

## Exploding Postal Scales September 25 – October 13 The Planet of Turkey, with a Dash of Greece

Thirty-six hours after leaving Pompeii we found ourselves sitting in the main cabin of an all-night ferry leaving Athens, Greece. An elderly woman about 200 pounds overweight went up and down the aisles singing at the top of her very capable lungs. No one paid her any attention, because she seemed the most sane person in the crowd. This was our first experience with Greeks in large numbers. I was reminded of a scene from the movie, “My Big, Fat Greek Wedding,” except we were missing the guy with the bottle of Windex.

Pulling out of port we had to leave behind any notion that we could ever blend in again. Our northern-European skin and hair betrayed the fact that we were not members of the surrounding clan; two little girls, ages about four and five, stood staring at me through wide and unblinking eyes, mouths agape so that I could scrutinize their dental work.

Although we could no longer *blend* in, *fitting* in seemed within reach – at least in the midst of a ship full of Greeks. Surveying the scene before me, I could not help but sit back and fully relax for the first time in ages, realizing that my noisy children and our tendency to spread our belongings out for all to trample on would not raise an eyebrow. Throughout Europe we had felt like water buffalo stampeding through a delicately constructed society. For example, on a train in Italy Jordan broke the silence when he returned from the W.C. by announcing loudly to the entire car that the restroom didn’t have toilet paper, describing in all its detail what that implied.

But no worries here; people were setting up little fiefdoms throughout the cabin with blankets on the floor, sleeping bags, pillows, boom-boxes and all manner of stuff. Each fiefdom had its own crowd and they all seemed to be making political ties with the neighboring tribes. We were hoping to be able to sleep there on the deck, but it was clear that the tribes were settling in for an all-night party.

This wasn't some college student's coming-of-age drinking party, either. With each tribe having its share of kidlets, aunts, uncles, and cousins, this was an affair the entire family could enjoy. While nobody was roasting a lamb on board, if I didn't know better all the maternal types had brought a potluck dish to share. We saw no evidence of a bundt cake.

We were dumped unceremoniously on a Greek island I had never heard of before at 3:30 in the morning. Rumor had it that at dawn we could catch another boat to Çesme on the mainland of Turkey, 30 or so minutes away.

Ordering a round of hot-chocolates gave us, I assumed, the privilege of sitting at a table in an outside café overlooking the pier; we waited to see what might happen when the sun rose. I thought for sure that the kids would fold their arms on the table, put their heads down and collapse, but they both put their books in front of themselves and nursed their hot drinks.

Thus composed, I had a few hours to contemplate what it meant to leave easy, predictable Europe. We had started our twelve-month around-the-world trip in Europe for a reason: to get into the rhythm of traveling in a place where it is easy to find a rhythm. Ahead of us were a few weeks in Turkey, then the Arabian Peninsula, Africa, East Asia and so on. I had of course reviewed the current events on where we were

heading on CNN.com and various other news sources. It seemed beyond dispute that folks in most of the Middle East were not too keen on Americans at the moment. There was the wretched war going on in neighboring Iraq and as hard as I tried to wish it away, every morning when I woke up it was still there.

Between scenes from the movie “Midnight Express” flashing through my mind and news stories filling up my inbox from well-meaning friends, I was not feeling completely confident about setting foot in this new land. We were on this trip to get past the stereotypes and prejudices to “know” and “experience.” But talking the talk is one thing; we now had to walk the walk. I was nervous.

While lost in my thoughts, another ferry arrived and with it, a young Turkish woman named Dilara. She asked if she could sit at our table, explaining that it was, of course, rather dangerous to sit alone, outside in the dark, in “the West.”

“Of course!” September answered, as she pulled a chair up to our table. “Can I offer you something to drink?”

My wife excels at extracting life stories from the unsuspecting. Maybe it was because being lost in their books, Katrina and Jordan never entered or otherwise aborted the conversation. Or, maybe it was just because I was too tired to take one of my normal “wireless walks” where I wander off looking for an unsecure Wi-Fi network. Whatever the reason, I was able to quietly observe an artist practice her craft and I would grunt approval or disapproval when prompted by the Lean, Mean, Talking Machine.

