



# TURKEY:

## Where East Meets West and Ancient Arts Feed Modern Sensibilities

by Monica Frim



A view of the European side of Istanbul. Cruise boats ply both European and Asian sides of the Bosphorus and offer great views of Ottoman architecture.

When in Turkey, do as the Romans ... or Byzantines ... or Ottomans ... or any number of Europeans do who are encouraging the ancient arts and practices in a modern world: take a Turkish bath. Of course you will also want to visit the mosques and museums and admire the beautiful tapestries and ceramics, whose traditional designs and fastidious production methods lure collectors from all over the world. However, it's the communal bath, known as a hamam (also spelled hammam), that serves as a true cultural linchpin.

Hamams aren't just about getting clean. They're about getting social. The tradition goes back to Greek and Roman times, when it was a ritual to get scrubbed and purified in a communal setting. The Ottomans maintained the practice, as it was often the only way that women could socialize outside of their homes, and they often spent the entire day in a hamam. According to a rumor, a woman could divorce her husband if he failed to supply her with an allowance for the hamam. Gentlemen, consider yourselves warned.

One of the prettiest hamams in Istanbul is the Çemberlitaş Hamami,

## NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL DESTINATIONS

*Istanbul is a bustling, cosmopolitan city of 14 million people, with more historical, cultural and recreational landmarks than can adequately be crammed into a three-day visit. Monica Frim makes a valiant effort, then flies to Cappadocia for a whirlwind tour of "fairy chimneys," underground cities, rock churches and a pottery shop. What spurs her? A knowledgeable guide who makes it all navigable, comfortable and fun.*

Travel with us.



commissioned in the 16th century by the mother of Sultan Murat III. First-timers may feel some trepidation at being bubble washed, scrubbed and exfoliated naked and supine upon a heated marble slab by a stranger. Rest assured, it's not as salacious as it sounds. There are separate facilities for men and women. And if you're worried about protocol, the attendants are accustomed to non-Turkish speaking patrons and manage directions quite well with gestures and smiles. But be forewarned, the scrubbers have individual styles and methods. I watched a member of our group get an invigorating scrub and eagerly anticipated the same treatment. Alas, my attendant either suffered from a wrist ailment or feared hurting what she may have considered my delicate composition. The "oomph" I expected afterwards to spur me on to tireless treks through mosques and museums just wasn't there.

Fortunately, I was able to muster up energy on my own aided by our delightful guide, Barış. Turkey is so full of cultural monuments and geological wonders that it would take months, even years, to explore them all. Barış crammed the best into a three-day tour of Istanbul, followed by a two-day adventure in Central Anatolia's Cappadocia region. Cappadocia translates from the Persian language as "land of beautiful horses," but it's the "fairy chimneys," underground cities and

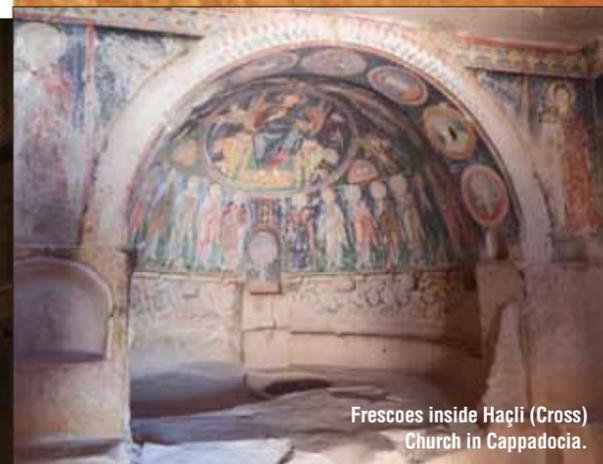
rock-hewn churches, that form its most alluring features.

