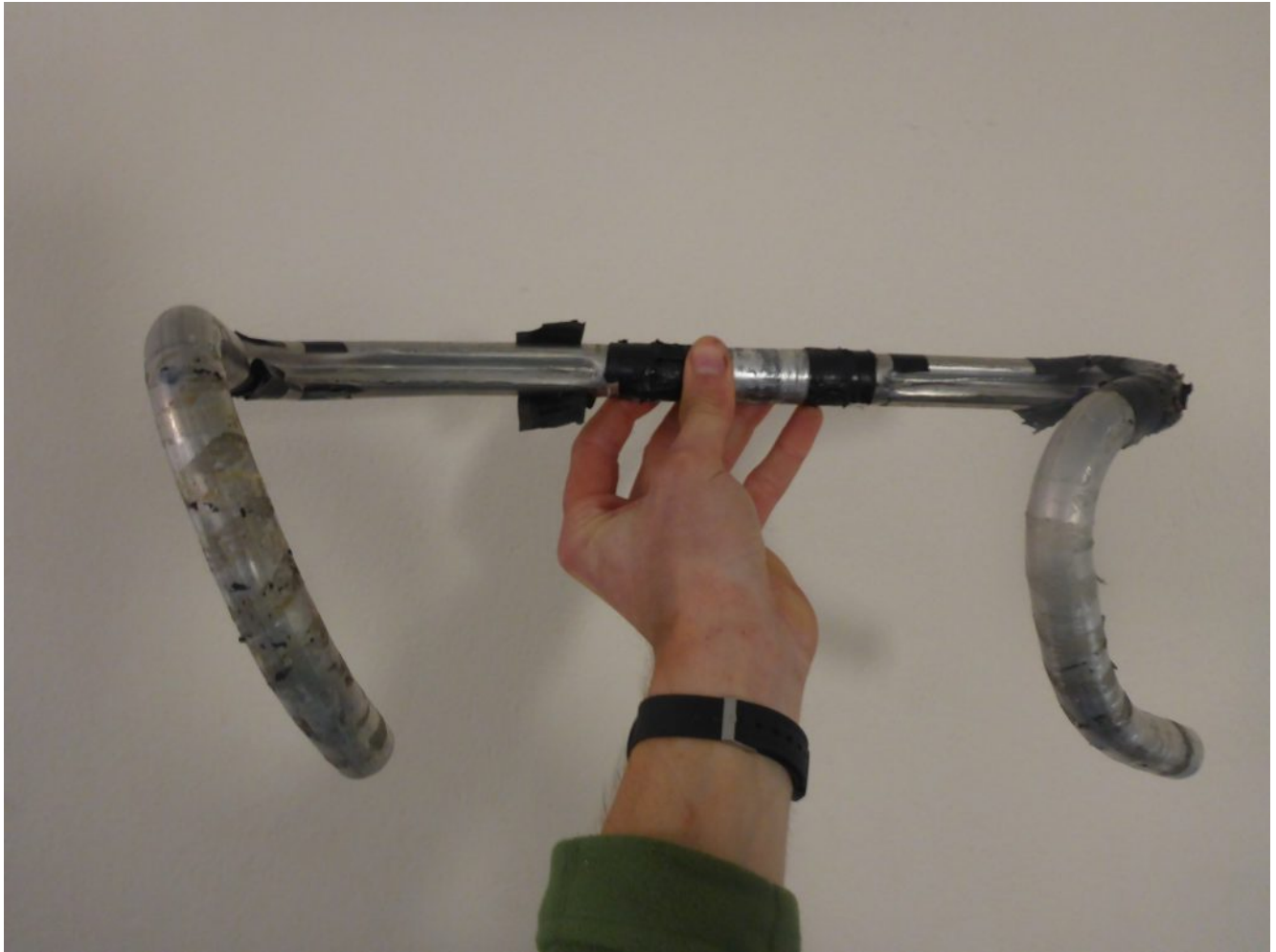


wasn't much else that could be done. Kirsty was also shaken up from the slam down so wasn't keen to go far for a while either.

Some post crash analysis revealed that the cause of the burst tyre was from one of the brake blocks rubbing ever so slightly on one side. At high speed the friction was enough to melt a small groove in the side of the tyre, leaving a tell tale black residue on the brake block. After 1 too many 70kph descent the small groove became a small hole right through to the tube and that's when things went wrong. We think the brakes must have got knocked when we were clearing the clay off the bike after our visit to the quarry. Although avoidable with a bit more of a careful check of the bike each day we're very glad to know that it wasn't just a random puncture or unexplainable inner tube failure. A lesson learned for sure though.



Rim damage



## Bent Bars

In our feeble states the occasional hobble to the shop for fresh supplies or to the clinic for a fresh dressing was about as much as could be done during that first week and even that was probably over doing it. The weekend after the crash we were glad of a visit from Charlie and Ryan who brought with them a pack of Haribo, well know for its healing properties. We had met Charlie in Istanbul and he and Ryan are following the Silk Route to Beijing. We'd left Istanbul a few days before them and were hoping to stay ahead for a bit longer but now we'll be following their tyre tracks once we get back on the bike.





Charlie and Ryan

By the following Monday, 9 days after the crash I paid another visit to Nevşehir hospital as it was time for the staples to be removed. The procedure was quick, relatively painless and could have been done by Kirsty with the Leatherman pliers without the 84 TL bill.

Although Arif's flat had everything we needed (a kitchen, a sofa and the internet) we were now desperate for a change of scenery. We still had some money left on the Hotel Voucher that was so generously given to us by friends and family before we left so using this we booked a room in one of the famous cave hotels in Göreme.



## Our Cave Hotel

Göreme is like no other town we'd ever seen. It's often likened to the set of Star Wars or the Flintstones with its a



rock houses and surreal landscape but even George Lucas would have struggled to dream up such a unique place.



## Goreme

Our hotel room has been carved into a mound of rock high above the town and from the breakfast terrace we get some great views looking across the valley punctuated with dozens of rock towers, each one with windows and doorways revealing the fact they are not just geological features but are also luxury accommodation.



## Goreme

With the staples removed from my knee and Kirsty's grazing healing up well we decide to finally get out and see what Cappadocia has to offer. There are 17 valleys and each has its own collection of unusual cliffs, hoodoos and cave dwellings in a variety of unusual shapes, sizes and colours. The most famous of which is Love valley whose phallic rock towers are enough to make a nun blush.





Paşabağ Fairy Chimneys





Camel at Zelve





Zelve Fairy Chimney



Zelve Fairy Chimneys



Nice pose



Zelve Open Air Museum





Zelve Open Air Museum

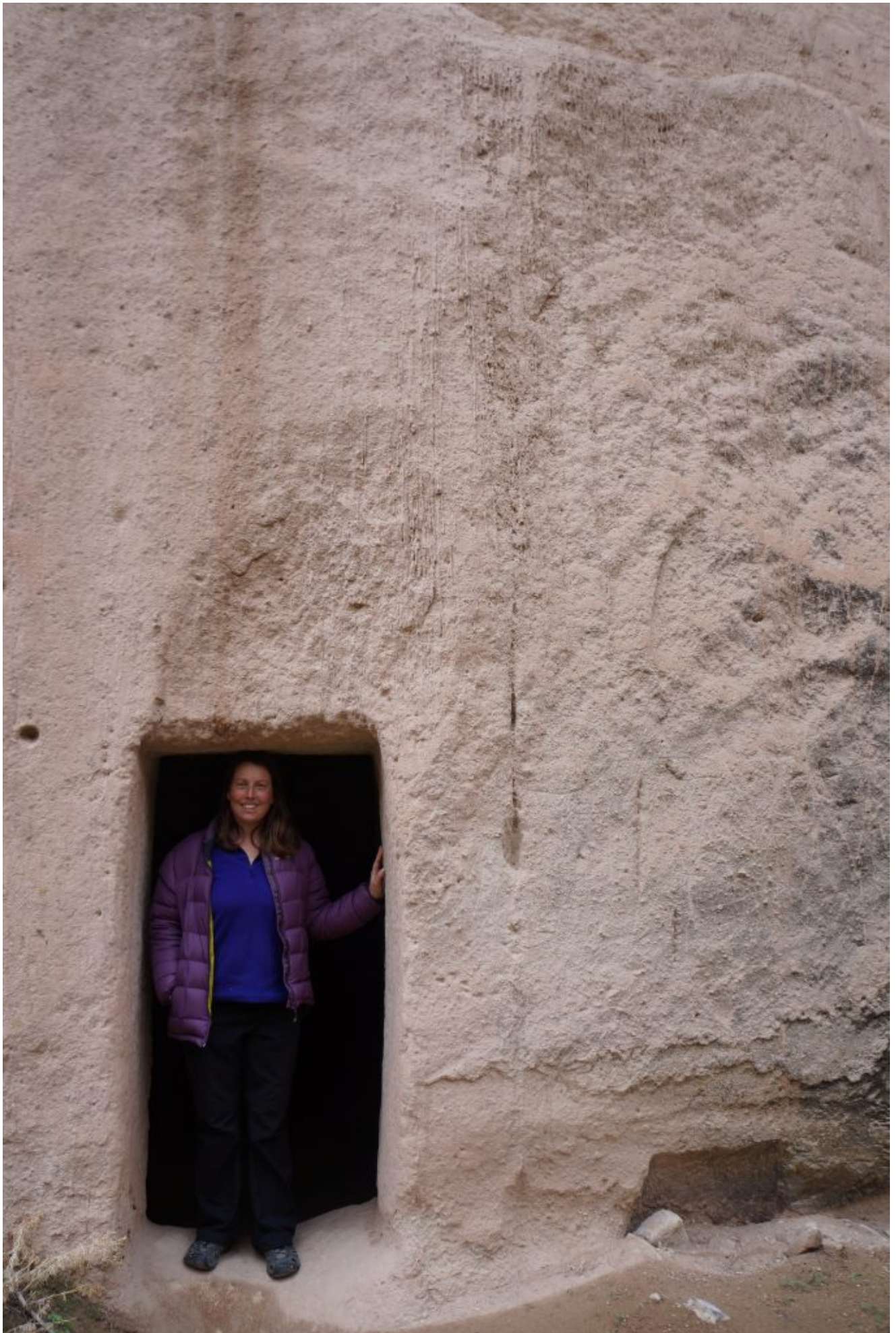




## Zelve Open Air Museum



Rock Church, Zelve Open Air Museum





Cave dweller



Rock church, Zelve Open Air Museum







Çavuşin

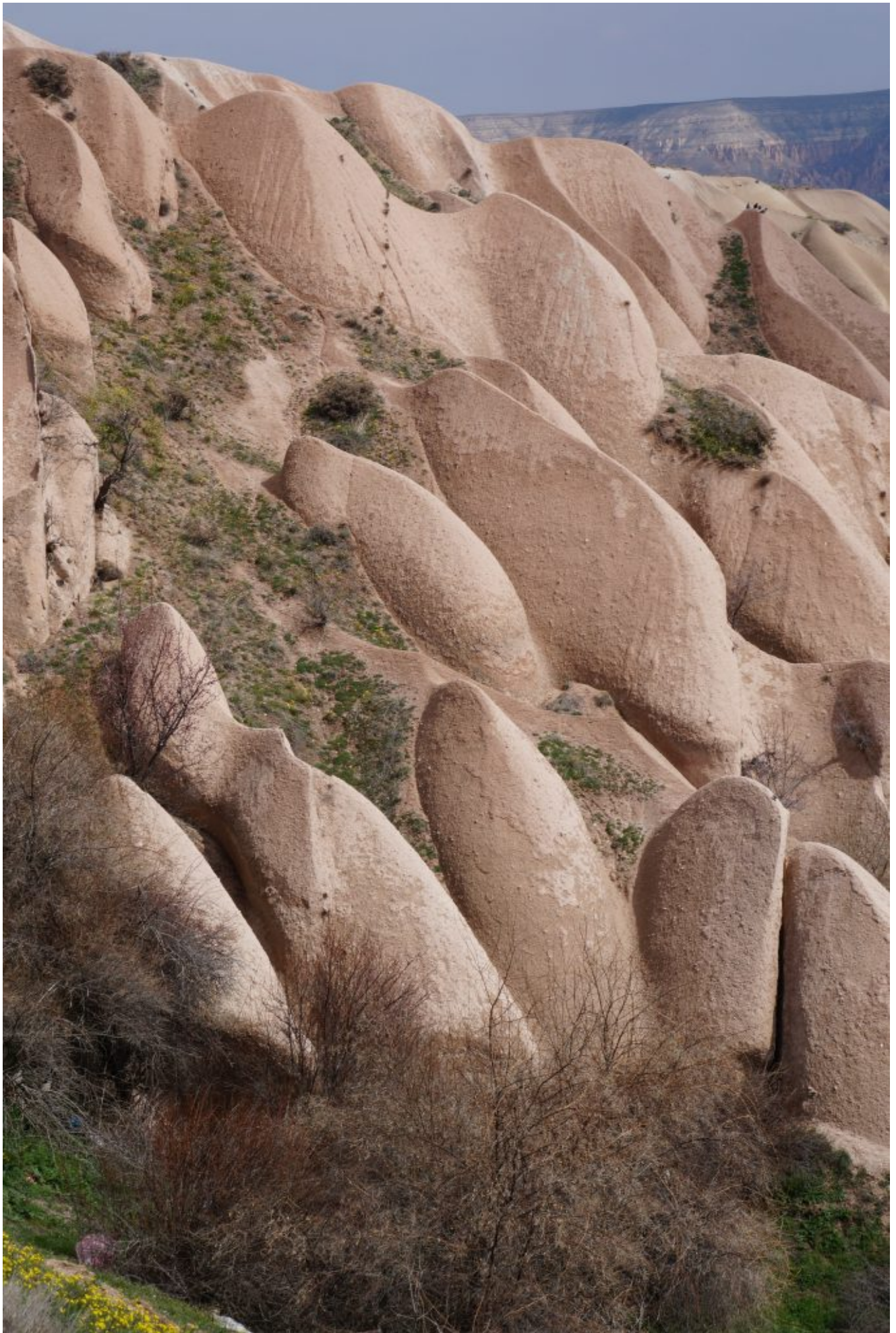


Pigeon Valley with some campers who we were very jealous of



Rock house in Pigeon Valley







Pigeon Valley



Honey Valley



Honey Valley





White Valley



Love Valley



Cappadocia is also famous for hot air ballooning and so most mornings a huge flock of them fly over, teeming with Japanese tourists keen to snap the sun rise. One morning they fly straight over Göreme so we watch them from a cliff above the hotel. On another of our walks they chase us down the valley like a scene from The Prisoner.





