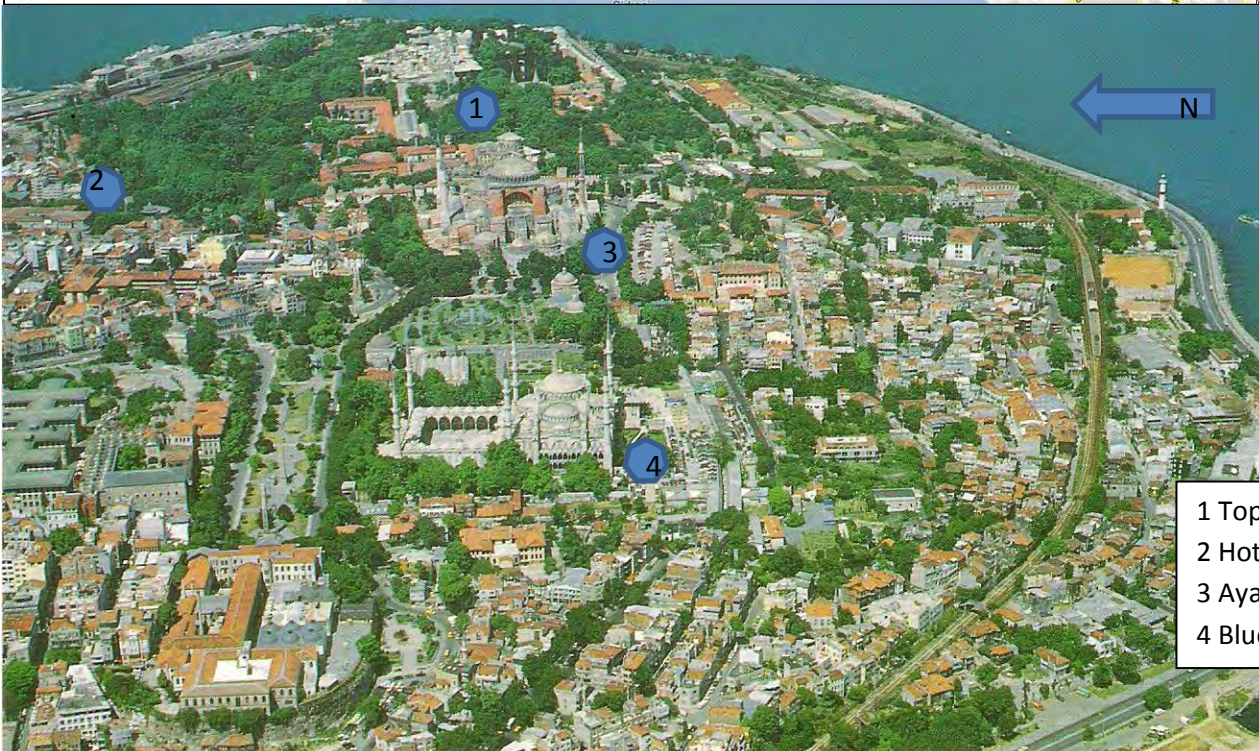
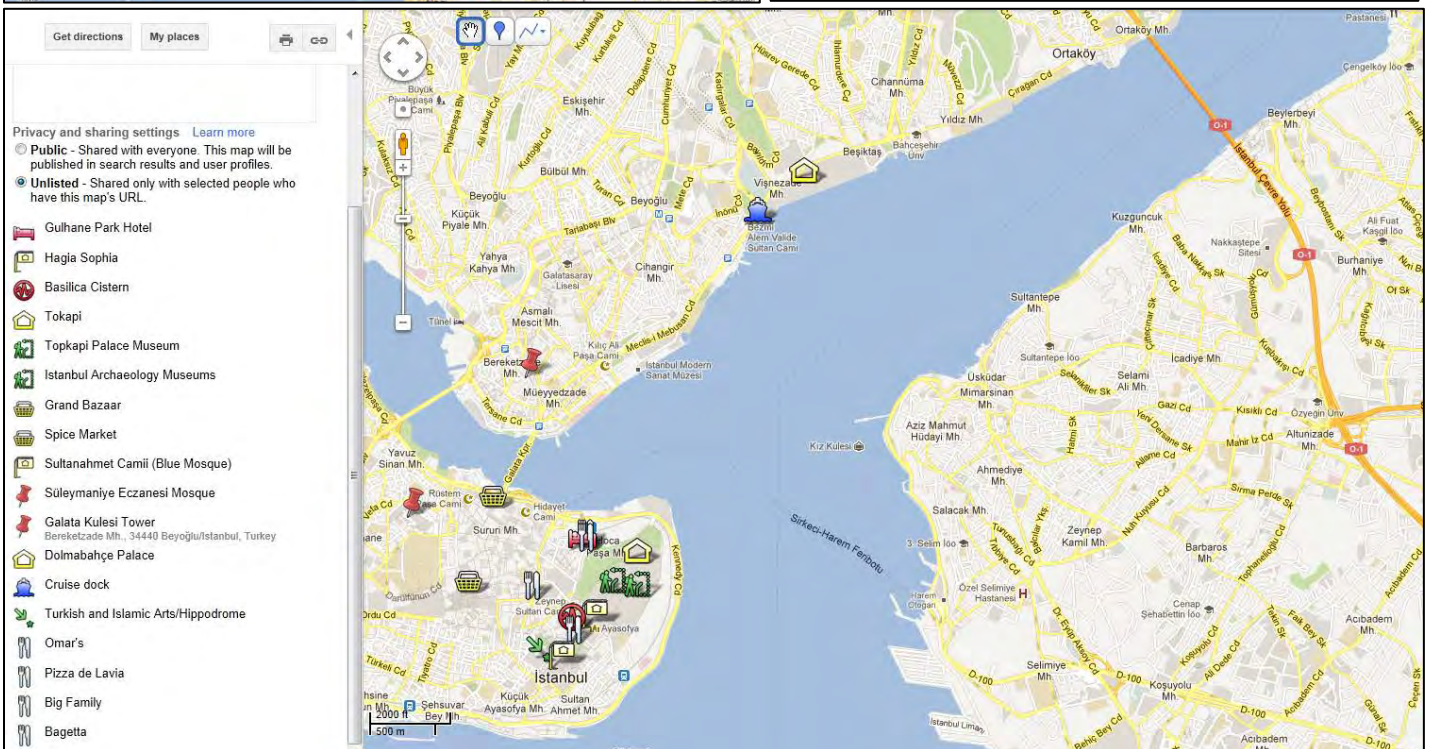
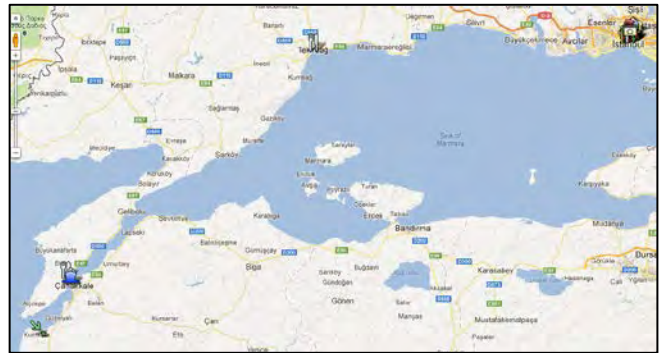
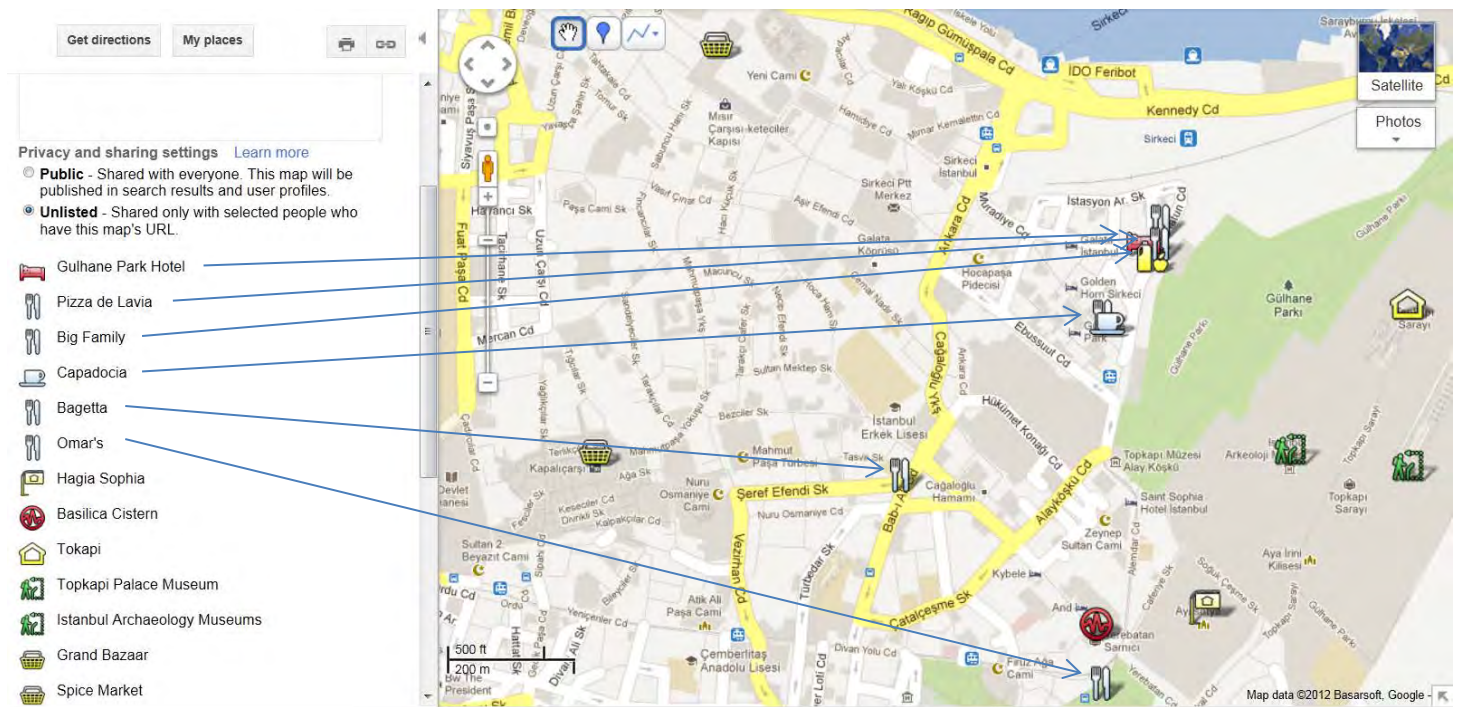


Collins Family Christmas trip 2012: Turkey (Istanbul, Troy)

[The pictures start on page 4]



- 1 Topkapi Palace
- 2 Hotel
- 3 Ayasofya
- 4 Blue Mosque



Tuesday, December 25

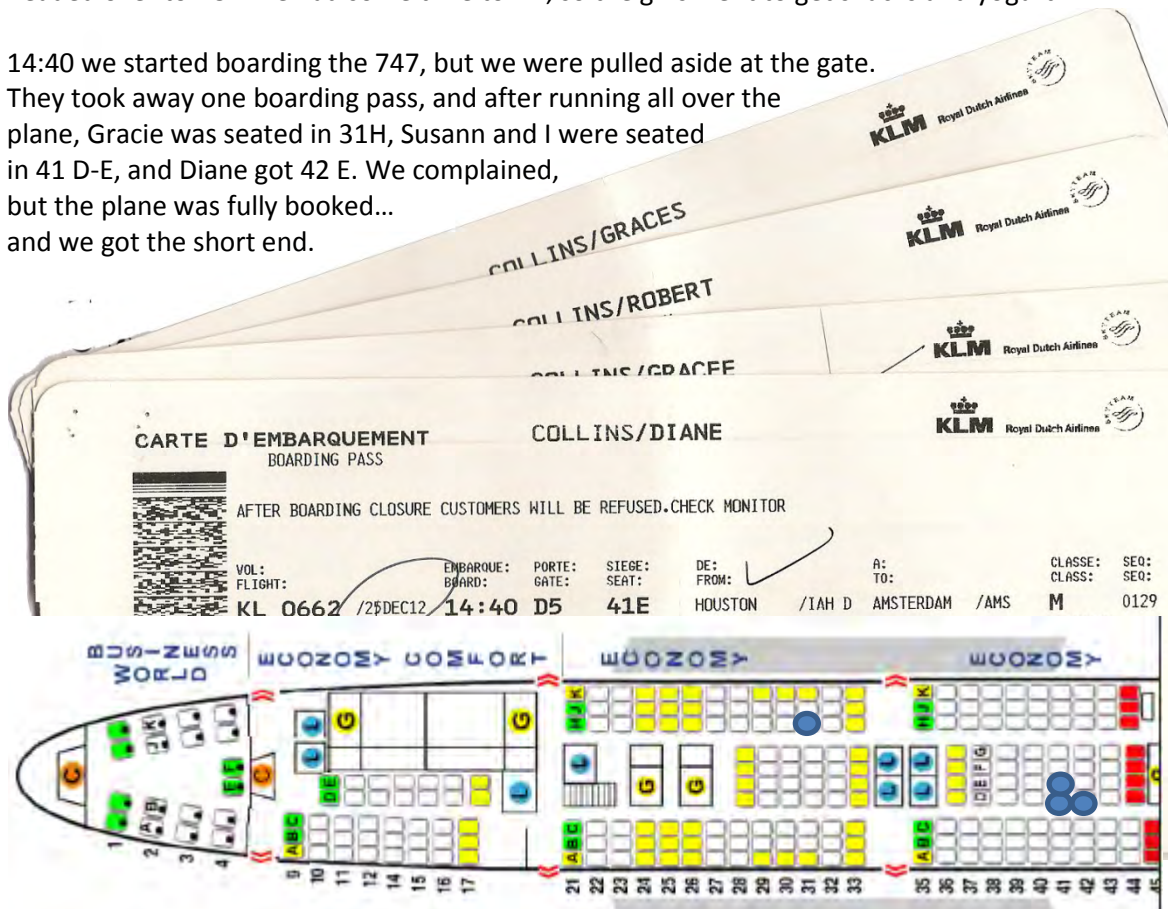
We got up early, and the Daddy made eggs, bacon, and orange Danish that we ate while we watched a marathon of old Match Games on TV.