Dilara was returning home to Turkey with only hours to spare before her visa to study in the E.U. expired. “Some of my family disapproves of my studying away from home,” she explained. “But I want a career in which I can meet lots of different people

and do something important.” She explained that she loved studying in Europe, even though she bristled at the idea of the upcoming “ascension” talks for Turkey to be admitted into the E.U. She was nervous that she would not make it to Turkey that very day as that would complicate matters for her visa.

“When does the Çesme ferry leave?” she asked.

“No idea.” September replied. “The good folks on our ferry gave us a gentle shove down the plank when we asked them that question. We’ve looked, but there is no obvious ferry service, no postings, nothing. The waiter is pretty sure we can find ‘something’ in the morning, though.”

Dilara informed us that she keeps abreast of world events by watching CNN. “I watch it in English to help learn the language better.” Over a period of an hour Dilara gradually approached the subject of life in the U.S. It felt like she was tap dancing around something she wanted to say. Finally, it came out. “Life in America must be... difficult with all the violence.”

That comment caught me off guard, but as usual, I let September do all of the talking for the two of us. I gave September a “one eyebrow raised, one-eyebrow furrowed” look, to let her know to probe deeper.

“You’ve been watching too much CNN,” September replied conversationally; then she shot me a meaningful glance. “A lot of us are guilty of that.”

It was clear that Dilara was proud of her liberal cosmopolitan attitude. She told us that in spite of all the “obvious” dangers, she even planned to visit the U.S. someday. “I’m certain that some parts of the U.S. might be safe,” she explained. “By the way, could you please tell me which parts those might be?”

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Several hours later we found ourselves on Turkish soil. We hadn't even gotten through Customs when a machine gun wielding official at passport control decided that Jordan's blond hair looked too flat and tussled it up. Trying to keep the encounter positive, I said, "Wow, Jordan. A guy with a machine gun touched your hair. Can I touch your hair, too?"

"Dad," Jordan said, "you said personal force-fields didn't get any smaller than six inches."

"I wouldn't worry about it," I said. "Guys carrying machine guns feel like they can get away with anything. It probably won't happen again." Yet, after we had been in Turkey a few days, it was pretty clear Jordan's force field had mutated into a tractor beam.

As we tumbled out of Passport Control, I didn't really know what to expect; this was my first visit to a Muslim country. It was then that I noted September was in shorts.

"You might want to rethink your pant length," I said.

September merely gave a snort of contempt and reminded me what an effective communication tool eye-rolling is.

The pier and passport control in Çesme is a long walk from anywhere. We started to slowly make our way toward what looked like town. Fresh off of the boat and with no local currency it was, of course, time to feed ourselves. I had a hunch the corner shop by the dock would accept my Euros, but I had no idea what the exchange rate was. I selected a few food items and then handed the guy a 20 Euro note and acted as though

this was a perfectly normal transaction. To my relief, he acted the same and handed me a bunch of change.

When I got out of the store, I looked at what the clerk had handed me as change, eager to get an idea what the exchange rate was. To my extreme befuddlement I counted three 5-lira notes, three 1-lira coins, and a one MILLION lira note. Being an engineer, I can only work with two, sometimes three, significant digits. So, as I stood looking at my one million lira note, I wondered why I cared about the simple fives and the ones.

“Check this out.” I handed Jordan the one million lira bill. “They gave me a million dollars.” Over the last several weeks we had been using the word “dollars” to denote the local currency, whatever it happened to be, because at times it seemed like we changed currency types every other day and couldn’t keep track of what they were called.

Jordan eyes bulged to the size of saucers. “COOL! Can I have it?”

What we later found was that Turkey had recently devalued their currency by a factor of one million (!) and that there are both new and old flavors of lira in circulation. The one million lira bill and the one lira coin were equivalent.