I am not a number!



























By the end of the 2nd week we're back in Avanos and ready to think about pedaling again, but we need a bike to ride. The now very familiar Turkish postal system tracking website is being watched eagerly while our parcel of bike parts gets closer and closer. While we wait we pay a visit to an underground ceramic museum which is not as impressive (or unusual) as the hair museum, housed in a cave. Here, thousands of locks of hair dangle from the ceiling, left by previous visitors and the explanation from the owner is that one girl started it and then lots of people did the same. Of course Kirsty is obliged to add to the collection but I'm not allowed to donate as it's for girls hair only. Not even beard hair is welcome.





Intricate ceramic plate

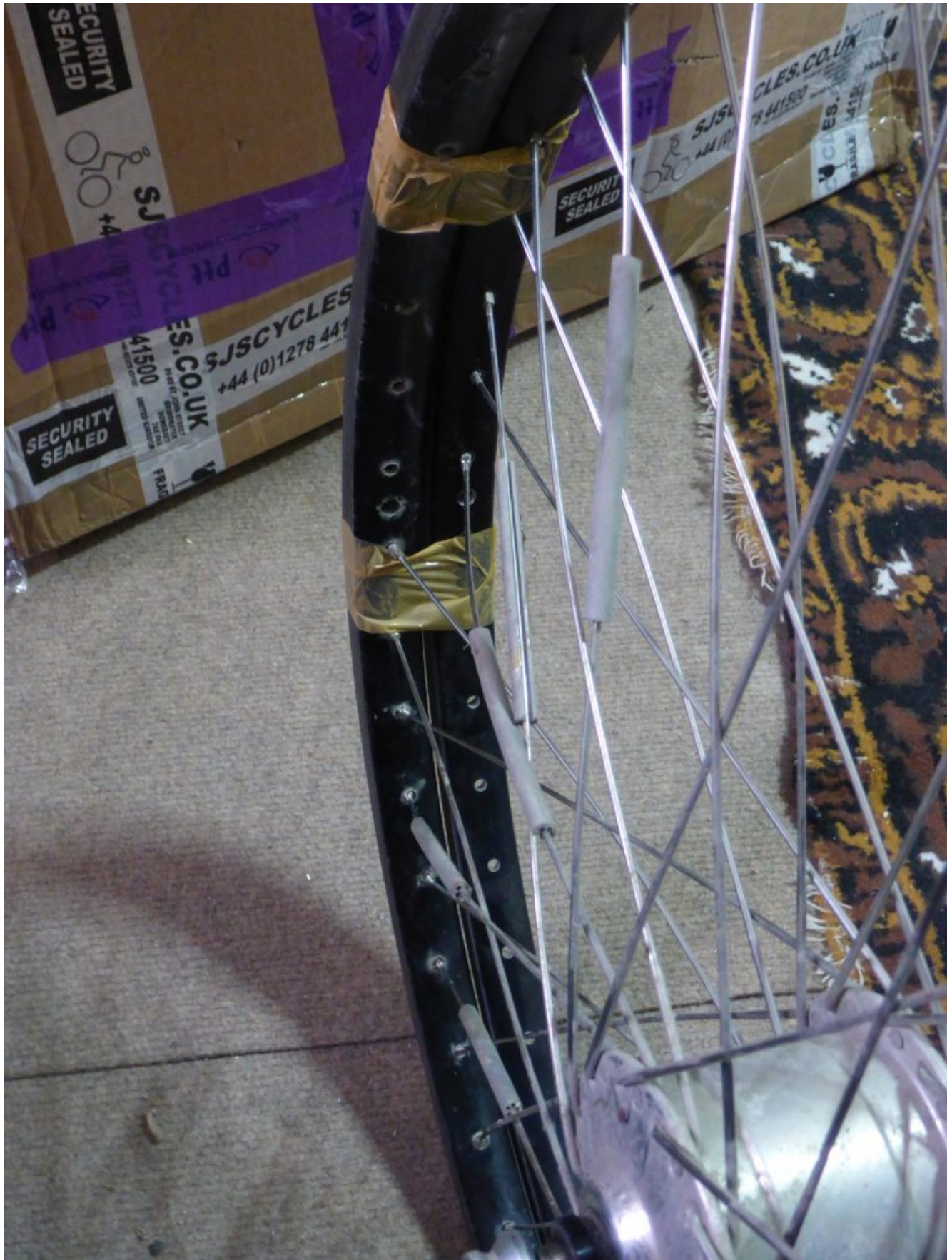


## Hair museum

Finally the parcel arrives, in a town 10km away due to an address error. But the next day we get to collect it from Avanos post office.

So the bike rebuilding gets underway. I've never built a wheel before but it seems like a good enough time to have a go so at least I know how to do it if something happens again. Or know to always get a bike shop to do it for me if it goes wrong. I get a handy tip on how to go about it using a cheats method after some enquiring online. By taping the new rim to the old one each spoke can be moved across one by one. It's then a case of tightening it all up methodically, making sure the wheel is round and tight and Bob's your Uncle we should be rolling again (Hi Uncle Bob).





Rebuilding the front wheel

After a few hours of spoke nipple tweaking it certainly looks like a wheel. It goes round and the spokes go ping of if I hit



them so the only thing left to do is ride it and see what happens.

Without The Big Crash we would be well on our way North East to Trabzon by now. But our uncertain physical capabilities and the size of the mountains en route that would test even 100% fit riders meant that another plan was needed. We also planned a rendezvous with someone in Tbilisi and with all the delays a speedier method of transport was needed to make sure we got there in time.

A thirteen hour coach journey provided the answer. 700km passed overnight and with it all those chance encounters, epic views, challenging climbs and snowy camp spots that would have made for a great bike ride (you can read about Charlie's experience of the ride [here](#)). Bus travel is certainly an effective way to get across a country quickly but in terms of experiencing the country fully we'd much rather do it by bike.





"You can't put that on the bus". " yes we can ". " OK yes you can "



Driver cam. A variant is being developed for the tandem so Kirsty can see where we're going.

In Trabzon our host is Yildirim who runs an English language school. He makes use of our command of English to test some of his students so we get asked how we are by four 8 year olds in turn. I hope we passed the test too.



Our Trabzon hosts





### Helping with the English lesson

While in Trabzon we decide to try and play the longest of long shots. So long in fact is this shot that it's well clear of the 18th hole and somewhere amongst the BMWs in the car park. We stroll into the Iranian embassy and ask if we can apply for a visa knowing full well that the rules for UK citizens changed last year. We're supposed to now need a code that's issued by the government once they have verified that we have a registered guide for the entire time we're in the country and a fully planned itinerary. This is hugely expensive and also makes the kind of spontaneous travel we like almost impossible. If we'd arrived 12 months previously this wouldn't have been necessary but the rules changed without warning. If we were from any other country other than UK, USA or Canada we wouldn't need the guide either. But there are rumours that it may change again which is why we thought we'd give it a go without a code to see what happens.

Our time in the embassy lasts less than a minute and the conversation goes something like: "where are you from?", "England ", " do you have a code? ", " no ", " go and get one and then come back ", " bye ".



Perhaps the closest we'll get to Iran for now

It's a great shame as Iran was somewhere we were looking forward to a great deal but it will have to wait until another time and another trip. This time a voyage across the Caspian Sea will be our next best option.

While in Trabzon we also take another bus trip to the famous Sümela monastery. As if one bus trip was not enough for one week.. Perched on the side of a cliff high up on a mountain it's not easy to get to at the best of times but there's been heavy snow so it's now even more difficult. Usually I'd prefer to travel across snowy mountains on a pair of skis but here we have to brave a ride in a mini bus with snow chains on for the



last stretch of road up to the top. The ride up is quite hairy but coming down is equal to the adrenalin rush from the most treacherous of black runs.



Minibus slalom ride







It's worth it though to see the incredible buildings built into the rock face. Just as incredible is the amount of damage from graffiti and from shepherds using the priceless frescos for target practice over several decades. It's all now very well guarded so hopefully it won't get any worse.





Sümela monastery



Sümela monastery





This wasn't us, honest guvnor.





Graffiti, Sümela monastery



Sümela monastery





Sümela monastery









Sümbela monastery

Our bus takes longer than expected as it includes a lengthy stop for lunch at a restaurant that feeds our driver well for bringing in his bus load of guests. So our plan to leave Trabzon that afternoon needs a rethink. It's actually a lucky escape as the customary Black Sea rain has been falling all day. Yildirim tells us he wouldn't have let us leave in that weather anyway so we stay another night.

Our long awaited return to the bike and continuing journey east has to wait until the next day and by now my patience is almost at an end. Hopefully cycling is as good as we remember.



Get your face printed on a doormat. Things you never knew you needed.

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## Aksaray to Avanos

written by Marcus | 15 April, 2015





You may be surprised to hear that I believe in fairies. For a start there's the P\*nct\*re Fairy, a spiteful little creature who takes great delight in deflating tyres at the most inconvenient time and is easily summoned just by mentioning the P word a few times. A good friend of hers is the Adventure Fairy who gets her kicks from chucking in a few mishaps and a dash of crisis during a trip just when you least expect it. With the proliferation of Microadventures taking hold all over the UK the Adventure Fairy has had her hands full trying to keep up with the number of bivvy bags that need raining on and stoves that need preventing from lighting. As such we've been allowed to get away with having far too good a time for far too long. But sooner or later the evil little flying pests were bound to catch up with us and have a bit of a score to settle.

Once we arrive in Aksaray we stop at a petrol station for fuel for the stove and meet a man who thinks he looks like Tony

Blair. It's uncanny, but only if you shut your eyes very tight. He offers us a Turkish flag for the back of the bike to help us win favour with other drivers on the road. It seems to work as we get plenty of waves and beeps as we ride across the town.





Flying the flag

It's been a long day so after buying fuel for our stomachs we find a small park near the outskirts which seems quiet and



dark enough for us not to be noticed and get the tent up.



### Park Life. Aksaray

In the night Kirsty is woken up by a noise that sounds like someone tripping on a guy rope but when she opens her eyes there's light pouring in through a gaping hole in the side of the tent. Still half asleep it takes a few moments to realise what is going on. but then I jump out of the tent to see that there is no-one there, however several street lights have been switched on, lighting us up like a Christmas tree. Christmas isn't popular here and someone must have wanted to demonstrate that by delivering a sharp rock straight through the tent. Kirsty had found the offending object lying next to her while I was checking the bike.





Extra ventilation for the tent

We don't sleep much for the rest of the night, but for the few minutes that I do dose off my dreams are filled with images of all sorts of things breaking.

In the morning we can survey the damage more clearly and it's going to take some careful stitching and a good roll of gaffa tape to get our home weatherproof again. We can only be grateful that the missile didn't land on either of us and cause more painful damage. At least we weren't hurt.



Inspecting the weapon of choice while Kirsty tries to stitch the hole

In a despondent mood we pack up and get going early and cover all of 900m when a car pulls out from a turning on our left, drives the wrong way down the road towards us then turns right across our path. There's not much time to react to such an unexpected manoeuvre so I swerve as best I can. A front pannier comes into contact with the car's rear wing and is ripped clean off. We wobble violently but stay upright.

I push the bike to the side of the road and throw the damaged pannier down in frustration while Kirsty has a sit down and takes some deep breaths. The driver of the car is a nurse and was just turning into the hospital. She comes to see if we're ok then asks us if we'd like to go and drink tea. This is not the time for tea as all we can think about is how we can continue when the pannier is ruined. At least we weren't hurt.





Pannier vs car. Car wins

She calls her husband and a few other people gather round while we try to explain our predicament. They agree to drive

us back into Aksaray to see what the local bike shops have and also to see if anyone can fix the pannier but our hopes are set very low on finding a possible solution from either option.

It's not a huge town and the only pannier we find amounts to little more than a school satchel. Our best option seems to be the Vaude dealer that we'd visited back in Ankara so I borrow a phone and give him a ring. He needs to see if he can get the bag we want from the Vaude distributor so I leave him to look into it and also for him to arrange a courier to get it to us.

Meanwhile we are driven back to the scene of the accident to be reunited with our bike. Another nurse who speaks better English is found and the negotiations begin. The driver and her husband think they've done enough by trying to help us find a new bag so want to walk away, but of course we're not happy to leave it at that and tell them about the cost of the new bag. The driver protests saying that the fault lies 50:50 and so they offer to pay half, also pleading that they don't have much money. Turkish law may be different but in our view, a driver driving the wrong way down a road and turning onto an oncoming bike should take more than half the blame. We tell her this and are given an ultimatum: either take half the cash or call the traffic police. Sitting through a foreign police procedure doesn't sound like much fun so we pursue the cash option and give our own demands for 200 TL, the approximate cost of the new bag adding that we now have to stay in Aksaray until it arrives, which maybe tomorrow (Saturday) or possibly Monday. At this the husband reluctantly pulls out a huge roll of bank notes and peels off a couple of 100s before climbing back into his new Volvo. The nurse offers a few apologies and then dashes off into the hospital.

The rest of the morning is spent in a cafe organising the delivery of the new pannier and finding somewhere to stay for the night. One of the waiters used to live on the south coast of England so speaks good English and is happy to help



wherever he can. He lets us use his phone to speak to the bike shop in Ankara and the good news is that they have the pannier and it can be delivered tomorrow morning, all for 190 TL, which is convenient.

A flurry of emails to couch surfing and warm showers hosts brings back a quick reply from Ahmet who is more than happy to help even though it's short notice. We then spend the afternoon on a park bench in Aksaray taking stock of an eventful morning and watching the crowds pass by. Every now and then a different small boy would arrive to try and sell us tissues. These are Syrian, Afghan and Somali refugees, a lot of whom will have walked hundreds of km to escape the troubles in their home countries. Our inconveniences seem incredibly petty by comparison.

We meet up with Ahmet in the evening and he and his girlfriend Orkide treat us to a great meal while Ahmet explains that he loves to assist travellers in need. He is a member of a Turkish emergency medical response team that can be deployed anywhere in the world in case of a disaster. Ahmet and Orkide have half a dozen 10 day old Labrador puppies for us to play with so the panniers will have to be checked before we leave in case Kirsty has tried to smuggle one out.