08:45 Finished loading the car and headed from Temple to Houston's IAH, in drizzly weather.

11:40 We actually made good time, and arrived at the Jack in the Box near our parking place, and grabbed some lunch. Dropped the car at Preflight, spot D64, and zipped to the KLM desk in Terminal D. We got our boarding passes and headed over to D5. We had some time to kill, so the girls went to get snacks and yogurt.

14:40 we started boarding the 747, but we were pulled aside at the gate.

They took away one boarding pass, and after running all over the plane, Gracie was seated in 31H, Susann and I were seated in 41 D-E, and Diane got 42 E. We complained, but the plane was fully booked... and we got the short end.



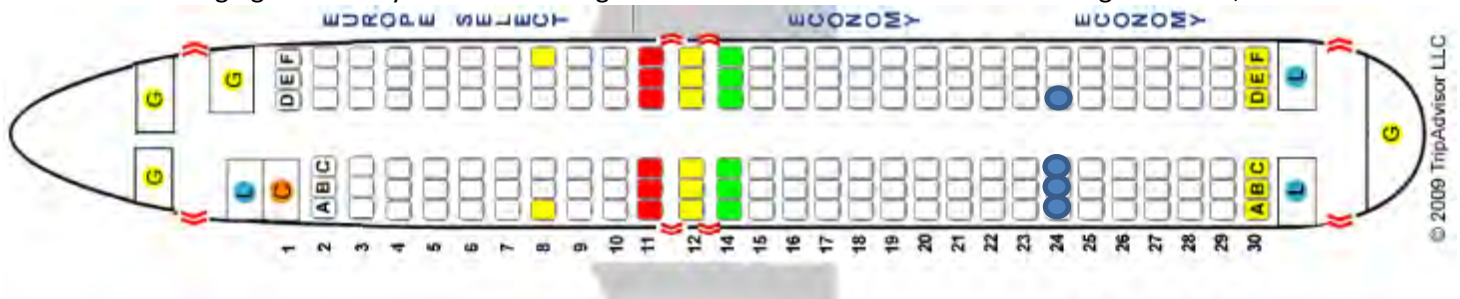
On board, we each had seatback entertainment with thousands of on-demand movies, games, and TV shows. For dinner we had a choice of Cheese Pasta or Beef, with a mint brownie to wrap up our 9 hour flight.

Wednesday, December 26

For breakfast, we had muffins, fruit, and an English muffin with egg whites.

07:30 Arrived at Amsterdam AMS, crossed from terminal G to D to wait out our nearly 3 hour layover.

10:20 Went through gate security and had two bags taken to be checked. Cattle call boarding to row 24, seats A-D.



Wednesday, December 26, continued

On board, we had a spiced wrap and brownie for our near three and a half hour flight.

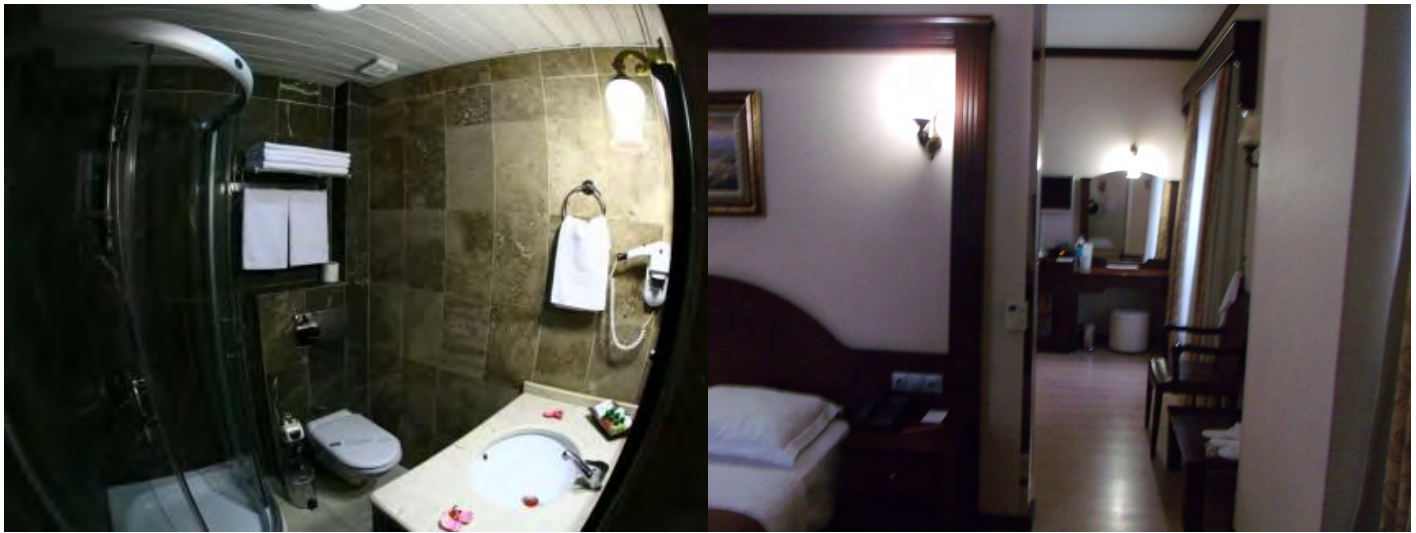
15:30 Arrived in Terminal G, where we proceeded to purchase our visas (\$20.00 each), and then past customs. Then on to pick up our two kidnapped bags, and then we headed to the Arrivals terminal. The hotel had told us to look for a Mr. Kerem, holding a sign with our name, but we could not locate him. Another driver called the number, and we were told he would arrive in 15 minutes. He did, and we set out toward the hotel, and had our first Istanbul traffic experience. We passed the Old City walls, some Byzantine, and drove under the exquisitely lit Blue Mosque, or *Sultanahmet Camii*.

17:40 Arrived at the Gülhane Park Hotel, after driving through the Sultanahmet area to Fatih.

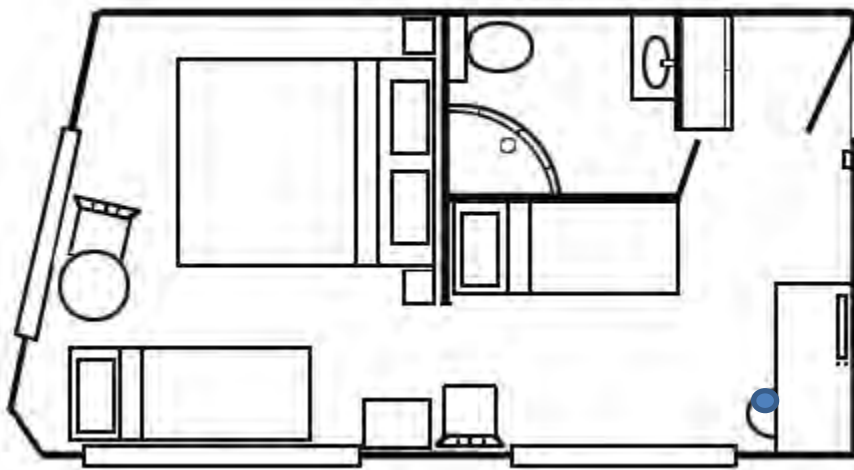


From our window in quad room 101, we could see an empty parking lot across the way, and a few restaurants and markets on the side street, backed up against the wall to Topkapi Palace and Gülhane Parkı ("Rosehouse Park").

We chose Pizza de Lavia where we had our standard drinks of cappuccino/latte for Susann and Diane, and Fanta and water for Gracie and Craig. We ordered pizza marghareta, and a pizza on pita with sausage and lamb. Interesting cheese, and we enjoyed it. Afterward, we stopped by one of the markets and got some cookies and bottled water. Then we headed back to the hotel, snacked, watched Italian sports, unpacked, and finally crashed after about 30 hours of travel.



Gülhane Park Hotel, Room 101

**Thursday, December 27**

05:00 Time to start getting up.

7:30 Breakfast buffet had eggs, non-pork meats and sausages, cheeses, crepes, yoghurts, and cake. The staff was friendly, but did not speak much English, and it took us awhile to figure they were asking where we were from. We also notice that a lot of places play music videos on the TV, but have the sound down and play a radio at the same time.

8:45 Neon Tours picked us up... Onar was the guide, and there were two Americans, three Egyptians, and us in the group. We drove to the Hippodrome, and began the mostly walking tour at the square that roughly marked the original structure, with several prominent columns and a fountain. To one side was the Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum, then on the other was Blue Mosque, or *Sultanahmet Camii*.

HIPPODROME
 (Sultanahmet)


The ancient Hippodrome, now better known as Sultanahmet Square, was built by Roman Emperor Septimus Severus in 203 AD.

OBELISK


In Turkish known as Dikilitaş, it was originally erected in the 16th century B.C. by the Pharaoh Thutmose III in honor of the God of Sun Amon Ra in the city of Teb, Egypt, in front of the temple of Luxor.

SERPENTINE COLUMN
 (Burmali Sütun)


Part of an ancient Greek sacrificial tripod, originally in Delphi & relocated by Constantine I the Great in 324. The serpent heads of the 8 m high column remained intact until the end of the 17th century (one is on display at the Archaeology Museum)

CONSTANTINE COLUMN
 (Çemberlitaş)


Constructed on the orders of the Constantine the Great in 330 AD, it commemorates the declaration of Byzantium (renamed Nova Roma) as the new capital city of the Roman Empire.



After looking at the columns and hearing the history, we crossed to the Blue Mosque, or *Sultanahmet Camii*.





In the center was an old fountain, used for ablutions... and there were cats everywhere.



We had to take our shoes off before entering; we carried them in a bag as to not hurt the carpets... but it was worth it.

Blue Mosque

Sultan Ahmet Camii

The blue mosque, which takes its name from the mainly blue İznik tilework (see p161) decorating its interior, is one of the most famous religious buildings in the world. Serene at any time, it is at its most magical when floodlit at night, its minarets circled by keening seagulls. Sultan Ahmet I (see p33) commissioned the mosque during a period of declining Ottoman fortunes, and it was built between 1609–16 by Mehmet Aga, the imperial architect. The splendour of the plans provoked great hostility at the time, especially because a mosque with six minarets was considered a sacrilegious attempt to rival the architecture of Mecca itself.



A 19th-century engraving showing the Blue Mosque viewed from the Hippodrome (see p80)

Thick piers support the weight of the dome.

The loge (see p39) accommodated the sultan and his entourage during mosque services.

Mihrab



★ Inside of the Dome

Mesmeric designs, employing flowing arabesques, are painted onto the interior of the mosque's domes and semidomes. The windows which pierce the domes no longer have their original 17th-century stained glass.

VISITORS' CHECKLIST

Meydanı 21, Sultanahmet. Map 3 E5 (5 E5). Tel (0212) 458 07 76. Sultanahmet. 8:30am–noon, 1:45–4:30pm daily. Prayer times. Son et Lumière May–Sep: daily after dusk (see the board on Mimar Mehmet Aga Caddesi).

★ View of the Domes

The graceful cascade of domes and semidomes makes a striking sight when viewed from the courtyard below.



Ablutions Fountain

The hexagonal şadırvan is now purely ornamental since ritual ablutions are no longer carried out at this fountain.

Each minaret has two or three balconies.

