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Anastasia M. Ashman , Jennifer Eaton Gokmen , Jessica J.J. Lutz (Contributor)

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As the Western world struggles to comprehend the paradoxes of modern Turkey, a country both European and Asian, forward-looking yet rooted in ancient empire, *Tales from the Expat Harem* reveals its most personal nuances. This illuminating anthology provides a window into the country from the perspective of thirty-two expatriates from seven different nations - artists, entrepreneurs, Peace Corps volunteers, archaeologists, missionaries, and others - who established lives in Turkey for work, love, or adventure. Through narrative essays covering the last four decades, these diverse women unveil the mystique of the "Orient," describe religious conflict, embrace cultural discovery, and maneuver familial traditions, customs, and responsibilities. Poignant, humorous, and transcendent, the essays take readers to weddings and workplaces, down cobbled Byzantine streets, into boisterous bazaars along the Silk Road, and deep into the feminine stronghold of steamy Ottoman bathhouses. The outcome is a stunning collection of voices from women suspended between two homes as they redefine their identities and reshape their worldviews. Coining the "expat harem" as a distinct community, the editors also boldly reclaim the concept of an Eastern harem - long the subject of erroneous Western stereotype. "Much like the imported brides of fifteenth-century sultans, our expat harem is conjured by the shared circumstance of being foreign-born and female in a land laced with a harem tradition," Ashman and Gokmen declare. "Our writers are inextricably wedded to Turkish culture, embedded in it, yet alien nonetheless."

Tales from the Expat Harem: Foreign Women in Modern Turkey Details

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Kate says

I can't remember the last time I enjoyed an anthology of essays this much -- I began to pace myself in the second half so I wouldn't finish it so quickly. I started this book during my first 6-day trip to Turkey; reading it for weeks after we returned felt like an expansive and deepening continuation of my first experiences there. I particularly enjoyed how much Turkish language the storytellers weave into their tales; it reminds me that some concepts just don't translate and are best understood in their native language and cultural context. I also appreciate the reminder the deep personal transitions can be the outcome of struggles and intentional reflection. The breadth and diversity of the content and the authors is deeply satisfying. I heartily recommend this book to anyone interested in deepening their understanding of Turkey and/or the expatriate experience.

Nico says

I happened to get this book from my parents somehow. They traveled to Turkey, and maybe it was something someone gave them... I am not sure. Even though I don't specifically have (or I should say "have had") an interest in Turkey as such, this book really helped me appreciate the culture, people, and customs...for a time when I might - some day - perhaps be able to travel again. This book was published before the serious unrest and influx of refugees from Syria, which I think needs to be taken into account. Even so, it's a wonderful read.... There are a number of short stories written by a variety of English-speaking women from different backgrounds. Well written, concise, and interesting. A lucky find for me!

Catherine says

I'm going to Istanbul this summer and this is a great introduction into the culture. The short stories are from women living in Turkey, but not native Turks. Great insight. My favorite so far is the peace corp volunteer whose American friends prayed for her safety as she departed for Turkey and her Turkish friends were so worried about her returning to the violence of America after her two year stint in the safety of Turkey.

Rebecca says

I'm about a forth way through of the short entries from these expats and am enjoying the book more than I expected. Of particular interest to me is the contrasts made between the Western society's rules regarding a woman's body as compared to the norms in Turkish society. For example, one expat notes that the women, in the presence of an immam, cover their faces but not their nursing breasts, while in the US, only recently, do laws allow women to breastfeed in public without the legal accusation of lewd behavior. However, in religious locales in the US, patrons are advised to follow the rules of the places, which most likely, involve covering up the breast.

Another story involves the anxious quest by a woman to the pharmacy for a commonplace feminine malady - yeast infections - anticipating the group participation in what the writer felt was a private physical and potential moral blemish, only to find that people of all ages and genders immediately looked past her physical circumstance (and as anticipated, all in the store vicinity attempted to help her with her issue, whether their assistance was requested or not) to comfort her through a sense of common humanity. Another example which makes the body in Western culture beyond what one would term intimate, and instead, taboo, and sinful.