The milk bar

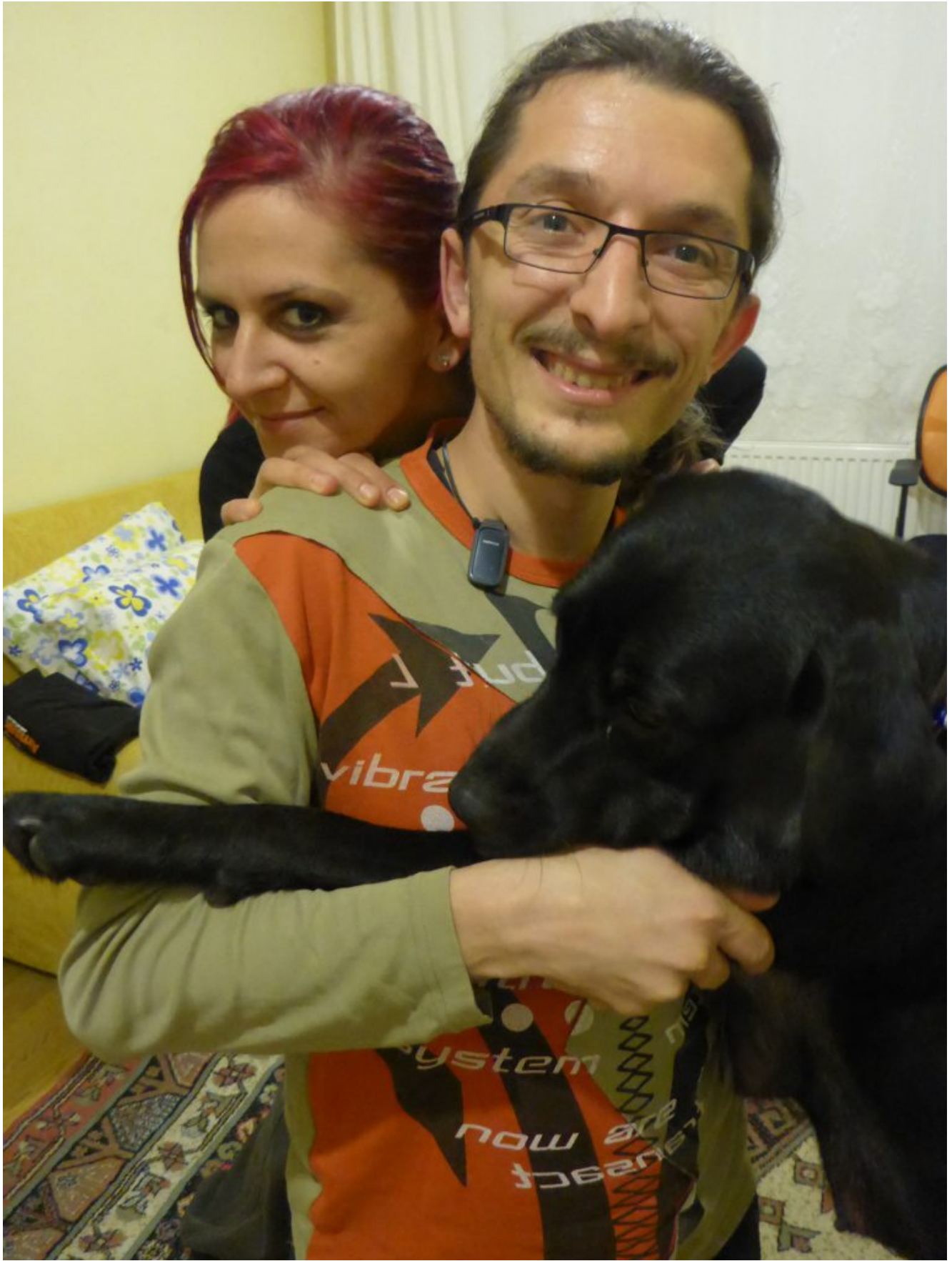




There really isn't any more room in the panniers Kirsty  
In the morning we drive to the parcel depot and miraculously  
the new pannier is there waiting for us, which means we can

get back on the road again. Waving goodbye to Ahmet and Orkide, and counting all 5 of the puppies, we set off into the glorious sunshine with Mount Hasan taking centre stage again for our view.





Orkide Ahmet and Dost



The shiny new pannier

The road to Nevşehir has a wide shoulder and being a Saturday there isn't much traffic. The temperature climbs to the mid



20s so we're in shorts and t-shirts and pootling along nicely. In many ways we are glad to be clear of Aksaray as it seemed to be a town that held bad luck for us. But at the same time we had made some new friends and hoped that we'd meet them again sometime and somewhere.



Pastures around Mount Hasan



Shepherd near Aksaray

Of course Lady Luck hadn't quite finished with us as she tends to favour dishing out her misfortune in batches of three.

After spinning up a long drag we crested the hill to see a straight descent followed by another long climb. We needed as much momentum as possible to get up the other side so we tuck down and pick up speed. I remember glancing down and seeing the speedo pass 60 kph then shortly after there's a sound that every cyclist dreads. A loud hiss from the front wheel is very quickly followed by the sound of tearing rubber, then crunching gravel and the world flips upside down.





0.01 km/h later, all hell broke loose

The bike, bags and its two riders all eventually come to a stop in a heap on the hard shoulder after bouncing and sliding

along for an unknown distance. We've both picked up a fair bit of road rash and Kirsty has a bleeding lip but on first inspection there are no major injuries so we sit and take deep breaths trying to compose ourselves.

The bike has taken a good whack too with my bars twisted and bent, the front tyre ripped and several chips in the rim. Most annoying of all though is that the only bag to be damaged is of course the brand new pannier. It lasted 35km.





Not sure we can ride away from this one

We flag down a truck from Iran whose driver takes one look at the bike, shakes his head then drives off. Shortly after



another truck pulls over and is a bit happier about chucking everything in the back and letting us climb into the cab. We just have to take our shoes off first as it was fully carpeted.



Our friendly truck driver

Our kind driver takes us to Avanos, 50km away and deposits us outside a cafe while wishing us luck (we could do with more of that). We had intended to get to Avanos the following night and had made arrangements to stay with Arif. We fired off a text message from the truck to warn him we were in a bad way and ask if we could arrive a day early.





Into Cappadocia



## Into Cappadocia

While waiting for Arif to come and pick us up the waiters from the cafe come out and give us water. One of the staff is a mountain biker and calls her friend who happens to be the bike mechanic for the Turkish cycling team. Then Ahmet arrives as he happened to be passing by and had spotted us. As he is an emergency anaesthetist he has a good supply of first aid paraphernalia in his car so sets to work bandaging us up. Arif arrives shortly after and then the bike mechanic zooms in on a motorbike to give his assessment of the damaged tandem which in summary is 'no problem, I can fix it'.

We're overwhelmed by the crowd of concerned helpers but during all of this my knee has been getting steadily more painful. It had been bleeding badly when we'd got out of the truck and Kirsty suspected it would need stitches, but for now she had bandaged it tightly.



Our luggage goes in the back of Arif's friend's car with Arif hanging out of the back towing the back half of our bike. We ride in Ahmet's car and after dropping everything off at Arif's house we head to the nearest emergency clinic.



Arif tries an unconventional tandem transportation method  
Kirsty's fears are confirmed when they unwrap the bandage on my knee to reveal a big hole, but the clinic isn't able to do much for me there and then. Instead they decide I should have a drip and try to put Kirsty on one too but she manages to refuse. We're then bundled into an ambulance for a ride to the main hospital in Nevşehir.



Ambulance ride

Straight away we're both inspected, scrubbed, disinfected, bandaged and I get several internal stitches and 6 external



staples to hold my knee together again. Kirsty comes away partially mummified to protect the grazing down her sides and with some superglue and steristrips on the cut on her lip. A few x-rays confirm that neither of us have any broken bones and then we're free to go. But not for free. We're handed a lengthy bill and have to pay there and then in cash. So Kirsty heads off to the nearest ATM only to find our daily limit won't allow her to withdraw enough money. When we try and explain this to the hospital they reduce the bill to a sum that we can afford making us wonder if we should have claimed that we had even less? The valuable invoices that we'll need for our insurance claim are printed off for us and we climb into a taxi to head back to Avanos, via a pharmacy for a few antibiotics. Now we need a cup of tea.



Aren't they supposed to shut the door before taking an x-ray?





Kirsty and her amazing technicolour leg



Franken-knee

So here we are again, housebound in Turkey with a waiting game to play. Kirsty has been stiff and sore for the last couple of



days and I can't really walk very far. Hopefully we'll both loosen up over the course of the next week and I'm due back at the hospital to have the staples out next weekend. How soon after that we can ride is anyone's guess, but the bike won't be serviceable for a while anyway. Once again we're at the mercy of the Turkish postal system as there are various specialist parts being sent over from the UK. As Kirsty keeps telling me, this enforced wait is probably a good thing as it prevents me trying to get pedalling too soon anyway.

Yesterday we had to give a statement to the police to say that we didn't want to blame anyone. This seemed like a huge waste of time for all concerned, but they insisted. Apparently if we hadn't gone they may have started a civil case (against whom was not clear since no-one had made a complaint) and this could have been an issue when we tried to leave the country. Quite the opposite reaction to the UK police who would struggle to give an injured cyclist a second glance even if they did want to blame someone. Arif tells us the Turkish police have been known to charge for damage to the road after a bike accident, so hopefully we didn't leave any 'tandem rash' on the hard shoulder.

It's at times like this that we realise just how wonderful and valuable the WarmShowers and Couch Surfing community is as Arif and his girlfriend Gülsün have told us we can stay with them as long as we need to. Gülsün was our translator during the police interrogations. Ahmet has also called in to see how we're doing and asked if he can help in any way. These are people who until a few days ago we'd never met and yet they are opening up their homes to us and doing everything they can to help us out. It's an amazing thing purely brought about by a shared love of pedal power and travelling, and we are incredibly grateful for what they are doing.

Travelling is all about new experiences and the last few days have given us a fair few that we hope to not have to repeat. We're both glad that our injuries are only superficial and

will take each day as it comes for the next week or two. Convalescing in Cappadocia could be worse. The region is famous for its amazing rock formations, cave towns, underground cities and tall rock hoodoos that they call fairy chimneys. Once we're mobile again we'll find the one that the P\*nct\*re Fairy and Adventure Fairy live under and give them a darn good kicking.



Feet up in Avanos

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## Istanbul to Aksaray

written by Marcus | 15 April, 2015





Leaving Istanbul by ferry is much more civilised than taking our chances on the roads again. Apart from the 7:30am sailing time that is.



## Leaving Istanbul

Once across the sea of Marmara we arrive in the small town of Mudanya and our wheels touch down on Asian soil at last. The route up through Bursa isn't quite the easy escape east that we'd hoped for so again we're mixing with fast traffic and big trucks for the first 40km.





But once we're under the motorway and past the airport it all quietens down and we find our own peaceful bit of tarmac leading us out into the hills. The road we've chosen isn't the standard route for cyclists, who tend to take the faster, flatter option through Eskisehir. In fact it barely shows up on Google maps but is much more prominent on our paper map so we think it's worth a look to get off the main highway. It turns out to be a great, scenic choice.

A hilltop quarry is an inviting campsite but I fail to spot the deep clay on the way in and push the bike right into it. 30 mins later we've extracted it again and got most of the mud out from under the mudguards which we now know work as effective mud collectors.



### Clay stops bike

It's good to be back in the tent and now we're not worried about the plummeting temperatures as we're properly equipped. Our new quilt acquisition is longer, wider and thicker than the old Thermarest model and is more snug than a bug in a rug. The difficulties with getting it are already a distant memory.

The hills get longer and steeper the next day. There are snowcapped mountains on the horizon on our right and huge cliffs on the horizon on our left so plenty to look at as we spin onwards, upwards, downwards then upwards some more. We stop for çay and pastries in Bilecik, which sits at 500m, then drop down into a valley to 250m knowing that altitude needs to be gained again, this time with interest.

We have only managed 60km by the time we arrive in Söğüt at a height of 600m but the cumulative climbing and severe gradients have left our legs telling us they've had enough. A



wooded park provides a good spot for the tent and we're joined by a curious boy who collects some firewood for us. It's a bit too public for us to get a fire started so we try to explain that we're very grateful but really just need to cook food and get into our tent, then he runs away.

Thankfully the next day starts easily as what goes up must come down. Almost straight away we drop into a magnificent steep sided canyon right down to the river at the bottom. On the way we zoom past hundreds of tangled poly tunnels. It's as if a huge storm has ripped them all apart. The farmers don't seem too worried though and smile and wave before getting back to the task of unraveling it all.



Descent to Çalti from Sögüt



Descent to Çalti





Acres of destroyed poly tunnels near Çaltı

We think we've got the road to ourselves until we round a corner and see an unusual rock up ahead. It turns out to be a tortoise taking a breather during its epic hike to the other side of the valley.



### Tortoise rescue

Quick as a flash Kirsty is off the back of the bike and carries it to safety before any cars can crush it. Hopefully she put it on the side that it was trying to get to otherwise that will be one angry tortoise.





Tortoise rescuer

While enjoying çay in the village of Inhisar an English speaker is fetched who explains that we are now in an area of

heavy agriculture where they grow anything and everything. It's currently onion season. When the snow fell a couple of weeks ago the village was completely cut off and had no power for 2 to 3 days so it was very lucky we hadn't arrived sooner. We get given a grapefruit by a passerby, presumably grown locally, before we head off again.



Spring Blossom





Çalti to Inhisar



Road from Inhisar

The valley really starts to impress through Saricakagen with amazing colours on the jagged cliffs. A geologist would describe them better but there are bands of red, green and orange made even more vivid as the sun starts to go down.





Road to Mihilgazi



Approaching Mihilgazi





Mihilgazi



The next day we're straight into a 15%-20% climb before the porridge has even had a chance to digest (the porridge topping of choice is now a tahini and grape molasses paste). It's our payment for a day on the valley floor and the only way out. The effort keeps us warm though as it's a much colder morning. We're grateful to find a small cafe with a blazing stove in a tiny village at the top. The owner is deaf so no problem with our lack of Turkish as we all resort to basic sign language. The now very familiar stirring teaspoon action gets a resounding nod.





Mar-Ket in Osmanköy



## Osmanköy

There are a few more 20% climbs along a ridge being grazed by various flocks of long horned sheep and then we get to enjoy



cashing in our potential energy and hit 70 kph on a long descent into Nallihan.



