

Taking delight in sights and sounds of Turkey

THE slightly metallic tinge in my mouth matched the influx of adrenaline flooding my arms. With growing nausea I watched the speaker from a distant Middle Eastern country winding up his interminable presentation. All too soon, it would be my turn...

At least the fear would soon be over. It had, as usual, been gnawing at me from the beginning – despite the brief respites occasionally offered by speakers such as the young lady from Eastern Europe.

Horrifying research

I watched with horrified fascination as she blithely described her study of a rodent model of skin grafts. First she explained that only local anaesthesia had been used for peri-operative analgesia. Next she described her finding that buster collars were effective at preventing the graft self-cannibalism that commonly occurred post-operatively. However, an unfortunate side effect was that rats wearing buster collars were unable to eat, and starved to death.

This otherwise charming speaker was obviously very proud of her research. Apparently she'd never heard of post-surgical analgesia, or humane end-points. What on earth is wrong with these people, I wondered? At least it distracted me from thinking about the reception I shortly expected to receive.

Admittedly, my predicament was largely self-inflicted, for I hadn't picked the easiest audience for my talk. The dominant viewpoint at this conference was that animal experiments had provided crucial contributions to all manner of human healthcare advancements.

But the published evidence from large-scale systematic reviews strongly suggested otherwise, and was the focus of my presentation. What would this

audience do when I presented that evidence?

After all, the ICLAS conference in Istanbul in June was the second largest annual European gathering of laboratory animal scientists. Around 300 researchers from animal laboratories across Europe and further afield were present.

The exhibition hall was filled with

ANDREW KNIGHT reports on his recent visit to Istanbul and his part in a gathering of laboratory animal scientists

displays of very expensive equipment from companies making a great deal of money from animal experiments. I rather suspected these people might not take kindly to my evidence that most of their research was unjustified, on both scientific and ethical grounds.

A cultural melting pot

The conference had, however, offered an irresistible opportunity to indulge my passion for travel. Formerly known as Byzantium (around 660 BC) and then Constantinople (from 330 AD), Istanbul has been a melting pot of cultures, warring armies and religions, for thousands of years, due to its strategic

location.

It straddles the banks of the Bosphorus Strait, connecting the Mediterranean with the Black Sea, enabling it to exist concurrently in both Europe and Asia, whose joint influences are not lost on its people, culture or architecture.

Determined for once not to arrive in a foreign country without having done any research, I clawed time from my busy schedule to print out a google map of the city. Triumphant, I arrived at the airport, and followed the sign to "shuttle buses". Unfortunately, that's where my plan began to fall apart.

Admittedly, signs were clearly provided but these were only in Turkish. Eventually I found my way onto a bus I hoped was heading to the city. Nearly an hour later I was discharged into a crowded square, teeming with a jumbled mass of humanity, street hawkers, sidewalk cafés, and yellow taxis. The taxis are

ubiquitous in Istanbul, numbering over 60,000 at last count.

It was late and my pack was heavy, so I showed my hostel address to a driver. He grunted and waved me away. The next day I did the same. It

appeared my destination was insufficiently lucrative! I resolved then and there to boycott all 60,000 of Istanbul's yellow taxis – a decision that would later cause me grief.

Old city adventures

Obscure instructions at the very bottom of my reservation printout advised me to "follow the tram lines to the end, then turn left". Unfortunately, the tram lines were unspecified among a choice of two. So I picked the left hand tracks and followed them down a brightly lit, cobblestoned mall for over a mile, deep into the heart of the old city.

It was odd to be surrounded by throngs of people, with whom I could hardly converse. I was truly alone, within a crowd. In theory, many Turks speak English well; the reality on the ground is rather different. At least their English is far better than my non-existent Turkish.

The cobblestoned streets became narrower, darker and rougher as I wound my way down into the old city. The human population thinned considerably, to be replaced by a rise in the numbers of feral cats. A neutering and educational outreach programme appeared urgently warranted.

To my delight, my hostel magically



The author in working mode at the ICLAS conference.

appeared just short of the magnificent 14th century Galata tower. I derived great enjoyment photographing it from the hostel fire escape, but my appreciation sharply plummeted sometime around 4am. An amplified yowling (not to be confused with yodelling, which is distinctly more refined) erupted from the upper balcony. Perhaps some of the stray cats were engaged in a vocal territorial dispute, on high.

But when similarly haunting sounds issued forth from loudspeakers on minarets all over the city at random times during the coming nights and days, I eventually realised it was the muezzin, or criers, calling the faithful to prayer. No less than five times each day and night – the latter seeming preferred. It proved a literally inescapable reminder that I was indeed a very, very long way from home.

Explorations

I had one glorious day free, before the conference began, so I embarked on a 90-minute Bosphorus cruise. I relaxed with a drink on the sundeck, admiring the succession of river palaces and castles rolling by.

Afterwards I wound my way into historic Sultanahmet, which may very well have the world's greatest

concentration of markets and mosques. The spice market appeared to have been in nearly constant operation for at least several centuries.

Outside, the smaller animal market was filled with overcrowded cages of panting birds, chicks and puppies, admired by shoppers apparently unaware of the welfare problems before their eyes. For



The Blue Mosque seen from Fountain Park.

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Topkapi Palace, home of the world's greatest harem.

disappointed to discover that its harem appeared temporarily closed. This realm of great beauty and mystery had expanded over the centuries to encompass nearly half the palace.

