

Istanbul to Aksaray

written by Marcus | 8 March, 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 Davutođlan 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 Davutođlan 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



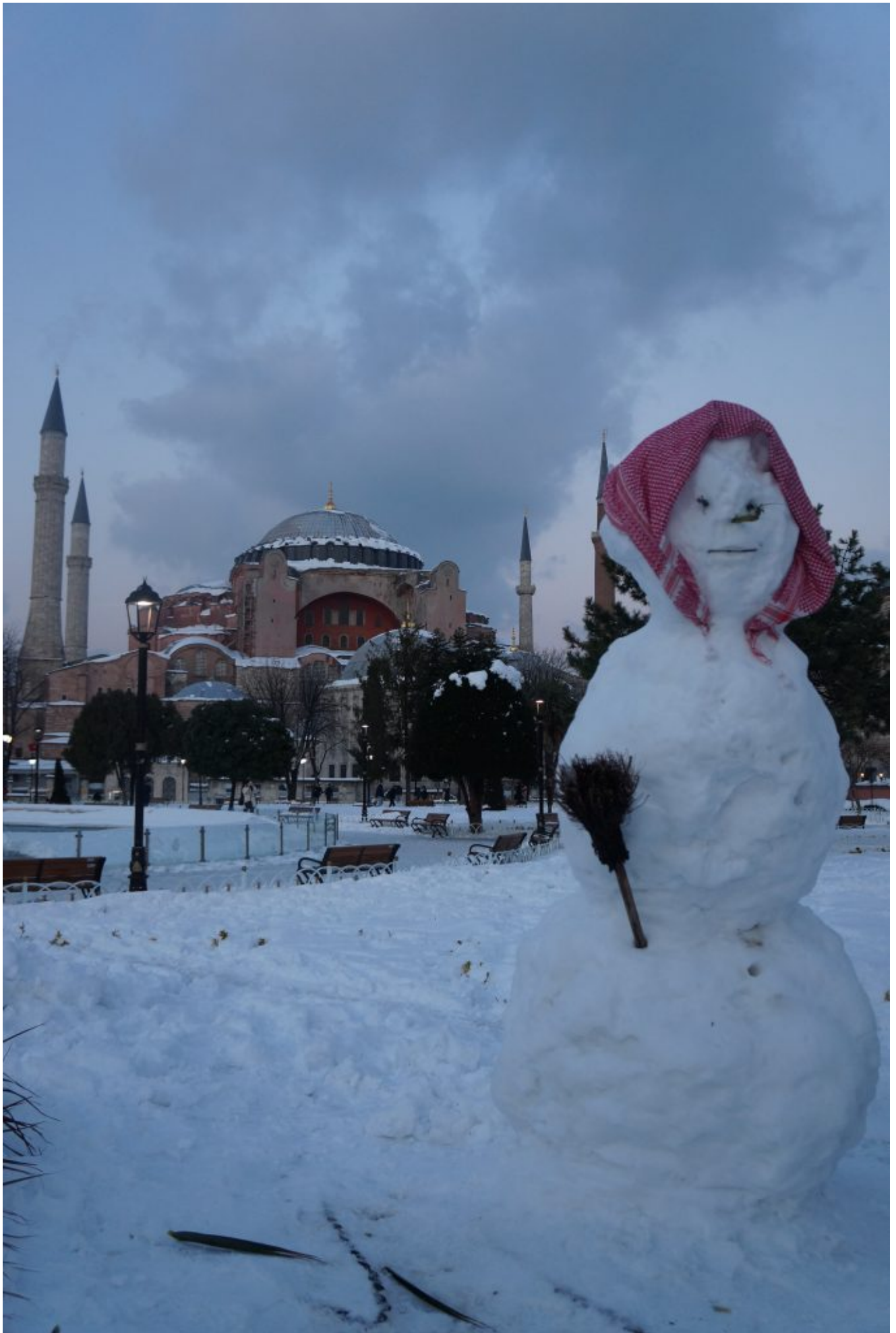
Into Aksaray in the shadow of Mount Hasan

