

e-postcard from Siringe

18 May 2004

Kemal, our guide, pulled his motorcycle over to the right shoulder. I stopped next to him and said, "What are they doing with all of those huge cauldrons?"

"I don't know," he replied, "but I think it's worth finding out."

Quickly checking traffic on the quiet village street, he did a U turn and rode back toward the school courtyard we'd just passed. I followed, and pulled our bike into the shade of a large tree that sheltered the wall around the schoolyard of the village of Ayvacik Kocaköy along the Aegean coast of Turkey.

As we dismounted off the bikes, the old women gathered on the front steps looked up from their work, casting us curious glances. The men tending the boiling pots that stood like a long line of sentries in front of the middle school building also looked our way, but with longer stares and smiling faces.

After doffing our helmets, we strode into the courtyard, Kemal in the lead. He spoke rapid fire Turkish with several of the men, nodding and smiling at the news he received. Turning to us he said, "When they have a good crop, they prepare a feast for all of their people and also invite the surrounding villages. They feed everyone for free, with the poorest eating first." The men smiled proudly, as we exclaimed our endorsements of their charity.

"How many do they feed?" I asked, my eyes scanning the long line of boiling pots. More rapid fire Turkish was exchanged, followed by Kemal's summary, "They don't know for sure, it gets larger every time. They estimate that more than one thousand attended the last one."

"Come," Kemal said, "let's go see what the women are preparing."

We walked towards the steps of the old primary school building. Gathered around several large pots and large trays were a half dozen women pulling chicken meat from the bones. They smiled shyly and returned our greetings. They were typical Turkish teyzeler (aunts, or older ladies), wearing modest dresses and scarves to cover their hair, surrounded by an aura of generosity. After a brief discussion, Kemal told us they had cooked over 250 chickens, and the ladies were just finishing the job of preparing the meat to add to the keşkek (boiled pounded grain) and rice boiling in the giant stainless steel cauldrons in the schoolyard.

We ventured on into the interior of the old primary school, since abandoned for a new school on the other end of town, to find a room with another batch of younger women grating cucumbers into a one meter diameter tray. They were preparing cacik (cucumbers and yogurt), eaten as a side dish. As we turned to leave after speaking with them, two teams of women entered the room carrying five gallon size buckets of fresh yogurt.

It was an amazing production for a village of 500 residents. A large portion of the village's adult population was mobilized preparing food grown locally or purchased with community funds to give away to the poor and the residents of surrounding villages.

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The men tended the fires and wielded two meter long wooden mallets to pound the grain in the boiling pots of keşkek. Two men to a pot, they would smash the grain as a team. Some chose a steady rhythm, slow paced but never ending. Others, often younger, would work in frenzied bursts of five minutes or so, then nearly collapse. Regardless of method, all sweated profusely into their best clothes in the afternoon sun, everyone being dressed well in honor of the occasion.

I set up our portable printer and started giving pictures to the children who were playing in the courtyard, waiting for their parents and grandparents to finish working and join the fun. While I shot photos and ran the printer, Steph orchestrated the children and distributed prints and Kemal provided interpretation services and crowd control as people started arriving from surrounding villages.

Soon the mayor stopped by to thank us. In talking with him, we learned that he felt the most important thing about this feast was not the charity of sharing the food, although charity is an important element of their faith. (Charity is one of the five pillars of Islam, the religion of 99% of Turkish citizens.) Instead, he felt the most important thing they were doing was creating and sustaining good relations between the local villages.

"How true," I thought. I remembered the story I had read about a young man who had ventured off to explore the world on a motorcycle in the late 1930's. As he traveled across central Asia, he stopped for the night in a village. There, the people, who were friendly and hospitable, warned him of the dire peril he faced if he traveled down the nearly abandoned track over the hills to the village beyond. "They are horrible people," the villagers said. "They will kill you and steal your clothes," they warned. The next morning, as he set out, the women of the village cried and wailed, certain he was riding to certain death. The men of the village made one last attempt to dissuade him from his journey. The local holy man prayed and conducted their ritual of last rites for the certain dead.

Undaunted, he rode on, over the hills, to the next village some forty miles away. There, the residents ran from their homes shrieking with wonder. The entire village gathered and celebrated him like an arriving demigod. Their most urgent question concerned where he had come from. When they learned he had come over the hills from the previous night's village, they shrunk back in horror. "No!" they exclaimed, "Those people are savages. Surely, they would have killed you and stolen your clothes. You could have never survived a night spent with them!" In the end, both villages turned out to be populated by generous, happy and loving people. Two villages separated by no more than forty miles spent generations convinced that the next village down the road was filled with savage killers. They were two neighboring villages, separated throughout their history by untruths, mistrust and ignorance.

Kemal, our Turkish guide, had told us of his childhood filled with books and movies about battles between the evil Byzantines and the noble Ottomans. The Byzantines, Eastern Orthodox Christians, had been driven from Turkey by the Ottomans, Moslems who ruled the world from Northern India West to Northwest Africa. The Ottomans had penetrated Europe by conquering most of Spain and West along the North coast of the Mediterranean to the gates of Vienna, Austria.

