



Oscar Kanan – Alan Jones Travel Prize Report

I was fortunate to travel to Istanbul for two weeks over the summer to attend a Turkish language school in preparation for my final year. Despite initially applying to study only Arabic at Pembroke, the nature of the course meant that I was given the option to pick up an additional language from the region, and having greatly enjoyed a brief visit to Istanbul during my year abroad, I decided on Turkish. At the end of my third year, having spent a year studying the language, I felt that the summer vacation was a perfect time to return to Istanbul to help prepare for finals and put into practice everything I had learned in Oxford. For this, I am grateful to Pembroke for awarding me the Alan Jones Travel Prize which was invaluable in making possible what was a rewarding and memorable trip.

We found accommodation within walking distance of the language school which was on Taksim Square, placing us in the centre of what is often considered the heart of Istanbul's European side. Leading onto the busy İstiklal Street, Taksim Square was constantly alive with activity as countless tourists flocked to explore the various shops and restaurants. As such, there was never a dull moment and on our morning walks to the language school we saw everything from impromptu live music to crowds and heavy police presence in preparation for a Presidential visit to Taksim Mosque. Though atop a very steep hill, Taksim was nevertheless a perfect location to absorb the city's culture and a great base from which to explore the rest of Istanbul.

The language school held classes from 0900 until 1300, meaning our afternoons were free to explore the rest of the city. During our stay, we travelled to Sultan Ahmet, home to the endlessly fascinating Hagia

Sophia and Blue Mosque which dominate the Istanbul cityscape; in addition, we explored the neighbourhood of Balat, famed for its colourful houses, as well as catching the ferry to Kadıköy and Üsküdar.

Owing to Istanbul's size and enormously complex cultural history, these neighbourhoods felt like their own individual cities. For example, Kadıköy was striking for its vibrant nightlife, with sprawling bars and clubs spread throughout the neighbourhood, while Üsküdar was far more traditional with a reputation as a more religiously conservative area. Although ostensibly neighbouring districts, the two places could not have felt more juxtaposed; indeed, such diversity is emblematic of a city that straddles two continents and is home to such a wide array of cultural backgrounds.



The bustling streets of Taksim, overlooked by Taksim Mosque.

A definite highlight was our day trip to the Adalar (which means 'islands' in Turkish) on the middle weekend of our stay. Despite their popularity among the Istanbul residents, the Adalar remain relatively unknown among foreign tourists. We visited Büyükada, the largest of the islands, with its rolling hills and paradisiacal beaches, only made better by the fact that cars are not permitted, meaning we could hire a bicycle and explore every corner of the island in a day. We ended up doing two and a half laps, a testament to both our enthusiasm and my companion's sense of direction. Nevertheless, it was a stunning island and a trip that will live long in the memory.



Büyükada, the largest of the Adalar.

By the time it came to leave Istanbul, I could not help but feel that there was much left to see, and I am keen to return one day for a longer period. Owing to its variety, ease of travel and welcoming people, our trip was an overwhelmingly positive experience. As for the language, the opportunity to talk to locals from across Istanbul as well as the intensive classes meant that

in just two weeks there was a noticeable improvement and I feel far more prepared in advance of my final year.

In terms of advice to anyone considering visiting Istanbul, I would primarily suggest not worrying too much about location within the city, as the public transport was cheap and easy to use. I cannot recommend visiting the Adalar highly enough and would suggest staying in Istanbul for at least two weeks to get a true sense of the city and its various neighbourhoods. I would be happy to give any more specific advice or help to anyone planning a visit to the city, so feel free to get in touch.

Thank you once again to Pembroke for awarding me the travel prize, as the trip would not have been possible without such generous financial assistance.



The busy İstiklal Street.



The colourful houses of Balat.



The view from the roof of our apartment in Taksim.