The Imperial Pavilion



Minbar

The 17th-century minbar is intricately carved in white marble. It is used by the imam during prayers on Friday (see pp38–9).

Prayer hall

Exit for tourists

Müezzin mahfili (see p38)

Entrance to courtyard

STAR FEATURES

- ★ İznik Tiles
- ★ Inside of the Dome
- ★ View of the Domes

Over 250 windows allow light to flood into the mosque.

Entrance

The courtyard covers the same area as the prayer hall, balancing the whole building.

Exit to Hippodrome

Washing the Feet

The Muslim's ritual ablutions conclude with the washing of the feet (see p39). Taps outside the mosque are used by the faithful for this purpose.









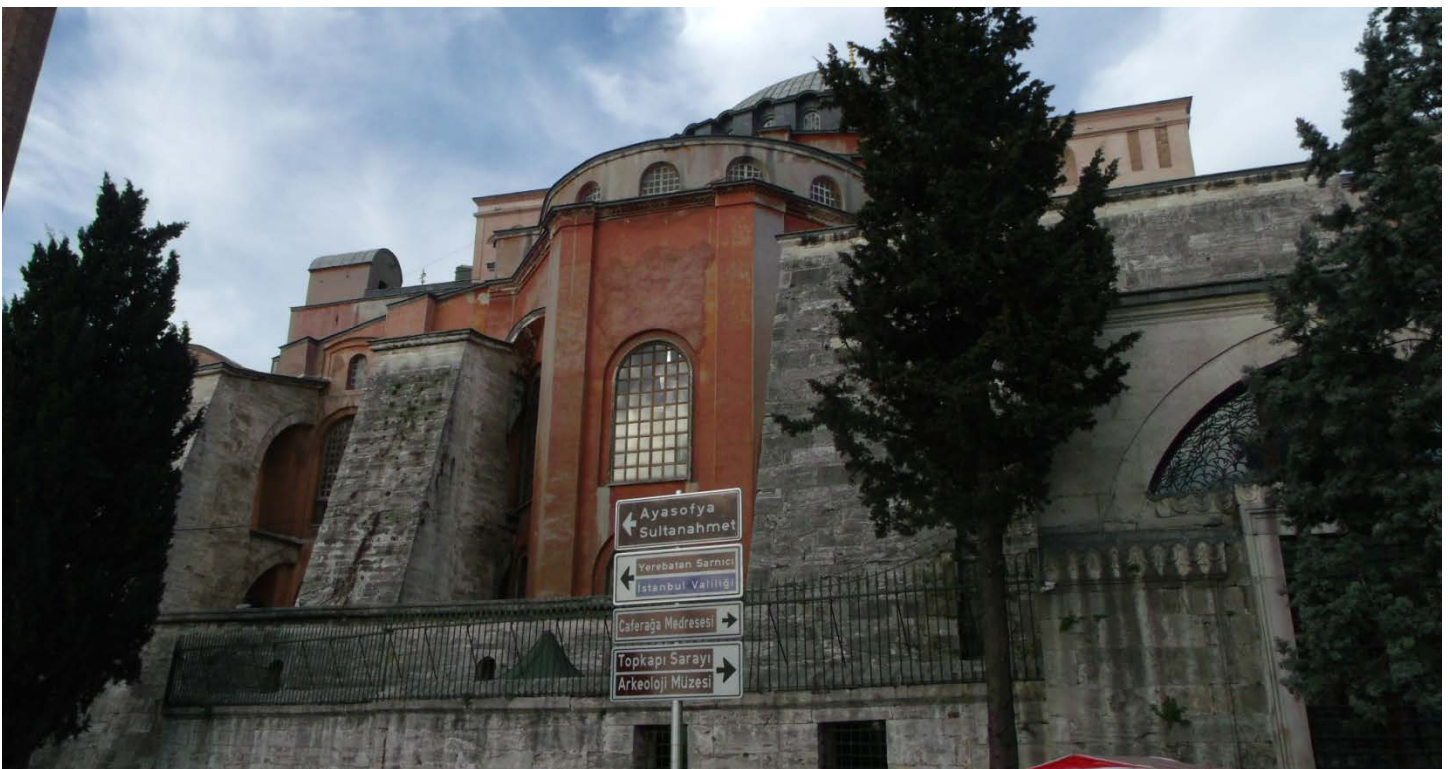
Upon exiting, we got some more great exterior view of the structure built in 1609, and it's six minarets.



Then we headed to a courtyard, and got our first view of Hagia Sofia (Ayasofya), even bigger, and 1000 years older.



I got some great shots of Ayasofya as we walked around; once the largest building on the planet, if it was still a church, it would still be the fourth largest in the world.... but for now we were headed to Topkapi Palace; we would be back soon.



The Fountain of Ahmet, near the 1st gate to Topkapi Palace, or Topkapi Sarayı.



The view as we were approaching the 2nd Gate to Topkapi Palace.



Topkapı Palace

Topkapı Sarayı



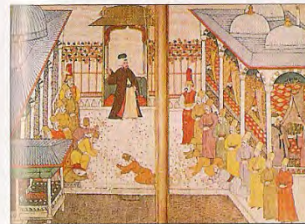
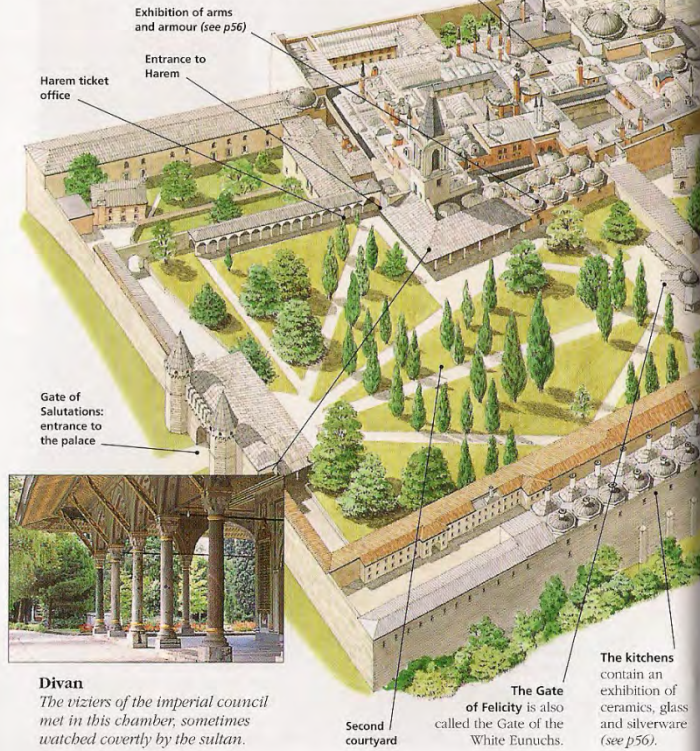
Süleyman's tughra over the main gate

Between 1459 and 1465, shortly after his conquest of Constantinople (see p26), Mehmet II built Topkapı Palace as his main residence. Rather than a single building, it was conceived as a series of pavilions contained by four enormous courtyards, a stone version of the tented encampments from which the nomadic Ottomans had emerged. Initially, the palace served as the seat of government and housed a school in which civil servants and soldiers were trained. In the 18th century, however, the government was moved to the Sublime Porte (see p61). Sultan Abdül Mecit I abandoned Topkapı in 1853 in favour of Dolmabahçe Palace (see pp128-9). In 1924 Topkapı was opened to the public as a museum. Some areas are currently closed for renovation.



★ Harem

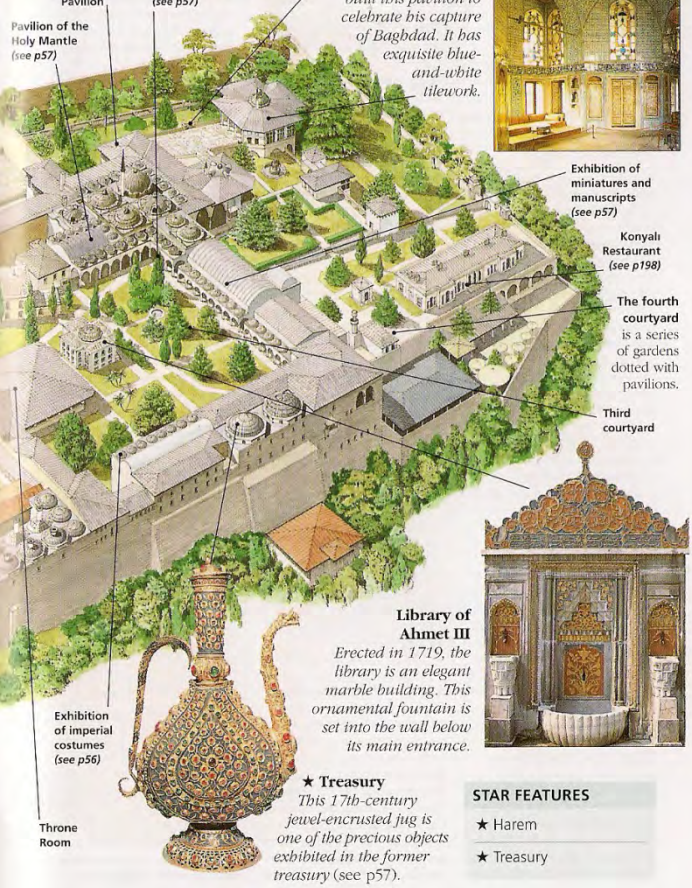
The labyrinth of exquisite rooms where the sultan's wives and concubines lived is open to visitors (see pp58-9).



Circumcision Pavilion

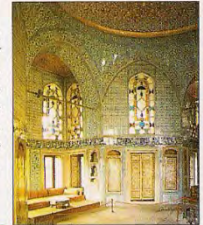
Exhibition of clocks (see p57)

Pavilion of the Holy Mantle (see p57)



VISITORS' CHECKLIST

Babıümayın Cad. Map 3 F3.
Tel (0212) 512 04 80.
Sultanahmet 9am-4pm
Wed-Mon. 9am-4pm
Harem 9:30am-3:30pm Wed-Mon.
(book early)



Exhibition of miniatures and manuscripts (see p57)

Konyalı Restaurant (see p198)

The fourth courtyard is a series of gardens dotted with pavilions.

Third courtyard



STAR FEATURES

- ★ Harem
- ★ Treasury

After entering the 2nd Gate, we headed to the Divan, where the governing council of Viziers met. The exterior was incredibly ornate, and the Arabic script was wonderfully stylized and the focus was more on the art than the words, it seemed. Once a curtain divided the room between the council and the secretaries, and a gilded window cover allowed the sultan to listen in.









From here we went to the an exhibit of arms and armor.



We passed into the next courtyard via the Gate of Felicity, passing the Library. We saw thrones, costumes, and ridiculously large emeralds.





Then on to the 4th courtyard, with views down to the old walls, and the Bosphorus.







Then on to kiosks that over looked the park and sporting events.



From here we say the Baghdad Pavilion, the Circumcision Pavilion, the cover for the Sultan to fast under, and fountains.











In the distance we could see Süleymaniye mosque, largest mosque in the city, and Golden Horn with the Galata tower.

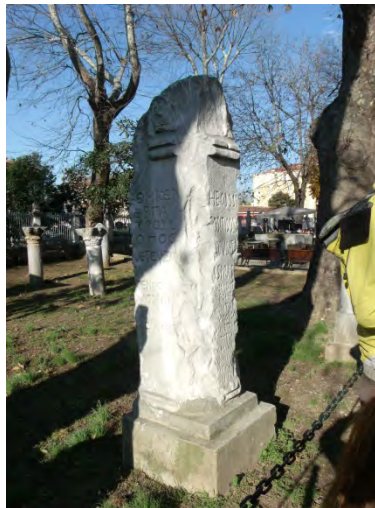


While at Topkapi, which was over run with school kids, one said “Are you from US of A? I am a Turkey.”

13:00 From here we headed to out, passing into the space between Ayasofya and the Blue Mosque. It was over the Basilica Cistern, and near Roxelana's Bath. The two American's were on the half day tour and broke off, and the rest of us decided to have lunch before continuing. We ate at Omar's and the tourist fixed lunch was actually good. We started with Salad, then had Pacanga Boregi, which is a cheese wrapped in dough or pastry. We had this almost every day, and each time it was slightly different... sometimes wrapped in filo dough. The main course was kebab, chicken, rice, and fries. For dessert we had baklava and the similar kadayik. The place itself was very visually stunning.



From here it was back to Hagia Sophia, or Ayasofya, the 1500 year old wonder. On the way, we passed some excavations to the original entry.



When we entered, our jaws literally dropped. The interior space was MASSIVE.

Built as a cathedral, it was covered in mosaics, until the time of the iconoclastic movement when they were covered. Over the years, buttressing was added to keep the walls from moving. Later it became a mosque, and minarets were added. It is now a museum, and many of the mosaics survived.

