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JANUARY | FEBRUARY 2015

*Hit the slopes
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HIGHER CALLING

For Turkey's true underground scene, head to Cappadocia.

BY SARAH KHAN

THE FIRST SHARDS OF LIGHT SPLINTER ACROSS THE horizon, cloaking the landscape in an ethereal glow. From a wicker craft in the sky, hovering above a cluster of mushroom-shaped rock formations blooming 1,000 feet below, a silly thought flits across my mind: Is this what it's like to be an astronaut?

I'm jolted back to reality by a glimpse of scarlet against the hillside, and then violet, then hot pink striped with orange and navy blue. All around me, colorful hot-air balloons drift and pirouette in

an airborne carnival. I'm not approaching a moon landing; the rocky outcrops, sunken craters, volcanic valleys, and "fairy chimneys" fanning out beneath me form Turkey's Cappadocia region. This 25,000-square-mile expanse unfolds in the central part of the country, and is best navigated with the aid of a guide. The hamlet of Uçhisar makes a prime base for exploring the region and its abundance of outdoor activities.

Some experiences are synonymous with certain destinations:

Rock of life: The outskirts of Uçhisar.

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Great Outdoors



shark-cage diving in South Africa, Patagonia's glacier treks, sandboarding Nicaraguan volcanoes, and sunrise hot-air ballooning in Cappadocia. I'm hardly alone in the ascent – I count 85 bulbous orbs afloat before losing track – but sharing the sky with so many others doesn't diminish the moment. If anything, the colorful spheres enliven it, a Dalí painting come to life.

"If you can't go to the moon, go to Cappadocia," my guide, Sami, says after picking me up at the Museum Hotel. Surely among the most unusual places you'll ever check into, its setting in a series of caves provides travelers with a (very posh) take on local life a millennia ago. As we head out exploring, he explains how three ancient volcanoes unfurled fiery plumes of ash and lava across the plains ten million years ago; the earthquakes, rain, snow, and winds that ensued carved an unusual new topography from the soft volcanic rock.

To get a closer look at what quirks thousands of years of erosion can yield, head to Devrent Valley, also known as Imagination Valley, where everyone sees something different. "Use your imagination," Sami instructs, and camels, crocodiles, a sphinx, two lovers locked in a kiss, and even a side

profile of Napoleon appear amid the shapes. It's a fanciful child's dream come true – and, I assume, an ex-hippie's worst nightmare. Even more bizarre are the gargantuan phallic pillars in an area dubbed "Love Valley." Mother Nature appears to have had quite a juvenile sense of humor, and it's on full display in Cappadocia.

These wind-worn stones and hills harbor a somber history. Beginning in the first century AD, small bands of Christians fleeing persecution from the Roman Empire sought refuge in the region's mountains. Secreted within their slopes are countless natural caves; the soft rock was ideal for carving out extensive underground villages that came to serve as hideouts. One such subterranean dwelling, Kaymaklı, reveals a complex warren of interior chambers, each of which served a specific purpose: stables, churches, kitchens, wineries, dining rooms, and living rooms spread over eight floors. It's a surprisingly sophisticated tunnel network within which thousands of refugees could have managed for months – provided they weren't too claustrophobic or tall, given that most of Kaymaklı's ceilings are under six feet.

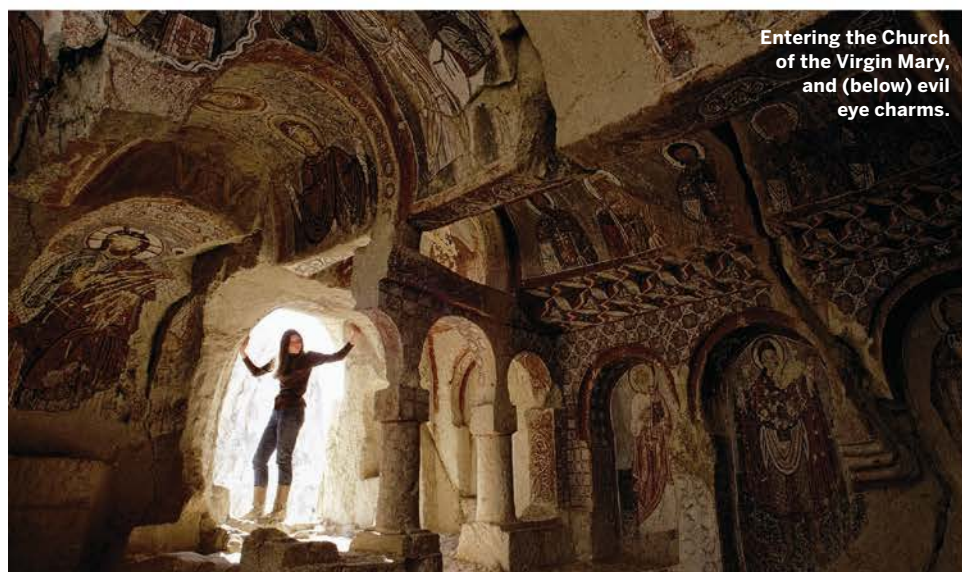
(LOVE VALLEY) APROTT/GETTY IMAGES; (CHURCH CAVE) JONATHAN BLAIR/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CREATIVE. (EVIL EYES) DANITA DELMONT/GETTY IMAGES

Jutting numerous stories into the sky, Uçhisar Castle is a staggering feat. Rather than building on top of the land, residents hollowed out an entire mountain to create a misshapen fortress. If you can get past its pockmarked exterior, which looms eerily as though setting the scene for a horror movie, it's well worth a climb up the steps for views from the summit.

