

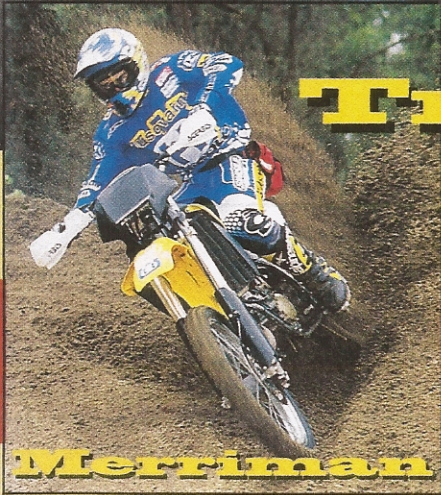
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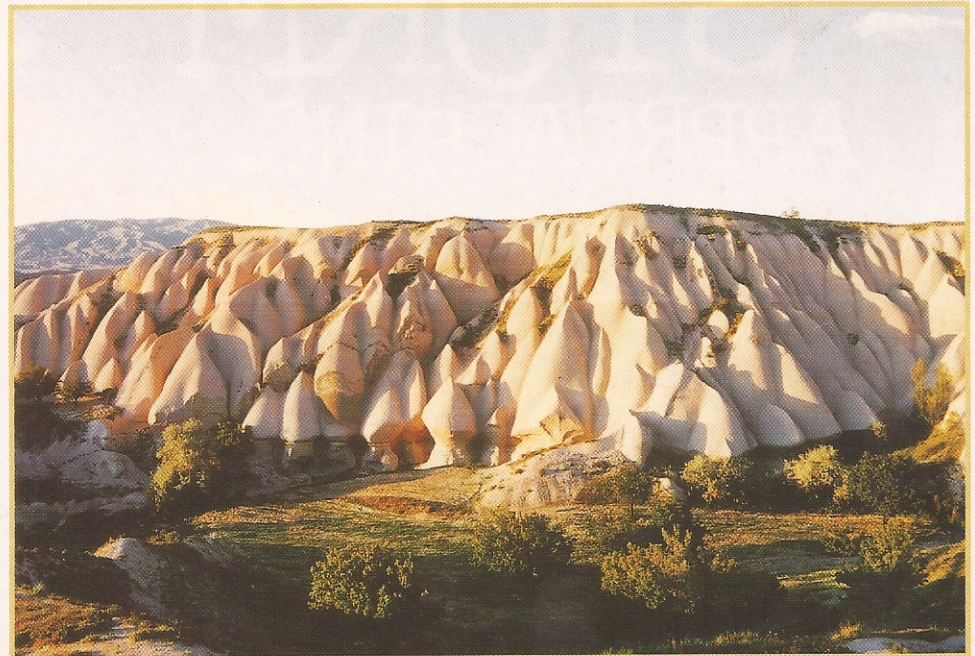
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Merriman - Close to winning!

Talking TURKEY

Story and Pictures by Mike Ferris



Ottoman houses. If you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much room.

A low sun provides eerie lighting on an already eerie scene.

With 8,000km of twisty coastline, 7,000 years of history, 36 underground cities and at least 40 different ways to cook aubergine, Turkey has a lot to offer even the 'traditional' tourist. Turn loose a bunch of Aussies on two wheels and you've got a trip that's bound to be memorable. Tour Leader Mike Ferris files his report of the latest Ferris Wheels motorcycle safari, starting with the mandatory pilgrimage to Gallipoli and Anzac Cove.

We made a conscious decision to time our visit to Gallipoli for a couple of weeks after Anzac Day. We had heard alarming stories about 15km traffic jams with up to 300 double-decker tourist coaches, of accommodation being impossible to find, of Aussie and Kiwi 'patriots' inciting drunken street brawls with the locals and/or each other, and we thought it best to honour the sanctity of Gallipoli in our own quiet way. Besides, we had sent our advance emissary, Johnny Howard, over to represent us on the Day and he seemed to have done a good enough job.