In the movies that Kemal watched as a child, the Christian Byzantines were always depicted as despicable barbarian savages who ate Islamic Ottoman children alive. The Ottomans were depicted as liberators; brave, noble, kind and just.

As a young man, Kemal spent six months in London as an exchange student to improve his English language skills. After a couple of failed attempts to find families who were open to a Turkish Muslim student, he ended up renting an apartment with another student, Niko, who turned out to be a Greek. Greece is the only remaining fragment of the once glorious Byzantine Empire, which at its height under Emperor Constantine was the center of the Roman Empire, and

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stretched across most of the known world. Niko was a Greek Orthodox Christian, a remnant of the Eastern Catholic church that was largely swept aside by the rise of Islam.

Not surprisingly, Niko had grown up watching movies depicting Islamic Ottomans as despicable barbarian savages who ate Christian Byzantine children alive. Accordingly, the Byzantines were depicted as liberators; brave, noble, kind and just.

Two neighboring young men, two neighboring countries forming the border of Christianity and Islam, two neighboring civilizations, all separated by generations of untruths, mistrust and ignorance.

When the food was ready, the villagers brought us bowl after bowl, urging us to eat our fill. Old women and young men, hopeful smiles peering above the rim, held up bowls to us, their hospitality and good will bridging the gap of generations of untruths, mistrust and ignorance that so long has separated our two worlds.

Be well,
Doug

PS – some photos of our recent travels follow

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The Mosque of Sultan Ahmet I, more commonly known as the Blue Mosque, so called for the original dominant color of blue in the interior tile work. Sultan Ahmet I wanted to build a mosque that would be grander than the Sancta Sophia, the nearby church built by the Eastern Orthodox Byzantines who the Ottomans had driven from Istanbul in 1453. Ironically, the mosque is not commonly known by the name of the Sultan who built it as a monument to his reign, but by the color of its tile. It was built between 1609 and 1619. The lighted words roughly translate to "Human life will end but charity is eternal." Charity is one of the five most important tenants of Islam. Istanbul, Turkey.



One of the Ottoman treasures in the museum of the Topkapi palace, the former seat of the Ottoman Empire. Yes, those are diamonds. Istanbul, Turkey.



Worn marble doorway at Topkapi Palace. The metal track is for a roller on the bottom of the door. The palace was built in 1457. Istanbul, Turkey.



Our guide for the first portion of our trip, Kemal Ertem, teaches us about Islam at the Blue Mosque. Among the things we learned is that Allah, the god of Islam, is the same god of the Jews and of the Christians. Muslims include all the prophets of the Christian bible in their faith. Istanbul, Turkey.



Interior tile detail of the Blue Mosque. Istanbul, Turkey.



The central domes of the Blue Mosque. Most major mosques share this design of a central dome surrounded by four half domes. Istanbul, Turkey.



Ready to ride at our hotel across the street from the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. The flags on the pannier box are from the countries I have toured by motorcycle. Photo by Kemal Ertem. Istanbul, Turkey.



Fishing boat detail. Assos, Turkey.



Dipping sea water to wash the stone paving in the morning. Assos, Turkey.



Village women separating chicken meat from the bones for the community feast. Kocaköy, Turkey.



Cooking pots boiling rice and keşkek for the community feast. Kocaköy, Turkey.



Men pounding the grain to make keşkek for the community feast. Kocaköy, Turkey.



Village woman. Kocaköy, Turkey.



Homeric period wall of Troy (Troy VI). There were nine different cities built at the site of ancient Troy, all layered on top of the previous incarnation. The most famous Troy, described in Homer's poems of the Trojan War, was Troy VI. Ancient Troy, Turkey.

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Amphorae, huge clay pots that were buried up to their necks in the ground. They were used to store food year round and to keep liquid cool. Ancient Troy, Turkey.



Next month's gas prices in Southern California. The prices are in Turkish Lira, per liter. Along the road in Western Turkey.



Roman water pipes. They used Terra Cotta pipes, which were easy to create, not toxic like lead pipes and less expensive than stone. Stone blocks with holes bored into them were used for corners and junctions. Site of ancient Ephesus, Turkey.