Escape from Istanbul

written by Marcus | 8 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



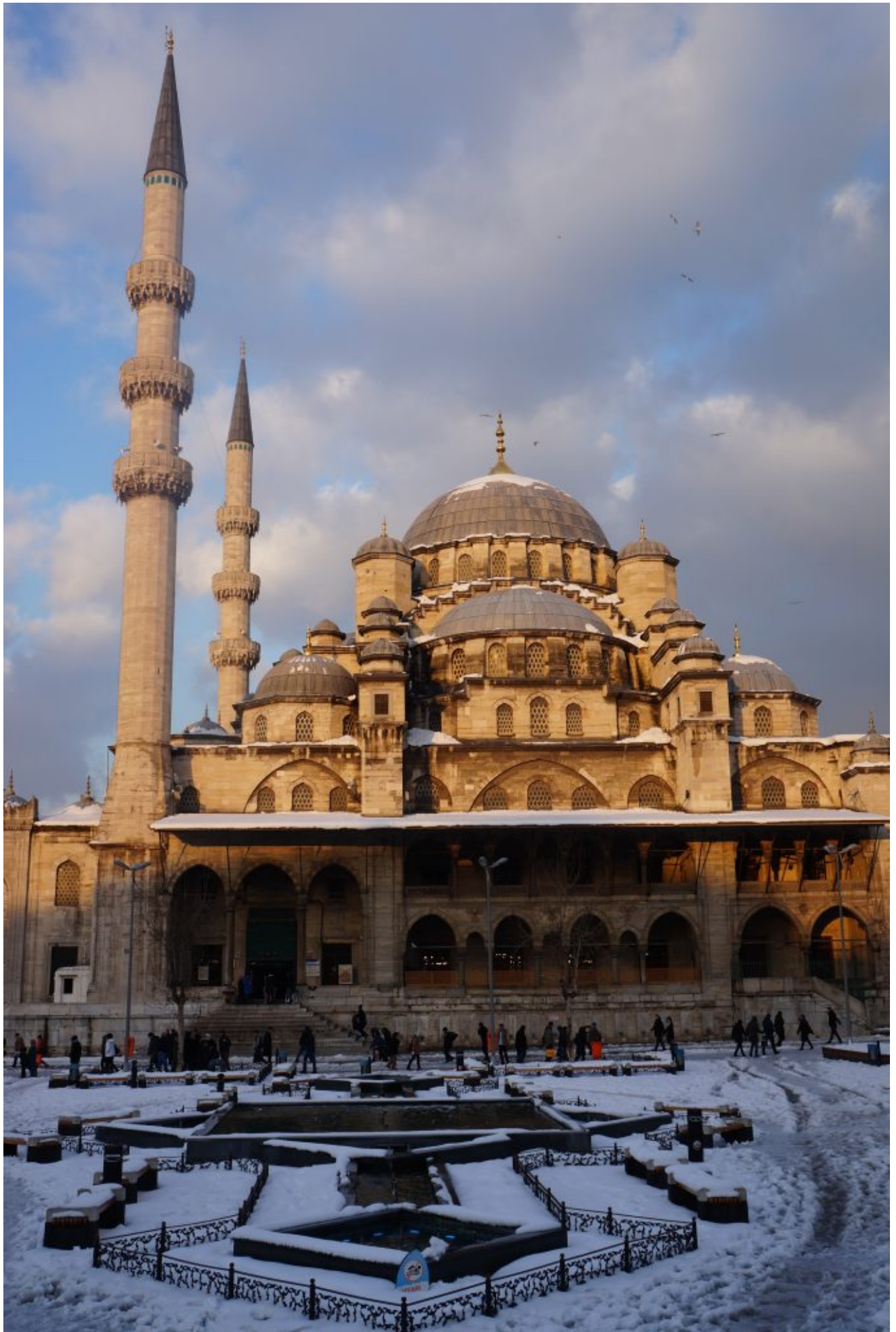
Istanbul Traffic

Once we eventually arrived in the tourist epicentre of Sultanhamet

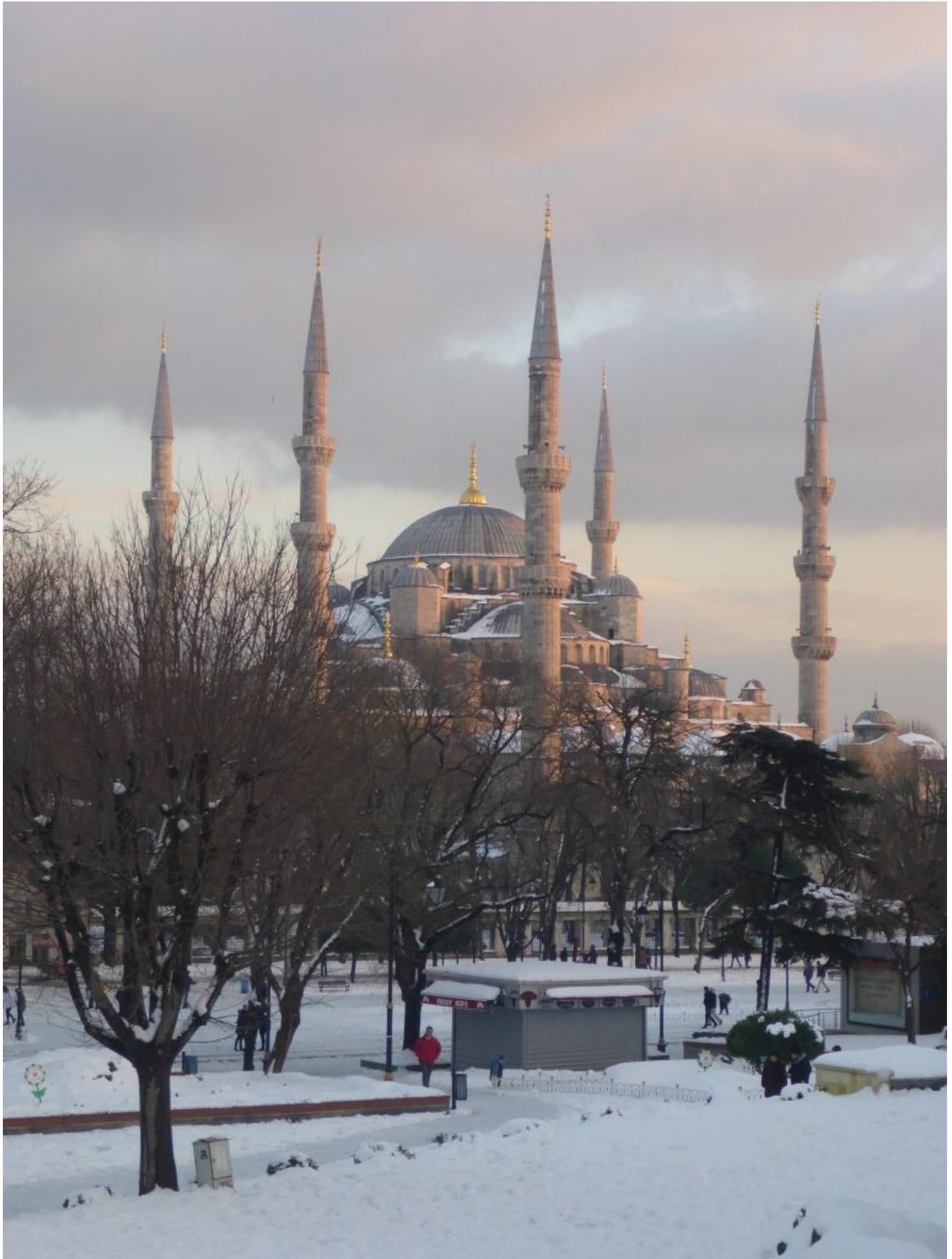
we were treated to the unusual sight of all of the majestic landmarks decorated with snowy white caps and precarious icicles. The street hustlers were kept at bay by the cold and so were a lot of the crowds but it wasn't easy negotiating the streets as the majority of the pavements hadn't been cleared. 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