So the nine of us rode from Istanbul to the Gallipoli Peninsula on day one of our three week tour, early in May. The northern spring is a sensational time for such a visit, with the wild red Anzac poppies flowering in vibrant abundance everywhere. They added a poignant touch of symbolism, with blood-red splashes of colour in evidence across the rough and hilly terrain. We spent several hours in quiet reverie, exploring the beaches, the trenches, the museum and the cemeteries of both Anzac and Turkish soldiers who were massacred senselessly for the sake of someone else's war.

At the site of the first landing in Anzac Cove a huge memorial now stands, bearing the magnanimous words, 'Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives – you are now lying in the soil of a friendly

country. Therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehments to us where they lie side by side here in this country of ours. You, the mothers who sent their sons from far away countries, wipe away your tears; your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land, they have become our sons as well.' This monument was erected in 1934, just a few short years after the carnage, by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk who had been the general in charge of the successful Turkish forces at Gallipoli and had risen to become the father of the new independent Republic. Our hardened bikers all had a lump in the throat and a tear in the eye.

On a Lighter Note

Having thus spent our first day in a somewhat sombre mood, things lightened up a little when we arrived at our resort hotel and immediately went for a dip in the Aegean. The sea was even warmer than the hotel swimming pool! The food was excellent, the wine quite acceptable and the usual Aussie banter was starting to show through. Someone discovered the billiard table and the rest of the night was given over to games of pool and enthusiastic consumption of raki, the local innocuous-tasting aniseed-flavoured jungle juice which does nothing whatsoever to

‘Those heroes that shed
their blood and lost their lives
– you are now lying in the
soil of a friendly country.
Therefore rest in peace.’

improve hand-eye coordination.

We spent half a day exploring the splendid 7,000-year-old ruins at Troy, where the wooden horse wouldn't pass muster because he's in bad need of serious maintenance, then we swooped south along the Aegean coast. The roads are brilliant here and just perfect for riding. We had eight different bikes in the group, ranging from a Kwaka EN500 cruiser to a Yamaha XT600 and all points in between. The BMW F650 and the Honda Transalp were voted the most versatile, but it was the KLR650 Ratbike which was first put to the test. A motorist pulled a completely illegal U-turn through an intersection directly in front of Maurice, at cruising speed on the Rat and with nowhere to go. He threw out the picks and managed to wash off a bit of speed, but not enough to stop him T-boning the back end of the hatch and smashing helmet-first through the rear windscreen, like he'd been fired out of a cannon. In attempting to ascertain what speed Maurice had been doing, the police subsequently asked him exactly where he had hit the road.

"I never even touched the road, I was in the back seat of the #\$\$@%ing car!" he replied.

Unfortunately, he added, he wasn't quite close enough to get his hands around the driver's throat. In retrospect it must have been quite a hilarious sight, but poor ol' Morrie was in no mood to appreciate it until X-rays cleared him of any breaks or fractures. Half a day in the support bus and he was back on the Rat for more.

Modern Turkey

It must be said that this was an isolated incident and that generally we found the drivers to be well behaved, disciplined and even courteous. The Lonely Planet guidebook would have you believe that the Turks are all a bunch of murderous maniacs on the road but we found this to be simply untrue; trucks even gave way to our bikes at roundabouts! Every single vehicle on the road is well maintained and relatively new, a result of the very active and visible police spot-check regimen on every major road. We were amazed at how modern and progressive everything is in Turkey; for example the women wear short skirts and tight jeans, in what is after all, a Muslim society. Another legacy perhaps, of the forward thinking shown by Ataturk when he gave women the freedom to vote and to serve in parliament as far back as 1935.

Club Med

On our way to the Mediterranean coast we visited the very impressive ruins of Ephesus where St. Paul delivered his epistles, then the truly amazing spectacle of Pamukkale, where calcium-laden hot springs burst out of the top of a hillside, bubbling down the sides to leave snow-white travertine rock pools filled with steaming water. Here yet another ruined city, Heiropolis, testifies that the Romans understood the therapeutic qualities of a mineral spa bath after a hard day's march. Or ride. We certainly enjoyed our hotel's thermal pool, fed by the same steaming waters.

