

In Caesar's Wake

Cappadocia in Turkey boasts a prestigious list of ancient visitors. Retrace their steps, explore underground cities and taste wine with a 4 000-year-old history.

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FROM ISTANBUL'S MOSQUES and palaces to the classical city of Ephesus, Turkey has unbeatable historical depth as the former capital of the Ottoman and Byzantine empires. Constantinople, as Istanbul was known until the 1920s, was the world's most important city for centuries, from the end of the Roman Empire until the likes of London took over as the Ottoman Empire unravelled. The list of historical figures who visited the country's plains and mountains reads like an ancient who's who, ranging from St Paul and Julius Caesar to whirling dervishes and Silk Road traders.

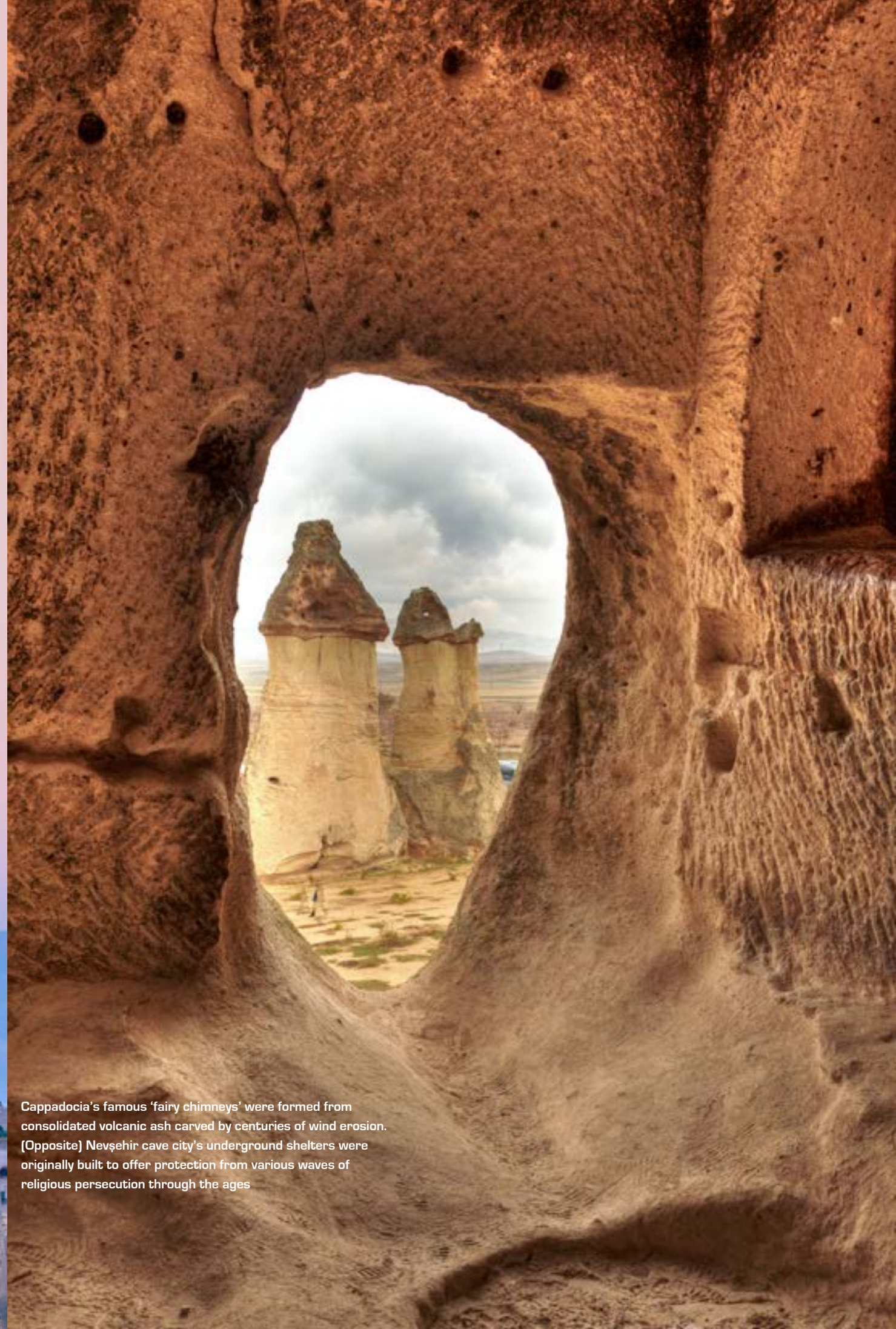
While lyrical ruins are found on many Turkish beaches, city corners, windswept plateaus and even the Mediterranean seabed, the most impressive fusion of history and scenery is Cappadocia. This dreamy slice of central Turkey dotted with pointy rock formations, known as *kale* (castles) by the locals and 'fairy chimneys' by everyone else, has a back story as remarkable as its landscape. Volcanic eruptions created this surreal moonscape – the lava flows formed tuff rock, which wind and rain sculpted into sinuous valleys with curvy cliff faces and phallic fairy

chimneys. Cappadocians chiselled homes in the soft rock, paving the way for cave-dwelling hippies and today's boutique fairy-chimney hotels.