Road to Aşağıbağdere



Heavy traffic on the way to Saricakaya





### Road from Aşağıbağdere

While enjoying complimentary coffee in a mini market the owner suggests we head for a lake called Bird Paradise for the evening. It sounds like a great place to camp so we crank up the gears and get going.

From Nallihan the view changes again. This time we have a wide arid plain and a long straight road right through the middle of it. There are more coloured cliffs in blues and reds. The 1kg of bulgar wheat that we'd bought helps us pick up speed on the gentle downward gradient but needs to be eaten before the next climbing day!



Road from Nallıhan





Road from Nallıhan



Approaching Davutoğlu Kuş Cenneti (Bird Paradise)





Bird paradise turns out to be cycle tourist's paradise too. The artificial lake was formed when a dam was constructed downstream and is now home to tens of thousands of migrating birds. There is a glorious backdrop of mountainous cliffs in multicoloured stripes and the marshland surrounding the lake is teeming with activity.



Approaching Davutoğlu Kuş Cenneti (Bird Paradise)





## Davutođlan Kuş Cenneti (Bird Paradise)



## Davutođlan Kuş Cenneti (Bird Paradise)

We're very grateful when the park warden tells us it's no problem to camp by the side of the lake and we get one of the best views from the tent so far. It's also the first night for ages we haven't been woken by the ezan before dawn, just a few howls in the distance that may or may not have been live versions of the stuffed wolf we'd seen in the visitors centre.



Camping by Davutoğlan Kuş Cenneti (Bird Paradise)





Davutoğlu Kuş Cenneti (Bird Paradise)



## Davutoğlu Kuş Cenneti (Bird Paradise)



## Davutoğlu Kuş Cenneti (Bird Paradise)

The next couple of days aren't quite as picturesque but the climbing is much more gradual. We're on our way up onto a plateau that a lot of central Turkey sits on at around 900-1000m above sea level.



## Road from Beypazarı

Stopping at the off-puttingly named 'Kiler' supermarket in Beypazarı we're loading up the rack bag with a few meals worth of food when the manager comes out and offers us çay. We're then led to the canteen and asked if we'd like to join the



rest of the staff for lunch. Now Kirsty and I were loyal customers of our local Aldi back in Bristol but I can't remember the manager even saying hello so there are clearly customer relation lessons to be learnt from the Turks. I expect the Aldi staff don't get fed quite as well either.



Lunch in the Kiler supermarket canteen, Beypazari

Near the end of the day we get a stiff climb from 700m to over 1100m through Ayas that brings us out onto a dual carriageway



with a high barrier preventing us from getting off the road. Just as we think that we'll be trapped until Ankara, a layby appears with a gap in the barrier and an adjacent wood. We hop off the road, get the tent up, the stove on and a fire lit for our highest camp site yet. Getting close to the fire and sipping ouzo before diving under the quilt helps us shrug off the fact that its -4c. Did I mention how much better life is with our new quilt?



Camp fire and ouzo at 1100m. Near Ayaş

Ankara may be the capital but its only a third of the size of Istanbul. Still big enough for us to be reluctant to take on the roads into the centre so we wheel the bike onto a metro train in Sincan to make the final 20km more pleasurable. 50p well spent.



Frosty morning. Near Ayaş

Although we probably didn't give it much of a chance, few people had much to recommend of their capital so we plan on a



brief visit. It seems to be a fairly bland, very busy, business city built in a bowl surrounded by steep hills.

Our task is to visit a good bike shop, Erdoganlar, and pick up a few bits and pieces, stay overnight to celebrate our 200th day on the road then get out the next morning.

I'm sure regular readers are tired of hearing about our wheels so I'll spare you the details but in short we need yet another new front tyre. The shop also happens to be a Vaude dealer so we pick up some spare buckles to replace the one broken in Istanbul. For some reason Vaude changed the design of the buckle between us buying the rear panniers and getting the front ones and the new design, although looking better, is not nearly as sturdy so it's handy to have some more in reserve.

We spend the night in a room in a hotel that doubles as a sweat lodge, get woken up by a faulty electronic door latch that refuses to stop beeping and then have to decamp to another room at 2am when it can't be fixed. Who says sleeping in a tent is less civilised?

With a yawn, and after filling up at the breakfast buffet that includes chips and soup, we climb up to a chilly, windblown summit overlooking the whole of Ankara.



## Views over Ankara

The wind blows from the north and places two icy hands on our shoulders to speed us south. Finally that pesky wind is on our side and begins making up for all those days when it was the other way round and it felt like riding through treacle.





## Outskirts of Ankara

Picking the truck stop with the largest number of vehicles outside on the basis it must be the best we head inside for a refuel. It's packed with leather jacketed men, there's a constant supply of çay moving round the room on trays and hazy smoke drifts out from the open fire, loaded with kebab skewers, in the corner. We meet a couple of drivers who know a thing or two about long distance journeys and they invite us to sit with them. There aren't many railways in Turkey and it's a big country so there are thousands of trucks moving container loads of goods on every road. Every few minutes we've had a friendly, and often musical, toot as they come thundering past, always giving us plenty of space. We seem to be kindred spirits.



Making friends in a truck stop





One of our lunch mates is heading for Iraq and offers to smuggle us over the border but that's an adventure for another day so we politely decline.







Ghost town made of mud houses. Almost completely deserted.

Back on the road we sit tall to get maximum purchase from the helpful northerly breeze and arrive at the shores of Tuz Gölü in time to watch the sun go down and with just enough light to find a spot for the tent.



Shadow racing





Sunset by the salt lake.

Tuz Gölü is the second largest salt lake in the world and in the summer dries out to form a vast, blindingly white crust. But at this time of year there is a shallow covering of water, only 2m at its deepest point. With the right conditions it takes on a mirror like appearance with some spectacular photo opportunities.

When we crawl out of the tent in the morning that's exactly what we see. Despite being barely above freezing I roll up my trousers and wade out while Kirsty snaps away. Losing the odd toe to frostbite seems worth it for the results. A few minutes later the wind picks up again and the mirror effect is gone.



Airing the quilt. Tuz Gölü







Tuz Gölü





## Tuz Gölü

There's nothing like a bit of cycling to warm you up again so that's exactly what we do. 'Tost' and çay for second breakfast

then we round a corner to see mount Hasan rising up from horizon to a height of 3268m. And it stays there for the rest of the day, getting bigger and closer until we arrive in Aksaray near its base.



Oh go on then...





Keep on trucking



Roadside nut stall





Roadside nut seller

It's been a great few days with plenty of pleasant surprises and Turkey has really been showing off its wonderful scenery and huge generosity. The town of Aksaray has a few more surprises in store as our fortunes change significantly but that's a story for another post.



Approaching Mount Hasan





Into Aksaray in the shadow of Mount Hasan

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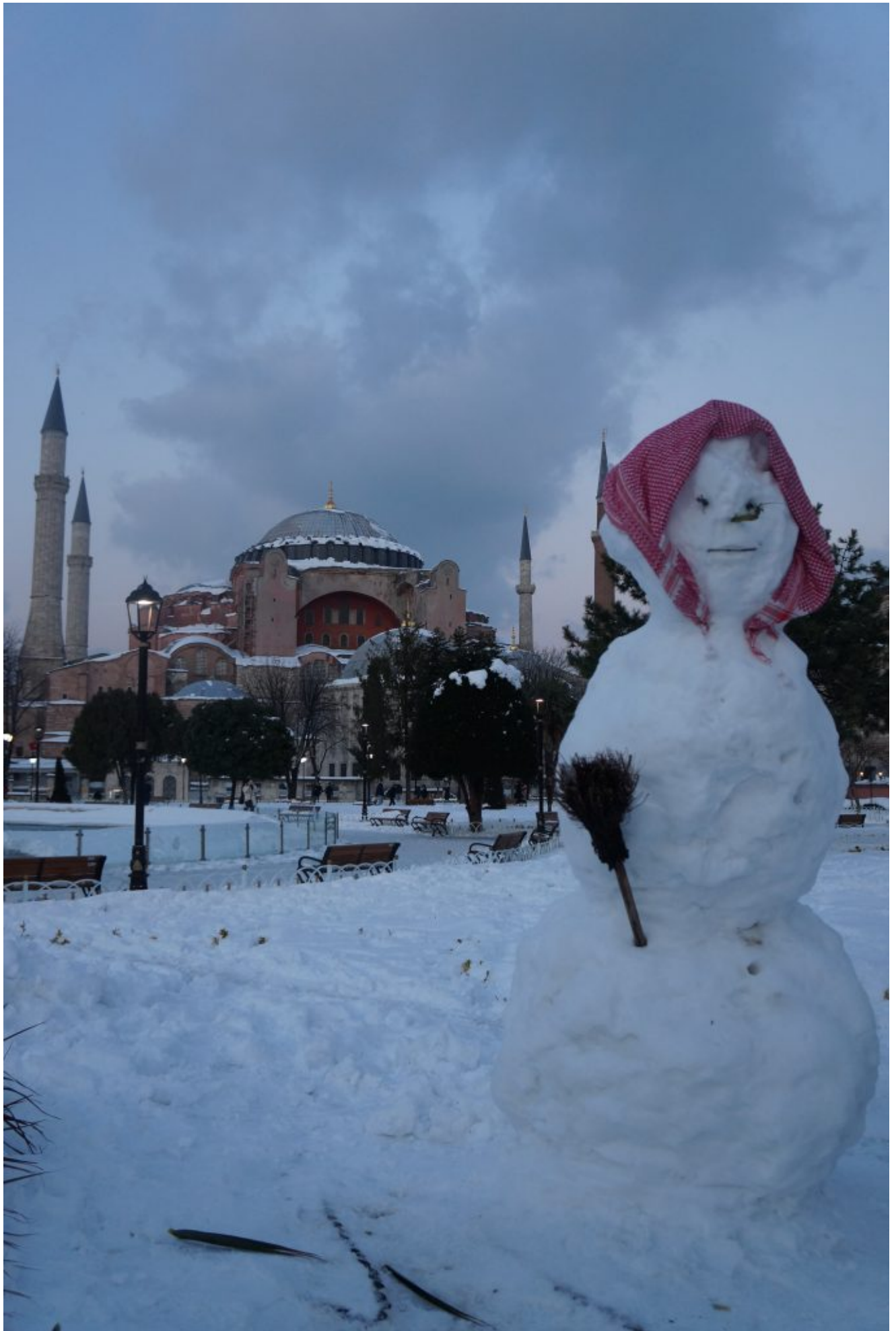
# Escape from Istanbul

written by Marcus | 15 April, 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

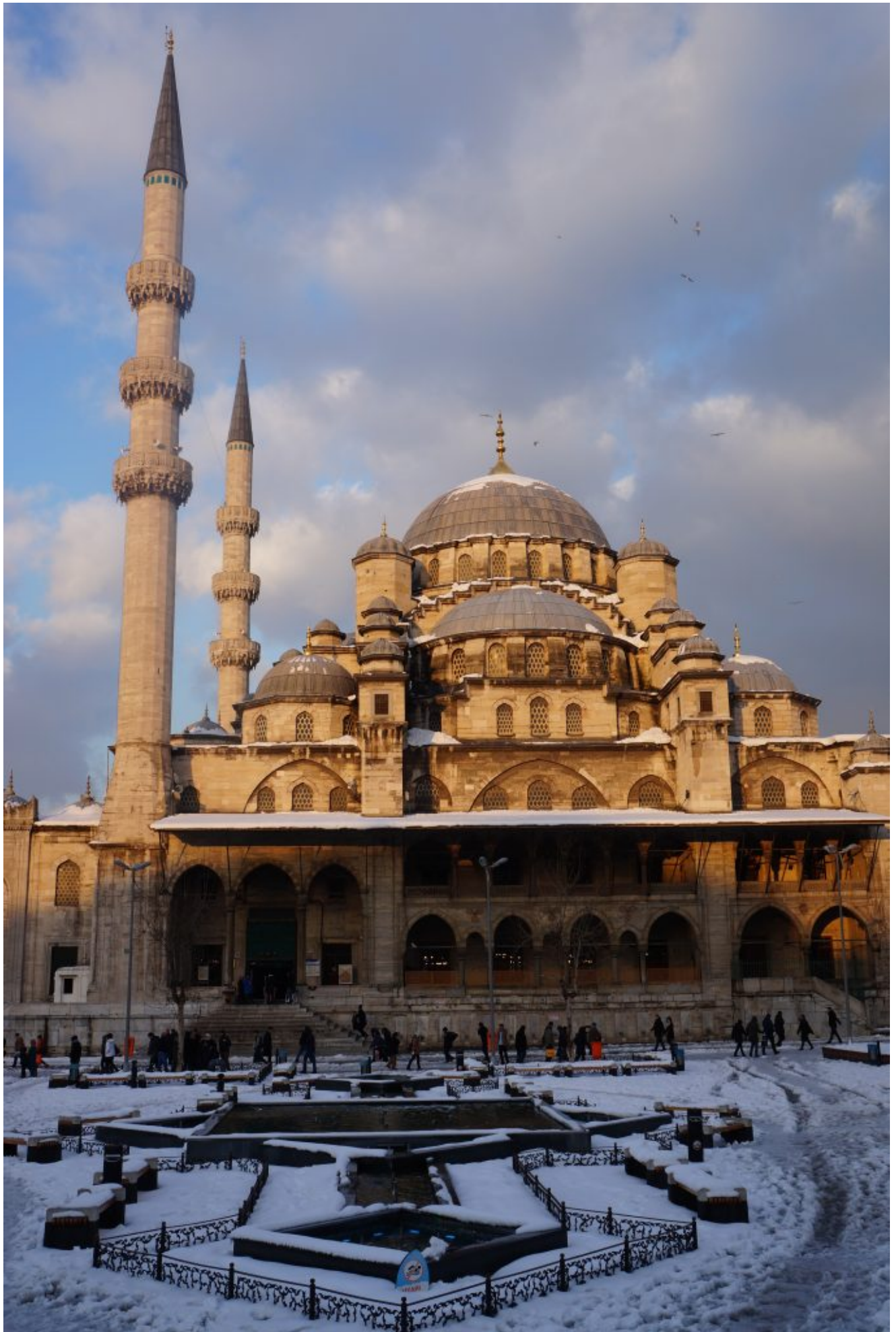
Once we eventually arrived in the tourist epicentre of Sultanhamet

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.



