

Following Miss Bell


Travels Around Turkey in the Footsteps of
Gertrude Bell

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Preface

*'The most exalted seat in the world is the saddle of a swift horse
and the best companion of all time is a book.'*
El Mutanabbi, quoted by Gertrude Bell in Nazlı's guestbook;
undated but probably July 1907

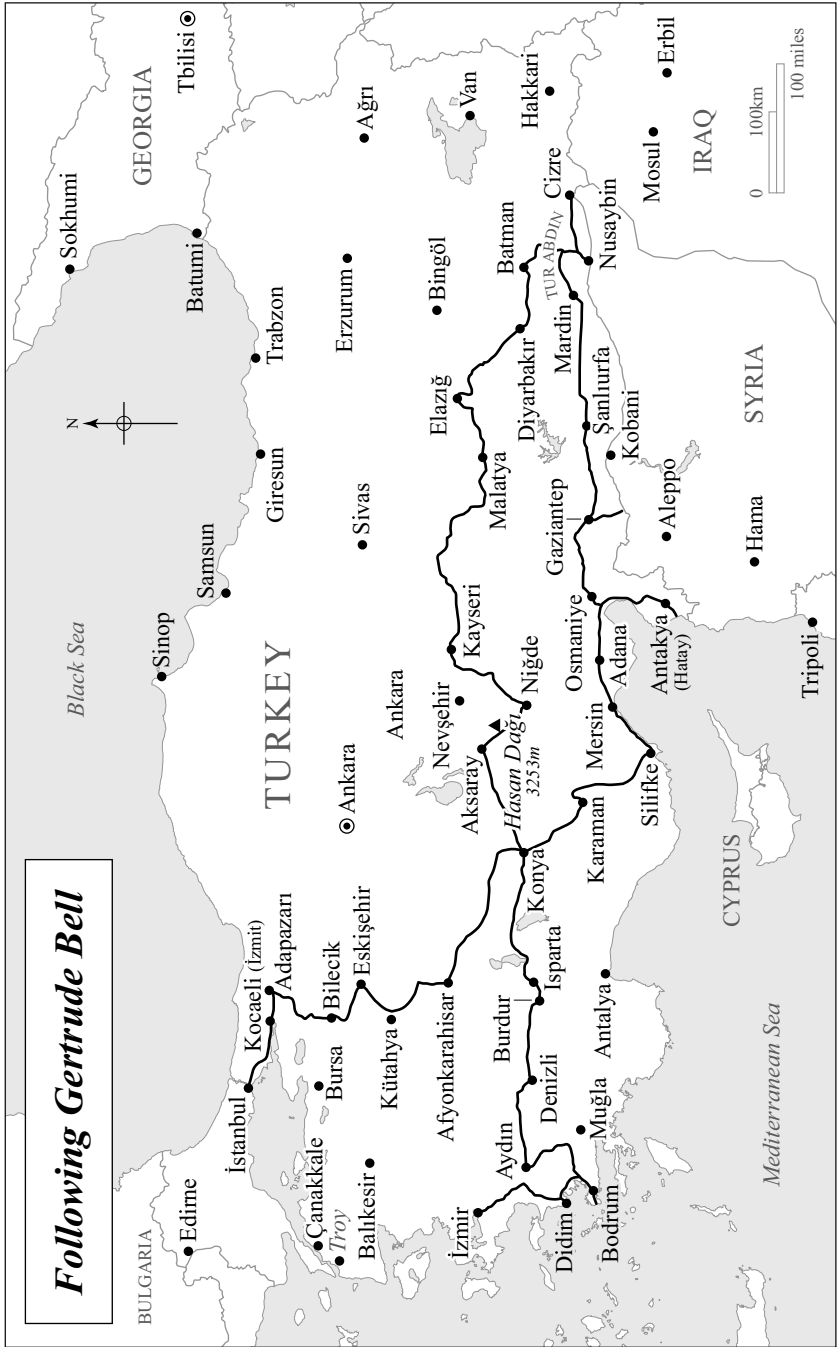
Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the artist, archaeologist and statesman Osman Hamdi Bey was a leading light in Constantinople society. The coming of the Turkish Republic cast a shadow over all things Ottoman, but in 2004 the sale of his painting *The Tortoise Trainer*, for what was then a record-breaking sum for a Turkish artwork, signalled a revived interest in him. So when an Istanbul museum showcased the contents of his daughter Nazlı's guestbook, I was eager to find out what famous names might be lurking between its covers.

To my surprise, my eyes alighted on the autograph of Gertrude Bell, best known of a band of British 'desert queens' famous for exploring the Levant in the years before the First World War. Born into a wealthy family of industrialists from the northeast of England in 1868, Gertrude travelled extensively in the territories that are now Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine and Saudi Arabia between 1905 and 1914. When war broke out, her pioneering adventures in little-known areas of the Middle East elevated her from amateur archaeologist and traveller to go-to expert, the only woman in a group of British former explorers with experience of the region's complex tribal politics. After the



© CBPA

Gertrude Bell, aged 26, between her third and fourth visits to Turkey



war she settled in Baghdad where she came to be associated with the crude 'lines in the sand' used to conjure nation-states from the territory of the defeated Ottoman Empire. Later she would wet-nurse the inexperienced Saudi-born Prince Faisal as he made his stumbling first steps as ruler of the newly created Iraq.

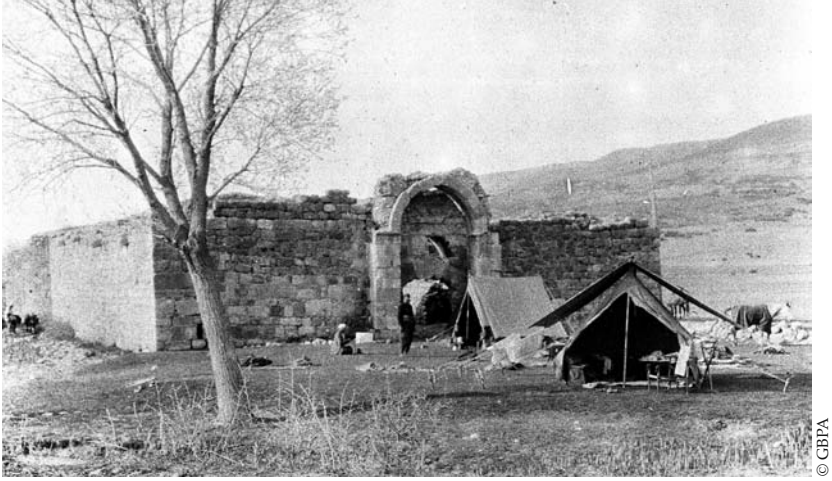
Gertrude's, then, is a name more commonly associated with deserts than Aegean beaches, and, accordingly, for Nazlı's guestbook she selected a quotation from a revered Iraqi poet. But its presence there set me thinking. To have visited Osman Hamdi at home suggested a more than passing acquaintance with his family, which in turn implied a more than passing acquaintance with what was at that time still Constantinople.

