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Jeff Steele

INTO THE PAGAN PAST
**A Search for
Gods, Heroes and a Really Good
Greek Salad**

Written and Illustrated by

Jeff Steele



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**Journeys Exploring Modern & Ancient Greece
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Into the Pagan Past

CelebrateGreece.com
Santa Barbara, California USA

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ISBN: 978-1478231585 (Paperback; Color interior)
978-0-9837918-1-2 (Paperback; B&W interior)
978-0-9837918-2-9 (Digital)

UPC: 897429001257 (Paperback; Color interior)
897429001233 (Paperback; B&W interior)
897429001240 (Digital)

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Note: Despite our best attempts, the Greek script contained within this book does not show accent marks.

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INTRODUCTION

I was asked by Dr. James Stathis of CelebrateGreece.com to write a journal of my recent trip to Turkey and Greece. Because this was my first visit to these, or any country outside of North America, and because I'm a closeted Hellenophile (a lover of Greece), James thought it would be interesting to hear of my experience as a first time visitor to the land of the Olympian gods. Now I have to be honest, my interest in the Aegean lands ends about the time that those brutish Romans decided to come to Greece and stay awhile. I understand that Greece has a rich and fascinating history from the time of the Roman occupation until the present, but I try not to concern myself with that era. I'll leave it to others to discuss the history and culture of Greece since then. I went to Turkey and Greece to connect with the ancient pagan past. I wanted to locate and experience the historical and mythological remnants of a vanished Golden Age. I wanted to walk in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, Achilles, Agamemnon, Jason, Leonidas, Minos, and James Bond. Okay. I realize that the dashing 007 has little to do with ancient Greece, but he was associated with one of the sites that I visited during my trip. I'm sure that any reader even remotely interested in Greece knows what that connection is, but if not, continue reading my narrative and you shall see.

Before I tell the tale of my modern age *Odyssey*, I suppose that I must introduce myself. My name is Jeff. I am an average American working stiff. I am not a scholar, or an archaeologist. I don't sit around a table, magnifying glass in hand, trying to decipher faded ancient texts. Nor do I drag ground penetrating radar devices behind me in an attempt to locate the lost tomb of Alexander the Great. No. I deliver mail for a living in a suburb of Detroit, Michigan. My interest in ancient Greece goes back to those now distant days when I was a typically nerdy high school student (now, I'm a typically nerdy mailman!). I had taken a tenth grade mythology class, and was introduced to Homer's *Odyssey* as required reading. There was something about that epic tale that enthralled me. Perhaps it was the characters that were so alive and vibrant. Or perhaps it was the plot of the story that was so appealing: a man trying desperately to get home to his loving family, and having to overcome almost insurmountable obstacles to do so. Whatever it was that grabbed me about that book, I have been hooked on ancient Greece ever since. I vowed that one day I

would travel to that distant and historic land. Of course, it would be awhile before I could make that dream come true. Life has an annoying habit of interfering with dreams. But the time had come to take the plunge. My house was paid off, I did not have a car payment, and I had no children to put through college. I had sort of put any thoughts of international travel on hold, until one night I watched the Nia Vardalis movie *My Life In Ruins*. After watching this incredibly funny film about a tour guide and her group of misfit tourists, I turned to my wife and said, "I'm going to do that. I'm going to go to Greece!" I wasn't getting any younger. Like many people my age, I sort of had a bucket list of things to do bouncing around inside my head.

Once I had made the decision to travel to Greece, I then had to decide whom I would take with me. I knew that my wife would not go with me, due to her fear of flying. No amount of begging or pleading on my part would change her mind. Instead, I asked my good buddy John if he would be interested in joining me. Because he was unemployed, as many people are these days, I told him that I would pay for everything but his meals, his souvenirs, and his passport. This might sound very generous, but I was actually doing it for very selfish reasons. As I explained it to John at the time of my offer, it was well worth it for me to pick up the costs, since I really did not want to travel by myself. But I also offered to pay his way because John makes a great traveling companion. We have known each other since junior high school, and have since that time, taken several road trips together throughout the United States and Canada. Besides being my fellow road tripper, he was also the best man at my wedding. John is a very easy-going type, which is an essential quality when traveling with someone for several weeks, more so since we'd be exploring two exotic foreign countries for the first time! After thinking over my offer for about two seconds, he said yes. If I really had to, I could have traveled by myself, but that would not have been nearly as much fun as sharing my travel experiences with another human being. Besides, John is a big, teddy bear of a man who has a gentle, disarming way with strangers that I lack. With my knowledge and passion for Greek history, and John's laid back and easy-going personality, we made a pretty good team.

