



This is the compendium of stories about our 2019 Turkey Tour. Some are travelogue, some are fictionalized accounts, some are political commentary and all are written with great pleasure by your faithful correspondent. The map at the end chronicles our exploits.

Rich

Heading to the Center of the Earth

When you learn about the anthropological history of mankind (whether through a course or a personalized DNA sample intended to give you some sense of whence you evolved), you quickly learn that the best anthropologists can determine, we all began in East Africa somewhere as part of Lucy's clan. From there our ancestors headed north across what we now call the Red Sea into the Fertile Crescent of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is now mostly Iraq on up through Jordan, Israel and Syria. From there, whole branches of the evolutionary tree spread up into the Caucasus Mountains between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea and through Iran to the Eastern shores of the Caspian into what we affectionately know as "the Stans". These are the steppes of Central Asia and are where humankind spent many generations figuring out what it was and where it should go. When you see the migratory maps, the sense now is that it is from these Central Asian areas that mankind spread to all the ordinal points of the compass. I'm not sure that can ever be definitively proven, but it seems to make sense with all the evidence uncovered to date. Perhaps the best evidence is quickly building with all the genetic DNA tracing that is now possible. The maps of mankind are well-hidden but irrefutably evident in the chromosomes of the human genome.

I am fascinated by pre-history and it all pretty much takes place in this part of the world. Since so much of current world dominance is driven by the

Caucasian tribes that sprang from those mountains north of the Fertile Crescent and found their way to Europe through modern-day Turkey and then across the Dardanelles or the Bosphorus, it is logical to imagine that Turkey was and perhaps still is the gateway between East and West and therefore can be considered the center of the known world.

The history of Istanbul is fascinating. It was initially the intersection between Anatolia (Persia to most of us) and Thrace (norther Greece as we know it). Even today people refer to the parts of Istanbul as being either the European or Asian sides. But in addition, the entire western coastline of Turkey that borders on the Aegean was for many years more like and more a part of Greece than a part of the Asia side of the country. In ancient days, somewhere in between the Thracian Tribes, the hordes from Lagos and Persia descended on Turkey. In addition to these and other Arabs, the city took the name of its most impactful culture and thus became known as Byzantium. It was known as such when Alexander the Great, the young Macedonian King who had a penchant for conquest, took it as his capital.

Even when the Legions of Rome, headed by Septimus Sevinus, overtook the city and made it the seat of the Eastern Roman Empire, they called it the Byzantine Empire despite honoring their Emperor by declaring the city as Constantinople. They rebuilt the city around their own Roman image by building it on seven hills. The city of 500,000 was the largest city in the world and was a wonder for the country folk that found their way to it one way or another. This lasted more or less a Millennium. Along the way, the schizophrenia of East and West was matched by the religious schizophrenia of the polyglot of eastern and western sects that came and went. The Fourth Crusade cohort stayed in the city longer than most invaders and certainly longer than they had planned, turning buildings like The Hagia Sofia from mosque to church, only to see it revert to a mosque again before the city fathers finally decided it would be easier to just make it a non-sectarian museum. I find the existence of Viking Runes (the closest thing they had to a written language) carved into the mezzanine railings at the Hagia Sofia clear evidence that sooner or later all marauders or conquerors lead to Byzantium.

The history of Turkey for the last sesquicentennial is divided into the Ottoman Empire, begun by Sultan Mehmet and based in Istanbul, and then the modern era led by Ataturk as exemplified by the new capital city of Ankara. He solidified the Muslim faith and culture, establishing Turkey as an important and permanent bridge between east and west, but with a decidedly Arabian flair to it. While to most of us from the west we think of places like Troy, Ephesus and Gallipoli as holding the history of Turkey. I suspect the true battleground is found in the arid and mountainous land to the east and southeast. He's are the places

where big battles were inevitably fought over and over again. Tribal man has a penchant for spilling the blood of whomever opposes his wishes. Is it man's baser instinct that gives him this bloodlust or is it his cerebral ability to imagine a future of abundance and prosperity if only he can get past one more competing tribe? Did early man wage war for the sport of it or did he only lash out at the prospect of unmet needs or in defense of what little he had? Whichever it was, it was easiest to battle those that were most different, and nowhere were the differences more well-defined than in this crossroads of the ancient world. Even today, the harshest and most prolonged conflicts seem to lodge in this dusty mountainous region from the middle of Turkey down to the subcontinent of India and eastward to the Hindu Kush.

Perhaps life is so harsh there as to harden the hearts of men. They say the fiercest fighters in the world are the Gurkhas, the Kurds, the Afghans, the Kashmiri and, of course, the Turks. These warriors have proven the strength of their metal over and over again across four millennia. They regularly outlast far superior numbers and technology by sheer tenacity. From the days of the vast British Empire, superpowers have simultaneously coveted the strategic value of the region and yet feared to engage fully. Attrition is a way of life there and smart leaders steer clear.

The closest we will get to such a place is in Cappadocia, at the end of our journey. We will both see and inhabit the caves used by early man and warriors alike. There we will feel what it's like to be both far from the madding crowd and yet smack in the center of the earth.

Back in the Bul

We arrived yesterday afternoon at the brand new Istanbul Airport. While I first came to Istanbul twenty-five years ago, I feel like I have had a crash course in Turkey in the past two years. When I came here several times between 1994-1998, it was while I was running Global Private Banking for Bankers Trust. We had a number of clients in Istanbul and I would spend most Friday's and Saturday's here because when on a Middle East swing, it was nice to have a Muslim-light place to come where business could be done on those days. Saudi, Kuwait, Qatar and the Emirates are much more religious in their business practices than Turkey. Since 1920, thanks mostly to Ataturk and the cultural wave he rode, Turkey became a dominantly Muslim country. But first and foremost, Istanbul is a trading hub. It's positioning at the straddling of the Bosphorus makes it not only the east/west link between Europe and Asia, but also the ultimate linkage of Russia and the rest of Central Asia to the Mediterranean as trade and travel by ship from the Black Sea progresses through the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara and down through the

Dardanelles. This is an unusually narrow straight through which so much trade and travel must flow. It is the ultimate crossroad of cultures and economies. Wealth tends to accumulate in such places to the extent geography contributes to economy.

It is also worth observing that where people gather they tend to erect great temples as showings of their virtue. It is not coincidental that Rome is the seat of Christianity, or that Mecca and Medina, on either side of Jeddah on the Red Sea are the seats of Islam. Jerusalem is much more than just the center of Judaism, but it certainly is all that as a center of the basket of early civilization. My experience tells me that the accumulators of great wealth feel the need to prove to the world that they also possess great virtue and do both under the grace of a God. That may be a bit cynical, but I doubt it is untrue and the rest of us benefit in that these centers of wealth and virtue are littered with great works of art in the form of cathedrals, mosques and temples. We spend time admiring this splendor, wondering how such grandeur came to be. It is all about accumulated plunder and the forgiveness it seeks.

After all of my chasing wealth visits to Istanbul, I returned two years ago to show this gem to my wife Kim, who had heard of its wonders from her globetrotting older sister. We were heading to a motorcycle ride through Greece and Turkish Air had a great deal that allowed us to make this short pre-trip visit at a moment that proved quite prophetic. First there was the visa ban on American visitors that was underway when we went. Kim had just barely gotten out ahead of it and we had our online visas and were advised by Turkish Airlines that we were good to go. We chose the Four Seasons Sultanahmet due to its location and history as a prison (ref. *Midnight Express*). We were one of two couples staying there as the visa ban had its effect. Everyone was surprised to see Americans in town, and assumed we might be German or British.

During that visit I was asked to go see a physics professor in search of diligence on a company that was asking me to join as CEO. I took the ride up to the University in northern Istanbul, set on a hill overlooking the Black Sea. The University looked like Stanford, which was less surprising when I learned that the professor was actually the president of the largest private university in Turkey (Koc University) and a tenured 35-year professor of none other than... Stanford University. He spent an hour convincing me of the world-changing nature of the science and the need for me to take the job. It worked and after my motorcycle ride through Greece and a consultation at the Delphic Oracle, I signed on. In the two years since I've been back to Istanbul several times to discuss with the largest private companies in Turkey at the highest levels. It seems this same professor was quite persuasive with those companies in getting them interested in our technology.

All of this business dialogue has given me reasons to see more than a few parts of the city. I feel like I know the city reasonably well now, but it's such a big and sprawling city (16-20 million) with so many different areas, cultures and neighborhoods, that it has stayed very interesting in many ways. The food is as diverse as anywhere you will find as Lebanese and Greek flavors dominate, but food of any kind can be found here. There are modern shops and street push carts selling honeydew melons just as they have for thousands of years. The old city blends with the modern infrastructure in a natural way. The movement of ships and ferries around the Bosphorus, Sea of Marmara and Golden Horn make this harbor as active as any other than perhaps Hong Kong. I look out on New York Harbor every day and while it is an active harbor, it's nothing like the churning of the waters of Istanbul.

As we went around the city today in a comfortable Sprinter van, our guide, Sammi, gave us clear lessons on modern life in Istanbul. He doesn't trust the tap water, he doesn't care for the policies of Erdogan, but he admires the infrastructure improvements Erdogan has pushed through, and he loves any type of kebab or mezza. Tomorrow we will get a more traditional dose of the touristic view of Istanbul with visits to Topkapi Palace, Hagia Sofia and the Blue Mosque under renovation.

I don't know how many more times I will come through Istanbul in this life, but I know I will always marvel at this wondrous center of culture, trade and antiquity. My imagination runs wild in this place where so many things come together to show off all the good and interesting aspects of mankind. I think I can find interest and never be bored with this city because my mind can easily feel I am in almost any era of the last 2,000 years, without regard for the geopolitical woes of the moment and focused on the senses and cultural diversity that make for fascinating days and romantic nights everywhere I go and at everything I see. I feel less of the decadence of wealth here (though I know it exists in many of the nooks and crannies) and feel more of the virtue of magnificence in the age-old ornate structures.

