

TURKEY: A SHORT GEOGRAPHICAL BRIEF

Geographical Overview

—Strategic position between Europe and Asia

—Concept of a “land bridge” or a “thoroughfare” (often for warfare)

—“Turkey controls one of the most vital seaways in Europe, the two sets of narrow straits that link the Black Sea with the Mediterranean.”¹

—“The Asian part of the country is mainly a long peninsula, bounded on the north by the Black Sea and on the south by the Mediterranean. In the southeast it borders Syria and Iraq, in the east Iran, and in the northeast Georgia and Armenia. The European part of Turkey borders Greece and Bulgaria.”²

—The Asian part of Turkey is called Anatolia. The European part is called Thrace.

—The country is predominately mountainous, with the 2,000-foot high Anatolian Plateau in the west rising to the over 6,500-foot high Pontic Mountains in the northeast, the Taurus Mountains in the south, and the Anti-Taurus Mountains in the southeast. The highest point of 16,853 feet is Mount Ararat in eastern Turkey.

—There are few extensive lowlands in Turkey, except for the central plateau and along the coasts. Coastal Plains include the Black Sea coast in the north, the Cilician Plain along the Gulf of Antalya and the Gulf of Iskenderun in the south, and the craggy Aegean coasts in the west.

—Several rivers run from the heartland into the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea respectively. The Kizil Irmak is the longest river, flowing 734 miles from east central Turkey into the Black Sea. Natural resources include a good number of metallic minerals.

—The climate varies from the Mediterranean type on the coasts to a harsh Continental type on the central plateau and in the eastern mountains. Vegetation and wildlife vary.

¹“Turkey,” *Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia* (SoftKey Multimedia Inc., 1996).

²Ibid.

—The population of Turkey is composed of a majority of Turks (80%), with Kurds as the largest minority (18%), and smaller numbers of Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, Georgians, Circassians, and Jews. About ninety-nine percent adhere to the Islamic religion (79% Sunni, 20% Shia), the remainder either Christian or Jewish. Depending upon location and local influences, the outlook of the people can be anywhere from that of modern European to traditional Oriental. There is great variation across the country as a whole due to the lasting influence of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, national leader from 1923 to 1938, who abolished Islamic law and diminished the power of religious leaders.

Historical Outline

—As Asia Minor, the Hittites, whose civilization rivaled that of the Egyptians and the Babylonians, controlled the area. They were followed by Greeks, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols, and the Turks.

—The modern history of Turkey begins with the demise of “the old man of Europe” (the Ottoman Empire) at the end of World War I, and the rise of Ataturk to power and his secular reform of the country.

Leisure and Recreation

—Cuisine: “Turkish cuisine finds its roots in Ottoman cooking, which draws from the nomadic traditions of the Central Asian tribes and the many civilizations that swept through Asia Minor. An Assyrian cookbook found during recent excavations showed that similar dishes have been served for thousands of years.”³ *Kebab* is the most famous dish.

—Hospitality: This foundation of Turkish life follows Koranic tenets that praise hosting the guest, *misafir*, with graciousness. “Hospitality is taken to such lengths that a foreigner often feels he is suffering for a surfeit of it, after being piled with food and drinks for hours and being unable to refuse anything lest he hurt his host’s feelings.”⁴ Also, associate the need for hospitality with Turkey’s geography, i.e., East-West thoroughfare, mountainous village isolation.

³Semra Mesulam, ed., *Let’s Go Turkey* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 69-70.

⁴*Turkey Travel Guide*, Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Istanbul: Guzel Sanatlar Matbaasi, 1985), 20.

—Coffee Houses: Just about every village has its *kahve* where men can talk, sip coffee or tea, and play the national game of *tavla*, backgammon. Another popular game, *okey*, is like gin rummy except played with tiles. In Istanbul, men still enjoy smoking their *nargile*, hubble bubble pipes.