With the decision having been made to take this trip, I then had to sit down and figure out what kind of a trip I would take. What sites would I visit? How long would the trip last? Would I travel independently, or be part of a tour group? There were pros and cons to each method of travel. Being independent allows you the

freedom and flexibility to see what you want, when you want. A tour, on the other hand takes you to predetermined locations chosen by the tour company. They also do all of the driving, provide a knowledgeable guide, and coddle you with some fairly decent hotels. With much agonizing deliberation, I decided to travel independently AND take a tour. In the end, it was a two-for-one airfare promotion by my tour company, which sealed the deal. I couldn't pass up free flights, especially since I would be footing the bill! I then determined that I would take three weeks for this trip, with the tour being taken during the second week.

After further study and contemplation, I figured that if I was going to fly half way around the planet to visit Greece, then I had to make a pilgrimage to Troy. After all, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are my two favorite books. How could I be so close to the ancient city of Troy, and not visit it? This meant that my trip would now include the country of Turkey, a land that conjures up exotic images of mosques, belly dancers, and pesky carpet salesmen. Altering my trip itinerary, Istanbul would now become the starting point of what was becoming an amazing journey!

Over the next several months, as I began hammering out the details of the trip, I began to stress out as I listened to the news. First off the ticker tape was that Greece had been hiding a massive amount of debt. This discovery led to a tightening of the financial belt in Greece, resulting in riots and protests throughout the country. "Don't worry Jeff", I thought, "There's plenty of time for these problems to work themselves out." Then there was the enormous belch of an Icelandic volcano, which grounded most of the flights over western and northern Europe. "Relax", I reassured myself, "the volcano will calm down by the time the trip begins in September." Next up, my air carrier had labor problems, with their employees hitting the picket lines. "Hmmm. Strikes can't go on forever, can they?" I thought. The disgruntled airline employees eventually solved their differences with management, and returned to their jobs. "Phew! That was a close one," I thought as I chewed off my one remaining fingernail. It almost seemed as if the travel gods were giving me signs not to take this trip. I was sensitive to such omens due to a road trip to Alaska, which ended in disaster. Among other things, the transmission of my minivan decided to have a meltdown while in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. The cost to replace it was a staggering \$3400, a sizable chunk of the funds that I had allocated for the trip. There had been many signs not to go to Alaska that year, but I ignored them. The result was that I got as far as Bozeman, Montana before returning home to Michigan. I

lost another large chunk of change in reservations that I could not cancel. The whole fiasco left a bad taste in my mouth, which I could have avoided if I had only paid attention to the warning signs. If I was going to overcome these latest negative omens, I was going to need the help of higher powers. I needed to make a sacrifice to the gods of Greece!!

In Homeric times, the Greeks would have offered up a sacrifice to the gods by slicing the throat of an ox, cutting up the meat, and tossing the fat into the fire. The resulting smoke from this fat would rise up to the gods. It would be their portion of the sacrifice. Wine would also be poured onto the ground in a similar gesture. Since animal sacrifice has recently been outlawed in southeast Michigan, I had to do the next best thing. I went down to the nearby Lake Erie Metropark, lit some charcoals on a grill, and tossed my offering onto the flames. That offering was a fast food hamburger. As a substitute for the wine, I poured a diet cola onto the ground. Watching the hamburger turn crispy black, my eyes followed the rising smoke upwards to the blue skies above. I could only hope that Zeus and company would awaken from their slumber long enough to notice the frantic pleas of a stressed out suppliant about to embark on the journey of a lifetime!

