



MOSQUE

feet off the floor. One of the two drawings on a wall was that of a rose ... which we were told was sometimes used to represent Mohammed. It is said that Mohammed had the smell of a rose. (Today in Turkey, guests to a house are often greeted with a small amount of rose water sprinkled on their hands – in memory of Islam’s prophet)

THE INTERIOR OF THE MODERN



THE CHURCH

As I left the modern mosque ahead of the rest of the group I realized that one of our Muslim friends from UTSA was not with us. I entered the Church to find him sitting in one of the pews – apparently deep in thoughtful meditation. The parallel was striking – I had felt a spiritual presence in the Blue Mosque, and my Muslim friend finds that same presence in a church.

Theater of Aspendos

After visiting the garden of tranquility, we drove for about an hour to the *Theater of Aspendos*, the best preserved ancient theater in Asia Minor and the most magnificent Roman building in the province of Pamphylia. Built between the years 161 and 180 AD during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the theater is still used today for summer concerts. The theater seats about 15,000 people (just slightly less than the A T and T center), and as we experienced, a person speaking on the stage without the use of electronic



At **INSIDE THE ASPENDOS**

amplification could easily be heard at the top row of seats. Unfortunately our visit was about a week before the evening concerts began. Did St. Paul preach here? Was this the theater where he might have begun his ministry? Though some have said it was, the fact that the theater was built about 100 years after Paul's death lets history speak for itself.

A short distance from the Theater, are the remains of the ancient city of Perge (believed to date back to around 1500BC). This was the first visit on our trip to the ruins of an ancient city. We walked down the main street where modern vendors peddled their goods on blankets spread on the ground amid remains that are probably the small shops two thousand years ago. We strolled through the remains of homes and visited the remains of the public baths. Its height, the population reached almost 200,000.

Perge is first mentioned in the Bible in Acts 13:13 ("Now Paul and his company set sail from Paphos, and came to Perge in Pamphylia. And John* left them and returned to Jerusalem.") This was at the beginning of St. Paul's first journey. Perge is mentioned only one other time in the New Testament, Acts 14:25. We learn from this second scripture passage that Paul did preach in this ancient city, and we were indeed traveling on the roads and walking in streets where the great Apostle to the Gentiles had walked almost 2000 years ago.

The remainder of that day was spent visiting typical tourist places of the region and an early evening flight took us to the modern city of Izmir near which we would find the remains of the ancient city of Ephesus, the basilica of St. John and a house believed to be the final dwelling place of the Virgin Mary.

*The identity of the John mentioned here is questionable. Many scholars believe to be "John, also known as Mark" (Acts 12:12) who is also identified as the probable writer of the third Gospel. Nevertheless the exact identity of the John of Acts 13:13 remains inconclusive.

The early evening flight to Izmir afforded our group the opportunity to spend a relaxing evening in the hotel lobby discussing the highlights of that day and the upcoming expectations of the following day. As we stepped off the bus we felt the humid breeze of the Aegean Sea though we could not see the water because of the sand dunes. I knew our schedule would be hectic, so I decided I would get up early the next morning and take a walk to the beach, which may be my only opportunity to stand on the shores of another mid-eastern ocean.

Looking out the hotel room window in the morning, the magnificent sunrise left little to be desired as colorful rays peeked over the horizon. I quickly got dress and trekked about a half mile along what appeared to have been a hastily constructed and a somewhat uneven concrete sidewalk linking the hotel and the ocean. While reflecting on the antiquity of the area, I picked up some small seashells from the sandy beach to keep as souvenirs.



It was still early when I returned to the hotel. No one from our travel group was in the lobby or the restaurant, so I returned to my room and took a quick shower to wash off the salty residue of the ocean wind. When I looked out the window again, the early morning sun revealed a man watching his small herd of cattle (about 12 head) grazing in the small field below. Two dogs helped him keep the “herd” together and if a cow wandered too far the trained dogs would corral the stray back to the group. I

wondered if this man and his simple lifestyle might be the descendent of a herdsman of apostolic times ...

After eating a traditional Turkish breakfast of hard-boiled eggs, cereal and some food items I have yet to identify, we boarded our minibus and headed toward a mountain just outside the ruins of Ephesus. The driver skillfully maneuvered the vehicle up the narrow winding road. Several times I looked out the window but could not see the edge of the road. The lush green tropical-like forest below looked like a soft pillow to cushion a fall. “We’re going to visit your house, Mary,” I thought, “please bring us there safely”.

