

The Holy Trail by Serena Fass

Armed with a car and a delightful young Turk who spoke very little English, I was heading east. Setting off from Adana in southern Turkey, my aim was to follow the trail blazed by William Dalrymple in his book *From the Holy Mountain*. Rather disconcertingly, my driver had never been this way before, but I had visited Antakya (ancient Antioch), Urfa and Lake Van in the 1980s. In those days it was impossible to go to the ancient Byzantine monasteries of Deyrul Zafaran and Morgabriel, which lie in east Anatolia, close to the Syrian and Iraqi borders. However, thanks to recent political developments in Turkey, the area is heavily patrolled by the army and is now safe for travellers. I had several objectives in mind, the first of which was to visit the early monastery-churches in and around Antakya, where St Peter met up with St Paul and Christians were first called Christians.

With Dalrymple's book in hand, we drove high above the Orontes River, zigzagging on a precipitous road that led to St Simeon the Younger's ruined Byzantine monastery. Built round the ever-taller pillar on which the sixth-century saint lived – just like his namesake and predecessor across the mountains in Syria – it has an abundance of fallen, finely carved capitols and architraves that once would have welcomed the entire Byzantine population of Antioch, who trekked out to consult him on spiritual and political matters.

My own consultation over, we descended to the azure shores of the Mediterranean and discovered the old Roman port of Seleuceia in Pieria. It was from here that St Paul and many of From Noah's tomb to the shroud of Christ, Serena Fass is blessed with it all on a journey through eastern Turkey the apostles set sail on their journeys; today it is a lively little fishing port, and I ate a delicious platter of the day's catch while looking out over the shimmering sea.

My next objective was the ancient city of Edessa (now called Urfa), the birthplace of Abraham. It is an unspoilt spot of huge charm, with narrow streets and impressive Byzantine, Crusader and Ottoman architecture. But I had a specific site in mind: the city gate.

Reputedly, in a niche above this ancient gateway, the Mandyllion (or Turin shroud) was concealed to protect the city for the first 900 years of its history. In 2000 I went to Turin for the Exposition of the Holy Shroud and became determined to trace its journey all the way back to Jerusalem. Edessa is the penultimate spot.

Legend tells us that King Abgar V of Edessa suffered from leprosy and, hearing of Jesus' miraculous powers of healing, invited him to Edessa. He never came, but after the crucifixion, the apostle Thaddaeus took him Jesus' burial cloth, known as the Mandyllion, and Abgar was cured as he held it. The Mandyllion was revered in a church built to receive it until, to safeguard both it and the city from invasion by the Parthians, it was walled up in the main gate and remained there until AD943, when the Byzantines took it to Constantinople.

The old city of Urfa is enclosed by strongly fortified walls and pierced by several gates, but my enquiries led me to the Harran Gate. Still standing and partially rebuilt by the Seljuks when they conquered the city, the archway intrigued me: as I took a closer look, I found a faint Byzantine inscription beside it. A kind man from the bazaar rushed to find a rickety ladder and held it as I climbed to photograph my discovery – I await a translation.

Archaeological hijinks completed, I spent an unusual morning in Urfa's Gumruk Hani (customs depot) playing backgammon and drafts with the locals while sipping delicious Turkish apple tea under the shady plane trees. With great charm they praised my play, but still beat me every time. Second-hand everything was on sale here, watches and fiddle beads were mended, and fast food was served, while upstairs teams of tailors sweated over immaculate, made-to-order suits.

Kurdish music is a speciality of Urfa and I was treated to some rousing songs every mealtime. The menus were predictable but home-grown and wholesome: lamb and chicken kebabs, a large variety of fresh vegetables and salads, generous spoonfuls of yoghurt, succulent fruit and – as a change from ice-cold Efes beer – often washed down with *ayran*, a delicious yoghurt drink mixed with herbs and spices and served well chilled on ice.

Half an hour south of my modern hotel in Urfa lay the ancient city of Harran – one of the oldest continuously inhabited places on the planet, but finally destroyed by Ghengis Khan in the 13th century. Firmly on the old trade route following the Euphrates from Mesopotamia, Harran was home to many of Abraham's relatives, so it was natural that he arrived here, married Sarah and lived in the town for over 30 years – until he moved down into Israel. Now Harran boasts unique clusters of beehive houses and the ruins of the oldest mosque in Turkey inside its mud-baked walls.