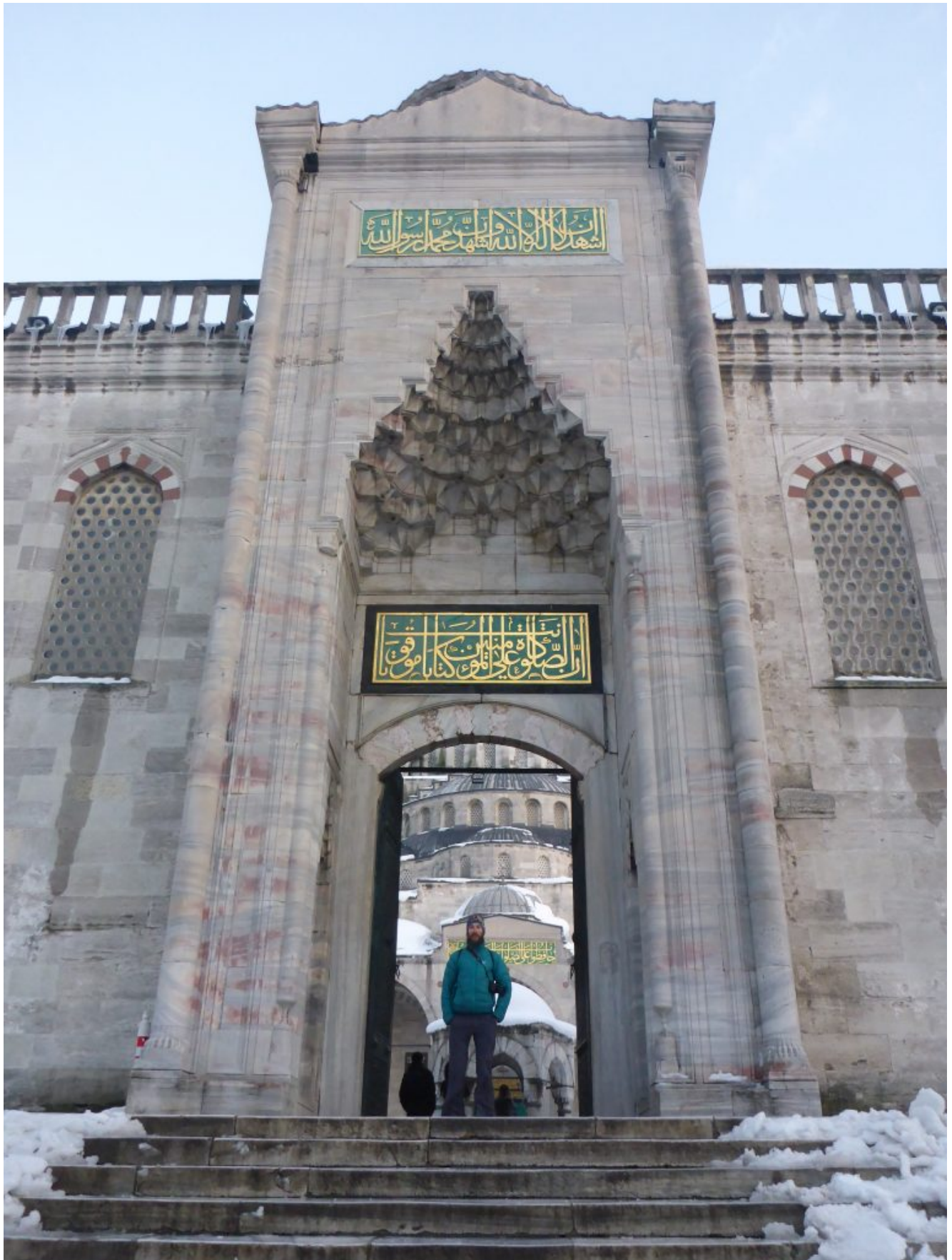
Yeni Mosque



Sultanahmet (Blue) Mosque



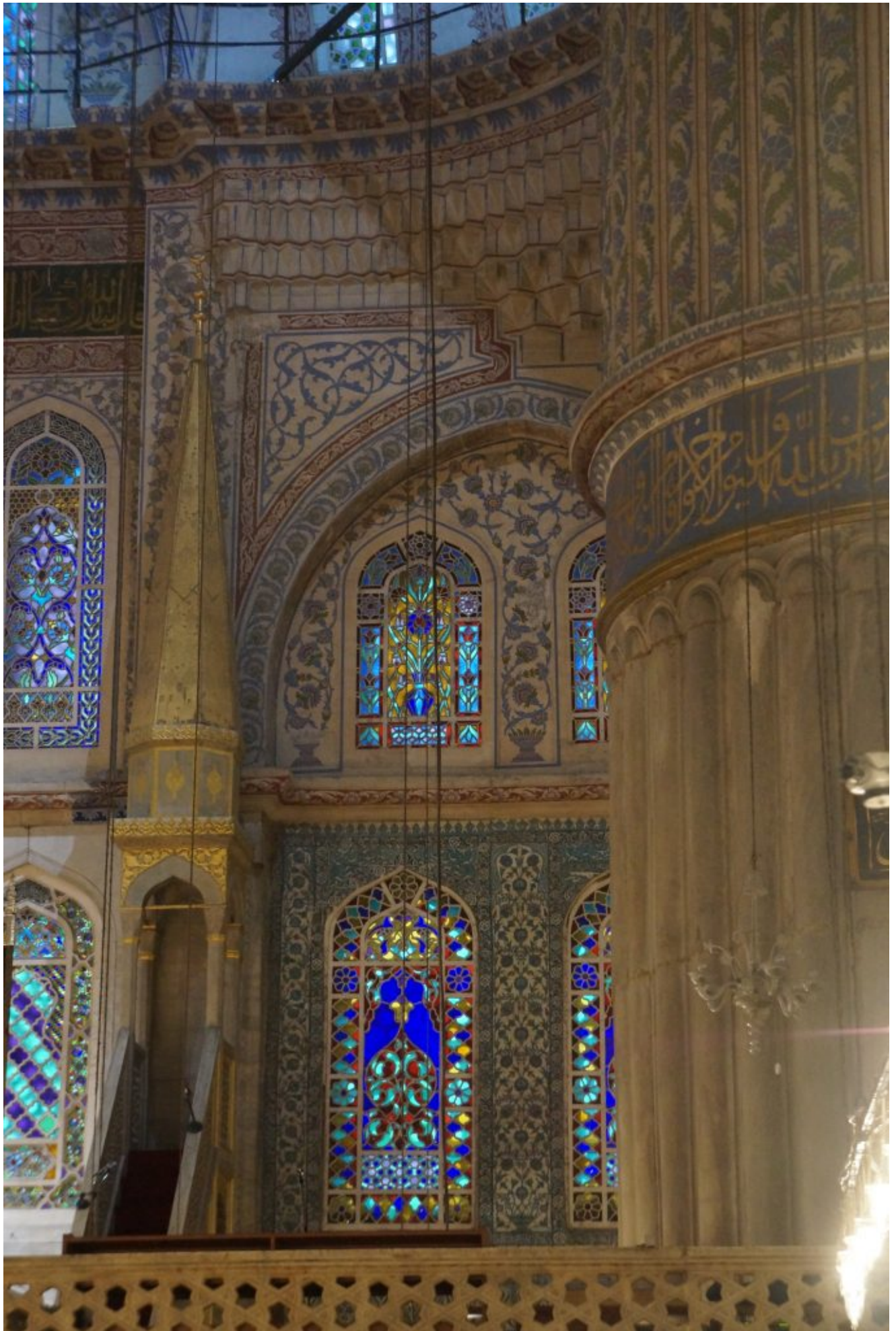
Blue Mosque



Sultanahmet (Blue Mosque)



