



Standing today where the cheapest seats of the Great Theatre would have been, it is easy to imagine the hustle and bustle of Ephesus at its prime, 2,000 years ago. The view from the topmost seats of the theatre is spectacular. The Harbour Street stretches away to where the Aegean Sea used to lap at Ephesus before the port silted up. Goods would be unloaded here and then take to the Agora (market place) to the left.

Walking through the caverns (the so-called 'backstage') beside the ring, where gladiators must have waited – anxiety and apprehension coursing thick through them before being called upon to fight to their death – you can still feel a palpable sense of fear and despair.

This was the eighth day of my Turkish road trip. We'd spent two days in Istanbul, two days in Gallipoli and three days in Izmir. The car I was driving was the Nissan X-Trail – a good set of wheels for an extended road trip, given its roominess, comfort and luggage capacity.

Back then, the silting up of the port of Ephesus was its curtain call. After it was abandoned, the sands of time, literally, enveloped the city completely and this is what kept it

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Turkey!
Great drives,
awesome food,
enigmatic ruins and
such friendly people.”

well preserved. Excavations started about 150 years ago, and today, this is Europe's most complete example of Greco-Roman architecture from hallowed antiquity. And, 80 percent of the city is yet to be excavated. Hadrian, the Roman emperor who was bitten by the travel bug was here, and Artemis, Apollo's twin sister was worshipped here at the Artemision which was recognised as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Today, Ephesus is wondrous to wander through. The highlight is the Library of Celsus that was built in the 2nd century AD and was the third-largest library in the world after Alexandria (in Egypt) and Pergamum (in Turkey). It was designed to protect its 12,000-

odd scrolls from the extremes of temperature and moisture. About 8km south of Ephesus is Meryem Ana Evi or the House of the Virgin Mary. It is believed that after Jesus departed to heaven, it is here that Mary came to spend the rest of her life. Today, it is a place of pilgrimage, and, as we noticed, not just for one particular faith. There is a wall on which people write down their wishes and pin them up, and these make for some very interesting reading. More than money or power, it's love and happiness that most people wish for.

WHERE THE ROADS GO
Right from when we started from Istanbul, I was marvelling at the condition of the roads in Turkey. In fact, over the 2000km I drove, I didn't come across a single pothole or an extended stretch of uneven road. The D.525 that we got on to drive south towards Mugla was fabulous and even though we took our time, often stopping for cups of tea and snacks (see box) and at Kusadasi, we were making good time towards Bodrum. But then on a whim – and because we were on a road trip and had no particular schedule – we decided to cut away towards the sea, on the Aydin-Didim Road and eventually got



Built in 117 AD, the Library of Celsus once held 12,000 scrolls in a temperature- and moisture-controlled environment.

Turk of the town

It's a country that's rich in more ways than one – be it culture, architecture, food, sights or warm people. **Rishad Saam Mehta** talks about exploring Turkey by road.

PHOTOGRAPHY RISHAD SAAM MEHTA



Simit, the favourite anytime snack that Turkey loves. I did too.



Gözlemes, good conversation and cups of tea with Khadriye.

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The classical city of Letoon has recently been
conferred UNESCO World Heritage status.
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You always find the time to take a break and enjoy a cup of tea or three in Turkey.



Mustafa Kemal, the first President of modern Turkey, is still respected and revered.

lost. But that was great because we discovered such a lovely seaside restaurant called the Giritli Restaurant, set in a little cove. Run by a family from the Balkans, the jolly waiter told us that the fishing trawler was just in and whatever was freshly caught he'd serve us

that. What we ate that evening was sea bass and sea bream. The closest place to this restaurant on the map is the town of Kazikli.

We had, in fact, stopped there just for a cup of tea, but the setting and the sunset won us over and we spent more than two hours there. As

a result, it was pitch dark by the time we left for our hotel 55km away. The 32-odd kilometres from the coast to the main highway were on a narrow country road. This is where the X-Trail's powerful headlights that swivelled in the direction the steering wheel turned, were an absolute boon. It gave me the confidence to corner at a good clip and we made it to Hotel Marvel near Bodrum in less than an hour.

