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UNDERGROUND CITIES, FRESCOS

# Hidden Turkish delight

**T**HE first thing I thought when I visited Cappadocia in central Turkey was "Why on Earth didn't Jesus live here?" It has everything you might imagine the Son of God would need;

ancient cave dwellings, fruit trees, donkeys and an unearthly, rippled pink landscape. It has wonderful spas, too, and enough boutique hotels to ensure Mary would definitely have found an inn.

But where Jesus missed out, others have not. People have been living in Cappadocia for at least eight millennia, making it one of the oldest civilisations in our world — and one of the most beautiful.

## CAVE DWELLING

VOLCANIC eruptions between three and nine million years ago left the land covered with ignimbrite deposits which eroded over time to form soft, meringue-like peaks, nicknamed "the fairy chimneys". The Cappadocians later

BY ALICE VON SIMSON

carved their dwellings into these rocks, most of which remain today, along with hundreds of incredible cave churches, hermit lodges and even an underground city built to house 10,000 citizens during times of war.

Tiny windows carved high up in the rocky peaks are the only indications of secretive people whose best defence was camouflage, so to fully explore the area a guide is essential. Remzi Kaya at Cappadocia Tours (from £141 for a private day tour) is the best and his infectious enthusiasm and uncanny ability to time his visits to avoid other tourists made us feel as if we were party to incredible archaeological discoveries in every cave. "See this?" He'd cry hoarse with excitement, "Frescos from the Byzantine era!"

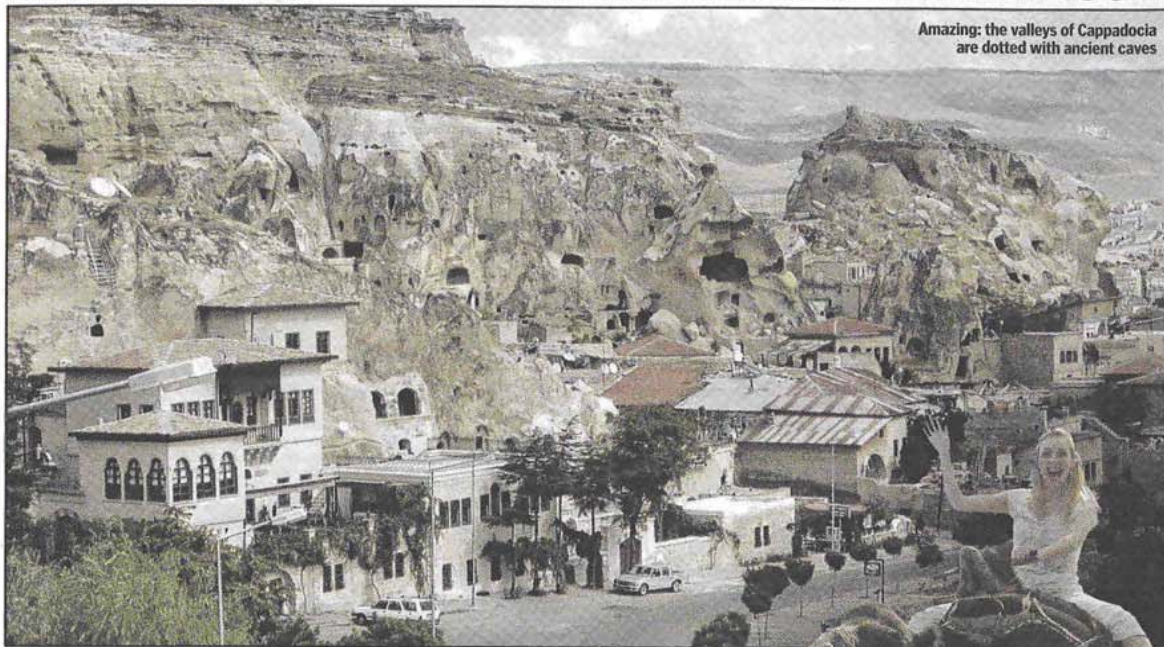
Having explored the Göreme Open-Air Museum, an old nunnery where more than 300



Cave art: Alice saw Byzantine frescos on her tour

## AND HIP HOTELS – ANCIENT MEETS MODERN IN CAPPADOCIA

Travel



Amazing: the valleys of Cappadocia are dotted with ancient caves

novices once trained, hermit caves where men would chain themselves to the wall for years at a time and the Valley Of Imagination where the rocks appear to have taken on animal and human forms, it was time to explore Cappadocia from another angle — the air.

## BALLOON TOUR

OUR alarm clock went off at 4.30am on the day of our balloon flight (£200, [kapadokyaballoons.com](http://kapadokyaballoons.com)), the same time as the first call to prayer.

It was an unpleasantly early start and things got worse when we discovered we were unable to regulate our body temperatures before dawn.

Hunched, with chattering teeth, we waited as the balloons were prepped but we were sold the instant we floated off the ground. You cannot steer a hot-air balloon, so we were at the mercy of the wind.

The breeze carried us on an ethereal journey over peaks and troughs which burned pink and then orange as the sun rose, before depositing us in a field where we were met with cake and champagne — my kind of breakfast.

## SPA TIME

A QUICK spa session at our hotel, the Cappadocia Cave Resort ([ccr-hotels.com](http://ccr-hotels.com), standard room £279 per night)

helped us to recover from the early start. As well as the usual pool, sauna and steam room, it has been kitted out with a salt room, a snow room and a marble hamam (£47) where you can be soaped, scrubbed and massaged into a new person. It is seriously luxurious.

## FOODIE TREATS

THE food in Turkey comes in quantities that would make a Strasburg goose's eyes water and the Turks are determined people, so don't expect any mercy.

When it comes to second helpings "no", and any variation on the word, means "yes" and you will be made to eat three times your bodyweight at every sitting. Luckily it is all delicious and, therefore, no real hardship.

Stews are popular and most local menus also include kebabs, baked meats and shepherd's salad, made from tomatoes, sweetcorn, cucumber and feta.

The new boutique hotels have taken the very best of the local dishes and brought them up-to-date to appeal to an international clientele, so there are many options for fine dining, too.

One of the nicest places to eat is the dining room of the Museum Hotel ([museumhotel.com.tr](http://museumhotel.com.tr), standard room from £102), a privately owned establishment with breathtaking views over the

Rose Valley. It is a firm favourite with visiting politicians and dignitaries, while movie stars such as Harvey Keitel have bedded down in its beautifully restored caves, one of which boasts its own wine cellar.

And speaking of wine, Cappadocia is the oldest wine-producing region in the world and much of the local economy still depends on this. The mineral-rich soil is perfect for producing grapes and the caves, with their constant temperatures and porous rock, are perfect for ageing it. After 4,000 years, the locals have picked up a few tricks and the wine is good, if rather expensive due to the high taxes.

Cappadocia must be seen to be believed and currently offers outstanding value for money as it's still outside the euro-zone — the lire makes things much cheaper. It's really the holiday of a lifetime. Put it on your list of things to do before you die... but make sure that it's near the top because you're certain to want to come back again.

●Pegasus Airlines flies to Istanbul five times weekly with 16 connections across Turkey and North Cyprus. Prices from £40 one way, [flypgs.com/en](http://flypgs.com/en)



One hump or two? Alice explores the area by camel

## WHERE IS CAPPADOCIA?