Hagia Sophia

Ayasofya

The "church of holy wisdom," Hagia Sophia is among the world's greatest architectural achievements. More than 1,400 years old, it stands as a testament to the sophistication of the 6th-century Byzantine capital. The vast edifice was built over two earlier churches and inaugurated by Emperor Justinian in 537. In the 15th century the Ottomans converted it into a mosque; the minarets, tombs, and fountains date from this period. To help support the structure's great weight, the exterior has been buttressed on numerous occasions, which has partly obscured its original shape. Three mausoleums at the site are also open to the public.



Byzantine Frieze

Among the ruins of the monumental entrance to the earlier Hagia Sophia (dedicated in AD 415) is this frieze of sheep.



Print of Hagia Sophia from the mid-19th century

Seraphims adorn the pendentives at the base of the dome.

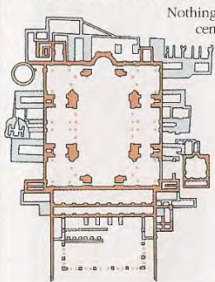
Calligraphic roundel

Kürsü (see p39)

Buttresses

Imperial Gate

HISTORICAL PLAN OF HAGIA SOPHIA



Nothing remains of the first 4th-century church on this spot, but there are traces of the second one from the 5th century, which burnt down in AD 532. Earthquakes have taken their toll on the third structure, strengthened and added to many times.

KEY

- 5th-century church
- 6th-century church
- Ottoman additions

STAR FEATURES

- ★ Nave
- ★ The Mosaics
- ★ Ablutions Fountain



★ Nave

Visitors cannot fail to be staggered by this vast space which is covered by a huge dome reaching to a height of 56 m (184 ft).

Brick minaret

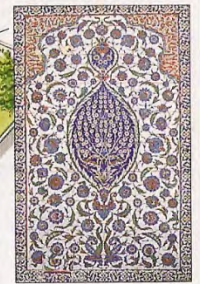
★ The Mosaics

The church's splendid Byzantine mosaics include this one at the end of the south gallery. It depicts Christ flanked by Emperor Constantine IX and his wife, the Empress Zoe.



The Coronation Square served for the crowning of emperors.

Mausoleum of Mehmet III



Mausoleum of Selim II

The oldest of the three mausoleums was completed in 1577 to the plans of Sinan (see p91). Its interior is entirely decorated with Iznik tiles (see p161).

The mausoleum of Murat III was used for his burial in 1599. Murat had by that time sired 102 children.

The Baptistry, part of the 6th-century church, now serves as the tomb of two sultans.

★ Ablutions Fountain

Built around 1740, this fountain is an exquisite example of Turkish Rococo style. Its projecting roof is painted with floral reliefs.



VISITORS' CHECKLIST

Ayasofya Sultanahmet Meydanı

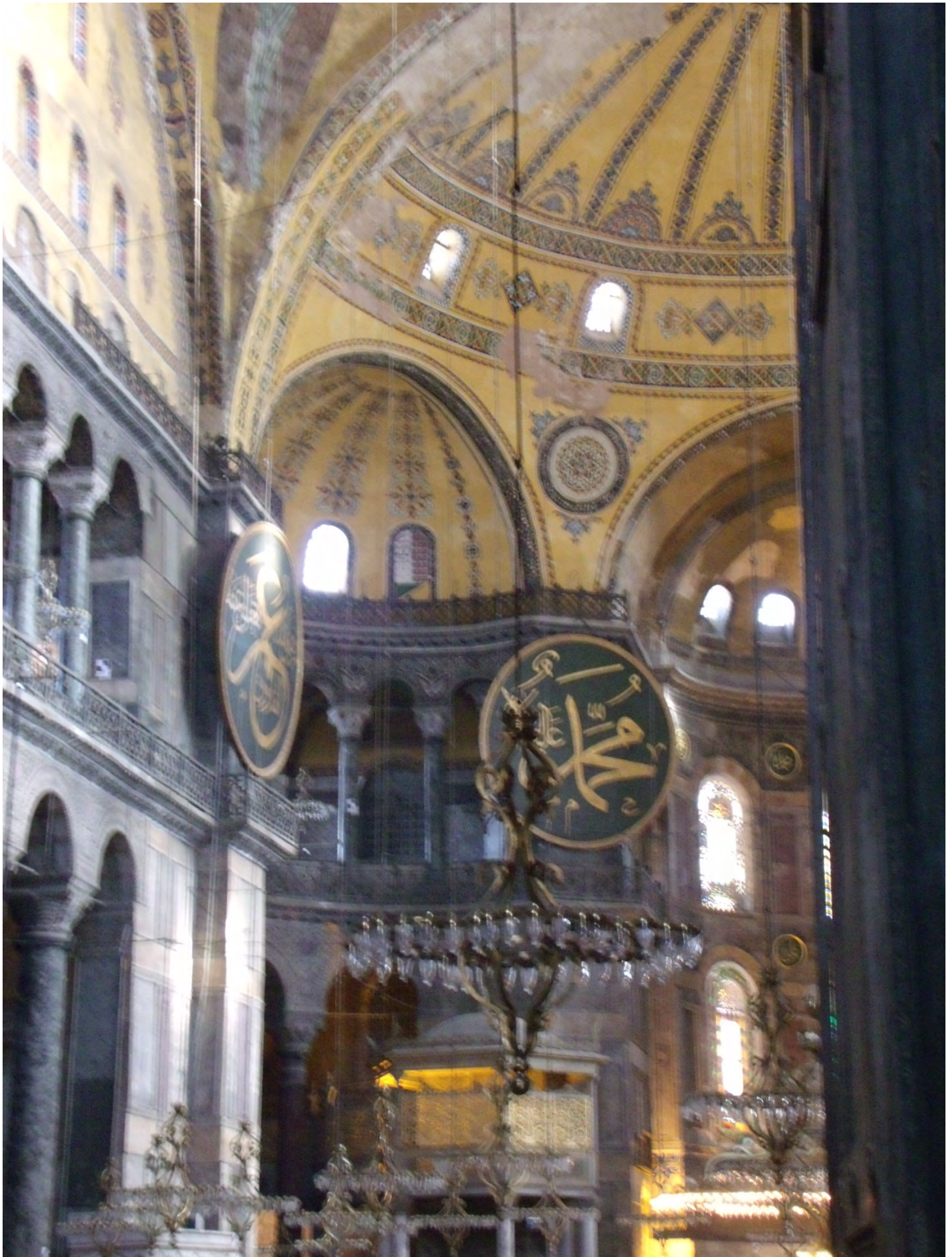
1. Map 3 E4 (5 F3). Tel (0212)

528 45 00. Sultanahmet.

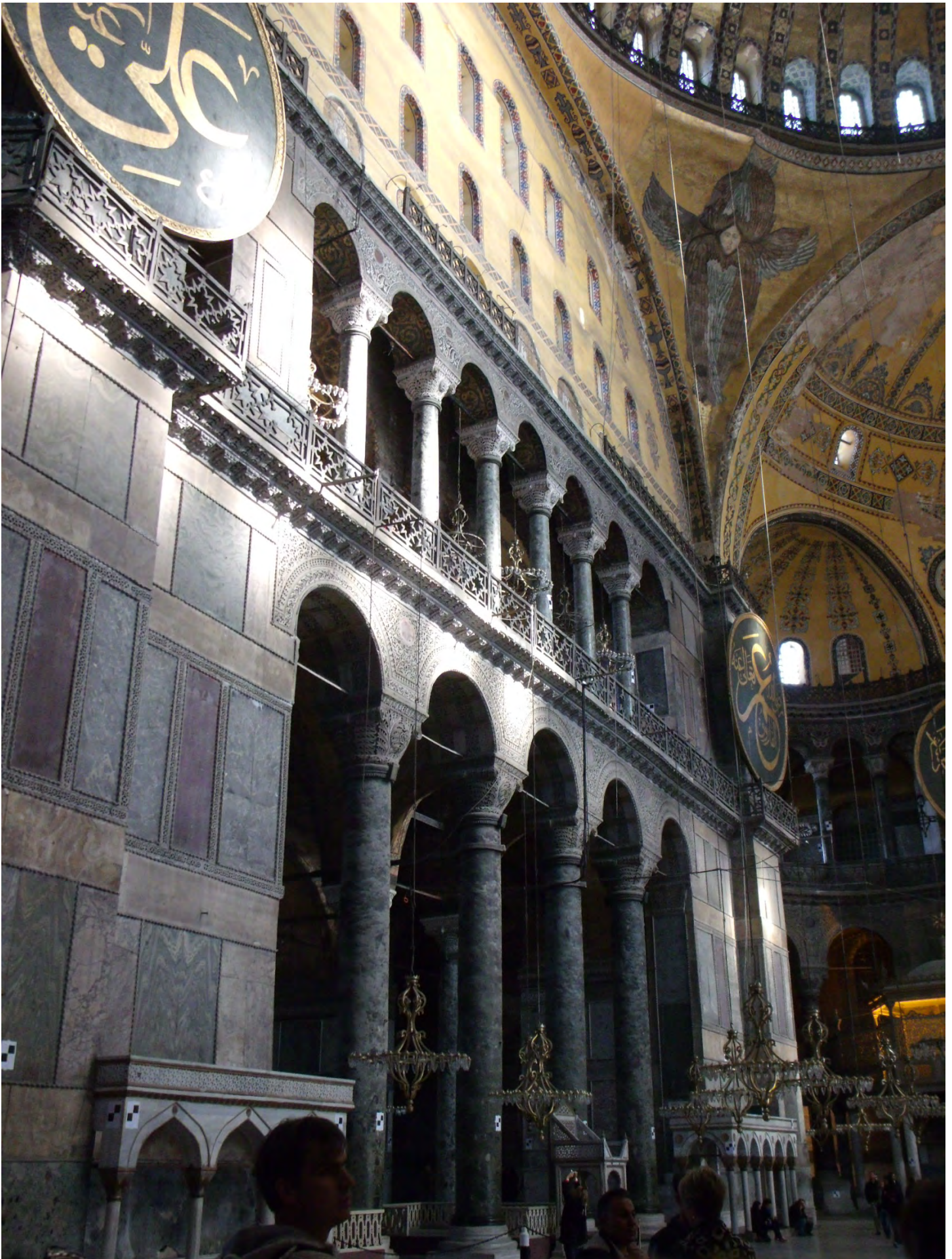
9am–6pm Tue–Sun.

ground floor only.



