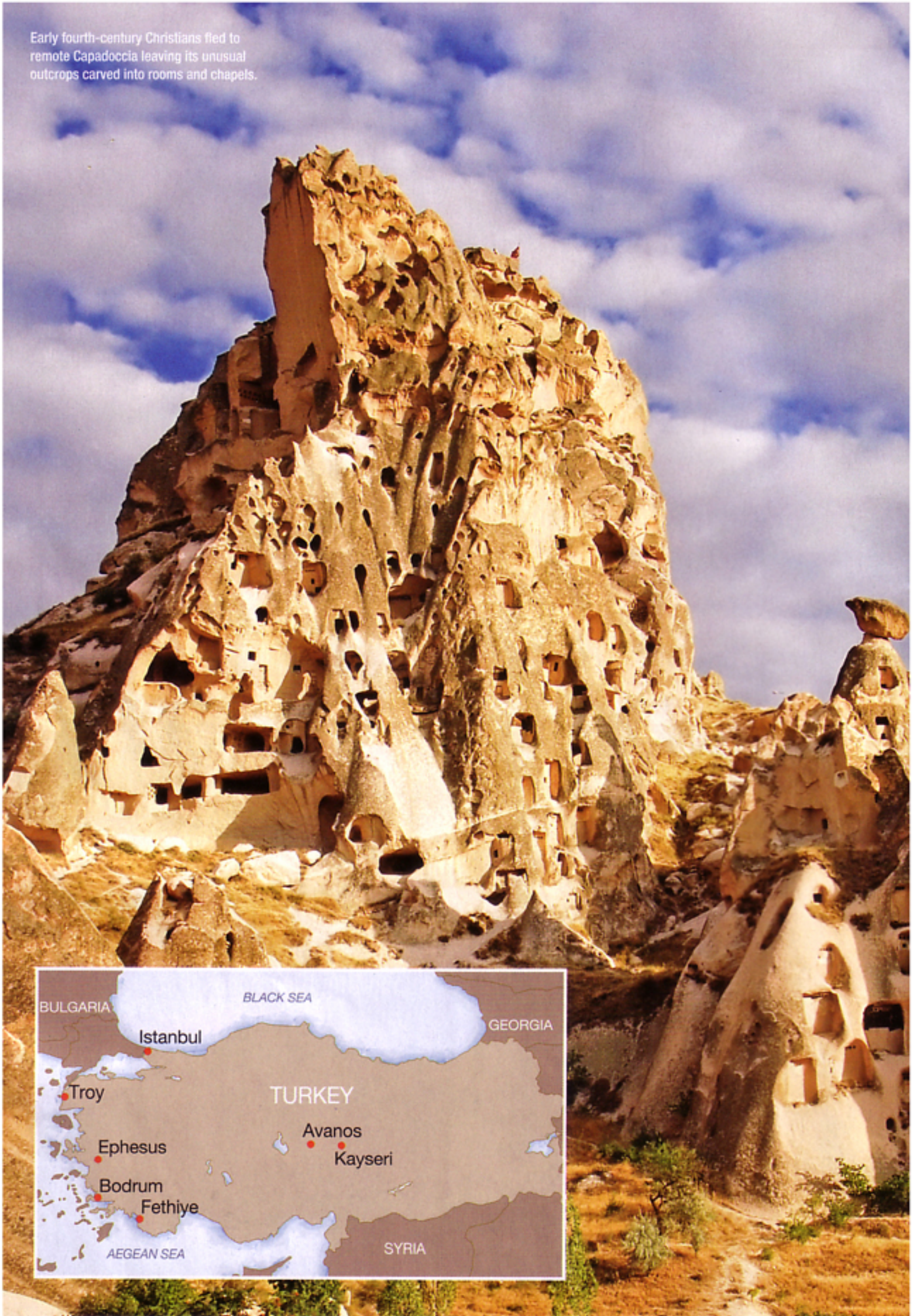


Early fourth-century Christians fled to remote Capadocia leaving its unusual outcrops carved into rooms and chapels.

