

You want to take the train?



PHOTOS BY TERRY BOYD/Stars & Stripes

Above: A conductor on Turkey's national railway is ready to start another trip to Ankara. Though some of Turkey's rolling stock is old and neglected, most overnight express trains are up to date, clean and inviting. At top right: The author's daughter takes a last look at the Izmir station before beginning the big trip to Ankara. Trains are kid-friendly, other than the smoke-filled dining car.

Despite what they say, Turkish trains can be a very pleasant ride

BY TERRY BOYD

Stars and Stripes

Don't do it. As we were preparing to move to Turkey three years ago, Americans who had lived there told us to never to take the trains.

When we arrived, the message was the same. Don't take the train, said our Turkish friends. It's dirty. It's slow. It's uncomfortable.

Take the cross-country buses. Fly. Drive. But don't take the train.

Don't do it.

But then last summer, we started hearing good things about the train. Specifically, the Izmir-to-Ankara overnight express.

Lyn Ashford, wife of the Air Force chaplain at 423rd Air Base Squadron in Izmir, told my wife that the train is great fun and a great bargain. Lyn is sophisticated and worldly and knows what she is talking about, so we decided to take the train to Ankara as the first leg of a mad-dash weekend trip, flying on from Ankara to Malatya in southeast Turkey, then driving to Nemrut Dag, about 50 miles south of Malatya for a one-day visit.

But when my wife, Cheryl, went to see Sema, our favorite travel agent, Sema couldn't believe her ears.

"You want to take the train?" Sema asked. "No one takes the train."

Cheryl persisted. So did Sema. The "express" train takes 15 hours to crawl the 400 miles from Izmir, (Turkey's westernmost major city) to Ankara (on the central Anatolian plain), she said. You can fly there in maybe three hours, maximum five depending on connections.

No, said Cheryl, we want to take the train. Sema shrugged and wrote two first-class tickets for the sleeping car, which cost about \$60 round trip — less than half the cost of flying. And unlike

the plane, our daughters — Lale, 15 months, and Lucy, 4 — go for free.

I try to prepare everyone for how bad train travel can be, relating tales of the infernally crowded Catalan Talgo from Montpellier, France, to Barcelona, Spain, and finding the Barcelona station to be one of the more revolting places on earth. And we'd had a horrible experience in 1999 traveling from Frankfurt, Germany, to northern France.

The truth is, rail service is declining even in Europe, where people would rather drive or fly. I read recently that Germany has cut its rail budget and that trains no longer have dining cars.

But when we arrive at the Alsancak Train Station, a two-minute taxi ride from our apartment in central Izmir, on a warm Thursday in late October, we realize that this is going to be great.

We were expecting a filthy, chaotic train station. Instead, Izmir's is virtually empty, spotless and inviting. The staff at the ticket and information desk are helpful and friendly. We hand our hustling porter our bags and we're set. In fact, we have 45 minutes to kill, which we spend taking family photos and chatting with people in the station.

Our sleeping car is fairly spacious, with two pull-down berths. Our compartment turns out to have a small refrigerator, which doesn't work very well, and a sink with hot — very hot — water.

With the door closed, the kids have a little room to romp or play with their toys. But Lale, who's been walking for five months, loves the long aisle, popping into our fellow travelers' compartments uninvited to check on them every so often.

What I'd forgotten in all these years of travel is just how relaxing a good train can be. As we roll out of the Alsancak station at precisely 6:35 p.m., Cheryl and I

SEE <\$\$JN> ON PAGE <\$\$PN>



PHOTOS BY TERRY BOYD/Stars & Stripes

A porter in Ankara, Turkey, wheels the baggage — along with 4-year-old Lucy Boyd — to a taxi, and the next leg of the adventure.

<\$\$JN>, FROM PAGE <\$\$PN>

have fun checking out neighborhoods we've never visited as we skirt the western edge of Izmir. By the time we get to the junction that swings us northeast from Manisa toward the mountains around Usak, then Eskisehir, it's dark.

Which means that it's time to eat. The dining car is connected to our sleeper, so we herd the kids through the automatic doors and into a nearly new diner. Dinner is tasty, inexpensive and served on real china. It totals 12,000,000 Turkish lira, or about \$8 at the time, including tea and sodas. Only problem is that though there is a no-smoking section, cigarette smoke doesn't seem to be able to read, and most of the car is at lethal levels of secondhand smoke. That said, we should have sat nearer the kitchen where the ventilation was much better.

We get the kids settled in early, and I go back to the dining car to read old issues of the Wall Street Journal, smoke cigars and indulge in 60-cent rakis, Turkey's anisette-laced national drink. And I think to myself, "Boy, this beats the heck out of racing through airports or fighting traffic." I actually have time to think and appreciate why so many authors, from Agatha Christie to Paul Theroux, wrote often and longingly about trains. In the days when there were good trains.

The night passes smoothly,



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and after we open the windows to relieve the over-efficient heater, everyone sleeps well, sedated by the swaying car. When we awake about 6:30 the next morning, we have to adjust to the pure sunlight of the central plains, unfiltered by city pollution.

Breakfast is the highlight of the day. We're transfixed by the scenery, breaking our attention only long enough for another cup of tea or coffee poured gallantly by the server.

The kids seem to think the dining car's windows are big-screen TVs as they watch the world pass by at a pleasant clip. It's almost disappointing as we roll into Ankara at about 10:30 a.m., an hour late.

The return trip we make a few days later is just as smooth and relaxing — and on time — though the dining car is a little decrepit.

We have learned that the express trains linking the big cities are Turkey's best. Local trains are not as nice, and are used mostly by villagers who can't afford cars.

Traveling ahead of her husband, Mark, a British airman, our friend Sue Rendell and her boys Thomas, 8, and Jonathan, 4, recently took the local from Alsancak in Izmir down to their seaside summerhouse outside Selcuk.

"The train was really, really packed. It was uncomfortable, though it wasn't bad because we got the last seat," she said. "It was very busy, and it stopped everywhere, whether it needed to or not."

The train trip took two hours instead of the usual 45 minutes by car, she said.

On the plus side, women on the train kept feeding her and the boys apples, oranges and cucumbers "and we saw lots of little villages that you'd never see from the highway."

"Thomas loved it. Jonathan hated it and said he never wants to do it again," she said.

But we do. Even if the express train had not been great, we would still use trains as an alternative to flying as we dread lugging the kids through airports and onto cramped planes.

Sometimes at night we get out our travel books and maps of Turkey. We put a finger on places as far as you can go from Izmir and we ask the magic question: "I wonder if the train goes there?"



PHOTO BY TERRY BOYD/Stars & Stripes

Rail workers in the countryside wave at the passing train. Besides comfort, scenery is a big reason to go by rail in Turkey. The Izmir-to-Ankara train takes you across the great Anatolian plain, where craggy mountains give way to bits of green.