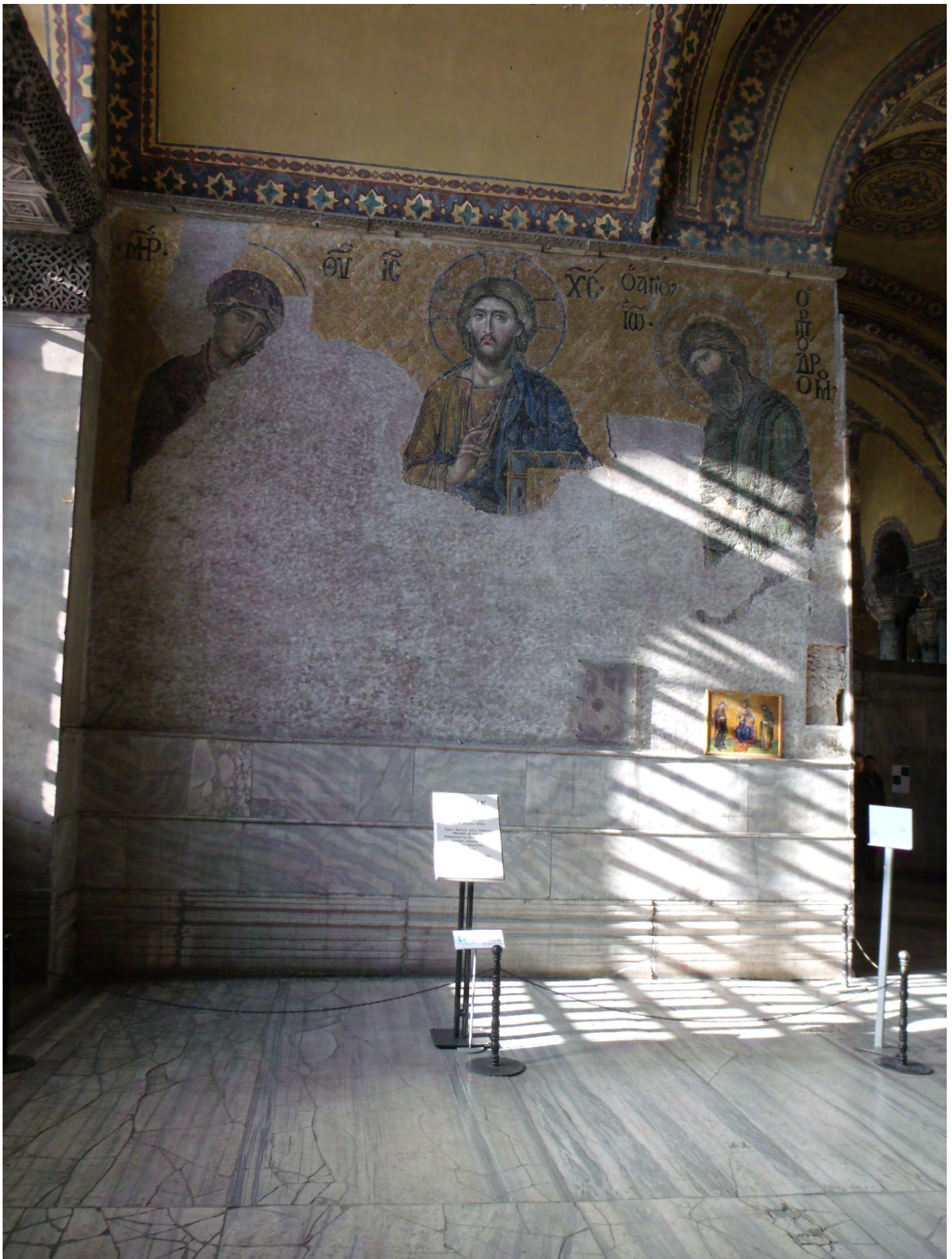








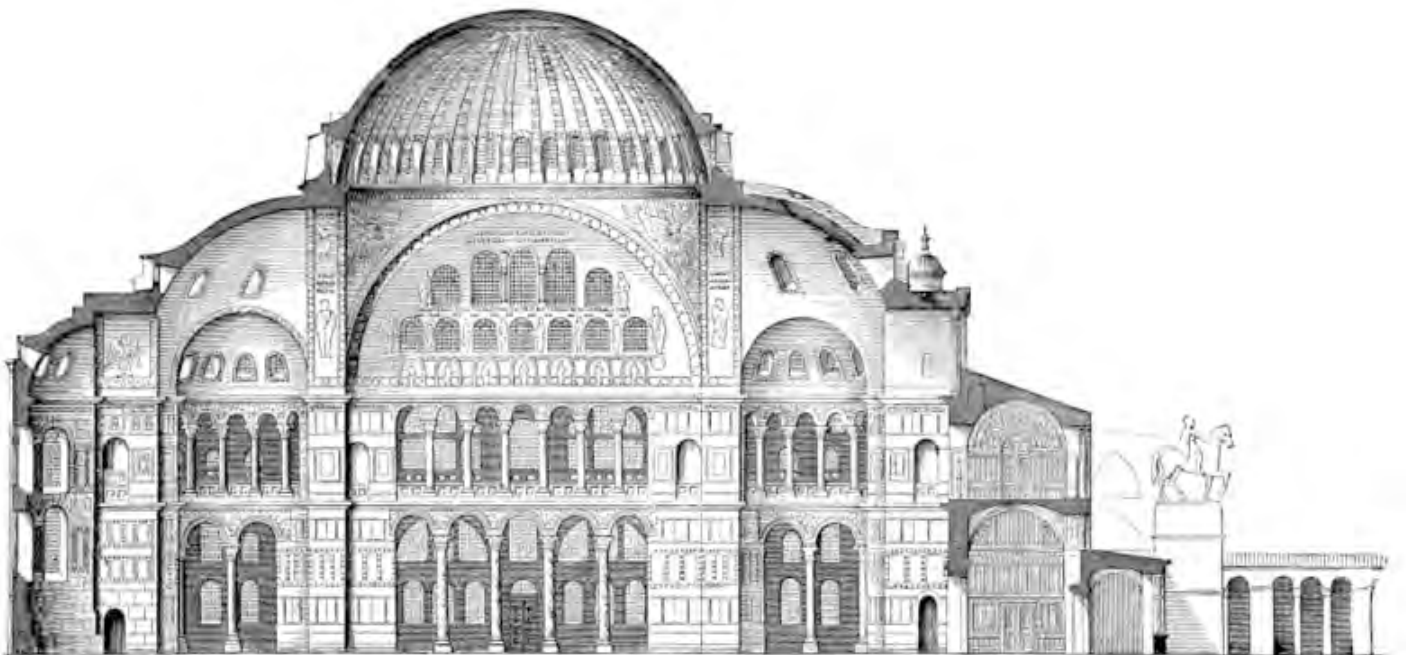








When built, this was the largest building in the world. Only the Great Wall of China and Pyramids of Giza were larger, but this was a building! If it was still a cathedral, it would be the fourth largest in the world. Onar told us much about ancient seismic detectors, the changing mosaics of a much married queen, and about the sheer size of the interior space.







From here we grabbed the van, and were escorted to Nakkas, a seller of Oriental Rugs. We had a double knot weaving demonstration and apple tea, and while the Egyptians bought carpet, we visited the cistern.





Now it was time to hit the Grand Bazaar. We wandered in the constant fear of getting lost in this maze of shops that are now covered.







16:00 We were picked up by Onar, and delivered back near our hotel. It turns out, there was some construction going on all around us, with various projects.

We took the time to do a little shopping in some of the shops near by, then let the girls crash for a bit.

18:30, we headed across the street to Big Family, and at toasties, fires, cappuccino, and water in the dining room straight across from our place, and watched America's Home Video type clips on the TV while we listened to Dean Martin. The woman spoke little English, so we did a lot of pointing at items in the menu, and each reply was Bon Appetit.

We got more cookies, and a 5 l bottle of water, and settled in for the evening.

Friday, December 28

Still not adjusted, the adults woke early.

7:30 Standard breakfast

8:45 No pick up from Plan Tours, so we called; they were running way late.

9:10 Picked up and taken to massing point, got on the bus for tour 6, and met our guide who we will from now on refer to as "My Group," as that is what he constantly yelled as he tried to keep the 40 some odd folks in the group together. The last family aboard had to be spread out on the bus. And we were off, driving on the south cost of the peninsula, passing the ancient walls... some from the Byzantine era, circa 660 BC. We headed around Kennedy with circles the peninsula to the north edge near the Galata Bridge over the Golden Horn... near the New Mosque, in the Shadow of Süleymaniye, to the Egyptian, or Spice Market. We were running late, so we only had 30 minutes... much of which was taken up by at a programmed stall where we got apple tea, some sample of Turkish delight, and covered in Saffron by an ungainly guy hauling a huge camera.











We didn't have much time, but we decided we would come back on our free day, Sunday. We headed back to the street, and found our bus gone. "My Group" was not pleased as we were already behind, but it returned, we reloaded, and headed across the Golden Horn and up the coast to the site of our Bosphorus cruise. For about two hours we sailed past Dolmabahçe Palace, Rumeli Fortress (Rumelihisarı), the Savarona (Presidential yacht of Atatürk), and grand houses on the European side. Then we crossed the one way traffic for freighters on the straights (changes direction every six hours), and came on the Asian side by the old wooden houses, the hunting summer Beylerbeyi Palace (Turkish: Beylerbeyi Sarayı), the Jewish quarter, and near the lighthouse before returning to dock right next to Dolmabahçe. Too bad we had to drive across town in traffic for other events before returning to the palace... we were right there!

"My group" using the PA to enlighten the English and German tourists.



The dock, near the clock tower and Mosque, at Dolmabahçe Palace.













The Asian side









Back to Dolmabahçe Palace.



It was a hectic drive to a leather goods store, who provided a fashion show, and then we went next door for lunch, at Şehir, on the coastline.. We had packaged bread, chicken and meatballs, rice mashed potatoes, and bought some water and Fanta.



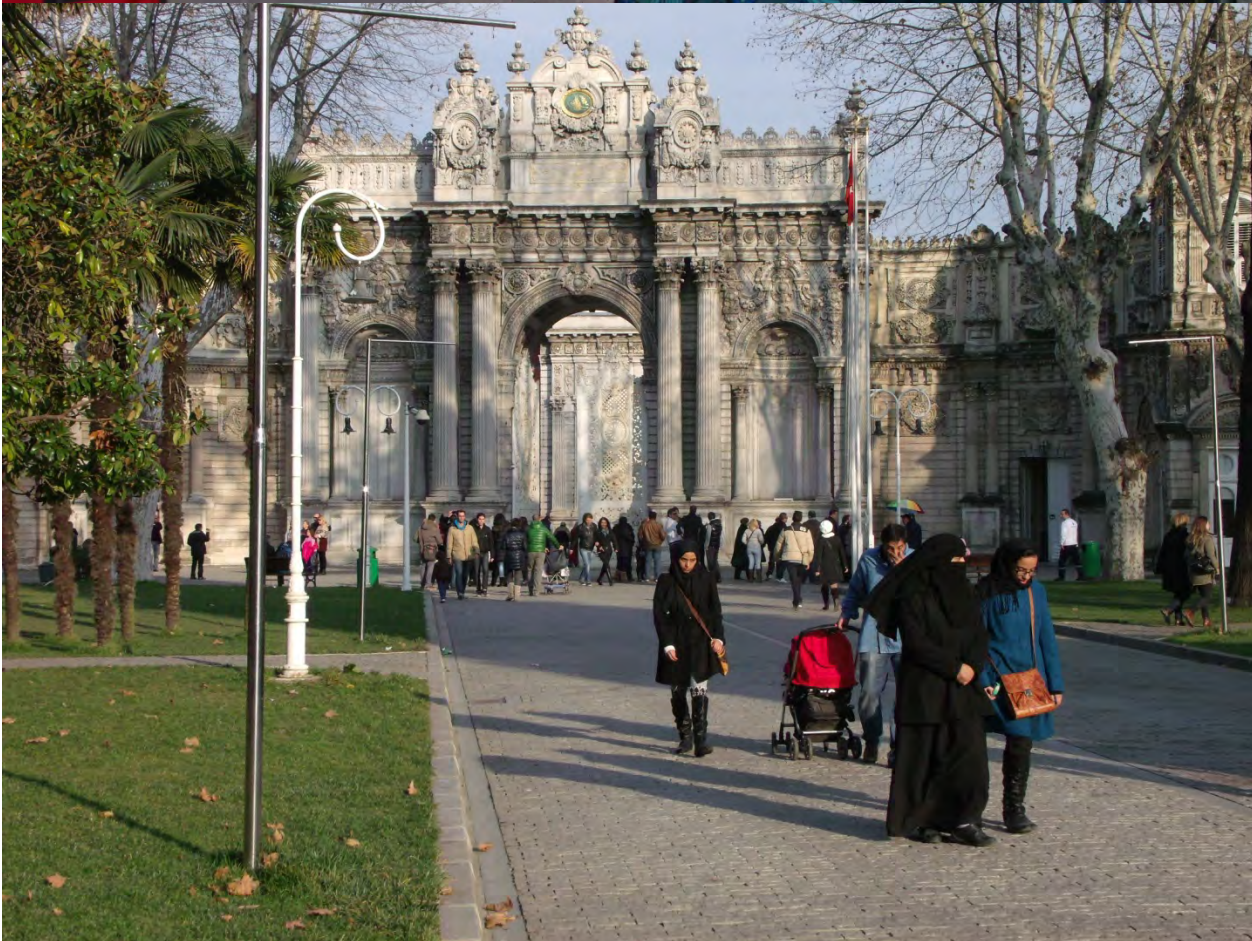


From here, it was all the way back to Dolmabahçe.

