

Hopalong Hotep Hobbles the Holy Land

Part 2: Syria, Israel, & Turkey

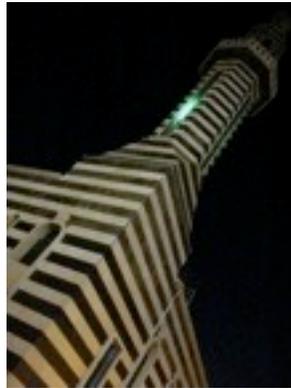


December 2009/ January 2010
Egypt/ Jordan/ Israel/ Syria/ Turkey
Sean Crowe

Part 3: The Axis of Surreal

Arabian Nights

Many claim Syria is the 'friendliest rogue state in the world' and as I experienced en route to Damascus that some Syrian's may be a little too touchy; the rest comfortably confirm the claim. Fleeing the shared taxi and peg legging it to a traveller's hotel, I quickly discovered that despite some serious drawbacks; Syria has to be the most mis-marketed country. I am sure the Syrian government would blame George Bush, His Speech Writers, or the Western Media. But the real blame should be on their internal PR department for not cashing in on Disney's Aladdin (I don't think copyright even applies here) as after a few minutes in the old city of Damascus, one quickly realizes that black or white; this place is an actual magic lamp where every wish is full of mystique and mayhem.



Damascus is renowned the world's oldest inhabited city. With this vintage, everything in Damascus is a photograph - yet very difficult to photograph. The old city is divided up into quarters reflective of the cultural and spiritual remnants 10,000 years of immigration, occupation, and conquest leave behind. Principally today the majority of the population is Muslim with a sizable Christian population. Denominations aside, the Syrian population tends to have whiter skin then those reared south of the Mason Dixie. The city streets are a labyrinth of two story buildings, poor electrical wiring (I would avoid the place



when raining), merchants, mosques, and markets. As the city has been built over itself several times. secret passages can be found to transport you under the city or portal you into a new courtyard or unknown. As getting lost in Damascus is not hard. On my first night I quickly found myself in such a state. Looking to the sky I followed a glowing blue light, as I approached closer I realized it was a florescent crucifix, and at this moment I found Jesus. I was now in the Christian Quarter, meaning the blood of Christ himself – alcohol!

Celine Dion

There is no Arab equivalent to 'Dos Cervezas Por Favor', so when you settle into a cafe and see the availability of beer and the abundance of hard liquor - you can't help but double fist. After a little arabic pizza, a Lebanese beer and some Turkish Raki, I wandered into a hotel bar that was about 900 years old (they've had a few renovations since then, but no single malts). I was expecting to see the 72 or so Virgins promised in the Quaran. As there are no such things as virgins anymore, I had to settle for a local beer (Barada) and the following conversation with the bartender:

- Bartender: 'Etes Vous Canadien? Parlez Vous Français?'
- Sean: 'Oui. Je parle Francais tres, tres, tres mauvais. Je suis Sean'

- Bartender: 'Je Suis Jacques. Faites-Vous aiment la musique de Celine Dion'?
- Sean: 'Non'
- Bartender: 'Pourquoi? J'adore Celine Dion'!
- Sean: 'Je deteste la musique de Celine Dion' (My French is limited and I did not know how to 'parle' this more diplomatic)
- Bartender: 'Pourquoi !?' (Angry – he slams his hand on the bar)
- Sean: 'Je prefer autre musique Canadien'
- Bartender: 'Ce qui autre musique Canadien'?
- I show him my ipod and sample (Neil Young, Corb Lund, Wintersleep, Sam Roberts, New Pornographers, Feist, etc) .We share a moment of détente.
- Bartender: 'Vous êtes très chanceux pour habiter au Canada'.
- Sean: 'Comprend. Mais pourquoi'?
- Bartender: 'Celine Dion habite au Canada'!
- Whether I could say it in French or not - I did not have the heart to tell him otherwise.