For over 300 years, no man other than the sultans, princes and eunuch guards were allowed within its inner

around 50p one could even purchase enormous leeches. I was informed that their blood-letting properties cured a wide range of illnesses.

In a rediscovered state of excellent health, I navigated a succession of winding streets up hill to the famous Blue Mosque, Istanbul's largest. After passing inspection by the foot police, who ensured all shoes were left outside, I entered within. As in Christian cathedrals I found an awe-inspiring hall, complete with beautiful stained-glass windows.

Nearby Topkapi Palace had been the home of sultans for many hundreds of years. I was deeply

domain. Perhaps, I thought, this could be my problem?

Realising I could pass for none of the former, I briefly contemplated a female disguise. But only the most beautiful women were admitted to the harem, and my inexperience with make-up could only lead to a hideous end.

I was, at least, able to view the holy relics, where I admired a succession of prophets' beards, cut up pieces of beards, and wickedly sharp, heavily bejewelled swords. In more ways than one, prophesying was clearly a hairier profession than I'd ever imagined!

Being possessed of limited courage, even more limited facial hair and only a Swiss army knife, I resolved to stick to veterinary medicine for the time being.

At least, unless my employers consent to the substantial raise I would require for the necessary jewels – in which case I feel quite sure I could supply some truly quality prophecy.

Success in the end

Sadly, the sun's fading rays heralded the dying hours of my adventure. Far sooner than I would have wished it was time to face my doom at the ICLAS conference. Amazingly, however, my talk went well. Although my prayers for language barriers sufficient to prevent rigorous questioning went unheeded, I was saved in the end by time constraints.

I only had to face one comment



Professor Dr Sülük's leeches in the market await the unhealthy.

from a gruff lady who sternly vowed she would "read my book!" – for which I duly thanked her. And after grimly going through it page by page, an even sterner gentleman informed me he'd be ordering bulk copies for his university!

Perhaps I'll find the courage to return for the next one after all, I mused, as I boarded what I hoped was the correct shuttle bus to the airport, my bag stuffed to overflowing with vegan Turkish delight.

CONSERVATION

Dealing with some notorious scavengers

PREDATOR-prey relationships are well understood by biologists. As the population of a prey species increases, predators who rely heavily on it for food enjoy better reproductive success. The predator population increases, more prey is eaten and the pendulum begins to swing in the opposite direction.

There are times when such a direct relationship does not hold true, particularly with predators that are more adaptable and can utilise a wide variety of food resources. One such species that has attracted a lot of attention recently is the magpie.

Magpies are members of the crow family and are one of our most easily recognised native birds. Not simply black and white, their feathers have a vivid iridescent sheen of greens, blues and purples.

They are notorious scavengers with some 15% of their food commonly obtained from "picking through" dog faeces. They feast on road kill, bugs and grubs and earthworms, as well as nuts and berries. Most notoriously, they are reviled as recognised pillagers of other

birds' nests for eggs and chicks.

It is this last trait that has caused so much debate recently. Is the increase in the number of magpies responsible for the decline of some of our songbird species? And should magpies be culled

VETERINARY PRACTICE

conservation correspondent, takes action against magpie attacks on the swallows in his byre

to protect vulnerable songbirds?

There are protagonists on both sides of the argument with some people adamant that magpies are guiltless and that domestic cats are far more likely to be to blame.

The RSPB takes a pragmatic view and where local conditions dictate it does use lethal control of magpies to improve songbird breeding success. This approach, though, is very much the exception rather than the rule.

At home I have certainly noticed a big increase in magpie numbers in the last five years and we have certainly experienced problems with them stealing eggs from the hen house. But it was not until very recently that I had thought it necessary to take any steps

against them.

We have had swallows nesting with us for every one of the 20 years we've lived here. Indeed, in the last two years we've had five pairs of swallows in the byre, each producing some three broods, a total of over 50 chicks reared each year. In August and September the sky over our house is usually awash with swallows.

Numerous occasions

This year things have been different. Shortly after the swallows returned in the spring, I found a magpie causing havoc in the byre. The swallows were shrieking at it and I shooshed it out.

Over the next few weeks this scenario was repeated on numerous occasions and I can report now that not a single pair of swallows has nested with success. The sky is virtually devoid of them and I miss being woken in the morning by their chattering whilst they are perched on the telephone wire outside our bedroom window.

Three weeks ago I decided to take action. Hearing the screaming of sparrows (also in decline nationwide) coming from the byre I hurried round to find three magpies flitting around in the rafters. Enough was enough, I

thought, and closed the byre doors, returning a few minutes later with the air rifle.

As I entered I felt like Spike, the dog from Tom and Jerry, the episode where he enters his kennel knowing that Tom is hiding within and intent on teaching him a serious lesson. As I pulled the door closed behind me, I resisted the temptation to give a cold, hollow laugh "to camera".

Two shots later and there were two dead magpies on the byre floor; the third escaped through a hole at the top of the door, ironically cut by myself to allow the swallows to come and go if anyone inadvertently shut the door.

Was I wrong to do what I did? I don't think so and whilst there are still plenty of magpies in the garden and surrounding fields, I haven't seen one in the byre since. I just wish that I had taken action some months earlier.

So this year we have no baby swallows to marvel at and all I can do is hope that birds will arrive from somewhere next year and chance their luck in our byre again. They can rest assured that I will "deal" with any future magpie incursions at the earliest opportunity.