

# Going places in Istanbul

(and coming back) is no less an event than that underground journey in *The Hobbit* where Bilbo Baggins finds the Power Ring. On such journeys, however, you have to confront a thousand Gollums - and far from winning the prize of a ring you are lucky if you get away with your life.

Turkey's president pointed out recently that each year more people die in traffic accidents here than were lost in the entire War of Liberation - twelve times the number who perished in the Cyprus Landing of 1974. And since Istanbul has by far the most vehicles and heaviest traffic of any Turkish city, its share in the carnage can well be imagined.

Every year Istanbul's sprawl pushes the "city" limits out in three directions (the south being curbed by the Sea of Marmara). Each new east-west route crawls that inch further toward Polaris, as do the squatter towns teeming with people who think that living beside an expressway brings them closer to civilisation. But a future route linking Kilyos and the Lighthouses to Sile will cap this northward expansion, and then the city will ooze toward Tekirdağ on the west and Izmit on the east - fulfilling its destiny as the megalapolis of Tekiristanmit.

All this makes one thing plain: Istanbul is a city developing along motorway axes. Though it is a maritime capital, and although until the mid-twentieth century it was shaped by railway routes, since 1950 liberal politicians, most of whom were educated in the United States and captivated in their youth by its transcontinental highways, have tipped the scales toward that mode of transport. The image of settling into a huge American

car and gunning it westward, to lose oneself in the vastness of the prairies and, further west, the desert, is a form of romanticism which, married in a shotgun wedding to Turkey's oil-based economic and cultural structure, has produced a bizarre synthesis.

The dream has five key features:

Cars, initially imported but in the last 25 years assembled here in an industry that the state protects fiercely, are hugely more expensive than those in the US or Western Europe;

Gasoline and petroleum products are by contrast exceedingly cheap, because they are state-subsidised;

All sectors of the economy are addicted to oil and the automotive industry;

A middle-class love affair with the car, especially in the past quarter century, goes beyond the bounds of satire;

Government policies, to support and expand this consumer trend, put all their chips on motorways as investment in railways and shipping all but dries up.

Whatever the prognosis for the automotive industry worldwide, for oil reserves and for the ecological consequences of burning fossil fuels the spectacle of a nation whose own automotive industry has is totally derivative, and which is technologically dependent on other economic structures, but which nevertheless is committed to the automobile, brings tears to the eyes - in every sense of the phrase.

Until the 1960s mass transportation in Istanbul meant the Sirkeci-Halkali suburban railway line, the Karaköy-Tunel metro, and a venerable system of ferryboats. The scene had begun to change in 1950s as Menderes created the Sirkeci-Yesilköy shoreline causeway and the "London Asphalt." The trend culminated in 1973 with Demirel's Bosphorus Bridge. The shoreline causeway and the London Asphalt had spawned such satellite cities as Ataköy and Merter, pushing Istanbul out towards the airport. The bridge now multiplied this sprawl effect. But things happened so fast there was nothing that apartment developers like Emlak Bankasi could do: with blinding speed access roads to the bridge attracted squatters. Supposedly built to free up transportation, the bridge boosted car sales so greatly, and created such a need for access to and from the new squatter

towns, that within five years the car jams in Istanbul were greater than ever before.

Like a snake eating its tail, each new bridge demanded a twin, each motorway another; for bridges fan car sales and cars demand more bridges. Even though the car is a very expensive consumer item to most people, sales multiplied. The government had pledged to keep the price of petrol down and to supply the necessary infrastructure.

The middle classes went along with this expensive game. Fibreglass coffins called the Anadol – Anatolia – sold for the price of Cadillacs, and it is more the economists' job than mine to determine the impact of this on inflation. Meanwhile industrialists were cagy, insisting on BMWs and Mercedes, also a favourite of the state-sponsored hitmen. The post-Özal lumpen bourgeoisie were also eager for these makes, but in time they were bowed by inflation and mainly had to settle for a Tempra, that paragon of poor taste and automotive ineptitude.

In the 1980s the project launched by Menderes and Demirel to make Istanbul a snarl of expressways found its third and possibly greatest architect. Özal's Mehmet the Conqueror Bridge and Istanbul-Ankara Freeway put its predecessors in the shade. With the completion of these projects, the "new" Istanbul was consummated: A small "old" city fragmented and embraced by expressways, and the squatter towns swarming about them like bunches of grapes on a vine.

The symbol of this change was the six-lane highway which Özal's mayor, Dalan, blasted through one of Istanbul's oldest and most cosmopolitan districts, Tarlabasi, leveling the place as he did so. At the time debate hinged on the question of which should have priority, our cultural heritage or the public good. It's well to remember that Dalan, an avid defendant of the public good in this debate, for years shelved the Istanbul metro project on the grounds that it was "not profitable, and didn't fit the design-build-operate model of implementation".