Most Syrian's (as well as Lebanese) speak French as either a first or second language. It dates back formally to French Mandate for the region and more informally to the Crusades. As for Celine Dion (most of the songs you hear in ambience are in English), the music of Syria seems to consist of either Islamic prayer propaganda or crappy pop. Rock and Rap appear non-exist, international artists such as U2, Sting, Jay-Z, and even the Beatles seem to be unknown by many in the populous.



East Berlin

It only takes a few hours in Syria to realize that as awesome as it is to see and experience, it is not a place you would want to reside indefinitely. The country is technically a democracy, however has been under emergency rule by one party/ one family (Ba'ath/ al-Assad) since 1963. The next day I explored more of the city with some fellow travelers. One of whom Marco, summarized the Syrian experience best; 'This place reminds me of growing up in East Germany, except with shopping'.

My only familiarity towards totalitarianism comes in the form of 'Voluntary 1984' - Facebook. When visiting an internet cafe or wireless hotspot in Syria, you may be asked for your passport (if you are not, the place is submitting a fake log to the government). If you try to log into a foreign newspaper, you will time out before the browser. And if you type www.facebook.com - due to government paranoia over some Western or Zionist conspiracy; access is denied. You can web proxy into Facebook, but unless you are employed in a company whose internal language is made up of acronyms... you probably would not know to do that.



Le Petite Mortir

In the Western world adolescent boys are warned against partaking in a certain activity as it may develop hair and/ or callus on their hands. In reality one probably stands a better chance of ripping it off then developing a callus. Nevertheless in the Arab world no one seems to warn young men that if they spend too much time on the floor in the orgasmic ecstasy of bowed prayer; they may develop a callus on their forehead. Concentrating in Syria, but existing throughout the Arab world, there is no shortage of devout Muslim men who (with the dedication of a 13 year-old boy) compete with each other on who can develop the largest callus of vain piety. In the end the only real difference between the activities of young Arab and Western males is one culture is both simultaneously proud and (visually) able to brag about it.

Life In Ruins

As alluring as a city may be, one cannot spend all his travel time there - no matter how good the food, attractive the women, or comfortable the room. With this attitude I boarded the Syrian equivalent of the Greyhound at a bus station resembling Mos Eisley Spaceport (In all my times spent in North Africa and the Middle East, I cannot help but notice the similarity to aspects of Star Wars) to travel across the desert to Palmyra. Palmyra houses some great Roman ruins, and an old Castle of the chivalrous nemesis of the crusaders Saladin (One can view his tomb in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus). There are also a few tombs and bus loads of Italian tourists who like the British, seem to enjoy traveling the world to spend time in the remnants of their once-upon-an-empire.



Cry Freedom

After my near death from diarrhea experiences in India, what Sean Crowe travel story would be complete without at least one mention of something that is not exactly dinner table conversation? Returning to Damascus, this incident had nothing to do with bacteria or parasites and everything to do with the powerful antioxidants found only in a litre of freshly squeezed pomegranate juice. The net-effect is very similar. Thankfully I found an Internet Cafe (who asked for my passport) with a large photo of 'El Presidente' above the computers, and a public washroom to deliver my protest of emancipation.



The Emperor's New Clothes

Despite the security of wealth, I would not want the insecurity of being born into royalty or even worse - a political party. Whether you are King, President, Prince or Pauper your picture will be adorned with propaganda force all over your country to remind your people how things could be worse (the irony); so be thankful for you. The photos are quite amusing as the

style is more reminiscent of a Barbie Doll than a world leader. But as a 3rd World Leader, your photos will showcase your leadership as Royal Barbie, Business Barbie, Military Barbie, Sport Barbie, Etc.



Spa Day

When traversing the Arab world, make it a point to forget your razor and indulge in the masculine facial that only an Arab barber can provide. Your face is left in a state of smiling bliss as the practitioner massages, tones, oints and erases the hair by scrapping follicle by follicle. For piece of mind; make sure you ask for a fresh blade and negotiate the price once the razor is removed from your neck.