Sultanahmet (Blue) Mosque



Blue Mosque



Blue Mosque



Sultans Lodge, Hagia Sofia



Hagia Sofia



Christian Mosaic, Hagia Sofia



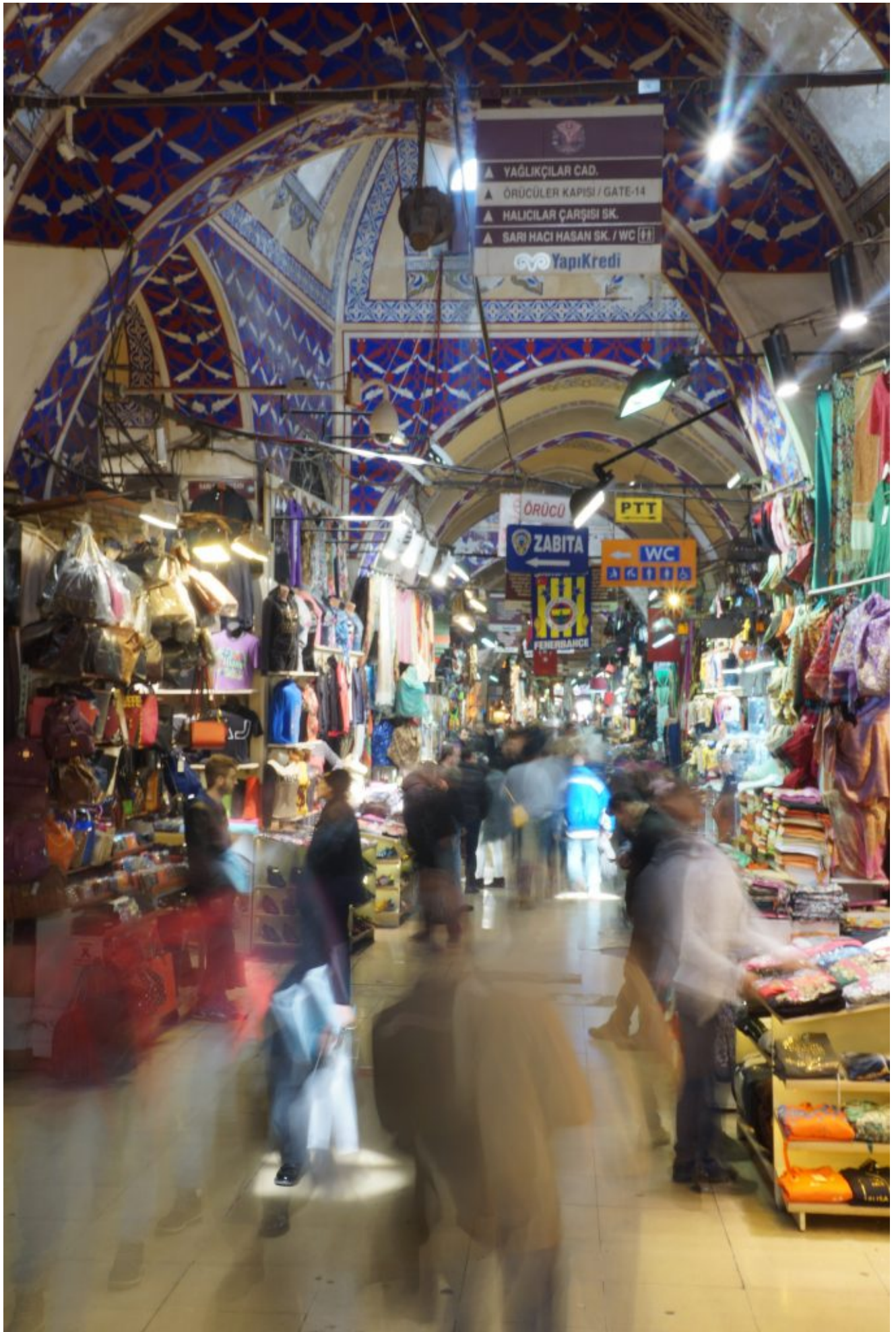
Decorations, Grand Bazaar



Spice Bazaar



Dried Fruit, Spice Bazaar