Jeff Steele

Chapter One:

THE JOURNEY BEGINS!

Monday, September 13th

This trip of trips began at the train station in Dearborn, Michigan, within sight of the Ford World Headquarters building. Because our air carrier has not flown into Detroit since



John and Jeff at the Dearborn train station

(Full size, color drawings may be viewed by clicking drawing or visiting CelebrateGreece.com and searching "Into The Pagan Past")

the American auto industry imploded, John and I had to take the train to Chicago, where our flight would depart from O'Hare airport. I had never traveled by train before, at least not a real passenger train. I did ride a popular tourist train while I was in Alaska during my first successful trip to that state in 2005. But that was a brief excursion that went from the gold rush town of Skagway, up into the mountains to the Canadian border, and then back again. I've also been to numerous historical parks and villages that have their own trains that ride on a circuitous track. Many of you may be familiar with these. Half way through the journey, the train is held up by an "outlaw" demanding all of the passengers' valuables, but is thwarted by the timely arrival of a "hero" on a white horse. Hopefully, there would be no "outlaws" to interrupt our government subsidized trek to Chicago. The trip to the Windy City would be a real train ride, hopefully without any sort of delays. I once knew someone who, for their birthday, was taken to Chicago for the weekend by friends. They rode the rails there. On the way back home, the train ran over an inebriated man who decided that, somehow, the railroad tracks would make a real comfortable place in which to take a nap. It was a nap which he would never awaken from. The train was held up for several hours while the local police were called in to clean up the mess and to do their investigation. I silently prayed to Dionysus, the god of wine, to please keep his followers off of the tracks for my journey!

The train trip to Chicago almost did not happen, at least for John. I had arrived at the station twenty minutes before departure time. Speaking with my buddy the night before, he had assured me that he would be there at least a half hour early. But when I arrived at the Dearborn station, John was not there. I tried calling him on his cell phone, but there was no response. Becoming somewhat alarmed as our 7 A.M. departure time neared, I walked out into the parking lot, looking to see if I could spot John's van. It wasn't there. I tried calling him again. Still no response! I began to think that my buddy was going to have to have his significant other, Betty, drive him to Chicago if he missed our train. Then, with only five minutes to spare, John raced into the station parking lot. He apologized, and explained that he and Betty had gotten a late start to the day. He did not answer his cell phone because he was too busy breaking land speed records on the Detroit freeways so that he could get to the train station on time. He also knew why I was calling, and did not want to deal with me frantically asking him, "John, WHERE THE HECK ARE YOU?????" Relieved at his arrival, I could only hope that this was not a taste of things to

come. Our train came lumbering into the Dearborn station only a few short minutes after John had arrived on the scene. With the smell of diesel fumes wafting faintly in the air, we said farewell to our better halves, grabbed our gear, and boarded the *Midnigander Express* (not the real name) for the Windy City. The ride west across Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois was essentially uneventful. No rascally "outlaws" stopped the train to steal our valuables, and no sleeping drunks met their gruesome demise beneath us. In fact, nothing out of the ordinary happened during this leg of our adventure. That was a good thing.

The *Midnigander Express* unceremoniously arrived at Chicago's Union Station to absolutely no fanfare whatsoever. There were no bands playing music. No cheering crowds of well-wishers urging us on to Europe. There was nothing. Apparently, news had not yet reached Chicago about this incredible journey that we were now on. Instead, John and I quietly grabbed our bags and hauled them out of the station to a line of waiting taxicabs. There a young man, whom we thought was a cabbie, asked if we were waiting for a cab. We said yes. He grabbed our luggage, and plopped them into the trunk of a big yellow sedan. "That will be eight dollars", we were told, not realizing that this smiling, young man was not a cabbie at all. John gave him a ten, but received no change. "Extra fee for the luggage being so heavy", he explained. Ah, this con artist was obviously a follower of Hermes, the Greek messenger god, who was also the god of thieves!!