Exact Change Only

I originally intended to make an overland trip from Egypt to Turkey, however within days of kicking off in Egypt, I received an email to come to Tel Aviv for New Years by laser-girl herself, Gili. The good was I was going to a world party capital for the most anticlimactic day of the year! The bad was that I was going to have to backtrack and give up on wonders such as the Crac De Chevaliers castle and the rock formations of Capadocia. Oh well, just another reason to return another time - hopefully able footed. On my final moments in Syria, I went to purchase a water and happened to use an Israeli Shekel instead of a Syrian pound (I could not tell the difference, and did not know where I received it). The cashier, forced the coin back into my hand and told me to toss it down the drain as he is suppose to inform the police. Thankfully he put his customer above the law.

Part 4: Exodus

The Promised Land

Heaven has a cover-charge, and so does the land once called Palestine. The trip from Amman to Jerusalem (via Jericho) cost me about \$55 in taxi, bus, exit and entry fees. It was the most expensive 25km of my life. The border crossing is a demilitarized zone segmented by the River Jordan (incidentally the size of this river is anything but Biblical). Exiting Jordan, a bus traverses the King Hussein/ Allenby Bridge to a border entry in the West Bank. Once here you place your luggage for airport style baggage screening and enter a customs line for airport style people screening.

Rogue's Gallery

On the bus I met a widow from Toronto, who in her late 60's travels the world volunteering. I also met a nice newlywed Australian couple on a 6 month tour of all the world's most romantic honeymoon locations: Lebanon, Syria, Israel Jordan, Pakistan, Iran, and some more countries that end in 'an'. As advanced search and questioning is reserved for people who have evidence of a visit to a questionable country on their passport, I did my gentlemanly (now gentlemanly) duty and let them go ahead in line. My Syria trip would look benign in comparison ;)

Is the Gaza Strip What Middle-Easterners Call A Brazilian?

After the old widow and the Australians were escorted away for further search and questioning, the pretty border agent enquired about the reason for my trip. I stated tourism, she asked if I intended to visit the Gaza Strip. As much as I was about to say 'yes', I realized she was referring to the incarcerated land mass and a 'yes' would void my entry - no pun intended. Once she confirmed I was not traveling to Gaza, she transformed into a tourism office with several recommendations of what to do in Israel. Complementing on her fashionable eyeglasses and using my cast as a prop for flirtation, I suggested she take a few days off to show me around. I did not get a 'no', but I did get a blush, a passport entry stamp and a 'I don't think my boyfriend would approve'.

The Lazarus Language

Before visiting Israel I was under the impression that Hebrew, like Latin was an almost extinct language and only existed for cultural expressions and prayer. I thought the modern dialect would be more similar to the roots and construction of Ebonics or Spanglish. I was pleasantly surprised (and frustrated...oy vey) that this was not the case as Hebrew is a revitalized language and now continues to evolve.

Do Suicide Bombers Have Self Destructive Personalities?

Due to several incidents that you may have read about in the newspapers over the years, there is understandably a strong climate of cautious paranoia in Israel. The trip between Jericho and Jerusalem is one of amazing desert landscapes peppered with armed outposts, cement walls and barbed wire - sadly standard construction materials all through Israel.

Once you pass the fortifications, Jerusalem is an amazing city that is part history, part myth, and part government. Also, it is probably the only place where a rabbi and a priest can walk into a bar without a punchline. Aesthetically Jerusalem is stunning. Built upon several green olives treed hills, almost all buildings are constructed of an off-white limestone with the original name of Jerusalem stone. Forget the history/myth/government as it is when the sunsets in Jerusalem that one witnesses the divine.