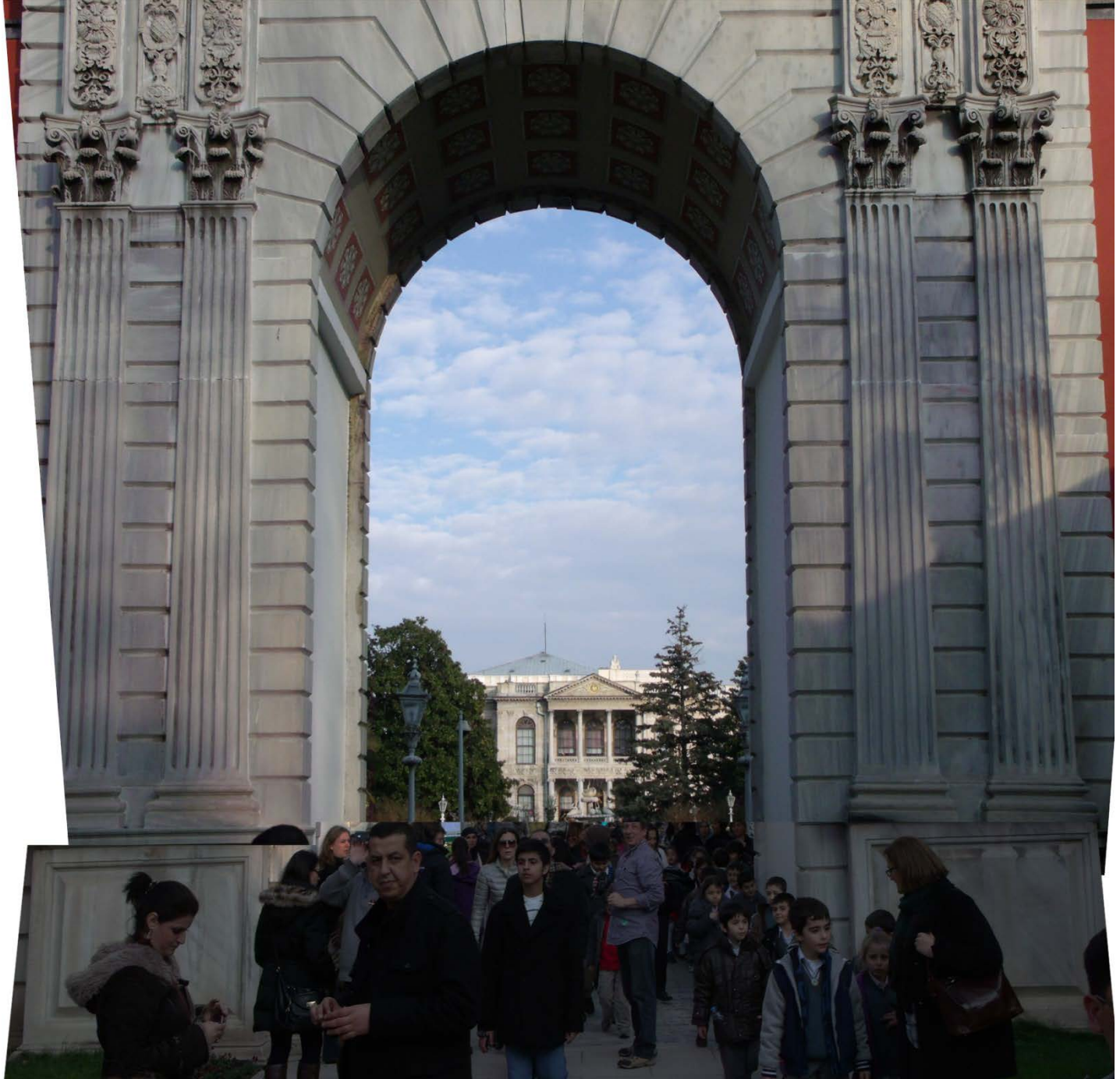


14:15 We entered by the Mosque and Clock tower, through the gates, and cued up to enter the Palace... we had to put on plastic gab style overshoes to "protect us from the Palace."











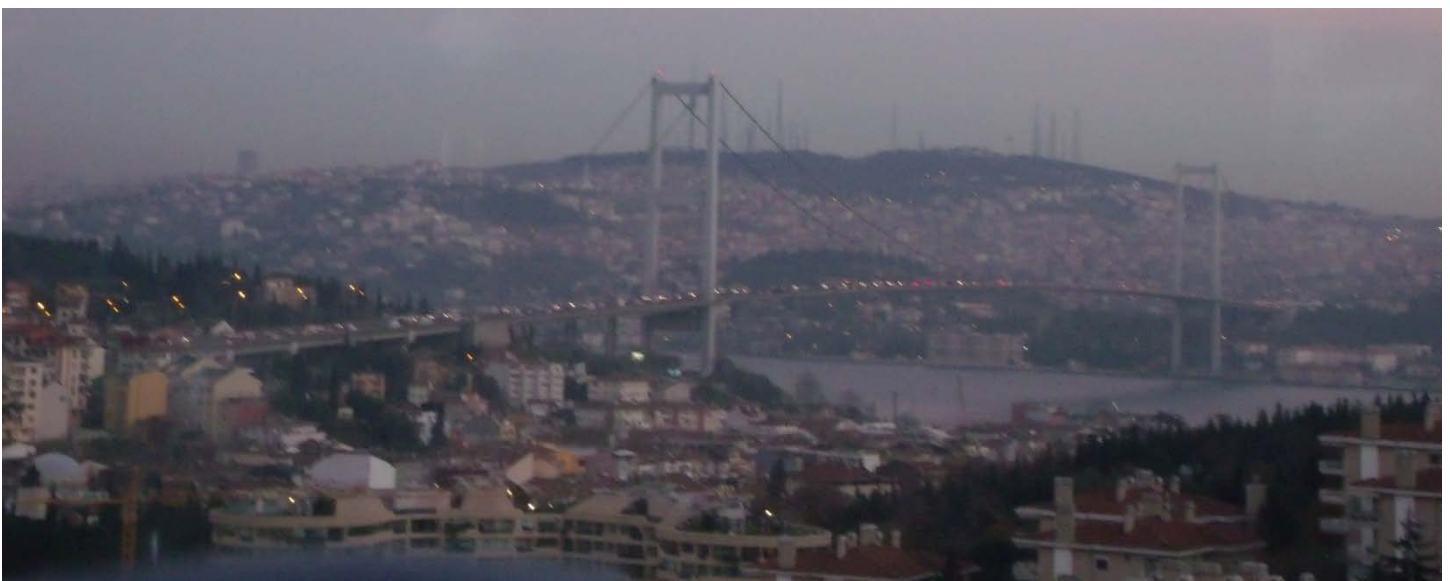


While very much like Versailles or Buckingham on the outside, as it was built on reclaimed land the Palace interior is made of very light wood painted to look like other materials, but it was grand none-the-less.

We saw each grand room had once chandelier, one table one rug, and there was incredible art everywhere. We ascended one of the crystal stairways, and toured the meeting rooms, salons, library, harem, and son on. No Photos allowed of the interior, so I had to grab this one off the Internet of the Ceremonial Hall, which contained the largest crystal chandelier in the world. The huge room was a total surprise, even in the grand place... so huge that Gracie yelled "This is ridic.." out loud.



16:15 Now we were off to Asia. We journeyed through epic traffic and crossed the now glowing Bosphorus Bridge, and actually saw a yellow sign welcoming us to Asia as we headed to a scenic point up high.









17:30 Reload the bus, and TRAFFIC galore as we work our way back, dropping folks off along the way.

18:45, we hit our hotel; wandered a bit, got some souvenirs and snacks for our breakfast the next day. We decided to stay close, and went back to Pizza de Lavia, trying some different pita pizzas. Early crash as we had an EARLY pick up.

Saturday, December 29

Early, we had snack breakfast in the room.

6:30, picked up by a driver we called as "Mama Mia," as that is what he called to all the women, Mama, or Mama Mia.

7:00 We stopped on the freeway near Ikea, and our baby sitter, a student of Japanese and English boarded. The group was small; some going to Troy and some to Gallipoli.

9:00 We stopped at a truck stop about half way in Tekirdağ, formerly Bisanthi, in a part of the region historically known as Eastern Thrace. It was cold and rainy, and we had to pay to use the WX. They had a self serve breakfast for the tourists of bread, cheese, olives, etc. that they charged an outrageous sum for.

11:00, stopped for lunch in Eceabat, at Balık, right on the Dardanelles. Blustery outside, but nice inside, with a view of some of the ferries. Chicken kebab and fixings for lunch, then we changed buses for the trip to Troy.









12:30 We headed to the ferry, and crossed to Çanakkale, and down to Troy.





We stopped at a gift shop, and the guide who ran the place joined us. Very knowledgeable, he used to chat with the archeologists, and had a passion for the place. We started in the tourist area, with a cheesy horse that we of course climbed in, and visited the museum. An huge new facility is coming, but for now it was quaint. Troy, more properly Hissilic, is where I took the most pictures, but I'll spare you most of those.







The dome provides shade, but also represents where the tell used to be, that is, where the hill that grew up use to be.

