

Late deals

UK/IRELAND

JERSEY JAZZ: Modern Hotels (01534 759529) offers three nights' half-board at Mayfair Hotel, for prospect of 17 hours of live music in three days including Gibson Brothers, Melody Players, Blam Quartet and Brian White. Land-only price of £199 includes hotel stay, all jazz events, live jazz Sunday lunch.

LUXURY IN HARROGATE: Superbreak (0871 2223055) offers bed and breakfast at four-star Ridding Park Hotel, south of Harrogate and close to Leeds and York, from £102 (two sharing) until April 30.

SHORT BREAKS

ROME/VENICE: Citalia (0844 4151956) offers three nights' room-only at three-star hotel in Florence from March 7 from £215, with three nights' bed and breakfast in Venice for £279, saving up to £66 per couple. Packages include flights from Gatwick, and online discount.

DUBAI: Destinology (0800 6342866) offers three nights' bed

and breakfast at five-star Atlantis The Palm, from £815, including return Emirates flights from Gatwick. Book by February 13 for travel March 1 to 22.

OLD ISTANBUL: Voyages Jules Verne (0845 1667035) offers four nights' bed and breakfast at three-star hotel, near Topkapi Palace and Blue Mosque, from £575 departing February 17 and 24, from £595 in March and £675 during April. Excursions include St Sophia, Roman Hippodrome, Bosphorus cruise, historic buildings.

BUDAPEST: Voyages Jules Verne (0845 1667035) offers three nights' bed and breakfast at four-star Hotel Astoria, built 1914 on medieval town walls, from £545 on March 11, from £595 (April 22) and £625 (May 27). Package includes flights, transfers, accommodation, guides, local reps.

SHORT-HAUL SUN

CYPRUS: Holiday Jewels (01293 533 338) offers seven nights in four-star tourist village of Chloraka for £324, from Gatwick March 2.

More than meets the eye to Turkish delights

Jenna Richards goes off the beaten track on an overland trip to Turkey and discovers a country steeped in culture



■ **CULTURE SHOCK:** Left, looking down on lake Egridir from Akpinar, above, Drinking Turkish coffee with the local nomadic villagers at Akpinar. Below left, walking amongst the unusual formations at Cappadocia and right, Jenna's tent overlooking lake Egridir



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I THOUGHT Turkey was a destination for the unadventurous who'd got bored of their annual Spanish sojourn.

I had imagined a soulless holiday complex serving English food to lobster-red tourists who spent their days lounging beside the hotel pool. But after discovering Turkey's unique mix of the familiar and the exotic on an overlanding trip I realised there was so much more to Turkey than I'd ever envisaged.

From the remarkable ruins of Ephesus to the stunning scenery of Egridir the phenomenon of Pamukkale, the battlefields of Gallipoli and the curious constructions of Cappadocia — Turkey never failed to make an impression.

Not only were the sights a treat but the culture draws on influences from the Middle East and the Mediterranean, the Balkans and central Asia making it a mesmerising place to travel. Turkey has been invaded from every direction since the beginning of recorded history evidenced by the churches that coexist with mosques and Roman theatres and temples crumbling close to ancient Hittite cities.

The trip with Oasis Overland saw 24 strangers ranging in age from 20-somethings to over-60s and nationalists including Australian, British, American and Italian thrown together for a six-week jaunt through the Middle East. Our transport, a yellow Scania lorry, and our accommodation, for the most part a tent, provided the setting for what proved to be the experience of a lifetime.

The overland journey began in Echeabat, an 'uninspiring and cheerless' place according to The Rough Guide. It was our base for exploring the Gelibolu Peninsular or Gallipoli, a place with a grim military history.

The area is the site of the 1915 Gallipoli landings undertaken by the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps. It is debated whether the men landed in the correct place after the advancing troops were confronted with rugged hills, ridges and steep gullies. It is believed almost half a million men died during the campaign and the area contains a sobering series of cemeteries and memorials, both allied and Turkish.

A short wander from our grim

rubbish-strewn campsite — a bit of wasteground beside a bar, but admittedly the worst place we would stay — took you into town and a graphic depiction of the Gallipoli landings. Almost life-size soldiers with bright red wounds peppered the scene as brave comrades gallantly fought for their country amongst a sea of bodies.

A coach tour took us to ANZAC Cove and the cemeteries. The area was respectfully quiet and peaceful; tourists talking in hushed tones meandered among the graves silently contemplating and paying their respects.