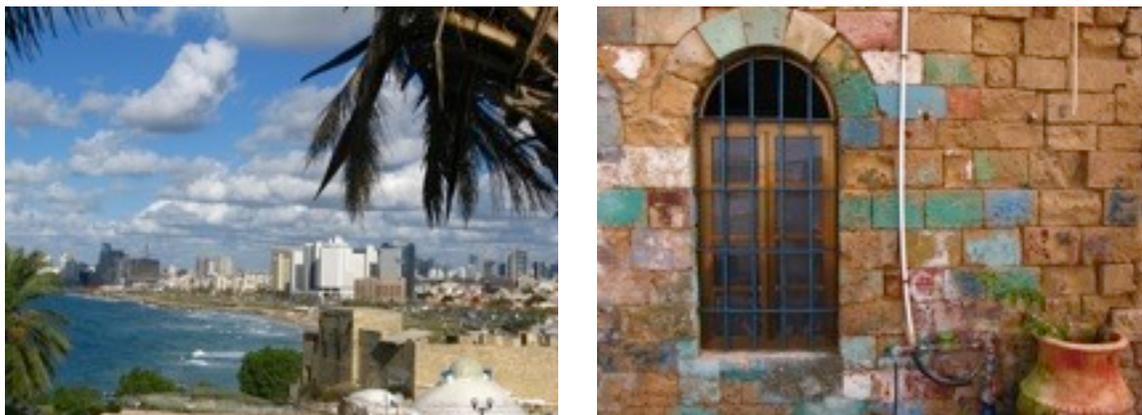
We Now Return To Our Regular Scheduled Program

When I knew little more than the alphabet, I remember playing with a globe and noticing a city called Tel Aviv. Of course I could not read and thought there was an actually city named TV and one day I would view/ visit.



Tel Aviv is a gem on the Mediterranean. A relatively new city at just 102 years, Tel Aviv boasts a fantastic coastline of beach and facilities (including playgrounds for adults) that gently rises into boulevards of white Bauhaus buildings and apartment block neighborhoods housing a diverse crowd, kitschy shops, great cafes, fantastic pizza, too much falafel, too much shwarma, and pubs. And like all the major or fringe concourses of the world, several are Irish pubs of course.

The popular drink is understandably vodka while the regional beer is only Goldstar. You would think a country consisting of Hebrews with a city called Beersheba would have more malted selections. Anyway, despite being deemed kosher; Goldstar is anything but clean as it does not take too many to deliver an awful hangover. All is not lost though, the wine is near divine as the industry likely roots back some +/-2000 years to a myth about a Mexican-named vintner who made it from water.



Hostel Environments

The Middle East seems to have a shortage of quality backpacker's hostels for 2 reasons. The first is whether student or middle age, the cost of a hotel is relatively cheap. The second is most hostels are set up with the severance packages of burnt out 30 something's who want to shag university girls - and most of these only go to the gateway exotic of Prague, Dubrovnik, or San Sebastian. Returning to the Western price list of Israel, hotels are once again replaced by hostels and Tel Aviv can be added to the list.

My Shoes Just Don't Go With That

Ancient cultures such as the Chinese or Hebrews have a New Year's date contrary to that of our Julian calendar. As the Jewish have the religious Rosh Hashanah, they have the evening of Silvester reserved for the secular party. My friend Gili and her local friends brought me to the warehouse/ deluxe nightclub district for some vodka fueled revelry. The nightclub scene is off-the-hook and the one we visited was so posh, I felt out of place with my mismatched footwear.



As I am such a popular guy in Tel Aviv, I departed the nightclub (it was hard to dance/ stand for hours in a cast) around 1am to a house party I received an invite to earlier in the day. Roaming the streets with two others from the hostel, I scored us an invite to the party by chatting up a girl in a store. (The store was near a street called 'Penis Street' in the area of Neve Tsedek) She told me, 'I have a boyfriend (what's with all these Israeli girls and their boyfriends?), so don't get the wrong idea but you and your friends should come to my friend's house tonight'. I wish I remembered her name as the party was fantastic with a mix of artists, students and others who are best characterized as new bohemians.

Smashed Bag of Assholes

Waking up on New Year's Day was a very sobering experience for a couple reasons. The first being I was sober and hang-over free. I avoided the Goldstars and as vodka was about 50 shekels a shot (~\$15) at the nightclub, my budgetary mind did not over indulge. My friend Gili was in more appropriate condition for a New Year's morning and recited, 'I feel like a smashed bag of assholes'.

