



City of Cats

'The city of cats', as one bookshop owner described it, is an exhilarating place with a variety of life that most other cities would find hard to match. Like a furnace in summer and soggy freezer in winter, the diversity of the seasons indicates the multiplicity of this Euro-Asian metropolis.

But perhaps more than the Aya Sofia or Blue Mosque, what impressed me most was the raw emotion that people show for cats. Whether Darth Vader black, powder-puff white, or a mix of colours in between - they're there on every doorstep, curled up on each little patch of spare ground, sitting majestically on top of that pillar-box red Porsche; fed and watered by their neighbours from apartments above, stroked lovingly by passers-by.



Image: Duncan Gregory

And you'd think it would be a blue-rinse granny thing, or a stroller-encased toddler urge – *"Let me out mummy, I want to pat the cat"* - to connect with the feline species. But no: busy looking ladies, with bulbous shopping bags and smartly attired office types, ties loosened to ease the stress of the climb, stop and bend down to caress the cat, lost for a moment in another world that carries them away from their more-earthly duties

I was in Istanbul to spend a week with my daughter; both defying climate change as we descended in from other parts of the planet, to the voluminous halls of the latest word in air terminals, just opened a few months before. After dire warnings about unscrupulous taxi drivers from airline staff, my fifty-kilometre ride into the city went without a hitch, sweeping under and over stilted motorways and when nearing the centre, through endless illuminated tunnels, with consummate ease. Contrast with the jam-packed streets of Beyoglu – my destination - was stark.

“Dad, dad!” I heard my daughter’s familiar voice call, as we negotiated yet another narrow street, coming to a halt on a corner, where I opened the door and climbed out to hug the young lady I had not seen for almost a year, causing much consternation and tooting from behind: not because I was hugging my daughter, but because the yellow cab I had arrived in was now blocking the narrow way. Turks seem not unlike Italians in their indiscriminate approach to driving and parking; but beware if you block their way!

We climbed up the spiral-like staircase – four flights of sixteen steps each, as I came to know all too well – with a fluffy white ball curled on a box, outside the third landing door. The climb was worth the reward, a somewhat quirky, but well-appointed apartment, with its jewel in the crown a broad terrace view over one of the busiest waterways in the world: The Bosphorus. On subsequent days we would re-run that journey together, with a bottle of wine, to sit and watch as day turned to dusk; and all kinds of sea-going vessels, moving in slow motion, back and forth.



Wine on the terrace overlooking the Bosphorus



The author enjoying kahvalti

The place where we stayed was a little gem, if perhaps something of a training camp for the up hills and down dales of the shop-fronted world outside. On the first morning’s street adventure, the typical Turkish breakfast – or ‘kahvalti’ - was a delicious discovery, with mind-boggling array of cheeses and jams, breads and sauces, meats and vegetables: a banquet in miniature, just for two. “*Why hadn’t I discovered this before?*” I thought to myself. It seemed such a nutritious assembly of foods, in a myriad of tiny dishes, which offered the opportunity to pick and mix according to one’s palate. Less than twenty-four hours in and I was beginning to enjoy! Every morning we would sample a different kahvalti hideaway, each time elated by subtle changes to a familiar theme. How wonderful to grow up with such tradition as part of the ingrained lifestyle.

But breakfast was just the start: a revelation in early morning eating habits, which introduced us to a new environment, a different culture, another way of doing things. And it wasn't so much the food – though cheese at breakfast was a bit unusual – it was more to do with the way the variety of food was presented as the focal point of interaction. I watched people nearby - and began to imitate their habits – of mixing vegetables with sauce, cheese with jam, as they conversed sometimes quite casually, sometimes more intensely, with their kahvalti partner. At lunchtime, the same could be said about mezes: a glorious mix of finger foods, set on a circular plate, almost as if the food was chairperson for the meeting, between hungry participants.



*Kahvalti for breakfast (above)
Mezes for lunch below*



Images: Duncan Gregory



Istanbul, like Sydney or Hong Kong, is a city of ferries. For me, this always conjures up a feeling of timelessness, or perhaps to be more exact, the feeling that time is ongoing and never-ending. Every hour, every day, every year ...the boat's hull bounces off the dock, the ropes are tied, the passengers move to and fro; regardless of whether one is there, or not, the process continues. Perhaps because of that momentary tethering to the dock, when land, boat and water are joined together, ferries seem more tied to time than

buses or trains. And so, we too joined in that passage of time, on board the ferries that traversed the Bosphorus ... up, down and across; along its tributaries and underneath its iconic bridge: the umbilical cord between West and East.



The ferries were the sunny days, when a May sun shone down with a youthful benevolence: the gentle start of more serious things to come in the searing heat of summer. On one particular day, just before the start of Ramadan, we were gliding back to Karakoy, at around one o'clock, when calls began to ring out from mosques on every side of the water. We had experienced the same multiplicity of sound in the evening, from our terrace vantage point, but being on the water and in the midday sun, that short moment in time was especially moving and memorable.

In between those sunny 'ferry' days we were caught 'on the hop' - on two or three occasions - and came to learn how Istanbul's notorious '*poyrax*' wind could suddenly transform the city, bringing with it a cold rain, from the north-east, across the Bosphorus. Misguided beforehand into thinking all May days are sunny days, we arrived with only light summer clothing ... and paid the price! A couple of soakings and unusually cold wine evenings on the terrace ensured that I came down with a severe cold a day or two after the holiday ended. "*It never rains in Istanbul, in May,*" our apartment host declared, whilst watching the rain pouring off his wooden pergola!



Image: [gettyimages.com](https://www.gettyimages.com)

Image: [Duncan Gregory](#)



Inside the Blue Mosque

The byways of Beyoglu were so varied and enticing, that for the seven or eight days we were there, my daughter and I hardly got near a mosque or a museum. One that we did venture into – The Blue Mosque – was undergoing a serious make-over, and so we decided that rather than look at drapes and boards with mosque and museum-style designs printed on them, we would be better served to get back to the real business we were there for, which was all about enjoying oneself on the streets and waterways of the city, meeting the locals – both people

and cats – and doing our best to support as many gastronomic enterprises as we could, during our discovery tour.

Departing the area, after a memorable stay, I said goodbye to the fluff-ball on the third landing, waved farewell to the elderly gent feeding five cats outside the entrance door and passed by the six-cat, miniature apartment block, on the corner of our street. The speedy, under-and-over drive out of the centre went without hitch and the more-than-honest, yellow taxi man, even smiled as he handed me my bag, before I turned and disappeared into the cavernous halls of the gleamingly new air terminus. It had been a great pleasure to get to know Istanbul; she already felt like an old friend and I promised myself I would return ... sooner rather than later.



Images: Duncan Gregory

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