I travel to find new feelings and renew old feelings. I heard a photojournalist talk disparagingly about Kabul, saying she was back in the Kabubble. I guess that meant a certain detachment that allows her to survive in a difficult place. I have forgotten how much I like the feelings of timelessness I get in Istanbul. So I guess I'm just thrilled to be back in the Bul.

The Table Tilts

We try to keep politics out of the mix during our motorcycle rides of the last twenty-four years. We tend to fail miserably at that goal since feelings run deep

and in opposite directions, just like on the national scene. In the motorcycling world nothing means more than the kind of metal you ride. While there are plenty of subcultures in motorcycling, the big rift is between people who ride Harley Davidsons and those who ride European or Japanese sport bikes. The former is about look and feel and sound while the latter is about performance, reliability and ergonomics. Culture versus engineering. But with rare exception, when motorcyclists pass one another on the road, they wave at each other out of a sense of camaraderie, regardless of their ride. Even within our group, with its logo built around a winged BMW roundel, there is no animosity towards Harleys and those who choose to ride them (we have a few).

But politics, which would normally not rise to a level of concern in a motorcycle club, seems harder and harder to avoid as the divisiveness and galvanization of American and global politics marches onward these days. We have always enjoyed a socio-economically diverse membership in our club. Admittedly, the international travel team is more skewed towards the 1% than not, simply by virtue of the cost of foreign travel. Some bikers travel by bike for the sensation and love of the sport, but some undoubtedly do so to keep costs down. We used to have a motto of “high mileage, low expectations”, but we regularly joke that the reverse is more true of us these days. If one can gentrify a motorcycle club, the AFMC has been gentrified. Gentrification and aging have a tendency to move people’s political meters to the right and we have seen exactly that. To be fair, I don’t know that we ever benchmarked ourselves on this increasingly important spectrum in days gone by, but my view would probably be corroborated by other members.

At our opening dinner for our 2019 AFMC Turkey Tour, we gathered in a pleasant but not especially chic or expensive kebab joint near the hotel (just my kind of place). Whenever we travel we have these meal moments when we must each decide where to sit at dinner and who will therefore be our dinner companions. Our group consists of twelve riders and spouses and two tour guides (total of nine bikes on the road). There are five women and nine men since there are five couples and two stag riders. We had an unexpected last minute addition to the team when the recently out-voted ex-governor of Illinois joined. He has been a member of the AFMC for perhaps eight or nine years, but has been missing in action for the past five due to his stint of seeking, gaining and then exiting public service. He is relatively unique in Illinois politics for having won the State House as a Republican and not having been indicted on some corruption scandal and ending his term of office with a term in the hoosegow. That was a good thing since he has lost considerable weight and hair during his term of office. We have two couples from Chicagoland, so they are big supporters of his. Those five are joined by another couple and the other stag that are all decidedly Republican in their

voting preferences. I mentioned to one that if he becomes embarrassed by being a Republican due to the antics of you-know-who, he could just declare himself a Libertarian, like so many others are increasingly doing. He stood straight up and said he was not embarrassed to be a Republican. Such is the staunchness of these AFMC red members.

Those crazy-eights found themselves at one end of the dinner table for reasons I suspect are more random than not since we all get along just fine and political orientation is not tattooed to any foreheads. Our Turkish guide happened to sit at their end of the table even though I doubt he voted for Erdogan (the closest thing to a Republican in Turkish politics). At the other end of the table were the four of us who happen to all live in lower Manhattan and are decidedly liberals and blue to the core. We were joined by our Texas Hill Country, Mexican-heritage tour guide whose politics is Beto O'Rourke versus Ted Cruz all the way. That made the tilt five blue versus eight red. That felt like a bigger tilt right than I'm used to in this group. Where are our Vermont, Minnesota and Washington state members that would have balanced this ticket?

While I am wary of a direct political debate, less for fear of losing and more for fear of membership angst in either direction, I do make a habit of sliding in little anti-Trump zingers as the day wears on, more to test the limits than anything else. I have more of the troublemaker in me than anyone, especially my wife, wishes I had. But what I get out of it is the ability to plumb the depths of support that exists for Mr. Wonderful in the White House. I am one of those people who are amazed at how some people cling to their man regardless of what he does or who he shoots on Fifth Avenue. At breakfast I asked a solid red team member who he likes in the Republican roster to replace Trump when he comes completely unglued by the current "coup"? That's the kind of insidious comment I find most helpful to slight Lord Voldemort without making directly abusive comments. I am pleased to say that one red couple gave me clear comments that indicated that they were no longer Trumpster fans. That does not put them on our blue team necessarily, but it may allow me to put them in the undecided camp. That makes the score 6 red, 5 blue, 2 undecided.

I know one of our red guys is an avid environmentalist. While he did say that Nancy Pelosi was the most dangerous politician in Washington because of her facelift, I still consider him to have a loose thread that can easily unravel his red-button support. In addition, one of the newer couples to the group, despite being Chicagoan, is not really yet declared as red and I suspect they have some wiggle room in their views (more her than him, I suspect). Another couple I would characterize as red on economics and blue on social issues, so we might be able to push them into undecidedland with a few more sideways comments.

So you can see that as the AFMC table tilts, there are never any shortage of manipulative tactics available to tilt it back again. The truth be told, Trump does more all by himself with his twitter-sense to tilt the table back into a more rational direction. This morning at breakfast I also heard the best news when I was told that the Democrats cannot win the 2020 election because America is not ready for socialism. That is exactly the kind of blind thinking in reverse that Trump rode to his unexpected victory in 2016. Sooner or later, everyone learns that the harder you lean in on the table, the more the tilt works against you.

Hospitality in the Modern World

Back in 1975 I was asked to teach hospitality economics to the students at Cornell's Hotel School, arguably the best school in the world for hotel management. It was not so challenging devising hospitality examples or cases to highlight important economics principles, though getting these abstract concepts into the heads of students fixated on "flush and gush" courses and wine-tasting was a bigger obstacle. The concept of mean reversion and diminishing returns were some of the hardest concepts for budding hoteliers to grasp. Given the tendency for first-time hotel investors to lose their shirts on hotels so that the next owner can have a reasonable go at it, should have held more interest to these students. I look at the money poured into the look and feel of these grand facilities and wonder how anyone could reasonably envision making money on their investment.

As I sit here in the Swissotel lobby in Istanbul, and remembering what life in Europe was like when I went to high school in Rome fifty years ago, I am struck by how far the hospitality world has come in those fifty years. Grand hotels have existed for much longer than that, but the process has refined itself inordinately such that people come and go from these grand hotels with such ease. They are able to enjoy the grandness of the experience in small snippets rather than for longer extended stays, which was more the norm in days gone by. Add the use of Expedia, hotel.com or Trivago and I get totally lost in the profitability math of making these behemoths work.

We are staying in this hotel for what will amount to three nights, having extended the planned visit by one day up-front. That already feels like a long time and I feel like an old hand around the place, recognized by the breakfast room server and the lobby attendants. The buffet alone cannot possibly have its costs covered by the room rate, but it is all included, so I guess it must. The marble and furniture of the lobby are hard to imagine being adequately amortized over a normal useful life, and yet there is no added charge for them. I know enough to know how one makes this all pencil-out in a projection, but I also know how far reality of per-person spend falls short of projections, or at least how easily that can

occur. Keep in mind, Istanbul is a BIG city with enough Eastern and Western commerce going on that it can undoubtedly support lots of hotel rooms. Central Istanbul alone has 817 hotels, of which over 50 are 5-star rated. That's over 56,000 rooms. That compares to 107,000 rooms in New York City, headed soon to over 130,000. Granted that New York is the #1 urban tourist destination in the world, but it is also half the population of Istanbul. Hotel room occupancy and average room rate are the key parameters that drive both hotel profitability and new hotel construction. Within the hospitality industry, these are not arbitrary or casual statistics, they are very precise and standardized data that is widely and uniformly available and used to drive the business.

Despite all of that, people will be people and egos will drive decisions despite data to the contrary. The tendency to build great monuments to people's perceived sense of opportunity and importance is as old as the Pyramids. But pyramids are intended as monuments and hotels are monuments only to egos or senses of excessive exuberance. There is a place for luxury hotels, but does Istanbul really need or can it support 50 5-star luxury hotels? I know nothing of the data on Istanbul hospitality, but here's what I do know now:

- Istanbul has a new huge airport that looks strangely familiar to the new huge China airports. Remember China's Belt and Road infrastructure policy certainly includes Turkey in its long term plans.

- I've stayed in four of the 5-star hotels in Istanbul (it will be five by the end of this trip) over the past two years and so far, none of them have been at all busy or even close to full. My guess is that occupancy runs well below 40% on average.

- One of these hotels is more elegant and grander than the next. No expense was spared at any of them. I note the St. Regis, where my associate was brought a cappuccino with his picture infused in the milk foam. This was a technology, regardless of whether or not you consider it frivolous, that no one had ever seen in the U.S. or Europe. Money was being spent to differentiate.

- They all make more money on their F&B than they do on their rooms, between services and maintenance.

This upcoming trip through Turkey will give us a wide range of perspective on Turkish hotels. Our guides have carefully chosen each and are familiar with them all. They are organized to fit our travel route and the places we prefer to stay for more than one night (both in the southern vacation areas). We will stay at five beach hotels, one that is as grand as an Istanbul 5-star, two that seem very Spartan and two that seem like modern boutique hotels. We are then staying at two hill town guest houses. The one odd-ball hotel is the last one of the ride in Cappadocia, which is partially carved into the caves of the local fiery spires.

It will be an interesting experience if for no other reason than the diversity of hotels on the roster. Some will be in small villages, some in larger towns. All I'm

sure will be comfortable and have all the modern conveniences. When I lived in Europe fifty years ago, European hotels were one hundred years behind U.S. Holiday Inns or Howard Johnson's. They were charming and full of character, but light on everything else, particularly electronics. Today I watch on TV as American homeowners buy properties on the beach in Europe and Turkey and they have granite counters. Stainless steel appliances, including dishwashers (something that didn't even exist in Europe at the time) and networked WiFi as well as ultramodern bathrooms with subway tiling, Grohe faucets and rain-shower shower heads.