In Western Europe and the United States the automobile has long ceased to be a status symbol. In Turkey, however (and especially in Istanbul) the population in terms of transport is sharply divided into Disraeli's "two nations." Industrialists, and the middle classes who emulate them, enjoy the privilege of the

car, while the working class and semi-employed residents of the outer city are doomed to use mass transportation, of which there are three types:

**Buses:** The vehicles which, as cars create near-gridlock, make it possible to spend half the day getting to and from work. Inadequate for the job, they lead to unwanted "intimacy" among the passengers, especially at rush hour. Behavioural patterns are increasingly under the influence of the outlying districts, and of the (Islamist) Rafah Party which rules the roost there. This in turn (especially when the RP-dominated Istanbul Municipality offers free bus rides on holidays) leads to an invasion by the population of those districts – with their fundamentalist inclinations – into the "posh" areas which, at holiday time, are vacated by residents who head for the coastal and mountain resorts. Meanwhile the quieter, sleeker but less frequent new split-level buses have not managed to persuade the middle class that mass transportation has its charms.

**Rail:** Since the 1960s there has been no investment in either the Sirkeci-Halkali or Haydarpasa-Gebze line. The same old trains ply the routes, bringing people into town and back from their poor districts strung east and west along the Marmara shoreline. The recently-completed light rail and supertram lines have begun to carry many people from new dormitory and business areas out toward Esenler, Yenibosna (New Bosnia) and Ikitelli. The Metro, long delayed by Dalan's scuttling tactics, is still under construction and, if by the grace of God it someday opens, will shoulder much of the burden on the city's north-south axis. It's hoped that the Metro will at last wean the middle class from their cars – for with an underground system Istanbul will take its place among such megalopoli as New York, London, Paris and Moscow, and this may be the status symbol needed to displace the car.

**Ferries:** The bond between Istanbul and the Bosphorus is like that which links Paris to the Seine, London to the Thames, Montreal to the St Lawrence, New York to the Hudson, Budapest and Vienna to the Danube, and New Delhi to the Ganges. Unfortunately, the water is there, the boats are there, but the city authorities just can't seem to conceive of the Bosphorus as a transportation corridor, the strait being viewed as an obstacle to

overcome. Kadiköy-Karaköy and Üsküdar-Besiktas are popular lines, but a few more bridges will soon put them, too, out of business. The same logic has gradually reduced, almost to the point of extinction, the Bosphorus routes north-south. And yet, despite their slower speed, ferries can actually get you there much faster, given Istanbul's traffic. Of course the international tanker traffic through the Bosphorus is a problem. Controlling it is a prerequisite for scheduled urban traffic on this waterway; but it is hard to believe that authorities which neglect to impose safety controls for the tankers will do the same in the name of urban transit.

The hot debate of recent times is how an Asia-Europe through route can be achieved, given the bottleneck which has developed in the decade since the second bridge was built. Two projects symbolise the two different approaches to this problem: one for a third bridge, and the other for a tunnel under the Bosphorus. If a third bridge is built north of the second, the squatter towns which will grow around to its access routes will degrade and ultimately destroy Istanbul's last remaining green areas. This will spell an end to the chances for fighting air and water pollution. Southward, however, there is only one possible site: the span between Besiktas and Üsküdar. And that will mean sacrificing Yildiz Park, the last park of any size left in the city.

Naturally, those who stand to gain from selling land are lobbying for this project. But the question has another dimension. Because of the oil crisis likely to hit home in the first decade of the millennium the Turkish automotive industry wants bridges and expressways built as fast as possible. The cars sold may have a life expectancy of just over ten years, but the more they can peddle before buyers wake up to this fact the better. A bridge scheduled to open in the year 2000 will double car sales in Istanbul over the next five or six years.

But the other project might just mean Istanbul's salvation. Unlike the bridge, a Bosphorus tunnel (at present planned between Yenikapi and Haydarpaşa) would be for rail, linking Halkali and Gebze as a single system. This would mean the modernisation of suburban lines, and a rapid flow of surface and underground trains, integration of the north-south axis. It just might induce people to leave their cars at home.

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**BÜLENT SOMAY**

*Istanbul's traffic nightmare*

But let's not count our chickens before they're hatched. As long as we Istanbulers continue to feed our masochism there we'll be, gaping, until at around seven each evening we hop in our cars and head for the bridge, which will take an hour to reach, have a swearing match with four drivers, and finally jump out and hit one. At nine o'clock, with luck, we'll make it home, plop down in front of the television, and view the close-ups of people, dozens of them, who have died in that day's accidents. Well, we'll say, thank God it wasn't me. The half-completed Metro tunnels will fill with rain, and in the rain we'll look vainly for a taxi.

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*Bülent Somay*, born 1956 in Istanbul. Since 1983 his essays and articles have been published in *Akıntıya Karşı*, *Zemin*, *Birikim*, *Demokrat* ve *Defter* (reviews). He was attached to Mozaik (a music group) between 1984 and 1995. He continued his musical activities independently after 1995. He works as editor in chief of the science fiction collection in *Metis Yayınları*.