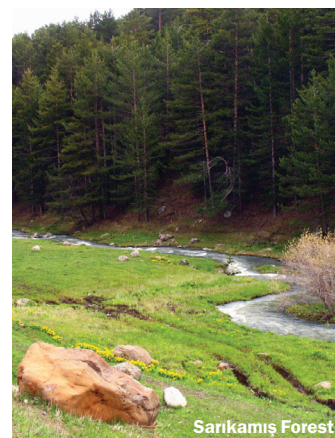


Travel



Unlike their avian counterparts, few human visitors to Turkey make it as far as Kars.



Into the wild

The spectacular landscapes around Kars beckon birdwatchers, nature-lovers and history buffs. Words and photography by **Jennifer Hattam**

I can feel the small bird trembling as I hold it in my cupped hands and walk outside the weathered metal trailer to release it. Bits of feathers explode off its back as it hurriedly takes flight in the crisp, clean air of remote north-east Turkey.

Inside the trailer, Sedat blows gently on the underside of a penduline tit, ruffling the bird's feathers back from its belly to reveal a tiny round bulge beneath the skin. 'It's going to be a mother,' he says with a smile.

The area around Kars has a bleak reputation, in part due to Orhan Pamuk's dark portrayal in his acclaimed novel, 'Snow'. And while winters are indeed harsh, with up to four months of snow and temperatures plummeting as low as -40°C, the vast landscape of high plateaus and green lowlands vividly comes to life in the spring.

Foals and calves totter on shaky legs in lush mountain meadows where nomadic herders pitch their

tents. Delicate purple crocuses and bright red poppies – the colour of the traditional bridal veil that gives them their Turkish name, *gelincik* – burst from the earth. And thousands of migratory birds stop over at Kuyucuk Lake and the Aras River wetlands, where local environmentalists

running field research stations have spotted more than two-thirds of all the bird species recorded in Turkey.

Russian and Armenian heritage

Unlike their avian counterparts, few human visitors to Turkey make it as far as Kars. Most who do come do



so to see the haunting ruins of Ani, an important trading stop on the Silk Road and the 10th-century capital of a medieval Armenian kingdom. Unfortunately, there's no easy way to travel the 42km to Ani without a private car, though a municipality-run shuttle service is scheduled to start this summer. But the trip is well worth the effort and the expense.

Imposing basalt walls bring an end to a long, rutted road that passes through tiny villages, seemingly little changed since Ani's heyday. Beyond the massive main gate, stone churches, palaces, mosques, caravanserais and *hamams* rise up out of the overgrown grass like islands in the sea. Down in a steep canyon, what's left of an ancient bridge hangs over the Aras River separating Turkey and Armenia, its impassable state reflecting the closed border between the two neighbours.

Despite the ongoing rift, the Caucasus influence remains strong in the region's cuisine, architecture and culture. Like other Turkish cities, Kars has more than its share of multicoloured concrete blocks, but they are interspersed with stately Russian buildings made of large, finely cut dark stones. The landmark Fethiye Mosque was once a Russian Orthodox church, its onion domes later swapped out for minarets. Both the Kars Castle looming above town and the Sarıkamış ski area some 50km south-west of the city were the scenes of fierce fighting during World War I, claiming many Russian and Turkish lives.

Remnants of an even older Kars reveal themselves on the slope leading up to the castle, where the 10th-century 12 Apostles Church (Kümbet Mosque) has retained its distinctive Armenian architecture despite being converted back and forth to serve both Christian and Muslim worshippers over the years. Crumbling Seljuk and Ottoman *hamams* cluster around Kars Stream and the 16th-century Taş Köprü (Stone Bridge) at the base of the castle hill, an area now full of laidback tea gardens.

New tourism initiatives

Long reliant on Ani, the castle and skiing at Sarıkamış to attract visitors, Kars is now awakening to its full tourism potential. Last year, the house of famous Turkish poet Namık Kemal was converted into a cultural centre devoted to keeping alive the *aşık* (minstrel) tradition of storytelling through song. New guided tours show the city through the eyes of Pamuk, the Russian author Alexander Pushkin and the Greek-Armenian writer George Gurdjieff, three famous figures who have depicted Kars in their literary works.

With some of the country's most spectacular and biodiverse landscapes right in Kars' backyard, nature tourism is also gaining ground as a way to draw more people to the region without spoiling it. Homestays are available in the nearby village of Boğatepe, where a new cheese museum celebrates traditional products such as the hard yellow Kars *grayyer* and the unusual local *cecil*, which tastes like a cross between string cheese and blue cheese.

The Kars-based conservation organisation KuzeyDoğa is setting up a visitor and environmental education centre near its field station at bucolic Kuyucuk Lake, a birdwatcher's paradise. This summer, the group will run its first nature tour for foreign travellers, featuring wildlife tracking in Sarıkamış – home to bears, wolves and boars – and bird-watching at Kuyucuk. It is also working with Balyolu, a new initiative to train female beekeepers and take visitors on honey-tasting walking tours. With dozens of bee-friendly plant species thriving in the area, it's quite possible for every village to lay claim to a sweet taste all its own.