Curiosity piqued, I turned to her letters and diaries and quickly learned that between 1889 and 1914 she had visited what is now the Republic of Turkey on at least eleven occasions. Between 1889 and 1899 a sequence of short trips had taken her to Constantinople, Bursa and Smyrna, as well as to the famous archaeological sites of Troy and Ephesus. In 1902 she spent a month exploring Smyrna and its hinterland, the experience marking, in Turkish terms, the turning point between Gertrude the tourist and Gertrude the explorer. That transition was completed in 1905 when she arrived in Turkey not in the relative comfort of ship or train but astride a horse, riding into Antakya (Hatay) from Aleppo on her way back from Syria and Palestine. Two years later Turkey itself formed the sole focus of a four-month overland expedition from Smyrna to Binbirkilise, a remote cluster of early Byzantine churches in the heart of Anatolia. Then in 1909 she rode into Cizre and across Turkey at the end of a long expedition through Syria and Iraq. Two years later and the border town of Nusaybin served as her entry point at the tail end of another months-long journey into Iraq and Syria. A premature farewell to Constantinople came in 1914 when she paused there briefly on her way home from a fraught expedition into what is now Saudi Arabia.

Despite these many visits and the fact that she had met both her friend and colleague Lawrence of Arabia, and the great love of her life, Dick Doughty-Wylie, there, Gertrude's time in Turkey has been largely overlooked. Yet the story was always hiding in plain sight. Her journeys had resulted in two books – *The Thousand and One*

Churches and *The Churches and Monasteries of the Tur Abdin* – that were wholly about Turkey, and another three – *Persian Pictures*, *The Desert and the Sown*, and *Amurath to Amurath* – in which it played a walk-on role. Pieces of the story cropped up in volumes of her letters published by her stepmother, Florence Bell, and her sister, Elsa Richmond. A sequence of articles on Cilicia and Lycaonia also appeared in the *Revue Archéologique*. The snag lay in the absence of one single book that pulled together all the threads. Plenty of foreign men had traversed the Turkey of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and published accounts of their adventures. Gertrude was perhaps the only Western woman to have done the same thing at the same time, yet it wasn't until Newcastle University placed her archive online that the scattered pieces finally came together to reveal just how extensively she had travelled within the country, sometimes in the footsteps of renowned scholar-explorers such as Sir William Ramsay, sometimes – as in the Tur Abdin, where it can sometimes feel as if she has just walked out of the room – breaking new ground of her own. Her diaries revealed her climbing mountains (Cudi and Hasan) and rafting a river (the Tigris); they described her ventures in places as disparate as pre-Blue Cruise Bodrum and the Karaca Dağı, a region so remote that it is barely mapped even today; and they showed her at Binbirkilise, rolling up her sleeves as the first Western woman to dig for the past in the Anatolian countryside. Her letters oozed the gossip of late-Ottoman society. Her photographs immortalized all but inaccessible Byzantine ruins, some since lost to storm, quarrying or dynamite. They live on, rather touchingly, on the computer screens of local planning officers, cherished as the first known images of their domains.

The kernel of an idea began to seed itself. Cautiously, I marked onto a map all the places that she had visited on her different journeys. Then I joined the dots and stood back to admire an itinerary that kicked off easily in the comfort of Istanbul, then tracked down to Izmir on the Aegean coast before sweeping east across the heart of the country to dusty, neglected Cizre on the Syrian border and doubling back west to Istanbul via the basalt-walled stronghold of old Diyarbakır. Gertrude had ticked off archaeological sites as well known as Sardis and Aphrodisias and as forgotten as Blaundos and



Gertrude Bell's camp in front of the Ertokuş Han; 1907

Larissa; places as easily accessible as Konya and Eskişehir and as hard to reach as the Syriac monastery of Mor Augen. By amalgamating all her journeys and then retracing them, I hoped to find out how much had changed in Turkey and how much had stayed the same.

Boarding a bus out of Izmir in April 2015, I could never have imagined the casual way that politics would upend my plans as a mid-June election triggered the collapse of a peace process between the government and the Kurds. Turkey went into a tailspin. As I journeyed steadily further from the safe, tourist-favoured west coast towards the embattled southeast, the country's troubled past started to snap at the heels of its unhappy present. Only by keeping a low profile (and perhaps being a woman) could I keep going.

Most of my travel took place in 2015, but because of the fragile situation on the Syrian border I researched the Karkamış chapter first, in 2014, even though fighting in Kobani was underway. The ascent of Hasan Dağı had to await suitable weather conditions and was carried out belatedly in 2016.

Pat Yale
Istanbul, 2022

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The Man in the Cummerbund

NİZİP–KARKAMIŞ–BİRECİK

'[Met] an interesting boy, he is going to make a traveller.' Letter, 21 May 1911

In the shade of an arch leading off Nizip's main square a group of elderly men are whiling away the morning over *çay*. They're sitting in front of the padlocked gate of what looks like a late-date *han*. Hoping for a closer look, I try to sneak past unobserved, but at once their heads pop up and swivel round like those of the ground squirrels that used to haunt the Anatolian plain. Momentary silence descends before curiosity gets the better of them. Because foreign visitors are almost as unlikely as those squirrels in Nizip, a backwater town midway between Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa.

We bat conversation gingerly back and forth as I try to interest them in the history of the *han* while they try in typically Turkish fashion to divert me onto the minutiae of my identity.

'Do you know what this building was?' I ask hopefully.

'A soap factory. Olive-oil soap. Everything belonged to the same family,' one of the men replies, waving a hand towards a bulkily corbeled building that forms one side of the square.

The man keenest to talk to me is neatly besuited – I half expect him to pull a fob watch out of a waistcoat pocket with a flourish. 'Are you Christian?' he asks.

'Sort of,' I reply, shuffling awkwardly.

'What?'

'Yes, I was born Christian,' I say, shamed into firming up my reply.

