

Progress Report #1: Online Summer Course and Istanbul

The online summer course, although it may seem bothersome, is actually really helpful in providing you with the basics about Turkey. At least for me, I knew virtually nothing about modern Turkey when I applied to this program; I simply thought that it would be a neat place to go and learn about, particularly because I did not know much about it and because it is somewhere that you don't hear about many American students traveling to. The online course simply requires you to learn some basic things about the country where you will be spending the fall semester. We had to explore various sites about Turkey, including the embassy site, in order to learn about Turkish food, weather, politics, measurement systems, and history. The assignments take generally less than 2 hours to do, depending on how much time you put into surfing the web. And after doing them, I felt that I at least had a general overview of Turkey; I knew at least a little about what to expect when I arrived. So, the online course really isn't that bad.

The first three weeks of the program are spent in Istanbul. During this time, you take intensive Turkish classes (we took Turkish for three hours every morning), attend general lectures about Turkey (politics, history, economics, culture and religion, etc.), and have lots of free time to go out and explore the city. On Saturdays, you participate in group fieldtrips that try to cover the most fundamental and important monuments and places in the city. At first, I thought that this part of the trip was not going to be so great. I was not looking forward to three hours of Turkish everyday, lectures, and required fieldtrips. However, I had a wonderful time in Istanbul. Looking back, I am really glad that I had the opportunity to begin taking Turkish as soon as I arrived. I have been to various places in Europe, and as soon as I got to Istanbul, it was obvious that English is not as prominent here as it is in various cities in Europe. I actually got around easy using my broken and very basic Turkish than I did when trying to use any English. A dictionary is a must; as our Turkish teacher said, "my fingers were always fast-flying with dictionary." But people were really patient with us and accepted that we did not know much Turkish. Often times we were able to get English menus at restaurants or people tried to accommodate us with what little English they knew. At the same time, our group had two Turkish students who basically hung out with us constantly for the entire three weeks, and really helped us learn how to get around. They would describe food to us, show us great places to hang out, and tell us places to avoid. It was amazing.

The lecture series I have to admit I sometimes found really dull. The teachers here have a very different style of teaching but it is something you have to accept as part of Turkey. And despite this, I still learned a great deal about Turkey through these lectures. It was great to have the politics lectures and then be able to actually follow and comment on what was reported in the newspapers.

The fieldtrips, of course, were great. Sometimes they were really long, and by the end of the day I was exhausted. But I saw so many wonderful and beautiful things. I really got a sense of the incredibly diverse history of Turkey, from Byzantine times all the way up to the modern era.

But I think maybe the best thing about the three weeks in Istanbul is that you have lots of free time to go exploring, get dinner, shop, and just get used to Turkey. What

really surprised me is that Istanbul is a very cosmopolitan city, I at least did not really suffer from culture shock. We stayed at Istanbul Technical University and the campus we stayed on happened to be a five-minute walk from both the Bosphorus and Taksim Square, which is one of the city-centers. Our rooms were wonderful; we each had our own room and bathroom, with sheets and towels provided, and a view of the Bosphorus. Then, we could walk to Taksim to get dinner or shop. Taksim itself was incredible. As I walked down the street, I saw people who were well-dressed, people begging, bookstores, clothestores, cinemas, and music stores, blaring American rock, Turkish pop, Dance or Electronic music, even classical music. While Turkish food is definitely great (although I have had to have more of an open mind eating here than at home), there are places like McDonalds, Burger King, and Arby's (which are run in the classic American tradition) if we got really homesick for something familiar. There was just so much to do and so many different kinds of people! At night we would go out to movies, which are shown in English with Turkish subtitles, go to bars or nightclubs, hang out at street cafes and play backgammon—the game of choice—and drink chai (tea) for hours. The pace here is so much more relaxed than at home, and despite the fact that I was always doing something or going somewhere, I felt good and more relaxed myself. It was a great way to get accustomed to Turkey!

There were a few things, however, that are completely different from America. First, the toilets. Traditional Turkish toilets (although many places have “normal” toilets) are basically holes in the ground. There are generally not public toilets, or if there are, you have to pay a small fee (anywhere from 15 cents to .50 cents) to use them, and very rarely is there toilet paper provided. At first, I was definitely uncomfortable. But just carrying around a Kleenex pack with me helped; and after giving the Turkish toilets a chance, I decided that they really aren't that bad—its just like going out in the woods. Also, I definitely heard the call to prayer 5 times a day. At first, it really stood out, but after a couple of days, it didn't seem so weird anymore. And walking down the street, people stared at us much more than in America. But once I realized that its not necessarily because I stood out so much rather than because staring here is just much more casually accepted, I didn't even notice it much.

After thinking back at all this, I realized how great Istanbul was. I not only learned a lot about Turkey, but I had some time to adjust, which I think has made the transition, now that I've spent time in Ankara, much easier.