Gone are the days of the little Greek island with the *Mama Mia* 10-room rustic inn. Now that place is a Relais & Chateaux that costs \$700/night, minimum 3-night stay. There is no longer American or European Plan for dining. Everything is strictly a la carte except for the one free bottle of water per person in the room.

But that's alright. We can't blame the world for giving us what we wanted. Hospitality in the modern world demands it.

Surrendering to the Darkness

I usually don't credit people for giving me titles since I usually snatch unintended catch-phrases out of thin air and feel the person had no idea what they were saying. But this one is different. One of our intrepid motorcycle tour guides, Skip Mascorro, the founder of MotoDiscovery, gets the nod. I will fill in the details of the day in a bit, but as we were getting our final ride briefing at the exit from the ruins of Troy, Skip was worried that our long day might eclipse dusk before we got to the little seaside hotel we had booked. The prospect of seven AFMC riders with three pillions riding through the Turkish countryside in the dark was not comforting to this veteran motorcycle guide. We are age-ranged 61 to 84 with the average about 70. We only had one fall today, but it was in the first five minutes.

Skip advised us to "surrender to the darkness" if it overtook us. I guess he thought we might pull a Dylan Thomas and rage against the dying of the light. Those words, said mostly for reassurance and to fill in a solution for an unavoidable consequence, can mean so many things to me these days. The darkness can easily be construed in this moment as some troubling blend of politics and sociology-economic malaise that has accumulated to bother our kinder, gentler predispositions. The darkness can be the aging process that leads us into ponderings on retirement and obsessions with what to do with the rest of our lives. Some, including the money management firms trolling the airwaves for our business may like us to think that those are lighthearted issues, but most of us

know they are anything but. And of course, as we age we encounter a growing list of friends less fortunate that need to face the ultimate darkness. To me, one of the worst darkneses would be to give up my love of motorcycling. I know it will come, but I don't like to even think about it.

Let's discuss our day today in the context of surrendering to the darkness. We got off to our usual start, on time, but not totally together with Bob taking an early spill in the garage at the up-sloping exit. Istanbul traffic at 7am was also a bit challenging, but the "every man for himself" approach worked as one would hope. The ferry across the Marmara Sea from Europe to Asia was two hours in a pre-assigned seat. The amusement came in the form of Edwina not recognizing that Mark's social media picture of the ferry with the oddly shaped clouds (looking ever so much like the universal WiFi symbol) was a promotion on each and every tabletop, including the one in front of her. Off the ferry and into Bursa where we physically lost three of our group (Bruce, Kevin and a Karen) and psychologically lost Kim and Ann when they saw that their "Princess Van" was nothing more than a cramped yellow taxi. Being Kaz suddenly became a very dangerous job when the first rest stop unleashed the fury of two women scorned. We had lost all five (the taxi's top speed was about 40kph) by the time we just made the ferry to the Gallipoli Peninsula. At least the dockside lunch was pleasant once the two busloads of Chinese tourists finished their lunch. At least the restaurant was out of fish-head soup by then.

We skittled down to the ANZAC Cove WWI Memorial where we admired the kind words of Ataturk in consoling the survivors of the brutal battle for the Dardanelles as disastrously coordinated by a young Winston Churchill. A very short ferry back again to the Asia side evidenced why the British ships couldn't get far under the accurate and deadly Turkish artillery. We were reminded that in 1915 the Turk soldiers were defending their home soil. Those were certainly dark days for the young Australian and Kiwi soldiers under the direction of King and Empire.

Then we headed to the site of the ancient and mythological city of Troy. This city was made famous by Homer's famous epic poem, *The Iliad*. It has all the great stories that make a place great. Greek Gods and Kings get aggressive over feminine pulchritude and launch a thousand ships into battle where the young Prince Paris shoots a demigod, Achilles, in his soft heel. Somewhere along the line the Greeks bear gifts via a wooden horse that holds a battle-ready surprise for the Trojans, who few took pity on due to their years of tolling the sea traffic through the Dardanelles. As if that was not enough darkness, the German entrepreneur who found the long-lost city and its treasure, spirited it off to Berlin for the Third Reich to march before its armies until the Russians pillaged it back from them and stuffed it in some obscure Moscow vault. I'm sure it was a very dark vault.

As we rushed the final 35 miles to our boutique hotel on the Aegean, just ahead of the march of darkness, we saw a magnificent sunset replete with cloud formations with more than a few silver linings. It had been a long day and we had not needed to surrender to the darkness. After a short rest, we all gathered for dinner on a balmy terrace that seemed nice enough, only to find Kevin and Jeanne scrapping with a gang of nasty ferrell kittens that were more demanding than expected.

Darkness can spring on you when you least expect it, and planning to embrace it, surrender to it or outrun it is not recommended. Sorry, Skip, the AFMC credo remains that we must rage against the darkness, not so much for the purpose of conquering it, but more because it scares the piss out of us.

A Night to Remember

This was a day for working our way down the Aegean coast of Turkey and enjoying the influence of Greek architecture and culture on these Asian lands. We began with a pleasant outdoor very Turkish breakfast with the lapping waters just a few steps away. The biggest event was the arrival of the replacement “Princess Van”. I do not want to get into describing automotive interiors with all this ancient grist for the mill awaiting us, so let’s just say that Kim and Ann felt this new tricked out Mercedes Benz limo/SUV was much more in keeping with the style they had become accustomed and had expected. They were very happy campers and felt that Kaz had redeemed himself from the prior day’s Tijuana Taxi episode.

As they snuggled into their plush beige Corinthian leather seats, the rest of us strapped on our riding gear and hardware, readying for the ride. The most unusual mechanical maintenance underway was Bruce Rauner taking a ball-peen-hammer to the interior padding of his \$600 Schuberth helmet to accommodate some strangely misshapen aspect of his head, which he described as more egg-shaped than normal. And I thought I had helmet fit problems!

We rode along the Aegean with the sun rising across the water from the East. The sun and the clouds were just as we had left them yesterday. We were headed to the Ancient Greek ruins of the Acropolis of Pergamon. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and sits high on a hill (acro) and was a city (polis) of great wealth and power in ancient times. Perhaps the most notable feature is how well it has survived the millenia in very recognizable manner. We walked up the stone path past the normal bevy of Turkish merchants trying their best to mimic everything from New Yawkers to Valley Girls. It’s more off-putting than you might think and I’m sure more-so than they believe. The site itself is large and with an amphitheater that looks to seat several thousand. That seemed large to us, but only for about eight hours. The story of Pergamon is typical of the area. The Greeks

were eventually run out by the Antinorians of Persia and the story progresses to the modern era with the city being gradually abandoned to its own inconvenient location and its own grave robber in the form of the German railroad builder who got the Sultan to sign-off on giving him the pile of rocks on the site of ancient Pergamon. Naturally, he rooted around until he found the Temple of Zeus under a pile of dirt, and promptly shipped it off to Berlin, where it still sits.

After a long Acropolis tour and an even longer lunch set on the grounds of a hillside park surrounded by old stone buildings, we chose to boogie hard to get to our hotel 240 clicks away. We hit “the slab” (what we motorcyclists call the divided arrow-straight highway). Unfortunately, highways must be fed and this one was no exception. Except the toll system still had kinks in it trying to get nine motorcycles (eight with toll tags and one aberrant Ducati Multistrada without). I guess all roads lead to Rome, but just not on a clear paying basis. At a final toll booth outside Izmir, where I was doing the polite thing of going last, they were so confused by their own toll-tracking system that they kept a few of us waiting and waiting.

One of the Cardinal rules of jet fighter engagement is to never, never leave your wing man. So sayeth Iceman and Maverick. The Marines brag that they never leave a man behind, which is sort of the same concept. In the AFMC, we find talk cheap and we find that “Every nan for himself” is what we tend to do, regardless of anything we did or did not say in the locker room before hand. So, three of us toll-challenged riders got left at the gate while the others were lead towards the hotel, once again racing the sunset.

We all found our way to the very remote and very rustic hotel on a wooded hillside. Some of us were fit to be tied by the atrocity of being left behind, by the general malaise of a long, hot day, the difficulty of navigating the gravel roads on “the last mile” to the hotel, and to the climb up The 10,000+ stone steps to our waiting room and shower. Next time just leave me by the side of the road rather than face those finishing stairs. We had twenty minutes until dinner and we were told it was important to be timely. Without bags, it’s hard to get the shower thing going in the right direction on a timely basis. So I made a command decision (more like a hot grumpy decision) to skip dinner.

While showering, I was told by Kim that Kaz was pleading that we all go since he had worked on the arrangements for going on six months. I relented and toweled off so quickly that I put my underwear on backward (something I discovered later that night). What’s the old expression? “Nothing goes right when your underwear’s tight.” It all seemed ill-fated, whatever “it” was.

What Kaz had arranged was to rent out the ruins of Ephesus, one of the best-preserved Ancient Greek cities in the world. It was lighted resplendently and he

had arranged a catered dinner, complete with string quartet, at the Library of Celsius...all to ourselves.

I rented Hearst Castle last year for Kim's 60th birthday, so I am no stranger to grand venues, but this was an inspired choice by Kaz. The gesture and beauty literally brought several people to tears (including Kim). It was a perfect ending to an imperfect day and was certainly, a night to remember.

The Angel's Trumpet

The best part about traveling with a diverse group of people is all the interesting tidbits of valuable information you gather along the way. Today was no exception even though one is reminded that it's important to be discerning in what one chooses to believe or not. Mr. Ripley had it right when he collected his curios from around the world. It may not matter sometimes whether it's true or not, but you should probably decide somewhere along the way whether you believe it or not.