But no matter where you start or where you go, history visibly punctures the landscape. Minarets rise from rolling hills above the roofs of rectangular buildings and former palaces take on new functions as museums or hotels. In the former village of Ortaköy, the burnt-out shell of the historic Esme Sultana Mansion surrounds an interior glass-walled structure that was pulsating with purple flashes of light when we drove by. The mansion was Sultan Abdülaziz's wedding gift to his daughter, Esme, and now functions as a trendy venue for a variety of events. It's situated in one of Istanbul's artsiest neighborhoods, where young people congregate nightly to gorge on waffles and kumpir (a giant baked potato with various fillings such as mayonnaise, tomato sauce, pickles, sweet corn, sausage bits, carrots, mushrooms and Russian salad) then watch the sun go down over the Bosphorus. We joined the throng at the end of a pedestrian street lined with cafés, restaurants and vendors' stalls displaying a variety of artisanal goods: chunky jewelry, jaunty clothes, paintings, handmade toys and knickknacks of many persuasions. Nearby, the Ortaköy Mosque formed an unlikely background to the convivial noise and consumerist atmosphere. The entire scene perfectly summed up the dichotomy that is Istanbul.

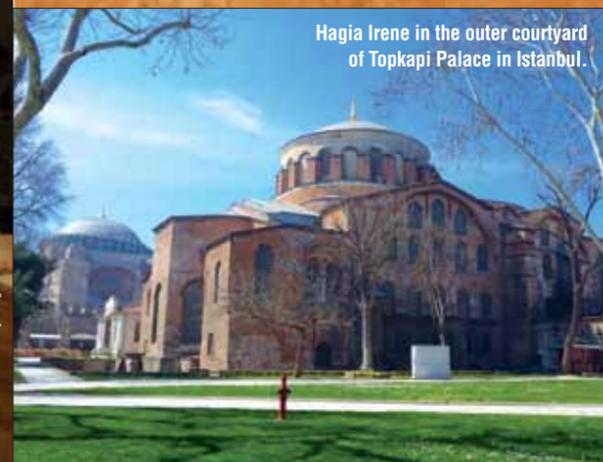
Hagia Sophia is one of Istanbul's most iconic landmarks. Once an important place of worship for both Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, Hagia Sophia evolved from church to mosque to museum.



Whirling dervishes turn dance into a form of prayer that preaches tolerance and a search for understanding.



Frescoes inside Haçlı (Cross) Church in Cappadocia.



Hagia Irene in the outer courtyard of Topkapı Palace in Istanbul.

It's not just that Istanbul has a foothold on two continents, but somehow the city manages to combine contemporary culture with ancient history to the enhancement of both. While the panoply of mosques, palaces, museums, markets, sidewalk hustlers, clubs and cafés can overwhelm the first-time visitor, a cruise along the Bosphorus can provide a calming antidote. This fast-flowing strait that bisects the city and joins the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara is the perfect introduction to Istanbul's European and Asian splendors, yet many visitors miss it simply because they don't have time.

Barış effortlessly, or so it seemed, slotted a cruise into our busy schedule and, at Eminönü in the Old Town, whisked us aboard one of the boats that sidle up the European coast and back down the Asian side. We passed palaces and piers, wooded hills and waterfront houses, fortresses and fancy hotels — in short, some of the most expensive real estate in the city. All the while Barış kept up an encyclopedic commentary on the most interesting waypoints: "... the Galata Tower was built in 1348 and used as a watchtower against attacks ... the Dolmabahçe Palace was the last home of the last sultan and the home of Turkey's first prime minister, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk ... Çırağan Palace, once the home of another sultan, is now one of the most expensive hotels in the world. Its Sultan Suite costs more than

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*Where East Meets West*

Ortahisar Castle in Cappadocia is riddled with ancient cave homes and secret tunnels. Once a fortress that housed the entire town, Ortahisar's many caves are now used to store lemons and other fruits grown in the area.



US\$15,000 a night ... the Rumeli Fortress (see those crenelated walls and turrets that go on forever?) was built in 1452 in preparation for Mehmet's siege of Constantinople, which ended the Byzantine Empire ..."

At the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge, the boat crossed to the Asian side for the return journey, continuing alongside a chain of historic fortresses and buildings that included a former military high school and the marble Summer Palace of the Sultan, now turned museum.

Our group unanimously wanted to set foot in Asia, so disembarked in Üsküdar. Barış pointed out a tiny island tower called Kiz Kulesi (Girl or Maiden's Tower) and regaled us with the most popular legend (there are many) surrounding its construction. This story had an emperor confining his daughter to the tower to thwart an oracle that prophesized she would die from a poisonous snakebite on her 18th birthday. That fateful day, the emperor brought his daughter a basket of fruit to celebrate both her birthday and his presumed prevention of the prophecy. However, hidden in the basket was an asp ...

