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Arrival Day:

As our group was coming from different places in Europe and the United States, everyone arrived at different times. Nonetheless, the arrival greeting at the airport was flawless, complete with a map WhatsApp'd to us with very good instructions on where to go. We were all whisked away to the Shangri-La Bosphorus, our host hotel for the first three nights of our stay in Istanbul.

In a city that straddles Europe and Asia, the Shangri-La is anchored on the shores of the Bosphorus strait in a 1930's historical building. Ottoman glamour with Asian design elements are prevalent in this hotel, but for me, the coziness, excellent décor of the rooms and impeccable hospitality made me fall in the love with this hotel instantly!

We dined at IST TOO that evening in the hotel, with the wonderful Sales Team from the Shangri-La. It was a perfect first evening of global cuisine.

Day 2:

Our first full day in Istanbul was jam-packed with excursions and site visits. We began the day early, as we wanted to fit in so much in that first morning; The Hagia Sophia, Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace and the Hippodrome. We saw so much and had such an excellent guide, however, my favorite of the morning was the Hagia Sophia as it was representative of both Christians and Muslims working together to honor a place of worship for both religions. Constructed three times in the same location, it is the world's oldest and fastest-completed cathedral. The Hagia Sophia Mansions were also a highlight of the morning, as walking the grounds of the mansions, you could almost feel the people of ancient times here. They are aesthetically beautiful gardens filled with a myriad of important artifacts from many centuries.

We had a brief stop for a delicious lunch at the Green House Garden Restaurant and then went on to the Grand Bazaar, with private access to the rooftops which can only be arranged with prior permission (thanks AIDA!). These rooftops are famous for Daniel Craig's stunts in the movie Skyfall, and it was such an experience to walk these rooftop pathways and take our Instagram worthy photos, all while enjoying stunning views of Istanbul all around. Of course, when we were done with the rooftop, we spent our time perusing the Grand Bazaar and shopping (as isn't that what we do best on WanderLuxe FAM's)?!?

We ended our extraordinary first day in Istanbul at the Ciragan Palace Kempinski, the only Ottoman Imperial Palace & Hotel on the Bosphorus. Our hosts there took such great care of us, first with a site of the vast 313 rooms and the breathtaking Sultan Suite, one of the biggest in Europe, ending with an elegant dinner. A few of us did not want the night to end, so we headed to the outdoor dining area and indulged in a little hookah...which became one of our favorite FAM experiences as the week went on!

Day 3:

Our third day in Istanbul was a full industry work day, as we sited: The Four Seasons Bosphorus, SwissOtel The Bosphorus, Ecole St. Pierre (with a delicious lunch) and ended with dinner at the Mandarin Oriental Bosphorus (wowza!).

Throughout the sites, however, we were able to fit in some great experiences like Turkish coffee, riding Istanbul's mass transit and exploring the Bohemian part of Istanbul.

The highlight of this day, however, was a surprise cruise on the Bosphorus, arranged by AIDA, with a drop-off right at the dock of the Mandarin. Seeing Istanbul by way of the Bosphorus is a must-do for any traveler to Istanbul. Being able to view the city, both the European side and Asian side from the strait, is a can't-miss experience. I always believe that viewing a city from several different perspectives is the best way to really "see" a city.

Day 4:

It was time to say good-bye to our beloved Istanbul, a city that our entire FAM group quickly learned to love.

We were off to Cappadocia today...a place I had personally dreamt of experiencing for many years. The flight from Istanbul to ASR was quick, easy and flawless on Turkish Airlines. Upon landing at ASR, we had about a 90-minute drive to Cappadocia. Our host hotel, Seraphim Cave Hotel, was just so perfectly Cappadocian (if that is even a word). Welcoming guests in a historic mansion originally constructed in 1853, Seraphim Cave Hotel offers expansive grounds covering over an acre of gardens and rock formations. Each of the 21 rooms is unique with distinct details. The mansion greets guests with a historic lion's gate with a Greek inscription, "Oh, son of man, if you are a friend, enter joyously; if you are an enemy or conceal bad intentions, stay far from this door. Today is mine, tomorrow's another's, in truth no one's". Well, we were clearly friends and entered joyously, to be given, again, the warmth of the Turkish hospitality, complete with champagne and hookah when we returned for a respite in the evenings.

On this day, we also inspected AJWA Cappadocia and had a lunch prepared tableside...just spectacular!

Before our return for dinner, we enjoyed the Goreme Open-Air Museum; a series of rugged rocky cones that have been hollowed out to form a network of centuries-old chapels, churches and homes. The Byzantine Christians built over 30 churches here as early as the 4th Century. This area always contains some of the most mesmerizing and iconic fairy chimneys in the region...all of which is what Cappadocia is known for!