Take Kevin for instance. He's been part of AFMC since 2005 according to the official AFMC website. But he's been a probationary member who has chosen to live in that limbo for fourteen years simply because he has chosen to not adhere to the simplest of conventions of organized society. The fundamental problem has been that he cannot be believed. This is again less an issue of truth and more an issue of belief. We suspect that he himself is a nonbeliever so he does not allow himself to be believable. If you say to Kevin at breakfast, overlooking the Selçuk valley of West-Central Turkey, "what time will be gathering at the vans?" He's as likely to say 10:00, 10:30 or never and you can be left hanging wondering whether you should gulp down your Turkish coffee or order a plate of eggs. Talking to him is like wrestling with that fictional pig. You get dirty and the pig likes it.

We finally all got in the vans at 10:30 to head into Ephesus. Kim and Ann own the Princess Van, make no mistake about that. This was a hard-won prize that they paid dearly for by token of eight hours spent on Thursday in a big yellow Istanbul taxi with no suspension and even less horsepower. They invited several of us to join them in their van for the ride down to Ephesus. Someone who will go unmentioned (but it might have been me) did the equivalent of fart in a crowded elevator by mentioning an unmentionable topic regarding a controversial tidbit of information from the night before that might or might not have been believable. Ripley was not available to adjudicate so instead we turned the topic to the socially more fluid topics of religion and politics. Kim kept asking. "Are we there yet?"

Kazim, our main man on things Turkish, was still on a pedestal from the prior night's outstanding accomplishment of getting all of Ephesus to stand at attention to salute the AFMC flag for us. He doubled down by choosing to drop us

off at the uphill side of Ephesus so that we could leisurely walk downhill on the Fifth Avenue of the ancient city-state. He has learned a thing or two about a thing or two in the nineteen years he has jockeyed our little band of misfits around the Mediterranean. As they say in legal briefs, he possesses information and belief that American Flyers perform better and with fewer complaints if they are allowed to walk historical sites downhill rather than uphill. Kaz is a veritable font of wisdom on the history of Turkey, Greece and Persia as best we can tell. Whether everything he says is complete truth means nothing to us. We believe in the man so we follow him dutifully through the baths, temples and shopping malls of Second Century Ephesus.

The tricky part of the trek is that everything is paved with ancient worn stones that are quaintly used to cobblestone the roads and sidewalks of this town where each and every stone carries the scars of at least two millennia. When and if I wonder why these advanced civilizations with their terra-cotta plumbing and their ornate colonnades failed, I believe with every step that at one time or another they all had sprained ankles from missteps on their stone-strewn paths in life and just gave up in favor of the next marauding horde that happened by. The history of the world according to Rich.

After walking all the way through what we are told was a mere 15% of the ancient town, we exit past the 24,000 capacity stadium/theater that must be one of the largest that existed. Kaz tell us that historian/archeologists use stadium sizing to estimate population and by using a standard 10X factor, conclude that Second Century Ephesus was 250,000 souls strong. That would have made it the biggest city in Asia Minor at the time, bigger than Byzantium he claimed. Impressive.

Lunch in Selçuk on market day was another treat. The fruits and vegetables of all kinds were on colorful display. Chris showed his Okey roots by being the only one who could identify a weird-looking reddish green pod as okra. Given that my anecdotal roadside observation is that at least half the towns and businesses in Turkey start with the letter O (perhaps a subconscious nod to the power of their time as the seat of Ottoman rule), I'm rethinking my views about both Okra and Oklahoma.

During lunch, Chris handed me his iPhone which had a Wikipedia reference to a large flowering plant next to our table. It was called the Angel's Trumpet and it was a much nastier plant than it's droopy flowers made it seem. Supposedly it's flower (and any part of the plant) possesses some powerful hallucinogenic narcotics. So far, so good. But those narcotics produce terrifying hallucinations and can lead to bizarre actions by people under the influence, and even death. You have to be pretty desperate to want to escape reality so badly that you are prepared to brave terrifying hallucinations to do it. And the flower is so pleasant to look at

and even to smell. Mr. Ripley probably already knows all about Angel's Trumpet or certainly should.

I'm a little concerned that Chris knows so much about this dangerous plant and I think I want to remember not to mess around with him and do our usual ride tricks like cutting him off or slowing him down. That's the thing about overly aggressive behavior, you never know what darkness lurks in the heart of man, not to mention what he might know about terrifying narcotics. This concern can rightly be upgraded during a ride in Turkey, given its history as the land of the poppy, believe it or not.

Note to self - remember what Angel's Trumpet looks and smells like and remember to be nicer to Chris.

Constable Osman Almost Gets a Promotion

It was 7:00am on the first Sunday in October and Constable Osman of the Trafik Polisi Turkiye, Güneybatı Bölümü (Southwest District - covering the provinces of Izmir, Aydın and Muğla) woke up with a big headache. October was make or break month for his promotion to Sergeant and he really needed the extra 750 TL per month the promotion would give him since his wife was expecting a new baby soon. September had been a slow quota month since it seemed every car he stopped had a loyal party member of the Justice and Development Party at the wheel. The rumor in the department was that you would be put on an anti-Erdogan list if you gave tickets to Party members. That was probably not true, but that was also trouble Mirac did not need. While he was dressing, his iPhone rang and it was his brother-in-law Omer calling to tell him something to help keep Mirac out of Omer's pocket by helping him get his promotion. Despite being younger and less senior than Mirac, Omer was already a Sergeant on his way to becoming a lieutenant. He was a crafty guy and Mirac hated when his own father said things like, "Why can't you be more shrewd like Omer?" Shrewd was a very big desirable characteristic in this part of the world whether you were Muslim, Jewish or Christian. If you were a rug merchant or a lawyer you needed it. In some ways Mirac had joined the force to avoid it since it simply wasn't in his nature.

Omer was very excited. He reminded Mirac that he was on special assignment to watch Ms. Mujde, the owner of the Nisanyan Guest Houses. Her ex-husband had escaped recently from prison and fled to the island of Samos just offshore, but technically a Greek Island. There he lived openly in Pythagorio (named after Pythagoras and looking out at the not-too-distant Turkish Coast). As a side note, it is said that most of Pythagoras' best work, including his famous Euclidean Geometry Theorem, was really due to his collaboration with the famous

Greek (thought to be Turkish) mathematician, Thales of Miletus...but that's another story altogether. While staking out the Nisanyan Guest Cottages, Omer had donned a disguise and wandered past the place on horseback, looking like an innocent goat herder. What he had seen was a large group of American tourists, ten on expensive motorcycles, two beautiful women (one dark haired and one fair haired) riding in a luxurious Mercedes van, which they referred to as the "Princess Van" so perhaps they were royal concubines, and an entire large van, just for all their luggage. One of the waiters whispered that the tall slender one was an important politician from somewhere called Montana. Based on all the talk he overheard about Trump this and Trump that, he assumed they were a rich and powerful delegation from America on some sort of secret mission to Turkey. And if they were consorting with that dog Mujde, it could not be anything good or pro-Erdogan.

Omer's idea was that Mirac should call in his chips with his fellow constables in the traffic squad and orchestrate a program of harassment which would give Mirac a bounty of tickets for his quota and perhaps some valuable intelligence for Omer to share with his superiors. Win-win as the Americans say.

Constable Osman was not a man easily given over to conspiracy theories, no matter what his career ladder-climbing brother-in-law said, but he was desperate to get some tickets written that day and this group of Americans were certainly not Party members. He made a few calls and called in his favors as suggested. The first stop would be just south of Selkuc. His Selkuc team waited and missed the group, the first three getting away before the big one the size of a truck pulled over on command. The tall hunched-over lanky one almost tried to make a run for it, but the team had some newly issued iPads to check licenses and registrations, so they made a show of recording all the information despite the bald Turkish one pleading the tourism case they were so used to hearing. As planned, no tickets were issued as this was intended as a reconnaissance stop to be sure they were Americans and were unarmed. There were several riding two-up who looked like thugs that might be toting AR-15's but no weapons were found.

The group carried on to the Temple of Apollo at Dityma before stopping for lunch overlooking Lake Bafa. Several undercover officers saw them eating Gozleme (Turkish crepes) and then ordering French fries with ketchup all washed down with Coca Cola Light. This confirmed that they were all, indeed, Americans. Another team stopped them again just before lunch, but their mission was to check out the route map which they openly displayed on their tank bags. The big one started to dismount and had to be told sternly to sit back down on his motorcycle. He readily complied. This confirmed that they were heading for Bodrum, which was the perfect spot for the sting. A third stop after lunch was to put them at ease so the head constable agreed to a group photo. After a quick and now anticipated

stop at the Temple of Zeus for another photo opportunity, the group headed towards Bodrum.

Constable Osman set up a speed trap with the department's new photo-radar rig at kilometer 10 outside Bodrum. It was a perfect road where everyone sped just a little. He then positioned two on-duty young officers at kilometer 8.5 from Bodrum and there they set up their cones and wore their best yellow day-glo vests (something the other policemen always made fun of them for wearing). This had to look official. Unfortunately, that idiot Mustafa forgot his iPad, but at least Yusuf had his.

When the bikes came into sight, Constable Osman was shocked that the lead rider was going exactly the 99kph speed limit. Luckily, about six of the others were going just 1-5kph over the limit, so they had them dead to rights, if just a bit on thin evidence. Yusuf and Mustafa pulled over the whole group including the princesses and started the ticket-writing program. The bald Turk was getting pretty upset and they thought he might look like a guy who was known to be a friend of the exiled Mujde, so they watched him closely. Mustafa was hand writing the tickets while Yusuf called in the names to Mirac for a quick run-down. Mustafa had only gotten one signature from someone named Christos Shriver when Mirac hurriedly called Yusuf and told him to just let them all go, NOW! Mirac had put in all the names to Omer and when Omer realized that the tall cigar-smoking one was a governor of someplace called Illinois (as opposed to Montana), Omer freaked out and thought this might get elevated to Erdogan's staff in a bad way. So he pulled the plug, just in case.