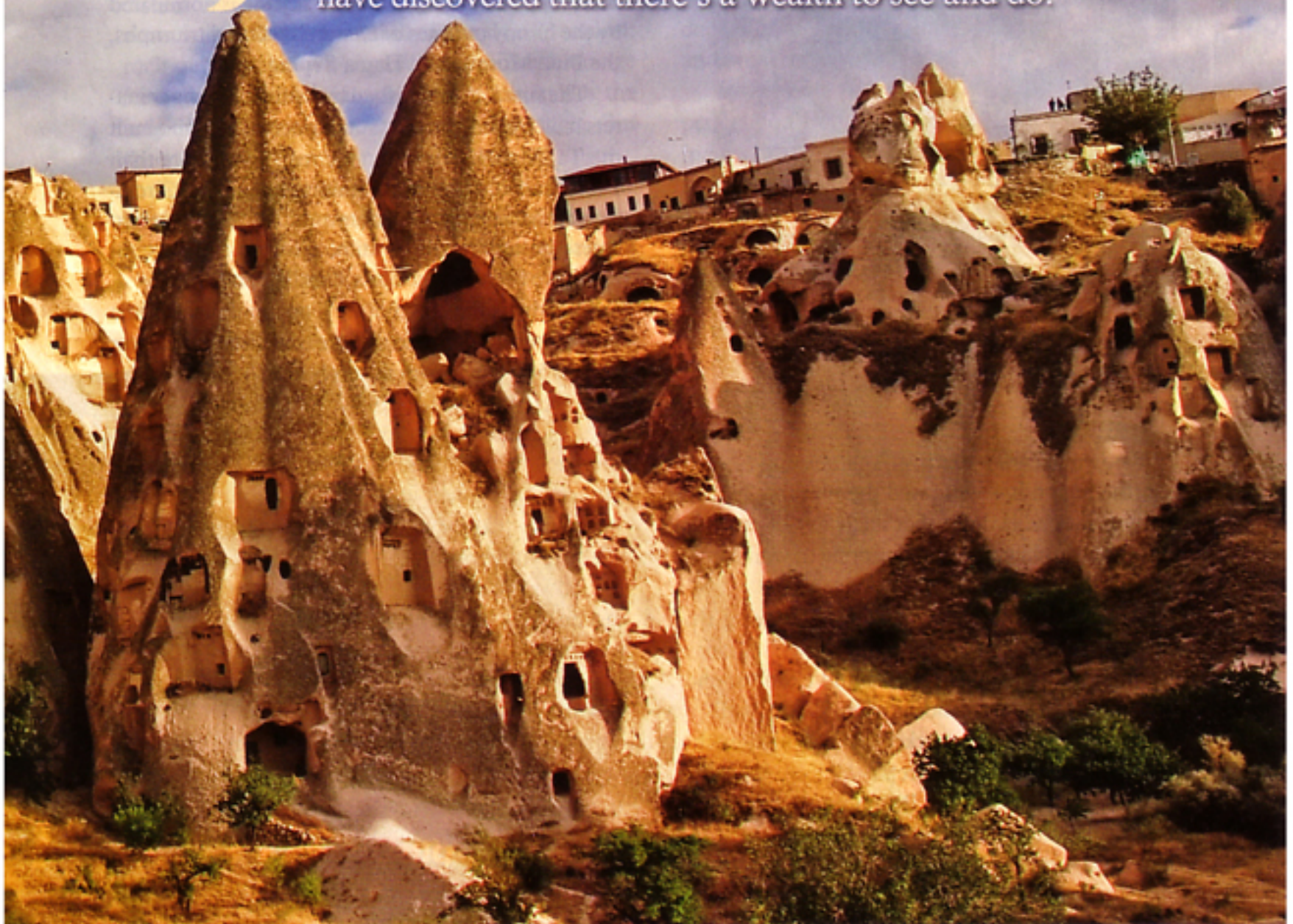


# Meze and moonscapes

From the Turquoise Coast to the fairy chimneys of Cappadocia, Turkey's dazzling sights don't disappoint

BY *Roger Weatherburn Baker*

**I**t's been said that there are more ancient buildings, ruins and excavations in Turkey than in both Greece and Italy combined. Long neglected as a tourist destination, travellers have discovered that there's a wealth to see and do.



*Cappadocia's draw is its valleys of conical rock formations that look like giant phallic symbols. They're the subject of many a jab, wink and stifled giggle*



The 5000 shops of the Grand Bazaar have been selling goods for 600 years.

