

EXPLORE THE ANCIENT CITY OF EPHEBUS IN TURKEY WITH **CHARUKESI RAMADURAI**, AND FIND OUT WHY IT'S THE SECOND MOST VISITED PLACE IN THIS FASCINATING COUNTRY, AFTER ISTANBUL

HOME IS WHERE ARTEMIS IS

There are many theories about the origin of Ephesus in Turkey. Of these, my favourite is the one that claims that it was founded by a clan of women warriors known as the Amazons. The city is known locally as Efes, a name supposedly derived from Ephos, the name of their queen. The story rings true to me, given the history of Ephesus as a place that worshipped women in the form of Artemis, or Diana, as the mother goddess.

Therefore, it is only correct that I begin my tour of Ephesus at the temple of Artemis. It is located not quite at Ephesus itself, but at nearby Selçuk (pronounced Sel-shuk). Built in 550 BC, this temple was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Greek poet, Antipater of Sidon, who compiled that list, is supposed to have said that the sun had never shone on anything grander.

However, all you can see today is a lonesome pillar that stares defiantly back at you. It marks the centre of the original location of the temple. I cannot see many other tourists, but there are a few locals who hound me with offers of "genuine antique coins" that look suspiciously new and shiny.

Mr Nisanyan, my knowledgeable host at the cosy hill inn where I am staying, narrates the story of the Artemis temple. It was destroyed by invaders in the 3rd century AD, and some of the pillars taken out to support part of St John's Basilica close to it. Over time, some of those pillars also found their way to the beautiful 14th century Isa Bey mosque in the same neighbourhood.

Temple tales

During the reign of Emperor Antoninus Pius, another temple of Artemis was built in Jerash in Jordan, completed in 150 AD. Artemis was also the patron goddess of Jerash, called Gerasa then.

With one last look at that forlorn pillar, I then make my way to the main Ephesus complex, where I meet up with my guide. Ephesus is deemed an archaeological wonder, with some of the best Roman ruins in this part of the world. There are two access gates and my guide suggests the one on the top, known as the Magnesia Gate. There is an excellent reason for this, which she reveals only later at the opportune moment.

Ephesus, our guide begins, used to be a prosperous Roman city with a population of over 250,000 people. (As she speaks, I suddenly remember a bit of pleasing trivia, which is that Ephesus played a starring role in Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*.) She then takes our group through the Upper Agora (administrative square), the Odeon (theatre plaza), the Prytaneum (town hall) and... my eyes have begun to glaze over already.

Just when I am beginning to get all ruined out (with the broken columns and overbalanced stones), we begin the walk down the gentle slope, known as Curetes Way, once among the main roads of this great city. And that is when our guide's insistence on our entry from the upper gate becomes clear. The obvious reason is, of course, that walking downhill is easier (bless her for her thoughtfulness).

But more significantly, right at the bottom of this street, in our field of vision throughout, is the most splendid of all buildings in Ephesus, the Celsus Library. Even if wide marble roads do not lead down to it, as they must once have, the building is still beautiful enough to make the tired tourist forget the heat and dust of modern day Turkey.

On the way down, we make a quick halt at the temple of Hadrian, with its beautiful arched entrance and reliefs of Medusa inside. This 2nd century structure is strictly not a temple, but was built as a monument to honour Emperor Hadrian of Athens. Right next to it are the Baths, which used to be a place for men to socialise and catch up on the local news. Built in the traditional fashion of Roman baths, they have a dressing room, followed by cold, warm and hot rooms.

We do not linger at these spots, since the library beckons. This building once stood at the heart of the city and, at its peak, held over 12,000 scrolls stored in niches lined neatly on the walls. It is said that the Celsus Library was rivalled in glory only by the one at Alexandria. It was destroyed in a fire some time in the 3rd century AD, but a good part of the facade remains, giving us an idea of its grandeur.

My last item to tick on the Ephesus list is one of the most interesting



AMONGST THE RUINS:

- 1 Only a solitary column remains in the vast area that was once the temple of Artemis
- 2 getting a lesson in ancient acoustics at the Roman amphitheatre
- 3 a statue in one of the passages of the Celsus Library
- 4 the walk down Curetes Way towards the library
- 5 several broken columns and statues lay scattered around in Ephesus, like this statue of Goddess Nike
- 6 and this slab with Latin inscriptions



structures inside this vast complex, the Roman amphitheatre. It is magnificent even now, and in its time, was capable of seating 24,000 people. I flop down on one of the lower steps, to rest my weary feet after over two hours of walking. I can see the highway snaking in the distance, and the brown hills far behind it. It feels idyllic, and I sit still, savouring that moment of silence.

Elton John has performed at this amphitheatre and St Paul the Apostle is believed to have preached there. I too have a few magical moments of my own here.

As I stare into the empty space around me, a small group of Italian tourists walks in, along with their guide. And the area is instantly filled with cheerfully loud voices and purposeful hand gestures. I heave a sigh, mentally bidding goodbye to the tranquility I had been enjoying so far.

Suddenly, the visitors break into song; they organise themselves into a semi-circle and begin their arias in perfect harmony. There are no mikes, no wires, nothing but the soaring voices of a dozen adults enjoying the acoustics. I walk further up the steps and the voices follow me just as clearly as if they are right next to me.



By then, a small crowd has gathered, drawn by the music, and we all sit in companionable silence, applauding joyfully at the end. At that moment, it is difficult to imagine this as a site where gladiators once fought bloody battles.

This experience is all the more special since it goes against everything I had expected from Ephesus. I had read somewhere that after the Sultanahmet area in Istanbul, where many of Turkey's most popular attractions are located, Ephesus is the most-visited destination in the country. A friend in Istanbul had described loud tour groups, herded by louder tourist guides, and I had, therefore, approached Ephesus with some trepidation.

What I found instead were visitors from all over the world, quietly engrossed in the rich history of the site. Ephesus is considered one of the largest – and best preserved – classical cities in the world, although just over 15 per cent of the site has been excavated so far – and even that took 150 years of careful work.

Later, at the Ephesus archaeological museum, I come full circle by heading straight to its most renowned exhibit, the statue of Artemis. Once this region's primary deity, Artemis still stands watch, as she has for over a hundred centuries. **W**