The group went on to their hotel in Bodrum and Mirac went home with his old headache and a bunch of due-bills to fellow constables, especially Yusuf, who saved the day. He swore he would never listen to Omer again. What he didn't know yet was that that idiot Mustafa had submitted the signed ticket on that Greek guy, Christos, and there was another chapter to the story yet to unfold at Istanbul airport when Christos tried to leave the country...

Gator Bob: Tomb Raider

What about Bob? To start with, Bob is a very special name amongst AFMC members. Yes, it is a palindrome, meaning it can be read forwards or backwards with equal ease. The name Robert has been around in England and Germany since the Middle Ages and Bob has been used as the hypocorism (shortened "nickname") as well since then. It seems they were into rhyming names back then, so Rob easily became Bob (as well as Nob, Hob, Cob and other great names). The name Robert peaked in the U.S. back in 1912 and has now fallen to 71st. place among male names, though you would never know it from the AFMC roster. We have enjoyed

an over-abundance of Bob's in the organization from the beginning, With our average age of about 70+, that would mean that we benefit from the higher popularity of the name Robert in those years of the Second World War. I have no empirical evidence for this, but I also suspect that those were easier days to use hypocorisms like Bob. The popularity of the shortening of Richard to Dick was certainly easier back then for reasons I don't need to elaborate. Bob suffers a very similar fate these days. It seems the Urban Dictionary, which captures much of the slang in use these days, tells us that texting BOB to some one is a reference to "Battery Operated Boyfriend", commonly known as a vibrator. I wonder if that has anything to do with the English expression "Bob's your uncle"?

Anyway, we have lots of Bobs of all ages. In no particular order, there is Chicago Bob, Vermont Bob, Capistrano Bob (who used to be Calgary Bob), Santa Barbara Bob (RIP), Virginia Bob (also RIP), Boston Don't-Call-Me-Bob Rob, and, of course, Gator Bob, who, at the time, inhabited Augusta, Georgia and Fernandina Beach, Florida. Both places struck most of the members as swampy places where gators roamed freely. Some say he has a bit of that sly squinty-eyed calm that gators use to sneak up on their prey. Run silent, run deep in the words of the Navy. Gator Bob was a naval officer in his youth, having served as the officer of the deck of the U.S.S. Lexington. That may be an aircraft carrier, but Bob must have had to know a thing or two about submarines sneaking up on the Lexington the way a gator sneaks up on an unsuspecting duck. Maybe he observed and adopted. Hence, Gator Bob.

I spend a lot of time riding near Gator Bob and this ride through Turkey has been no exception. I feel the need to describe that riding style as best I can. The basics are that Bob is a lifelong tall lanky drink of water. He is now eighty-four, which is quite surprising. Bob has a Harvard MBA and has always been as sharp as a tack. He hasn't lost a step. As for his physicality, did I mention he is riding a motorcycle around Turkey with us? Gator Bob is as timeless as a gator. He may not look like a youngster, but his stamina is every bit as strong as someone a third his age. He has ridden over 1,000 miles in a forced-march riding day...by himself. When we arrive at the hotel after a short day, Gator Bob wants to take an extra ride to rack up some more mileage. Whenever there is an optional extension of a riding day (this is when I am at the hotel pool and hot tub), Gator Bob is the first to sign up and regularly does his Eveready Bunny imitation.

But Bob is also a study in contrast. He is New England scrabble-hard conservative in all things. His hero is Silent Cal Coolidge (on whose foundation board he served). The man just spent six months in the Rauner Library at Dartmouth researching and writing the definitive history of Bridgewater, Vermont from 1741-1791. Who does that other than a stubborn, rock-hard traditionalist? And yet, Bob rides motorcycles at speed. He is frugal and tight as the proverbial

frog's ass. But he owns multiple homes and motorcycles that he barely uses and does not Air BnB for defraying costs. He made his fortune in the food business (Gator Bob was a big canned meat guy) and yet he looks at me funny if I order a bowl of chili at lunch. He likes to ride aggressively with the big dogs, yet prefers to follow closely rather than lead. Bob would never be one to stay on the porch. But he's also picky about who he wants to follow. He tends to like following me for some reason, and I'm happy to accommodate, though I find myself wondering "why me?" Gator Bob falls down far more often than any other rider on our squad. Sometimes it's for good reason (a slippery garage ramp or someone falling into him) and sometimes he just gets distracted or forgets to do the basics. The amazing thing is that I have never seen Gator Bob not just jump up as though nothing at all had happened and carry on. It's actually amazing his imperviousness. Maybe that's another reason the name Gator Bob is a perfect name for him. Nothing seems to hurt him or damage him, he is King Kong flicking off the biplanes as though they were mosquitos.

Today we left Bodrum and headed due East with the Aegean just feet from our right side on winding cliff-hugging roads. It was a spectacular ride with a combination of roads, including mountain switchbacks and seaside sweepers. Bob went down early on a tight inside hairpin. He will argue that some combination of the other riders around him or his under-powered BMW 700GS were to blame, but that's not how motorcycling works. You have to drive defensively and always know how to control your beast no matter who does what or what fails. The margin for error demands it. But here's the thing, even though he needed help righting the bike, Gator Bob was back on and Pooh-poohing any suggestion that he might be hurt. The Gator was back in the water as though nothing had happened. How does he do that? I would be writhing by the side of the road nursing my boobos. Not Gator Bob.

At the end of our riding day we were treated to a boat ride up the Dalyan Delta. The featured element of the ride were the Lycian Cliff Tombs adorning the high rock cliff walls. Sitting in the boat watching Gator Bob take photos of the tombs with his iPhone 11, extolling it's triple lens optics, and then responding to emails while others of us just "looked out the window" and vegetated, made me realize something about Gator Bob. The man is a superhero. That's not as much an exaggeration as it sounds. He is accomplished, highly educated, has been of service with the U.S. Navy, has been a highly successful entrepreneur (he sold that canned meat business to Bumble Bee Tuna for a tidy sum), is a true adventurer, is physically fit by standards of a man thirty years younger, and is genuinely an interesting guy to talk to and a good friend. There is not one of us who would settle for his state when and if we reach 84 years of age. He can be ornery, feisty, provocative to a fault and, once in a while a royal pain in the ass. But you know

what? I can handle all that and I know I want to be more like Gator Bob: Tomb Raider than not.

Go No-Go Gulet

This morning it rained cats and dogs here in Gocek. Our motorcycle tour of Turkey has been blessed with great weather so far, which looks to remain great through the next week. Nothing is more important for a happy ride than the weather. We all have several weather apps that we use to forecast weather. My favorite is Dark Sky, which gives a weather coverage radar map that you can move over a ten day timeframe. The annoying part about weather is that it's so unpredictable, as President Trump discovered in his recent Alabamagate incident where he claimed he was right and the national weather service professionals were wrong. In any case, we had a decision to make about our planned boat excursion for the day and we needed to assess the risks.

We agonized over whether the weather made for a more unpleasant day on a boat or a more unpleasant day stuck at a beach resort hotel. Go or No-Go? After some What's-App dialogue among the group, it was decided that we would go forward with our planned activity for the day and thanked the motorcycling Gods for having this be a lay-over day rather than a riding day. The plan was to take a pleasant and sunny boat ride on what is called a gulet, which is a classic Turkish wooden yacht, which are used mostly these days for stay-on-board charters and day-trips like ours. They are extremely comfortable two-masted sailboats that no longer use the sail, but rather use a motor for propulsion. They are outfitted with expansive cushioned lounges and a big group dining table in the center. They are also equipped with platforms from which guests can swim. In other words, the gulet is perfectly suited for our group that enjoys eating, relaxing and taking gentle warm swims...if the weather is accommodative.

We began with a rubber zodiac ride to the gulet, named Holiday 10. It had all the comforts of home including WiFi, so we were not exactly roughing it. We got underway quickly and headed to a nearby quiet bay in the driving rain. We were protected enough from the elements whether we stayed on deck or went below. Luckily, the water remained relatively calm and the forecast showed clearing skies in the afternoon, so we remained bullish about the day. We all always seem to find things to discuss amongst ourselves and five or six conversations were going on at once. By the time we dropped anchor, the skies were clear enough to encourage a hearty group of the men to abandon their risk aversion and jump in for a swim. I should note that all but Bob jumped in, and Bob dove in like the Olympian that he is, showing no fear of the water's depth.

There was a certain walking-the-plank feel about it all, but everyone hammed it up and were rewarded with warm and crystal-clear waters that were deep enough to handle Bob's shallow dive. There was even a rope swing for everyone to look foolishly like children trying to navigate. More risk and just a snik of reward. Nevertheless, good fun was had by the swimmers and the watchers/photographers alike.

Lunch was then served on the deck by the gulet staff. It was what we have come to feel is a typical Turkish Aegean lunch with a wide variety and too much food for any of us. The freshly caught and fully-headed fish was a culinary risk given the bones and staring eyeballs. Plenty of tea, coffee, beer, soda and cake was able to overcome the fish and to keep everyone happy.

We then motored over to another bay as the skies began to unexpectedly darken again (damn those forecasts!). Maybe No-Go would have been better. This bay was an old Lycian ruin, which some chose to hop on the zodiac to go visit. Lycia as an area has a rich and varied history that mimics much of what we have already learned about the history of Anatolia and Asia Minor generally. It all goes back to the second millennium B.C. It plays a role in Homer's Iliad much like Troy and, indeed, in sympathy with Troy against the Greeks. But even before that, it is the scene of a very significant event in Greek mythology. There was a Greek sculptor and architect who was endowed with great wisdom. His name was Daedalus and he was attributed with many important accomplishments, but none more memorable than designing the Labyrinth on Crete that was used to vex and contain the gruesome Minotaur (a beast with a human body and bull's head born to King Minos' wife Pasiphae, who chose to mate with a white bull given Minos by Poseidon. These Greeks! You have to watch them every minute!)

