

The Anatolian express

TURKEY'S EXOTIC CITIES, BLONDE SANDY BEACHES AND 2,500 YEARS WORTH OF HIGH CULTURE AND HISTORY HAVE LONG DRAWN VISITORS FROM AROUND THE WORLD. BUT FOR A DIFFERENT TAKE ON TURKEY, FOLLOW THE VESTIGES OF THE LEGENDARY SILK ROAD FROM ANKARA TO THE SYRIAN FRONTIER, AS IT DISSECTS THE COUNTRY ON ITS WAY FROM EUROPE TO MESOPOTAMIA

WORDS | RAF JAH

Whenever I travel, I prefer to take the train. The soothing movement, large windows and comfortable beds offer an intimate experience of a country – putting it in context. This is especially the case in Turkey, where the slender tracks pass over isolated mountain ranges, through semi-arid deserts and fairytale forests, winding along historic rivers such as the Euphrates and the Tigris.

Built in the 1880s by German engineers, Turkey's noble railway lines stretch from Edirne in the west to Iran, Iraq and Syria. The most famous is the Hijaz Railway, which links Istanbul to Medina in Saudi Arabia. The Hijaz was built by Sultan Abdul Hamid, in order to give his people safe passage to perform the *hajj* (Islamic pilgrimage). On this classic Silk Road route, I was to travel the section from Ankara to Malatya by train and then catch a bus to the frontier garrison town of Gaziantep. When my wife Cisca heard the words "trading town", "lost world" and "Syrian frontier" she instantly decided that this was a shopping opportunity not to be missed.

We arrive in Ankara with an ear-splitting squeal of the automotive's brakes. Our host, a foreign correspondent, is waiting for us in the station's main hall. "Come on, let's have coffee," she says, striding off, dragging our bags into a long tunnel under the tracks. We emerge in front of a regiment of typically chic cafés. Coffee morphs into a breakfast of goats' cheese, bread and olives. "You eat too much salt," my host chastises. "I'm Oriental, leave me alone," I joke, sipping my

over-sweetened Turkish coffee. A triple whammy for the heart: salt, sugar and caffeine. I feel great.

Our host has been in Ankara for two years, and lives in a stressful world of deadlines, finance and government bonds. On her advice, we visit the Anitkabir, the mausoleum of the founder of the Turkish Republic, Kemal Ataturk. This memorial of Turkey's most legendary leader encompasses a massive marble courtyard and a small building with strong architectural lines. Square pillars line the front; it's almost a heightened form of Art Deco. A ceremony is in progress: dignitaries place wreaths while sentries stand stock still on the ramparts. It's all very 1930s, and really quite impressive.

Many people see Ankara as being a centre of power, but I see it as a pleasant city huddled by green hills and full of warm people. Most importantly, it is a jump off point to explore Anatolia. After the formal ceremonies of the day, we dip into the trendy Cankaya district. The spring evening is warm and the shops are wide open and busy. The restaurants are buzzing with young people and it's hard to find a seat. Eventually we choose a tapas bar that serves *patatas bravas*, cheese and garlic prawns, which we wash down with an excellent local white.

At 3.30am on Monday morning we are back at Ankara station, waiting to board the Guney Ekspresi (the Southern Express) heading for Malatya. It's supposed to arrive at 3.30am from Istanbul, change locomotives and head off. The train is notorious for being late. Having had just two hours of sleep, I am ⇒

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regretting my last glass of chardonnay. Cisca is hopping about like a bunny, completely taken by the spotless, Art Deco station.

"Look at those door handles" she says, snatching my camera to record the burnished gleaming handles. She also points out the luggage delivery area, which is still lovingly maintained. The original brass protective straps are still in place. I recover enough to change lenses and record our sleeping co-passengers and the elegant architecture. Thankfully it is cool and pleasant at this hour. We cross to platform two and order tea from a tiny signal box-like buffet. We chat idly about the journey ahead when suddenly Cisca asks: "Hey, what's that?"

A burning light appears in the distant darkness. It grows larger and closer, but is surprisingly silent. Seconds later, an enormous Mitsubishi electric locomotive rolls into the station, dragging behind it the eight carriages

of the Guney Ekspresi. We wander down to the sleeping car and present our tickets to the attendant. He is a thin, middle-aged man in a smart grey shirt, who looks truly miserable. I put it down to the uncivilised hour. "Tickets" he says grumpily. "Here you go," I reply brightly. "Grumph." He shoves the tickets into his clipboard. "You are in numbers 13 and 14, your beds are made, you just pull them down and you can go to sleep," he intones. I smile at him. Giving me a sideways glance, he seems to give in a little. Very carefully and quietly he says: "There is no restaurant on this train, you know, so you need to buy what you need here."

I show him our goodie bag of bread, white cheese, Turkish sausage, Ayran yoghurt drink, water and two bars of excellent Turkish hazelnut chocolate that Cisca had snuck in. We enter the air-conditioned carriage. The door to our compartment is open, the lights

are on, and the beds made. Grumpy though he may be, the attendant is excellent at his job. It is still dark as I climb in between the soft clean sheets and rapidly fall asleep.

A few short hours later, I awake as we clatter along the Anatolian Plateau. Groggily, I sit up in bed and look outside. "Am I in Mongolia again?" I wonder as low, rolling, green hills disappear into the distance. I can just make out the mountains in the background. As if to reinforce this, the train takes a bend and we follow a roaring river lined with poplar trees and pretty blue flowers. We set off into the plains again, past herds of sheep and a camp of semi-nomadic people loaded with tents from central Asia in an ancient Renault 12. Just in case the traveller is ever in any doubt of his location, Turkish Railways have etched a crescent and star into every window.