'We're Muslim,' he says, as if anything else was likely in this particular part of deepest Anatolia.

When I mention that I'm heading south for Karkamış, alarm sparks in his eyes. 'Don't go,' he pleads. 'It's dangerous. Go to Zeugma instead. It's much better. Very historic. The Romans were there. The Greeks too. Tourists love it,' he winds up desperately.

The *dolmuş* to Karkamış leaves from one of those curious quarters to be found in all of Turkey's eastern towns that seem unsure of the time zone they're inhabiting. The glossy new branch of the İstikbal furniture emporium, for example, suggests an enthusiasm for the future. On the other hand, the house with one side fallen away to leave the bedrooms exposed suggests that the past is still very much lingering into the present too.

Several men are waiting for the *dolmuş* to depart. 'Are you Italian?' one of them asks me, the only foreigners normally to be found lurking by the *dolmuş* stand being the Italian archaeologists who have been excavating the neo-Hittite site of Carchemish on the Turkish-Syrian border since 2011.

It is, of course, this archaeological site that has brought me to Nizip at precisely the moment when considered opinion would advise staying well away from the border. For it was at Carchemish in 1911 that Gertrude met Lawrence, in the days when he was not yet the Hollywood dreamboat Lawrence of Arabia but just plain Ned, a blue-eyed, wet-behind-the-ears archaeologist yet to make his mark on the world. Gertrude was forty-three, Lawrence just twenty-three, and it was hardly love at first sight. The man who walked towards her looked younger than his age and was often perceived as 'weird'. Even his clothing marked him out. He was still some years from jettisoning Western garb altogether in favour of a *thobe*, but already he was testing the sartorial waters with an idiosyncratic combination of college blazer, baggy shorts and cummerbund.

Never one to keep an opinion to herself, Gertrude was soon chiding Lawrence and his companion, Reginald Campbell Thompson, for what she dismissively called their 'prehistoric' methods of excavation. In a letter to David Hogarth who was in charge of the dig, Lawrence described having put her firmly in her place:

She was taken (in 5 minutes) over Byzantine, Crusader, Roman, Hittite & French architecture (my part) and over Greek folklore, Assyrian architecture & Mesopotamian ethnology (by Thompson); prehistoric pottery & telephoto lenses, Bronze Age metal techniques, Meredith, Anatole France and the Octoberists (by me), the Young Turk movement, the construct state in Arabic, the price of riding camels, Assyrian burial-customs, and German methods of excavation with the Baghdad Railway (by

Thompson). This was a kind of hors d'oeuvre: and when it was over (she was getting more respectful) we settled down each to seven or eight subjects and questioned her upon them. She was quite glad to have tea after an hour and a half, & on going told Thompson that he had done wonders in his digging in the time, and that she thought we had got everything out of the place that could possibly have been got: she particularly admired the completeness of our note-books. So we did for her*.

I like to think that after these initial tetchy exchanges Gertrude and Lawrence sat down beneath the stars and found common ground in their shared alma mater (Oxford), in their mutual love of Arabic and Charles Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, and in the remote outposts such as Krak des Chevaliers that they had both visited. Certainly they dined together, their meal rustled up by Lawrence's cook. At first light villagers were waiting to wave Gertrude off with sardonic grins. Only later did she learn that Lawrence had quashed their hopes that she might be a potential bride. Far too plain, he explained.

'[Met] an interesting boy, he is going to make a traveller,' she wrote to her mother, a patronizing put-down given that less than two years earlier Lawrence had trekked over a thousand miles through the exact same Middle East as she had, in search of Crusader castles for his thesis. Little can either of them have suspected that they would go on to become fast friends, Gerty and Ned against the establishment when it came to the fraught years of struggling to shape new countries from the embers of the Ottoman Empire.

This was not Gertrude's first viewing of the great *tell* (mound) at Karkamiş. In 1909 she had paid it a brief visit at the start of the journey down the Euphrates that was to become *Amurath to Amurath*. 'One can't be within a few hours of the capital of an empire without visiting it,' she wrote, although the detour required a tricky crossing of the Euphrates from Tell Ahmar (now in Syria). At the crossing point she found the boat half-full of water, which the devoted Fattuh duly bailed out. But soon 'a little sharp west wind had got up and the boatmen began to shake their heads and eye the ruffled Euphrates gloomily'. Not to be thwarted, she led her horses into the

*Quoted in Anthony Sattin's *Young Lawrence: A Portrait of the Legend as a Young Man*.

river anyway and recorded that 'the wind drove us a quarter of a mile and more down stream ... we made very slow progress ... but with a good deal of labour and much invocation of God and the Prophet we were at length landed on the other side'.

Except that they were actually beached on an island mid-river! 'The stream had risen during the rain of the previous day and was racing angrily through the second channel, but we plunged in and, with the water swirling round the shoulders of our horses, succeeded in making the passage,' she wrote, before turning her thoughts to all the thousands of people who had made the same journey before her, 'going up and down to learn the news of the capital and bring back word of the movements of Assyrian armies and the market price of corn'.

The return crossing proved no less tricky, for word had leaked out that the foreigner would be returning and 'every one in the district who happened to have business on the opposite bank and recognized in our passage an unusually favourable opportunity for getting over for nothing' had assembled on the riverbank. No sooner had they boarded the boat than 'some twenty persons and four donkeys hustled in after us and were likely to swamp us'. But Fattuh was having none of this and 'ejected half of them, pitching the lean and slender Arab peasants over the gunwales and into the water at haphazard until we judged the boat to be sufficiently lightened'. As far as Gertrude was concerned, those who managed to stay onboard soon earned their crossing when the boat ran aground again and 'they leapt out and, wading waist high in the stream, pushed us off'.



Inside the *dolmuş*, three headscarf-wearing women with toddlers in their laps wait demurely, no doubt summing me up as a shameless hussy to be out on the pavement chatting with men. Then the engine starts up and we whisk through the outskirts of Nizip, before turning abruptly left and heading straight for the border. On either side of us fields of coffee-coloured soil sprout rows of pistachio trees. At Karanfil we hang a right and trundle through a village that is little more than a large turkey farm. Then we rattle into Karkamış and at

once the halfway modern world of Nizip falls away, its place taken by a settlement that looks as if it can't quite make up its mind whether it's in Turkey or Syria.