TRAVEL BASICS

Regular flights from Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir land at Kars Airport, 10km from the city centre.

An attractive boutique hotel in an old Russian mansion, the Kar's Otel (0474 212 16 16, www.karsotel.com) is the best pick of the somewhat-limited lodging options. Its newly opened Kar's Store restaurant offers good local food, wine, live music and folk dancing. The Hotel Temel (Yenipazar Caddesi No. 9, 0474 223 13 76) is a cheaper, more basic alternative.

The women-run Kamer Vakfi Mutfak ve Café (Halit Paşa Caddesi No. 97, 0474 212 89 57) serves excellent homemade specialties such as *hengel*, a type of *mantı* (Turkish ravioli); *kesme aşı*, a green lentil soup with noodles and mint; and warm, almost ginger-bready *helva*. Goose is another favourite local dish.

The Turkish-language online Kars City Guide (www.karskentrehberi.com) gives a very thorough overview of the area's history, culture and sightseeing opportunities.

HOW TO VOLUNTEER

Each spring and fall, the conservation group KuzeyDoğa Society operates bird research stations at two wetland areas near Kars. Some 200 volunteers from 20 different countries have spent two weeks or more helping watch, count and band (ring) birds at the Kuyucuk and Aras stations. Both facilities are located in peaceful, beautiful rural areas, affording opportunities to hike, swim and relax in between checking nets, collecting data and banding birds. No experience is necessary, though licensed ringers are in high demand. Conditions are basic, meals hearty and the scenery unparalleled. This year's spring activities run between March 15 and early June. Contact KuzeyDoğa (0474 212 38 84, www.kuzeydoga.org) for details.



Kuyucuk Lake, the site of one of KuzeyDoğa Society's bird research stations



A bird removed from a net at the Aras River field station

Kars' queen bee

A Colorado native, Catherine Jaffee turns to an ancient trade to help local women gain employment



Catherine Jaffee with her village 'anne' (mother)

When I first quit my job to move to Kars, Turkey, almost every person I met would ask me: *why would you ever move to a rural place like Kars?* At first I could tell by their looks that they were suspicious. *Are you here to write a book? Are you here to study politics and the Armenian issue? Are you a spy, an agent, a fraud?* With Turkey's beautiful seas, massive west coast tourism industry and Istanbul, why, why, why would you ever go to Kars and, gasp, stay?

'I am here to study honey,' I would reply confidently.

Immediately, their faces would shift. Anyone who really knows Turkish honey understands that north-eastern Turkey has one of the most established beekeeping and honey traditions on earth. It is the birthplace of the original Caucasian bee, with an ancient trade culture around honey and local products spanning hundreds of years back to the Silk Road. Co-evolving with the endemic bee population are over 2,000 local flower species – resulting in a floral blend of so many different honey flavours, it is a wonder to think that wine tasting – in which 75 percent of wines are made from one grape type – has dominated most tasting adventures instead.

The market opportunity of honey tasting in a place like north-eastern Turkey is substantial: a unique culinary travel experience that is environmental, family-friendly and offered nowhere else. Its greatest potential, however, lies in how it can shift circumstances for local women to become rural entrepreneurs.

My team and I are starting Balyolu: The Honey Road to do just this. We are the first honey tasting walking tour of its kind, led and inspired by women in north-eastern Turkey. More than 10 million women live in rural parts of Turkey, and although the country has one of the world's lowest employment rates for women (22 percent), women are working full-time (albeit unpaid) while they care for their large families and run small family farms. But in these remote villages, they are cut off from the city centres, so there are limited opportunities to translate this labour into income, education opportunities or professional development.

Organic beekeeping, particularly in rural, untouched areas such as north-eastern Turkey, is an ideal livelihood for women because women are stable (and therefore not moving their bees into areas with harmful crops or pesticides) and beekeeping can be done right in their backyards without taking away too much time from raising a family. In a place like Turkey – where the word 'organic' does not yet have a clear, quantifiable meaning, where these rural villages are isolated from local markets, where producing organic honey yields small amounts, where most of the women beekeepers we are targeting (those at the bottom of the pyramid) do not have an education past the sixth grade – it is hard for them to compete in a domestic market full of honey.

By subsidising honey production with compelling nomadic travel experiences that are full of authentic cultural interactions such as bread-making workshops with a local villager, or birding with a local non-profit, we hope to use travel to create a mobile marketplace of ideas and cultural exchanges that lead right to a woman's village. True to the Silk Road model, we are harnessing walking routes in rural areas to shift the dynamics of poverty, particularly for women. With Balyolu, over 70 percent of trip funds are reinvested directly back into local communities through organic beekeeping, hospitality and marketing trainings, as well as incubation of new green small businesses.

Now, almost a year later, instead of people asking me 'why would you ever go to Kars?' the much more frequent question is 'when can I book a trip?'

For more information, visit www.balyolu.com.