The difference between the “new” and the “old” money, however, was lost on Jordan. Over the next few days whenever I got another one (or five) million lira bill, Jordan would hoard it, thinking that the store clerks kept making mistakes. By the time we left Turkey he almost had enough to buy a McDonalds Happy Meal, but to hear him talk about it, Donald Trump had better watch his step.

Çesme is a beach town; in late September Çesme was pleasantly warm and the skies were a brilliant blue and the sun seemed to be brighter than normal. After a day of recovering from the all-night ferry party, we made our way to the beach. It was

pleasantly warm and the lightest piece of clothing I owned was my Bill's Burger Barn shirt.

"I don't believe it! It is little wonder that this shirt was on the clearance rack."

September asked, "S'matter?"

"Oh, it's just this cheap shirt. Now the seam across the shoulder is unraveling. I am throwing it away."

September reached for her needle and thread; she learned long ago that I am a danger to myself with sharp objects. "I can fix that, if you like. It'll only take a minute."

I knew how she hated to sew. "That's OK. I'll save my sewing credits on more worthy causes." And with that, the B<sup>3</sup> shirt was history.

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As we walked to the beach we found the streets lined with vendors of all types. We strolled along, looking for a new sturdy shirt, and a man approached us, "Hello my friend!" he said. "Where are you from?"

"California."

"Really? Me too!"

I eyed my new "friend" with suspicion. Then he said, "We have all types of beautiful hand woven carpets that will compliment your home in California."

I quickly learned that virtually all adult males in Turkey are carpet salesmen, or the brother of a carpet salesman, and they are all from California. Eventually, I started to reply to carpet salesmen that I was from Namibia. Suddenly all the salesmen were from Namibia, too. After only a few days in Turkey I was looking to replace my B<sup>3</sup> shirt with a T-Shirt that stated in bold lettering "No Thanks, I Don't Need a Carpet."

Once at the beach I was pretty stunned to see local women in bikinis. Not that I am complaining, mind you. Talking to no one in particular, I said, “Check out the bikinis!”

“No thanks. Doesn’t do much for me.” September replied.

“No, that’s not what I meant. Well, perhaps a bit. But I would have never guessed I’d see women in bikinis in a Muslim country.”

“Well, I guess there are Muslim countries, and then there are Muslim Countries.”

“Yeah,” I commented, “if it weren’t for the five times daily call to prayer blasted over loudspeakers from every street corner, I might have thought we were in Mexico.”

Of course, I didn’t have a clue what the muezzin, a.k.a. Mr. Singy-Person, was saying during the call to prayer. In fact, he doesn’t *say* anything. The call to pray is a *song*, sung in a bluesy, country-western twang. I speculated that it is really a song about how Mr. Singy-Person lost his job, lost his girlfriend, and has a car rusting on the front lawn. But I didn’t have the nerve to ask the locals what they thought about my hypothesis.

Turkey is a huge country, but with much less transportation infrastructure than Europe. There are no trains that crisscross the country, nor are there little villages around every bend. Distances between towns and regions can be vast and the terrain desolate. Our options for getting around the country were limited to renting a car, taking the bus or flying. When it was time to leave Çesme, we opted for the clean, efficient and last, but not least, ridiculously inexpensive bus network.

Aboard a bus, about three hours outside of Çesme, September turned to me, bursting with something to say. “Your Bill’s Burger Barn shirt wasn’t cheap commie construction. It was *robust* commie construction.”

When September said this, Katrina’s ears perked right up, and she turned to face us, listening intently.

I had no idea what September was talking about. Katrina and September looked as though they had just won the lottery. Relying on one of the most witty retorts in my arsenal I said, “Huh?”

September replied, “Your Bill’s Burger Barn shirt was virtually indestructible. Tightly woven poly-blend fabric, triple stitched seams – the works. It wouldn’t have come unraveled without a little sabotage.” I should have suspected such from the woman who once sewed the flies of my underwear together to remind me to either sit or put the seat down.

“I’m sorry, but I just couldn’t bear to be seen in public with you wearing that shirt.”