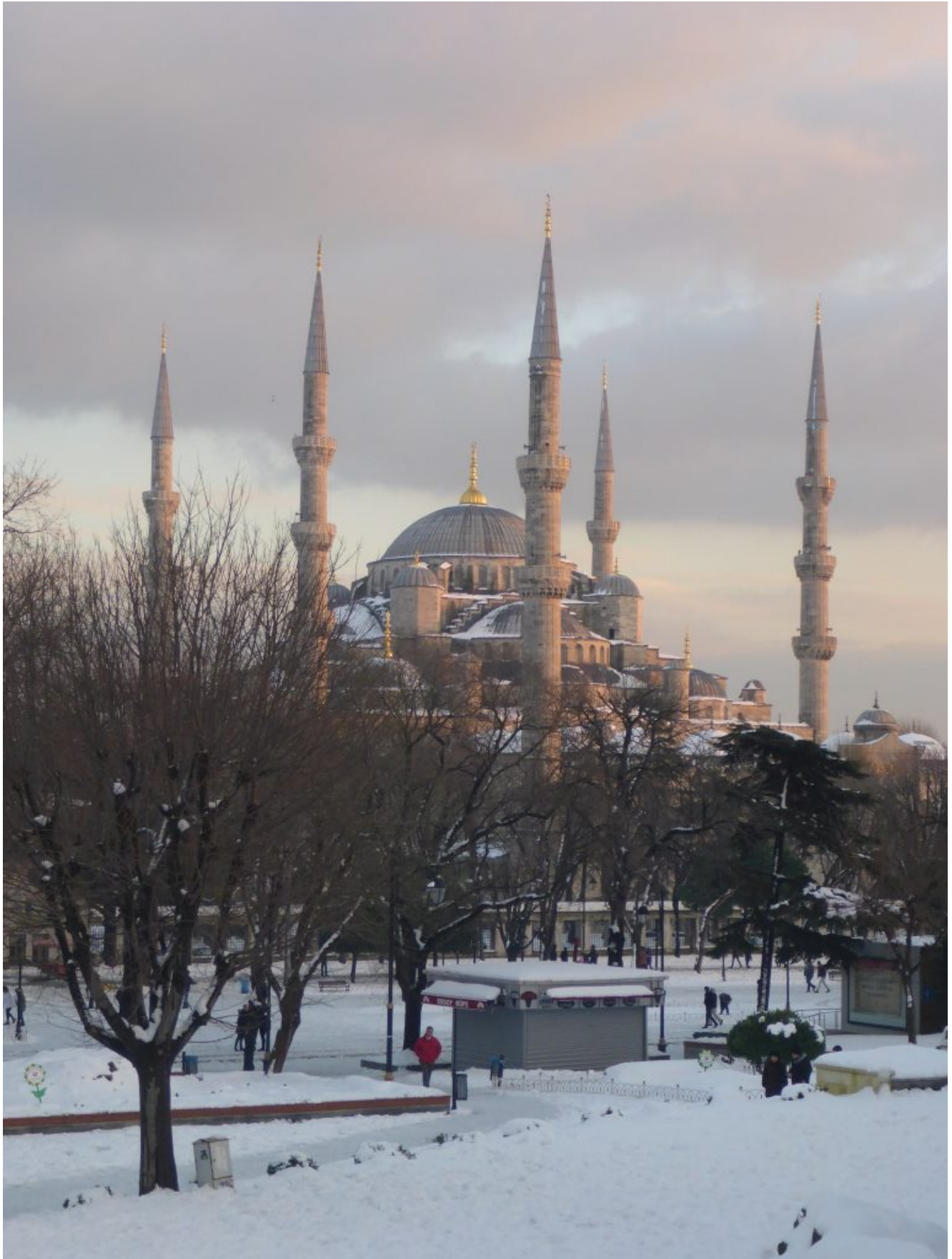


Time for coffee





Yeni Mosque

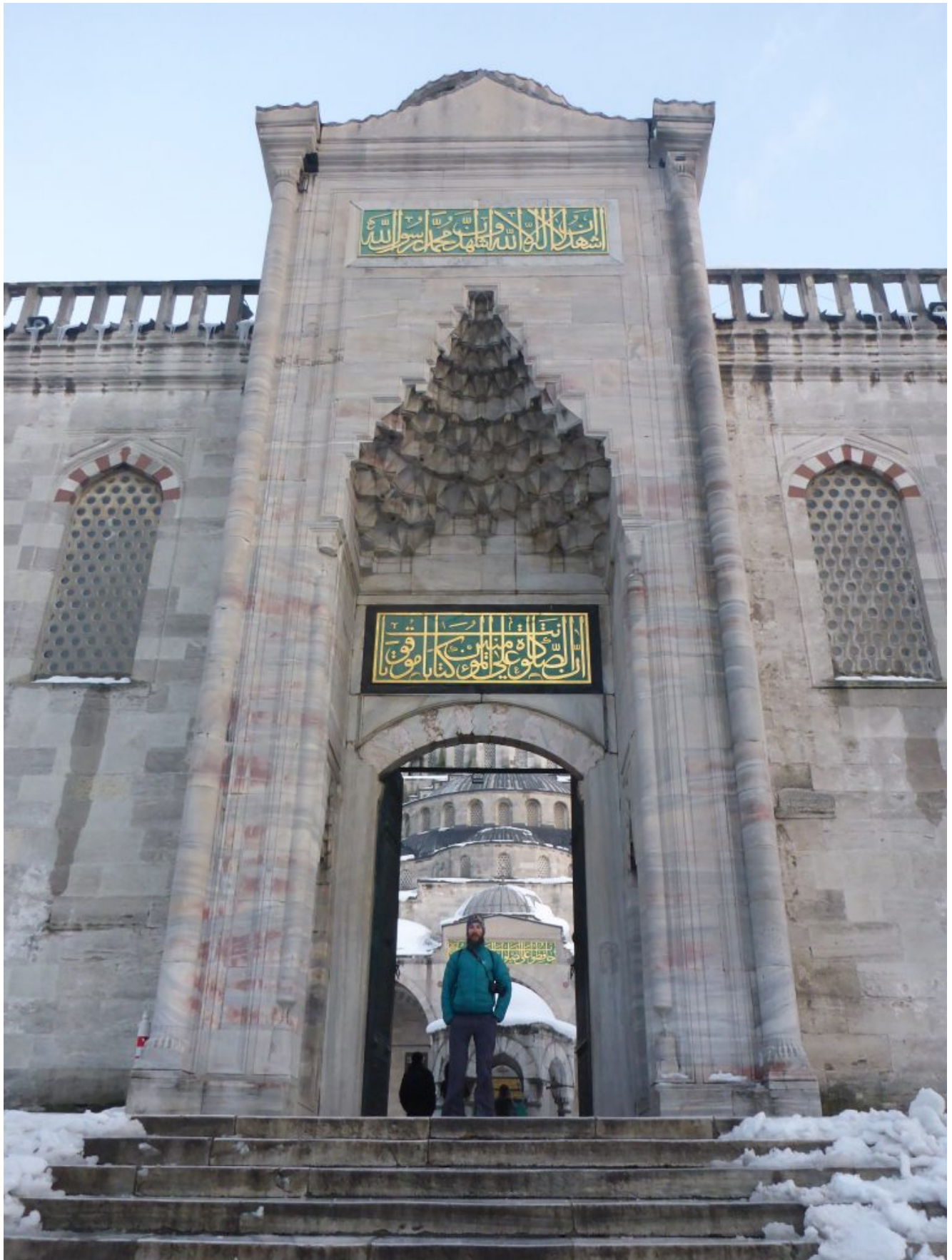


Sultanahmet (Blue) Mosque



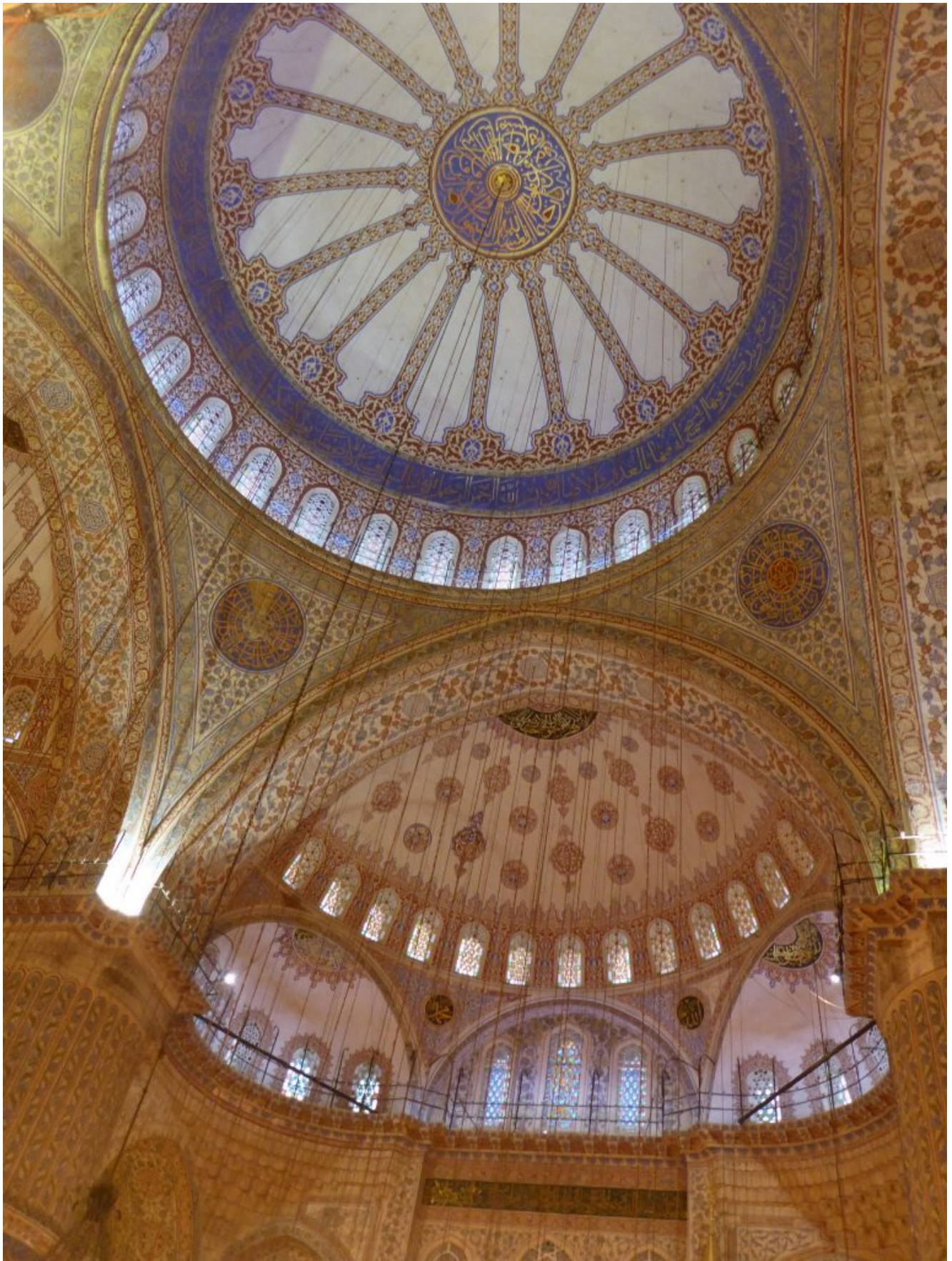
Blue Mosque





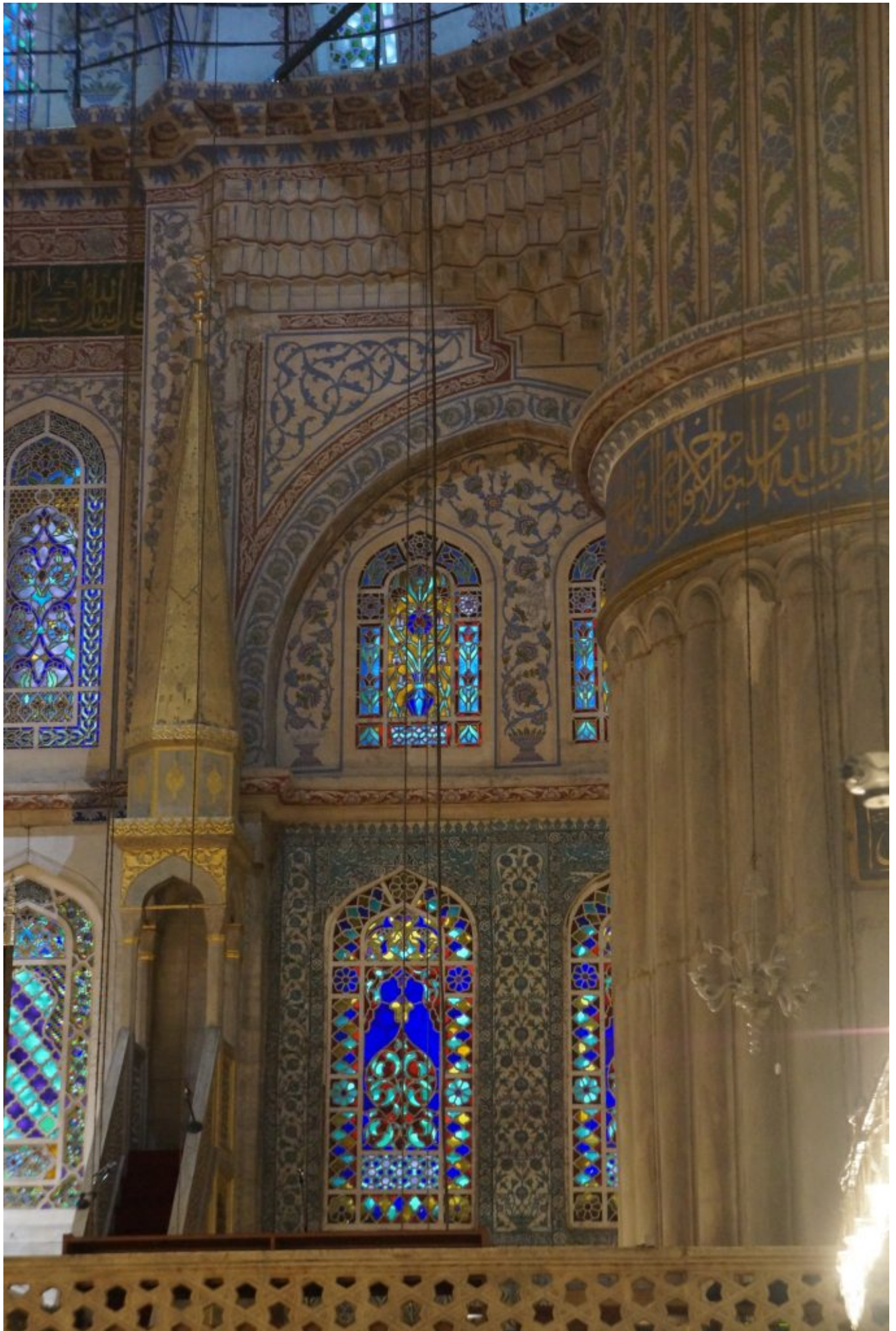
Sultanahmet (Blue Mosque)