While Daedalus was busy solving Minos' problems, he apparently succeeded in making Minos mad enough to imprison him and his son, Icarus, in a tower. This was an unanticipated risk he had not foreseen. Daedalus designed a pair of wings to free them from the tower. It seems Daedalus had spent too little time guiding the education of his son Icarus, who failed to listen to his father's careful instructions about the wings. Daedalus warned him about not flying too high, but Icarus took his wings across the Aegean from Crete to Gocek on the shores of Lycia (presumably where Dad couldn't see him) and proceeded to fly around unsupervised. He was having a good time just like those boys swinging on the rope swing. He chose to fly higher and higher as his confidence grew and he decided that he should fly up and check out the sun. As he flew higher and as he hadn't paid attention to his father's warning, he didn't realize that the sun would melt the wax that held the wings together. When that happened, he fell to his death into the sea. That supposedly happened just offshore of Gocek according to the myths.

Like Icarus and Daedalus, we are all part daredevil and careless risk-taker and part dedicated student of design and awareness. It's hard to say at any moment which of these two characteristics is the most dangerous. The risk of being a daredevil is clear enough, falling into the sea rarely ends well. But designing and over-thinking things like the Labyrinth or the waxen wings can lead to a whole other type of risk that is not initially so clear. Life is about risk and embracing it, managing it, negotiating your way through it, living with it and getting past it. Sometimes getting on a gulet for the day rather than hanging out at the hotel waiting for the rain to pass is the better strategy. Go no-go gulet is a risk we took and enjoyed and those of us who stayed aboard rather than diving into the warm and unsuspecting waters of the Mediterranean chose to take a lesson from Icarus and not get out over our wings by flying too close to the sun.

Twenty-Eight Klicks of Heaven

You know what gets my goat? I am in the middle of our vacation in Turkey and I have managed to get into my riding state of mind. Focus on 150 feet in front for road condition, check the bike mechanical stats regularly (very easy with two thumb clicks on the new BMW 1200GS), make sure I know where Bob is in relation to me, all the regular things. I leave all thoughts of impeachment, tariff wars and the state of wealth distribution at the breakfast table for Roger and Edwina to ponder. I am in the zone with the sun shining on southern Turkey. We drove from Gocek to Kekova, which is only about 170km, so a planned short day. One minute I am following the ex-Governor of the great state of Illinois and then the next minute I am in the midst of a herd of goats. That's how life works most of the time, especially in this part of Turkey. At least I didn't hit either of the two donkeys that leisurely crossed the road in front of me.

Last night we stayed in a Club-Med-like hotel called Rixos Premium Resort, just in case you had any doubt that it thought of itself as first class all the way. We all agreed the physical plant was great, but the "campus" was set across 100 acres of lawns, hedges and stone pathways that were only barely lighted. There were three restaurants which we were obliged to use since it operated on what used to be called a Modified American Plan where dinners and breakfast were included in the room price. The problem was that the restaurants, the spa and the pools were about a half mile from the rooms. It's unusual in the developing world (and I realize Turkey would object to that designation) to see a hotel go long on capital assets and short on labor-based service, but that seems to be the program at Rixos.

We had laundry done at Rixos because we stayed two nights to enjoy Gocek Bay. They have figured out how to charge developed world prices for their laundry service, which, strangely enough, they chose to denominate in U.S. Dollars,

perhaps the only thing we have found in the past ten days in Turkey that is not priced in Turkish Lira. My first rate Manhattan cleaners would be embarrassed to charge \$173 for what we had laundered. Next time maybe we'll just bring disposable underwear.

After riding through town, we went along about 80 km of a mix of Hills and distant ocean views. It was warm, but not hot. It was sunny, but not blazing. The morning light was occasionally in our eyes depending on how the road turned, but there was scant traffic and today, no police to roust us. We were enjoying the gentle countryside and blue sky and then we turned off the main road onto a small paved, but lightly maintained road with scruffy grass growing alongside. This led us to a small parking lot with a ticket office and a bar/gift shop that served the rare tourists that found their way to Xanthos, the ancient capital city of the Lycian Kingdom. Make no mistake, this wide-spot in the dusty road is an important archeological site, so much so that it has obtained UNESCO World Heritage Site status, which is no mean feat. It was noteworthy for having twice succumbed to marauders and ending the siege by mass suicide rather than being taken prisoners. This mimicking of the Zealots' creed (think Masada in Israel) was done in 400BC when the Phoenicians (they were from modern-day Lebanon) came calling and then again in 100BC (I guess other indigenous Lycians moved in after the Phoenicians got bored) when the Holy Roman Empire sent Brutus to mess with the Xanthians. The Lycians must have been a fiercely independent bunch to off themselves twice rather than negotiate a peace. It is said that Brutus even offered to pay them not to kill themselves and even that failed to move the needle.

From Xanthos we headed towards the coast. Note that we have "turned the corner" East at this point, so the water was not the Aegean any more, we were mainlining it on the Mediterranean Sea itself at this point. Kaz had warned me that once we came up over a rise with the sea falling off in all directions, I should strap in for some good coastline riding, which he called better than the Pacific Coast Highway in California. He was not exaggerating. What lay before us was twenty-eight clicks of heaven. Whoever built this road should have a statue erected for them. It is riding perfection. It sweeps gently back and forth, hugging the jagged coastline. The road is a wide two-lane road with extra-wide shoulders paved exactly like the road surface. That makes it a 3-4-lane road masquerading as a two-lane road with very forgiving sides that allow for lots of gawking. There is, indeed, lots to see with beautiful rocky hillsides and azure blue ocean. Every once in a while there is a runoff ravine which creates an inside hairpin turn with a lovely multi-hued blue grotto beneath. This seems to go on forever and makes the entire trip to Turkey worthwhile. I honestly stack that twenty-eight kilometer piece of road (especially riding Eastward on the ocean side of the road) as a global top ten ride spot. Boom!

Shortly thereafter, we again turned off the main road and headed down to the town of Ucagiz, where we parked the bikes and vans and boarded a private launch (a mini gulet of sorts) for a fifteen minute boat ride to the town of Kekova. This town, though on the mainland, negotiated with the government in the 1960's to NOT build a road to it. That left it only accessible by sea and has made it one of the most delightful little sea resort towns. I am writing this story under an umbrella on the dock of the small pensione we are staying in. It is a delightful, but bare-bones place that has already fed us a pleasant and relaxing outdoor lunch and will do likewise for dinner a bit later...perhaps after another swim and then a nap. Life is very tough today for the AFMC travel crew. Bob is already asking about when we are walking up to the small castle at the top of the hill. That's Bob, always restless. I just hope he noticed and savored the twenty-eight clicks of heaven this morning.

This Side of Olympus

We started this, our tenth day of this Turkey Tour in the most beautiful little spot of waterfront we may ever see. Kekova is the isolated little town of 100 souls (70 in winter) that has no road serving it and is only accessible by boat. The water is crystal-clear and as blue as anywhere in the Caribbean. There are three small pensions, two of which are owned by brothers. There are a few shops and an old Lycian fort on the top of the hill with an oversized Turkish flag. This is the sort of place where you have no choice but to relax since there is scant to do and nowhere to go. We took three meals on the dock of our little hotel, which was wonderful, but was also the only option for dining other than one of the other hotel docks. The whole town can accommodate about 75 guests at full capacity, so we represented 20% of the market. There is the occasional day-tripping gulet that passes by blaring Chinese or Russian tour guide hoo-haw. This morning, the heartier in the bunch took a morning swim with the Governor making it out to the rocks about a half mile out. He does like to swim. The rest of us, meanwhile, had a simple breakfast while waiting for our gulet ride back to the bikes.

The ride plan for the day was again short on distance (180 km) to Antalya, a large Rio-like resort town that anchors the southern coast of Turkey. The interesting thing is that the Turkish army has decided to proceed to attack the Syrian indigenous Kurds, just as we move TOWARDS the Turkey/Syria border. We are still 500 miles from where the fighting is underway, but as we keep heading East (actually Northeast) we will get within 300 miles of the ruckus. While you can argue that this is a localized police action to secure the Turkish border (that is certainly Erdogan's contention), it's bigger headline news around the world because President Trump effectively gave permission to Erdogan to proceed and

withdrew the U.S. troops from the field of battle (only less than 100 troops, but very symbolic in the withdrawal of the U.S. support of its longtime Kurdish allies). So, here we are, a bunch of Americans close to the #1 global news story, enjoying nice beach resorts in Turkey and riding around on motorcycles. It sounds more irresponsible than it is.

The geography of this part of Turkey is dominated for hundreds of miles by the jagged and prominent Taurus Mountains that demarcate the boundary between the Mediterranean shoreline and the Anatolian plateaux. They appear largely remote and uninhabited, but they certainly provide Turks and others with a lovely alpine playground. It seems strange to see alpine landscape so close to the azure blue shore, but no less strange that this is the original home of St. Nicholas, our favorite Christmas icon, Santa Clause. In the town of Myra, we stopped to pay homage to the Saint and his church. Merry Christmas! So said the hordes of visiting Russians, who obviously relate well to anyone with the name Nicholas.

We then found the second half of yesterday's 28 clicks of heaven for a second set of seaside sweeping turns until we got to the coastal area where the Chimera roamed, near the town of "burning rocks", called Yanartas. The Chimera is a mythical beast that was part lion, part dragon and part serpent. A nasty piece of fire-breathing work. The Chimera plagued Lycia, so with the help of Pegasus and others, he was finally defeated. It is easy to see where the myth came from when you hike up to the burning rocks on the top of Mt. Cirali. It was from these natural "eternal flames" that have burned at these spots for over 4,000 years, that the original Olympic Flame was generated. That spot is at the base of Mt. Olympus, which, to most of our surprise, is here in Turkey and not, indeed, in Greece.

After an outdoor lunch down in the tree-covered bazaar of the beach town of Cirali, we headed to Antalya for the last hour of driving today. The entire way was on the lower hillside of Mt. Olympus and the other mountains of the Taurus. Just before we entered the city of Antalya, we passed under the high-wire gondola that ferries tourists up to the top of Mt. Olympus. My guess is that lots of Russian was being spoken on the gondola.

