7 Fantastic Rides

- Boise and Beyond Idaho Shamrock Tour®
- Great Lakes Seaway Trail
- Sensational Turkey
- Discovering Newfoundland
- Wide Open Texas Panhandle
- Breathtaking British Columbia

RIDING TESTS: BMW R1200R • Kawasaki Vulcan 900
Harley-Davidson Dyna Super Glide • Ducati Multistrada 1000DS
SCOOTER TEST: Piaggio BV500
TRAVELS IN TURKEY
SCENIC, SAFE AND SENSATIONAL
There is much to be said for seeing Turkey on a motorcycle. The roads, ease of traveling from the U.S., the unequalled historic and archeological wonders, and the excellent hotels and restaurants make it as convenient as touring in Europe. But the best reason for coming here is to meet the warm and considerate Turkish people, who readily convey a genuine affection for Americans.

Text and Photography: Steve Larsen
Remnants of ancient civilizations appear everywhere.

My gaze skims past the steaming runway of the Istanbul airport to the city beyond as my mind attempts to soak up and retain everything this bird’s-eye view provides before touchdown.

The seed for this trip had been planted four years earlier, on a trip in Italy, when I met Kazim Uzunoglu (Kaz to nearly everyone), a native Turk and '93 graduate of the University of Virginia. Having begun to guide motorcyclists around his native land a few years prior to our trip in Italy, Kaz insisted that I someday ride in Turkey. “After all,” he boasted, “it is the birthplace of civilization. You’ll see ruins and antiquities dating back to the dawn of man.”

Our launch hotel, the Marmara Pera, is located in the heart of the Beyoglu district. This “new” section, built 300-400 years ago, is historic but contains a vibrant nightlife. A day of jet-lag recovery is spent touring Constantinople, as Istanbul used to be known, the only city in the world that spans two continents, with breathtaking suspension bridges linking the Asian and European sides.

Kaz first takes us to Hagia Sophia (the Church of the Holy Wisdom of God), and we wander about under its great dome, the highest in the world for over 1,000 years. We then walk the grounds of the Topkapi Palace and visit the dark underground cisterns of Yerebatan. At the Blue Mosque, a grand testament to Ottoman architecture built in 1616 and so named for the color that once decorated its interior, Kaz launches into a short exposition of the key principles of Islam. Leading foreigners around Turkey requires licensure from the Ministry of Tourism which involves years of study and mastery of Turkish history and culture, archeology, folklore, customs and first aid in order to pass.

Supported by BMW, Kazoom Moto Adventures provides new, low-mileage BMW R1200GSs and F650s for its tourists, and we pick up our bikes the following day at Borusan Oto Istmye, the largest and most spectacular auto/motorcycle facility I’ve ever seen.

Safranbolu

Leaving Istanbul’s insane traffic, we speed from civilization, heading 300 miles west to Safranbolu, in the Black Sea Region. Safranbolu is surrounded by a vast expanse of hills and mountains, and the last hours of riding offer us a sampling of the kinds of secondary roads we’ll travel most of this trip. Half of the
country is more than 1,000 meters high, with two-thirds of it at least 800 meters above sea level, and the roads here certainly harmonize with the dual-sport nature of the BMW 1200GS.

As in the U.S., the main roads in Turkey are large, divided highways in excellent condition. Of course, we avoid them. We choose secondary roads, the pink lines on the map, paved but varying widely in quality. We’re often on aged, one-lane blacktop, dodging pot holes, broken asphalt and gravel patches, alert for herds of goats that routinely appear around the corners. Occasionally, we tackle even smaller roads where the more aggressive riders in our group are happiest.

Entering Safranbolu’s stone streets, we find the massive Cinci Han, a “camel hotel,” at the center of town. Camel hotels dotted the historic Silk Road between China and Anatolia, and caravans were allowed to stay for free up to three days to make repairs and recover from their travels, safe from bandits. The Cinci Han has remained largely unchanged since it was built in 1645, although everyone is a paying customer these days. We bring one of the motorcycles into the beautiful central courtyard, where it becomes an object of great interest to the staff and other guests. A local news reporter prompts me to ride it around inside the courtyard, gingerly circling diners and the center fountain as his camera clicks away. (Safranbolu GPS: N41 14.682 E32 41.593)

Cappadocia

Sticking to secondary roads, we head south toward central Turkey, winding through fascinating small villages and towns. Unlike the deserted small towns in the U.S. heartland, with their boarded-up businesses and large-chain gas and fast food places, Turkey’s small towns are vibrant, crowded, full of children, parents, and seniors, all often seen walking arm-in-arm.

Along the Mediterranean coast of Turkey.