Known in earlier times as Anatolia and Asia Minor, the region has witnessed the rise and fall of so many great civilizations that its legacy of outstanding art and architecture ranks among the foremost in the world.

And what better place to start exploring than Istanbul, a city that assaults the senses? A city of dazzling sights, pungent smells and exotic sounds, from richly coloured mosaics on harem walls, to spices wafting in the markets, to the high-pitched prayers from ancient minarets.

The city straddles the Bosphorus Strait, one of the most strategically important bodies of water in the world, connecting Europe with Asia. The Romans called the city Byzantium and made it the

capital of their Empire. But they weren't the only ones to leave their mark. There were others, such as Persians, Arabs and the Crusaders.

Today, the city's cobbled streets swelter under an intense summer sun and teem with a population of 10 million Europeans, Asians, Muslims and Arabs, speaking languages as colourful and varied as their origins.

#### **THAT CONSTANT BUZZ**

Known for a thousand years as Constantinople, this great centre of religion and learning, power and wealth was the busiest port on the Mediterranean and the richest city in Christendom. Hunkered down behind massive walls and strengthened by almost 200 towers, the ancient city prospered for centuries, withstanding wave after wave of assaults until it was finally captured by Mehmet II in 1453 marking the beginning of the Ottoman Empire.

Enough of the great fortress walls remain to still intimidate. But today the city's skyline is dominated by the lumpy outlines of two architectural triumphs, the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia.

The first is distinguished by its six towering minarets built by some of the same stonemasons who built the Taj Mahal. The second is rose pink, more than 1400 years old and ranks among the greatest architectural achievements in the world. Within these two awesome testaments of faith, mosaics and calligraphy have been elevated to a dazzling art form.

Nearby is the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Topkapi Palace home to a glittering collection of treasures amassed over almost 500 years from throughout the far-flung empire. Here too is a labyrinth of brilliantly tiled corridors and chambers of the harem that once accommodated over a thousand concubines! Unlike them, you can have lunch in the hilltop restaurant, which has spectacular views of the crowded shipping lanes of the glinting Bosphorus below.

Down by the ferry boats, next to the faded pink facade of the Orient Express terminal, are the covered alleyways of the 400-year-old Spice Market. Aromatic powders have been sold here since the days when the precious cargo arrived in wooden ships from Egypt or by camel trains from the distant Orient.

A few strides away is the sprawling indoor maze of narrow streets and passages known as the Grand Bazaar. This medieval mall is the last word in shopaholic relief. More than 5000 shops, boutiques and stalls have been selling goods here for 600 years. But



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be warned: it's easy to lose your way, as well as your wallet and everyone you walked in with.

#### **A TRIP TO FAIRY LAND**

A short plane ride from Istanbul to Kayseri in central Turkey is one of the most bizarre landscapes on our planet. You'll feel you've just stepped off into some distant corner of a forgotten galaxy. Cappadocia's draw is its valleys of naturally-formed, tall, conical, rock outcrops known as *peri bacalari*. These strange formations look like giant phallic symbols and are the subject of many a jab, wink and stifled giggle. But there's more to them that meets the eye.

Early fourth-century Christians fled from the Middle East to this remote and desolate region leaving scores of these outcrops carved out as hidden chapels adorned with exquisite frescoes. You can

take an early-morning, hot-air balloon ride soaring above this bewitching wilderness as the orange dawn streaks across the sky.

There is evidence of early Christians below ground too. Around Kayseri are the remains of entire underground cities. Some believe there could be as many as 300 of these ancient honeycombed communities. Narrow, waist-high subterranean passages connect dozens of rooms, kitchens, storehouses, wine cellars and even stables.

Perhaps as many as 30,000 Christians evading persecution from the Romans are believed to have hidden dozens of metres below ground in these claustrophobic caves, sometimes for as long as a year.

Not far from Kayseri is the town of Avanos. For centuries this cool, leafy community beside the river Kizilirmak has been famed for its beautiful hand-

*Brooding over the popular resort of Bodrum is one of the most impressive fortresses on the Mediterranean, built to protect medieval pilgrims*

made pottery and ceramics, some created by masters of the craft recognized worldwide. Among them is the legendary studio of Kaya Seramik Evi. Many of the designs created here are reproduced from originals that adorn the sultans' palaces and the country's most important mosques. Avanos is also famed for its soft-as-butter silk carpets, the most collectable of which have 900 knots to the inch and the maker's name woven into the pattern.