The *dolmuş* pulls up in front of a wretched ticket office occupied by no ticket seller and kitted out with what looks like a cast-off office desk and a pair of blue plastic chairs. With an hour to wait before the archaeologists can collect me, I stroll up the road to drink *çay* in a men-only tea garden shaded by a pistachio tree and a vine-covered trellis. But this is a place where a sudden movement at the corner of one's eye that one takes at first for a passing pigeon turns out instead to be a plastic bag gently billowing in the breeze. Keeping me company beneath the pistachio tree are an assortment of discarded plastic water bottles resting on a carpet of cigarette butts. A commotion beside the rubbish bin comes from a cat and dog sparring over scraps.

If Nizip had had the rather jumpy air of a hostess caught on the hop by an unexpected dinner guest, Karkamış seems stupefied by the rapid change that has hit it. Not that long ago it had lived for the German-built railway line that still forms its perimeter.

'When did the trains stop running?' I ask a shopkeeper.

'Fifteen years ago,' he says. 'Then Karkamış was busy, busy. Now ...' And, exhausted by that short exchange, he hastens back indoors.

'Can you speak Arabic?' his companion asks immediately.

I shake my head. 'Are you Syrian?'

'Yes.'

'When did you come here?' He struggles to explain, but his Turkish isn't up to it.

'Recently,' the shopkeeper says, popping out again to offer *çay*. 'He came recently. He has family here,' and he starts into one of the rambling sagas of family intricacy that are a staple of Turkish introductions: who is married to whom, who is brother or sister of whom, who is uncle or aunty twice removed.

'Are there many Syrians here?' I ask, to curtail the litany. A quick whip round the town had shown me the old border with Jarablus sealed up with breezeblocks. Across the road, the shops where visitors used to exchange Syrian money or hire cars to drive to Aleppo stood abandoned. 'Want go Syria?' a boy of about ten yelled at me.

It was enough to send me scurrying for the sanctuary of this shop.

'Up the road. A tent city. The population? Half as much again now with the Syrians,' the shopkeeper says.

I'm trying to imagine what this would mean for a small town with nothing going for it beyond the border crossing when a white van bringing the archaeologists back from work comes zooming up. The door opens and I step straight into another world, a world of excitement, and purpose, and discovery, and the sort of honest exhaustion that comes from physical toil. Here are young people in their twenties, bright-faced, cheerful, above all healthy, in a uniform of jeans, T-shirts and trainers. Some lean against the windows, snatching sleep. Others throw words around the bus like jugglers tossing balls in the air. On the floor baskets made from tyre re-treads hold the fruits of the morning's digging.

Off we race into the countryside again. When Gertrude had ridden to meet Lawrence there had been no border to impede her. Everything had been seamless Ottoman Empire; remote and quarrelsome, perhaps, but still a recognizable entity. Then, within the space of a few years, all the paraphernalia and basic hostility of a frontier sliced through the middle of Carchemish. Even before war broke out, relations between Turkey and Syria tended to be tense and access to the site was stymied by politics. Now, exploring the ruins is out of the question, I've been told, the proximity of fighting having forced the shelving of plans to evict the military base there in favour of an archaeopark. Instead, I've been invited to spend the night with the archaeologists, a very Gertrudey thing to do, I think, as I sit down at a long table and tuck into macaroni with tomato sauce and a green salad, an oh-so Italian lunch prepared, unsurprisingly, by refugees.

We're eating in a concrete barn of a building which picks up and magnifies every word so that it feels as if we're in an aviary full of twittering budgerigars. Inevitably conversation turns to the war.

'Aren't you worried about being so close to the border?' I ask.

'Well, yes, of course we are sometimes worried,' admits one of the archaeologists. 'The main trouble isn't here, but we have heard shooting in the night and once we had to duck down behind the walls to avoid the bullets. Lawrence started work here in 1911 but

had to stop in 1914 because of the war. We started work in 2011 and now look – it’s getting worse all the time.’



Digging resumes in mid-afternoon and I settle down in the courtyard with a bucket of water and a scrubbing brush. I may have come here in search of Gertrude and Lawrence, but really Carchemish is a site about prehistory, a site that is particularly famous because its name crops up in the Bible and because it was here that the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar II, defeated the combined forces of the Egyptians and Assyrians in 605 BC. The main news of the season as far as the archaeologists are concerned has been the discovery of the palace of the neo-Hittite king Sargon, and I’m keen to earn my keep by scrubbing mud off shards of Hittite pottery while awaiting their return.

Sitting beside me in the sun are a woman from Idlib and her son, members of a family of eleven, forced, like so many others, to flee their home in the face of civil war. She knows only Arabic, but her fourteen-year-old son is making strides with Turkish.

‘What about school?’ I ask him.

He pulls a face. ‘In Syria school. Not now,’ he answers.

In a room nearby, two brothers are bent over less mundane fragments of pot, carefully copying patterns onto paper with the aid of compasses and dividers. They are veterans of many digs, now hoping to find work in Turkey as Syria’s lifeblood drains out into the rest of the Middle East, leaking not just the poor and desperate but also the talented and best.

In the evening the archaeologists flow back again, dirty, exhausted, hungry. Professor Nicolò Marchetti strides into the dining room as pudding is being served. Ahead of our introduction I’ve let myself imagine a latterday Lawrence, a fancy that has to be dropped as soon as I clap eyes on him. Lawrence was famously short, mop-haired and very English in appearance. Nicolò, on the other hand, is a beanpole of a man, tall, greying, distinguished, a man whose presence immediately dominates the room. He’s spent the day battling bureaucracy in Antep and presumably would have loved to be able to retreat to his office now. Luckily for me, though,

the Turkish tradition of hospitality has rubbed off on him and the plates have no sooner been cleared away than he is steering me into the room in which most of the finds are stored. There he picks up a particular stone, the front carved with a face in profile displaying the distinctive flipped-up hairdo and beaky nose of a Hittite. 'Gertrude was very scathing about the digging methods they were using here. She said they were old-fashioned. But everything was carefully recorded. Even after they found the big orthostats they still recorded these smaller pieces too,' he tells me. And, turning the piece over, he reveals the number painted on its smooth reverse. It's in Lawrence's hand. I hold it with reverence, fondly allowing myself to imagine him showing it to Gertrude more than a century earlier.

While washing the pottery I'd been piecing together the domestic arrangements for the pre-First World War dig at Carchemish. At first, David Hogarth, the brother of Gertrude's university pal Janet, rented an abandoned liquorice factory in Jalablus (now on the Syrian side of the border) where the archaeologists could live and store their finds. But once they knew that this was a dig with legs, Lawrence and Hogarth's successor as chief archaeologist, Leonard Woolley, had a more convenient house built right in the middle of the site.

