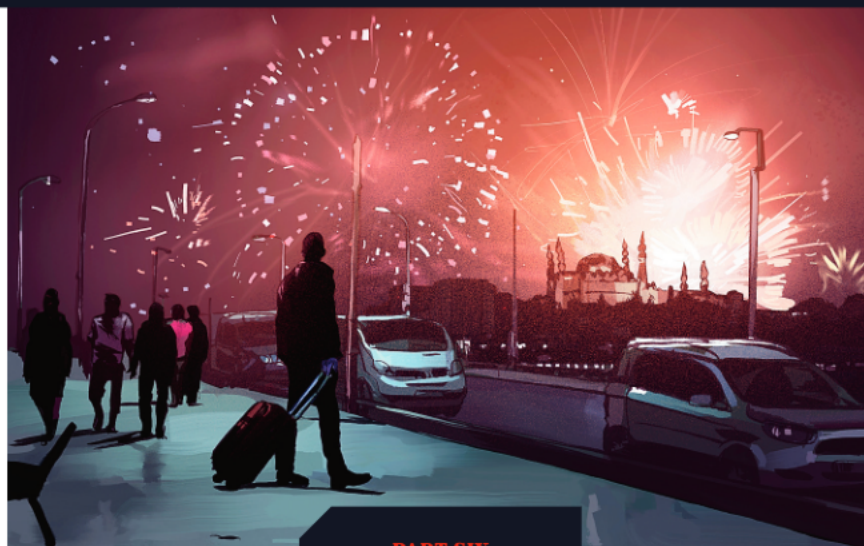


American journalist, was sitting in Evin Prison, in Tehran (he's now back in the U.S., having been released as part of a prisoner exchange accompanying the sealing of the nuclear accord mid-January). Essentially, the Iranian government alleged his stated purpose for being in Iran was a cover for illegal activities. I didn't want the same thing to happen to me. Dekker shared my confusing but easily accessible and transparent Web profile with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in Tehran, which is responsible for vetting Americans seeking visas (to determine if one will be granted the right to apply). I was approved, but on the condition that I secure a U.S. passport free of journalist visas, which I did.

On June 14, I flew to Tehran and was welcomed by Malihe, my guide, and Arash, my driver. From then on, I'd never travel alone: One or both would be with me, except while I was sleeping or in my hotel. (An Iranian guide is required for all visiting Americans.) Even more, Malihe knew me inside out, from I Pezzi Dipinti, my knitwear business, and my film projects, to my work for DEPARTURES and my interest in architectural conservation and my being a vegetarian. But she also knew about everything I saw, asked about, and didn't know to ask about.

My nine-day stay was jam-packed; the illuminated *Shahnameh* became reality. The blue-green-tiled mosques, ancient gardens, and bustling bazaars were kaleidoscopic and dizzily refined. I started and ended my stay in Tehran (sights included Golestan Palace and Milad Tower) and went as far south as Shiraz, where I saw the Hafez and Saadi tombs and Eram Garden. We stopped in Yazd (for sunken alcoves of the Amir Chakhmaq complex), Persepolis (for ruins and temples), Isfahan (for two days of superb architecture), and Kashan (for more architecture, more gardens) on the way back up. Ramadan began more or less as I arrived, limiting my contact with the food. I never made it to the contemporary-art galleries of Tehran—a trip ideally to be made as relations between Iran and the U.S. become (I hope) more fluid and restrictions on American travelers' movements ease up or vanish, making wandering and interacting in cosmopolitan Tehran as easy as it is in Paris or London. Because Iran is everything I dreamt it to be.

I was commissioned to write my account on December 16, 2015, six months after I left Iran. I went not as a journalist but am happy to have become one to encourage all to try to visit.



PART SIX

ISTANBUL Dispatch from a Frequent Traveler

BY MELISSA
BIGGS BRADLEY

I have long loved Istanbul for its layers of history and melding of cultures, but for the past several years I have also felt that it is one of the most vibrant cities in Europe. When Soho House expanded in Europe, the new outposts chosen were Berlin and Istanbul for their cool factors. And when the owners of London's hot spot Zuma grew their brand, they too skipped Paris and headed to Istanbul. In the Karaköy and Galata neighborhoods, dilapidated buildings have been reborn as art galleries, fashionable hotels, and eclectic boutiques. Unlike Venice, Rome, and Paris, where residents seem to be ceding their cities to tourists, Istanbul is inspiring local entrepreneurs and innovators, and their energy infuses the atmosphere.

These days, however, the city—and Turkey, in general—is attracting attention for its place in the center of the refugee crisis, proximity to Syria, and the January 12 attack by an ISIS suicide bomber. While in recent summers my travel company, Indagare, has sent as many families to Istanbul and the Turkish Riviera as we have to Paris and the South of France, this year, people are asking, “Is it safe?”

My answer is always to put things in context and to recognize that everybody has different comfort levels. Unfortunately, we live in a world of terrorism, and while there have been attacks in Istanbul and Ankara, they have not been worse than those in Boston, Paris, or California. In my experience, those who have been to Istanbul (or Israel for that matter) tend to panic less at headlines. They have witnessed the bustling life in the city and seen people of different backgrounds exist together.

Turkey itself is massive, with most areas unaffected by the problems. Of course, travelers should avoid political demonstrations and the country's southeastern part, which

borders Syria, Iran, and Iraq. But, as of press time, this is the only region that the United States government has advised avoiding.

“Turkey, being the most secular and modern country in the Muslim world, condemns all acts of terrorism,” points out a Turkish friend. “We think terrorism is an assault on humanity and

universal values and that it can only serve to further promote Islamophobia, racism, and intolerance. Islam is a religion of peace.”

American personal-shopper and designer Denise Spencer, who has lived in Istanbul for 20 years, notes that Syrian refugees have replaced Turkish beggars. She participates in the U.S. State Department's Smart Traveler Enrollment Program and gets security notices from the U.S. Consulate. She believes that the risk of danger is small, but has been advising friends to visit when “the mood of the city is better.”

Others, like Istanbul-based House Hotel's brand marketing director, Antony Doucet, have a different view. “It is more important than ever to continue to travel,” he said the day after the ISIS bombing. Turkish jeweler Sevan Biçakçı, known for his carved stone rings, agrees. “Due to its historical role as a gateway between the East and the West, studying Istanbul has the potential to make us understand the true value of coexistence,” he says. He thinks dialogue with more people from around the world can illuminate “why certain things keep going wrong and how we keep ending up with conflicts.”

Istanbul-based Caroline N. Koç, founder of home-textile brand Haremliques, says, “Like residents of many great cities, we live our lives conscious of the possibility of something negative happening, but do not live our lives dictated by that possibility. My life goes on as always: enriched, challenged, and stimulated. I cannot imagine living life without Istanbul.” ♦