Student Dispatch: A Note from Istanbul

Coming to Istanbul is always a special experience, even if it is not the first time you’ve set foot in this former capital of three empires. The city is now estimated to have a population of over 15 million people. It has a thriving economy, as well as a vibrant cultural life with many faces, both Asian and European, each one having multiple districts hosting very different cultures and life styles: from the ultra-modern Istinye neighborhood to the traditionalistic Fatih District.

The two months of intensive language training were obviously not enough to see everything that Istanbul holds, but we did get a glimpse of what this magical city is all about. The program included four to five hours of Turkish language instruction and lab each day, with plenty of homework, as well as regular screenings of Turkish movies each Monday afternoon. There were many things that had the potential to distract students from their studies, among which, the fact that Boğaziçi (Bosphorus) University has one of the most beautiful and picturesque campuses in the world, directly overseeing the Bosphorus. Perhaps the most distracting, and actually painful, thing was the extremely hot weather combined with high levels of humidity, literally making you melt while trying to reach the classroom, follow lectures, learn hundreds of new words, and do grammar exercises. The Monday Turkish film screenings were a nice break from this routine, as the hall where most movies were shown was one of the few places on campus to have a working A.C.

I also thought that all the movies had been picked with a lot of taste, and showed different aspects of Turkish culture: some absolutely hilarious, others covering historical events and carrying deep spiritual messages.

In addition, the program included cultural trips to different parts of the city, like the trip to the Fatih District of Istanbul, a place where one gets the feeling that time has stopped, and that in a way, little has changed since the times of the Ottoman Empire. Alongside its numerous cultural monuments, such as old mosques, churches, and religious and secular schools that relate to the various religious and ethnic communities who lived in the Ottoman Empire, one can sense the traditionalist spirit of the people who live in this district. A significant portion of the population in the Fatih district, both men and women, dress in a fashion reminiscent of the Islamic empire that ruled most of the Mediterranean in the times of Süleyman the Magnificent.

During the first day of classes, one of our professors had remarked that it is very often the case that their assistants end up becoming our best friends. This was definitely the case with Büşra and Seda who assisted the professors for the advanced level class, as well as many of their friends and fellow assistants. It was Seda’s and Büşra’s idea to organize a trip to Eyüp outside of the official program. Eyüp is another municipality of Istanbul with a very distinct character.

Ramadan, an event that changes the character of the metropolitan by bringing it closer to its cultural and religious traditions, had started a couple of weeks prior to that. Besides hosting one of Istanbul’s most remarkable monuments, the Eyüp Sultan Mosque, this area traditionally becomes particularly vibrant during the long nights of feasting after
the Iftar (the breaking of fast during Ramadan). Crowds of families, friends, and company get together to drink tea, eat, and have fun after the long days of fasting in patience. Quite a few classmates and I had a marvelous time exploring this beautiful area of Istanbul during such a special time. I believe this is the first time I had the chance to understand and fully experience what stands behind the expression Ramadan'ın keyfi (‘the good times of Ramadan’).

The sea is an essential part of the city’s vibrant life. Many people commute between the Asian and European parts of Istanbul. Usually the reason for this is the more affordable housing on the Asian side. While this can be time-consuming, it is also a beautiful experience, especially in the hot summer months. There is no place as refreshing and beautiful as the Bosphorus when the rest of the city is troubled by traffic and burning heat. While traffic is actually a serious concern for the fast-growing metropolis, it is comforting that one can ride one of the “Marine buses” every day, to and from work at the price of a regular bus trip. This is also the case if one decides to embark on visiting one of the Prince’s Islands.

The intensive summer course on a FLAS fellowship was a wonderful experience that helped me strengthen and further develop not only my prior knowledge of the language, but also better understand the culture from which this language springs. Two months are not enough to explore fully such a city as Istanbul, but I am certainly looking forward to seeing more of its many faces and understanding it better as I embark on a full year of academic study on a Boren Fellowship.

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