Trained as a classical archaeologist, Sylvia di Christina has drawn what must have been regarded as the short straw – unearthing the remains of that house in the forlorn hope that the Lawrence name would attract visitors. Small and dark, she wears her hair tied to one side and falling to her waist. Multiple piercings top out her ears. Her English is brisk and competent. On her computer she shows me a photograph of Lawrence standing in front of the house. Above the lintel is a carving of a *faravahar*, a winged sun disc dating back to Assyrian times, that he had carved himself.

'I've looked and looked, but I can't find it,' says Sylvia sadly. 'It was made from soft limestone. It was probably taken away and reused for something else.'

Unlucky she may have been with that particular stone, but in every other way she has hit pay dirt. In 1920 the British archaeologists briefly returned to the site when it formed part of the French mandate,

but after the area was taken over by the Turks the dig had to be abandoned. The locals who moved into the house later reused slabs of Hittite basalt to improvise divans around the walls, placing them directly on top of a Roman mosaic that had been used to floor it. 'The parts that were hidden by the divan survived,' explained Sylvia, 'but the area left exposed in the middle of the room was destroyed.'

In this house Lawrence and his colleague Leonard Woolley stored the smaller finds from the site, many of them re-emerging as the modern dig proceeds. 'Every time I uncover something I rush back here to see if I can find a photograph of it,' says Sylvia.

But it's another photo that particularly catches my eye. This one shows a cosy sitting room with vases of flowers on a wooden table in front of a fireplace framed by slabs of Hittite masonry. The ceiling consists of rough-hewn tree trunks, a style of rural architecture common throughout Anatolia until recently. The walls and floor are adorned with oriental carpets, Lawrence having been an avid collector. It could be a picture of a London sitting room belonging to a member of the Bloomsbury Set, I think, and I want to imagine Gertrude walking into it, unlacing her boots, bending to smell the flowers, then settling down at the table with a glass of wine, anticipating an evening of lively conversation in English after months of speaking Arabic. Alas for that fancy, though, her visit took place while the men were still muddling through in the liquorice factory.

Up beside us pops Dr Hasan Peker, a man as dark and jolly as Nicolò is fair and earnest. Hasan reminds me of a Labrador puppy, full of irrepressible bounce. He's that rare thing, a fully-fledged Hittiteologist. 'There can't be more than a hundred of us in the world,' he laughs. 'One bomb on a plane on the way to a conference and they'd be rid of us all!'

With night falling, we sit beneath the stars, indulging in the sort of archaeological chitchat that can't help but stray into the black humour of current affairs. This was a part of Turkey where many locals traditionally made a living by smuggling tea and cigarettes across the border. 'It used to be difficult to get labourers to work on the site because we paid less than they could earn from smuggling. But when ISIS started chopping hands off, all that stopped. This year they're keen to work for us,' chuckles Hasan.



Professor Nicolò Marchetti and Associate Professor Dr Hasan Peker at Karkamış

At the mention of ISIS my ears prick up. Before my visit I had assumed the jihadists were still much further east. Now reality is dawning. 'They're just one kilometre away,' says Nicolò.

'Can you see their flags?'

'See their flags? We can see their faces!'

During the night, planes roar overhead as the Americans fly east to drop bombs in defence of Kobani. I leave Karkamış on the morning *dolmuş*, my brain buzzing with the extraordinary disconnects along this border. In one place, Italians digging for Hittite remains, scrubbing pottery in the sun and tucking into tasty Italian food on the site where two famous people had once met in untroubled times; in the other, Kurds forcing their way through fences to go to the aid of their compatriots on the far side of a border whose very existence was in part dreamed up by those same two people. How they would have despaired to see their handiwork unravelling so spectacularly.

★ ★ ★

At Birecik the Euphrates is wide and dramatic. But Birecik is also hot

and dusty. Very hot and dusty. Stepping out of the *dolmuş* is like stepping up to a kiln, the heat so intense that it all but crushes me. Like so many carefully planned itineraries, mine has slowly slipped its moorings. A day here, a day there, and now it's early July and I've arrived in the southeast of the country just as the temperature has soared into the mid-forties.

Nor is that the only problem. I take as quick a turn around the town as the need to keep to the shade will permit, and then the boom of a cannon marks the end of a day of fasting with a puff of smoke and a flutter of frightened pigeons. For not only is this the start of the sizzling season, it is also the first day of Ramazan, the Muslim month of fasting. Since Ramazan follows the lunar calendar, every year it retreats by eleven days. This year it coincides not just with the hottest days but with some of the longest too. Now all those taking part in the fast – which, in the southeast, means virtually everyone – will have to go without food, drink or cigarettes for the more than seventeen hours that yawn between dawn and dusk.

Birecik has always been one of the main crossing points on the Euphrates and in *Amurath to Amurath* Gertrude noted that Seleucus I Nicator had built a bridge here. By the time she rode into town, however, it was long gone and instead both riverbanks were lined with the high-prowed wooden sailing boats used to ferry people, their produce and their livestock across the river. The sheer press of boats ensured that there would be no hanging about. 'Ferried over,' she recorded. Simple.

Between her visit and the 1950s not much changed in Birecik. It remained a pretty mini-Mardin of a place with the Euphrates lapping against the walls of the Ulu Cami and the upper storeys of the Ottoman houses leaning out over it. Then in 1956 a modern road bridge was thrown across the river, obliterating almost overnight the age-old ferry trade. Of the 'splendid' Birecik she had admired, its castle 'long and narrow like a sword', only hints now linger: the odd house, the odd stretch of town wall, the ruined castle, shadows more than substance.