We drove to Çamlıca (Pine) Hill where paths wind among pine trees and early spring gardens burst with tulips in splashes of red, yellow, white and purple. From the top of the hill, we could see Asia unfolding in one direction, Europe in the other and a few of the Prince Islands, part of a chain

of nine islands in the Sea of Marmara. As motorized vehicles are not allowed, bicycles and horse-drawn carriages are the favored means of transportation on the islands, which are popular as summer tourist destinations.

The cruise and the hill provided glorious introductory glimpses of a city that demanded we get up close and personal, too. Barış' insightful commentaries continued in advertorial bursts chock-full of dates, events and place names as he continued to fill our days with visits to popular haunts such as the Blue Mosque, Hagia Sophia, Topkapi Palace, the heady Spice Market and the labyrinthine Grand Bazaar. How he managed to fit in a ceremony by whirling dervishes at the old Sirkeci Train Station (once the terminus of the famous Orient Express), visits to the city's old Roman cisterns, aqueducts, defensive stone walls, a carpet shop and demonstration, and some of Istanbul's most atmospheric restaurants remains a mystery even as I reread my diary. Were there really that many hours in each day?

In the old Balat and Fener neighborhoods, we wound past old and new office buildings and trudged up a steep hill with multi-colored apartment buildings in various stages of renovation, many with cantilevered balconies that hang over the sidewalk. "Many TV shows are filmed in this area," said Barış. "It's a very family-like atmosphere." He led us to a large red brick



A passage in Kaymakli Underground City.



The 15th century Rumeli Fortress built by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II.

building. It was a Greek Orthodox school and we just happened to get invited inside because one of the teachers came by as we stood there admiring the architecture. It was off-hours and we visited an empty classroom that looked like something out of the mid-1900s, with a chalkboard at the front and old wooden double desks with attached seats arranged in tidy rows. It was a serendipitous detour to St. George's Greek Orthodox Church, the oldest in Istanbul, and famous for the splinter of the cross of Christ supposedly brought to Constantinople by St. Helen, the mother of Constantine the Great.

While there are a staggering number of things to do and things to see in Istanbul, other places beckoned. For our group it was the lunar landscape of Cappadocia where ancient rocks have been carved over eons by wind and water into iconic formations that appear like giant origami figures in stone: folded, flattened, even phallic to those who are inclined to see them that way. Nature is compliant here, meaning that the landscape lets itself be manipulated by a variety of forces. But it's man's hand that's made the most amazing cuts. Starting perhaps 2,000 years ago, ancient civilizations began carving into the hillsides, building underground homes that eventually evolved into entire cities with stairs, rooms and passageways that descended several stories deep under the ground.

Construction was all done in secret and featured huge, millstone-like doors that could be rolled with metal rods in front of access ways so that any passers-by, particularly marauding armies, would simply see them as rocks that were part of the landscape. Who would have thought that those rocks would hide a slew of life-supporting amenities underground such as: granaries, stables, water wells, cisterns, wineries, ventilation systems, kitchens, even garbage collection systems? Or that the rocky outcroppings of Cappadocia once contained