Other stories involving gender roles in the formation of relationships are also quite interesting.

Christie says

I am really enjoying the varied tales of the experience of foreign women living in modern Turkey. My sister lived for many years in Turkey and in Italy and I think of her often during my reading. In the same time period, I lived in Mexico as a wife and a mother, my husband a Mexican national. While the Turkish experience is very unique in many ways, the experience of sharing a family and traditions does not seem to vary so much from one country to another. I am coming away from this book with a lot of love for the Turkish family as I have for the warmth of the Mexican people.

Anisa Ali says

I thought this book would be good for me to read because I will be teaching English in Turkey for a year, and have been wondering what it would be like as a western woman traveling and living by herself in Turkey. As a compilation of Western women's experiences traveling to and living in Turkey, the book is definitely helpful in understanding Turkish culture, family relations, and dating/relationships/marriage customs. It was divided into several different themes, including: experiences with the Turkish bath, romantic relationships with Turkish men, wedding ceremonies to Turkish men, the role of superstitions in Turkish culture, and Turkish hospitality.

Although I felt that some pieces of the same theme were a bit redundant (I found this especially with the weddings section), the book as a whole can be very eye-opening to someone that hasn't been a part of, seen, or been really familiar with Turkish (or a similar) culture. As someone raised in a Pakistani family, I found that I was not surprised by many things mentioned in the book, including the large extended family networks, restrictions on romantic relationships in conservative families, and a deep belief in superstitious rituals. However, I could also say that the selections were useful in at least confirming what I had already suspected.

Another thing I got from this book is that it's important to remember the diverse lifestyles within Turkey. Turkey varies widely in religiousness, as well as the degree of Westernization. As is apparent in the various pieces throughout the book, many of the authors had vastly different experiences with their travels to various parts of the country, and with relationships with Turkish men. While some women seemed able to travel throughout the country with little bother from local men, other women struggled with unwanted and persistent attention from men. Also, some authors who married Turkish men did not encounter much difficulty in being accepted into the Turkish family (for various reasons), while others really struggled with it.

My favorite piece is the very last one, which is about a fundamentalist Christian woman in Turkey for the

purpose of proselytizing Muslims. She describes her journey in letting go of her fundamentalism as she became closer and closer to the Turkish family she lived with. She also explains how she was surprised that in the end, it was her who had something to gain, rather than the other way around. Although it may sound a bit cliché, to me her story symbolizes one of the primary outcomes of traveling: learning more about the people in the world, and learning to cooperate with one another, regardless of who we are or where we come from.

Waverly Fitzgerald says

I have been thinking of traveling to Istanbul and also am reading a series of historical mysteries set in Istanbul (*The Janissary Tree*) and I have a friend who moved to Istanbul ten years ago and never came back, so when I saw this book at the library, I scooped it up. What a delight. And my friend, Diane Caldwell, had an essay in the book which helped me understand why she never came back.

Some of the essays were better written than others, but all of them were illuminating, in terms of helping someone like me who does not know much about Turkish culture, understand the variety of people who live in Turkey, common customs, religious practices, the true nature of shopping (conversation with the shopkeeper!) and especially, the hospitality for which the Turks are famous. It certainly made me more eager to visit Turkey.

There's not much about politics or about history in this book, which is understandable. The overall impression one is left with is one of pleasure and generosity and welcome. I hope that is still true.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

This is the most thorough of all the Seal Press collections I've read in terms of introduction to the various aspects of a nation's culture. I never thought much about Turkey as a place to visit, although its history always fascinated me. I remember that old song from when I was little, "CON-STAN-tinople...." I think it was Danny Kaye singing that one, but I'm too lazy to check the search engines and confirm it.

The thing that touched me most deeply in these essays was the hospitality of the Turkish people. It's a strong tradition with them, whether you are a friend or a stranger. Some of the examples of their generosity and caretaking moved me to tears.