If you plan to buy a piece of Turkish culture in a tourist mecca, note there are few ATMs outside Istanbul. You'll be using plastic. But don't hand it over too quickly however polite and pleasant the salesman may seem. Be prepared to haggle. The Turks love to bargain. They'll offer you coffee, cakes and smiles while they attempt to take you to the cleaners. When they start to sense you may actually know what you're doing, a couple of their "brothers" show up to verbally gang up on you. When they all start to get really offended and tell you they can't possibly support their wives, children and relatives on the paltry sum you've offered, you're getting warm.

#### ON TURQUOISE SEAS

After the sizzling summer inland, the southern coast of Turkey is blissful relief. It's marketed as the Turquoise Coast, which is not only romantic but perfectly apt. It's a craggy ribbon of sandy coves, inlets and bays of crystal-clear waters ideal for sailing, swimming and snorkelling.

It's a Turkish Riviera of picturesque harbours and fishing villages that teem with boats, parasailors and sun worshipers by day and throb to a disco beat by night. But behind this contemporary façade lies a much more ancient history.

Brooding over the popular resort of Bodrum is one of the most impressive fortresses on the Mediterranean, the daunting castle built on a peninsula by the Knights of St. John to protect pilgrims on the way to the Holy Land. Nearby is Halicarnassus the site of the ancient tomb of King Mausoleus, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world that gave us the word mausoleum but was torn down by the knights to build their castle.

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Traditional wooden *gulet* boats ply the Turquoise Coast in the country's southwest.

## ALL ABOARD TO ASIA MINOR

**Turkish Airlines** (tel: 866-435-9849; [www.thy.com](http://www.thy.com)) offers direct flights to Istanbul from Toronto, and connecting flights from other Canadian cities. A number of other airlines, including **Air Canada** (tel: 888-247-2262; [www.aircanada.com](http://www.aircanada.com)), and a number of European carriers also offer connecting service; compare prices on [Travelocity.ca](http://Travelocity.ca) or [Kayak.com](http://Kayak.com) before you book.

It's easy to hit Turkey's major sights and the path is well-trodden by European tourists.

Those who'd rather have everything arranged for them will find great options from Canadian tour outfitters, whether it's the gritty budget tours of **Gap Adventures** (tel: 800-708-7761; [www.gapadventures.com](http://www.gapadventures.com)) or the high-end cultural escapes of **Adventures Abroad** (tel: 800-665-3998; [www.adventures-abroad.com](http://www.adventures-abroad.com)).

For more information, consult **Tourism Turkey** (tel: 202-612-6800; [www.tourismturkey.org](http://www.tourismturkey.org)).

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Today, traditional wooden boats known as *gulets* leave the postcard-perfect port of Fethiye to cruise the Turquoise Coast for two or three days of gentle sailing and sightseeing. Once, ancient ports like Fethiye were important centres for seafaring Greek and Roman traders. None was more important than Ephesus.

**ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME**

Ephesus is one of the greatest ruined cities of the western world. Its spectacular ruins date back to the fourth century when the bustling city flourished under Roman rule as their chief Aegean port. The magnificent Library of Celsus is the glorious centerpiece of this once rich and prosperous community. Evidence of their extraordinary affluence and refined culture is everywhere in excavated villas, decorated with exquisite murals and mosaic floors, and temples, arches, fountains and colonnaded streets built by some of the finest artisans of the Roman Empire.

St. John the Evangelist is believed to have taken Jesus' mother to Ephesus in 37CE. Today, the modest stone House of Mary on a wooded hill on the city's outskirts is a shrine revered by both Christians and Muslims who draw water from a spring believed to have healing powers. Also nearby are the ruins of the Temple of Artemis, another of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

From Ephesus, it's a short drive back to Istanbul. Many visitors find it hard to pass by one of the oldest ruins of them all, the site of the ancient city of Troy. This pivotal site of Homer's *Iliad* and the place where the decade-long Trojan War was fought, is legendary if also a little disappointing. A thriving port city 4000 years before Christ, it's not surprising that sadly there is little left to see. But, like so much of Turkey, its shadows are long, its echoes are powerful and its history as irresistible as a siren's song. ■



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