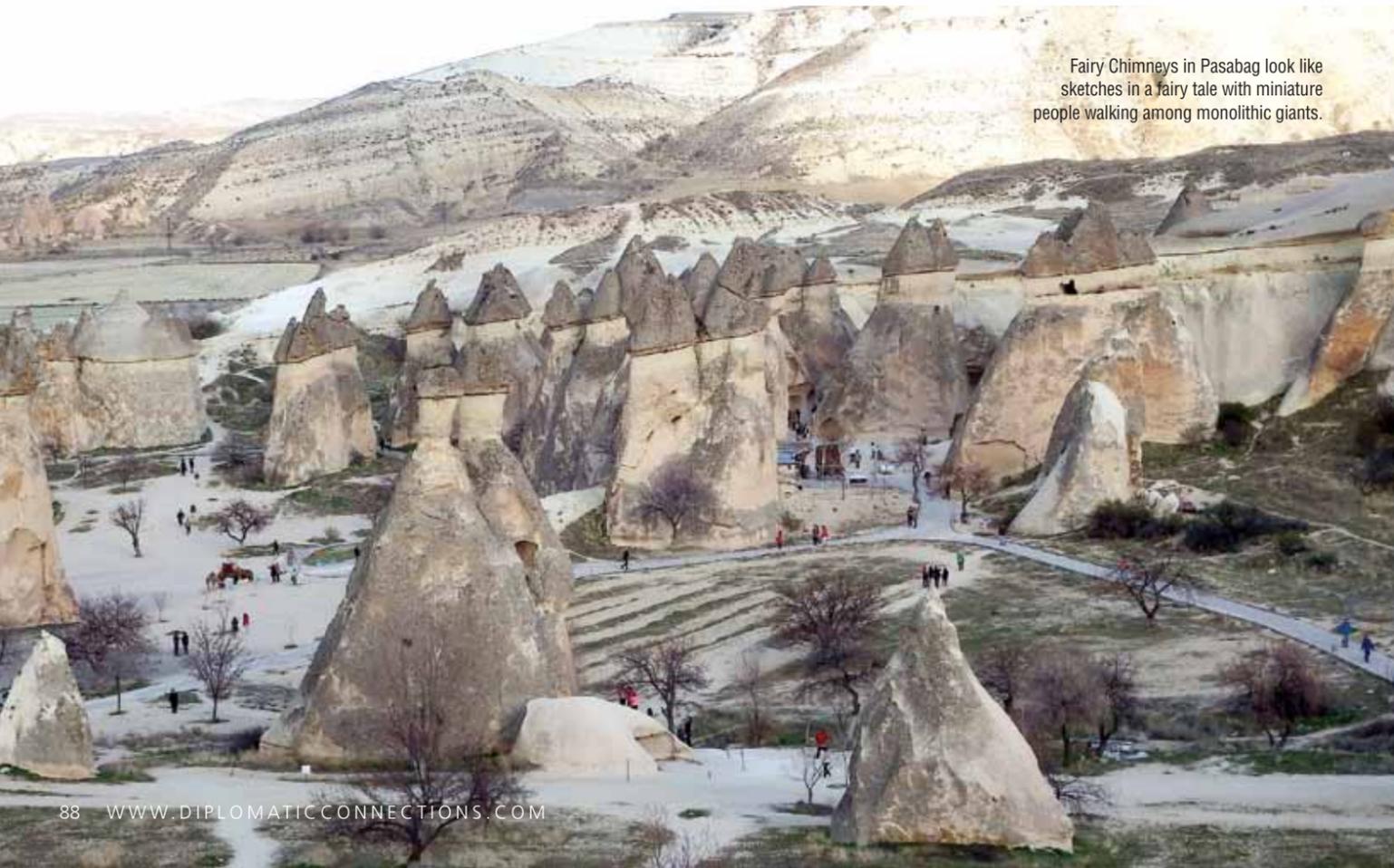
more than a thousand churches carved into the soft tufa complete with arches, vaults, domes and columns, many decorated with brilliant frescoes depicting scenes from the Bible. How were these buildings possible and why were they built?

It turns out that millions of years ago volcanic eruptions left a layer of tufa or tuff, a soft volcanic stone, over the earth that eventually eroded through the actions of wind and water into the fanciful shapes that we know today as "fairy chimneys." In addition, the ground fragmented with the changes in climate as rocks expanded in the heat, then broke in the cold or as water froze in the cracks.

There is some evidence that the Hittites, a culture that moved into the Anatolian region around 2,000 years BC, may have been the first to tunnel into the soft (geologically speaking) rocks, although more elaborate construction, including the building of churches, developed during the early days of Christianity.

Our group visited Kaymakli, one of several underground cities built and used by early Christians to avoid Roman persecution. It is estimated that the city extends seven or eight levels, but so far only four levels have been excavated. There are two visitors' routes: you enter into the church, then follow the red arrows down, and the blue arrows up. A caveat: it's not for claustrophobics or the obese, but anyone else will find the narrow passageways, low arches and storage niches an adventurous leap into a sci-fi movie or a throwback to the times of the Templars. You can almost hear the Hollywood theme music.

