

A photograph of two men, Burt and Evelyn Johnson, smiling and holding large, light-colored, textured objects that look like sea shells or coral. The man on the left is wearing a blue and white striped shirt and has a purple marker in his pocket. The man on the right is wearing a red shirt. The background is a light-colored wall with some wooden panels.

MindStormPhoto Turkey 2016 pt 3

Burt and Evelyn Johnson

Table Of Contents

Turkey 23 – Safety and Security	2
Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul	7

Turkey 23 – Safety and Security

There were also large sections of the bazaar dedicated to dry goods of all types. Designer blue jeans (meaning pre-ripped...) for 25TL (about \$8 US), blouses for 5TL (less than \$2US), etc. Women gathered around vendors, sizing up clothing items (no dressing rooms), picking up and feeling plates, tossing linen and towels to test their weight. There was clearly a LOT of merchandise sold, and you could sense a buying frenzy whenever new stock were brought in. We saw many women with wheeled carts and large shopping bags filled with goods all day long.

Turkey 23 – Safety and Security



Mehmet (the guide for the photo tour we took back in April) says that every neighborhood has a local bazaar, but that this is the largest one in Istanbul. When we visited the [Grand Bazaar in April](#), we found most of the shoppers were tourists, with vendors constantly hawking their wares, trying to get every passing tourist to come into their shop.

Turkey 23 – Safety and Security

The vibe here was very different. There were only a few hawkers, and those were generally busy slinging their goods into bags while singing out their pitch to attract others. Even more important though -- we were the only tourists in the entire place. It was packed with people actively buying, but everyone apparently lived in the area, buying goods they would take home and use that night. This was clearly a successful, active market used by locals, rather than a tourist trap.

Whenever our cameras lifted, there was always a vendor shouting out "*take picture of me!*" This was another place where the people were universally friendly and inviting. It was quite a treat to take a photograph, and have that person then say "*sağol*" (Turkish for "*thank you*") and hand us free samples of their food to show their appreciation.

Turkey 23 – Safety and Security



I just had to add one more block of the friendly faces we saw today. Turkey will always stay in our memory as one of the most friendly countries we have ever visited.

Turkey 23 – Safety and Security



[NOTE: This post was written before the bombing at the Istanbul airport. The contents here still applies though. Such mass attacks have occurred in Belgium, Paris, London, and... Orlando. The world seems to be rapidly going crazy. Anytime you choose to leave your home, you at risk of an attack... or simply being hit by a car. We choose to continue to live and enjoy life, and not worry about things we cannot control.]

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul

That said, the death rate (from all causes) is much lower in Turkey (5.1 per 1000) than it is in the US (8 per 1000). We will be returning to this part of the world again in 2017.]

Now that we have completed 11 weeks in Turkey, I want to address one concern that came up repeatedly. Not with anyone in Turkey, but with friends and family back home. Whenever we said we were going to Turkey, we could count on the response being along the lines of "*How can you go there? It is so dangerous!*"

Well, not really...

There have been some attacks in the Southeast part of the country, with ISIS crossing the border from Syria, and some bombs set off in a few crowded tourist areas before we came. (The incidents are occurring randomly around the world whether in Brussels, Paris, etc. these days, and not just in the middle East.) Almost all casualties on the Turkey side on the border involve military personnel, and we were never closer than 600 km from the trouble. Never a threat to us.

I have often said how safe we feel in Cuenca, Ecuador. Istanbul felt far safer than Cuenca. In Ecuador, we have the constant worry about petty crime. Nothing big. Murder and assault are rare, but pick-pockets, or drive-by snatches (e.g., a motorcyclist grabbing a phone or purse) are quite common. Leave a phone on a table while going to the counter, and you will probably find it gone when you return.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul

Not so in Istanbul. Many people casually carry their phones in their hands while walking, yet I never saw or heard of any phone thefts. People leave items on a table while walking away frequently, and their stuff is always there when they return. Our photo tour leader told us many times not to worry about leaving our camera bags unattended, since people in the villages all knew everyone. People are required to leave their shoes outside when entering a mosque. With dozens of pairs of shoes outside every mosque, I never heard of anyone having a pair stolen. At the Turkish Cyprus airport, we were told to just leave our luggage outside while we went in for rental car paperwork. "*Don't worry. Nobody will steal it in Turkey or here*" we were assured. Yep, no problem when we returned for it later.

