

Christmas

My 2011 Christmas present was a trip to Istanbul. My partner and I had the naive hope that there we could escape from the whole tinselly hoopla. Christmas in western countries now begins in September so by the time December comes around I've had enough. I saw an article once about a British man who liked Christmas so much he celebrated it every day of the year, including the stuffed bird and the plum pud. This man obviously qualifies as a bona fide nutter but he is the retailers' dream human.

Christmas not only starts early these days but is also now very widespread. Asia has taken to it in a big way. Christmas is not only made in China it is celebrated there (or at least a weird Sino-Pop version of it is).

Istanbul too had some tinsel and lights and the Christmas-themed advertising but not too much. It made an interesting counterpoint to the call to prayer.

I had wanted to see Istanbul for some time and the city exceeded expectations. Its ancient heart is wonderful for walking and the carpet-sellers are friendly. For a fan of good grub Istanbul is heaven. For a history buff the place is fascinating.

I was fascinated by the constant presence of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, hero of Gallipoli and founder of the Turkish Republic. He died in 1938 but his image remains absolutely current. One particularly large painting of the father of the nation hangs in the great hall of Sirkeci central post office. This giant figure towers over the humble supplicants for stamps. I was reminded of Franco-era Spain where the Generalissimo's mug was on everything. I still have some of the stamps from that time with pictures of Franco as chameleon in purple (25cts), green (50cts), and orange (1pta).

Outside of the metropole I was given more reminders, this time by the guardians of Atatürk's legacy, the Turkish military. We visited Anadolu Kavağı to see its 14th-century fortress (Byzantine military), take a look out to the Black Sea and eat a fish lunch while watching Russian tankers ply the Bosphorus. In warm sunshine on Christmas Day with not a shred of tinsel in sight.

Walking back down the hill from the restaurant I spotted a bit of castle with various brightly-painted barriers in front of it. History! Pattern! Colour! Sunlight! shouted my photographer brain and out came the Olympus XA. In no time I was the Cartier-Bresson of inanimate objects and had captured the decisive moment. Which was followed a second afterward by the decisive shriek of a whistle. Now my photographer eye zoomed in on the white hut and the whistle-blowing man at its little window. And then, like a jack-in-a-box, a soldier appeared. A heavily-armed, flak-jacketed, helmeted kind of soldier. Suddenly I was a war photographer, which is not something I ever wanted to be. I do believe the soldier laughed as I backed away in confusion. Least ways he didn't shoot me. Probably because it was Christmas.

The decisive moment turned out well. Raking winter light illuminates a hulking Byzantine tower in the background and an arrangement of fencing, blocks and poles in the foreground. Lots of stripes: yellow and black, red and white. To the right there's a small white portakabin with windows. And not a soul in sight. It would make a good Christmas card.