The area's most extraordinary phase was during the medieval era, when the valleys were a refuge for Byzantine Christians. The religious troglodytes established monastic settlements, and their cave churches add a Biblical solemnity to the Flintstones-like region. The Göreme Open-air Museum, one of Turkey's 15 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, has the best collection of chapels and living quarters, most dating to around the 11th century.

Byzantine frescoes

Despite centuries of weathering and vandalism, the frescoes (technically seccos, painted on dry rather than wet plaster) decorating the rock-cut chapels are glorious, colourful sights. The Dark Church has the best examples – multi-coloured angels cover the pillars and vaulted ceilings, along with scenes such as the birth of Jesus, with an ox and ass poking their noses into the manger. As the church's name suggests, the lack of



Cappadocia's famous 'fairy chimneys' were formed from consolidated volcanic ash carved by centuries of wind erosion. (Opposite) Nevşehir cave city's underground shelters were originally built to offer protection from various waves of religious persecution through the ages



The thousand-year-old frescoes in the rock-hewn chapels of Göreme – now a UNESCO World Heritage Site – have remained beautifully preserved

light has preserved the paintings, which still look fresh and vivid after a millennium.

Other monastic complexes nestle in the valleys, many recalling *Star Wars* backdrops (but do not believe mischievous guides who claim Chewbacca was ever here). The most popular for a stroll is Ihlara Valley – filled with riverside greenery, birdsong and a string of churches cut into the base of towering cliffs.

Underground cities

The local Christians were persecuted, first by the Romans and then raiding Muslims, and they often had to hide from hostile forces. When they heard hoof beats, they would abandon the cave churches and go underground – quite literally. Beneath Cappadocia's rock formations is a network of subterranean cities, which housed up to 10 000 people each. The largest discovered are almost 10 levels deep, with narrow passages connecting the floors like hamster tunnels.

Touring the cities, you pass stables with handles used to tether the animals, churches with altars and baptism pools, walls with air circulation holes, granaries with grindstones and blackened kitchens with ovens. The ventilation shafts were disguised as wells, and chunky rolling-stone doors served as last lines of defence. Not many artefacts remain – the inhabitants took their possessions when they returned to the surface – but the cities give a sense of life continuing in tough conditions.

On a practical note, as both the churches and underground cities are confined spaces, it is best to visit early in the morning, at lunch time or near closing, to bypass the tour groups. Particularly at the underground cities, a guide is beneficial as they can explain what happened in the bare stone chambers.

Live like a troglodyte

Staying in Cappadocia today doesn't involve any hardship or subterranean chambers. Many cave dwellings and fairy-chimney chapels have been converted into boutique hotels, where you can try the troglodyte lifestyle in luxury. Features include cave *hamams* (Turkish baths), rock-cut arches, walls patterned with volcanic colour-banding and panoramic terraces surveying the valleys. You will quickly discover what the locals have known for centuries – the tuff rock keeps rooms cool in summer and warm in winter. For the best cave hotels, head to the hills in popular Göreme village and Ürgüp's upmarket old town, home to Ottoman Greeks until the population exchange of the 1920s between Turkey and Greece.

The tourism industry is slowly changing life in this agricultural area, and the allure of tourist dollars has tempted many Cappadocians away from the fields. The pigeon houses riddling the rock faces – traditionally used to collect the birds' droppings for use as fertiliser – mostly stand empty, while pensions proliferate on village lanes. Nonetheless, rural life continues at the pace of a rusty tractor and vestiges of the fabulous past remain, including the local wine. Cappadocia has one of the world's oldest wine industries, which stretches back some 4 000 years to the Hittites – the first to recognise the volcanic soil's viticultural qualities, and to carve rock cellars. As you sample the Anatolian grape, there is certainly a great deal of history to reflect on in this land of fairy chimneys and Byzantine remains. □

Emirates, Qatar, Etihad and Turkish airlines travel from Johannesburg to Istanbul. Turkish Airlines flies to Cappadocia.