In Ecuador, as in the US, when you enter a store carrying a bag, you are required to leave it with security at the entrance. Bags are often inspected upon leaving, to be sure you didn't steal anything. Not so in Istanbul. Just walk in with the bag from another store. When you check out, nobody looks twice at the bag you didn't put on the counter. It is just assumed that if you got something inside the store, you will pay for it on the way out.

Some small neighborhood stores will even let locals have an account, and goods purchased to be paid for later.

In Ecuador and the US, most larger stores have security cameras, where a guard is in a room scanning the crowd for shoplifters. Not in Istanbul. I never saw a camera security camera anywhere, and never had a store employee follow me to be sure nothing was stolen. Again, they just assume you are honest, plus the punishment for getting caught is quite extreme, up to 20 years in prison (one minor received a [sentence of 7 years](#) for stealing a pack of cigarettes).

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul

We are often warned that crowds are a playground for pickpockets in Cuenca. We never felt the slightest bit threatened in Istanbul, even in the largest crowds. We lost the habit of checking our pockets after someone bumped into us -- because in Istanbul it is simply the large number of people who bump into you, and not someone trying to get into your pocket.

All of this is with very few visible police. In Cuenca (at least in Centro, where we live), it is unusual to go more than a couple blocks before seeing one or more policemen. They are there to discourage crime, and they do a pretty good job of it. Once again, not in Istanbul though. Large parks with hundreds of people will usually have one police car parked somewhere in the vicinity, with two to four police inside. We averaged walking 6 miles per day in Istanbul, yet there were several days that we never saw a single police officer.

Istanbul does have obvious concerns about terrorism. That is visible in only two instances though, both of which are unique to Istanbul in our recent travels. Every group of turnstiles entering into the metro has one security guard with a "*magic wand*" that he passes over all backpacks and luggage, to detect explosives. Also, you must pass through an X-ray and metal detector going into any shopping mall, plus go through double security lines at the airports before going through passport control. Both are done very efficiently though, and have almost no impact on traffic flow (unlike TSA...). And, you cannot get a SIM card unless you are a resident, as cell phones have been used as remote triggers.

Overall, we have never felt any safer in all our travels than we have in Istanbul, and Turkey in general. Newspapers tend to distort and generalize, making problems seem much worse than they are. We could point to many examples of situations we have actually been involved in, where we saw that up close. It is true for the problems in Turkey too. In summary, we highly recommend people come and enjoy one of the most friendly countries we have visited.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



How can you be afraid when broad smiles greet you at every turn?

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul

Now that our latest vacation is complete, this is a summary of what it feels like to live in Istanbul, even if only for a couple of months. First, mosques are everywhere and a part of daily life, even for those who are not practicing Muslims. There are 2,995 active mosques here, and every one of them has loudspeakers on their minarets, so the call to prayer can be heard 5 times a day throughout the city.

Those calls to prayer create noise at those times. The rest of the time though, the city is surprisingly quiet. Not "*out in the countryside*" quiet, but much more so than a city of this size would suggest -- and *much* quieter than Cuenca. In 11 weeks in both Turkey and Cyprus, we never heard a single car alarm (yeah!) nor house alarm, which has become an almost constant background noise in Ecuador. In Cuenca, we have church bells that ring at multiple times before sunrise, and hear rockets that are fired off frequently. None of that annoying noise exists in Turkey, which balances out the sound of the calls for prayer from the mosques from morning to night.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



The skyline of Istanbul is that of a modern city, punctuated by frequent mosques. There are very old structures, dating back more than 1000 years, sitting right next to modern buildings put up in the last couple years. Istanbul is quite picturesque, and a real treat for photographers.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul

Construction is going on everywhere, including a new 5-level apartment building right across the street from where we were staying. There are more than a dozen new apartments going up within a few blocks of where we have been staying. Many mosques and museums are also being renovated as part of the construction boom. We could hear sounds of drills and hammering 7 days a week. For each building under construction though, we only saw a few workers each day, and it seemed like it would take a long time to finish at that rate.

Istanbul is a city of 15 Million people, concentrated into an area of 2000 sq miles. Compare that to Ecuador, where the entire country also has 15 Million people, but spread out over an area of 110,000 square miles. Ecuador has 50 times more land with the same number of people in Istanbul itself.

