

A whirl of its own

Few westerners visit **Konya**, but Kevin Gould is spellbound by the tomb of the original whirling dervish and the city's brilliant architecture

It is the heart of Turkey. Konya, a city of a million souls, squats slap in the middle of Anatolia's wild plain, surrounded by open, endless prairie. Turkey's most culturally conservative city, Konya seems at first to be a place of tight headscarves and foreboding beards, of ostentatiously observed pieties and forbidden beers. But uncovering Konya is easy - for here, at the heart of the old city, in his tomb of turquoise tiles, is Jelaluddin Rumi.

Rumi is one of the world's most read poets. During his life, and since his death in 1273, pilgrims have come to Konya. Today, Rumi's tomb is Turkey's second most-visited tourist attraction after the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. Rumi was a mystic, a Sufi saint who loved all religions, and whose own religion was love. His followers would (and still do) lose themselves in trance and dance, sometimes spinning like tops for hours on end.

These whirling dervishes are now the symbol of Turkey's tourism campaigns, and you can sip tea in your Istanbul hotel lobby watching some poor bloke in a tall beige felt hat whirling for your entertainment. For the real thing, though, come here. Come to Konya and you come to Turkey's soul. In Rumi's words:

*"Whoever you may be, come
Even though you may be
An infidel, a pagan, or a
fireworshipper, come
Our brotherhood is not one of despair
Though you have broken
Your vows of repentance a hundred
times, come."*

Almost every year since 1983, I've been coming with the two million-or-so tourists who visit Konya annually. Most are Turkish, although many Iranians (who claim Rumi as their own, because he wrote in their language and was born in eastern Persia) also make the pilgrimage.

Rather than making Konya a halt on a bus tour, I recommend staying for a few days, soaking up the feeling, eating some of Turkey's best lamb, seeing its best Seljuk architecture and - maybe - falling in love with Rumi. You can fly in cheaply from Istanbul, from where there's also a scruffy, atmospheric train, or arrive by road. Konya is within easy reach of the cave dwellers and carpet sellers of Cappadocia.

Rumi arrived here as a boy, when Konya had already been a city for 2,000 years. It was founded by the Hittites, who were succeeded by the Phrygians, then the Lydians, Persians, Cappadocians, the kings of Pergamon and the Romans, who called the place Iconium. Saints Paul and Barnabus both preached here, but by 1071 the Seljuks, a Turcoman tribe, were in charge, and their architectural legacy endures.

Their Karatay Medrese from 1251 is a masterpiece of ornate tiling and harmonious domes. It is today the Museum of Tiles and Ceramics, whose contents retain the vibrancy and punch they had when first fired. Close by, the Ince Minarali Medrese is now the Museum of Stone and Wood Carving, and is a lot less dry than I've made it sound. These two buildings whet your appetite to discover the ornately tiled Sircali Medrese, and the magnificent



Sahip Ata mosque: unlike much of the Muslim world, in Turkey you are encouraged to visit mosques, whatever your religious tastes.

At the junction of the old city and its ugly new neighbour is the Alaaddin mosque, the city's vantage point, whose beautiful ebony pulpit and delicate prayer-niche are from 1155 (the complex was completed in 1221). The boulevard radiating from here brings you to Rumi's tomb, of which more later. Rumi is known to Turks as Mevlana (the Sainted One), and today Konya is in thrall to Mevlanamania.

When I first came, Mevlana's followers, the Mevlevi, were a banned organisation, tolerated only for their "folkloric dancing" and whirlings. Meetings were held secretly, illegally.

Change has come, and Rumi's image now adorns everything from hoardings to souvenir snow domes. There's a massive, impressive new municipal auditorium where this tender whirling human ballet is performed, and any amount of lovely shiny-eyed mystics in carpet shops, cafes and medieval bazaars, all delighted to invite you to a private zikhr.

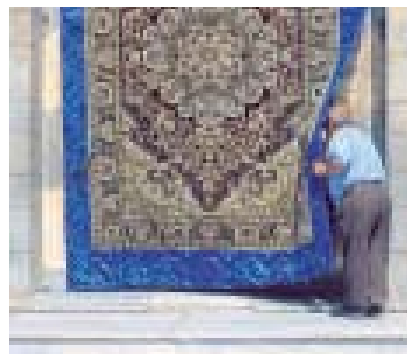
I mentioned food, too. Konya's lamb-centric cuisine is superb. *Etlı ekmeğ* is a long, thin roll-up pizza spread with delicately spiced mince, and Konya kebab is a lamb shank, very slowly roasted and served on a pillow of bread with a sweet red onion. The very best is at Konak (Restoran, Akcesme mah. Piriesat Cad. No 5, +90 332 352 85 47), whose soups and homemade yoghurt are heaven-made.

Thus, beautifully fed, and with many glasses of sweet tannic tea inside you, make your way to Rumi's tomb. You join the awestruck, the curious and the fervent. A strange twinkly light plays on the tombs of Rumi and his followers. The walls are embroidered with calligraphy, and the ceilings are a kaleidoscope of beautifully executed arabesques. Rumi's tomb is covered in vastly embroidered cloth of gold, and seems to radiate light and peace and mercy.

Some of your fellow pilgrims will read Korans, and others Rumi's poetry. Most take photos, although this is strictly forbidden. There are those who weep silently, and those who laugh out loud; people who meditate for hours on end, and people who hurry through. All are moved, for here is love.

Playing quietly and insinuating itself into your consciousness is the ney, a reed flute. It sounds like breathy air, but is really the sound of fire, which rises and falls inside us all. This is not some sullen religious moaning, but the sound of yearning, of communion, of the heart. You've got it - it's soul music, and it really sends you. So come.

● [Turkish Airlines](#) (020-7471 6666, [thy.com](#)) flies to Konya via Istanbul from Heathrow, Stansted, Birmingham and Manchester, from £219 rtn inc taxes. Istanbul to Konya by rail costs from around £24 return ([tcdd.gov.tr](#)), or around £36 return by bus ([ulusoy.com.tr](#)). [Hotel Balikcilar](#) ([balikcilar.com](#)) has rooms or around £70 (and also serves cold beers). [Hotel Dergah](#) (+90 332 351 76 61) rooms around £20. Tickets to see the whirling dervishes are free from the tourist office, behind Mevlana's tomb. [Mete Horzum at SeleneTour](#) (+90 532 564 9192, [selene.com.tr](#)) arranges private whirling and zikhr from £30pp.



Pull the rug out . . . a man peeps into one of the city's many mosques

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Going full circle . . . Konya's famous Whirling Dervishes