The wonderful, and ironic thing about our train ride being paid for with taxpayer's dollars is that it was cheaper for us to travel from Dearborn to Chicago by train, than it was for us to take a taxi from Union Station out to O'Hare airport! Our cabbie, whose name I now forget, was a convivial enough soul from Pakistan, a land once conquered by Alexander the Great. We asked our Pakistani friend if he wouldn't mind making a stop along the way to the airport. For years, I've been telling John that the best hot dogs in Chicago, and quite possibly this quadrant of the galaxy, can be found at a rather unassuming eatery on the northern fringe of the city called Superdawg Drive-In. Superdawg Drive-In is distinctive not only for the leotard-wearing hot dog figures perched atop the restaurant, but also for the insanely delicious dogs that they serve up with all of the typical Chicago dog toppings; mustard, onions, bright green relish, pickles, hot peppers, and a pickled tomato, all stuffed into a poppy seed bun. I'm drooling all over myself just thinking about it!! The dog is then gently and lovingly placed into a box (or bed in Superdawg lingo),

and buried under a pile of crisp, golden fries, which are gloriously revealed when the box is opened up. Other hot dog joints around the country cannot even begin to compare themselves to the culinary treats found at a Superdawg Drive-In. I know this from personal experience, as I have visited Brooklyn, New York, where another famous hot dog joint is located along the boardwalk of Coney Island. Their dogs are good, but not on par with a Superdawg! Perhaps it is just my Midwestern bias showing itself, but I doubt it. My taste buds would never, ever lie to me. At any rate, our cabbie, probably tired of me rambling on about hot dogs, agreed to take us to the Superdawg Drive-In for lunch. Upon arrival, I shot out of the cab and eagerly stood in line with a few other devotees, who all agreed with my opinion that the Superdawg was indisputably the best hot dog known to man. After a bit of a wait, I returned to the cab, treasures in hand, and handed John his first Superdawg. The heavenly choir sang above, as we sat in the back of the cab, munching away on our divinely-inspired lunch. John was impressed.

We arrived at Chicago O'Hare International Airport with plenty of time to spare, several hours in fact. Just as train travel was new to me, so was the whole airport experience. In fact, I did not take my first commercial jet flight until I was 46 years old. That was during my 2005 Alaska trip, when I flew from Fairbanks to Barrow, the most northerly city on the North American continent. But that was only a one-day trip that involved experiencing Eskimo culture and dipping a body part into the numbingly cold Arctic Ocean. I did not have to concern myself with luggage or airport transfers. Entering the Fairbanks airport was merely a matter of parking the van in the airport parking lot, and walking into the terminal building. There were no lines of cabs or airport shuttles. It was all so simple and quaint. But now I was at O'Hare, one of the world's busiest hubs, and I had to figure out the rules of airport survival as I went along. Hopefully, I would not make too much of an idiot out of myself in the process!

Having printed our boarding passes the day before, John and I now just had to locate some mysterious location called a "bag drop", which did not sound too promising for any fragile items within our luggage. To my relief, I discovered that the "bag drop" was, in fact, the spot where an amiable ticket agent greeted us. We then dropped off our checked luggage to be weighed and tagged with pieces of paper with strange, undecipherable runes written on them. In the case of Chicago O'Hare, those strange runes spelled out "ORD", obviously the name of some dark, Tolkien-like

beastie. Perhaps these are the creatures that would be placing the luggage into the belly of the plane. I'm not quite sure. At any rate, I watched my luggage vanish into a partially covered opening in the wall behind the nice ticket agent lady, who said that I was eligible to upgrade my seating arrangements from economy to premium economy. It sounded like such a bargain, especially for only \$250 for each of us. But I had to decline her generous offer on the grounds that I am but a humble public servant who earns but a humble wage.