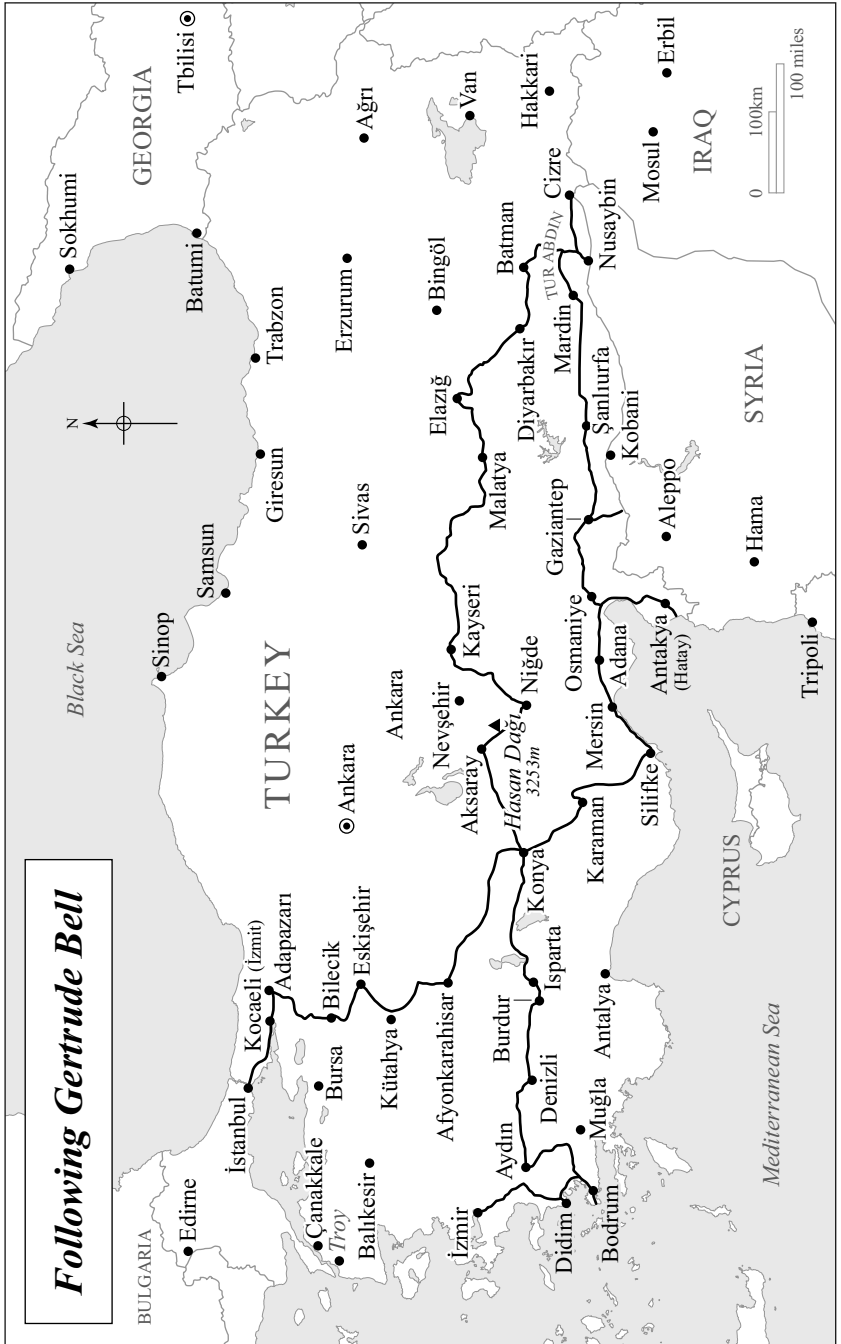
Gertrude made camp at Karşıyaka on the opposite side of the river, ready to head on to Carchemish at first light. With no boats to