After traveling upward for almost fifteen minutes the bus pulled into a parking lot from which, looking out over the horizon, we could see other mountains in the distance. I’m not sure what the elevation was, but I remember thinking that if this indeed was the final home of the Virgin Mary, she must have wanted to spend her last years on earth as close as she could to her Son.

As we exited the bus, our tour guide directed us across the parking lot, still mostly empty because of the early hour, to a narrow path that continued upward. After several minutes of walking, we came to a small, white arrow-shaped sign whose black letters simply read “**Mary’s House**”.

The house of the Virgin Mary

Early in the nineteenth century a German Nun of the Augustinian Order, Anne Catherine Emmerich (d. Feb. 9, 1924), a stigmatic and an ecstatic, wrote of her visions of the Blessed Virgin. In these writings she described the location of Mary's final home on earth in the hills outside Ephesus. Herself an invalid, Sister Emmerich never left Germany. Following her notes, two expeditions were formed to search for the house, the foundations of which were discovered by the second expedition toward the end of the 19th century. Sr. Anne Catherine Emmerich was beatified by Pope John Paul II on October 3, 2004.



Mary's House

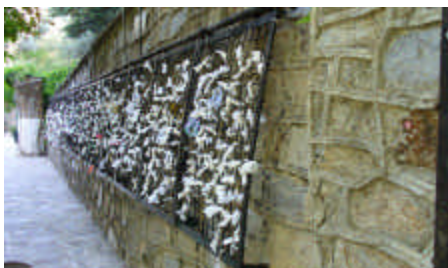


Guide pointing line of rocks indicating the level of the walls when the house was discovered.



Nun at Prayer

Our Turkish tour guide led us along a narrow winding trail which led to the entrance of a small courtyard. In the center was a circular “hole”, about three feet deep and twelve feet in diameter, with a series of opposing steps. This appears to have been a pool or outdoor bath. On the opposite side of the courtyard was a small, L-shaped rock building – Mary's House. Our Guide pointed to the rocks from ground level to about two feet up. They were slightly darker than the rocks above and he explained that when the house was discovered this line marked all that remained. The house has been rebuilt and today is a small chapel. As we entered I noticed a nun seated in a chair to the left of the altar. She was reading from her Prayer Book. I stepped to one side and remained behind for a few minutes contemplating the history of this humble building as our group continued on.



Back outside, our guide pointed us toward a “prayer wall” – a rock wall with a metal grid-like mesh on which pilgrims, Christians and Muslims alike, write petitions and place them in the metal grid. There were petitions written on candy wrappers, shoelaces, and any number of various scraps of paper, all left behind asking for Mary's intercession.

Not far from the prayer wall were faucets that were tapped into natural springs. Several veiled women were filling water jars there. As I was later to learn, spring water from a holy sight is considered by many Muslims to be beneficial to one's spiritual and physical health. This "holy" water is often drunk or poured over one's head. I quickly emptied a bottle of *Ozarka* that I had with me, and refilled it from the spring.



**Faucet in wall from which visitors
fill bottles of water**

Our guide, himself a Muslim, told us about his wife (then his finance) who, when she had finished college, was unable to find a job in Izmir. She made a pilgrimage to Mary's house where she prayed and left her petition. Two weeks later she was hired by the Turkish government, a job she still holds today. And, he told us, she returns here every year ... to give thanks.

On November 11, 1979, 13 months after his election to the Pontificate, Pope John Paul II visited Mary's house, and on November 28, 2006 Pope Benedict XVI said an outdoor Mass at the sight.

This past August I saw a brief news clip about a forest fire around Mary's house. Unable to find any more details in the American press, I solicited the help of a freelance Turkish journalist here in San Antonio and he was able to get information via internet from the Turkish media. A series of forest fires, not unlike those we have seen in California, destroyed large areas of forest. One video clip showed helicopters dropping water and chemicals on the fire in an effort to contain it. Another showed a firefighter carrying a nun from Mary's house. Almost miraculously, she was not hurt and there was no damage to the structure from the fire. I can only imagine what the lush green forest that we had seen must have looked like after the fire.

As we traveled back down the narrow road that had brought us to Mary's House, traffic coming up in the opposite direction was getting heavier. It was now a little past midmorning so we had eluded the heavier onslaught of pilgrims/tourists. However as we reached the parking lot just beyond the ancient city of Ephesus, The crowds we thought we had alluded found us.

The archeological uncoverings of this ancient city, made famous to ancient and modern Christians by the writing of St. Paul, have only been underway about two decades. Most of what has been unearthed is the public areas of the city - the "main drag", the shops, the theaters, the sports arena, the public baths and toilets (where much of the business of this seaport city took place), the library and the brothel.