The next morning after a sumptuous breakfast spread at a Karya Firin (*firin* means bakery), we drove to Bodrum. Once a small fishing village, Bodrum today is tourist hub and not the kind of place we were looking to visit on this Turkish road trip. So we set our sights on the little town of Datça – a 90min ferry ride south across the bay, but since the ferry wasn't operational, it was a 3.5hr drive to cover 230km. The town is

on a narrow tongue of land called the Resadiye Peninsula stretching westwards from Marmaris, and the sea views on the drive post Marmaris are just breathtaking. Here at this little seaside village we met Murat and his wife Nurcan. They actually live in Eski Datça (or new Datça) that is 2km away and is a drop-dead gorgeous village populated with stone houses, the walls of which are often draped with colourful flowers, and verdant little lanes. Murat and Nurcan have a lovely home here which they share with Sofi, their dog and two cats. They invited us over for dinner and asked us to stay the night rather than go looking for a hotel. It was a fun and happy evening.

One of the first things I did the next day was stop at an Opet service station and wash off the bugs and the dust that had accumulated on the car over the week since we'd

started driving from Istanbul. Service stations in Turkey have very convenient car-wash stations that are coin-operated and self service. The first lira starts the high-pressure water spray and the second lira starts the soap spray and then the high-pressure water spray again. Within ten minutes or so, the X-Trail was spanking clean.

Opet service stations, in particular, were my favourite to stop at. A woman owns the Opet chain and one of her mandates is spotlessly clean washrooms at all service stations. In fact, even the doors to the washrooms along with the water faucets, the soap dispensers and napkin dispensers are touch-free. Sure, they weren't the cheapest as far as price of fuel goes but, at least I was assured that the quality of diesel wouldn't be subpar.

Fethiye with its blue seas and sunny days is where pasty Britishers



The village of Eski Datça with its stone houses and artisan shops.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

TURKISH AIRLINES FLIES a convenient and comfortable daily service from Bombay and Delhi to Istanbul. The Business Class is an absolute delight with good food and great service. The flights to India depart Istanbul late in the evening and that is a good thing because the Turkish Airlines lounge is really worth spending time. It is a last chance to snack on some tasty Turkish food, putt at the mini driving range, race some cars on the giant track or watch a movie. There is a large choice of rental cars available in Turkey and it is advisable to book online. The cost of diesel is about Rs 87 a litre. There are three major mobile networks in the country and they are Vodafone, Turkcell and Turk Telekom. I used Turkcell and it worked great all over, especially for Google Maps.

And lastly, put aside all thought about this part of Turkey being not safe. Not once did I feel threatened or unsafe.

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The beach at Butterfly Valley has been cited
as one of the prettiest in the world.
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arrive longing for the sun. In fact, a testament to how popular this place is with the British and how liberal Turkey is as a country is that hotels here advertise the fact that they serve bacon and eggs for breakfast.

But rather than Fethiye, it was Ölüdeniz that called out to me more. Quieter and secluded, and 15km south of Fethiye, Ölüdeniz is one of Turkey's prettiest beaches. More than the turquoise water – that gives the Turquoise Coast its name – it is this place's location that makes it such a charm. It has a long sandy pit of a beach with a blue lagoon behind it and Baba Mountain towering above it. The latter makes this a prime destination for paragliding and the views from up in the air are astounding. In fact, during mid-morning, the main street of Ölüdeniz becomes a landing strip of sorts as tandem paragliders descend here.

Even more stunning by virtue

of location and colour of water is the beach at the Butterfly Valley. The beach can be reached either by walking down a steep and treacherous path from Faralya or by boat from Ölüdeniz. Of course, I

chose the latter, and in 25min, I was there. The valley gets its name from the unique Jersey Tiger butterfly that is found here, and on my walk to the little waterfall I did come across many butterflies

(I don't know whether any of them were the Jersey Tiger butterfly), and an old tortoise.