I was speechless. I doubt she wanted to unburden herself as much as she wanted a laugh at my expense. I said, “And so you waited until we were well out of the city so I couldn’t retrieve it from the landfill.”

“Something like that.”

Jordan in particular was scandalized to learn that his own mother was capable of such seditious behavior. I said, “Well Jordan, I should have known better. Your mother once donated my *California Superbike School* T-Shirt to a homeless shelter. But she *promised* that she would never throw away any of my shirts again.”

“And I didn’t. *You* threw it away.”

Katrina, not being able to hold back any longer, burst into laughter. This called for more than just soap squished together. Jordan and I started scheming over how to get even with Team Estrogen.

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We pulled into Selçuk, the modern city near ancient Ephesus, and checked into a hostel near the bustling town center. One of the hostel workers decided to make it his mission to get Jordan to smile.

Since arriving in Turkey, Jordan was rapidly learning to avoid every adult he saw. Our intent of giving the kids an appreciation of other cultures was really backfiring in Turkey. Jordan’s blond hair and blue eyes were something of a novelty and he was getting way more attention from well-meaning strangers than he wanted. Initially, we were having some success in getting him to smile as he was being patted on the head and told how cute he was. But by the time we hit Selçuk, we were judging these encounters as successful if Jordan didn’t grimace and clench his fists.

Katrina, being a middle-sized girl in a Muslim society, was largely immune to the little pokes and prods, and did her best to protect her little brother by acting as a human shield. September explained to Jordan, “You’re getting this treatment because they love children here.”

“I don’t like being treated like a little kid!”

I didn’t want Jordan to have bad feelings for those who were trying to be friendly, but a kid from the U.S. is used to having strangers keeping themselves at arm’s length.

Ephesus had been one of the greatest cities of Asia occupied first by the Greeks and then the Romans. It was abandoned in the sixth century because the harbor silted up, rendering its port useless. Ancient Ephesus was best known for the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. When *we* went to see the Temple of Artemis it was just a stone column sticking up out of the ground, pieces of it having been carted off to the British Museum some decades earlier. Of course when we were at the British Museum the previous June, we naively assumed that this wonder of the Ancient World would still be on location and not relocated to downtown London.

Lucky for us, the amphitheater where Paul the Apostle preached had *not* been relocated to downtown London. The audio guide we rented didn't tell the story of Paul the Apostle. It told the story of local artisans, whose livelihoods depended on making figures and images of the many-breasted Artemis, Goddess of Fertility.

As the story unfolded, we heard about how new-fangled religion was being preached in the city by someone named Paul who claimed to be an Apostle. Paul started to gain many converts and preached that the worship of Artemis was wrong. The local artisans who built the Artemis figurines saw Paul as a threat to their livelihood, as the Temple of Artemis was famous and drew crowds from far away. The artisans incited the crowd at the amphitheater to jeer Paul by chanting "*Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!*" A riot ensued and Paul was obliged to leave.

If only those artisans could have seen 2,000 years into the future, they would have known they could still make a living crafting crosses, crèches and other worshipful stuff.

*Jordan's Journal, October 1*

*Today we went to the ancient city of Ephesus. It has a marble street. It is really slippery when it rains. We played hide-and-seek. I got “gum” flavored ice-cream, except I think it was actually like the tree-sap kind of gum. It was really, really bitter. We hid it in a napkin and threw it away. All of the patting on the head and tickling and poking is getting even worse. I hope the next town we go to isn’t as bad. I want a hat with metal spikes on it.*

We decided to leave Selçuk earlier than planned because the hostel worker who had been repeatedly trying to coerce a smile from Jordan crossed the line, pulling Jordan onto his lap and holding him there against his will. I came through a few minutes later to find Jordan struggling for his freedom and near tears.

I walked over and took Jordan by the hand and said, “We need to go run an errand.” But if we had been in the U.S., I would have called the police on the spot.

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A few hours later we were on a 14-hour overnight bus ride into the interior of the country. We stepped off the bus at 4:00 the morning in the tiny town of Göreme and seemed to have landed on an alien planet. We later found that a few scenes from *Star Wars – A New Hope* were in fact filmed here.

