CULTURE ROUTES IN TURKEY

Helene Robert
Bachelor in Physical Education and Commerce, NEW ZEALAND
helene.robert@otagoalumni.ac.nz

Hüseyin Eryurt
Coordinator of the Culture Routes Society, TURKEY
huseyineryurt@yahoo.com

Long distance trekking in Turkey has always been driven by a small group of independent travel agencies and enthusiasts. They seek to show off the rich layers of civilization that clothe the Turkish countryside and expose walkers to the deep relationship between the local culture and its heritage. However over the past few years, it has become clear that concerted efforts to protect and advocate for the lands and communities associated with these trails are required in order to guarantee their thriving existence for years to come.

So in the spring of 2012, a group of enthusiasts founded the Culture Routes Society, known locally as the “Kültür Rotaları Derneği” (KRD) in Turkish. The KRD develops and sets standards, works to protect the trails, helps provide income for villages, and promotes the trails to both Turkish and international walkers. It also acts as a representative body to the Turkish government, with particular emphasis on formalizing links to the Turkish Culture and Tourism Ministry, as well as the relevant European authorities. The society now oversees the management of 18 trails, providing a guidebook, a map, downloadable GPS points and continuously updated information for each one. The Culture Routes Society is a non-profit organization that has been established as a legal body under Turkish law. We believe that by protecting and promoting the cultural heritage of these ancient paved roads, we can help local communities benefit from rural tourism in a sustainable way.

Keywords:
cultural routes – ruins – landscape – sustainable tourism – Turkey

1. FOLLOWING THE ANCIENT ROADS AND TURKEY’S CULTURE ROUTES SOCIETY

Tourism in Turkey provides unique opportunities to pursue the unexplored, the natural, the untouched, the pristine, the unique, and the authentic. This great land is looming with an abundance of treasures: golden beaches in the west are framed by a piercingly pure turquoise blue with green forest carpet that connects the beaches to the rolling mountains; the north is lined by the rugged coastline of the Black Sea, exemplified by the Kaçkar Mountains or the Pontic Range, and is rife with many ancient ruins such as the famous archaeological site of Göbekli Tepe. Venturing into the mountains gives the sense that you have stepped back in time. The landscape is littered with ruins that date back to the times of the Hittites, quaint villages dot the countryside where people live a self-sufficient existence, and you are likely to find yourself captured in a mutual stare of intrigue. However in many places you can also find five star resorts, luxurious golf courses, crowded beaches, excessive sewage and litter, roads running through ancient archaeological sites, ad-hoc developments and abandoned villages as people move into the crowded cities. The Cultural Routes Society is working hard to act as a force to counter these trends, establishing cultural hiking tourism as a prominent form of alternative sustainable tourism in Turkey.

As a developing country, Turkey has invested heavily in creating a highly competitive tourism sector. However it frequently approaches its abundance of natural, cultural and historical assets with indifference, choosing instead to follow the mantra of “out with the old and in with the new” planting a solid foot on the front stage as an emerging tourist destination (Tosun, 2001; Kuvan, 2010). Between 1991 and 2000 Turkey has enjoyed the fastest growth in tourism compared against the world’s average, and in 2012 Turkey ranks 6th in the amount of international tourist arrivals worldwide with 35.7 million tourist arrivals (UNWTO, 2013). As is the case with other developing countries, tourism has proven to be an excellent source of foreign exchange and is considered to be an economically lucrative activity (Kuvan, 2010).

Mass tourism is known to play a key role in the degradation of natural and cultural resources in the developing world (Kuvan, 2010, Tosun, 2001). Unfortunately, Turkey has followed suit and has blindly thrown itself into the ruckus of development, giving very little thought to long-term consequences. For example, developing luxury hotel resorts and golf courses in the area of Belek has destroyed over 40 percent of the region’s forest. This genre of tourism has resulted in significant loss of biodiversity through habitat modification. For example, it is widely known that golf courses utilize a disproportionate
percentage of local water resources, and that they also pollute the local water-ways with the fertilizers and pesticides (Kuvan 2010). Timothy Tosun (1998) describes how the Tourism Encouragement Act in the 1980s encouraged development in the Ürgüp region without consideration to proper ecological planning and preparation, not only taking a toll on the environment but also on the cohesion between participating stakeholders. Tucker (2010) states that the improvised nature of tourism development in Cappadocia left locals alienated from the decision process: not only was their voice stifled, but they were also isolated from the financial benefits. These are just a few examples. There is a large and growing body of research demonstrating the threat this sort of tourism development poses to the environment, the local economy and the local culture.