—Bathhouses: Islamic law places a premium on cleanliness. *Hamam*, public bath houses, have been enjoyed since medieval times. “After entering the *hamam* and leaving one’s clothes in a cubicle, one proceeds, wrapped in a towel, *pestemal*, to the *gobek tasi*, a large heated stone, where one perspires and is rubbed down by a bath attendant. This method of bathing is most refreshing, and many of the old marble baths are very interesting architecturally.”⁵ In western Anatolia, there are over 1,000 thermal springs. Numerous towns have thermal spas with facilities for therapeutic treatments.

—Shopping: Oriental rugs are especially fine. Handwoven on upright looms, weavers work at home in village cottages, in nomad tents, or in city factories. “The fineness of the weave and the wearing qualities are determined by the number of knots. These vary from 64 to 400 to the square inch. Of the two knots in use, the Ghiordes (or double knot) is regarded as Turkish and the Sehna (or single knot) as Persian.”⁶ Orchestral cymbals, the item of choice for percussionists, have been manufactured by the Zildjian family for over 300 years.

—Storytelling: *Once the Hodja*, by Alice Kelsey, collects stories about Nasr-ed-Din, or the Hodja, that have circulated in Turkey for hundreds of years. *Korolu, the Singing Bandit*, by Barbara Walker, relates the exploits of a Turkish Robin Hood.

—Outdoor Recreation: Visitors can camp, hunt (but only in authorized parties), fish, horseback ride, mountaineer (with plenty of options, including glacial ice), and ski (snow).

—Water Recreation: Ample opportunities exist along the coasts for sailing, yachting, scuba diving, or just lounging on the beach.

⁵Ibid.

⁶“Rug and Carpet,” *Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia* (SoftKey Multimedia Inc., 1996).

—Folk Traditions: Kept alive by *asiklar*, troubadours, and played with kettle drums, clarinets, cymbals, and bells, “the lively Turkish folk music, which originated on the steppes of Asia, is in complete contrast to the refined Turkish classical music of the Ottoman court.”⁷ Folk dances include the Black Sea Dance (*Horon*), the Spoon Dance (*Kasik Oyunu*), the Sword and Shield Dance (*Kilic Kalkan*), and an Aegean Dance (called *Zeybek*). A couple of folk heroes are Nasrettin Hoca, a thirteenth century humorist and sage from Aksehir, and Karagoz, a fourteenth century jester from Bursa now immortalized as a shadow puppet.

—Traditional Sports: Camel wrestling, *deve guresi*, pits male camels against one another, but once one has established supremacy, the loser is dragged away so that no harm is done to either. This sport is played in Aegean villages in the spring. *Cirit oyunu*, a javelin game of daredevil horsemanship, allows competitors to toss wooden javelins as horsemen of the opposing team. This game is played mainly in eastern Turkey. The national sport of Turkey, one that has attracted the country’s attention for centuries, is *yagli gures* or grease / oil wrestling. Each year in July, at Kirkpinar near Edirne, the national championship is held.

—Modern Sports: Organized sports began in Turkey in 1863, when some lyceums first included physical exercise in their curricula. The Istanbul Football League was established in 1903. The first Turkish Sports Club, Galatasaray, began in 1908. In 1910, with the lifting of bans on organizations, other clubs were started, as well as the Ottoman Olympic Association. In 1922 after World War I, the Turkish Training Association Union was initiated. Under Ataturk, sports received more official attention. The country first participated in the Olympic Games in Paris in 1924.⁸

—Current Team Sports: Turkey has three football leagues, three volleyball leagues (two men’s and one women’s), three handball leagues (ditto), and three basketball leagues (ditto). Turks also participate in wrestling, taekwondo, judo, karate, archery, track and field, gymnastics, marksmanship, weight-lifting, etc.

⁷*Turkey Travel Guide*, 19.

⁸Sadi Seferoglu, “Turkiye on the Web, A Cultural Warehouse,” located at: <www.columbia.edu/~sss31/Turkiye/>, dated May 1997, accessed January 25, 2000.

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