At the security checkpoint, John was basically allowed to go through after having his bags x-rayed. But because I obviously looked like I was bent on world domination, I had to stand in one of those full body scanners, you know, one of those machines, which creates a nude image of the person being scanned. All I can say, is I hope they got a good laugh from my lanky, nude figure. God knows that I do every morning when I go into the bathroom, and look into the mirror! Clearing security, I then put back on the items I had to remove; my death-ray wrist watch, my leather belt of unspeakable evil power, and, of course, my size fifteen thermonuclear sneakers. I then made my way to the gate where our plane would be arriving, and tried to make myself comfortable. I sat among hundreds of Indians who were awaiting their flight back to Mumbai, Delhi, or one of those hot, humid, and overcrowded cities on the Asian subcontinent. Sitting among them, I was reminded that India was the furthest point which Alexander the Great reached on his campaign of world conquest. The young Macedonian king would have kept marching eastward, but his men mutinied, forcing the sulking conqueror to return to his capital at Babylon. As I sat clutching my bags and thinking about Alexander's encounters at the ends of the known world, two little girls actually kicked John out of his seat opposite me so that they could look out the window he had been sitting next to! With such spunk from a couple of Indian girls, it is easy to see why Alexander decided that it might be best to heed the wishes of his soldiers, and retreat back home, rather than confront the armies of his Indian opponents!

At approximately 4 P.M., a big, white passenger jet pulled up to the gate, its engines whining loudly. This would be our transportation to Europe. I quickly looked the plane over, checking for any pieces of wire or metal dangling down that shouldn't be. There did not appear to be any dripping oil or anti-freeze. Nor were there any puddles of hydraulic fluid. I could not see anything of importance being duct taped. All appeared to be in

order. I certainly hoped so, because for the next six or seven hours, my life would depend on that plane being well maintained, and on the flight crew being well rested and highly competent. I certainly did not want to hear any unexpected noises on our flight that might indicate trouble. No *Whhoonks*, or *Snapppp*, or *Shplikkkk*, or even the dreaded *Pooka-Pooka-Bop-Pooka*. You never, ever want to hear that last sound!

We finally boarded our plane, and were greeted by several cheerful flight attendants. I felt so special, like the President of the United States coming aboard Air Force One. We were pointed to the location of our seats, which I had arranged to be on an exit row. John being wide, and me being freakishly tall, we would need this extra amount of space to accommodate our bodies. We were joined by a rather friendly Australian chap from Melbourne who was in Chicago visiting his son at one of the area universities. He was quite talkative and told us how miserable London Heathrow airport was, because they make passengers go through several security checkpoints. "Great", I thought. I couldn't wait to get there and experience that for myself.

At 5:15 P.M., we departed Chicago. I never, ever get tired of a plane thrusting upwards towards the sky. It is such a thrill to me that I feel like a giddy little boy on a roller coaster ride. Never mind the image in my head of the plane plummeting back to earth in a huge fireball, and slamming into the ground. I concentrate, instead, on the views out the window. It is fascinating to watch buildings, then neighborhoods, and then entire cities shrink to Lilliputian size in a matter of minutes. It had taken John and me about five hours to ride the train from Dearborn to Chicago. Now, in roughly twenty-five minutes or so, our plane was flying directly over the city of Detroit. Looking down, I could recognize the familiar landmark of Belle Isle, that island park that sits in the middle of the Detroit River. As we raced across Lake St. Clair, I was amazed at what I could see. Spread out before me was the entire southern tip of Ontario, Canada. I could see Lake Erie, and beyond that, the northern shore of Ohio. This must have been the sort of view that the gods had as they sat on mountain tops, watching the Greeks and Trojans beat each others brains out during the Trojan War. As we continued east, the daylight rapidly gave way to night. Soon, the orange glow of cities appeared in the darkness below. Monitoring our progress on the little video screens provided at our seats, I could watch as the tiny image of our plane passed by Toronto, Montreal, and then Quebec City on the map. Eventually, our flight flew over Newfoundland and into

Jeff Steele

the dark Atlantic void, where we experienced our first minor turbulence.