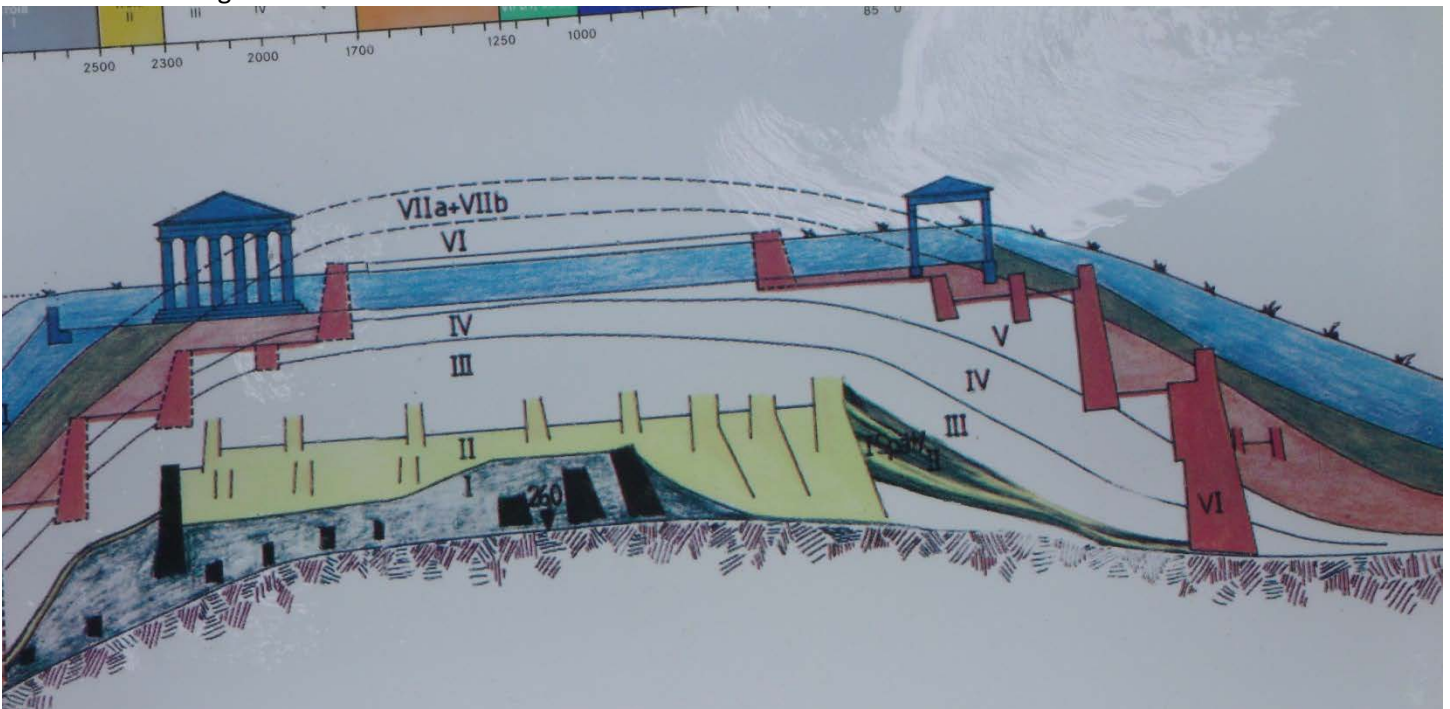


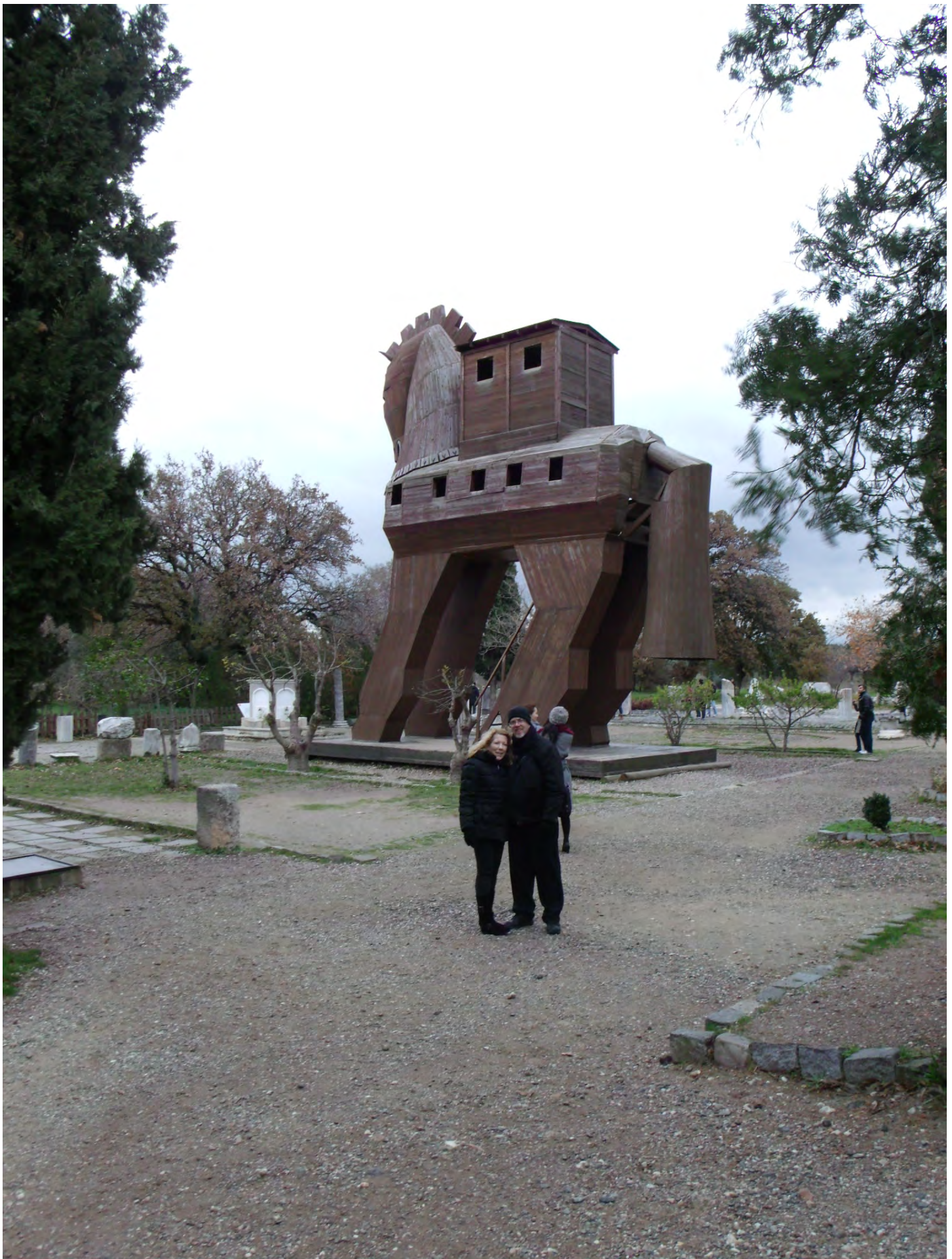




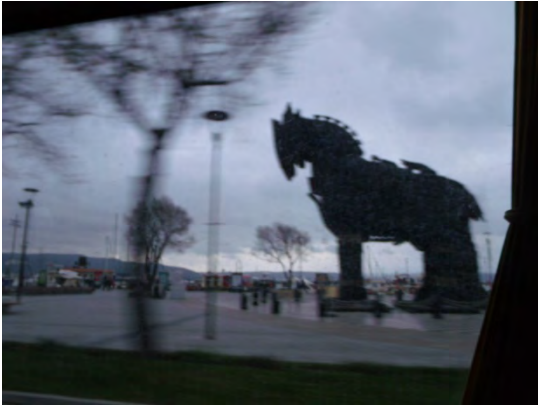


A graph showing the different historical layers, Schliemann hit Troy II, not the Hellenic Troy. The landscape has changed, the sea receded leaving marshes that were only recently drained. But our two hours here in the wind and freezing rain was worth the long bus ride.





14:30, load up the bus and back to the gift shop, then back to Çanakkale, where they have the Trojan horse from the last movie. We dropped on couple off at their hotel, but made it all the way on the boat before the other couple asked if we were going the the Anzac hotel... they decided to walk, rather than take a round trip ferry ride.



Saw a great old fortress on the ferry.



Back at the restaurant, we swapped vans again and were back with Mama Mia and some Aussies. It was a shorter drive back as our driver sped down the middle of the freeway.

20:30, from the hotel we went to Big Family for burgers, which were more like Turkish meatballs on a bun, and then back to the hotel; we went up to the terrace, and got some great views of the area, then down to the room to crash.

**Sunday, December 30**

7:30 Standard Breakfast and made final arrangements for airport transfer. Back up to the terrace to get some better shots of the Old Wall down to Aysofya and the Blue Mosque, up to the Gülhane Park, out toward the Dolmabahçe, the Golden Horn and Galata, and over to Süleymaniye.











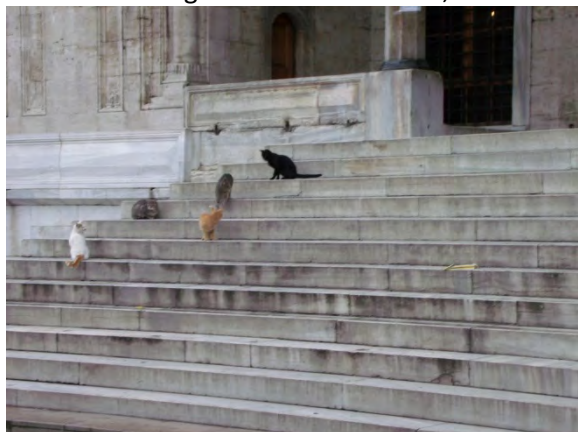
Headed out to the Post Office, which was closed and on to the Spice Market.

We got there before it opened, so we had a chance to walk around for a bit. Some of the outside shops were open, so Gracie got her spices there, then we just played tourist once we got inside.

While strolling the shops, we really noticed how good the merchants were at driving business. "Time to Hagggle," "Hey Sisters," "Be a good father and buy your daughter's something," "Let me help you spend your money," "It's almost free," and "Where are you from?" But many were experts at spotting where we were from, asking if we were from Houston or Austin, and some asked us where our guns were.



While not as big as the Grand Bazaar, this covered market was just as much a maze, but fun to wander around.



And yes, there were still cats everywhere, and a few dogs.







We wandered around as we headed back to the hotel, paid for the transfer, and headed out to the Archeology museum, by following the old wall past the parade point.





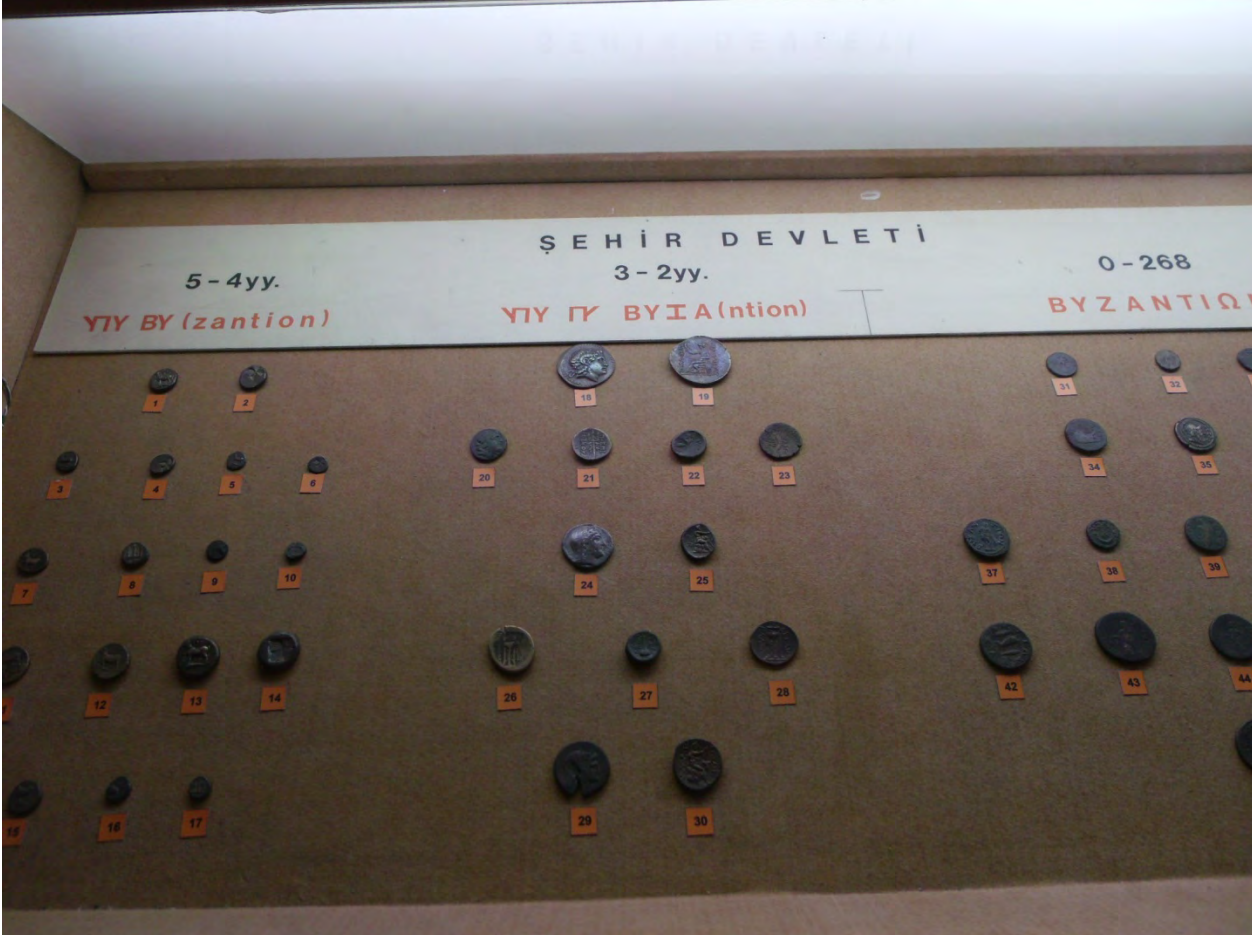


It was cold and windy, so were we glad to get inside. We started with Egyptian sarcophagi (Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire), saw Greek and Roman statues, friezes, mosaics, the top of the Serpent column, the Alexander mausoleum, the top of a temple, terra cotta items, and some of the finds from Troy.

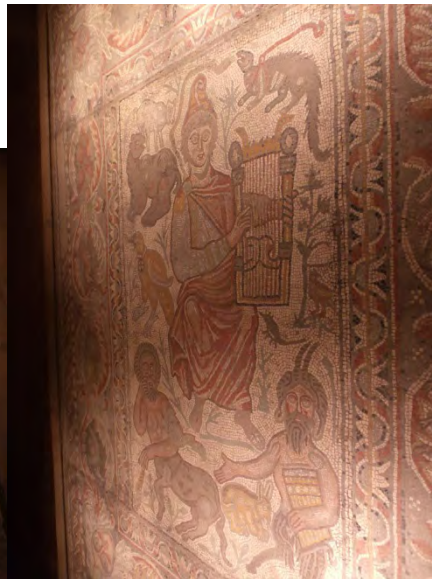




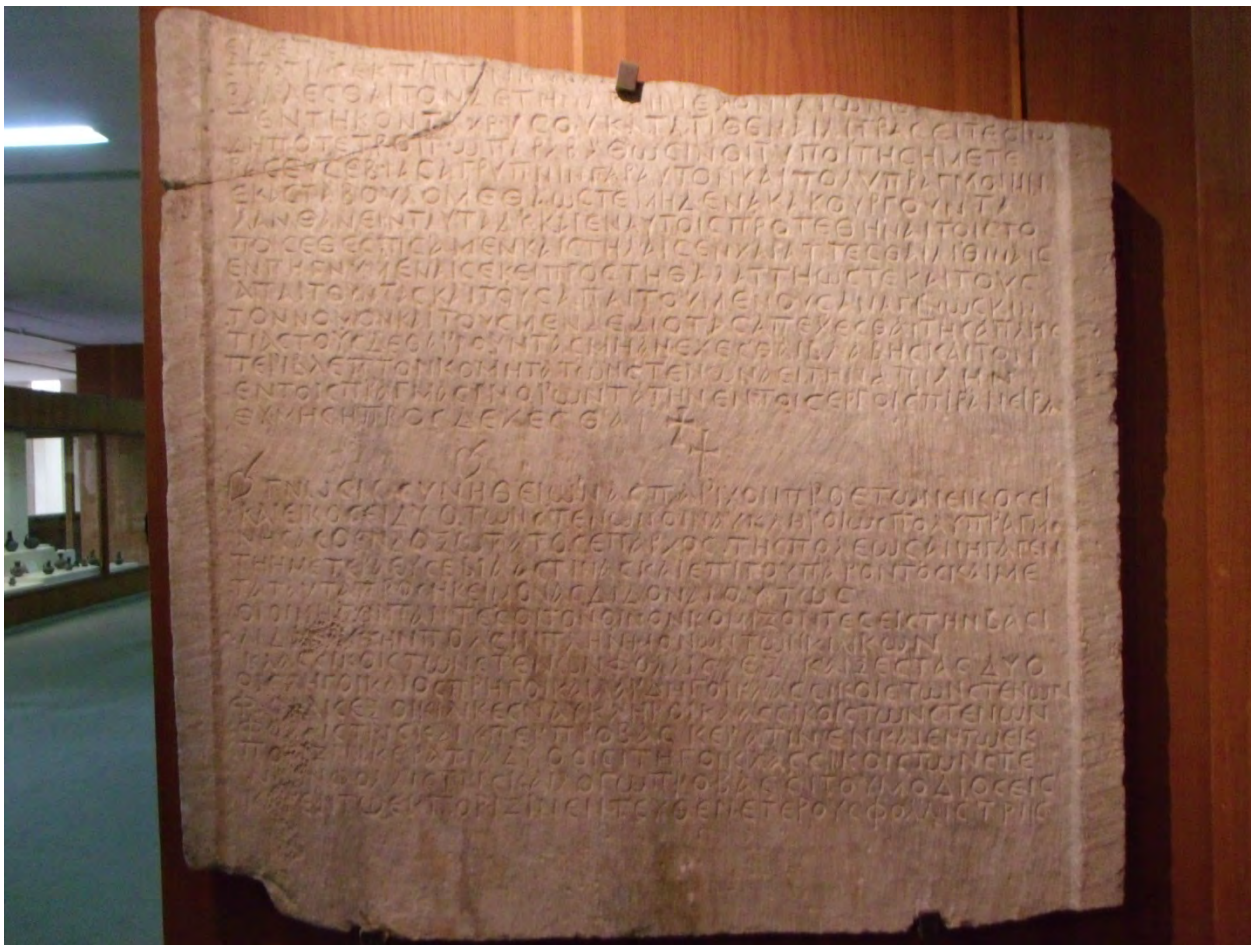












**LAW OF THE BYZANTINE EMPEROR ANASTASIOS I
(491 - 518 AD) REGULATING PASSAGE THROUGH
DARDANELLES' CUSTOMS:**

Marble

Abydos, Çanakkale

Byzantine Period 6th cent. AD

" Whoever dares to violate these regulations, shall no longer be regarded as a friend and he shall be punished. Besides, the administrator of the Dardanelles must have the right of receiving 50 golden Litrons, so that these rules, which we make out of piety, shall never ever be violated, we wish that the administrator never engage in any secret or evil activity, and be always alert affecient and hard-working.