Sultanahmet (Blue) Mosque





Blue Mosque



Blue Mosque





Sultans Lodge, Hagia Sofia



Hagia Sofia





Christian Mosaic, Hagia Sofia





Decorations, Grand Bazaar





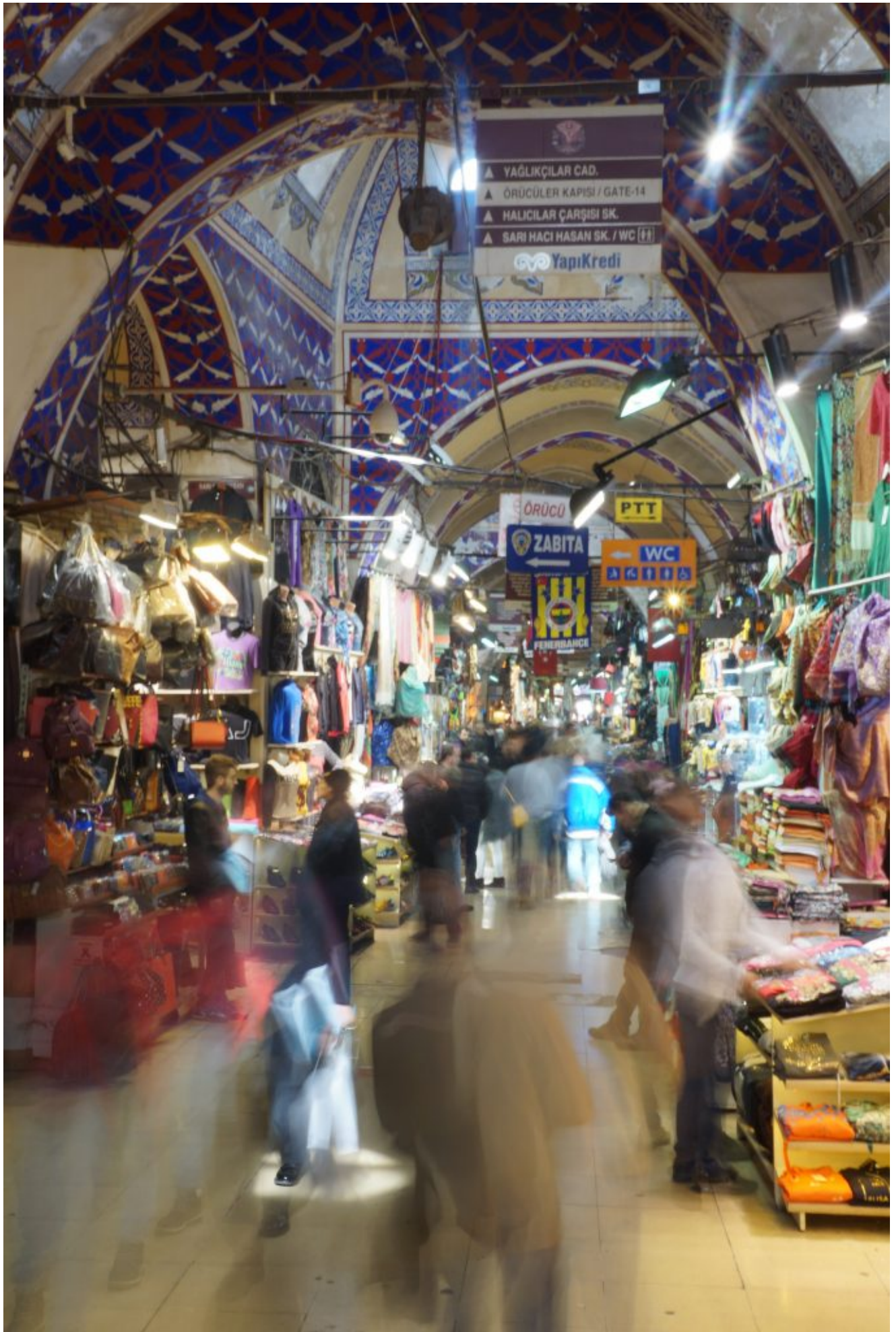
Spice Bazaar





Dried Fruit, Spice Bazaar





Grand Bazaar





## Basilica Cistern



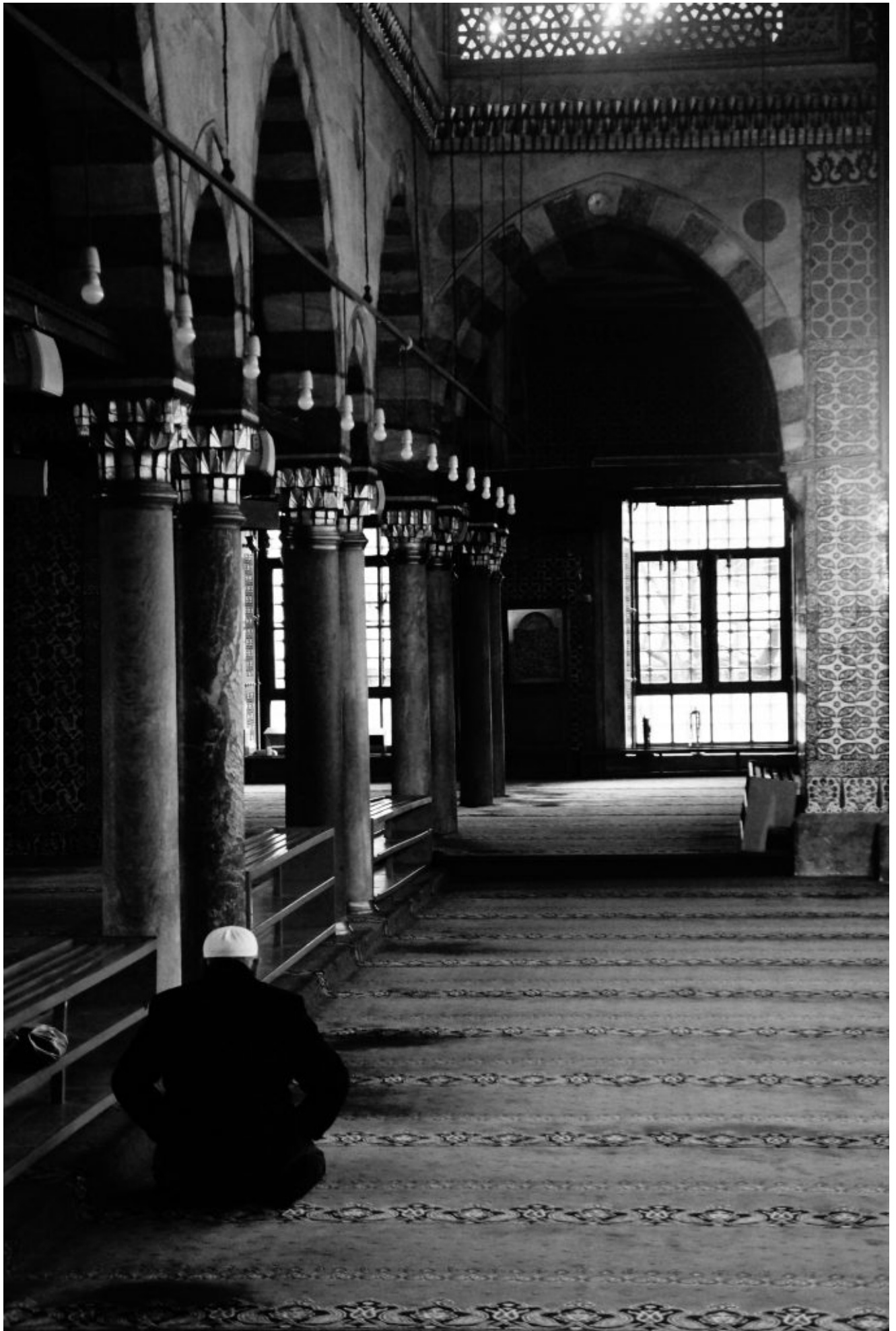
Medusa's Head, Basilica Cistern

After a visit to a photography exhibition we set the cameras

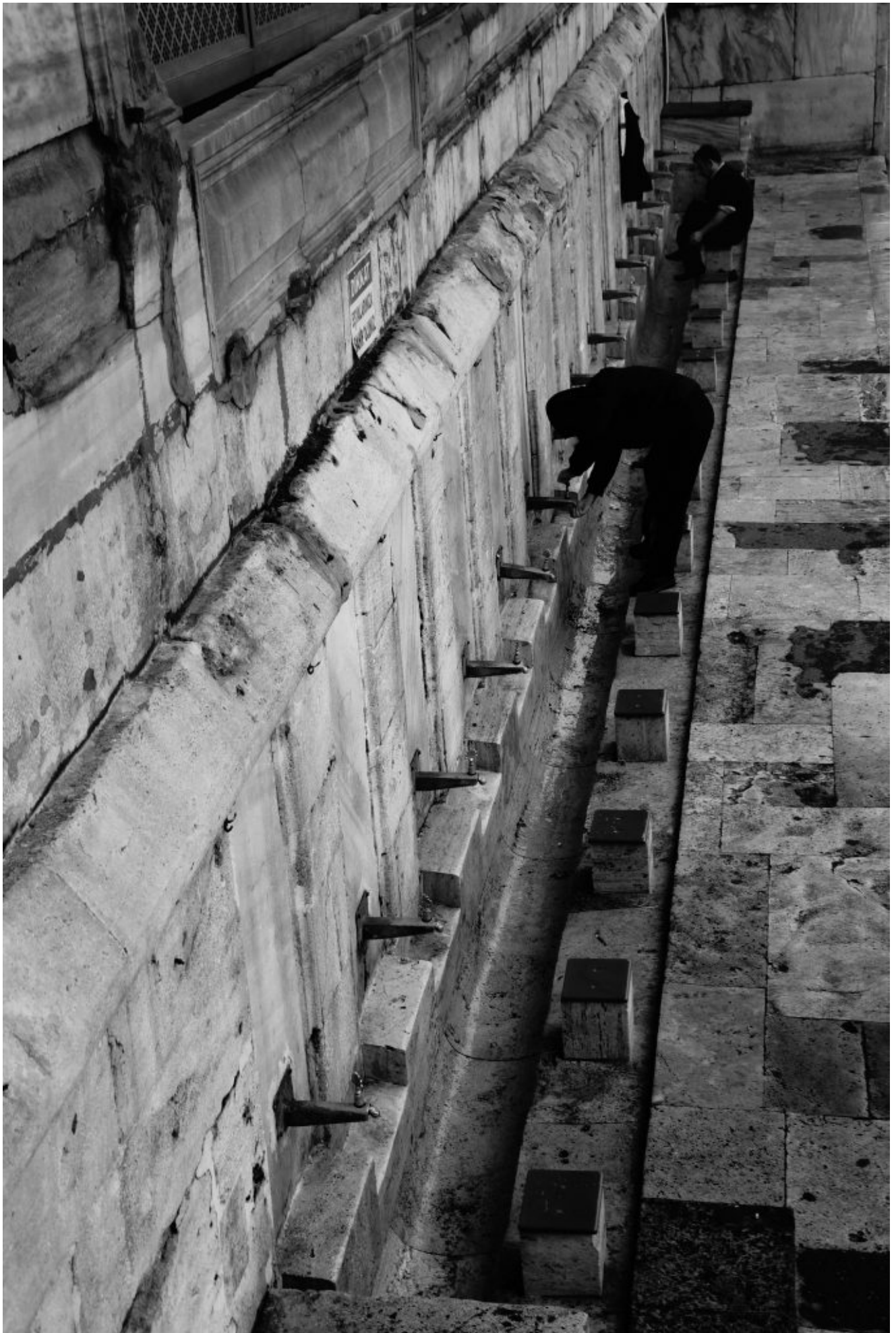


to black and white for the afternoon.