2. KÜLTÜR ROTALAR DERNEĞİ (CULTURAL ROUTES SOCIETY, TURKEY)

The Cultural Routes Society is a relatively new concept in Turkey, but it has played a key role in raising awareness about alternatives to mass tourism, namely trails for hikers, bikers and horse riders. In doing so, they are bucking the prevailing trend of prioritizing the economy above all. This is the basis for its stated goals: to develop, maintain and coordinate established culture routes, as well as the new ones that are proliferating across the country. The Lycian way is a prime example of this. It is one of the first trails created, it has been named one of Sunday Times World’s ten best walks (Clow, 2009), and therefore it provides a blueprint for other trails to follow.

The society has an office and small shop in central Antalya, only 15 minutes from the international airport. It is run by Kate Clow, who is also the society’s founding member. She came to Turkey from Britain 20 years ago and was immediately fascinated by old roads and their associated history. She set out to map and protect these points of heritage, collecting and connecting them to create her first long distance trekking trail, the Lycian Way. The way-marks and guidebook were completed in the year 1999.

The Lycian Way snakes along the golden mountain coast to the West of Antalya, stretching over 500 kilometers towards the historic city of Fethiye. Around 30,000 hikers a year lace up their shoes in order to retrace the footsteps of the Lycians and Romans, spending an average of five days walking and spending approximately 25 Euros per day. It is safe to
say that the Lycian Way has been a success as Turkey’s first cultural route (Clow, 2009), and that it has been a significant benefit to the local village economies. The Lycian Way acting as a pilot for other routes has paved the way for the development of a web of routes in the Turkish countryside. Other routes cover a wide variety of terrains and regions and vary from 120 to 600km in length.

Culture routes are developed around a theme of sustainability, meaning that development gives priority to the natural and cultural environment, focuses on benefiting local inhabitants and “meets the needs of the present without compromising those of the future” (Tosun, 2001).

Locals play a key role in the maintenance and management of the trail. Accommodation along the trails is comprised mainly of pensions, a type of homestay equivalent to a bed and breakfast that costs approximately 20 euros for a day (Clow, 2009). Local families run these pensions, and they represent a significant source of livelihood for a culture and population that is in decline. According to Clow, the percentage of the population that lives in the country has dropped dramatically over the past 20 years from a high of about 70 percent to a measly 30 percent today (Neel, 2012). In light of this reality, both tourists and locals are particularly appreciative of the exchanges made possible by these culture routes. The tourists experience world class hospitality and get an inside glimpse into a traditional Turkish lifestyle that is increasingly rarified, while the financial security that the tourists bring gives the villagers an incentive to stay in the country rather than migrate to already overcrowded cities (Neel, 2012).

a. ROUTES IN TURKEY

Since 1999 when the Lycian Way was opened and introduced this new concept of trekking in Turkey, the trail-building network in Turkey has spread widely. New routes are emerging all over the country: the Kackar Trails in the Northeast, Abraham’s Path in the Southeast, the Sultans Trail that links Turkey to Vienna, the Evliya Celebi Way and Phrygian Way are all located in the vicinity of Istanbul, Bursa and Ankara.

Fig. 3. Route in Beymelek, Turkey. Image by Aaron Cederberg.
A completely new route called the Carian Trail was opened recently. It extends over 800 km through the traditional coastal landscape around Marmaris and Bodrum.

These trails are not just historical - some are nature trails that are linked to National Parks such as the Kure Mountains, Kaçkar Mountains or Yenice Forest. A new route links the highest peak in Europe, Mount Ararat (5030 m), to Mount Suphan and Mount Nemrut in eastern Turkey. Most routes are designed for walkers, but one, the Evliya Çelebi Way, commemorates a famous Ottoman traveller and is therefore designed for horseback riding. Others such as the Hittite Trail are suitable for mountain biking; one commemorates Turkey’s rural gastronomy.

