

Pilgrim's progress: Turkey's new trekking route

A new pathway across Anatolia celebrates the Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi – in a landscape that has barely changed since he wandered here in the 17th century

Caroline Finkel
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Green route ... the Evliya trail passes through many isolated villages. Photograph: Alamy

In 1671, the great Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi, left Istanbul to undertake the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. So circuitous was his route that he took twice as long as the typical pilgrim to reach his destination.

Evliya was a courtier of the Ottoman sultan who loved to travel. For 40 years he criss-crossed the empire and beyond, from Vienna to Tabriz, from the Sea of Azov to Sudan, officially on state business, but mostly out of curiosity.

Evliya set out for Mecca with 15 horses, three companions and eight servants. Last September, I was one of six riders who embarked on an idyllic horseback expedition to retrace the early stages of his epic journey, through northwest Anatolia. Ours was the first attempt to follow one of Evliya's trails travelling as he would himself have travelled. We rode first south, then west, following in Evliya's tracks from the Sea of Marmara to the town of Simav, northeast of Izmir. Here we left his itinerary to loop back east to his ancestral home, the historic city of Kütahya, covering some 1,000km in six weeks. We aimed to establish the Evliya Çelebi Way, an equestrian and walking route (cyclists also welcome) that snakes through the ancient provinces of Bithynia and Phrygia, and also the region where the Ottoman empire was born. The Way will be the first long-distance route for riders in Turkey, and one of the handful that exist for walkers, and it takes in some of the most dramatic scenery in the country.

Horses can go anywhere. For 40 days we traversed spectacular landscapes and saw remnants of past cultures. We followed Roman roads and goat tracks, Ottoman roads and forest paths. In Turkey, unlike in Europe, there are few walls and fences. We rode along riverbeds and up and down mountains. We wound through woodland and across open plains, and walked beside cultivated fields and among laden fruit trees where local people greeted us and shared their harvest. We drank tea in isolated villages and negotiated milling cities. I had not ridden for 40 years, but revelled in my newfound freedom every stride of the way.

Our journey paid homage to a little-known individual who wrote a compendious 10-

volume account of his wanderings. Unesco's decision to proclaim Evliya Man of the Year on the 400th anniversary of his birth, in 2011, will publicise his remarkable life and work – of which little except the sections on Istanbul are at present available in English.

Sparing our horses Istanbul's sprawl, we hit Evliya's trail at the small village of Hersek, two days' ride north of the walled, lakeside town of Iznik, where the early church fathers famously gathered for the first Council of Nicaea in AD325. From there we climbed up and over a mountain range to reach the broad agricultural valley of Yenisehir, and headed west, towards the 14th-century Ottoman capital of Bursa. Again avoiding the traffic, we took one of Turkey's ubiquitous minibuses into the city to explore its gracious monuments and enjoy a day at the races; not the sort where horses gallop as fast as their jockeys can make them, but the popular Anatolian sport of *rahvan* (ridden pacing), where galloping can bring disqualification.

From Bursa, Evliya returned east, and then south across the lower slopes of the Uludag Massif (ancient Mt Olympus), dipping briefly down and rising again to cross thickly-wooded mountains that offered breathtaking views at every turn. Emerging on to the plain, we arrived at Evliya's ancestral home, the historic city of Kütahya.

Here we bathed in the 16th-century *balıklı* ("fish") hammam, where Evliya would have seen the ancestors of the carp that inhabit the courtyard pool today.

We left our steeds at a new horse sports centre while we stayed in a bed after many nights in a tent. Wild camping is permitted in Turkey except in fenced areas. Each night we asked the local village authorities to suggest a level site where we could pitch our tents near one of the ubiquitous water troughs fed by springs.

Much of the stage from Kütahya to Afyon is as flat as the ocean, and still strewn with classical remains, just as described by 19th-century travellers. In the small town of Altıntaş is a long section of Roman pavement culminating in a bridge that has seen better days. Afyon itself is famous for its many thermal baths and its medieval fortress high on a basalt plug. Half an hour's exertion takes you up a rock-cut staircase to the summit, where a panorama of mountain and plain spreads below you.

From Afyon we continued to the city of Usak, where we camped outside a village just short of the city. Usak also has a rich past. It was once the source of fabulous carpets rarely seen outside museums, and its museum houses a fabulous collection of gold artifacts dating from the seventh century BC. It is also famous as a centre of *cirit*, the other great Anatolian horse sport where riders hurl wooden javelins at one another as they dash from end to end of the pitch.

Leaving Evliya's route at Simav, we returned to Kütahya along the north of the Saphane mountain, via Çavdarhisar, a town best known as the site of the extensive classical city of Aizanoi whose ruins lie all around in romantic profusion. The most celebrated of these is the well-preserved Temple of Zeus, standing proudly on its high terrace. Our post-expedition cleansing, this time in Kütahya's thermal baths, was a welcome finale.

In September 2010, the Evliya Çelebi Way long distance cultural route will be inaugurated with the first ride organised for equine-tourists. The 17-day trip, of which nine days will be on horseback, will begin near Istanbul and finish in Kütahya.

Finding horses outside an organised expedition cannot be guaranteed, but the whole route will be accessible to walkers from next year when a guidebook based on the GPS waypoints recorded on our expedition is published by Upcountry (Turkey) Ltd. Relying also on signposts at critical junctions, other riders should then be able to follow in our – and Evliya's – tracks across this under-appreciated region of Turkey.

Best of all, our adventure is not yet over. Next year we will make another journey in Evliya Çelebi's hoofprints to establish a second Way in his honour: from Gaziantep, in southeast Turkey, to Aleppo in Syria, and back to Urfa in Turkey.

• *A place on The Great Anatolian Ride (29 August-14 September or 14-30 September) can be booked through the following operators: Far And Ride from £2,572pp; Equitours from US\$3,900; or Akhal-Teke Horse Riding Center, same price as Equitours.*

• For more information on the *Evliya Çelebi Way* project, visit kent.ac.uk/english/evliya/index.html or hoofprinting.blogspot.com. In August, *The Book of Travels: Evliya Çelebi's Journey Through the Ottoman World*, edited and translated by Robert Dankoff and Sooyong Kim (Eland, £18.99), will be published. Caroline Finkel is the author of *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1923* (John Murray, £14.99).

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