

The call of Cappadocia

A trip through central Anatolia in Turkey gives new meaning to the phrase “going to the country for the weekend”

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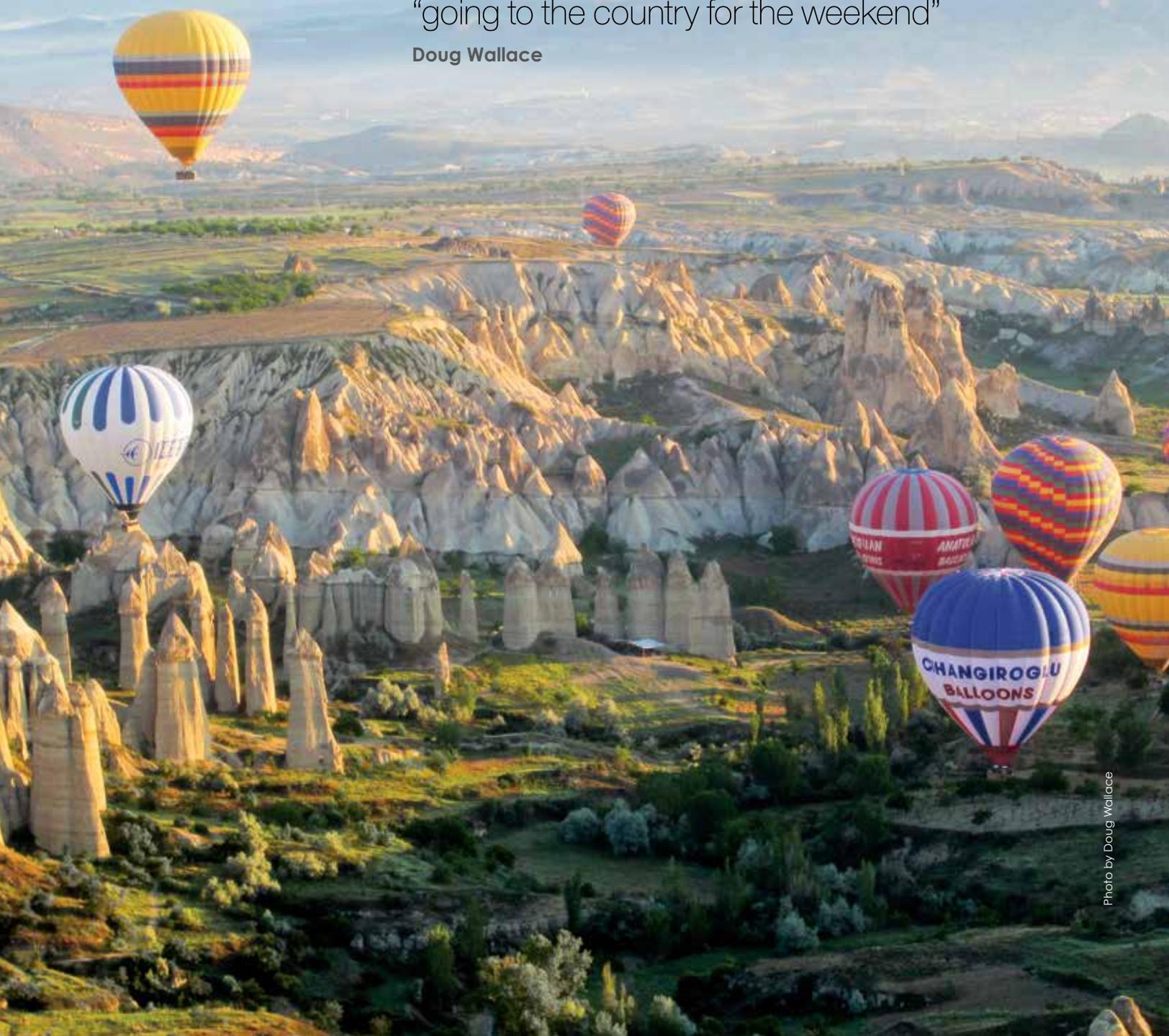




Photo by Ian Neubauer



Photo by Doug Wallace

There is no question: Your visit to Istanbul will be incredible – steeped in history, unbelievably beautiful – an amazing cultural experience.