I had dreaded this plane ride. Not because of any fear of flying, but because I knew that the seating in economy would be uncomfortable, and that I would be trapped there for several hours, held in a tight, vise-like grip by an ergonomically unfriendly seat. The seat width was too narrow for my frame, and the seat back was not nearly tall enough for my head to rest against comfortably. That is the price I pay for being so darn tall, and for not paying the price for an upgraded seat! I also feared that I would be stuck near a crying baby, or someone who snored. I imagined blood clots forming in my inactive legs, and how death would surely find me as I stepped off of the plane, the blood clots breaking loose and plugging up the blood flow to some vital organ or another. But my fears were unfounded. Across the aisle from us were seated at least two families with babies, but the children were surprisingly quiet during the entire flight. John did have a problem with his seat. The back would not stay up, and kept reclining into the passenger behind him. After several complaints to the stewardess, a solution was found by moving our Australian friend to the upgraded section of the aircraft, and giving John his vacated seat. It would have been nice for John to relocate to the upgraded section, or even better yet, me! But at least now, we both had some extra elbow room to make our flight a bit more comfortable. After passing by Newfoundland, I did try to sleep. I had bought one of those inflatable pillows that looks like a big, fuzzy horseshoe, but try as I might, I could not get comfortable enough to fall asleep, at least not for quite some time. I don't know how long I squirmed, and shifted back and forth in my seat until eventually I drifted off into some sort of unconsciousness. The next thing I knew, we were over Ireland and would soon be landing at Heathrow airport.

Tuesday, September 14th

Looking out the window for my first view of Europe, I was disappointed to only see a thick blanket of clouds. It wasn't until we crossed over into England that I finally began to catch brief glimpses of farmlands through the cloud cover. Seeing actual land, it seemed more official now. I was in Europe!! We landed at Heathrow airport, more or less on time. We then exited the plane onto the tarmac, and were driven by shuttle bus to the amazingly

huge Terminal Five building, where we would be duly processed for the next stage of our journey. Being in England was a bit like being in an alternate universe. The people looked like us, and sort of spoke the same language, but they drove on the wrong side of the road. None of the cars and trucks looked familiar, nor did the traffic signs. As I looked out the shuttle window, I thought to myself, "Are we still on Earth, or has our plane landed on some strange planet that mirrors our own?" Before I could figure it all out, we were dropped off at the terminal building, and proceeded inside to begin walking through a series of mazes which eventually led to a security checkpoint. Despite what our Australian friend had told us on the flight, there was only one security checkpoint at Heathrow, and we went through it with relative ease.

Heathrow airport is actually rather nice. Once we cleared security, John and I entered a multi-level area of shops and restaurants. It certainly appeared that we could keep ourselves occupied here until we boarded our connecting flight to Istanbul, which wouldn't depart for three and a half more hours. The worst aspect about being in Heathrow was that I had to lug my two pieces of carry-on baggage around with me. Both felt as if they were filled with lead ingots. On top of that, the pockets of the extremely versatile Scottievest that I was wearing were stuffed with cameras and other gear, further weighing me down. I had sworn before I left for this trip that I would travel lightly, but as my wobbly knees began to buckle from all of the extra weight that I was carrying around, I realized that I did not even come close to that goal. On the verge of physical collapse, John and I found some chairs to sit down on, and then took turns exploring the airport. One of us would remain behind with the luggage, while the other ventured off to explore this wondrous traveler's fantasyland. During one of my excursions, I purchased a postcard and mailed it off to my wife to prove that I had actually been to Great Britain. Or had I? I don't know how that works. If the duration of your stay in a country is spent only at an airport, then can you legitimately claim to have been to that country? I have visited forty-nine of the fifty American states, Hawaii being the only one that I have not yet honored with my presence. My own personal criteria for determining that I have officially visited a state are: A). I have to visit an attraction in the state, and, B). I have to spend at least one night there. Following my own rules then, I have not officially visited Great Britain, even if I could claim Heathrow Airport as an attraction. Furthermore, I never had my passport stamped, so technically, I suppose, I was never in the

British Isles either. But then again, had I shoplifted a Beefeater pencil eraser from a gift shop, then I surely would have fallen under the jurisdiction of the British legal system, and been sent off to the Tower of London. There, I would have been chained up onto some cold, stone wall for several decades to think about what I had done. So, was I or wasn't I in Great Britain? This would have been a good philosophical question for Socrates or Plato to ponder.