I commented, “Ramadan starts tomorrow.”

September replied, “Your point being?”

“Back home, the terror alert is being raised to orange because unrest is expected during the month.” I paused. “My mom thinks we are nuts being here during Ramadan.”

“What’s Ramadan?” Katrina asked.

“Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. To Muslims, it is a holy month marked by fasting.”

Katrina looked surprised, “Wow. I don’t think I could fast a whole month.”

“When the sun goes down at night people can eat all they want, and when the sun comes up in the morning, the fasting starts. This goes on every day for a full lunar cycle.”

Katrina looked confused, “I don’t get it. You mean people at home are nervous about a bunch of hungry Muslims?”

Göreme is in the heart of the vast Cappadocia region of Turkey. Large towers of rock adorn the landscape. The canyons are riddled with tunnels, caves, and spires of stone. The stone is actually volcanic ash, solidified into soft sandstone that then eroded over eons leaving behind tall, chimney-shaped rock formations. Many homes and dwellings are dug out of the rock, as was our hostel.

Just a few steps from the front door of our hostel, Karim tended his shop, where he sold fruits and vegetables. Karim was frequently sitting outside his shop, and even when he wasn’t, it was impossible to walk by unnoticed. He was very friendly and wanted to know all about our trip, where we had been and where we were going, and how we liked his country. Karim always had a piece of hard candy for each of the kids, and always had a pat on the head or pinch on the cheek for Jordan.

The popular thing to do in the area is to go hiking in and through the weird rock formations. Karim suggested an easy hike from our hostel into Göreme National Park and into “Love Valley.”

Jordan didn't want to go outside the hostel though. I said, "Just put on your baseball hat and sunglasses and come with me. And remember to smile."

Jordan protested, "I already smiled once today!" but he dutifully grabbed his hat and sunglasses as we headed out the door.

Love Valley, we found, is so named because of the three story-high phallics that nature has made out of the sandstone. Looking at the arid landscape from the road I would have guessed that nothing could grow in the area. In spite of the lack of evidence of flowing water, hiking through the little valleys we were quite surprised to find an abundance of wild grapes, apples and such along the floor of the valley where there would be natural run-off. We helped ourselves, supplementing our picnic lunch.

When we returned from our hike, Karim surprised us by sneaking up behind us and goosing Jordan from behind. "Argh!"

Karim held out two pieces of hard candy, one for Jordan and one for Katrina. Jordan scowled, but took the candy anyway. I couldn't blame him. Who likes to be goosed from behind?

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I groaned, "Make it stop!" For practical purposes it was the middle of the night.

"Why so early today?" September asked. "Mr. Singy-Person wasn't up so early yesterday."

You would think that the room in our hostel, carved into solid sandstone, would be impervious to Mr. Singy-Person. You would be wrong. "Today is the first day of Ramadan. It is time for the feast before the fast. Go back to sleep."

I had been nervous about being in Turkey during Ramadan. We found most Turks friendlier and easier to talk to than Europeans, but, curiously, they were cautious to talk freely about the United States. It seemed they did not wish to offend us by discussing the current state of affairs back home or the war in Iraq. If we got past the cautious phase, though, most Turks wanted to express their sympathies about the harsh existence we endure in the U.S.

As for myself, I didn't do all I could to convince those I came into contact with that Americans aren't ready to blow up everything that crosses their path. I am, of course, referring to the Exploding Postal Scale.

On our last day in Göreme, I took a fairly large package bound for home to the post office. I surprised the lone postal clerk, rudely interrupting his crossword puzzle.

I pantomimed to the postal clerk that I wanted to send the package by surface mail to America. We went through the motions of mailing a package, which of course includes weighing it. I noted that the scale was a modern-looking digital unit. I also noted that it needed to be plugged in before the clerk could weigh my package.

The clerk plugged in the scale, and then he placed my package on it, noted the weight, and proceeded to fill out a bunch of paperwork, leaving the package sitting on the scale.