Some pointed comments were overheard about the marketing documentation for this trip suggesting you look elsewhere if you were



expecting Club Med standards of luxury and pampering. Yet here we were, turning into a bunch of cream puffs ...

Our next destination was indeed the Med, where the rolling, sweeping coastal roads conjure up images of James Bond in an Aston Martin coming the other way at a reckless speed. A couple of our own young guns were getting a little wristy in the twisties, being caught up in the euphoria of perfect weather in an exotic location. The Mediterranean has a colour all of its own; a unique, startling blue that's impossible to describe. We stayed in the regional capital of Antalya, a lovely port city surrounded by dramatic mountains, where it's fashionable to go snow skiing in the morning and scuba diving in the afternoon. About half of our group opted for a swim in the Med, and found that we were very buoyant in the remarkably salty water.

Cap a What?

Soon it was time to leave the coast behind again and strike inland, to a region of the Anatolian plateau known as Capadocia. Yet another phenomenon impossible to adequately describe, this is true troglodyte territory where soft volcanic rock known as tufa provided cheap real estate development by allowing houses to be easily carved into the stone. Huge underground cities have been discovered here as recently as the 1950s, some as deep as 13 storeys with wells and ventilation shafts, security doors, churches, communal dining halls and stables. All these allowed the local tribes to live underground for several months at a time in the event of invasion, such as happened with the crusades of the Middle Ages. 36 such cities have been discovered in the region thus far, some with interconnecting tunnels. Above ground, 'fairy chimneys',

like giant termite nests were also sculpted into houses for habitation in times of peace, with rooms, doors and windows simply carved out of the soft stone. An early stronghold of Christianity, some of the world's best preserved religious frescoes and wall paintings are found here, protected from harsh light by virtue of being hidden underground or in cave churches. We spent two magical days in this eerie place, just wandering and gazing around in awe.

Some of us stayed up late here to watch the European Cup football final, where the Turkish national team, Galatasaray, was up against the more strongly fancied Arsenal. When the Turks won after extra time and a penalty shootout, the town erupted in the most amazing street party we'd ever witnessed. In a wonderful display of spontaneous pride and emotional outpouring, and a scene repeated all over the country, people danced in the streets for three hours, drums and trumpets and loud hailer appeared from nowhere, buses and cars did laps of honour blasting horns, and four or five ring-in Aussies got dragged onto a flatbed truck to join in the festivities. The Turks know how to party!

Then it was on to the national capital, Ankara. Although Istanbul is undoubtedly the cultural and commercial hub of the country, Ankara is certainly not without soul. It is an attractive, vibrant city with a lively night life, as some of us found out to our subsequent discomfort next morning. It was once called 'Angora', after the long-haired goats which contributed greatly to the early trading wealth back in the days when this part of the world was a regular caravanserai stop on the old silk route.

We visited the national museum and then Ataturk's mausoleum, gaining some more insight into this truly remarkable man who virtually rebuilt a backward nation and dragged it into the 20th century. Notable amongst his sweeping reforms was the removal of strict Islam as the state religion, adoption of the Roman rather than Arabic alphabet, and the banning of wearing the fez, which he perceived to be symbolic of the oppressive and now-past Ottoman era. Can you imagine our government trying to ban baseball caps or the Akubra?

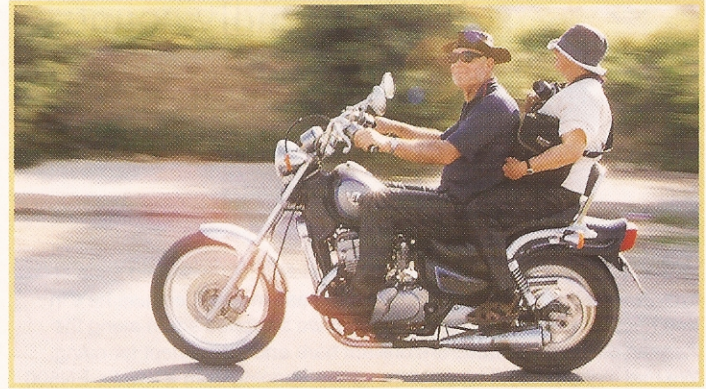
Back to Black

Heading directly north out of Ankara, we discovered what a real freeway should look like. This is a six-lane expressway with virtually no traffic on it whatsoever! The speed limit is a very sensible 140kph, and it's possible to travel several kilometres without seeing another vehicle. It has to be said that the roads here are in excellent condition, and obviously built for the expected increased traffic of the future. What a novel concept.