Grand Bazaar



Basilica Cistern

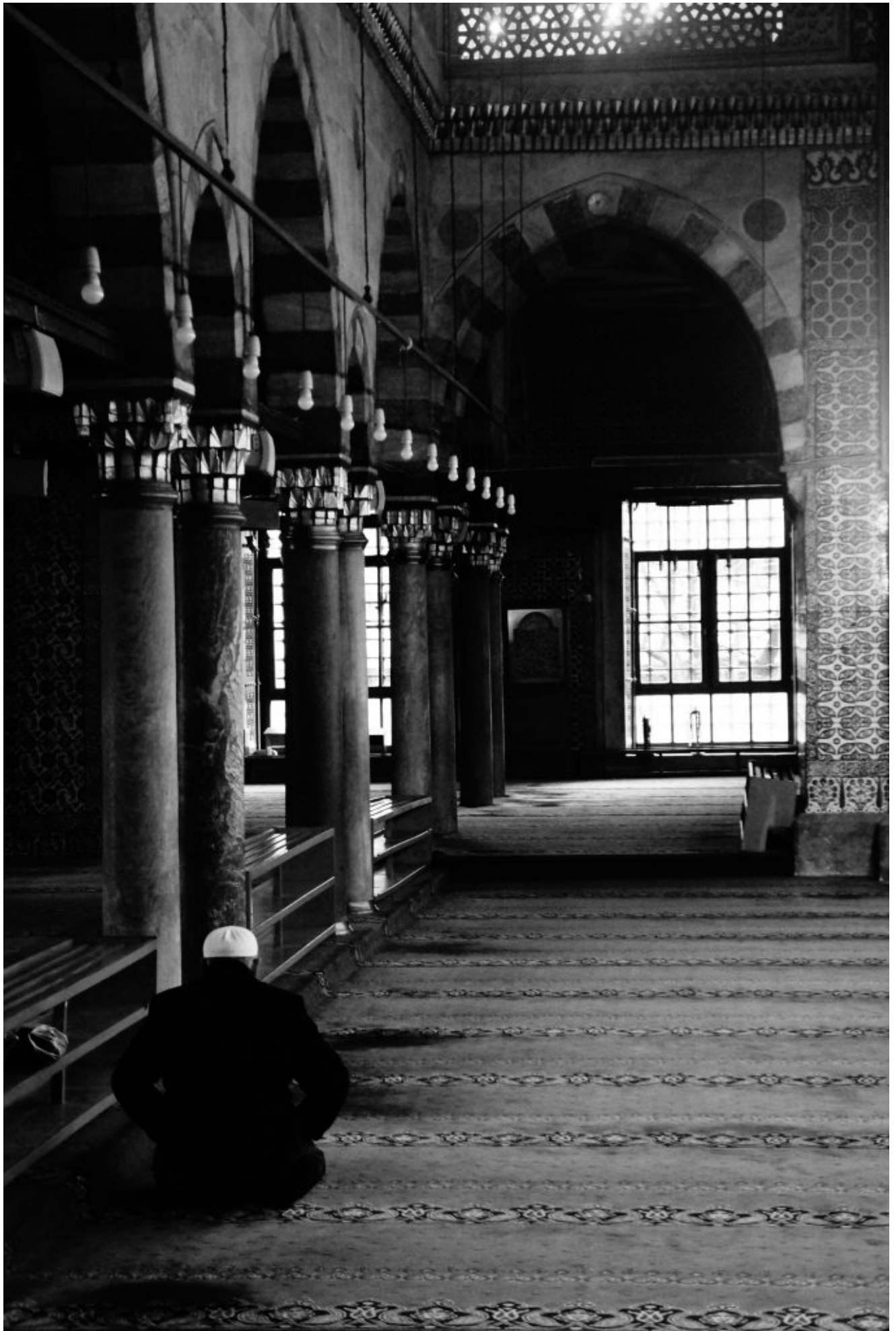


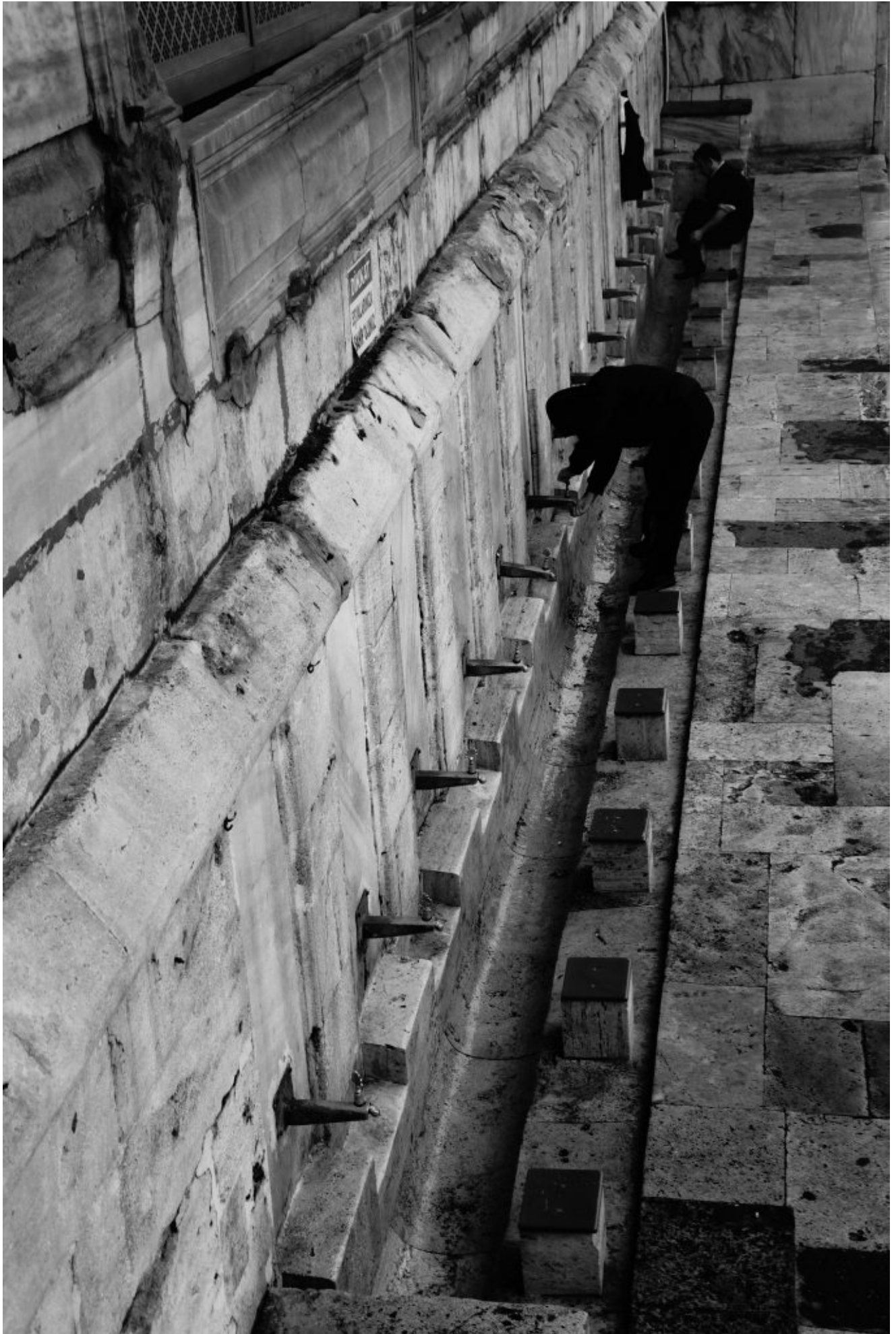
Medusa's Head, Basilica Cistern

After a visit to a photography exhibition we set the cameras

to black and white for the afternoon.







