

# Cappadocia:

## A land with mysterious rocks

By **DOMINICK MERLE**

GOREME, Turkey---If space travel isn't in the cards this year, try here. This is probably as close as it gets to the lunar surface, an "unearthly" setting worthy of anything that Spielberg or Lucas ever brought to the big screen.

We are in central Turkey, in the region known as Cappadocia where Mother Nature has created a vast wonderland of conical rock towers that form a bizarre skyline. Some look like huge tents, others like space rockets about to be launched and still others like Whirling Dervishes, those mysterious dancers who spin themselves like tops for up to an hour and who actually come from this region.

It took millions of years to form this spectacular landscape, and it all began with three volcanoes perched atop the three highest peaks. Numerous eruptions as far back as 10 million years ago covered the area in ashes, which hardened into a soft, porous rock called tuff. Over the centuries, high wind and water eroded the tuff into the free-standing cones, domes and other geological freaks of nature that we see today.

Perhaps the most outlandish formations appear where boulders seem to balance precariously at the very tips of the rocks. The hat-like boulders, along with adding yet another distinct touch to this strange land, also protect the soft platforms underneath from erosion. Cappadocian legend has it that fairies or angels carried the huge rocks to the top and these structures are now commonly referred to as "fairy chimneys."

But it is fact, not legend, that the first settlers, among them the Hittites, created shelter out of these formations by hollowing out the soft rock, and the Byzantine Christians were using them as hideouts back in the 1st Century when they were fleeing the Romans.



Unusual three-rock formation in Cappadocia  
المدائن الثلاث، تشكيلة صخرية غريبة في كابادوقيا

The Christians also carved a large religious community out of these rocks and it is perhaps the crown jewel of this amazing land. It is known locally as the open-air museum and is situated on the outskirts of the village of Goreme. There were once 356

churches in this monastic complex, one for each day of the year. About 30 are still open to the public. It is a staggering sight to come upon from the narrow roadway, and takes the better part of a day to explore.

In addition to the natural oddities on the surface of Cappadocia, what lies beneath the soil is almost as amazing, although man made. A few miles away from the open-air museum, where the land flattens, more than 30 cities have been discovered that were dug directly out of the stony underground. The Hittites are believed to have dug the first levels, while the Byzantines once again added the lower levels as hiding places during times of war. The underground cities contained chapels, schools, communal kitchens, wineries, wells and ventilation shafts, which were often sealed when discovered by invading armies.

Getting to this part of the world is not as difficult as it may seem, and because of current world tensions, prices are a fraction of what they should be. There are certainly many tour operators offering Istanbul and Cappadocia itineraries, but for the somewhat adventurous and budget minded, I would recommend securing your best airfare to Istanbul, take a bus (they're inexpensive and clean) to the capital of Ankara, rent a car and strike out for Cappadocia, about a four-hour drive. The roads are good and well-posted, most residents speak enough English to help you out, and you're free to stop and go as you choose. ➔

## City Tourism



Knitting Grandma in Cappadocia

الجدّة تحوك في كبادوقيا

Better yet, you're also able to shop around for a place to stay because lodging is definitely not a problem. At one hotel in Goreme, we were literally the only two guests, while there were four employees at the front desk alone. We spent a second night at one of the many rock fortresses that had been converted into a hotel, our "cave room" equipped with a Jacuzzi and satellite TV. Again, we were the only guests. With a little negotiating, four-star hotels can be less than \$25 a person including breakfast. Money is immaterial, anyway. From the moment you hit these shores, you're a multimillionaire. The rate of exchange while we were there was about 1.4 million Turkish lira to \$1. Lunch usually sets you back about 3 million.

We stayed in Goreme in the heart of the Cappadocia region. It's a picturesque village, but without the car, I would have had this trapped-in feeling, forever pacing the same wall-to-wall tourist shops and restaurants in roughly a two-block area. So during our time in Cappadocia we were able to drive to the nearby villages of Zelve, Avanos and Urgup for a nice change of pace. Each had its own charm, but we preferred Avanos because it looked more real than touristy.

There are still more than 1,000 so-called "cave dwellers" in Cappadocia today, tourism officials are quick to point out, but the fact is the vast majority are shop owners

who sell rugs and trinkets by day and retreat to their real homes after dark. Then there are the large number of rock caves converted into hotels, some 25 of them in Goreme alone. Stretching it a point, I also could qualify as a Cappadocian cave-dweller for a night. But you would have to look long and hard to actually find some fulltime "dwellers" who would undoubtedly be plunked in front of their satellite TV watching a Spielberg movie. When I first visited Turkey some 20-odd years ago, I considered it a surprising find on the world tourist stage. That trip took me from Istanbul down the Aegean Coast to the fabled Roman ruins at Ephesus. My second trip six years ago was on the Mediterranean Coast to the seaside resort of Antalya. Again, I wondered why most people only used Turkey as an overnight or two instead of a destination. Istanbul alone, that magnificent city that straddles both Europe and Asia, can fascinate you for a week or more. But it's time to move on. Besides, I've still got a few million lira to unload before I leave.

(Dominick Merle is a travel writer and consultant based in Montreal)



### IF YOU GO...

We flew Turkish Airlines from New York to Istanbul, boarded a commercial bus to Ankara and rented a car for our Cappadocia tour. We stayed at the Turist Hotel and Cave Legend Hotel in Goreme.

Visas are required for North Americans and can be obtained either at the nearest Turkish Embassy or Consulate, or on arrival in Turkey.

Either way, the fee is \$45. A service charge of 15 percent is included in most hotel and restaurant bills, but an additional 10 percent is customary for good service. For further information, contact the Turkish Tourist Office at 821 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, ny@tourismturkey.org; or at 360 Albert St., Suite 801, Ottawa, Ontario K1R 7X7, info@turkishtourism.ca, or try the website [www.tourismturkey.org](http://www.tourismturkey.org) ■