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SATURDAY, AUGUST 20, 2022

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EUROPE

The hidden beauty of Cappadocia

This region in Turkey has an underground side, carved into the rockscape

LILY HEISE
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

As our plane nears Nevsehir, a 90-minute flight from Istanbul, I begin noticing a change in scenery. Even at 30,000 feet, the view from my window gives me the impression we're landing on another planet, not central Türkiye (Turkey). The next day I expect to have an even clearer aerial perspective of Cappadocia's otherworldly landscape. I plan to join the thousands who travel here annually to go hot-air ballooning, and I'm dying with anticipation.

Starting 15 to 20 million years ago, and most recently around 7,200 B.C.E., volcanic eruptions cast clouds of ash over the Cappadocian hills and plains. This ash lithified into tuff, a soft stone that has since been shaped by erosion into fantastical rock formations, varying from craggy mounds to slender pillars with conical tops, known as fairy chimneys.

Viewing these formations by hot-air balloon has become a popular pursuit in recent years, courtesy of their Instagrammable appeal. After my trip was booked, I developed a mild obsession with images of the colourful balloons, which depart at dawn every morning.

Well, not every morning. What many visitors don't realize is that wind conditions can prevent flights as often as 30 per cent of the year. A thick layer of gloom — almost as dense as the tuff coating Cappadocia — descends upon our group when we learn our date has coincided with unlucky weather.

In our minibus, our guide, archaeologist Yunus Özdemir, attempts to brighten our spirits with an updated itinerary and new activities. "Exploring Istanbul, Ephesus and the Turkish coast is always amazing; however, Cappadocia is still one of the best places to examine and understand the local culture of our country," he assures us.

Seeing the volcanic formations from the sky is unique, but the lives, art and heritage created within them — yes, *within* — is what makes them culturally and historically very rich, he adds.

"Cappadocia's stone is too soft for building homes," Özdemir continues. "So early inhabitants found that the easiest way to create dwellings was to carve into the rock. The stable temperature of the caves also provided natural air conditioning from the scorching summer sun, and ideal conditions for storing wine, cereals, fruit and vegetables."

The many civilizations that have inhabited Central Türkiye over the millennia — the Hittites, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs and Ottomans — all created caves. And we're not talking about a mere handful of caverns. From 5,000 to just 50 years ago, 200 cities and countless churches, monasteries and warehouses were carved into Cappadocia's rock formations and into its tuffaceous depths.

Our first opportunity to see the scope of this cave heritage is at the edge of the 100-square-kilometre Göreme Historical National Park, the viewpoint overlooking Pigeon Valley. Our eyes journey across the windswept ravine, a jagged path that ends at Uçhisar Castle. Carved into a 60-metre-high rocky outcrop, the whimsical citadel is pocked with scores of black openings, the former residences of approximately 1,000 people.

Arriving in Uçhisar, we amble through its narrow lanes, marveling at the troglodyte town's ingenuity. We savour the astonishing vista, along with some refined contemporary Cappadocian cuisine at Laïa, the stylish restaurant at the Museum Hotel.

Well sated, we push on to the Göreme Open Air Museum. Built from the 10th to 12th centuries by Cappadocia's Greek Christians, the cave monastery is an essential stop. As we duck into the first seemingly banal cavern, our jaws drop at the elaborately frescoed chapel, entirely covered in Byzantine saints and biblical scenes. In addition to the wonderfully preserved rock-cut churches, we visit living quarters and communal kitchens, venues il-



Turkey's Cappadocia region is famous for hot-air balloons floating over an otherworldly landscape.

BEN STEVENS
GETTY IMAGES



LILY HEISE

The exterior face of a cave church.

lustrating the daily life of this medieval monastic community.

We too experience a touch of cave living at the Kayakapi Premium Cave Hotel. Opened in 2013, it was created by the local Dinler family, who wanted to save the area's heritage of cave residences. The boutique hotel's 44 cave rooms and suites, some with private pools and hammams, bear the names of their previous owners and display archeological finds unearthed during the restorations. It also hosts an elegant Turkish spa, an infinity pool and the restaurant Revithia, where we feast on an eight-course Cappadocian tasting menu paired with regional wines.

The next day, the hotel's hillside location allows me to take in the peacefulness reigning over the plains below, permeated by the early morning's gentle glow. We won't be seeing this for long: Our first stop will take us deep beneath the tuff to Kaymakli, one of Cappadocia's best preserved underground cities. Four of its eight levels are open to the public.

"The caverns housed residents and their goods, but also kept them safe during invasions," Özdemir tells us after we limbo under a low doorway into one of Kaymakli's subterranean rooms. "Not only were the entrances of these underground cities hard to locate, but invaders would have trouble navigating their way through its maze of tunnels and caverns, where residents had the upper hand."

As Özdemir guides us through the labyrinth, he shows us how the clever underground dwellers had large stone doors ready to blockade passages in case of attack, and how similar massive slabs were used to press grapes.

Our exploration of Cappadocia is capped off at Pasabağı. An open-air museum, it's renowned for its fairy chimneys, the very rock formations those famous hot-air balloons float over. As I gaze up, and not down, at the breathtaking and culturally significant structures, I can't help but wonder if the winds of fate had actually blown in our favour.

The grounded balloons gave us the chance to truly immerse ourselves in this one-of-a-kind destination, and not simply breeze over it. Plus, I'd only skimmed the surface of its rich layers of tuff and history. I'd have to come back — and my return trip might, or might not, include a balloon ride.



A view of Uçhisar Castle, a whimsical citadel carved into a 60-metre-high rocky outcrop.

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