

A Sacred Tour to the Land of Mystery A Pilgrimage of Empowerment

TO KNEEL AND PRAY with thankfulness that the privilege has been given to recognise "Him Who God shall make manifest"; to plead for forgiveness for shortcomings and humbly ask Him to show the way to be useful, steadfast and obedient. These were the prayers and exhortations that drifted through this pilgrim's mind as I sat in the House where Bahá'í wrote of the role that man must play in creation:



Pilgrims to the "Land of Mystery"

O My servants! Be as resigned and submissive as the earth that from the soil of your being there may blossom the fragrant, the holy and multicoloured hyacinths of My knowledge. (1)

Visiting Turkey and the historic places of Edirne and Istanbul revived the spirit and fed the soul. A tour to be well recommended sharing laughter and fun with other pilgrims. Bahá'í arrived in Istanbul, then Constantinople, on August 16, 1863. The houses where the Exiles lived then have been completely destroyed.

The journey over, settled in our modest hotel and budding friendships in hand, we immediately visited the two Holy Places in Edirne, then named Adrianople, where Bahá'í lived for one year during this period of exile from 1863-68. The wisdom of our tour guides, Mrs Alae, and Mr Afnan, in deciding to visit Edirne for the first three days was obvious as we were able to immerse ourselves in the spiritual part of the pilgrimage. An earthquake had destroyed the first house. The ruins have been excavated and are surrounded by a garden where we meditated and reflected on the hallowed ground. Here Bahá'í wrote to the Kings and Rulers of the world. I could almost feel the verses being revealed as we trod quietly long the pathways where butterflies rested briefly. The stillness vibrated only with the muffled sounds of a city at work. We met the Bahá'ís who were custodians of the Holy Places. With gentle, quiet voices they served refreshments and we moved on to the House of Rida Big.

The history of why and how Bahá'í was there dimmed to insignificance as I stepped over the threshold to be swaddled in peace and calm. For a moment I was a child maidservant looking over my shoulder, aware of the stirrings of mischief-makers, aware of the power and majesty of Bahá'í. From that point of entering this House the child in me emerged and I cast away my cares and worries. For one week, this wide-eyed pilgrim drank from the chalice of joy, ate of the heavenly fruits of companionship and mingled with the descendants of the city dwellers who once stoned and mocked our Lord of Hosts. The high wall muffled out the sound of the noise of the city, then the call to prayer from the nearby Mosque awakened us from our deliberations

To reach the Mosque of Sultan Salim we walked through the colourful bazaar, and the same steps up which Bahá'í walked. Once inside our buzz of excitement calmed and we drank in the beauty. Here an amazing experience for this pilgrim: I moved from the area where Bahá'í used to pray towards the centre of the mosque. A small group of visitors had gathered and suddenly a man pointed to me and said something I didn't understand, and started to cry. The crowd opened up and all faces looked towards me so I approached and asked why was he crying. No one understood me, then a small boy simply said "He is 98". I hugged this stranger and my tears began to fall.

Later that day when our tour guide hosted the meeting of the Bahá'ís of Edirne I met this gentleman again. I learnt that it was the first time he had left his home in Tehran for this pilgrimage journey of two weeks by coach and meeting Bahá'ís from other cultures was overwhelming for him.

Edirne is quite a small place and we took advantage of our free time to shop, visit a modern caravanserai, view the river where Bahá'í used to walk and which He termed "The Land of Mystery". The Tablet of Ahmad was revealed here "in this remote prison". We also sampled the local food and some of us even had a Turkish bath.

All too soon we had to leave Edirne for Istanbul. Istanbul, Istanbul – the Great City, holding secrets behind dusty windows where the verses that streamed from His Pen poured forth. Here Bahá'í gave away some of the Writings of the Báb to Mürzák Yahyá. Our journey was three hours of comfort; unlike the twelve days it took the Exiles. Our hotel was excellent and, as in Edirne, we met every morning at 7am for prayers. By this time we had to prise open our eyes when summoned to prayer! We also met the Bahá'ís of Istanbul and enjoyed consultation on teaching.

Our able and professional tour guide, Mr Afnan, organised the coach trip to see the route Bahá'í took. We walked over the old bridge, and visited the caravanserai where the Exiles rested. The Blue Mosque with its towering minarets was crowded with tourists and as we approached the call to prayer came so visitors were not allowed.

My companion pilgrim was from a Muslim background and familiar with the routine. In no time I found myself with my head fully covered and kneeling with the women. This experience was filled with a power and energy that was lost when I visited later and mingled as a tourist. We had opportunity to visit the famous markets and palaces, sample different foods in various restaurants where we were entertained by Turkish traditional dances and witnessed a Turkish wedding.

Twice we sailed: once on the Bosphorous, and crossing the Sea of Marmara to Bursa famous for its silks. Here in this city with a thousand mosques, the Bahá'í doctors offer their services of free medical treatment as a contribution to the welfare of the community once a month.

So we left Istanbul – a teeming city, where the feeling of the crowds seething with unspent energy was intensely felt. I could well feel a mob incensed to violence in the times of Bahá'í. Now there is a different type of hurry here with life for living and loving. With a measured pace Istanbul has dropped into the 21st Century and preparations for a football match were in hand, and still the old city keeps on turning.

After final farewells at the baggage claim, two pilgrims rested the night at the home of Mrs Alae in Arnos Grove and visited the Guardian's Resting Place the following morning. Fine rain caressed the pilgrims as they silently bowed their heads in gratitude for the privilege of the past days. We trod on the road where He had trod; we rested in a caravanserai where fellow Exiles rested all those years ago.

But for us now there were no locked gates, no guards, and no chains. For our freedom, our fellow Exiles our fellow believers, gave their lives. Now our tears of thankfulness merged with the rain as we said goodbye treading another old road that believers trod in 1957 to pay their respects to the Sacred Bough, Shoghi Effendi, the great-grand son of Bahá'í.