As there is no restaurant car, we sit on my berth and admire the views while breakfasting on cheese-filled pastries, bread, white cheese and beef sausage. Mr Grumpy makes tea, which we drink along with Ayran, a yoghurt drink that quickly becomes addictive. After breakfast, the sleeping car is empty aside from an elderly couple three compartments down. The husband wears a skullcap and his wife a headscarf. He clucks around her protectively, bringing her bread and cheese. I can't help wondering why they take the train. They must have the money to

fly: this compartment costs at least as much as a flight. But perhaps they too like the train, and its comfortable meandering.

The map says we are 4,000ft above sea level; our locomotive is designed for hauling containers by the hundred across the prairies and copes easily with the inclines. However, the one thing the Guney cannot do is gain time. By now we are two hours late and who knows when we'll get into Malatya? We decide to detrain in Kayseri and get the bus to Gaziantep from there. "We'll be there tonight," Cisca says. Mr Grumpy bids us farewell on the platform. As we wave goodbye, I swear he is almost smiling.

I don't like buses very much, especially when they break down, which our bus to Gaziantep predictably does. This is becoming an exceptionally long day. It's May, but snow still powders the mountain peaks above us. The bus drones up and over mountain passes and past low, red roofed, stone farm houses. We make it to the town of Kahramanmaras by 10.30pm, having been on the go since 3am. Gaziantep can wait until tomorrow.

Kahramanmaras is not on Turkey's tourist circuit, and it's hard to find out much about the place apart from the fact that it makes legendary ice cream. But in the gloriously sunny morning, our hotelier happily directs us through the bazaar and the 400-year-old *ulu cami* (mosque). We wander through the ⇒

IMAGES | Raf Jah & Shutterstock.com



PREVIOUS PAGE: The rolling green landscapes have become iconic of the Anatolian region
THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Gaziantep's harbour; Tourists alighting from their train; The beautiful town of Kahramanmaras from the train; Eim Anitkibir, dedicated to Turkey's leader Kemal Ataturk
FOLLOWING PAGE: Two men enjoying the afternoon in Gaziantep



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on some traditional Turkish music and we speed down the side of the Anatolian Plateau, descending an ear-popping 2,500 feet in minutes. The road is narrow and bumpy, we leave the celestial mountains behind us, and plunge through green forests until suddenly, as if summer has arrived, the earth goes brown.

A stone's throw away from the Syrian border, Gaziantep has been a trading town for centuries. Unlike Kahramanmaras, here the old buildings remain in use, giving the town a charmingly antique character. The castle is a smaller replica of the great citadel at Halep, which lies just over the border in Syria. Near the citadel is the old quarter called Turk Tepe. Beyond that, the town is made up of solid, two-tone, brown stone houses. Small businesses, such as grocers, foundries and mobile phone stores are located in this ancient heart. If Kahramanmaras had been a living person, Gaziantep would have been its twin. All around the town business – partly fuelled by an open border with Syria – is booming.

Time affords us one last excursion, so we visit the ancient Greek archaeological site of Zeugma. Foolishly, we arrive two months too early: a dam in the Tigris has submerged the site. The Ministry of Culture has moved most of the mosaics and artefacts uphill but the viewing area is still under construction.

EXPERIENCE TURKEY:

FOR SLEEPING: NOVOTEL GAZIANTEP

Situated on the edge of town, the Novotel offers the most luxurious sleeps in Gaziantep. Seamlessly marrying traditional Turkish hospitality with stylish facilities, the upper floors boast stunning views of the new city and the ancient citadel.

WWW.ACCORHOTELS.COM

FOR EATING: TRILYE ANKARA

Before setting out on a Silk Road expedition, spend an evening at Ankara's finest seafood restaurant. Trilye is embedded in the heart of the achingly stylish Gaziosmanpasa district. With the coast only four hours away, the fish is always fresh, and the gifted chefs regularly attract the who's who of Ankara.

WWW.TRILYE.COM.TR

FOR TRAINS: TURKISH RAILWAYS

The Republic of Turkey's State Railways (TCDD), to give them their official name, are endlessly popular with travellers in the know. Book ahead to avoid disappointment, and remember to pack breakfast.

WWW.TCDD.GOV.TR

FOR HISTORY: AYA SOPHIA

Anatolia is charming, but a trip to Turkey is not complete without visiting Istanbul. Among the numerous jaw-dropping attractions is one of Turkey's most precious museums: the Aya Sophia. With soaring domes, a beautiful garden and exquisite Iznik tiling, Aya Sophia was both a basilica and a mosque before being converted into a museum in 1935.

WITH ETIHAD HOLIDAYS:

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We wander through Kahramanmaras's green leafy streets and enter the bustling bazaar. The quantity of money and goods being traded is astonishing. Henna from India, local sheep skins and spices from Syria are all changing hands frenetically

green leafy streets and enter the small but bustling bazaar. The quantity of money and goods being traded is astonishing. Henna from India, sheep skins from the local farms, and spices from Syria are all changing hands frenetically. The locals are all speaking Turkish with thick, distinctive accents. Only one day's travel from cosmopolitan, European-influenced Ankara and here we are, deep in the Levant.

Mercifully, Gaziantep is only 45 minutes drive away by minibus. The driver switches

We don't mind too much, and drink tea in a grove of pistachio trees and watch a small ferry take visitors upstream.

On our last day, I go for a run. "Down the road to the railway station, turn right up into the dust and keep pounding along," I chant the directions. As I huff along in the 28-degree heat, a train appears from nowhere, blowing black plumes of smoke into the skies. This blue machine is the twice-weekly Syrian Railways service from Halep. I decide to try that one next time. 🚂