Stopping in Kursunlu on the local market day, our six large motorcycles are surrounded by a swarm of boys and men, polite and smiling but immensely curious, first about the motorcycles and then about us. Hearing that we are from the U.S., one boy says, “We like Americans.” We linger and eat lunch here, earlier than scheduled, under the spell of this wonderful, welcoming town.

Arriving in Urgup on the central Anatolian table known as Cappadocia, we find our rooms at the Elkep Evi, a bed & breakfast carved into the mountain. We are literally staying in caves, albeit caves with tiled bathrooms, modern wood floors and beautiful rugs. (Elkep Evi GPS: N38 38.135 E34 54.244) Cappadocia and the nearby Goreme Nation Park draw millions of tourists each year. Early the next morning we awake to the chant of a local imam calling the faithful to prayer. “Come to the Mosque, come to pray, come to pray together,” he chants in Arabic. Within a couple of minutes, another imam, closer to our hotel, begins his chant, and the words...

The courtyard of the Cinci Han, Safranbolu’s "camel hotel."
There’s no end to the mountain views and switchback calisthenics.

echo back from across the valley. Imams are chosen based on quality of voice and the passion to convey the five-time-per-day call to prayer.

Officially a secular country, 99 percent of the people in Turkey list their religion as Islam, although most follow a modern interpretation of the Koran. Alcohol, forbidden in the Koran, is available nearly everywhere in Istanbul. Women occasionally wear scarves or other headcoverings, but the majority dress in western attire. In the countryside more traditional apparel predominates.

Konya

Crossing the flat plains of central Turkey, we ride through barren landscapes on our way to Konya, the most traditional and devout Muslim city in modern Turkey. It’s home to the Whirling Dervishes, a mystical sect founded by Mevlana Celaleddini rumi, one of the most important individuals in Islamic history.

Kemer-Antalya

At nearly every stop we leave helmets on our bikes, jackets draped over seats, tankbags in place, and luggage boxes unlocked. My travel companion Philip remarks, “I feel safer here than I do in Bedford, New York, and that’s a safe place.” The crime rate in Turkey is a fraction of what it is in most countries around the globe.

We eat a traditional Turkish dinner at a low table (leaning on pillows) and occasionally peer through the restaurant windows at the dancing Whirling Dervishes, twirling trance-like to the music. The ceremony is surprisingly moving. [Konya GPS: N37 51.597 E32 30.452]

At every stop we leave helmets on our bikes, jackets draped over seats, tankbags in place, and luggage boxes unlocked. My travel companion Philip remarks, “I feel safer here than I do in Bedford, New York, and that’s a safe place.” The crime rate in Turkey is a fraction of what it is in most countries around the globe.

Kemer-Antalya

Approaching the Mediterranean coast, near Antalya, the group splits and I go solo, choosing a challenging ride through the Toros Mountains.

Knowing the series of towns you wish to go through is all one really needs to travel in Turkey. Few natives speak English in rural Turkey, but if you lose your way, it takes only a little while before you’re enthusiastically directed back to your correct route. While Turkish is a difficult language to learn, words are relatively easy to pronounce. The alphabet, with few exceptions, is pronounced like English, and sometimes Turkish spellings make more sense than the English, such as ‘taksi’ for our ‘taxi’ or ‘polis’ for ‘police.’

A night at Berke Ranch, on the intersection of the Agva stream and Tahtali Mountain, we ride the coast to the ancient Roman seaport of Phaselis, one of the most beautiful sites on the Mediterranean. Well-preserved and built around two bays surrounded by pines, the site is a remarkable example of ancient city planning. Walking the same streets where Alexander the Great spent the winter of 334 BC on his way
to conquer the world, Kaz points out the differences between the early Greek, then Roman and, finally, Byzantine construction styles. (Phaselis GPS: N36 31.520 E30 33.101)

Heading to Göcek, we stop midway at Myra. While some think of Myra as the home of St. Nicholas (he indeed did live his adult life here and became bishop of the city), it is the Lycian rock tombs carved out of stone cliffs that draw us there. Turkey is full of ruins and locals often take them for granted. Children are even said to have clubhouses in some of these tombs. (Myra GPS: N36 15.438 E29 59.147)

Göcek

The seaside village of Göcek has a marina with over 500 boats, many of them large luxury sailing yachts. Established in 1985, it is a thriving hotspot for English and German tourists. In Turkey the mortgage market is just developing, so most people pay cash for their homes. Real estate taxes are low now, but once the mortgage market matures, property values in places like this could soar, especially in resort towns where the views combine the Mediterranean Sea and dramatic mountains. (Göcek GPS: N36 45.181 E28 56.629)