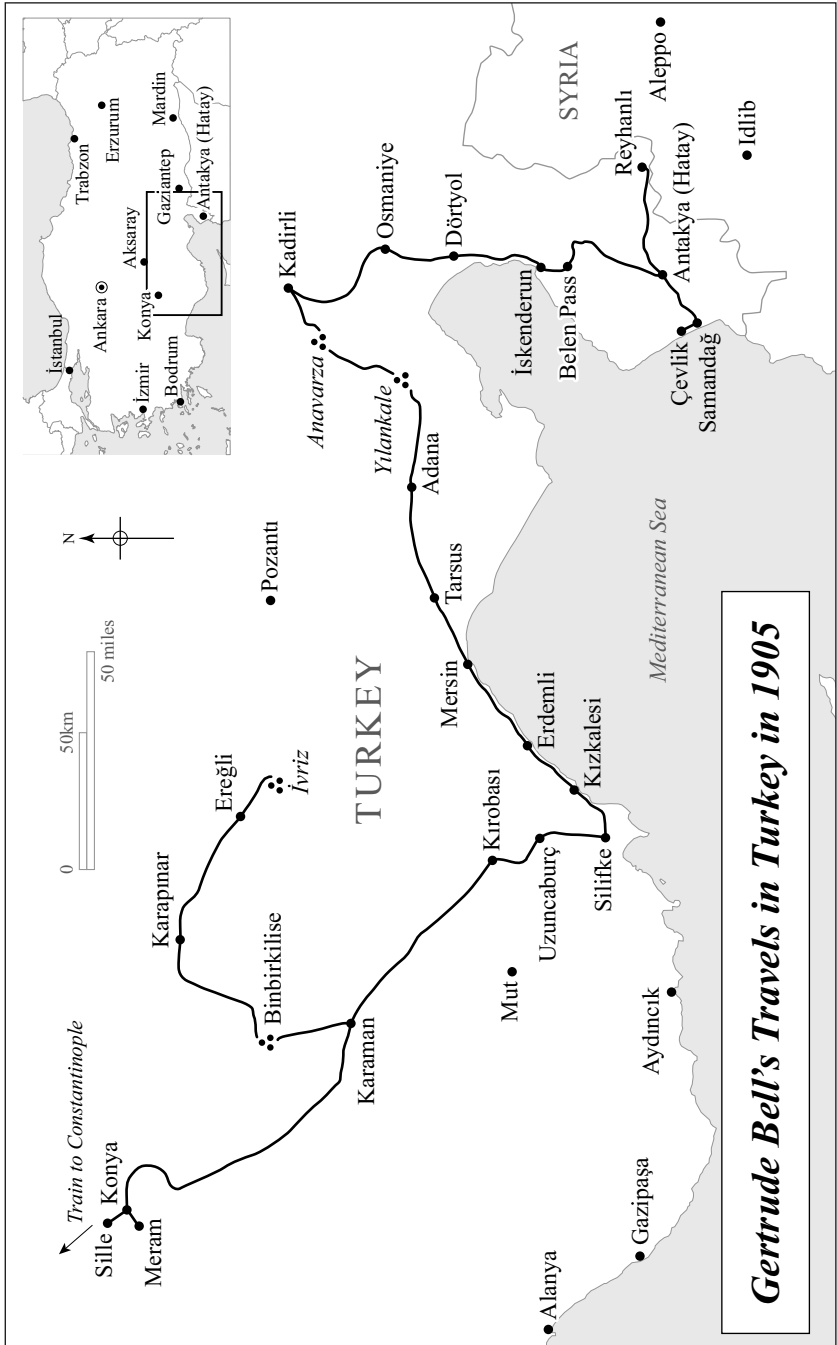


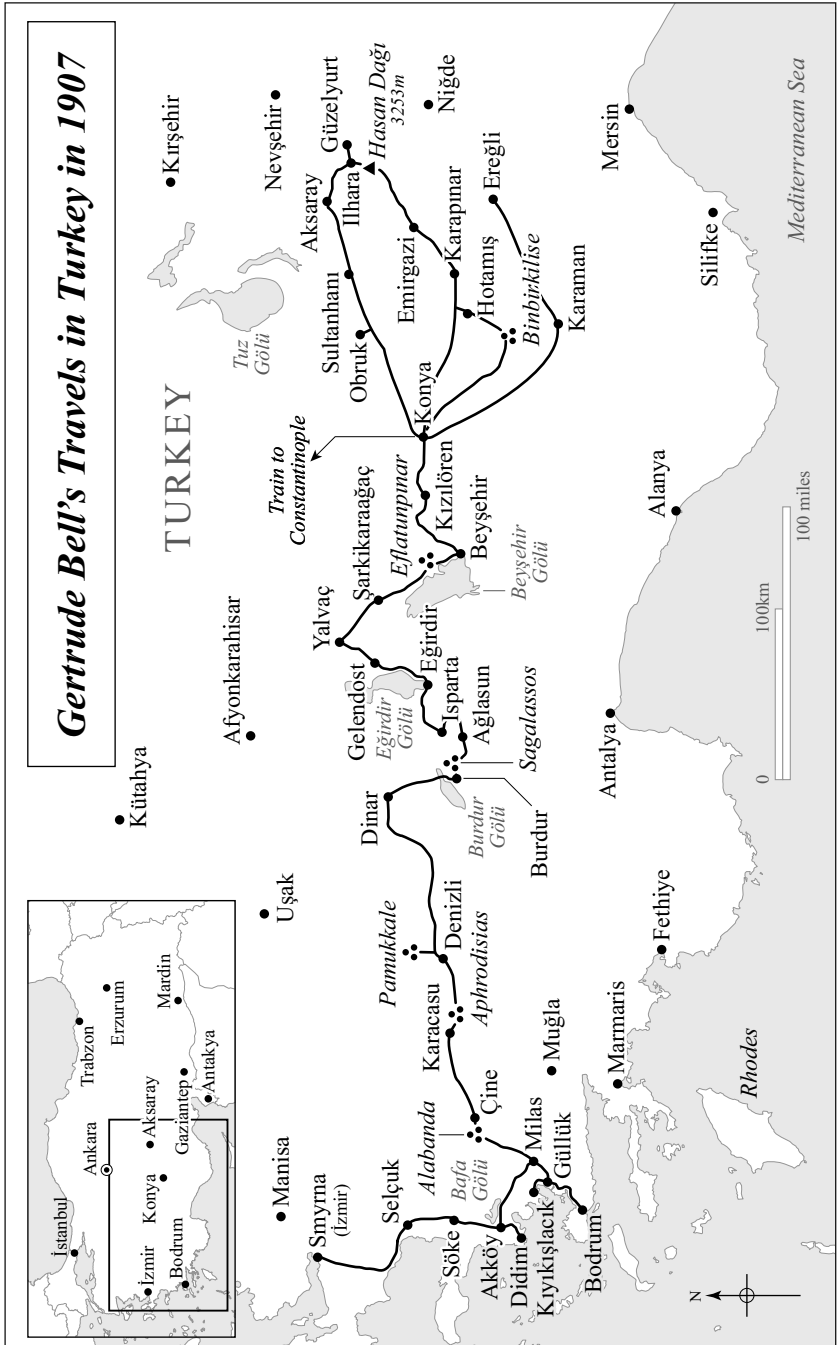
Boats waiting to ferry passengers across the Euphrates (Firat) in 1911

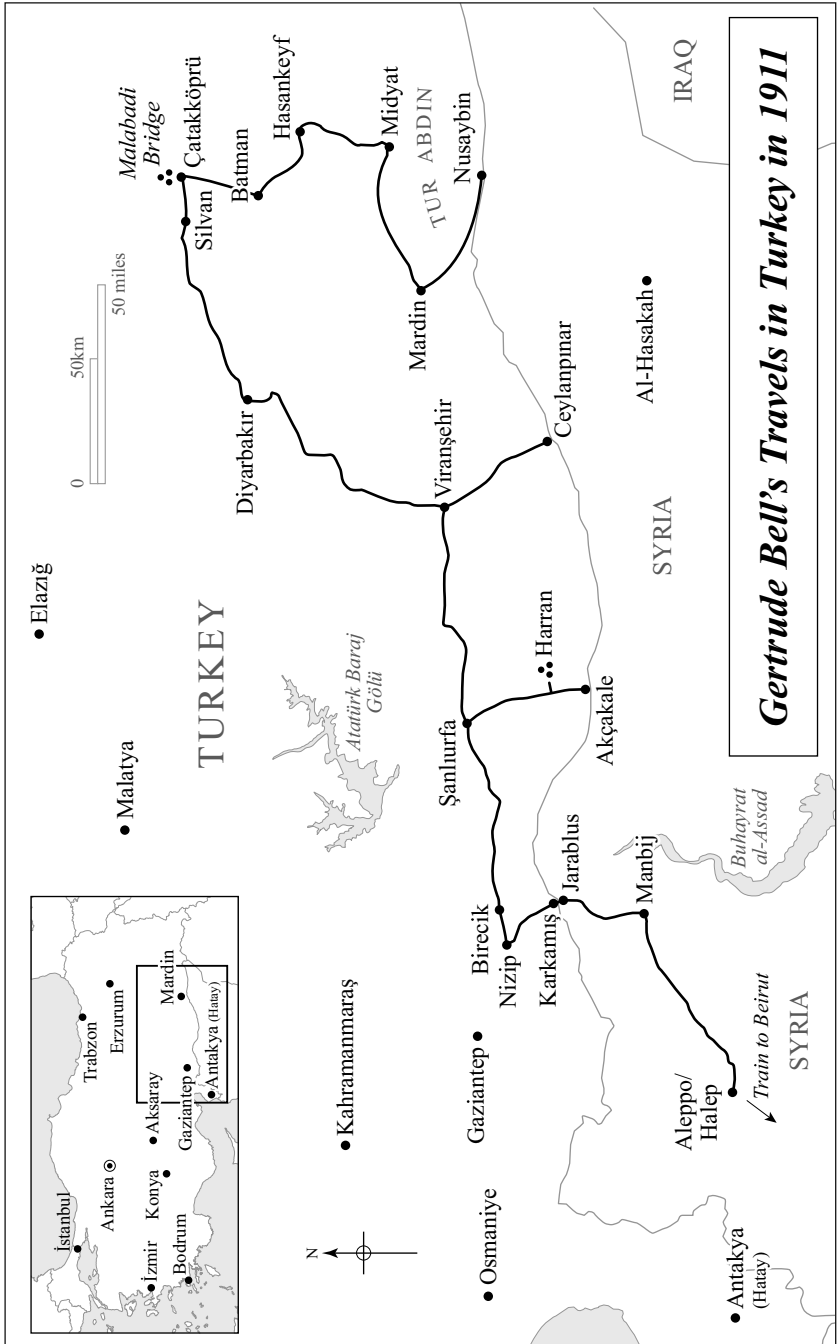
ferry me over, I force myself to walk across the bridge in defiance of the pounding traffic and then stumble down rusty stairs that look as if they might give way at any moment. In what should theoretically be a sublime setting, a few sad cows have been put out to pasture amid scattered rubbish. At the spot where I conclude from her photographs that she probably pitched her tents, trailing electricity wires prevent a closer look. A Kangal dog is snoozing in the sun in front of an abandoned tea shack, its legs as neatly crossed as a missionary's. It doesn't bother to lift its head as I pass. It's that hot.

