



Pamukkale-

a once-in-a-lifetime

Ever since I saw the weird images on posters, I have wanted to visit Pamukkale- one of the most unique sights in Turkey (and the world) and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. So I hopped aboard the “Venus” from Samos for the 1hr 30 min sail to Kusadasi, then a dolmus, followed by a 4 hour bus ride, another dolmus and I had arrived. I came prepared to be disappointed. But instead I was amazed and awed and had a unique and wonderful time. On the way, the countryside alternates between wide plains and mountains, green and lush with fruits and vegetables. The towns, however, are as ugly as the land is beautiful, ramshackle tin and concrete apartment blocks and factories. Yet it is colourful, noisy, crowded and fascinating. There is a buzz... an energy, missing in Greece. The Turks are kind, smiling, respectful and sometimes cheeky. The buses are smooth, modern, sleek, on-time and cheap, and you get more free refreshments than on most airlines. Sadly, the image of a modern society has a darker side, a dictatorship and brutally effective police force, currently being played out through violence, demonstrations and strikes that started seriously the day after I left. But I saw none of it. I travelled comfortably and worry-free. There is very little crime in Turkey I was told- the police act swiftly and brutally.

Pamukkale, with its calcium-rich, thermal waters has been a spa for centuries. What people from around the world come to experience are the unique formations of calcium terraces, “the travertines”, shelves, pools and cliffs along a high ridge above the village – unlike anything you’ve ever seen before and quite captivating. You walk barefoot up the ridge to a beautifully landscaped plateau, paddling through the blindingly-white calcium deposits in 36 degree thermal water. They cover an area of several kilometres. Even the most staid Japanese couldn’t suppress a grin- indeed everyone acted like happy children, splashing their way up the hill. It’s a weird and wonderful place.





At the top, you reach Hierapolis, the ruins of a whole spa city built by the Romans. It has been Roman, Byzantine, Jewish and Christian. Here is another magical experience, as you can swim in the Antique Pool among the fallen ruins and columns in 36°C clear water surrounded by pink azalea and palms. Soothing and lovely. Behind this, sprawl the ruins of the ancient town founded in 190 BC by King Pergamum but abandoned in 1334 after a major earthquake. Here you can find the Archaeological Museum, the oracle and high on the mountain slope, the spectacular Roman amphitheatre which once could seat 12,000 spectators, restored by Italian stonemasons in the 1970's. Very sensibly, they also demolished the hotels which had been built above the ridge in the 1970's and which lessened the flow of water to the pools. After a huge effort, they have been cleaned and restored though some remain dry. These are also fascinating though as you can see the dry calcium patterns and they are quite beautiful, too.



The atmosphere was made more dramatic by the heavy thunderclouds and rumbling on the horizon- a striking contrast to the blinding white of the travertines, and a dramatic backdrop to the stunning panorama across the whole plain. There is a beautifully-landscaped park with boardwalk along the edge of the pools and I stayed along with many others to watch the sunset before happily splashing my way back down to the village. The village is, as you might expect, full of tacky souvenir stalls, "genuine Turkish" tourist restaurants and tatty pension hotels which look as if they might collapse at any minute and probably do given the slightest earth tremor. But at 19 euros a night incl. bathroom and breakfast how can you complain. It was clean (especially as the toilet washed the floor every time you flushed it) and I met an interesting and charming Turkish family and a Dutch medical student on his way to work in a hospital in the Sudan via Egypt, taking a ferry from down near the Syrian border. I felt quite boring.. But nothing could wipe the smile off my face.