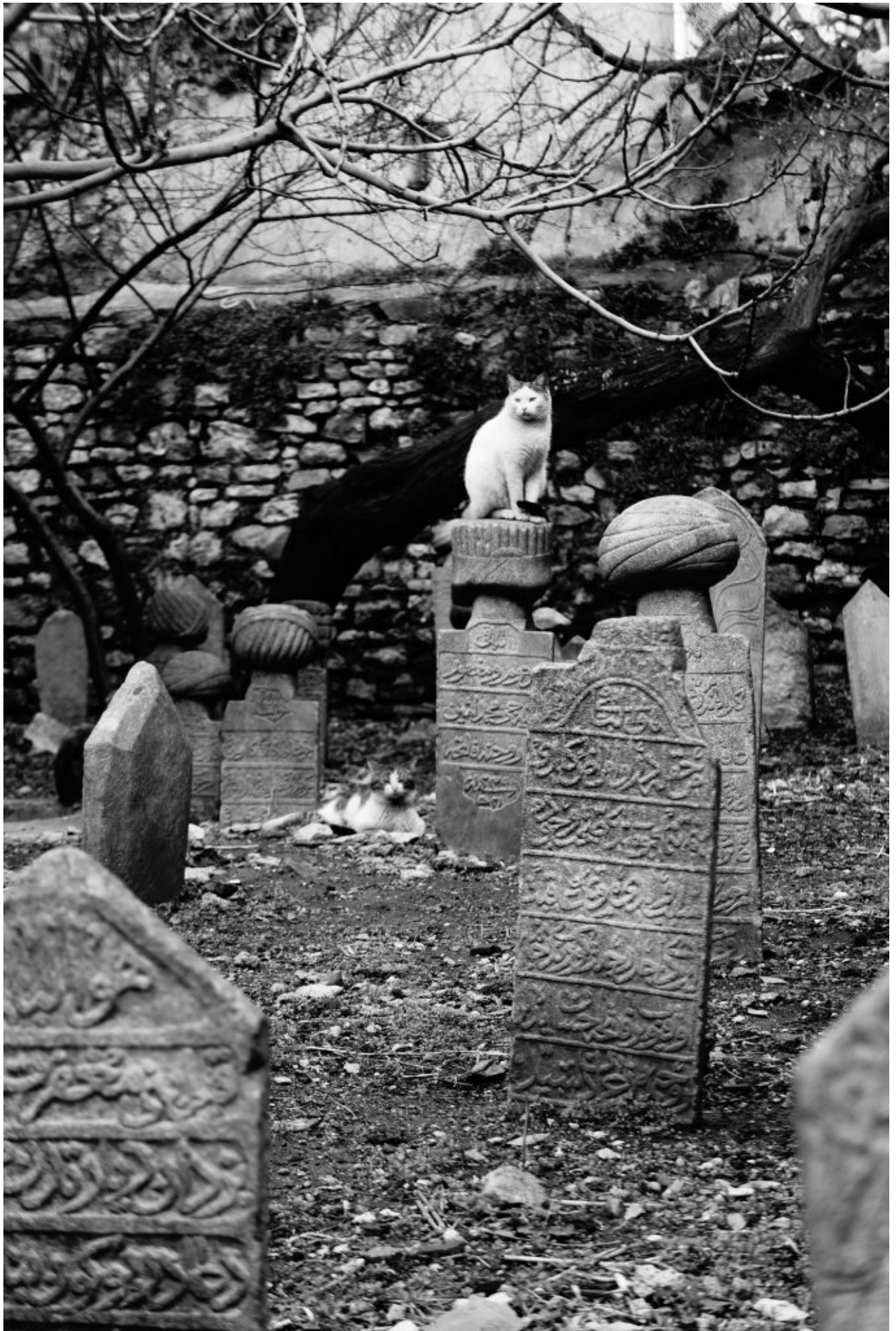








Basilica Cistern





## 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

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## Thessaloniki to Istanbul

written by Marcus | 15 April, 2015



There are some cycling records that are truly remarkable feats of human endurance. The round the year award which is to cover as much distance as possible over the course of a 12 month period is probably the most impressive. The current record was set by Tommy Goodwin in 1938 when he rode a staggering 75,065 miles in one year, an average of 205 miles per day. 3 men are vying to better that this year including Steve Abraham who I had the pleasure of riding part of the Mille Cymru with in 2014 and I can only wish him the best of luck for this huge commitment. Incidentally the ladies record of just over 30,000 miles (average of 81 per day) remains uncontested since it was set by Billie Flemming in 1938. Perhaps its time for someone to have a go at this one too?

Taking 6 months to get across Europe isn't exactly a new world record (last year a friend did it in 2 weeks) but it is a personal milestone for us that we have to admit we're quite proud of. We've also crossed the 10,000km mark without



realising. It turns out the trip computer had been calibrated for smaller tyres so had been underestimating our distance and speed by 4% each day since the beginning of the trip. This all adds up so we'd covered 400km more than we thought we had! Steve Abraham will cover this distance every 33 days throughout the year.



### The White Tower, Thessaloniki

Our snow day in Thessaloniki starts with a spin across the city to Georgios' shop, Action Bikes. On the way a car pulls alongside while we ride and the passenger insists on giving Kirsty a pair of gloves shouting "Take them, TAKE THEM!".

Georgios has managed to find a new freehub, the one remaining part I wanted to replace on the rear hub making it effectively now all brand new. His father, Costas, used to turn spanners for the Greek national cycling team so goes about the task of fitting the part and giving the bike a thorough service with a

meticulous eye.



Costas the master mechanic





### The Action Bike team

We try and arrange meeting up with a walking tour guide later in the day but they send us the wrong location for the rendez-vous so we end up standing around in the cold on opposite sides of the town. Instead of the tour we head back to Georgios' office (the first one) where his partner Eleni shows us to our accommodation for the night: the floor of the board room.



### Camping on the boardroom floor

On our way out of Thessaloniki the next day we pay another visit to Action Bikes to pick up a new Ortlieb rack bag that Georgios sells us at a price we can't refuse. We have been contemplating buying one of these for several months as, with a bit of rear end reorganisation, it should give us a bit more capacity for when we need to carry more than 1 or 2 days worth of food and water. Georgios sends us off with some recommendations for our route east and also the number for a friend who lives in a village along the way who he suggests we visit.





The posh new biscuit carrier





..with easy access to our supplies

We've been sent on the hilly but quieter route and pass through the appropriately named Panorama that gives great



views back down to the city. There's still plenty of snow high on the hills all around us but it's a cloudless bright day. Over the top we get to see a range of much bigger mountains over the border into Bulgaria as well as the lakes that we drop down to follow for the afternoon.



Panoramic view of Thessaloniki



Up to the snowline





Snowy Shrine





Bulgarian mountains in the distance





Incoming!

By the evening we've made it to the coast at the north east tip of Poseidon's Trident: Halkidiki. The forecast is for subzero temperatures overnight so we're keen to find some shelter if we can but there are no cosy churches in sight along the sea front at Vrasna. We stop to ask someone if we can camp in an olive orchard on the basis that he has a scarecrow on a bike in his front garden so must be cyclist friendly. While he's trying to direct us to a campsite (that will definitely be closed), his wife comes out and invites us in for coffee. Their wood burning stove, fresh coffee and even fresher roxakia cakes, a traditional Macedonian delicacy, are all very much appreciated and bring some warmth back into our toes. Ah yes, this is the Greek region of Macedonia and the reason why the country that sits to the north west has to be called FYROM.



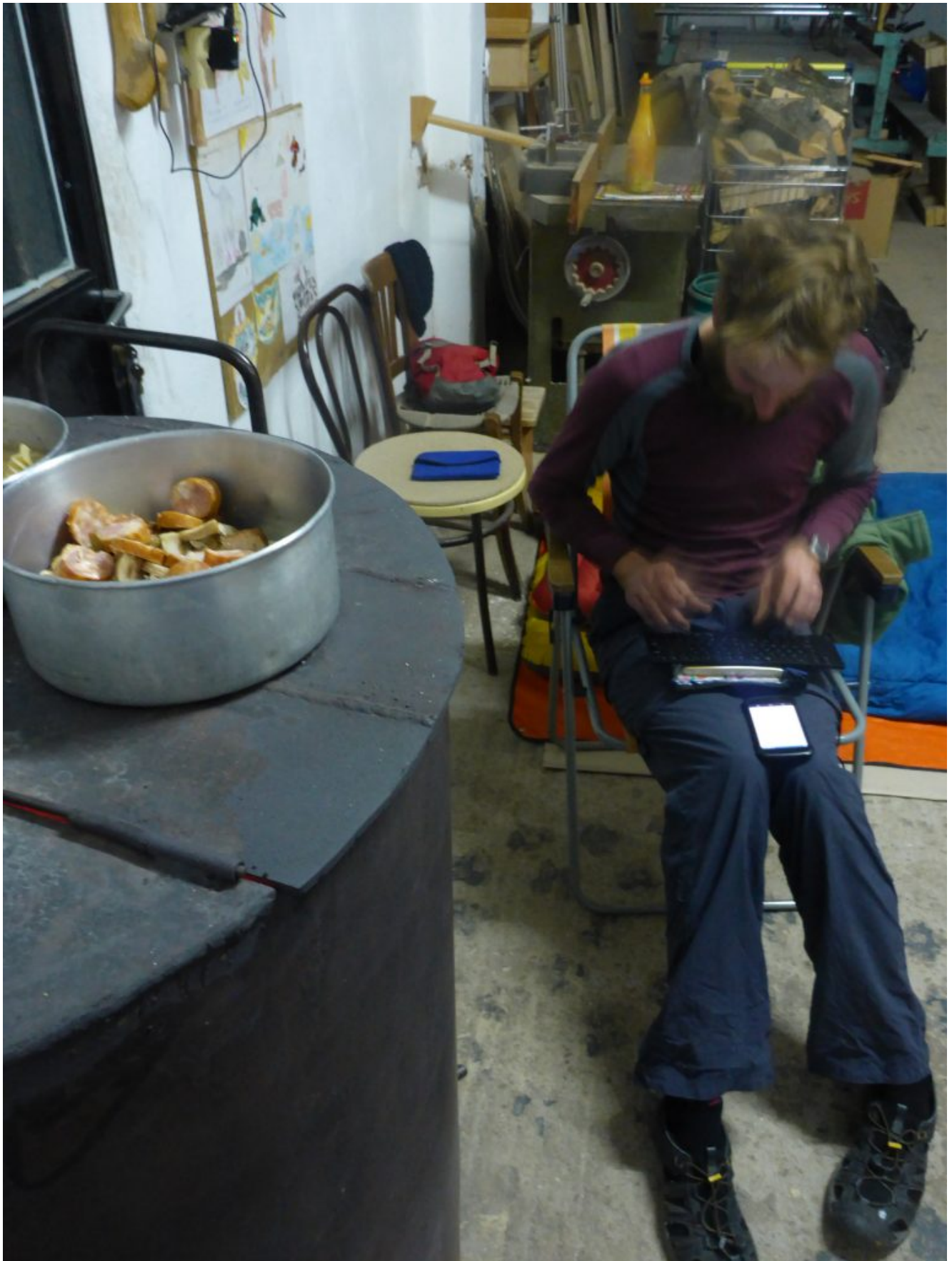


Tiny cyclist on rocking chair

While we enjoy the coffee and cakes their Dutch neighbours are brought round to translate so we explain what we're doing on a



bike on a freezing February evening. Before long we've been invited to make use of a carpentry workshop just round the corner, and the owner, Vassilis, sets to work sweeping the floor and loading up a huge stove with broken pallets. It soon becomes very warm and inviting and we're left to set up our beds and use the huge band saw as a dining table.



Dinner in the carpentry workshop

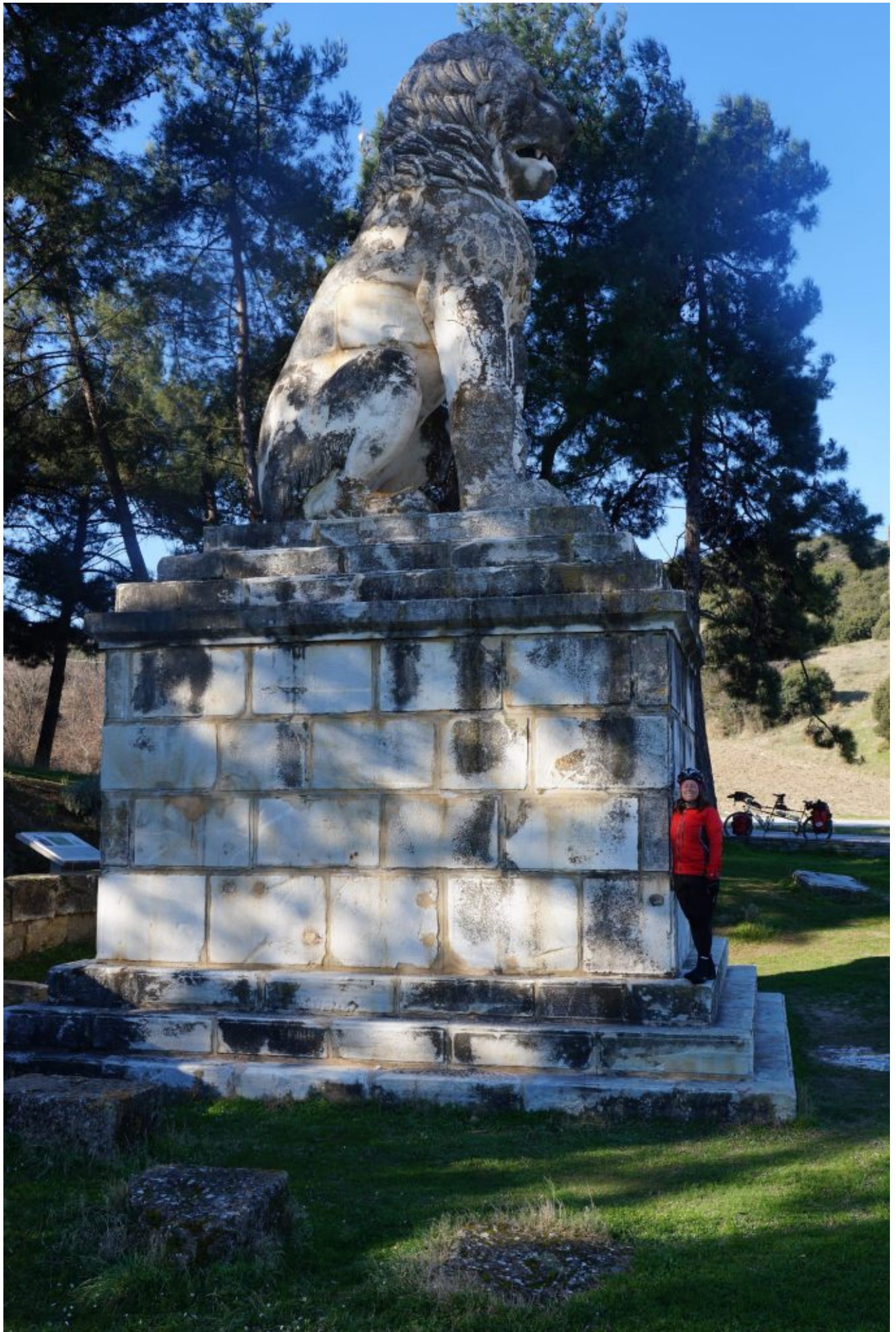






Vassilis brings us fresh bread in the morning then sends us on our way back following the coast to the east. Its cold but clear and when we get the chance we turn up towards the mountains to generate a bit more heat with some climbing.







The lion of Amfipoli from 4th Century BC



Riding towards the mountains near Mesropi





### Standard chicken selfie

A kind cafe owner refuses payment for our coffees at the top of the hill, then we drop down to the coastal town of Kavala. Here we get chatting to the owners of a small kiosk while we try to buy some stamps for some nieces' birthday cards and get another complimentary coffee and a big bottle of water. This side of Greece seems to be much friendlier than the west, possibly as it sees fewer tourists but also maybe because we're getting further east.