Göreme is, perhaps, the city most representative of Cappadocian variety. Originally an agricultural town, then a monastic center between the 4th and 13th centuries, the town features a range of cave hotels complete with traditional Turkish linens and carpets, pinnacled "fairy chimneys" that



Fairy Chimneys in Pasabag look like sketches in a fairy tale with miniature people walking among monolithic giants.

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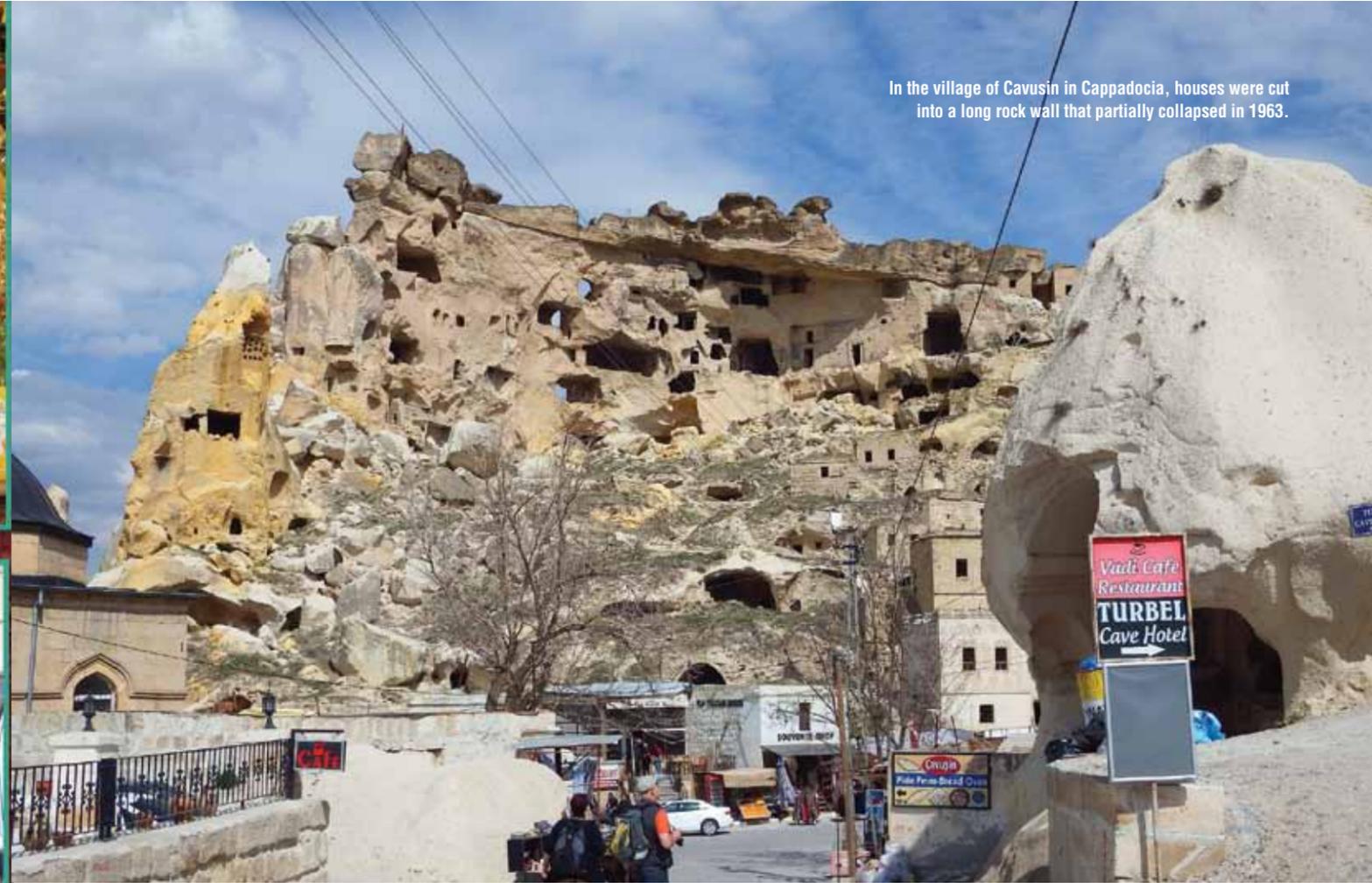
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Clockwise from top left: A pomegranate juice vendor; loose tea and spices in the Spice Market; a waiter serves testi kebab, an Anatolian specialty made of meat and vegetables; trays of baklava and boxes of Turkish Delight; a swirly street treat; a flaming pot of testi kebab destined to be broken open with great flourish at the table.