RIP

The second reason New Year's was such a sobering day was I learned a fellow who grew up in my neighbourhood when I lived in Edmonton was one of the Canadian soldiers who died in Afghanistan on Dec 30. I first saw the news on a Hebrew TV station over breakfast. I thought one of the soldiers looked too familiar. Opening my email minutes later my inbox sadly confirmed his name: Sgt. George Miok.

I am not too sure what my stance is on the armed exercise in Afghanistan. What I am sure about is my appreciation for those who go to these frontlines; whose efforts arguably allow me to prosper, playboy and parle wisecracks as some bastard child of the western world. Thank You.

Adult Autism

For a secular city, someone forgot to tell Tel Aviv that shutting down fully completely on Friday for almost 24 hours on the weekly Shabbat is not a very secular thing to do. Normally I would be all fine and dandy, but when you are traveling and have things to see, in a limited amount of time... WTF? The first evening was pleasant, as I was hosted for an excellent dinner by a University acquaintance Ari and his girlfriend. The next morning when I could not get public transit and I could not rent a car in Tel Aviv - my adult autism set in! After some cursing, a little twitching, (I would have kicked something if it had not been for my leg) my friend and I managed to find a shared mini bus to Jerusalem. It was here in the Parking Lot of Gethsemane that a car rental agency was open.

Walking On Water

Removing my cast to drive (the peddles were really small) the little Mitsubishi east, we travelled down the Mountain to the sub-sea level anti-tude of the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is the world's first health resort and the industry continues with beach cabanas and natural cosmetic products. The salinity of the sea is in excess of 30% (so speaking from experience - no splashing

in the eyes), making life difficult to cultivate, but easy to float. The bottom is covered with a special mud that helps exfoliate the skin and echo my principal of getting dirty to be clean.



Maybem, Motorists, Mosquitos and Messiahs

After a brief stop in the beautiful Ein Gedi park, we avoided several idiot drivers and their accidents to make it to Jerusalem for sunset. Pending the road, straddling the median or divide line seems to be the common driving etiquette in these parts.

There is a psychiatric wing in the Jerusalem hospital reserved for those who visit the city and in doing so become so overwhelmed they think they are destined to become the messiah. The condition is diagnosed Jerusalem Syndrome and it affects Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. As until Atheism became a religion, I would be considered an Atheist - I was unaffected.



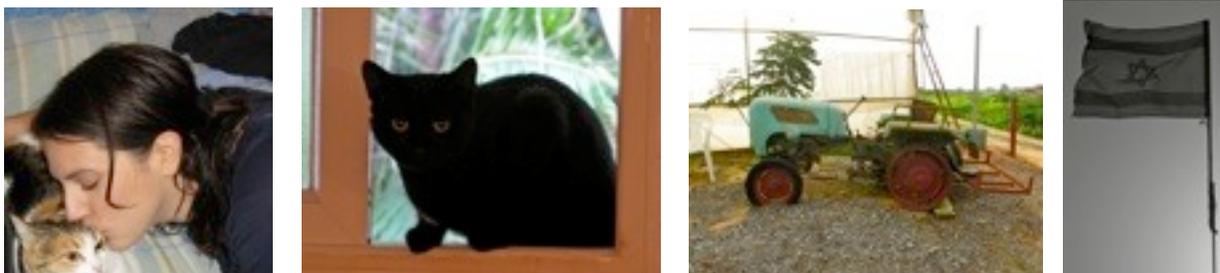
The phenomena of Jerusalem Syndrome may have some scientific basis. While watching the sunset near the Wailing Wall, we struck up a conversation with a friendly old woman who told us about a special mosquito that exists only in Jerusalem and if bitten, you will come back. She first visited from France in the late 1950's, and relocated 8 years later.

My mosquito came in 1.5 forms:

1. The form of a dead camera battery
- 0.5. It was still the Shabbat and photography was frowned upon in the old City.

Little Lions of Zion

Some years ago my friend Carla decided to pack her bags to move to Israel. After a stint on a Kibbutz and in Jerusalem, she moved to a cooperative settlement called a Moshav in a French influenced seaside city named Netanya. A Moshav is like a Kibbutz (sadly) without the drugs and orgies. Instead of Sodom's Lot, this Moshav had no shortage of pomegranate trees and cats. Thanks to Carla's cat food, these animals had the athletic build of little lions and were actually big enough to be employed by Andrew Lloyd Webber - if they could only communicate more than a 'meow'.