We ended our day with an authentic dinner next to our hotel called the Old Greek Restaurant. Live Turkish Folk music and a family-style menu, along with dancing, ended our perfect day in this beautiful region of Turkey.

Day 5:

Today was the day. The day I have been wishing for many years – hot-air ballooning in Cappadocia! Ballooning in this part of the world is iconic, and there are no less than 100 balloons in the air at any given moment here. While I am afraid of heights and loathe early mornings, nothing was going to stop me and our group from experiencing this once-in-a-lifetime moment.

It is safe to say that we had the most dexterous pilot, dipping us in the canyons of this other-worldly landscape. The ride was just about 90 minutes, and the photos, feelings and beauty that comes along with this experience are some of the best I have personally ever experienced. Our pilot was even able to land directly onto the trailer hitch for our landing, which could not have been easy. The ride ends with champagne, photographs and then time back at the hotel for a nap before we move forward with the rest of the day.

We continued with the afternoon to experience a few crafts in Cappadocia. Turkey is known for its pottery and rugs, so of course, we had to do what we do best and shop! First, we went to the family-owned pottery studio, Guray Comlekcilik. Here, we had a demonstration followed by a tour through their showroom where a beautiful piece of their hand-painted pottery now hangs in my foyer. We then proceeded to Bazaar 54, one of the most famous rug warehouses. The demonstration in itself was a show, as they brought out rug after rug, explaining the knots and the craft. After a glass (or two) of rosé, I ended up with a 45-year-old rug which now lays in my master bedroom. Two extraordinary purchases to forever remember Turkey and Cappadocia!

We ended our night at Argos, a well-known luxury hotel in Cappadocia. After our site throughout this beautiful hotel, we had a surprise dinner waiting for us in the cave of the wine cellar. It was such a WOW moment of this trip, and while eating by candlelight, it was truly an evening to remember.

Day 6:

Time to leave! We were up and at 'em early for a flight back to Istanbul to connect to ADB in Izmir. We arrived safely and had a beautiful check-in at the SwissOtel Buyuk Efes Izmir. AIDA's Owner, Adviye Bergemann and her lovely Team were there to greet us with flowers, just as she greeted advisors 20 years ago in Cannes. After a lovely meeting with Adviye, we freshened up to enjoy a rooftop dinner at the hotel with a stunning sunset!

Day 7:

Our final full day in Turkey was full of experiences! We packed up and left the hotel early to head to Ephesus, The House of the Virgin Mary and Sirince Village.

One of the most prominent centers of ancient times, Ephesus was founded near the harbor where the Kaistros River flows into the sea. Ephesus grew to be an important city due to the fertile land as well as its location as an important commercial center connecting the East and West, as well as being a significant religious center in the Christian era. The history of Ephesus dates back to 2000 B.C., and also houses the Temple of Artemis regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The most striking aspect of Ephesus for me was the main street, where "designer" shops were at the top of the street while the regular shops were at the end. It always just proves that humanity's mindset has stayed constant no matter what era you were born into. Just as we have our designer streets in large cities now, this has been a part of human existence forever.

The House of the Virgin Mary was a place I did not know about. About 9km from Ephesus, this home is known to be where Mary spent her last days. It was fascinating to observe the wishes and candles left for the Virgin Mary by tourists, recently, with these wishes being written on masks as a sign of the current times.

Finally, we headed to Sirince Village for a hilltop lunch which was something straight out of a book. We loved the rustic fare we dined on, always beginning with mezze. We also went to the famous jewelry shop in town who produced all of the jewelry for the movie Troy. Once again, we did what we do best and shopped 'til we dropped here.

We proceeded to the region of Alacati, to one of the most exclusive locations on the Aegean Sea to check into Biblos. What a stunning place that I cannot wait to go back to! The waters are crystal clear here, and the hotel was pristine...each and every room contained a hand-crafted wall mosaic. It was perfection.

We ended our time in Turkey with Adviye, Yüksel, and the Team at Stay Alacati with a beautiful al fresco dinner. We toasted, we laughed, we even cried as we had to say good-bye to our wonderful hosts as we ventured home the following morning. What a perfectly executed FAM, as the emotions of the group spoke with the power of what AIDA had done for us that week!

Turkey is now on the top of my go-to destinations. The warmth of the people and the culture are second-to-none. The gastronomy is exquisite and the history is vast. Our group instantly felt at home in Turkey, and the hospitality at every place we went to is some of the best experienced in the world. As a predominant Muslim country, I found solace in the call to prayer several times a day, and when I missed it, I was sad; as that moment of reflection several times a day was just what was needed in our busy itinerary. If you or your clients are looking to experience Turkey, all I can say is GO! And let the incredible Team at AIDA Tailor Made Travelling help you with it!

Written with love - Tara