Spring blossom above Kavala





Kind kiosk owners in Kavala

The mercury is set to plunge again overnight so once we've found a nice spot on a clifftop looking back to Kavala we get a small fire going and sip some of the ouzo we were given before pulling on all our clothes and diving into the tent



The aquaduct in Kavala





Cliff top camping near Kavala

Sophia and Antonis, the friends that Georgios had recommended we visit, live in a small village on the banks of the river

Nestos which is where we're heading the next day. The factor that convinced us to call in is that Sophia runs a small bakery, so when we arrive in Toxotes we head straight there and begin choosing from her range of delicious pastries. It happens to be the first day of a carnival season that runs up to Easter so to celebrate there will be some festivities later that afternoon and Sophia tells us we're welcome to attend.

There's time for a coffee and to tuck into the pastries before we join Sophia at her house then walk down to the village hall where a BBQ has been loaded up with souvlaki and meatballs. With loaded plates and cups of wine we get introduced to some of the other villagers while the local priest fires up a pair of turntables to try and instigate some dancing.



Souvlaki and wine!

The children are all dressed in various costumes and Sophia's daughter Eva has come as a leopard. We get to watch a puppet



show in Greek that we think involves a witch, a river and a judge that is actually a love story. Afterwards there's sack racing, more music from DJ Dog Collar and then we retire to the house of some friends of Sophia and Antoni's for another BBQ and homemade tspirou. Strong stuff!



Puppet show





Lunging for the line in the sack race



## Home baking and home brew

The couple who put on the puppet show, Miltos and Sozo have given up life in Athens to set up a farm in the mountains and suggest that this is something more people should be doing. It's a surprisingly popular dream amongst people we've met all through Europe with a common desire to become more self sufficient.

Sophia and Antonis kindly offer to let us stay for the night to avoid having to pitch the tent so we're grateful for another warm bed. We'd only originally intended to stop to buy food!





Sophia and Antonis

In the morning we call into the bakery again to load up the Ortlieb bag with fresh supplies for the day then wave goodbye

before rejoining Route 2 eastwards.

After 20km we spot a sign for thermal springs at Loutra Potamias so decide to take a look. We find a steaming hot ditch full of water with a small bath house alongside that the proprietor lets us dip into in return for one of Sophia's biscuits.





Hot springs at Potamias



### Hot springs at Potamias

A collapsed bridge forces us to push through a stream to get back onto the main road again and then we come alongside Lake Vistonida. It's a prime spot for bird watchers, but even with our limited ornithological knowledge we can recognise the flocks of flamingos all on one leg, then later a dozen or so pelicans.





Short cut at Potamias



Flamingos at Lake Vistonida





Lake Vistonida



Pelicans on lake Vistonida





## More Flamingos at Lake Vistonida

After lunch we venture onto another shortcut that takes us onto a minor road beside cotton fields. As with previous shortcuts it presents the odd challenge with 3 or 4 fords to negotiate and one that requires shoes and socks to come off and we get cold toes.



Cotton fields near Komotini





Cold feet (Mum)ford

The landscape is changing with rolling plains and bigger gaps between basic villages. We're also seeing more mosques than

churches as this region was formerly Turkish and retains a large Muslim population.



Spot the photographer

We set up camp next to the remains of the Via Egnatia, a Roman road that linked Rome to Istanbul and crosses from Albania through Greece into Turkey. There's enough of it left to invoke images of chariots making a similar journey to ours 2100 years ago but we're glad to have nice smooth tarmac instead of cobbles.





Our last campsite in Greece, near Mesti



Mesti





## The Via Egnatia

We're woken just before dawn by the ezan sounding out from the mosque in a village below us then the sound of barking. A pack

of 7 or 8 dogs have decided they don't like the look of our tent, and they like the head that pops out of it even less. They soon get bored though and leave us to enjoy our last breakfast in Greece.

We climb over a ridge then swoop down to the coast again into Alexandroupolis. Here we pay an emotional visit to what could be the last Lidl in Europe so stock up on some of our favourite biscuits and sheep's milk yoghurt.



Plain near Mesti

We need to print out our Turkish visas before we reach the border and look for possible options while riding down the high street. A computer printer shop seems suitably equipped and is more than happy to oblige.

But at the border our freshly printed visas aren't even checked and after visiting 5 different men behind 5 different windows we're through and into our first new country for over



2 months. As is often the case with roads leading away from borders, there is a large dual carriageway with barely any traffic due to the natural throttling effect of the passport control. Also typical of roads in and out of a border are the number of petrol stations. It's as if drivers are being told that this is their last chance to fill up with good quality Greek/Turkish fuel before crossing into the unknown.



Country #24

After 20km we're still 15km from the nearest supermarket and the light is fading fast, so we stop at a petrol station with



restaurant attached and ask if we can camp behind it on the basis we'll be buying our dinner from them. This seems to be a popular tactic with most cycle tourists passing through Turkey as there is almost always a nice picnic area beside each service station. So the answer comes back "Of course, but we have a hotel here too!" but we politely decline and pitch the tent then enjoy a romantic valentines meal in the empty restaurant, huddled round the only heater in the room.



Do we need a reservation?

As well as the picnic area the service station has a coop full of chickens and a peacock and also a mini mosque so we get the combined cry of cockerels and ezan to rouse us in the morning.



### Standard Turkey selfie

We have a windy and hilly day on a road that reminds us of a similar stretch in Finland. Curiously this is the D110 and the road in Finland was also the 110 so this is clearly a number saved for tedious roadways. The day is brightened a couple of times by some complementary çay when we stop for a breather at a cafe and later a service station.





### The picturesque D110 into Turkey

By the afternoon a heavy drizzle has set in so we're thankful that we have a reply from a Warmshowers host in Tekirdağ offering us a place to stay. But there are some complications. Zafer won't be home until 11pm so has suggested we go to stay with another friend until he gets back. While we're sat in a cafe trying to arrange this, another email arrives from Serpil saying we can stay with her, so to save rushing around town in the middle of the night we accept Serpil's offer and send our apologies to Zafer. He doesn't mind as Serpil is one of his friends too!



### The D110 in Tekirdağ

Serpil's flat is at the top of a very steep hill but once we arrive and catch our breath she, along with her daughter Ada and cat Bleu Orage make us feel at home allowing us to dry out and warm up again. Although she's not a cyclist Serpil loves travelling and loves hosting travellers just as much. It seems a shame that she's never been to Greece despite it being so close though but the EU Schengen visa is prohibitively expensive for her. We should be very grateful for how easy it is to travel as a UK citizen.

In the morning Zafer makes a surprise visit so we get to thank him in person for trying to help us. He offers us a generous gift of a kilo of chocolates which should require roughly the same number of calories to haul them up the hills as we get from eating them.





Zefar and Serpil

Back on the D110 its a similar ride to the day before only the traffic begins to get heavier as we get nearer to Istanbul. At the risk of sounding like a broken record the wind is of course blowing in an againsterly direction so we're keen to find shelter when it gets to lunchtime. While standing out of the gale behind a closed supermarket, a couple of security guards spot us and invite us into their cabin to offer us some sort of fruit drink that tastes fantastic. The four bar heater is a welcome sight too and there's a risk we'll not be able to extract ourselves and get back on the bike. But we just about manage it and just in time for the rain to start again.



1kg of chocs

The D110 becomes the notorious D100 at Silivri and the change of number only seems to increase the volume of traffic.



Inevitably a city of 15 million people sat on a land bridge between two continents creates a mighty bottle neck that has to be served by some major infrastructure. The subject of how to ride into Istanbul without perishing is the subject of dozens of blog posts and Internet articles with many reaching the conclusion that the best plan is to use the train. Minor roads are few and fiddly and cycle paths start to appear nearer the city centre but for now we have to just grin and bear it on the hard shoulder, which is thankfully wide enough to keep us away from the trucks speeding past.

At the top of a long, soggy climb into Büyükçekmece and with energy levels low after a tough day we pull into a service station to check for emails. We'd sent 2 last minute Warmshowers requests and were praying that one of them had been accepted but unfortunately both of them had to decline. The garage staff take us into their office and serve us çay while we check for nearby hotels on Booking.com. 15 minutes later we're checked in, muddy panniers are chucked in the shower and its a relief to lie down in a warm and quiet room after all the noise, fumes, cold, rain and hills.

It was colder than we thought outside as in the morning there's a compete white-out. A few centimetres of snow has fallen and its beginning to snow again when we set off which should make the D100 even more interesting.



Snowy start to the day in Büyükçekmece





Slidılg cars in Büyükçekmece



### Snowy start in Büyükçekmece

Luckily the road is well gritted and the weather is slowing the traffic down to a speed not much greater than ours. I position the bike right in the middle of the lane to prevent any unwanted overtaking manoeuvres and we seem to be getting plenty of space from all the drivers. Most of them quite rightly think we're mad being out in this weather and a few wind down their windows to tell us exactly that, but with plenty of smiles and waves of encouragement. The snow is falling heavily again and after a long downhill from the hotel the front of the bike is coated like a giant coconut cake and I have to prevent total snow blindness by wiping my glasses every 30 seconds.





Snow and traffic and snow on the D100 into İstanbul



Stoker's eye view during a blizzard





### Snow capped bar bag

Eventually we get to turn off the main road and pick our way through side streets crammed full of shops selling anything and everything and with the aromas of all sorts of interesting smelling foods wafting out of doorways.

We arrive at the tall apartment block that the Garmin tells us belongs to our host, Erdiñç but the entry code we've been given doesn't seem to work. Nor does the doorbell and he's not answering his phone. Cold and wet and standing in the foyer we contemplate our options but just as we're trying to explain our situation to someone living in the block Erdiñç calls back and asks where we are. We're not outside his flat that's for sure as that is where he is calling from, so we hand the phone to a bemused cleaning lady who has been watching us and she describes to Erdiñç our location. While we wait for Erdiñç to rescue us we get given an orange by the cleaning lady and offered çay by a security guard. We were actually a 10 minute

walk from the correct apartment block so not too far out.

So now we're finally in Istanbul, gateway to the east and with a vast city to explore. Only we've been housebound for the last 2 days. The snow continued to fall heavily and there's at least 50cm filling up the balcony and covering cars and the surrounding roads. Flights have been cancelled and there were 800 reported traffic accidents on Tuesday so we have to be very glad we made it here when we did. It's the heaviest snowfall for at least 10 years. But the chances are that if we try to get a bus into the centre we may be stuck on it all night, so our best option is to sit tight and wait for the big thaw which should be starting by the weekend. Luckily Erdiñç and his parents are superb hosts with the typical generous Turkish hospitality that we've already seen so much of. If we'd been one day later then we could well have been holed up in the tent behind a service station right now!



Cars stuck everywhere





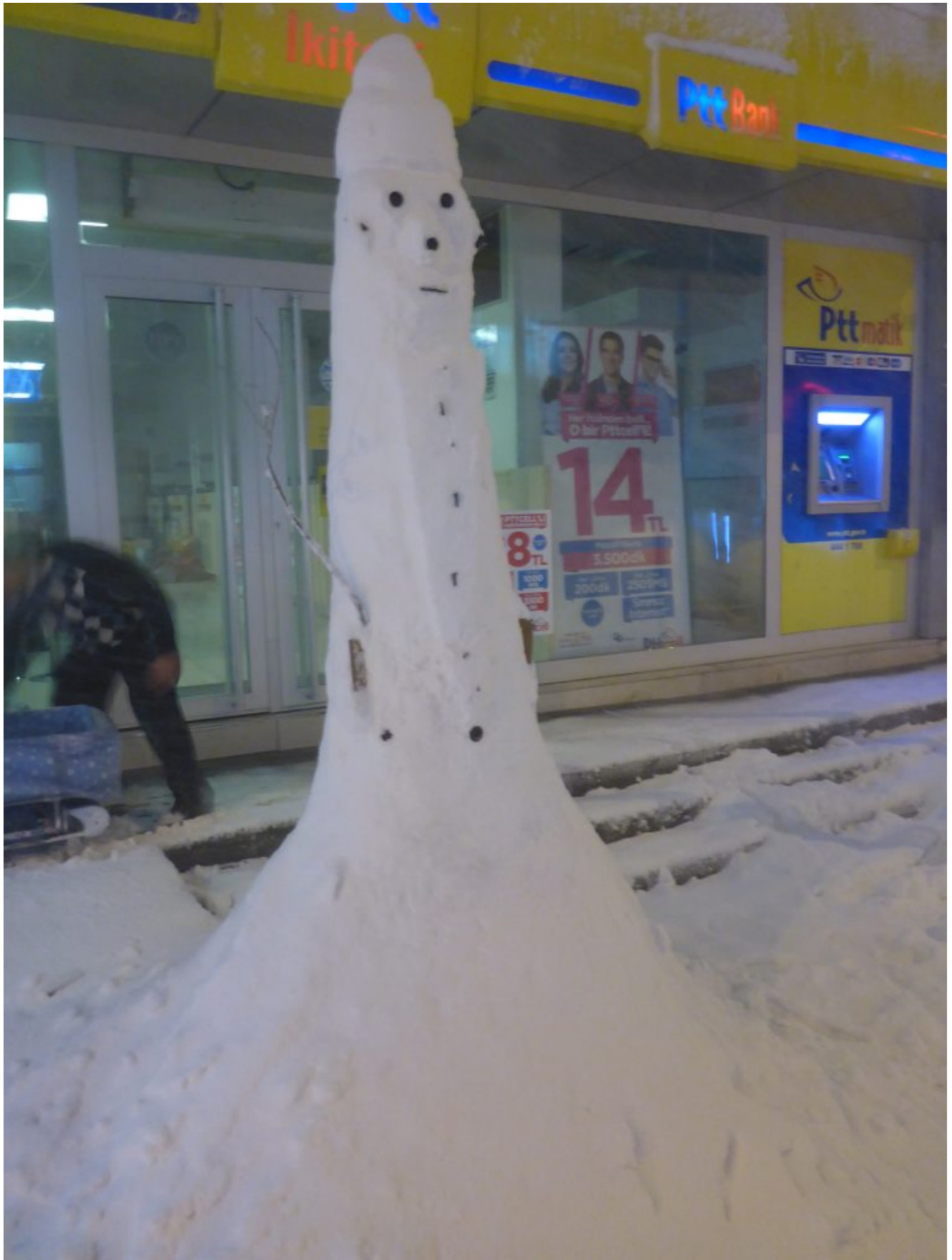
Deep frozen fish



Comparing snowy beards with Erding











Snowy Istanbul skyline