It made short work of our need to cover a longish day's ride, and we

arrived at Amasra on the Black Sea coast in time for a few hardy souls to complete their aquatic trifecta by having a dip in the somewhat cooler waters. Amasra is way off the tourist route and has a quiet olde worlde charm, with its Genoese fortress guarding the ancient harbour. We spent a delightful couple of hours wandering aimlessly.

There was a small incident on our way here, however, and despite what the good people at Rivet will tell you, I can report that their 'Adventure' jacket simply will not, repeat will not, stand up to the rigours



of being hurled into the rear wheel of a DR650 at 110kph. I dunno how it happened, but somehow a sleeve or something must have worked its way clear of the luggage straps holding it on the back on this warm sunny day, and it absolutely committed suicide. The back end of the DR, as you might expect, locked up completely and I described a big black sweeping 'S' for about 40 metres down the tarmac with my pulse rate screaming and my detached subconscious fervently wishing I was wearing my nice protective jacket. By the time we removed it from the wheel, chain, rear sprocket and axle, my now not-so-protective jacket looked like someone had just unloaded a 12-gauge shotgun through it. A very sad sight indeed. [Captain's log: must call my good friend Peter Mulder at R&R Speedsports when I get back...]

Long Blast Home

So we came to the final day's ride, starting with 100k's or so of beautiful sweeping Black Sea coast before joining the progressively

The sign says 'This bunch of Aussies reckon they can ride. You've been warned!'





congested motorway snarl leading back to Istanbul. Two hours from being home and hosed of course, it had to happen. An oncoming vehicle forced David to take a tight line through a corner, cranked over, where he quickly discovered a substantial fresh spill of diesel on the apex. He lost the front, dumped the F650 and slid several metres down the road with the bike on his leg before Dex, obviously riding in close, attentive proximity behind, slammed into them both and bumped the offending Beemer out of the way. Two bikes down, two riders hurt, but fortunately not too seriously. Both were able to laugh about it as they hobbled around getting medical attention from the support bus for various bruised and swollen bits, but the bent forks on the BM meant that David had to finish the last 150k of the trip in our bus rather than on two wheels; a little disappointing for him after nearly 3,500k.

Unfortunately this accident delayed a few of us by a couple of hours, with the result being that the nine of us headed into Istanbul in several smaller groups rather than a single group as planned. Good intentions for some of us were further disrupted when a freeway pile-up involving a couple of semitrailers resulted in the police diverting all traffic onto the smaller roads, where not so many road signs are in English! So what should have been a simple follow-the-leader became somewhat more farcical, but eventually we all arrived safely at our hotel in old-city Aksaray where, after three weeks of absolutely perfect weather, the rain started falling as we handed back the motorbikes! As they say, timing is everything ...

The highlights? Well, Gallipoli rated very highly as you might imagine, and so did the natural but surreal landscapes of Capadocia. But the hospitality and warmth of the Turkish people everywhere we went was overwhelming, and perhaps a little unexpected given the past conflicts between our two nations. It touched every one of us and drew many comments, plus added a tangible dimension to an already sensational experience.

TOP: Cheap middle-ages real estate development; just hand me a trowel.

ABOVE: Inside of main pic. The volcanic 'tufa' rock proved to be very workable.

Ferris Wheels Motorcycle Safaris operate fully escorted motorbike tours of Nepal, Ladakh, Kashmir, Rajasthan and Turkey, with Tibet possibly being added next year. Mike Ferris can be contacted on (02) [phone number] website at www.ferriswheels.com.au.

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