Tova says

This was good. Most of the stories were just okay, but I think I lost at least 10 years of my life due to the emotional pain caused by *Gaze*. RTC

Leanna says

I stumbled across *Tales from the Expat Harem: Foreign Women in Modern Turkey*. The title is rather off putting, but this collection of 29 essays is perhaps the most helpful book I've read in my preparations for moving to the country.

English-speaking women from around the world, though mostly Americans, write about their experiences living, working, and sometime romancing throughout Turkey (though most do live in Istanbul). Only a few of the authors are professional writers. Although the writing is not always stellar, it is more than adequate and sometimes even better than many of our current bestselling authors.

The women provide a variety of perspectives, but almost all openly admit to struggling with adapting to a culture so different from their own. In “Forever After, For Now,” Tanala OsaYande writes about maintaining her identity as an independent American woman while navigating the Turkish dating scene. Several women also write about experiencing the Turkish bath for the first time, and Rhonda Vander Sluis in “Failed Missionary” describes working as a Christian missionary who eventually rethinks her calling.

Only one essay is set in the city where I will be living. Unfortunately, it takes place in the 1960s, and the author has apparently not returned since then. I’ve been told Eastern Turkey is far more conservative than the West, but I suspect life has changed dramatically in the last 40 years, so I won’t take any advice from the essay.

Another story mentions a tradition I’m convinced Americans should adopt. Brides write the names of single women on the soles of their shoes, and grooms write the names of single men. Maybe if someone had done this for me, I would be long married. Then again, maybe someone will do this for me in the near future.

June says

This was right up my alley.. accounts of western women going to live in Turkey for many reasons; marriage ,work,study...some of the experiences really struck a chord with me. In one piece the author struggles to buy medicine for an embarrassing female ailment in a pharmacy staffed by men and full of male neighbours. Having been through a very similar scenario involving hemorrhoid cream, a french/arabic dictionary and a bemused Algerian pharmacist, I could easily sympathise...!

Lisa says

I savored this book of short stories told by foreign women who lived in Turkey after a visit to Istanbul myself this past spring. The references to neighborhoods around Istanbul that I had visited, foods I had eaten, and monuments I had toured helped me better understand my own experiences while in Turkey as well as the situations the authors described. I don't know if I would have found the stories as interesting had I not had the opportunity to see some of these things for myself first. But, as a recent visitor, interested in learning more about the customs and lives of Turkish people, I found the insights of the women who shared their personal stories to be fascinating and enriching. If you're a non-Turkish woman who has visited Turkey, I think you'll enjoy this book.

Helene says

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this collection of short essays. I learned a lot from the essays of how life is like living in Turkey as an expatriate. I learned more about the Evil Eye, the relationships involved, and other aspects of Turkey that I didn't know about before. I felt this book prepared me for when I will go to Turkey.

One story that really touched me was "Haze" and how bittersweet it was. I appreciate reading all the experiences these ladies felt while being in Turkey, where a lot of ancient ties still lie around in a modern world. I would have liked to read a story of an Asian-American expatriate in Turkey, though; that would serve to be an interesting story to me (considering I myself am Asian-American).

Overall, great book and highly recommended for anyone planning to move to Turkey.

Laura says

2.5 stars

I read the first 12 stories, and that's about as much as I cared to read. It's not that I disliked the stories, or what they had to say about the experiences of these women, it's that I didn't find anything compelling about them. They were all generally interesting in a bland sort of way; maybe a factoid here or a snippet of description there will surface in my memory some day, but there was nothing that I truly want to remember. Time for this reader to move on.

Lucy Houser says

Some of the women who wrote these essays were really naive. My middle-aged self doesn't have much sympathy with, for example, the woman who went to eastern Turkey, to the doorstep of the Islamic Republic of Iran, expecting Western manners from Turkish men. I mean, please. But the anthropologist who leads off the collection seems like a cool person, whose essay really illuminated Turkey for me.

Having finished it, on balance, it's a good book, worth reading. HOWEVER, it needed recipes. I mean, what do traditional women in Turkey do? They cook. A lot.