In the village of Cavusin in Cappadocia, houses were cut into a long rock wall that partially collapsed in 1963.

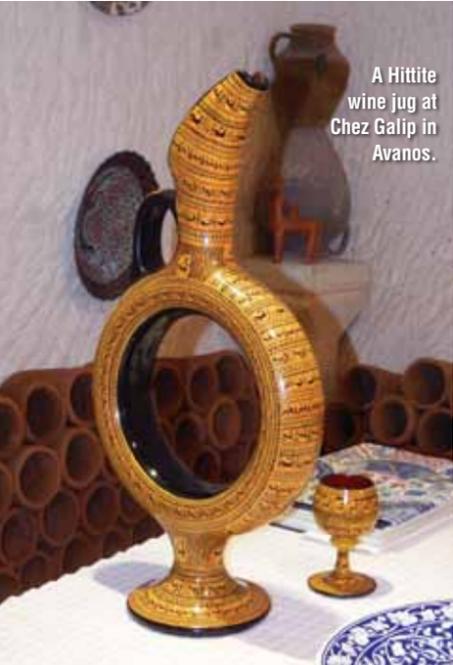
tower above the white-washed homes, views to the dovescotes of Pigeon Valley and short hops to the imposing Üchisar Castle, the highest point in the region. The castle rock, which was inhabited until the 1950s, looks menacing from a distance but, surprisingly, turns out to be fairly easy to climb. The reward for negotiating the steps, tunnels and niches is great scenic lookouts over the town and surrounding valleys on the way up and down. A panoramic view from the area around the flagpole at the peak makes you feel like you've just conquered a mountain.

About two kilometers east of Göreme, the Göreme Open Air Museum is a compound that allows visitors into eight of the best-preserved cave churches of Cappadocia. Most stem from the 11th to 12th centuries and feature amazing frescoes, many of them still brilliant with predominantly red, blue and ochre colorings. Some contain graves and visible human skeletons. A variety of construction techniques include barrel-vaulted ceilings, multiple apses, columns, domes, niches and cupolas. Most impressive is the Tokali or Buckle Church, which has the most brilliant frescoes featuring a distinguishing deep blue background color that is not found in the other churches. Built in the 10th and 11th centuries, it is the oldest

rock-hewn church in the area and consists of four sections: the old church, the new church, the lower church under the old church and the parecclesion (side chapel) north of the new church.

Underground cities are linked to their corresponding cities aboveground and usually involve a walk among souvenir stands weighted with ubiquitous tufa carvings, glass evil eyes, Turkish blankets, pillows, scarves and carpets. But for an authentic, albeit expensive, souvenir of the region, you cannot beat a circular Hittite wine jug. Also called sun vessels, these circular jugs have a round shape, not only for aesthetic reasons, but to keep the wine cool. The most intricately painted ones take up to 25 days to paint and can cost over \$2,000. Traditional colors are a deep yellow base color with very fine detailing in black, red and green, and a solid black band on the inner surface of the torus (the doughnut shape of the bottle). Prospective buyers beware: you can get cheaper, plainer versions in the markets of Istanbul, sometimes for under \$100, but they are likely mass-produced in China.

The best place to shop for authentic ceramic souvenirs is in the showrooms of Avanos where numerous pottery shops also give demonstrations of the kick-wheel method and



A Hittite wine jug at Chez Galip in Avanos.



Kiz Kulesi (Maiden's Tower) was once a quarantine station. It is now a popular restaurant on the Bosphorus accessible by private boat.