Not only did a population forced to go underground in the most literal sense of the word manage to survive in Cappadocia, it thrived. Embedded within the region's hills are countless cave churches and cathedrals. At the Göreme Open Air Museum,

a cluster of tenth- to twelfth-century monasteries has been beautifully restored and opened to visitors. Lavish frescoes adorn the rock-hewn chapels, the most striking of which is found in the Tokali Church, where scenes from Jesus' life play out against a vibrant midnight-blue background. Emerging from the chasm into the blinding sun, it's difficult to discern the surrounding churches from all the other crevices etched along the hills.

You can explore Cappadocia by balloon, horse, bike, or ATV, but nothing is as elemental as navigating it the way refugees did millennia ago: by foot. Just as the



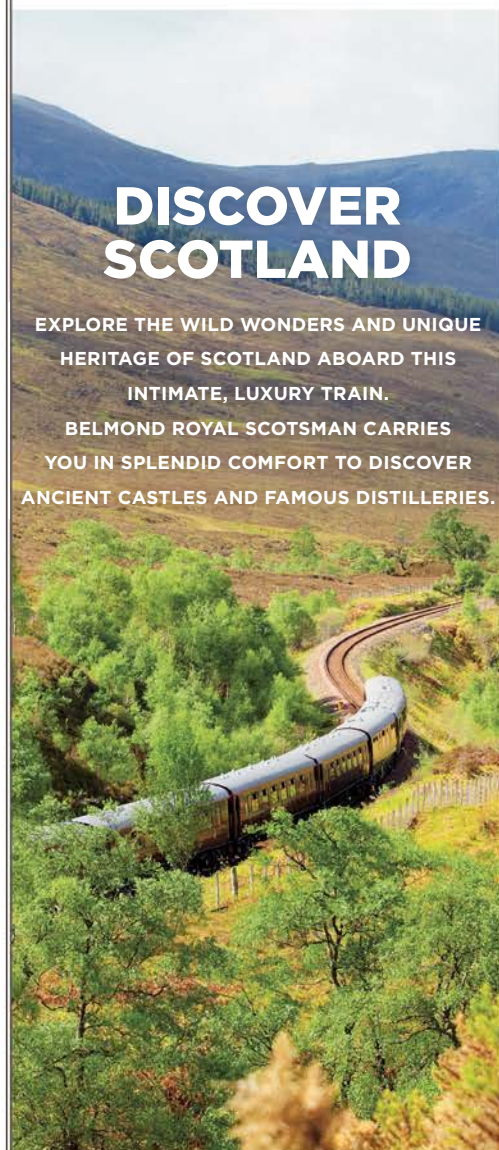
Entering the Church of the Virgin Mary, and (below) evil eye charms.



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tip

"The Tekeli Cave Suite is my favorite room at the Museum Hotel: Soaking in its Jacuzzi with views over the valley is surreal. Don't leave without trying the restaurant's *kavun dolması*, a delicious rice pilaf served in a melon that offers the salty-sweet combination Ottoman cuisine is known for."

— Yvonne Verstandig, travel advisor, Melbourne, Australia

Cappadocia from the Museum Hotel terrace.



CAPPADOCIA, UNEARTHED

How to best enjoy Turkey's cave churches and hotels.

WHEN TO GO April through May and September through October are the best months to visit. Cave hotels generally don't have air conditioning and can get warm in the summer.

GETTING THERE Turkish Airlines flies non-stop to Istanbul daily from six U.S. cities, with service launching from San Francisco in April. Travelers can choose from eight daily connecting flights between Istanbul and Cappadocia.

STAY Set almost entirely within a cave, the 30-suite **Museum Hotel** in the village of Uçhisar is a labyrinth of underground hallways adorned with antiques from the owner's

collection. Guests wake to a lavish breakfast buffet served atop a series of display cases housing vintage robes, but the hotel's highlight is its **terrace overlooking the valley** – a panoramic spot for a sundowner or even an early-morning shave courtesy of the traditional Turkish barber. *Doubles from \$270, including breakfast daily, a bottle of wine on arrival, and a \$100 dining credit.*

GO Turkey at Its Best's custom Cappadocia itineraries range from two-day overviews to immersive weeklong journeys. A five-day trip for adventure lovers could include sunrise ballooning, **hiking in Güllüdere Canyon** and Red Valley, and horseback riding. Along with

visiting the top sites, travelers have time to explore towns such as Avanos, where they can try throwing clay in a potter's workshop. *Departures: Any day through May 31; five-day adventure-travel itinerary from \$1,780.*

After touring Istanbul, Bursa, and Ankara, travelers on **Globus'** 14-day escorted trip through Turkey head to Cappadocia for two days of exploring Uçhisar Castle, Göreme's chapels, and the **Özkonak underground city**, among other sights. Also on the itinerary: Konya, home of the whirling dervishes; the Mediterranean resort city Antalya; ancient Troy; and Gallipoli. *Departures: Multiple dates, March 14 through October 24; from \$1,889.*

golden hour strikes on my last afternoon, Sami and I set out hiking across the Rose Valley, named for the dusty-pink flush that paints its hills each evening.

Less a hike than a meditative exercise, the three-hour walk is virtually devoid of other hikers, and we traverse in a contemplative silence past forests, muddy streams, soaring rock formations, and apple trees. Every now and then my steps surprise a swarm of butterflies, which erupt and career around in a frenzied cloud. The quiet is breached only when Sami pauses to point out pear and sour-cherry trees or the concealed entrance to another cave church, or offers me a sprig of wild mint or asparagus.

"There's not just beautiful scenery in Cappadocia," he says. "There's something spiritual for the people as well." I can feel what he means – there's a reason the surrounding hills were once filled with nearly as many churches as people. In a setting so staggering, so seemingly derived from fantasy, even the staunchest atheist might entertain an outlandish notion: what if? VI.

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