GERTRUDE BELL'S TRAVELS IN TURKEY – OVERVIEW MAP









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Of course all errors of fact or interpretation remain mine. One or two names have been changed for reasons of privacy.

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Glossary

abi big brother

abla big sister

ağa chief, landowner

bakkal corner shop, grocery

bayram holiday, religious or secular

Belediye(si) municipality, town hall

beys powerful warlords who established regional fiefdoms all over Anatolia in the *beylik* period (between the collapse of the Selçuk Sultanate of Rum and the takeover of the Ottomans)

cadde(si) street

caique long, low boat, once standard Bosphorus transportation

cami mosque

caravanserai waystation on major roads where travellers and animals could stay overnight

çay Turkish tea usually served in tulip-shaped glass

dağ(i) mountain; **dağları** mountains

dolmuş minibus shared 'taxi'

dragoman translator/interpreter

eski old

ev(i) house

ezan call to prayer

gavur infidel

gecekondu very basic housing, slum

göbekteşi marble slab for relaxation in centre of hamam

gület wooden yacht

hacı one who has been on the Haj; general term of respect

hamal porter

hamam Turkish bath

han urban equivalent of a caravanserai, where travellers and animals could stay overnight

GLOSSARY

- hanımefendi** polite term of address for woman
haremlik female/family section of house
iftar Ramadan break-of-fast evening meal
kahve literally, coffee; also name for old-fashioned village teahouses
kale(si) castle
kapı(sı) gate
karışık mixed up, troubled
kavass body guard
Kaymakam district governor
kerpiç mud-brick architecture
kervansaray see *caravanserai*
khan see *han*
kilise church
köfte meatballs
konak mansion
köprü(sü) bridge
köşk(ü) pavilion
köy village
külliyе(si) mosque complex
kuruş small Ottoman coin
liwan open-fronted arched portal
lokanta no-frills restaurant serving Turkish staples
lokum Turkish delight
mahalle(si) neighbourhood
medres(si) Islamic school
mescit Muslim chapel
mihrab niche in mosque wall indicating direction of Mecca
mimber pulpit in mosque
misafir odası guestroom
mor saint (Syriac)
muhtar headman, a local official in towns and villages
nargile(h) water pipe for smoking tobacco
ney flute associated with whirling dervishes

- oda(sı)** room
- okey** popular Turkish tile game
- örenyeri** ruins
- pardesü** ankle-length women's overcoat
- pekmez** grape molasses
- pide** oblong-shaped Turkish version of pizza
- poyraz** northeasterly wind
- Ramazán** Ramadan
- şadırvan** ablutions fountain
- şahur** special early-morning breakfast during Ramadan
- şalvar** baggy cotton trousers mainly worn by rural women but also by some men
- saray(ı)** palace
- sayyid** men descended from the Prophet Mohammed
- saz** lute-like stringed instrument
- selamlık** (1) male/public part of house; (2) sultan's ceremonial procession to Friday prayers
- simit** bread roll studded with sesame seeds
- tandır** clay oven
- tekke(si)** dervish lodge
- Ulu Cami** literally, Great Mosque; a town's main mosque, particularly used for Friday prayers
- vadi(si)** valley
- Vali** local governor
- yabancı** foreigner
- yalı** waterside mansion
- yasak** forbidden
- yayla** upland summer meadows
- yörük** nomad
- yufka** paper-thin unleavened bread
- Zabita** specialist market police

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Abbreviations: **DDW** Dick Doughty-Wylie; **GB** Gertrude Bell; **PY** Pat Yale
Photographs are indicated in **bold type**

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In 1889 the young Gertrude Bell, the great British archaeologist, writer and explorer, arrived in Constantinople (Istanbul) on the first of many visits to what is now Turkey. Over the next twenty-five years, she criss-crossed the country from Bodrum and Ephesus to Cizre and Diyarbakır, climbing Mts Hasan and Cudi, crossing the Dicle (Tigris) on a raft of inflated goatskins and taking the earliest photographs of remote villages. It was in Turkey, too, that she met her friend and colleague, Lawrence of Arabia, and her great love, the British war hero Dick Doughty-Wylie, who died at Gallipoli.

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Inspired by an entry in an Ottoman visitors' book, guidebook writer Pat Yale used Bell's letters, diaries and other writings to retrace the routes of her travels across Turkey.

The journey took her to a gem of a Levantine garden in Bornova, to the site on the Syrian border where Bell met Lawrence of Arabia, to isolated monasteries with solitary occupants, to villages where the conversation of trilingual inhabitants echoed a more multicultural past and to a small town facing inundation.

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