From Ölüdeniz, I didn't really have any destination in mind; all I knew that I had to get to Antalya in a day or two. But Berna, the receptionist at the Sea Horse Beach Resort at Ölüdeniz told me over dinner, that since I was so enamoured with Ephesus I should do a circuit that takes in some other classical excavated cities.

“They aren't that popular and they're off the usual tourist circuit, but I am sure you'll like them,” she said as she spritzed some lime over her lahmacun, rolled it up and bit into it.

It was a 162km circuit from Ölüdeniz to Kas and that was probably my best driving day. I got to put the X-Trail through its paces, on narrow, unsealed roads up to Pinara where I had the site all to myself. The amphitheater is one the

best located in all of Turkey, under the snowcapped Taurus Mountains that soar above it. At Pinara, too, is the temple of Aphrodite, the ancient goddess of love and procreation. At Tlos, Ebrahim, a shepherd tending his flock, took me scrambling over the ruins and rocks to show me an ancient carving of two serpents and a chalice representing an apothecary, and another of the Roman eagle and masks at the amphitheater.

On my way from Tlos to Pinara, I stopped at a little family run eatery for some çay (tea) and gözlemes (savory pancakes). That is where I met Khadiye. She was the one roasting the gözlemes over a wood fire in that village, but the half an hour I spent talking to her over cups of çay was like a hamam for my mind. Curious without being inquisitive, opinionated without being obtuse and well informed with a subtle and confident sense of humour, it was a delight spending

GOOD GOD! THE FOOD

THE FOOD IN Turkey is so much more than doner kebabs and baklava, and with both of us being foodies, we had a great time discovering the various delights of Turkish food. In Izmir, a very kind gentleman named Celeleddin Arpat (@celalarpat) showed us around the Kemeralti. We started off with some *bal kaymak* (honey and thick clotted cream) for breakfast and ended the

day with *kokorech* which are grilled lamb intestines. In between, he took us to his favourite places to sample some amazing food. We tried the *börek* (a type of filled pastry), deep fried liver, *katmer* (crunchy pancakes), and numerous varieties of baklava and innumerable cups of çay.

On our drives, we'd stop at little eateries and sample various kebabs,

thick and hearty lentil soup made of meat stock, and home-cooked stews. Then there was *menemen* (Turkish scrambled eggs), or *suçuk* (spicy beef sausage) that we'd have for breakfast, and *mantı* (Turkish ravioli) that was perfect for lunch. Turkish cuisine is truly a multilayered delight and there is no better way to discover it than on a road trip.



If you like meat and have a sweet tooth then Turkey is calling your name. Discovering the food was an absolute delight.

time with her and I would have spent a lot more if I didn't have other places to visit. But that half an hour told me all about the uniqueness of Turkey. Even though it is a Muslim majority country, it is very liberal. When Mustafa Kemal Atatürk became the first president of the secular republic of Turkey, he used his immense power and popularity to bring about rapid modernisation through revolutionary social and political reforms to give the country a shining new identity outside the shadow of the medieval Ottoman

Empire. One of his most ardent reforms was the emancipation of women. This is why many women in Turkey, whether they wear a headscarf or not, often wear an air of confidence.

That evening I drove what is probably my favourite road in the country – the D.400, the road from Patara to Kas. Hugging the Mediterranean sea with wide and perfectly cambered corners, this road is primed for a sports car. But my X-Trail didn't feel too bad either. When I went too hard around a

bend, it would apply the electronic brakes to stop it from a slide. When I disabled it, it got a little scary because the rear end often went rogue. What I thoroughly enjoyed, however, was the beautiful sunset views and the fine fragrance of burning rubber.

That drive, the evening in Eski Datça, that day spent in the Kemeralti in Izmir and that evening at the Giritli Restaurant were the best times...actually my entire time in Turkey, from start to finish, was fantastic. **A1**



Tasev Cafe Bar, which is close to the historical elevator in Izmir.



The road from Patara to Kas, was my absolute favourite road to drive in Turkey.