Heathrow prides itself on being a "quiet" airport. This means that they only make announcements over the public address system for the final boarding of planes. It is up to the traveler to keep an eye on the dozens of electronic boards scattered throughout the airport about the status of their flight. Unlike most other airports around the world, or at least the few that I've been too, Heathrow does not provide you with a gate number for your flight until maybe an hour before departure....if you're lucky. John and I kept our eyes glued on one of the boards waiting to learn what gate we had to go to. When it was finally posted, we had to sprint like crazed greyhounds across to the far side of the airport, as we were not given much time to get to the gate.

Boarding our flight to Istanbul, I sat next to an amiable couple from the island of Tasmania, who were gradually making their way back home to Australia. They were retired schoolteachers. I immediately hit it off with them. We spent much of the flight discussing politics, the economy, and Australian celebrities. John sat next to two young Turkish men who didn't feel like discussing much of anything. This was an odd situation. Usually John is the one who strikes up conversations with strangers, while I'm the one who remains aloof and silent. But here I was on our flight debating with my Tasmanian friends which of our countries should keep Rupert Murdoch. Neither of us wanted him. Before I could even begin to ask whether or not Tasmanian Devils actually spun around like tornadoes, our plane had landed in Istanbul, and we were in a strange, new land....Turkey!

Chapter Two:

TURKEY TIME

After a four hour flight from London's Heathrow airport, our jet landed safe and sound at Istanbul's Ataturk International Airport. As we exited the plane and made our way towards



Hectic Ataturk International Airport – Istanbul, Turkey,

customs, I couldn't help but hum the song *Istanbul* by the band THEY MIGHT BE GIANTS. Of course, this wasn't the only song associated with Turkey that I was familiar with. I had watched a German documentary about today's music scene in Istanbul. It featured interviews with various artists whose music spans the gamut from traditional, to punk and rap. There's nothing like a good, high-voltage Turkish punk song to lull you to sleep at night. Anyhow, I was so impressed by this film, that I downloaded the entire soundtrack onto my MP3 player. I now listen to this music frequently when I'm at work, I'm out riding my bike at the park, or when I'm trying to write a travel narrative.

John and I followed the signs at the airport, which directed us to customs. There, we paid our twenty dollars to have a visa stamp placed into our passports. A photo of Ataturk, the "father" of

modern Turkey, looked down at us from inside the customs booth, apparently making sure that everything was being done properly. Turkey would have the honor of being our first international country ever visited. I cannot count Great Britain because we were confined at Heathrow airport, and never had our passports stamped there. I also exclude Canada because, well, Canada is my next-door neighbor. Also, Canadians are so much like Americans, that we are almost one and the same. I know this statement will make some people in the Great White North cringe, but it's basically true. I'm not talking politics here. I'm talking about the people. We look alike, talk alike, eat the same foods, buy the same products, and share similar values and culture. So Canada does not really count as an international destination either.

After clearing customs, which was not nearly as bad as I had been expecting, we entered the main lobby of the airport where I had arranged to have a private driver meet us. Having done research online, I discovered that it was actually cheaper to hire a driver to take us to our hotel than to pay for a taxi. Thinking in my mind that a smartly dressed gentleman in a chauffeur uniform named Jeeves would be standing alone waiting for us, I was surprised instead to see an entire crowd of animated and noisy Turks standing before me with dozens of signs being held aloft, all with different names on them. Scanning the men and women standing there, I finally spotted a young dark-haired gentleman holding up a sign that had my last name scrawled on it. I approached him. He indicated to me with a series of rapid hand gestures that I should stand behind him, since he was still waiting for a few more arriving passengers to appear. I patiently stood next to a middle-aged Italian businessman, whose last name had been written above mine on the placard. In what little English he knew, the Italian told me that the young man was not our driver, and that our car had not yet arrived at the airport. After a very long, warm and uncomfortably humid wait standing with our luggage by our side, the Italian man was finally led away, presumably on to his air-conditioned hotel. John and I still stood there; sweat staining our armpits, wondering what kind of predicament had we gotten ourselves into. Any attempt at talking with the card bearer was pointless since he did not understand one word of English. Finally, another young Turkish gentleman led John and I outside to the curb, where we waited some more. Then after talking on his cell phone, he took us across the street to a parking garage. There, we were placed in a large German van, but were then quickly taken out of it, and returned back to the curb in front of the airport. This