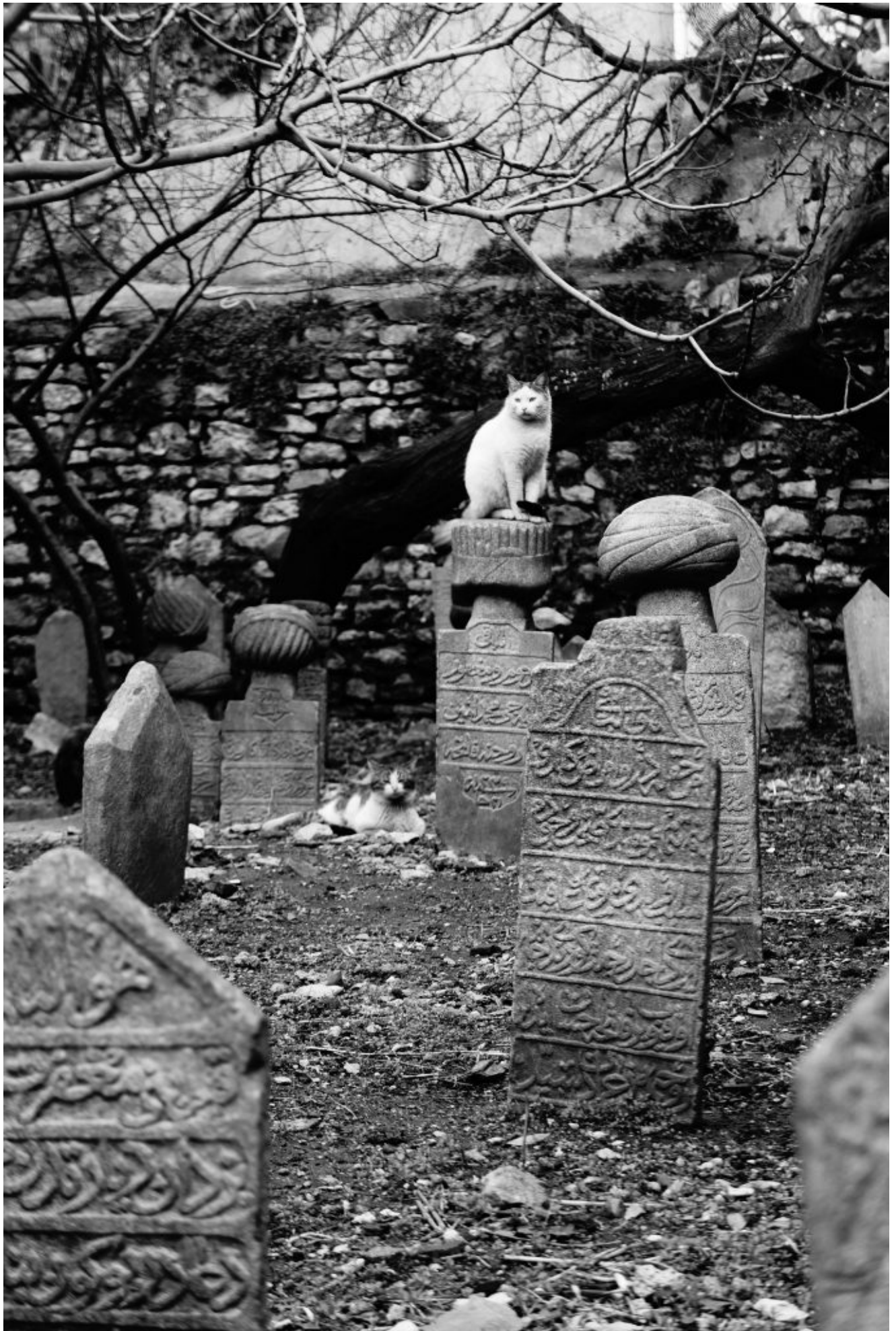








Basilica Cistern



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

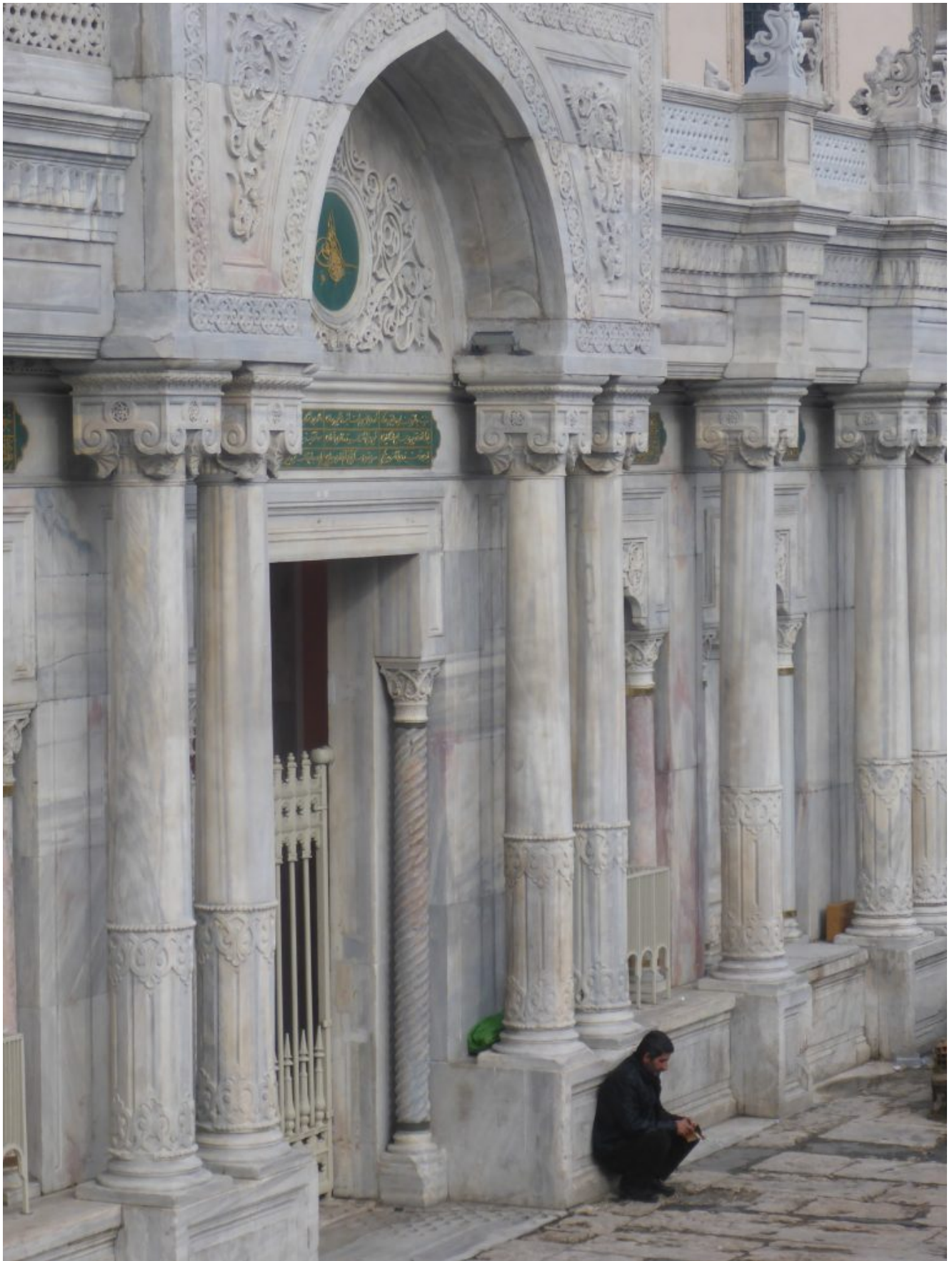


Carpet sellers delivering their goods

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

Thessaloniki to Istanbul

written by Marcus | 8 March, 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!