I watched the clerk for a few moments while he filled out paperwork associated with mailing a package overseas. Suddenly the sound of a gunshot ripped through the silence. The clerk gave me a look of abject horror and put his hands up as if he were surrendering to me. My ears were ringing from the blast. The sound clearly came from the direction of the scale.... or from the package sitting on top of the scale? I was just as

stunned as the clerk. A few seconds passed that seemed to stretch in an unnatural fashion. The clerk gradually began to realize that the Göreme, Turkey, Post Office was not under siege by a lone American. Ever so slowly, he put his hands down.

He gave a quick nod toward the package sitting on the scale and with a quizzical look, it was clear that he wanted to know just what in the hell I was mailing home. My mind raced as I tried to think of what in the package would have exploded like that, but I just couldn't fathom how our REI Four-Man Half Dome tent could spontaneously combust. Plus, the package looked perfectly tranquil sitting atop the scale. I shrugged, a gesture I hoped was universally understood as "beats the heck out of me."

It wasn't long before we understood it was the scale that had exploded. To the casual observer the scale looked perfectly innocent, but it was clear that it had weighed its last package.

Later that same day September had to go to the same post office to mail yet another package home. I told her not to be surprised if she wasn't able to mail anything.

When September presented her package to the postal clerk he pointed to the scale and said in English, "Machine kaput!" and indicated to her, by way of universal sign language of grunting and pointing, to just go up to the outdoor market and get the package weighed on the chicken scale and come back to tell him how much it weighed. At the market September found a perfectly functioning analog scale with no explodable parts, where she was able to weigh her package. She did have to brush a few chicken feathers off of the package before returning it to the post office, but perhaps after the postal clerk's close brush with American terrorism, the friendly chicken feathers would have reminded him that after all, he was living in safe, tranquil Turkey.

With our packages in the mail, we were ready to make our way to Istanbul. It had taken 14 hours to get to Göreme on the bus. It would take another 14 to get back out. At the appointed time, we left our hostel in our now familiar formation: Dad, Katrina, Jordan, and Mom, walking with our suitcases in tow to the bus station. Seemingly out of nowhere someone streaked in, swooped down and picked up Jordan.

“You are mine now!” came the familiar voice.

It was Karim.

“I have three lovely daughters at home, but no sons. I will trade you your son for all three daughters!”

I knew Karim wasn't serious, but Jordan didn't; he was fighting back tears and not doing very well at it. It was very awkward, as I thought of Karim as a friend. He had been very kind, reaching out to us in his way, but it just didn't bridge the gap in the cultural divide, especially not to an eight-year-old boy who was still trying to find his place in the world.

I told Karim I was tempted, but I would keep Jordan with us. And with that, I took Jordan in my arms and carried him the rest of the way to the bus station.

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There are many things for which Istanbul is famous, but perhaps none more so than the Grand Bazaar. As you cross the main entrance a plaque proclaims, in English:

*The Grand Bazaar – Since 1461*

The Grand Bazaar is capitalism at its best and worst. Best, because the competition inside for my cash was fierce. Worst, because I didn't want or need anything, but no one inside was willing to take no for an answer.

Divided into sections, the Grand Bazaar is made up of the spice section, the gold section, the textile section and so forth. The gold section was stunning. I had never been impressed by the look of gold. It is just a color, right? But a long corridor bursting with the stuff was truly dazzling. Past the gold jewelry there were rows of shops with chess sets, belly dancer clothes, water pipes, Viagra, and then even more Viagra.

“We need to head to the Spice Market,” September said. She was after saffron for friends back home. “I can smell spices over this way.”

So could I. All we had to do was follow our nose. On our way to the spice market I saw a store that sold... “Look at that!” You don’t see many of those anymore!” There was a stall dedicated to – are you ready for this? Typewriters. Both kinds – manual *and* electric! I had to take a picture of it.