My next objective was to visit two fourth-century Byzantine monasteries, still occupied by Aramaic-speaking monks and nuns of the Syrian Orthodox church; visits described by Dalrymple a decade ago, made under great duress during the difficult era when the Kurdish Workers Party made this area out of bounds. From my comfortable hotel in Mardin, a ravishing town of honey-coloured stone perched on a hillside overlooking the great Mesopotamian plains, I drove a short distance into the wilderness to the imposing fortified monastery of Deyrul Zafaran. Here, in the sunlit courtyard, I found myself face to face with the Syrian Orthodox Bishop of Mardin – who happened to be a distinguished Oxford post-graduate who spoke perfect English. I brought him up to date with Dalrymple's news, we swapped email addresses and he told me to come back at 6.45 the following morning – Sunday – for the Aramaic liturgy, the closest that exists to that of the early apostles. It was well worth the early start: a congregation of around 20 worshippers joined a large male choir, the bishop and his three fellow monks for some mesmerising, unaccompanied chanting in the austere chapel. Above the hills and caves of this ancient, holy place, the prophet Elijah is said to have ascended to heaven. From here I drove further east to Midyat, and on to the equally ancient monastery of Morgabriel, which sits in a vast stony setting looking down towards the Tigris.

Quite by chance, I met an American archaeologist who asked me if I was on my way to see Noah's tomb. I had no idea such a tomb existed! The professor showed me a photograph and said he had found the tomb a few years ago, together with Mount Judi, where Noah's Ark supposedly came to rest. He had followed Gertrude Bell's research, gathered in the 1920s when she worked for British intelligence. Apparently, snow-clad Mount Ararat, at over 6,000ft, would have been too cold for the animals to survive, and there were no vines or olives in the vicinity for birds to pluck twigs or branches from. On the other hand, Mount Judi – at just over 1,000ft – fits all the Biblical descriptions, is surrounded by vines and has the Tigris flowing at its feet. It is also mentioned in the *Koran* as the resting place of the Ark.

So the professor and I set off with my driver, taking the main Turkish-Iraqi border road, thick with oil tankers and soldiers, until we reached Sirnak. We turned in towards Mount Judi and, after questioning various local boys and showing them the photograph, we found ourselves on the outskirts of a farm. Here we found a Muslim graveyard housing an ancient stone structure, marked by generations of people tying small pieces of cotton to the overhanging branches as they made a wish – Noah's tomb. The professor entered the tomb and promptly fell down nine feet. He was rescued by my driver and the boys, and surfaced triumphantly, bearing a handful of old bones and announcing he would take them back to California for DNA testing.

For the time being, the summit of Mount Judi remains unexplored, but the professor is bringing back a team next year to search for more evidence. Traces of bitumen, similar to that which coated the Ark, found near the top have recently been carbon-dated to 4500BC. I hope to return next year – for a picnic on the slopes of the mountain.

Prime objectives accomplished, I had just enough time to revisit two more special places. First, Mount Nemrut, where King Antiochus I (a contemporary of the Romans) built an extraordinary mortuary mound with huge portrait heads of himself, his family and his gods. The ruins sit dramatically on the top of the mountain, with eagles circling overhead, in what is now a national park overlooking the new Ataturk Dam on the Euphrates. It is a vertiginous climb or drive on hairpin bends to the summit, but worth it as you can't fail to marvel at the workmanship – and the audacity – that created this huge monument so far from any habitation.

Lastly, I caught the ferry to the little island of Akdamar, in the middle of Lake Van – itself supposedly created by the receding waters of Noah's flood. I explored the abandoned, tenth century Armenian church and monastery of the Holy Cross, with its myriad carvings of scenes from the Old and New Testament. I was alone with my young driver and had a peaceful hour to enjoy this tranquil, thyme-covered spot before the next ferry pulled in. With not a soul to disturb me, I watched the sun set over the clear blue water, thinking about my exceptional journey through eastern Turkey and hoping, not only to return, but that, when I did come back, this magnificent land would still be as unspoilt.