Ephesus

Riding to Sirince near Selçuk, we stop at the ancient Temple of Apollo, near the modern town of Didim. This structure is another exquisite, awe-inspiring example of stone masonry erected long before builders had giant earthmovers and sky cranes at their disposal. Photographs do not do it justice. (Didyma GPS: N37 23.152 E27 15.388) Afterwards, it’s on to Ephesus, by far the most important and impressive ancient Greco-Roman site in Turkey. The capital of the Roman province of Asia Minor, it’s filled with temples, streets with markets, a magnificent library and a grand theater seating 24,000. Sting preformed in this theater several years ago to a sellout crowd of 40,000 fans spilling onto the surrounding hills. At the corner formed by Curetis Street and the Marble Road, a brothel sits directly across from the Library of Celsus, which has been restored to former glory — the way it looked thousands of years ago. (Ephesus GPS: N37 56.663 E27 20.476)

Our home for the night is Sirince, a small Aegean village of 600 inhabitants, located a thousand feet above sea level. We ride through pine forests to reach the village, where most of the houses date from the 18th century, when Sirince was predominantly a Greek village. (Sirince GPS: N37 56.448 E27 26.033)

Leaving Sirince, we head north through İzmir, Manisa, Akhisar, stopping in Susurlu for lunch before pulling into Bandirma to catch a 3:30 p.m. ferry for a two-hour ride across the Sea of Marmara to Istanbul. We hit traffic at the rush hour’s peak and it takes us four-and-a-half hours to cross the capital. As I turn in the bike, my odometer shows I’ve ridden just under 3,500 kilometers (2,200 miles) in nine days.

From the roof of the Hotel Armada in the heart of Istanbul’s historic peninsula, I stare intently, memorizing the rooftop views of the Blue Mosque and the Hagia Sophia. Though tired from the long haul, we celebrate with a final dinner together and spend most of the time raving about Turkey’s diverse and striking landscapes, its breathtaking scenery, the unbelievably delicious food, and of course the shopping — everyting from jewelry to rugs and ceramics. And while these alone are reasons enough to plan a motorcycle tour of Turkey, it is the warm, friendly, remarkable people we will never forget.

Fording fun on the BMW dual sports.
Turkey

**FACTS AND INFORMATION**

### In General

Turkey's location assures a temperate climate most of the year. However, the diversity of the landscape—mountains parallel to the coasts and the inland Anatolia plateau—means the climate changes dramatically from region to region. Most of the year is great, but avoid December to March. No special inoculations are required although current tetanus and diphtheria protection is a good idea, and having travel insurance is smart for any foreign motorcycle tourist.

### How to Get There

Several airlines offer direct flights from major cities in the U.S. to Istanbul's modern Atatürk International Airport. Normal RT coach tickets list for around $1,100, but you can find specials as low as $440 through Lufthansa and other carriers. Cabs are abundant and the 15km ride into the city costs around $20.

### Food & Lodging

In Istanbul, you want to stay in either the Beyoğlu district or in the Old City. The Beyoğlu has a vibrant nightlife and trendy shops. To be close to the Blue Mosque and other sites, many tourists often choose to stay across the bridge in the Old City. Clean, comfortable, inexpensive, western-style rooms, with Internet access, can be found throughout Turkey.

The food in Turkey is unbelievably good, especially the bread and tomatoes. Turks love seasonal veggies and fruits, eggplant, peaches, figs, olives, dried apricots, and all types of nuts. Centuries-old recipes, skewered and roasted meats, and flatbreads make every meal a delight.

### Roads & Biking

The main roads in Turkey are large, divided highways in excellent condition, but the best views come by seeking out secondary roads, although you may have to deal with occasional patches of aged blacktop, pot holes and broken asphalt.

We rented from Borusan Oto İstinye, in Istanbul, a BMW dealership stretching over 40,000 square meters (larger than eight soccer fields). They have an extensive stable of late model, low-mileage BMW motorcycles for rent.

### Shopping & Sightseeing

As expected, you can buy beautiful handmade carpets everywhere in Turkey. But don't overlook the ceramics, jewelry and leather, or miss out on visiting the Grand Bazaar, with over 4,000 shops, or the Egyptian Spice Market and the shops of the Beyoğlu.

### Addresses & Phone Numbers

- **Motorcycle Rental:** Borusan Oto İstinye
  - Address: İstinyeMah, Neslihan Cad, No:1/1 34460 Sanyer, Istanbul
  - Phone: 011-90-212-359-3030
  - www.bmw-motosiklet.com
  - (site in Turkish/Rental section in English)
  - The Marmara Pera Hotel
    - Address: Meşrutiyet Caddeesi
    - Tepebaşı 34430 Istanbul TURKEY
    - Phone: 011-90-212-251-4646
    - www.themarmarahotels.com

### Books & Maps

- Istanbul: The Imperial City by John Freely, Viking, New York, 1996, ISBN 0140244611, $16.00

Always consult more detailed maps for touring purposes.