



The man-sized heads in the foreground, including one depicting King Antiochus I, left, Nemrut Dag's creator, used to be on the three-story statues in the background. A series of earthquakes separated them.



This 6-foot-tall head once sat on the three-story high statue of Zeus, the king of the Greek gods from whom Antiochus I, Nemrut Dag's creator, believed himself to be directly descended.

Partying with the gods

Folks enjoy a visit with eerie ancient statues on Turkish mountain

BY TERRY BOYD
Stars and Stripes

On the interminable drive to Nemrut Dag from Malatya I'm consoling myself with the fact that when we get there — if we get there — we assuredly will be the only people on the 7,000-foot summit.

The bizarre statues atop Nemrut Dag ("Dag," pronounced "daa," is Turkish for mountain) must be among the most remote major attractions in the world. We drive this vile snake of a road from Malatya at rally-racing speed — stopping only for episodes of motion sickness.

The last real village is an hour behind us when, at the three-hour mark, the road literally ends. There's a huge bulldozer rolling around mini-boulders in this lunar landscape where the road used to be.

Our surly Kurdish driver sort of shrugs and turns off the engine until the bulldozer moves and something like a path appears.

More than an hour later, we're finally at the summit. And it is a queer sight. All of Nemrut Dag's treasures are displayed on two large terraces, one on the east, one on the west of a delicately contoured fake mountain top. The terraces are decorated with very peculiar pointy-headed statues that look more Egyptian than Greek.

With the crowds weaving through the heads and statues, Nemrut Dag seems more like a Fellini movie set than a ruin.

Yes, crowds. I'm shocked that in late October — the very last week before

snow traditionally starts falling here far above the treeline — there are perhaps 150 people milling around the statues and reliefs at sunset.

A British woman named Elizabeth and fellow travelers from New Zealand are celebrating her 22nd birthday with wine, a birthday cake and a picnic dinner. And though they're not aware of it, they're sort of continuing a 2,000-year-old tradition. King Antiochus I built this sacred mountaintop temple and tomb complex so that his subjects could come here from his kingdom around modern-day Khata and Aydiaman to the south and celebrate his birthday, as well as anniversaries of his coronation.

Nemrut Dag is one of the rare ancient sites that can be summed up in a few paragraphs: Antiochus, half Persian, half Seleucid — the kingdom that stretched from what is now northern Greece to India — believes himself descended from both Persian and Greco-Roman gods.

As king of Commagene, a wealthy buffer state between Persian and Roman empires, Antiochus has more money than sense. So around 65 BC, he builds himself this huge tomb/temple with statues three stories high of him and his god buddies atop the highest mountain in the area. And just to make sure it's the highest mountain in the area, he adds 150 feet of tumulus, the bits of rubble left over from carving the statues.

No one has ever located the tomb, but the statues remain, rendered headless by earthquakes.

Perhaps the oddest products of Antiochus' delusions of grandeur are the re-

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Finally, the summit. Katherine Cluxton, left, and Lucy Boyd, both 4, pose with the stone gods atop Nemrut Dag after three days of relentless travel and bouts of motion sickness on roller-coaster mountain roads.



In a scene that probably looks much like it did in 50 B.C., when Nemrut Dag was a work in progress, a traveler arrives at the summit by donkey. Two millennia later, it's still a difficult trip, taking most of a day to reach from either Malatya on the north or Adiyaman on the south.