With that many people in such a small space, crowds are a given. The streets are clogged pretty much 24/7, and there have literally been times when we walked a couple miles faster than the traffic next to us. Very long commute times appear to be common, and we have been told that 1-1/2 hours each way to work is not unusual.

On the Asian side (where we were staying), very few people use the sidewalk. Instead, everyone walks in the street, even though cars are rushing past inches away on narrow streets with cars parked on both sides. People complain about the sidewalks in Cuenca, but they pale next to Istanbul, where the sidewalks are both uneven and usually completely blocked from cars or equipment every couple hundred feet.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



We have found that most people in the world are proud of their home country. That is also true in Turkey, where flags are hung from numerous apartment windows and most parapets.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



We never really got a solid answer as to why there are so many pharmacies in Istanbul. There will be one every few blocks, and one corner near us has four pharmacies -- one on each corner of the intersection.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul

There is a dizzying array of transportation means to get around town. Modern subways and buses criss-cross the city, with the stations nearest us opened in 2012. We used every form of public transportation shown above! And, although the ferries take longer to get from the Asian side to the European side, the views from the ferries were stupendous and such a pleasant way to commute. All the transportation systems were efficient, and waiting times were so short, that it became fun to use the discounted *Istanbulkart* that was accepted by most of the transportation forms. Imagine walking to the station, traveling by underground subway, riding across the Phosphorous straits on a ferry, taking the T-1 tram across the city, riding a mini-bus to another part of town, traveling up a hill on a funicular, then taking the Marmaray train under the Phosphorous all in one day.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



And, when you're riding on a ferry, you cannot believe how many different types and sizes and boats are crossing the Bosphorus simultaneously. There were so many cruise ships, dozens of lines of ferries of all sizes and shapes, private cruisers, pilot boats, trash removing boats, cargo ships, speed boats, coast guard patrol boats, fire boats, boat taxis, party boats, row boats, barges, all going in different directions at high speeds, we were shocked we didn't see any incidents.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



Cats are everywhere in Istanbul, including hanging out in the ancient ruins. Whereas, Cuenca is a dog-friendly city. Even those that do not own a cat themselves will often care for feral cats in the neighborhood. It is common to see a cat sitting at the entrance to every restaurant, and common to see platforms where dozens of cats hang out and are fed by some elderly local.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



Turkish Delight is the national candy here. When buying some, the trick is to find a store with high turnover, so the Delight is fresh.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



American fast food restaurants are still relatively rare, but they are there.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



Pretty much everywhere we traveled, there was someone taking a selfie. Even though the "smart phone" cum camera and the selfie stick are not new, this is the first time we have seen it being so prevalent.

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul



Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul

And of course, the people. I have said this before, but need to say it here again at the end -- the Turkish people are the friendliest we have ever met in our wide travels. We traveled with a camera almost every day, and came back with 19,913 images, most of which included one or more persons. I can count on both hands the number of times someone indicated they did not want their photo taken. The more common response was a big smile, followed by a "*thank you*" for taking their photo. When we got lost, people would take time to personally walk us to the bus stop across the street, talk to the driver in Turkish to take us to our destination, or when we were trying to figure out which ferry to take, people would go out of their way to point out the correct stop.

The one negative for us is the language. The Turkish language is much different than English, or any Romance language, and the written language does not seem to have any relationship to the spoken language (I am sure it would seem closer if we really understood their alphabet). When listening to someone speak, I am not even able to tell where the words are in the sentence, let alone have any idea of what is being said. It was common for us to practice a word over and over, then say it to a local, only to be met with a look of bafflement. When it was finally understood what was meant, they would repeat the word -- and I swear it sounded just like I said it! (Of course, that was true our first months in Ecuador too...).

At one mosque, I met two university students who were studying English, and who wanted to talk to a native English speaker. We have become "pen pals" for the past several weeks. At one point, she asked "*Why don't you learn Turkish? It is such an easy language. Not difficult like English!*" I smiled, and pointed out that she had learned Turkish as a baby, and thus now considered it easy, just as I had learned English the same way. It was interesting that she had never thought of that, and had little concept of learning as a child vs learning as an adult (let alone a retired adult...).

Turkey 24 – Life in Istanbul

Turkey is a unique country in many ways. It's mind bogging to know that ancient civilizations evolved here, and you can still see both the old and the new together in one location. I think you will be surprised at what you find if you come and visit.