

Time Traveling with Anatolian Artisans

By Joanne Omang

The beginning heralded the whole. Our Anatolian Artisans' 2008 Cultural Tour opened on May 16 with an astounding dinner reception at an historic mansion overlooking Leander's Tower and the Bosphorus glowing in the sunset. The view, the site, the structure, the stories behind every item in every room – each begged for more attention, deeper thought, more time. So it went for the next ten days.



Our welcoming reception

We were 22 travelers united by a common curiosity about the cultures past and present of Turkey's far eastern edge. Half had been on a previous AnArt tour to other areas; six were Turks; four, including me, had been Peace Corps volunteers in Turkey ages ago; and all but one of the rest had tasted the country too briefly in earlier trips. From calm, organized Yildiz Yagci and her organization, we sought information, perspective and experience of the hands-on, feet-on, nose-on sort, and that is what she delivered.

Kars was as cold and damp as its immortal image, but we warmed up on its famous cheese and on the energy of women showing off their needlework at AnArt's Product Development Project.



Their presence in the new community center shows the town supports the effort, and if these first products lacked world market sophistication, we know it is only a short time away. The shoppers among us responded with our first feeding frenzy, leaving tables bare and back orders the local museum would have envied.

At the abandoned ruined city of Ani, worth the trip all by itself, we peered from crumbling ornate Armenian churches over a ravine into the former Soviet Union. Diligent guide Lale Kosagan observed that Ani, an 11th-century rival city to Constantinople, may be the most important site no one has ever heard of. That seems sure to change very soon.



In Dogubeyazit, snowy Mt. Ararat loomed over the windswept 17th-century mountain fortress of Karakose and Ishak Pasha Palace. The ancient Silk Road still carried global commerce below it

right past our hotel, huge semis channeling the camels of yore.



The Silk Road endures

Heading south, Lale bounced off the bus in unplanned stops so we could bemuse smiling Kurdish women and children offering tea in their mud-brick village, and three generations of



women washing rugs in a river during a hailstorm.

washing carpets near Van

At our Muradiye waterfall lunch stop, young picnickers danced around coal-burning grills—and the aroma took me right back to winter in Gaziantep 1964.



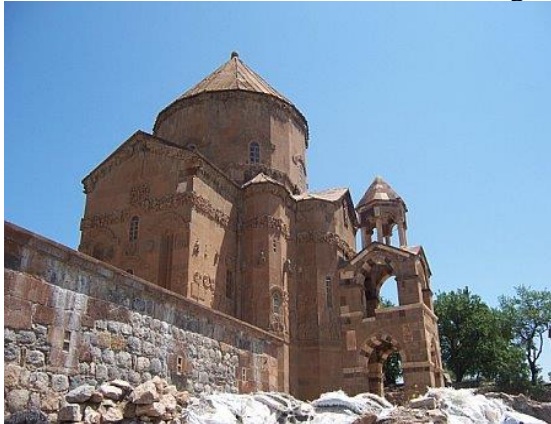
Locals picnicking at the waterfall

In Van, a big handicrafts factory (not linked to AnArt) reminded us that child labor remains a complex problem, here and worldwide. We recovered at the top of Van's ruined citadel, fingering the 9th-century cuneiform and dancing to a boom box as the sun set over the lake.



Pit Marshall at Van citadel top, dancing below

The next day an open boat and a brilliant day took us to a 10th-century sculpture-covered Armenian church on Akdamar Island, again worth the trip alone.



Akdamar: Church of Holy Cross

Poppies, paths, souvenir shops and a modern pier there, but not at Carpanak, where we stepped



gingerly off the prow onto a cliff face in order to climb up past frantic seagulls' nests to the unrestored ruins of another ancient church.



A glorious trip. Again on the mainland, we pitied the white Van cats who called to us from their breeding cage at the university, showing the one eye of blue and the other of gold that made them valuable prisoners.

Back in time then to Cavustepe, a fortress ruin of the 8th century BC where ancient guide and guard, known locally as Urartu Mehmet, translated the cuneiform inscriptions and explained the



cunning irrigation system.

We bought out all his carved amulets. Their ancient luck was no doubt what preserved us when we later pushed unknowing through the Hoshap castle gate that should have been locked and climbed all over the 1643 ruin, much to the annoyance of the army officer who caught us leaving. We mollified him with cookies.

In Tatvan, a local family helped me buy sparkly pink shoes for my two-year-old granddaughter.