There was every spice I had ever heard of and dozens that I hadn’t. Every vendor also had his own special house blend. In just a few moments of following September I had learned much more about saffron than I had ever wanted to. There are at least as many varieties of saffron as there are varieties of Coke. You have your basic Coke Classic, then Diet Coke, then there is caffeine free, and who could forget Diet Caffeine Free? After that you then start in with all the permutations Of Cherry, Vanilla And Lemon Twist.

“Arrgghh! Just pick one!” But no. September was entranced at all the nuances of saffron and was ready to start a bidding war between the two merchants she liked best.

The spice market was worse than shopping for a shirt any day. I stood in a corner and started to drool and make odd noises, hoping that September would be so embarrassed to be associated with me that she would be willing to leave, ready or not.

But September was deep in conversation about the differences between Caffeine-Free Saffron and the Diet Cherry Twist Caffeine-Free Saffron.

Annoyed that I was losing this round, I said to Jordan, “You want to go looking for something other than saffron? A place where you can buy a typewriter you can surely be able to find anything at all.”

Jordan said, “Cool. I want a baseball hat with electric probes so it will shock people who pat me on the head.” We abandoned the scene at the spice market and left the vendors at the mercy of Team Estrogen.

Hiding Jordan’s blond hair under a regular baseball hat hadn’t slowed down the head patting. He had been head-patted several times in the Grand Bazaar already. Looking for a hat that would shock people was more fun than drooling during the Caffeine-Free Saffron sales pitches, but sadly, there were no hats that would deliver a zap would-be head patters. Not that we didn’t try.

If there is anything in Istanbul of more historical significance than the Grand Bazaar, it would be the Blue Mosque and the Ayasofya. The Blue Mosque, which isn’t blue, and the Ayasofya face each other across a large public park.

The Ayasofya was built and destroyed a few times before the current structure was dedicated by the Byzantines in the year 537. It remained the largest cathedral in the world for roughly 1,000 years, albeit suffering from the occasional earthquake. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 the cathedral was converted to a mosque. Across the street from the Ayasofya is the Blue Mosque, which was completed in 1616. In 1935 Turkish president Kemal Atatürk concluded that the good people of Istanbul didn’t need two massive mosques across the street from each other and the Ayasofia was

secularized and turned into a Museum. Both structures are impressive and are historically important. If only the walls could talk, oh, the stories they could tell. A couple of years after we visited, the Pope visited the Ayasofia. All the buzz on the news was “what would happen if’n the Pope decided to genuflect while at the Ayasofia? Such a scandal!”

Since the Blue Mosque is a place of worship it has specific dress codes, especially for women. During our visit, Jordan demonstrated his potential as a government informer.

*Jordan’s Journal October 12*

*Today we went to the Blue Mosque. Girls over 11 HAVE to wear head scarves. I used my notebook and tallied 42 who didn’t wear their scarves. After dark we went to get cotton candy and stuff like that because it is Ramadan and there is always a big party outside near the mosque in the park.*

The entire area surrounding the Blue Mosque had been transformed while Jordan busied himself with his naughty-tally. It was approaching dusk and families had put down picnic blankets and had plates of food heaped up in front of them. On their faces they wore an eager expression and were poised ready to pounce on their dinners. Folks kept glancing at their wrist watches and soon Mr. Singy-Person shattered the silence and there was a great blur of elbows as picnickers broke their daily fast.

Sunset at the Blue Mosque was livelier than a tailgate party at the Superbowl, only more family oriented. The carnival-like atmosphere of Ramadan was enhanced by the mosque’s minarets, which were lit up like, well, like Christmas, for the occasion.

*JSH Journal October 13*

*In a few hours we will leave Turkey for someplace altogether new and different. Turkey has been a high point of our trip so far; I'm embarrassed I was nervous to travel here. There were no mobs trying to find us because September wore shorts, and Mr. Singy-Person aside, Ramadan has been fun. I can't help but think of the young Turkish woman we met on the island in Greece. She was afraid to come to the U.S. because of what she had heard in news reports. Of course, I was guilty of similar thinking about her country.*

Upon leaving Turkey, I felt much lighter, leaving behind prejudices I had brought with me. As travelers, we were starting to walk the walk.