Moving on, our portable accommodation was disassembled and packed away before sunrise. Wearily, we piled into the truck to drive to Troy, where outside the gates locals were aghast as the equipment was assembled and a cooked breakfast was washed and flapped dry. The cooker was returned to whence it came and no trace of breakfast for 24 remained.

Troy itself was unremarkable. The settlement is steeped in legend but historians don't know for sure if it existed, let alone its location.

The ruins, believed to be those of the city made famous by the Trojan War, are a hotchpotch of higgledy-piggledy tumbledown stones. The Rough Guide promised that modern excavation means 'non-specialists can now grasp the basic layout', adding 'if you use your imagination you may well be impressed' — I wasn't.

If you are passing, Troy is worth a visit, but I wouldn't make a special trip. Turkey has so much more to offer by way of ancient ruins such as the 2,000-year-old city of Ephesus, which is as impressive as it is old.

Ephesus was an ancient Greek and later a Roman city. During the Roman period it was, for many years, the empire's second city ranking only behind Rome, the capital. It is the largest and best-preserved ancient city in the Mediterranean and one of the most visited tourist attractions in Turkey.

Awe-inspiring intricate carvings decorate many of the city's structures but none are as impressive as the Library of Celsus. It is the largest building on the site and still remarkably intact considering its 2,000-year history.

The city has an inexhaustible beauty



■ **HIDDEN:** Dwellings dug into the rock at Cappadocia

and charm and boasts sight after sight that leaves you open-mouthed, with beautiful floor mosaics, ancient symbols and fabulously detailed stonework.

Beside ancient constructions veiled in archaeological significance and cultural resonance, Turkey also possesses some unparalleled scenery.

Emerging from the cliff face at Pamukkale is a strikingly unusual sight indicative of a snowdrift or glacier. But the white stuff is a plateau of calcium deposits about 100 metres above the valley that have been growing for centuries — one of the most spectacular and distinctive natural wonders I have ever seen.

The bizarre phenomenon creates a fairyland of solidified cascades and shell-shaped basins. It looks like a beautifully-constructed winter scene and gives the area its name — Pamukkale meaning 'cotton castle'.

Walking amongst the travertine terraces was a treat. The atmosphere was surprisingly tranquil — not necessarily quiet but serene and still. The gentle trickle of water could be heard as you approach the terraces but none are as impressive as the crumbling ancient city of Hierapolis. The route back down to our hotel was along a travertine walkway, an enjoyable amble in an exceptionally unique setting.

Travelling in November meant it was

cool, especially at night. But it was worth shunning the optional upgrade to a room and braving the icy chill of the tent to wake up with a view overlooking the magnificent lake Egridir — at more than 450sq km it is the second largest freshwater expanse in Turkey. The town bearing the same name is the focus of Turkey's lakeland. Branded the 'Turkish Lake District' it offers a natural beauty to rival that of Cumbria's ragged hills and expanses of water.

A hike up the Sivri Mountain took me to the Yuruk village of Akpinar. The village has around 50 houses, apple orchards, a stunning view over lake Egridir and a yurt selling Turkish coffee, tea and ayran (yogurt drink).

Clambering further above the nomadic village eventually you come to a military zone with forbidden entry, forcing you to gravitate back to town. As you descend, goat herders can be seen moving their animals across the hillsides and you are treated to breathtaking panoramic views of green rolling hills in all directions.

No exploration of Turkey's beautiful and curious scenery would be complete without admiring the visually striking structures of Cappadocia.

The miraculous natural landscape was formed by volcanic ash falling on molten rock and sinking in a cone shape. Over time erosion has exposed these 'fairy chimneys' which have been lived in for millennia.

Our base for exploring the area was Goreme. A guided tour took in fields of the weird formations, underground cities and a settlement dug into the cliff face. There was also time for a visit to the Goreme open air museum with its cave churches and beautifully-painted frescos.

Goreme, a pleasant relaxing town, was probably the most tourist-orientated place we visited, with the main street given over almost entirely to servicing the needs of visitors. It was off-season and quiet, but even so didn't feel at all sterile or 'touristy'.

I set out for Turkey expecting very little. I discovered a mesmerising country abundant with sensational scenery, a rich history and culture, and friendly, hospitable people. I saw and learnt enough to give me a hankering to return and explore the parts of Turkey that lay untouched by this trip — but for now the Oasis Overland truck, and its 24 passengers, was crossing the border into Syria.

FACTFILE

Oasis Caravan Istanbul to Cairo (37 days).

Trip price from £695 with a local payment from £270.

Start Location: Istanbul

End Location: Cairo

Duration: 37 Days

This trip also runs in reverse from Cairo to Istanbul. Trips depart on various dates throughout the year for more information see

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