Extraordinary Rendition

Whether personal or professional, when traveling by air I always try to wear a suit jacket as the airline industry loves business travelers and accommodates your tardiness and temper. However breaking my ankle was even better for travel - you did not have to wait in line, you can use clean private handicap washrooms, and airport staff even drive you around terminal to terminal in golf carts. My system worked flawlessly until I entered Ben Gurion International Airport.

Trying to avoid the large line upon entry, I inquired on where the handicapped line was. I was told to have a seat and a few minutes later I was met once again by an Israeli gorgeous government worker (GGW).

- GGW: 'Your boarding pass and passport. Where are you going?'
- Sean: 'To Istanbul'
- GGW: 'Your leg, did it happen in Israel?'
- Sean: (I was tempted to say the suicide bomber got me) 'No in Canada'
- GGW: 'Yet you still chose to come on this trip? Why?'
- Sean: 'It is better than sitting around'
- GGW: 'And how long have you been in Israel?'
- Sean: '5 days'
- GGW: 'You say you have been here for 5 days, but your passport says 4'
- Sean: 'I must be mistaken - 4 it is'
- GGW: 'Stop lying to me! I don't understand you! Why you are traveling with an injury? It does not make sense. Who are you? Tell me the truth!'
- Sean: (O'Israel I visit you for a few days and it feels like I have been in this relationship for years)

After I explained once again, she had a coworker take my pack to the x-ray machine. He took the bag to a table and unpacked it. Another agent x-rayed all my stuff item by item. I was requested to turn on and password my computer, ipod, and mobile phone; which they disappeared with. I was then escorted by a male guard to a change room reminiscent of a crumby department store's. After a body scan and pat down, I was told to remove my cast and clothing and place it in the bin. He took the bin for x-ray. Sitting alone in my underpants, I was unaware of the famed underwear bomber a few days earlier in the USA. In hindsight I suppose my crow print boxers were just too custom to be explosive.

The guard returned with my cast/clothes, and after I dressed we retrieved my bag (which was repacked). My ill tempered girlfriend escorted me to the Turkish Airlines counter where I was presented with a first class ticket I did not book. She walked me past the security gate (as I suppose 1.5 hours of searching was enough) and did not even give me a kiss good-bye. It was not until I arrived in Turkey that I realized my mobile phone was broken. I hope she is not expecting a call.

Part 5: Revelations

The Jewish Conspiracy... Or Lack There Of

After visiting Israel it amazes me that there is still a collection of conspiracy theorists, anti-Semites, and possibly a drunken Mel Gibson who feel there is a global Jewish conspiracy over our financial, political, and media systems. As punishment for such remarks or DUI charges, governments should send these individuals for an all expense paid vacation to Israel.

For a country (even in my lame legged condition) a seasoned marathoner ;) like myself could move across in 6 or so hours (although I may get cast rash doing so) this place does not have it together and probably stands an equal or greater chance of destroying itself internally then by the external actors who surround it. Drivers cannot drive, there is a civil war amongst its Jewish citizens, it virtually closes for 24 hours every week, and Israel has a new Prime Minister on a monthly basis. Even Canada has more direction (however I never caught what the Hebrew word for prorogue is).

Back to Point, after a couple of days the Ignorami will realize that despite some significant achievements of individuals of Jewish descent; as a group they are akin to any other nation and as such can barely run their own country, yet alone the world.

Middle East - See It While It's There

Although understandable, the airport experience in Israel served as some sour icing to the already bittersweet cake that is the Middle East. In every country I met some of the most friendly and generous people I will ever encounter. The majority want the same as you or I; the best for themselves and their loved ones. However their religious and political leaders seem to be on the same domination spree that has kept this region in turmoil since it was first inhabited.