Trails are way-marked in red-white paint flashes that are in accordance with widely utilized European standards and are furthermore designated by yellow-green signposts. Shorter day-walks that are associated with the trails are marked with red and yellow stripes.

The Society has also formed links with the Council of Europe’s Institute of Cultural Routes and it attends a variety of international conferences such as World Trail Conference that is held in Korea every year. Some of the society’s long term projects include cross-border collaborations and extensions of the Evliya Çelebi Way, the Abraham’s Path, and The Sultans Trail.

b. ST PAUL TRAIL AND DIGITAL GUIDEBOOK

The Saint Paul Trail, a 500 km, 27-day way-marked walking trail opened to the public in 2004. It follows the probable route taken by St Paul from Perge (now called Aksu, Antalya) to Antioch in Pisidia (now Yalvaç, Isparta). The route has two southern branches, representing alternative interpretations of the route he may have walked. It follows old Roman roads for much of its length, and it runs through ancient Roman settlements at Perge, Pednelissos, Selge, Asar Tepe (Kirme), Adada, Akrotiri (Eğirdir), Parfois (Barla), and Antioch in Pisidia. The guide-book and map for the route was first published in 2004 and since then it has sold over 8000 copies. We have recently released a second edition in English and a Turkish edition is available.
Furthermore, in 2013 we released an iPhone application with financial support from BAKA, a State sponsored local development organization. The application acts as a digital guidebook for walkers, providing them with real time GPS navigation that is layered on top of high-resolution topographical maps. There is also location data, photographs and descriptions of amenities and attractions along the way. The application offers many of the functions we have come to expect from ubiquitous software like Google Maps. However all of the data is specifically relevant to the hiking trails, and it is pre-loaded on the phone so that there is no need for an Internet connection while you are summiting a mountain, or navigating a dense forest.

c. USING THE ROUTES

The Culture Routes in Turkey website (www.TheCultureRoutesinTurkey.com) contains information about the existing routes, their level of difficulty, as well as advice on which seasons and areas of Turkey to walk and explore. You can find travel agencies offering holidays along the routes, or you can order guide-books and maps. You can download GPS points for all of the routes for use with a dedicated GPS device or with a smartphone, allowing independent walkers to follow GPS points from place to place along the routes. Together, the book, map and web sites provide detailed information about each trail and the sightseeing or nature along the way.

If you don’t want to trek independently, many Turkish and foreign tour operators provide group holidays along these routes and they can provide many services that make trekking easier and furthermore, they are a great source of in depth information about the areas you will be exploring.

d. MEETING THE PEOPLE

All of the routes give you a chance to enjoy varied accommodation, a mix of village home stays, small, family-run pensions and occasional boutique hotels, however some areas are developed enough that you could also stay in comfortable coastal or city hotels and only do selected day-walks on the routes. Furthermore, travel around Turkey by bus or by plane
is both affordable and convenient; so many travelers find time to explore a number of different routes during their vacations.

The culture route movement is relatively new to Turkey, but it is developing at a rapid pace and offers an excellent alternative to mass tourism. Mass tourism is not foreign to other more developed European countries, neither are the serious environmental consequences of these short-sighted activities. Turkey is at an advantageous position as it has the opportunity to observe and learn from mistakes made in similar destinations. However, it is imperative that the long-term perspective remains in the foreground, for example, by using tourism as a tool to protect, maintain and build assets as an alternative to other economic activities (Gezici, 2006). The Cultural Routes Society is doing just that. Their work implicates the use of the natural and cultural assets as well as providing a means to protect these treasures and include the

Fig. 5. Traditional market at Eğirdir, Turkey. Image by Aaron Cederberg.

Fig. 6. Fairy Chimneys in Cappadocia, Turkey. Image by Culture Routes Society members.
local people. CRS is not only setting the standard for sustainable tourism in Turkey itself, but setting an example on the international scene which is critical before irreversible damage is inflicted and the natural, the untouched, pristine, unique, and authentic perish before our eyes.

REFERENCES