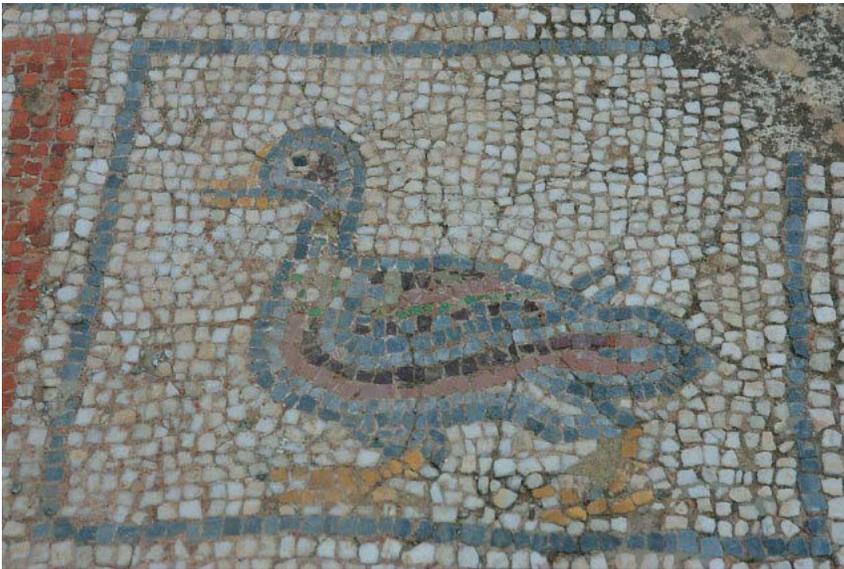


Kemal describes the grandeur of the main colonnade that connected the administrative district of Ephesus with the other parts of the city. At its height, in the second century A.D., Ephesus had as many residents as Rome, around 250,000, an estimated two thirds of them slaves. Ancient Ephesus, Turkey.

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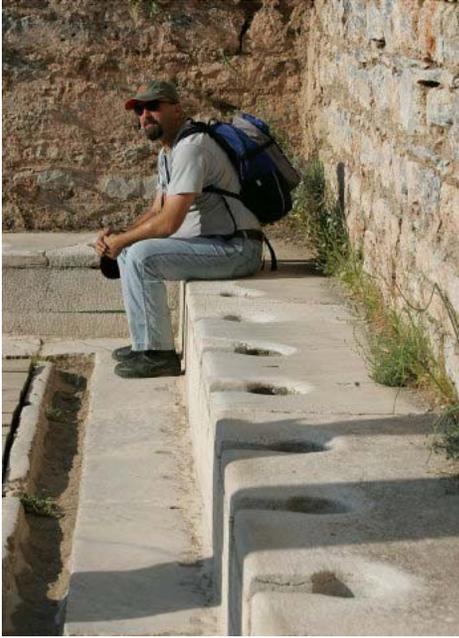


A junction between two sections of a marble column. The sections were joined by short pieces of iron and molten lead was poured down the channels to lock the iron in place. This method of construction was extremely vulnerable to earthquakes, which destroyed most ancient cities in this region. Ancient Ephesus, Turkey.



Floor mosaic detail. Ancient Ephesus, Turkey.

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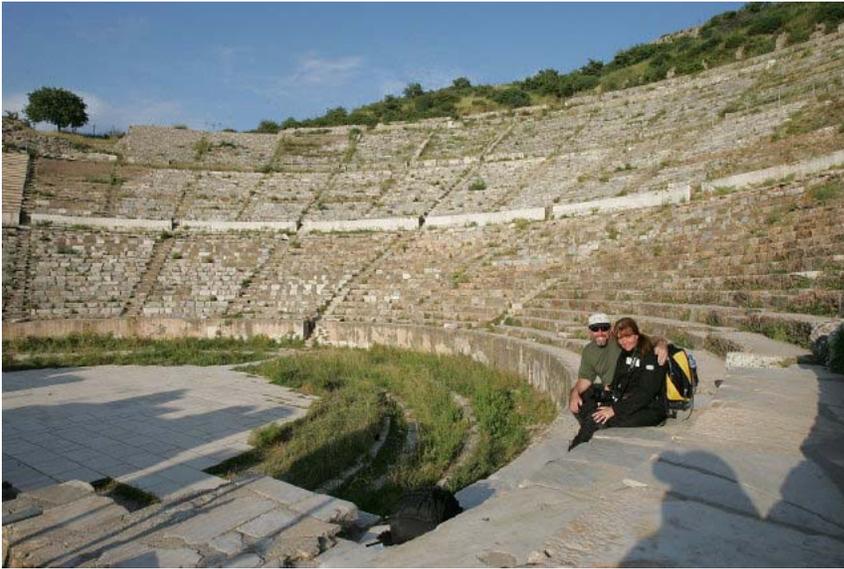
Kemal demonstrates the proper use of the Roman toilets. Water ran beneath the seats and carried the waste down to the sea. The channel in the floor in front of his feet carried warm water used for personal hygiene. Ancient Ephesus, Turkey.



Library of Celcius. Built in the second century A.D. Ancient Ephesus, Turkey.



Library of Celcius detail. Ancient Ephesus, Turkey.



Steph and I at the theater in Ephesus. The theater seated about 30,000 people (32,000 attended a Sting concert here in 1993). St. Paul the evangelist preached to the Ephesians here. Local history tells that he barely escaped with his life after a local vendor started a riot. Paul's evangelizing was threatening to lower sales of idols of the local gods, and the vendor led a mob to try and kill him. After escaping with the aid of some Christian soldiers, Paul never returned to Ephesus, instead writing letters to the Ephesians. St. John the apostle lived and died here in Ephesus, with a large Basilica built in his and the Virgin Mary's honor.