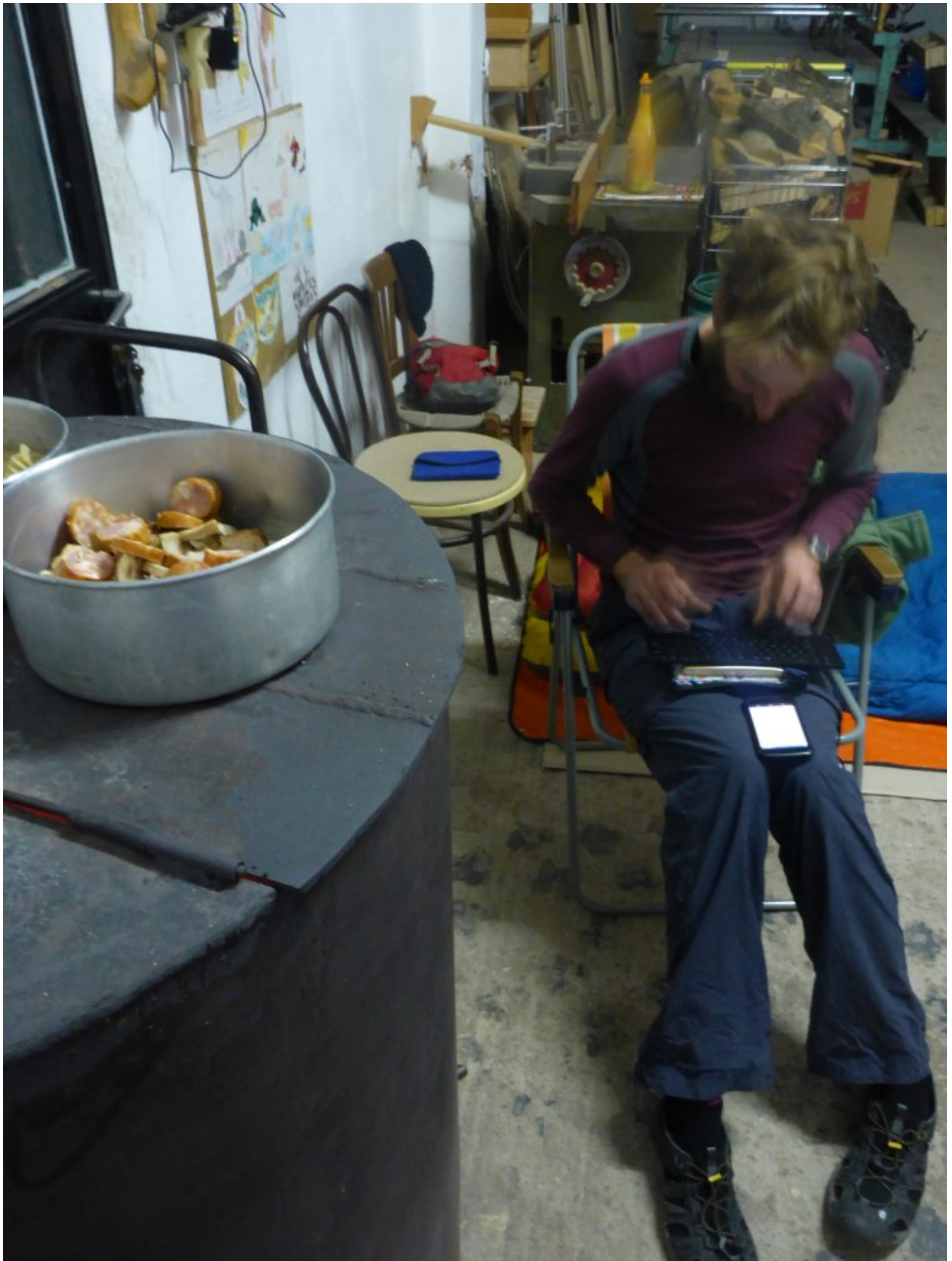
By the evening we've made it to the coast at the north east tip of Poseidon's Trident: Halkidiki. The forecast is for subzero temperatures overnight so we're keen to find some shelter if we can but there are no cosy churches in sight along the sea front at Vrasna. We stop to ask someone if we can camp 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