situation was almost comical. Again, we were taken across the street back into the parking garage. This time, we were shoehorned into a four-door sedan. Praise be to the travel gods!! It was our car.



Sirkeci Train Station

Our driver wasted no time taking us from the airport into the old section of downtown Istanbul. We literally raced down the highway along the Sea of Marmara, passing through the massive and ancient walls of old Constantinople. These very impressive walls were initially built by Constantine the Great in the early third century A.D. and were later expanded by Theodosius II in the early fourth century. They stretch thirteen miles from the Sea of Marmara on our right, to the Golden Horn to the north. The Golden Horn is the port of the city, and is connected to the Bosphorus, that narrow strait of water that leads up to the Black Sea. For 1000 years, these walls kept invaders out and Constantinople/Istanbul safe, but today, traffic zipping along Kennedy Boulevard barely notices them. Our driver turned off the highway near a seafood restaurant, and proceeded quickly up a hill into the old city. I suppose the term "white-knuckled ride" would be appropriate here. As we careened along the narrow and twisty back streets of Istanbul, cars would suddenly pull out in front of us as if we did not exist. Pedestrians, not to be outdone, would likewise dart across the street, without even considering the several thousand pounds of automotive fury that was our sedan bearing

Jeff Steele

down on them. It was as if we were in some crazy video game come to life! There were times during this ride that I truly believed



Along the Golden Horn of Istanbul

in miracles. There is no other rational way to explain how our driver rapidly squeezed between the many parked vehicles on those tiny, cobblestone streets without any metal being scratched, creased, or crumpled into unrecognizable shapes. John, a former parcel delivery driver in downtown Detroit was turning green as he clutched the seat in front of him. I just trusted that our driver knew what he was doing, and tried to enjoy the ride, much as one would on a rickety old roller coaster.

Closing my eyes to avoid having to witness a street vendor come crashing through our windshield, I instead pondered the history of this mega-city of some 13 to 15 million souls. I have read some accounts that speculate that Turkey's largest urban area may actually exceed twenty million!! These numbers astonish me as the entire Detroit metropolitan area that I call home is comprised of only slightly less than four million people at best. Istanbul is one massive city! There have been people living in what is now Istanbul for several thousand years, the first settlements stretching way back to the Neolithic Age. But in historic times, Greeks first settled this area in 667 B.C. from the city of Megara, just outside of Athens. Their king, a man named Byzas, from whom the new town received its name, Byzantium, led these colonists. Despite a strategic location on the water route between the Aegean and the

Black Sea, Byzantium never amounted to very much at first. It wasn't until much, much later, when the Roman Empire began to unravel, that the first Christian emperor, Constantine, chose the little town to be his new capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. Afterwards, Byzantium became known as Constantinople in his honor. While off to the west, Rome succumbed to barbarian invasions and was reduced to nothing more than a ruin-filled backwater, inhabited mainly by the Pope and a bunch of goats, Constantinople flourished and became the center of Orthodox Christendom. The Byzantine Empire (as it became known)...



A WORD ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Though inspired by actual experiences during the journey to Turkey and Greece, most images within this book were created from the imagination of the author and are not intended to be a faithful reproduction of actual places, people (living or dead), or events, unless otherwise noted. Any actual similarities are coincidental and unintentional. No animals, either real or mythological, were harmed in the making of these drawings...unless you count the satyr that was run over outside of Mycenae. But, that was a genuine accident. Really. He darted out into the road before the bus driver could react!

Note: You may view and order high-resolution, color images online for many of the drawings in this book by visiting CelebrateGreece.com.



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