We are staying in a completely different type of hotel tonight. This one is like a Las Vegas hotel with large, plush suites. The best part of the hotel is the view. From our terrace we look across Antalya Bay to the magnificent panorama of the Taurus Mountains and Mt. Olympus. Watching the sun set to the West, just highlighted the mountain range and reminded me of looking at the Sawtooth Mountains in Idaho as the sun sets behind them. It's an equally inspiring view.

Tonight, we were taken to a terrace dinner in the old town of Antalya. We watched as the restaurant shone a laser light display across the water at a stone cliff wall. It began as just the name of the restaurant. Then, at the table across from

ours, we watched as a young man asked for his girlfriend's hand in marriage. The laser announced the blessed event with a heart shape. A few minutes later, we were surprised to see the laser announcement that the restaurant was welcoming the American Flyers. There we were, for all of Antalya to see. No hiding now.

We may not be Olympians in the truest sense of the sporting definition, but I will declare that we are just this side of being Olympians by getting out there and doing something few will do at our age (ride motorcycles) in places like we go (Turkey during a global crisis... even though it didn't start that way). We rode today in the shadow of Mt. Olympus, but I would contend that we of the AFMC cast a long shadow ourselves in our own ways.

Sleeping is the Enemy

It's 6:30am in Antalya, Turkey, do you know where your mind is? Sleep is such a funny thing. There are times when the need for it is so desperately that I can literally stare at a page I am writing and see that I have drifted off into incoherence over three words, one of which is complete gibberish. And there are other times when I can put on my C-PAP mask and hear every breath I take for thirty minutes with nothing else occupying my thoughts and still not find that illusive slumber beast. Waking up in a strange one-night-stand hotel in a city I am unlikely to ever be in again in my life is also a sleep-related treat. While I am blessed to always awaken with full awareness of my place and surrounding (never having wondered "where am I?"), I am *compos mentis* enough to know that I must be careful figuring out in the dark where furniture, doors and obstacles are located.

Having a handy iPhone or iPad is both blessing and curse. The guiding light from a digital communicator is a great euphemism for our lives in modern society. It's a tool to get you to the hotel bathroom and yet it is a tool to distract you from further sleep. To begin with, it tells you the time. Is that a help or a hindrance? I like to know the time since it advises me on whether more sleep is warranted, likely or an efficient use of scarce resources. Is it worth it to try to revert to a sleep state at 6am when you are leaving the hotel at 9am fully repacked? There is breakfast to be taken or not (how easy or hard is to acquire in this particular hotel at this particular time of morning?). There is a shower to be taken or not (had one last night, but was a sweaty night or a dry night?). Do I have email or writing that needs doing? (Is the email more or less pressing?). Of course, the double-edged sword of having so much great information at our fingertips is that it puts the mind into gear and the sleep issue quickly becomes moot.

The 1990's TV series *Friends* had a great character, Joey. His best line ever was when he said, "Moot, you know, like a cow's opinion, it means nothing." Well, degree of wakefulness to the issue of sleep decision-making is anything but a

cow's opinion. At this point in the morning, I have over-thought myself into an advanced state of mindfulness. That is not necessarily a bad thing. On the contrary, I am using the time to good purpose. My trusty iPad has already thrown several in-depth articles at me about the latest Ukraine and Turkish affairs that are both irrelevant and highly relevant to my day. Strangely enough, the irrelevant is likely highly relevant long term (what can be more important to my well-being than whether Donald Trump is finally deposed and sent packing to the oblivion he so richly deserves) and the relevant (given that I am a mere 530 miles from the bombing and fighting on the Turkey/Syria border) is likely you become highly irrelevant to my daily existence once I board a plane at Istanbul airport in a few days (not that the suffering of foreign peoples deserves relegation to mindshare back-burnering, but life does go on for those of us not directly involved).

So I have now set aside sleep for this morning and must confront my daily reality. First there is the darkened room and my lovely sleeping beauty across the bed. Ah-ha! There is a terrace with a grand view and it's 73 degrees out. There is my momentary salvation, so I find my way out of doors. What greets me is the blue Mediterranean Sea, as lovely and calm as ever, with early-morning swimmers enjoying a refreshing dip (if I had an extra two hours I would be tempted to deal with a wet bathing suit in my bag). Across the open bay drifts a two-masted gulet off to some sort of excursion, but looking ever so picturesque for us tourists as it motors slowly by. But then there are the distant towering and majestic Taurus Mountains and specifically Mt. Olympus that we traversed yesterday on our motorcycles. What a sight to stare at on a clear, warm, October motorcycle-vacationing morning. It's enough to make me count my many blessings and awareness that life is good.

In the room I hear my wife's iPhone alarm go off. It's a ringtone of the start of the song, *Bring Me Sunshine*, which she does for me each and every day. It is now officially time to wake-up. I have squandered my early morning with these musings, but here's the thing... I think these musings are the very best of my life. I insist on counting my blessings each and every day and for me, a morning person by nature, there is no better time to do that than in the stillness of the morning before reality and daily tasks take hold.

We will drive over the Anatolian Plateau today to what is being billed as a very traditional interior Turkish town of Konya. It is well off the beaten tourist path, but happens to lie directly in our path to the fabled Cappadocia, where we end our biking journey with the flourish of a promised hot air balloon adventure. That will start at 5am so any morning musings will need to be set aside for caution's sake.

Sleep is a wonderful energizer. It allows us to capture the day and process it to a fully internalized state. It soothes sore muscles. It prepares us for our next adventure. But we owe it to ourselves to drink sparingly from that faucet. Sleep

will command us to slow down when we ignore it, so worry not about missing out on it. As my Welsh friend Michael likes to say, “You’re a long time Dead, Boyo!”

Stepping Up

I began this trip by describing our journey to the center of the earth, which I described as the Steppes of Central Asia. Well, today we said goodbye to the Mediterranean Sea and rode over the Taurus Mountains to the Anatolian Plateau or Plain, what we can reasonably describe as the Westernmost Steppes of Asia Minor. Specifically, we have entered the Konya Ovasi Basin, what those in the Western U.S. would call the high desert. Water and vegetation are all around, but less lush and more sparse. It is 10 degrees cooler up here than down by the Sea and that, combined with the lower humidity probably made it a better, more comfortable place to live back in the day.

Today we started our ride by going to Aspendos, the best-preserved Roman Theater in the world. That is one helluva claim until you see it. It is an amazingly well-preserved structure that could easily still be used to put on a show. An Asian man thought that was his mission for the day so he belted out an Italian operatic aria for all the Russian and motorcycling tourists in attendance. It was built during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, so it is almost two millennia old. It has stayed so well preserved because during the era of the Silk Road, this was repurposed as a caravanserai or camel-hotel rest station and inn for weary travelers. Apparently, that was enough to justify some entrepreneurial sort keeping the theater in good repair so that it is in the great shape it is today. I am fascinated by tales of the Silk Road and am envious of Roger Hansen having ridden that route from Istanbul to China. I am not altogether sure why this era of history pushes my buttons so much, but I’m sure it has to do with the romantic lack of full knowledge about it. It has left me reading about Marco Polo and Genghis Kahn to fill in what I can.

I am particularly intrigued by the connection with the Arthurian Legend and this part of the world. While the truth around these legends remains illusive, there is one theory that the Arthurian knights were all young recruits gathered in Anatolia among the aggressive and war-like Seljuk Turks that inhabited the steppes of Anatolia (perhaps around Konya). These brave warriors were taken from their families as tribute to the Romans, who had overtaken the Byzantine Empire under Constantine. Arthur was a young and noble Roman Legionnaire of high birth who was given the challenge of defending a wild and not-yet unified England against the marauding Saxons from the north. He and his “knights”, as he called his warriors, were trained and ready for battle and to salvage the interests of Rome in this distant and cold land. The dates of Arthurian presence and its central castle at Camelot line up between the dates of the Roman conquest of Byzantium and the Norman conquest of Britain, so it all hangs together on the timeline.

As we travel through the Roman ruins, which are so prevalent in Turkey (Anatolia), we see names like Hadrian like at Hadrian's Gate in Antalya and wonder about the connection with Hadrian's Wall, the fortification stretching for 75 miles across northern England. The thought that all of this got connected with a warrior exchange is fascinating and links this part of the world to Western Civilization in meaningful ways. These steppes are a huge part of our collective heritage and I "feel" this as we drive through the barren landscape.

So, we headed north and rode up over another fine new road over the Taurus Mountains. The road from Antalya to Konya is not a tourist track. In fact, I think it is fair to say that it is off the beaten path, any yet the road was excellent. I am told that infrastructure and all that comes with it is a priority to the current Turkish administration. It worked for us.

Then, after coming down the back side of the Taurus, we suddenly found ourselves in those steppes we've been talking about. We rode in and amongst them for one hundred miles or so until we got to Konya. As we closed in on the city, it became clear that we were moving into much more serious Islamic territory. Turkey has 85 million citizens and about 30,000 mosques. That's 2,800 or so citizens per mosque. There is a noticeable increase in our mosque sightings as we close in on Konya. They are easy to spot with their domes and minarets. Konya has 1.3 million population and 3,000 mosques. That means there's a mosque for every 400 people. That's a pretty good sign that we are in a much more traditional Islamic community.

We are staying in the center of town directly across from the main mosque which is adjacent to the most visited attraction in Turkey. It is the mosque where the Tomb and remains of a mystic named Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, also known as Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī, Mevlânâ/Mawlānā, Mevlevî/Mawlawī, and more popularly simply as Rumi, can be found. He was a 13th-century Persian poet, Islamic scholar, and Sufi mystic who has been a spiritual leader for many Muslims.

We toured his mosque and paid our respects before heading to dinner just beyond the mosque. Minutes later the evening call to prayer began as loudly as I've ever heard it. Louder even than in Jeddah or other religious centers in Saudi Arabia. I took this as further evidence of the seriousness of the faithful. Maybe it was our location so close to the minaret or maybe it was the spiritual fervor that has followed Rumi for over 700 years.