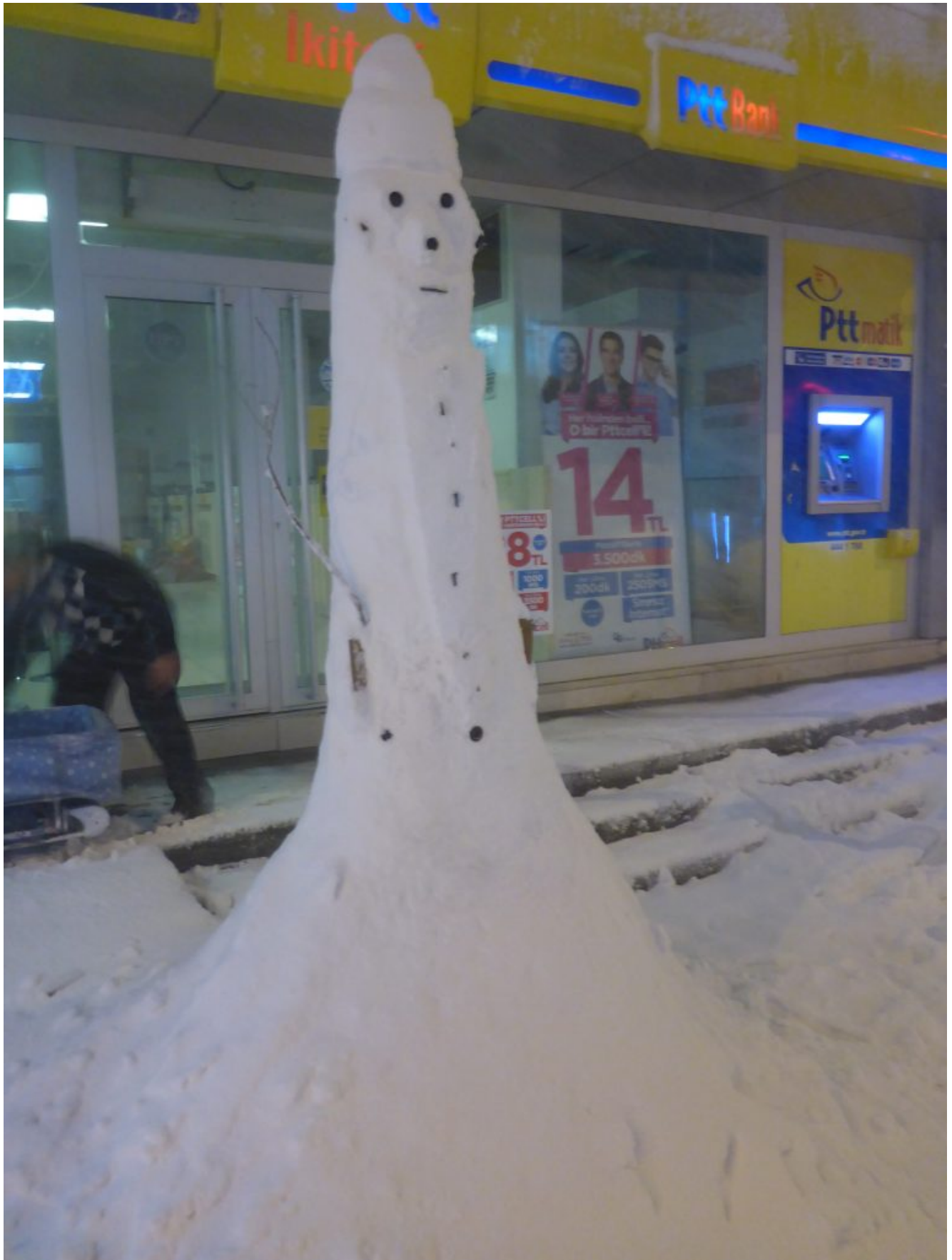


Deep frozen fish



Comparing snowy beards with Erding







Snowy Istanbul skyline