But just a one-hour flight into the heart of Turkey brings you to Cappadocia, a historical region in Nevşehir province. Here, visitors soak up the traditional lifestyle and amazing topography right alongside the apricot farmers, making time for ancient churches and underground cities, roadside markets, regional cuisine, artisanal rug makers and ceramicists.

Cappadocia, which translates to the “land of the beautiful horses,” is characterized by a landscape of soft rock created from layers of volcanic



Photo by Doug Wallace

ash millions of years old. The unusual swaths of aptly named “fairy chimneys” in the valleys are steeples of rock that remain behind as the supporting rock around them erodes.

This region was once the realm of the Hittite Empire, laying claim to settlements that date back to Roman times and further. Ongoing archeological excavations are unearthing entire villages, such as the Sobesos Ancient City, as well as “hideout” cities deep within the hills, once used to protect townspeople from marauders and religious persecution. Of the 35 underground cities, Kaymakli and Derinkuyu are the widest and deepest respectively, where visitors can wind through a multi-storey, thousand-year-old stone maze of rooms, including stables, kitchens, storage and prayer rooms.

The still-vibrant frescoes in the rock-cut churches of the Göreme Open Air Museum preserve the religious history of Cappadocia. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, this cluster served the spiritual needs of people for centuries, acting as a monk settlement, a pilgrimage site and now one big history lesson on early Christianity. The Church of the Buckle is the

largest cave church, its ninth to eleventh century frescoes representing the 12 apostles and many saints, along with scenes from the life of Christ.

One of the best ways to soak in the lay of the land in Cappadocia is from a hot air balloon. On a nice day, you can see more than 100 balloons coasting in and around villages, vineyards and fairy chimneys. These typically leave the ground at dawn, and there are many companies with which to fly. Word to the wise: Your stomach will thank you if you have a bit of breakfast first.

Home base comes in the form of a very unique hotel experience. Most tourists embrace authentic Turkish hospitality at the many boutique cave hotels that dot the map near Göreme National Park, Nevşehir and Ürgüp, staying in rooms that were originally carved into the mountainside centuries ago. Two in particular stand out a mile for their attention to detail and all-out luxury: Yunak Evleri Cave Hotel in Ürgüp and Gamirasu Cave Hotel in Ayavali. →

For dining, the Cappadocia cuisine is as delicious as it is varied. Most meals in Turkey start with a *meze*, an array of small dishes including cheeses, eggplant salad, red peppers, yogurt, humus, olives, fava beans and sarma, or rice-stuffed grape leaves. Resist the urge to fill up on all this, though, because grilled lamb or *kofte* (meatballs) will not be far behind.

While we tend to think of kebabs as coming on skewers, there are in fact a few different kinds, including the *doner* kebab you see on vertical spits that are shaved into a pita. Keep an eye out in particular for *testi* kebab, an Anatolian beef, lamb or chicken stew baked slowly in a clay jug with green peppers, tomatoes, garlic and butter.

Post-meal, locals drink *çay* or Turkish tea from tiny, elegant glasses. In fact, Turks pause throughout the day for a glass of tea, a break called a *keyif*, which means to “appreciate the life.” Once you get a taste of Cappadocia, you will see first-hand just how much there is to appreciate. ■



Photo by Doug Wallace

If You Go

- For touring companies, Trafalgar offers an excellent guided adventure that starts and ends in Istanbul: the 15-day *Best of Turkey* trip, which takes you on and off the beaten path for a full-on cultural, insider experience.
- Turkish Airlines does the trip up right, with the Business Class service especially pampering, particularly when it comes to the meals.



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