I bet Arthur and Rumi would have been pals. They both adhered to high ideals and they both left their mark on our consciousness and on the steppes of Anatolia.

Like Water for Camels

Our last day of riding was not really about riding, but more about mimicking a caravan across the Silk Road. The path was arrow-straight for 130 miles from Konya to Cappadocia and we flew like the wind in our set formation. The only stop we made was at the Sultanhanı Caravanserai, conveniently positioned just off our path and about half-way between the two cities. In the heyday of the Silk Road, these caravanserais were spaced about every 30-40 miles, which was a reasonable day's journey. It seems that pirating caravans was a real risk, so traveling at night was not considered prudent. We were attacked by three small boys looking for a handout and a sit on the bike. One chocolate bar and a few motorcycle poses later, they were off running wild again. I imagine boys who looked just the same did likewise over the years of the caravan trade, pulling on the not-bemused camels' tails.

The Silk Road was "in business" linking east and west via trade from 200BC through 1800AD. Technically, according to the coffee table book in our hotel lobby, the last camel caravan to traverse the Silk Road was 1997, but by then the traffic was light to nil thanks to more efficient means of caravanning. Operating for two millennia is an amazing accomplishment for any mode of transportation. I recall being amazed in the opposite direction when I learned that the Wabash and Erie Canals, which are memorialized as the great economic can-opener for the Midwest of America, took longer to build than the twenty or so years it was actually operational. Technological innovation in the form of the steam engine, put a quick end to the economic utility of a river barge pulled by draft animals. By contrast and for various reasons, the camel caravans that plied the Silk Road were not so put-off by the sailing ships that rounded Africa, India and Southeast Asia for most of two millennia. Not even steam impacted the caravan trade enough to kill it. WWII actually added value to the route since mining harbors forced the Chinese to work with the Russians to pave parts of the road to bring in needed supplies through the back door of the world. The Silk Road persevered.

After an appropriate amount of time gawking and taking pictures of the famous sandstone structures in the Göreme Valley, we went to see a Whirling Dervish ceremony. Strangely enough, it was held in another caravanserai that was equally restored to its former glory. It was an appropriate setting for this Sufi ritualistic and mystical dance that has existed for 700 years as an important meditative state. We are told that when describing the Whirling Dervishes, it is best to avoid calling their state of being a trance (they suggest that their meditative state is hyper-aware of its surroundings), and it is best not to call what we saw a show (there were set times and we did pay an entry price to get a seat...and there

was not an empty seat in the house). It was all supposed to be a religious experience of great enlightenment. That said, the “event” went off on time and lasted an hour or so, and the four Whirlers were accompanied by a three-piece ensemble (flute, drum and mandola) and a senior staging person (Imam?). It was all quite interesting to see and buy the t-shirt at the souvenir store at the exit...once.

This place of Cappadocia is the stuff of legends. People lived here in caves hewn from old volcanically-generated and naturally-shaped (wind and water erosion) hillocks. It must have been a VERY strange place to come across in the olden Silk Road days. I imagine a weary merchant traveler finding this mystical valley set in the middle of an otherwise desolate plain that stretched as far as the eye could see (think Kansas). He stops on his trek from China with several camels full of silk and spices which he feels will net him a tidy profit and make the two-year journey worthwhile. The whole thing has been a great adventure with many hardships and wonderful things to behold. He has passed all the dangerous parts where “Manifest-Destiny-Driven” Mongols, Krazy Kurds and Extortive Sultans hung around every curve in the road. There were taxes to be levied and paid. There were strange meals to be shared. There were even marauding sand pirates out to get you if you tried to take one short-cut too many. But you and your trusty pilot (the unusually calm bald guy who had been this way many times before and seemed to speak all the languages) have made it through the worst of it unscathed, or at least more or less intact. You’re in the home stretch and you can smell your wife’s lamb stew and warm bed awaiting you in Byzantium. Then, the southern route you’ve chosen to take through Anatolia finds you in this strange place. These are like-minded Muslims and not the pagan idol-worshippers of the inner steppes. But they wear funny tall felt hats and spin around with their heads back and their arms raised to heaven and are clearly in an altered state. You slowly back away saying polite things about what a fine rapture you have had and the spiritual pleasure to share with these men of God. All you can think of as you glance back over your camel-galloping shoulder is, “Get me outa here!” At least you have one more great story to tell your kids and their kids for years to come.

This is how I feel as we prepare for our morning balloon ride over the strange and exotic landscape of Cappadocia in the middle of Asia Minor, with the Mongol Swarm now transposed into busloads of fishhead-eating Chinese budget tourists. They have replaced camel prods with selfie sticks, but a camel prod in the eye feels little different in the face of silent nudging Asians doing what they have only always done; jockeyed for position in an otherwise over-crowded world. We actually commented amongst ourselves that the lovely and fully-booked restaurant at our Argos Hotel was devoid of Chinese, which seemed strange in a place so heavily travelled by the Chi-an Mafia. We assume that the current wave of Chinese in town find other accommodations more pleasing to their budget-

consciousness, not unlike when they lodge and dine in Jersey City before and after taking Manhattan.

The Mongol was a noble savage that quietly conquered as far as this world with a few horses and camels, all by the nourishment of a fully tenderized goat or two. The Chinese do the same with their Belt and Road Program, not to mention their \$9.95 tourism agency. We are witness to the ages and the ongoing repetition of history in this place of mystical enlightenment. We seek knowledge and experience with the daily grind of the camel-back saddle. We feed our camels 95-octane water for their journey back to Byzantium and wonder as we squint into the sunrise, will all my silk and spices fit into my bags for the journey home?

Up, Up and Away

There comes a time in every trip when it's not technically over, but you feel that you are just biding time until your flight home leaves. That time has now come for the 2019 Turkey Tour. We are in Cappadocia in a lovely hotel called Argos. It's funny that *Argo* is the name of the Ben Affleck film that tells the story of Tony Mendez, the CIA exfill specialist, who draws the assignment to get six American embassy employees who are hiding out in the residence of the Canadian Ambassador to Tehran out of Iran. It's a suspenseful and well-executed movie and has many of the elements we face here in Cappadocia. This is an exotic place with a hotel room that is all about stone walls and arches that make the place feel rustic and Middle Eastern yet comfortable for people of all cultures. The bathrooms, in the Turkish tradition are expansive lounges more than just utilitarian rooms that happen to have running water.

The hotel is built on a hillside and is in the very midst of the spires, faeries and sandstone that define Cappadocia. That means that every room can be denominated in the number of stairs it takes to climb to your room. I feel lucky that ours is only 25 steps or so. Getting to the restaurant is a hike with a climb before or after depending on the relative location of your room. The rooms are spread out over the hillside with the owner buying up adjacent properties such that he has expanded his little boutique hotel from 30 to 60 rooms going who knows where from there.

This morning we awoke at 5am in order to gather to get bused to a dark field in the less populated part of town. We had booked a balloon ride in a hot air balloon operated by Kapadokya Balloons, one of several dozen operators that have sprung up in town over the past fifteen years. As stated by our guide, Kaz, Cappadocia has gone from a place where ballooning is available to a place where ballooning is a main event. Every souvenir stand attests to this as it's hard to find a souvenir that does NOT involve balloons. The balloon companies have their

program pretty well figured out and ours started by passing out juice boxes and breakfast pastries. By the time we arrived at our designated balloon, we had passed dozens more balloons in various states of inflation and preparation for launch.

The ride itself is thrilling for several reasons. First, assuming you haven't ballooned too much, the physical act of silently rising in the open air is pretty exciting all by itself. The Göreme Valley at dawn is an amazing place to get a bird's eye view from a balloon. And then there is the art of flying the balloon to make it less of a balloon ride and more of a balloon tour. What is meant by that is to drop down into some of the many canyons and ride through the faeries and spires for a closer look. Screw the photo opportunity view spots we stopped at yesterday. The view on a crisp morning balloon ride gives you by far the best look at these amazing natural wonders and all that man has done to and with them over the millennia. The ride/tour itself took a bit more than an hour and our quandary about where we might come to a landing resolved itself when we spotted the truck and attendants. Our Turkish pilot, who spoke a bit of Japanese, Hindi, Mandarin and more than a bit of English, bragged that he could put the basket down exactly on the flatbed truck it came off of at the start. He did not disappoint to our amazement. We clambered out of the basket while the crew both packed up the balloon and set out our ceremonial champagne toast (cherry juice with some non-alcoholic fizzy cider). Photo ops and tipping were allowed and encouraged.

Cappadocia now boasts over 150 hot air balloon licenses, which means the daily tour capacity is about 3,000. They are supposedly allowed to launch 100 first and then an added 50 one half hour later. All I know is that my quick visual count put it at 120 balloons in the air at once, which is truly a sight to see at sunrise over Cappadocia.

After breakfast and bag packing, we headed off in a van for a tour of one of the underground cities Cappadocia is known for. It seems that the Sumerians came to the area in 3,000BC and chose to protect themselves and their writings (they are attributed with introducing the written word to mankind) by digging caves in which to hide from attacking armies. My guess is that once you realize the ease with which the sandstone can be hollowed, the idea of caves both above and below ground make sense. You can see it even today in the hollowing out of every hill by local farmers as a place to keep their potato crop dry and cool.

The last place we stopped was for a wonderful lunch at a local home, which was set up for private dining for groups like ours. This was a family affair with Dad running the show and Mom and Grandma doing the heavy lifting in the kitchen while junior served and cleared. We had a great meal with all fresh ingredients from their own gardens and pens. The local touch was a great finishing to our visit to Cappadocia.

We still have the dinner where Skip and Kaz will get their due applause for another amazing, fun and safe trip. We will discuss going to northern Spain and Portugal next year and we will all talk about our wondrous experiences. And then, when we wake up and head to the airport for our flight to Istanbul and our night at the Four Seasons Bosphorus, we will be doing what we always must do and head up, up and away to our homes until the next American Flyers Adventure.