We have decreed that our orders be engraved on stone plaques and that these be erected as near as possible to the seashore so that all men who want to may see them and all the other men we want that they see them can see them. These plaques must be erected in this area, just in the front. On one hand those who are afraid to give up their greed and meanness, and on the other hand those who display courage in order not to be punished must equally be able to read them. The distinguished governor and major of the capital







After the girls got some drinks in the museum café, we headed out to wander. On the way out of Topkapi grounds, we Passed Aya Irene, the old church that was never converted to a Mosque.



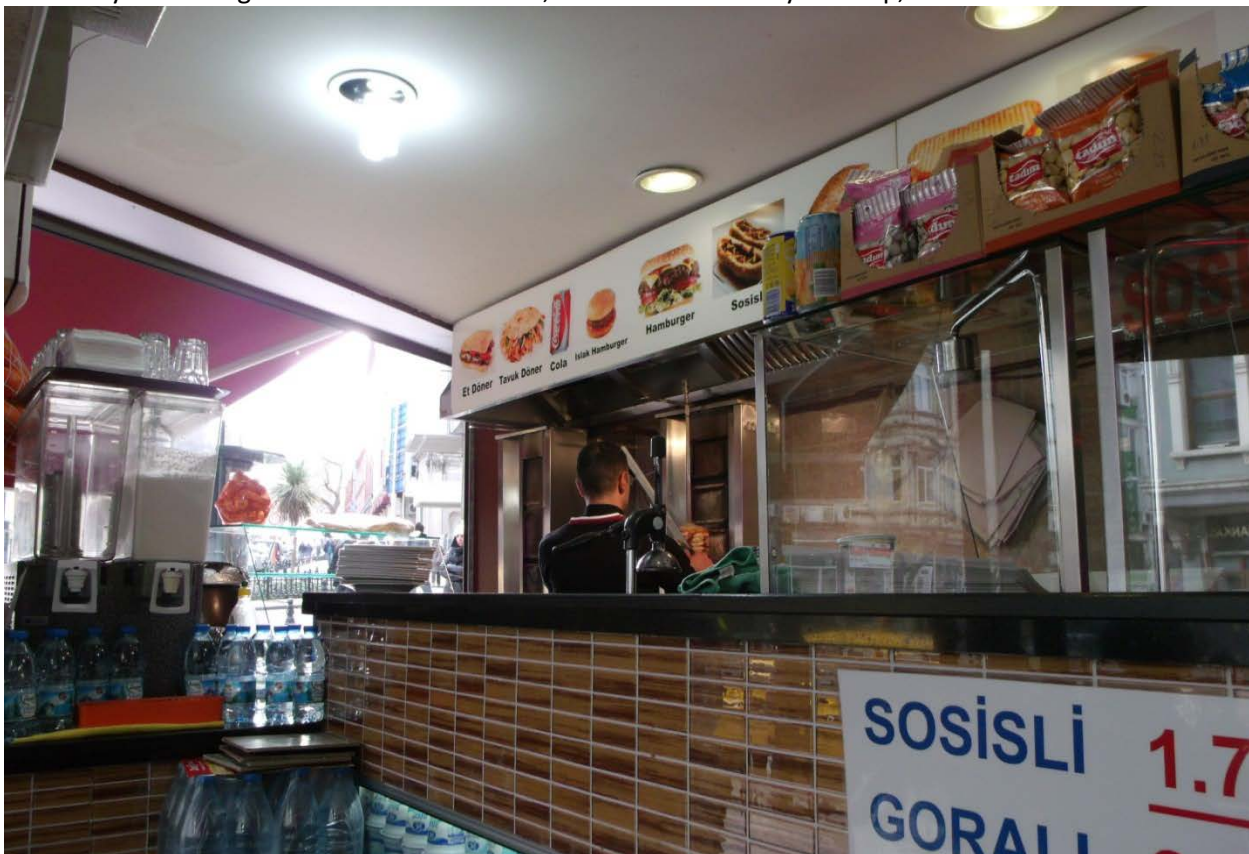
We stopped to admire Ahmet's fountain, Ayasofya, and the Blue Mosque again... those views just did not get old. We also found the Million stone, used to measure distances during the Roman empire days.







We finally found Bagetta off the beaten track, and had Swarma style kebab, and toasties.



We wandered back to the area between AyaSofya and the Blue Mosque, and wandered the open market on the side for a bit. We shopped in the market by Ahmet's Mausoleum, after wandering the Hippodrome again, as we found the Turkish and Islamic Arts museum was closed.



Then we decided to relax with a view. We went back to Omar's, sat on the glassed in terrace, wiped the mist of the windows and enjoyed the view, and desserts. More baklava, ice cream, rice pudding, and drinks; this was also our most expensive tab thus far, but worth every lira.



Aya Sophia

Basilica Cistern

Roxelana Baths

Sultanahmet Camii (Blue Mosque, as viewed from Omar's)

That is the Ayasofya on the left, the Basilica Cistern is under the ruins of the Roxelana Bath, and the Blue mosque.



More souvevier shopping, and we finally decided to splurge for dinner. We had been eating cheap, and we had money left over.

We went to Capadocia, which specialized in Ottoman nomadic food, mainly foods wrapped in a pancake like bread and heated on a big flat oven in the front of the window, tended by an elderly woman in bright white garb. We sat on divans, and the waiter snuck some harem hats on the girls. A very expensive meal, but quite a treat.

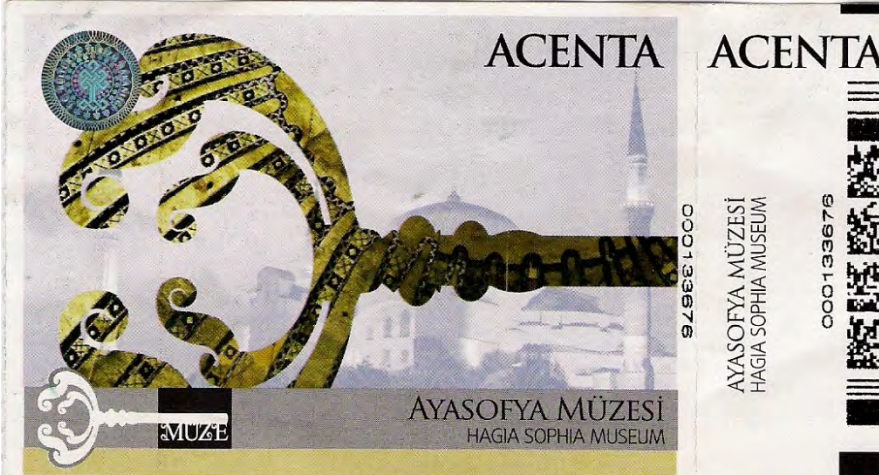








We headed back to the hotel, and packed. It was going to be a short night...



Monday, December 31

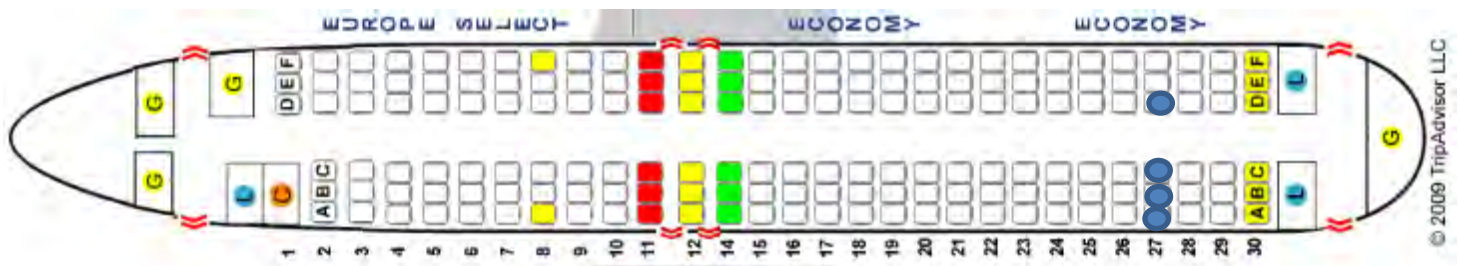
1:00 It was an early night, but we needed to be downstairs in just a few hours.

3:00 We were down stairs, but the drive was a few minutes late. So he was trying to make up time headed to the airport... we were panic stricken when we had pulled over; but the officer must have gotten a good story from the driver and he let us go.

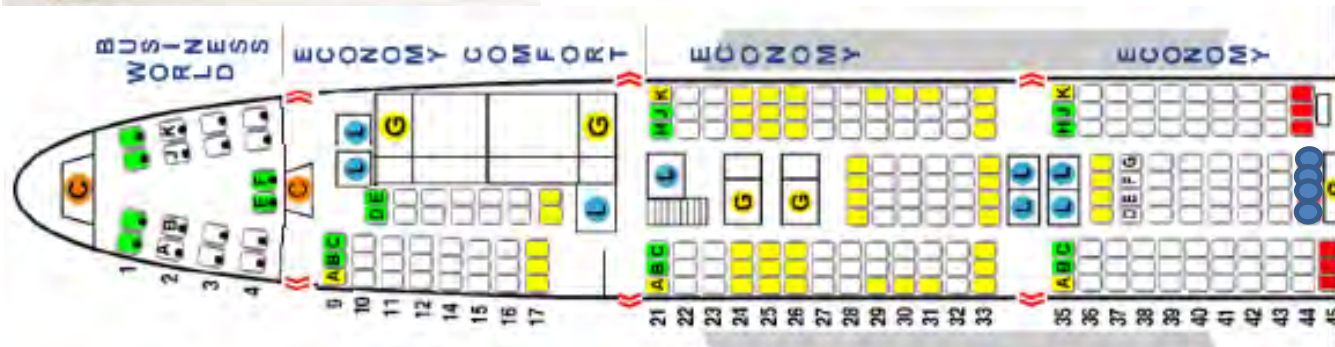
4:00 We checked in, and this time lost all four of our carry on to the checked baggage crazy folks at the desk.

We grabbed some Starbucks, did a bit of snack shopping, and exchanged the rest of our currency. Almost \$90.

After clearing gate security, we patiently waited to board first, as we were near the back of the plane, 27 A-D... then they announced general boarding and were nearly run over.



3 and a half hours later, we walked from D to G in Schipol, Amsterdam, and cleared gate security to again face cattle call boarding, for our last row seats on KLM 661.



2:00pm, Houston. 10 hours later we muddled through passport control, and then head to baggage. Mine never came. The attendant said "Oh yes, we know your bag didn't make it." She took us through customs and they had paperwork ready for us, said the bag would be delivered the next day, Jan 1. Grabbed our shuttle, paid an extra \$4 at the parking lot since we were delayed, crashed for an hour or so at a Baymont on I-45, then drove home in the rain.

9:00pm Dinner at Mi Pueblo, then crashed at home.

Thursday, January 3

My bag finally ended its vacation, and now we could actually sit down and laugh, and say "What a great trip."