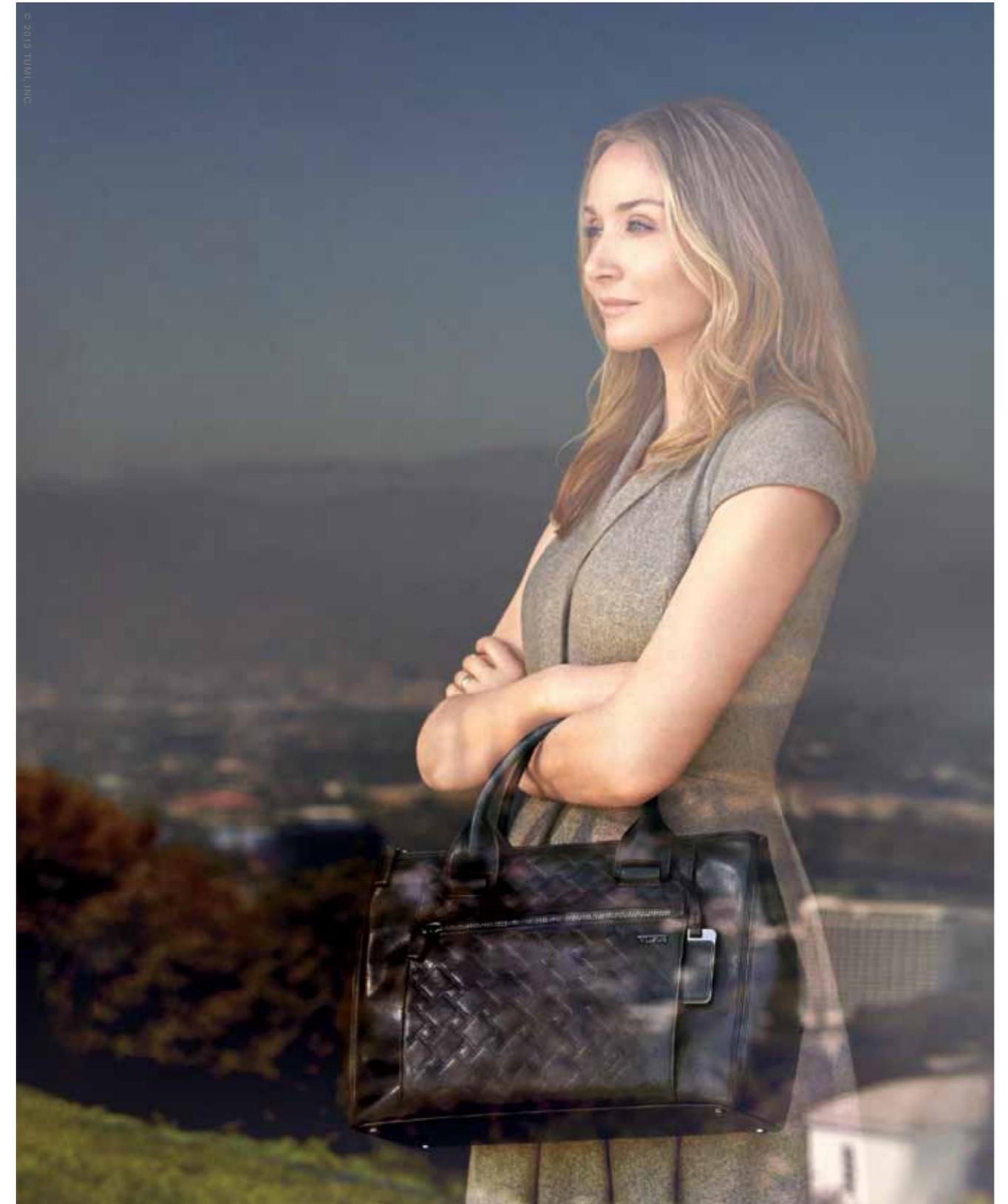
some even let you try your hand (and foot) at making a piece yourself. Since Hittite times, the art form has been transmitted down the generations from father to son, although at least one local potter is doing his best to pass the techniques on to women. Master Galip of Chez Galip has been teaching women from all over the world for 34 years in his studio. The area is renowned for its pottery made from the silt of the Kizilirmak (Red) River and the surrounding clay deposits.

Master Galip demonstrated how the clay sizzles when mixed by hand with some water and tells us when the clay "sings" it is the mark of a good clay.

I take him at his word and buy one of those good clay Hittite jugs from his showroom. It's a collector's item I reason. Although, until that moment, I hadn't considered myself a collector. Then again, until I tried the hamam in Istanbul, I hadn't considered myself a naked bather either. ■



The Grand Bazaar in Istanbul.



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