High above the city and the snowfield
crater, a nomad family camped by the roadside lamented their loss of grazing land, the eternal

at Nemrut



story of development and displacement . Then a super-heated lake got no bathers, but the cold lake just over the hill drew four intrepid swimmers: Beverly Lowry, Pitkin Marshall, Ali Betil and Nail Senatalar. And there we posed for our only group photo – missing only Anita Johnson, who had gone on one of her many long



walks.

South through twisting mountain passes to one more visit worth the whole trip – the Greater Anatolia Project site of Hasankeyf, a city ruin dating to the 4th century BC.



If the project goes as planned, its minaret tops will soon be drowned when the Tigris is dammed for

power and irrigation. Feeling lucky to be among the last viewers, we meandered through the shops and homes and churches carved out of the tufa cliffs and waiting abandoned for the rising water.

On to Mardin, tiered ancient city of stunning views, narrow passageways and carved buildings



and the ornate monastery of Deyrul Zafaran .

The 60-foot cistern under the ruins of Dara was huge, stunning, unbelievable – again trip-worthy all by itself.

In Mardin the craftswomen of Anatolian Artisans’ project were skilled and articulate – and again our shopping left cleared tables, exhausted inventories and many back orders for Yildiz to bring later. I bought three crocheted boas, intending two for gifts—but which ones? I cannot bear to



part with any.

Weddings were on our minds: the first night we crashed a bride’s “henna party” at our lush hotel and danced until it was time to hear Beverly discuss and read from her moving memoir of a murder and a gentle woman, *Crossed Over*. Then Lale arranged for Bev to be an uncharacteristically quiet bride to Pit’s groom at the restaurant’s exuberant mock wedding dance

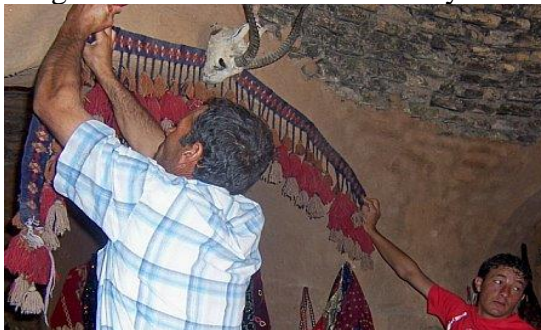
party and dinner, a spectacular and delicious feast of farewell for the group.



Six of us departed the next day on an extension trip that for me was a homecoming. I spent my two Peace Corps years in Gaziantep, allegedly teaching English to crowds of little boys 11 to 19, and visited Sanliurfa, Harran and Nemrud Dag during that time. In our rattletrap buses we would ponder the many mounds dotting the plains, knowing each hid a buried ancient ruin. This year I insisted we visit the relatively new dig at one of them, Gobeklitepe, near Urfa – a spectacular find of T-shaped stone monuments that pushes human settlement back to 11,500 B.C. A great privilege to see that, and one that every future AnArt tour of the region should include.

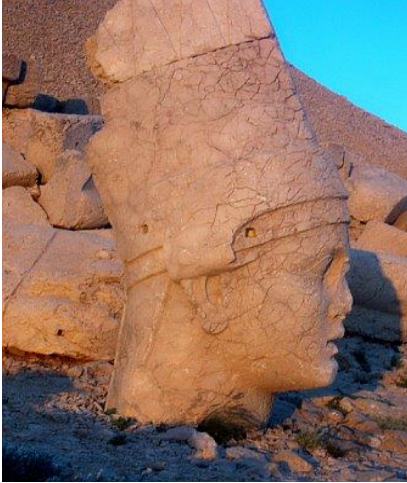


Harran was still haunting and unchanged except for the satellite dishes dotting every house. I bought a dust-covered tassel for my office right off a village shop wall.



Nemrud Dag—well, the trip in 1965 involved three hours on a donkey and then an hour-long clamber over a boulder field, so the minibus version was much easier, and every bit as awe-

inspiring in the sunset, even if the chiseled faces have crumbled a bit.



And finally Antep once more, the city huge and new and sprawling miles out now past its 1966 outskirts, the copper market near my old school now a tourist draw, along with the Zeugma



mosaics. I gave our charming guide Saadettin Ozer my crumbling 1964 copy of a “Turizm” guide to Antep that in those days had one stoplight and one paved street, the rest cobblestone. No one then ever dreamed so many people would one day live in the city, much less come to visit.

As we were leaving Mardin, the hotel staff threw water on the back of our minibus so that we might return like the flow of water. There is no doubt about that.