1@gm



The nature of the conflict is no longer (and probably never was) religious or cultural - but economic. The other factors are just used to sway masses/ differentiate justification. Each country (and its inhabitants within) are fighting over plots of sand with little more purpose than drying up blood. And with populations growing, freshwater is diminishing quicker than oil... while the destructive capabilities of weapons is ever inversely proportional to their portability.

The current situation is probably similar to the Balkans in the early 1900's, and sadly if this powder keg fully ignites, it will pull the whole world into a final act of this Greek tragedy.

It's Better To Be In A Dysfunctional Family Than A Nuclear One

The optimist in me sees the only route to salvation for these countries is to form an economic union/ joint strategy for development. There is no reason for conflict if they put their eggs in each other's baskets. If Europe was able to achieve the European Union after two world wars amongst a populous who is significantly more culturally, ethnically, linguistically, gastronomically, behaviorally, geographically... diverse; then building a Middle-eastern union should be relatively simple.

Part 6: Turkish Delight



Continental Embrace

Despite the airline losing my cane (they lost 2 canes during my trip), my first totter in Istanbul watered down my prophetic doomsday views and renewed some hope for the region. When it comes to cities, all have their unique aspects, yet all become very McWorld quickly. Istanbul is a world wonder in itself. European, Middle-eastern and Oriental cultures converge just as dramatically (but not destructively) as do the tectonic plates below it. Grand palaces, mosques, basilicas, markets, theatres and bazaars share the landscape with ultra modern skyscrapers, art galleries and cityscapes - nevertheless everywhere you visit fragrant aromas and conversations fill the air. Like Montreal, Buenos Aires, or Barcelona - it is a city that does not really belong on its respective continent, but in the its case; Istanbul can only exist because it sits on two continents.



Orient Express

Istanbul sits on both the European and Asian continents and is segmented by the Bosphorus Strait. Traveling around the city is cheap, easy and efficient with a great rail system and pedestrian pathways. At times the city can be ultra-touristy and expensive as it is a barter culture with no shortage of merchants shlepping counterfeit items, stolen merchandise, leather goods, jewelry, carpets, pashminas, silks, spices and other remnants of the spice trail. On the flip-side, there is a whole industry emerging upon modern Turkish design, which (I believe) in a few years will gain international recognition and rival the best of Italy and Scandinavia. Go now while the prices are good.



The Grand Bazaar (Kapali Carsi) was opened in 1461 and has to be one of the world's oldest and largest indoor shopping malls. It attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors daily! And like shopping malls it is now outfitted with plasma screens and no-smoking bylaws. Starbucks has yet to secure a lease on the premises, but there are plenty of artisan purveyors of strong and syrupy Turkish Coffee.



Tough As A Turk

Sadly backtracking had cost me about 2 days and now I had 24 hours in Istanbul with no cane. Fueled with a constant supply of Turkish Coffee, Pomegranate Juice, and an over-indulgence in Turkish food (one of my favorite cuisines) I was able to trot through a good chunk of Istanbul. The greatest physical triumph of my entire trip occurred in my final hours in Istanbul. I walked up (and then down) the hundreds of stairs to ride the elevator up the Galata tower and look upon the city and its googleable landmarks - Topkapi Palace, Ayasofya, Blue Mosque.



Epilogue: A Leg Up

Goodnight Vienna

The way home was the inverse of the way here; Vienna-London-Vancouver. This time in Vienna I had a choice - either to hotel it for 6 hours - or visit a few sites, a bar and upon closing time; drink a couple cans of Red Bull and wander the streets until departure. As I had a tooth-brush in my carry-on, I choose the second economical option.

There's No Class Like First Class

In London the choice of my past evening proved to be a good one. I had just checked into the airline counter and not only was my frequent flyer status reinstated as 'Elite'. Upon an inquiry for a better seat (I may have flashed my cast) - I was upgraded to first class at the gate. The seat was a private pod that reclined 6 feet into a bed, had a 21 inch television, offered 5 course meals and ice cream on demand. What made my seat even more comfortable was the benefit of travel miles - my flights for the entire trip cost me little more than \$300 in taxes. Sorry Visa.



Good-bye / Salam / Shalom / Xaatrix / Gule