



ANATOLIAN ARTISAN'S FIRST CULTURAL TOUR A WINNER!

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Imagine a land of lush greenery, rocky beaches, tea plantations, valleys and mountains in ochre colors with historic settlements, churches, monasteries and mosques dotting the countryside and towns. The Anatolian Artisans tour of the Eastern Black Sea (Karadeniz) region provided all this and more. Anatolian Artisans first cultural tour visited these sights during an eight day trip, June 24-July 1, 2006. The trip was designed to raise awareness of the arts and culture in a special area of Turkey and to support Anatolian Artisans' mission of product development, marketing and training for creators of handicrafts. Travelers were introduced to local crafts, history, regional food and drink, diverse architecture and an extraordinary landscape.

Quoting from the Anatolian Artisans tour flyer, the participants will encounter a fascinating mix of tradition, history, architecture and natural beauty. The Hittites, Miletians, Phrygians and Amazons colonized parts of the coast. Alexander the Great conquered the area and the Romans and Byzantines followed. In the 15th century, most of the area became part of the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Mehmet II.

Organized by Faruk Pekin, of the Fest travel agency, a leader in the development of cultural tourism, the tour provided a diverse and varied experience. Flying from Istanbul to Trabzon, and traveling by bus to Artvin, with significant stops along the way, allowed the group to see local artisans producing crafts and products in their homes, workshops and bazaars. Carpets, jewelry, weavings, dolls, fabrics, musical instruments and other handicrafts were just a few of the products observed, admired and bought when possible. While history, geography and scenery were emphasized, we also learned about local music (bagpipes and the Black Sea Fiddle), dance, native crafts, folklore and customs (the Laz people), unusual summer festivals (bull fighting) and seasonal events (moving the cows to the high pastures for the summer - "yayla") all native to the area.

Starting in Trabzon, we visited a local workshop for weaving "keşan" cloth, a design unique to the area, of stripes primarily in white, black, and red with some yellow. Watching the shuttle fly and the young weaver produce cloth from a workshop set high on a steep green hill top created for us a sense of admiration and respect for the women who add to the family income with their work and keep local crafts and skills alive. For the rest of the day, we visited some of the ancient churches and buildings in Trabzon including the Hagia Sophia and the Church of St. Anna, the bazaar and Atatürk's mansion.

On our second day, we drove through the Zigana Pass to visit the famous Gumushane Karaca Cave with limestone formations like dripping candle wax. Back in Trabzon, we watched women creating exquisite and unique locally designed and manufactured gold jewelry made from weaving thin gold thread into necklaces, bracelets and earrings. Shades of Rapunzel spinning gold out of straw.

Moving East from Trabzon, we went to Macka and Uzungol to visit the famous Sumela Monastery. The architecture and awe inspiring cliff side location were remarkable and some paintings inside still vivid. Since our visit, the Turkish Tourist Office announced that the renovation still going on during our stop has been completed now after forty years of work. After Sumela, we wanted to see another famous monastery (St. John of Vazelon) but only a

lucky few caught a glimpse of this fugitive building in the fog and some have the photos to prove it.

Next a drive to the Uzungol-Ikizdere area focused on different architecture. Wooden mosques in the area provided a look at different building materials than are normally used in mosque construction. The mosques had beautifully dovetailed and detailed work inside and out with carvings and scroll work. Both the *_mihrap* (niche pointing to Mecca) and the *mimber* (imam's pulpit) were of exquisite workmanship. The chestnut wood added a golden brown sheen to the ornamentation and building. Moving further eastward, we traveled through valleys and passes to reach Alpine meadows where cattle were pastured for the summer. Rushing rivers and streams added to the beauty of the landscape.

Our final eastern most stop on the Black Sea coast after traveling through the Coruh Valley, was Artvin, capitol of an old Georgian kingdom. We descended to view the renowned Georgian churches in the area. Ishan, Osk Vank and Haho, examples of early church architecture, were impressive and the remote locations in the woods added a mystical element to the buildings.

Our last day of touring allowed for visits to a few of the most interesting sights in Erzurum before returning to Istanbul. In close proximity were the Turkish and Islamic Arts (ethnographic) Museum, formerly a medrese and near by three old mausoleums. Our tour ended with a visit to the Rustem Pasa bazaar, (a former caravanserai), still in operation today. The famous local stone, "Oltu" (black amber) is worked and sold there.

In our own caravan, across the Black Sea region, we experienced the wide variety of weather changes associated with the area. During our week on the road we experienced fog, clouds obscuring mountain tops and passes, sudden showers, incredible greenery associated with frequent moisture and humidity and brilliant sunlight and shadows along the way.

Flying back to Istanbul brought a flood of memories of the tour and our common experiences, the connections formed and friendships developed along the way as we shared meals, walks, paired off on the bus and marveled over the region's scenic diversity. The congenial group, mostly Turks and Americans with a soupçon from France (Chantal, who hiked in the most flimsy and fashionable shoes and put other hikers to shame) were a solid group discovering much in common including "six degrees of separation" connections through conversations on the trip. For some, it was there first trip to Turkey, others were old hands such as Peace Corps volunteers, and frequent tourists, or born in Turkey. Nevertheless all were linked by our incredible experience of visiting the Black Sea region together.

Our visit was reported in the local Trabzon paper with photos so we felt like special visitors helping the Anatolian Artisans cause. A film of the trip was recorded by our two youngest travelers and hope that a short version of highlights of the trip will be used to promote the tour and the work of Anatolian Artisans.

I'm ready to sign up for the next Anatolian Artisans tour. Yildiz, please tell me where and when.

SCENES FROM THE TRIP



































