

You're welcome in Malatya

Visitors get red carpet treatment in bountiful Turkish city

BY TERRY BOYD

Stars and Stripes

Somehow, I thought I'd cash in my 15 minutes of fame somewhere a little closer to home. I always imagined, say, walking Sunset Boulevard when Spike Lee spots me for a movie. Or making the crime page ("... man sought for running up world record in unpaid parking tickets ...") of my hometown newspaper.

Instead, fame came in Malatya, a remote city in south-east Turkey, and it turned out to be better than I'd imagined.

People on the street actually pointed and said, "Look, there they are" as our odd little party — three whitebread Americans, one Turkish-American, one Turkish grandmother and three children who have spent most of their lives here — shopped the market area.

The reason for all the pointing, we finally learned, is that we were featured on the local television news the night before. We are the tourists who came all the way from Izmir and Istanbul to see — as Malatya's hefty, jovial tourism director points out every few seconds while the cameras were rolling — the dried-apricot capital of the world.

Actually, we had come here on our way to Nemrut Dag, a curious mountaintop refreshingly free of any historical significance.

Our trip took form the previous August when we met Akin Ugur from Malatya's Tourism Bureau at an Izmir International Fair. The boss of Akin Bey ("Bey," the Turkish version of "mister," goes after the first name) had sent him to Izmir to head up Malatya's effort to pry people out of western Turkey, and it worked. My wife and daughters and our friends — U.S. Army Capt. David Cluxton and his wife, Victoria Rebman, and their daughter Katherine, and Victoria's mother Sercin Rebman, who lives in Istanbul — decide to head east.

After meeting up at the Ankara airport, Victoria calls Akin Bey for a hotel referral before we fly the 45 minutes southeast to Malatya. Instead, Akin Bey tells her to sit tight at the airport once we arrive in Malatya and that he'll send a van to take us the 10 miles into town. Cool.

Sure enough, a driver is waiting for us, and we drive through a huge valley, past green oases of orchards and vineyards in per-



PHOTOS BY TERRY BOYD/Stars and Stripes

As you travel farther east in Turkey, faces seem less and less European. Here, two friends stop for a moment to pose on the edge of the city's large market. The area's superior produce and horse farms have attracted workers and investors, swelling Malatya's population to about 1 million.

fect counterpoint to treeless mountains, into the green city of Malatya. We unload at the Bezginler Hotel — which, loosely translated, means "those who are fed up." Sercin sees the name and remarks, "What a terrible name for a hotel!" For a nice little hotel, it turns out. Which is our first insight into Malatya's marketing savvy, or lack of.

Utterly gracious and patient, Akin Bey is waiting, and after we check in, the VIP treatment begins, much to our surprise. First, he treats us to a late lunch at the Turistik Restaurant and Café, a few blocks from our hotel. We work leisurely through masses of wonderful Turkish salads and *mezes*, or appetizers, then chicken and *kofte*, spicy meat patties.

During the main courses, our tall, thin and rather aristocratic host tells us how the area's superior apricots, cherries, apples, walnuts and horse farms have attracted workers and investors, swelling Malatya's population from a few hundred thousand in the 1980s to about 1 million people today. In addition, the huge Ozal Medical Center and Medical School and several industries including textiles make the city perhaps the most prosperous in the east.

Then, after lunch, things really get interesting as our little party walks to city hall to meet the local tourism chief. Passing up the main entrance, we head



All eyes are on Victoria Rebman, holding daughter, Katherine, 4, while taking on an interview question from Malatya's tourism chief. Her mother, Sercin, seems amused at seeing Victoria on the spot. At right, Akin Ugur is the man charged with bringing more tourists to Malatya.

toward a side door. When David and I start wondering why the detour, Sercin asks Akin Bey where we're headed. She matter-of-factly relays back us that Akin Bey has to use the side door to his office because he can't go in the main city hall entrance carrying his gun.

David and I look at each other simultaneously mouthing exactly the same two words: "His gun?"

Why, we're wondering, does the tourism guy need a gun?

Sercin shrugs in the casual way Turks blithely acknowledge the remarkable and says, "Oh, they all carry guns down here."

Malatya is on the edge of Turkey's Wild, Wild East, where Kurdish separatists and the Turkish military have fought mountain-village-by-mountain-village for the last 15 years.

Fortunately, the valleys between are rich in agricultural and natural resources, including oil, somewhat insulating Malatya from the instability just a few miles farther east in Diyarbakir, Batman and Siirt.

A local carpet dealer, Ali Dincarslan, tells me that the Kurdish/Turkish population in Malatya — about 50/50 — has reached a

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In addition to being the northern access city to the monolithic monuments of Nemrut Dag, Malatya is a carpet making center. Here, with thousands of yarn hues to choose from, a young man works on a damaged Kazak carpet from farther east in Turkey.

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modus vivendi basically through inter-marriage.

"I have two sisters-in-law who are Kurdish. And really half my family is Turkish, half my family is Kurdish. That's not unusual," he says. "So, how can we be separated?"

Still, Malatya has not been immune from the troubles — regional and international — and local tourism suffers. "Before 1991, we'd get four busloads (of tourists) every day, mostly Germans," Dincarslan says. "But when the Gulf War started, it died."

Sure enough, we didn't see any other Westerners in Malatya, and being eight in 1 million brings instant celebrity. With Akin smugly at our side like the captain of a boat that's just filled its hold with tuna, we end up in his boss's office making small talk.

Next thing we know, video cameras appear and Akin Bey's boss is interviewing Sercin and Victoria. Sercin, who was born in Istanbul, is all gracious smiles and loquacious answers. Then it's

Victoria's turn. Though born in Turkey, Victoria grew up in the United States with Turkish her second language. Still, she soldiers through without a translator, answering in what, knowing Victoria, was perfect diplomacy.

Then it's the turn of the foreign reporter. The tourism director loses me in the first paragraph of his multi-part question. Seeing my panic, an interpreter condenses it to, "So, why did you come here?" I don't even remember what I said, and looking back on it, I'm certain it was insipid, if not incoherent. Luckily, they cut my bit out, focusing the cameras instead on my two blue-eyed, blond daughters.

What I would say now is that I secretly hope Malatya's tourism effort is an utter failure. Sorry, Akin Bey, but Malatya is rich enough without a bunch of outsiders mucking it up, making the locals truly "bezginler" with the McDonald's, Benetton's and BMWs of Turkey's western cities.

You're just going to have to be satisfied knowing that of the few authentic places left on earth, Malatya's among the best.



The streets of Malatya aren't exactly paved with gold, but agriculture, oil and manufacturing make it wealthier than most cities in eastern Turkey. Here, light from gold shops give the jewelry district a distinct golden glow on a fall evening.



PHOTOS BY TERRY BOYD/Stars and Stripes

In this traditional city, you see men on the streets nearly round the clock while women tend to go indoors after dark. Here, supporters of a local soccer club try to drum up support on a street corner.

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