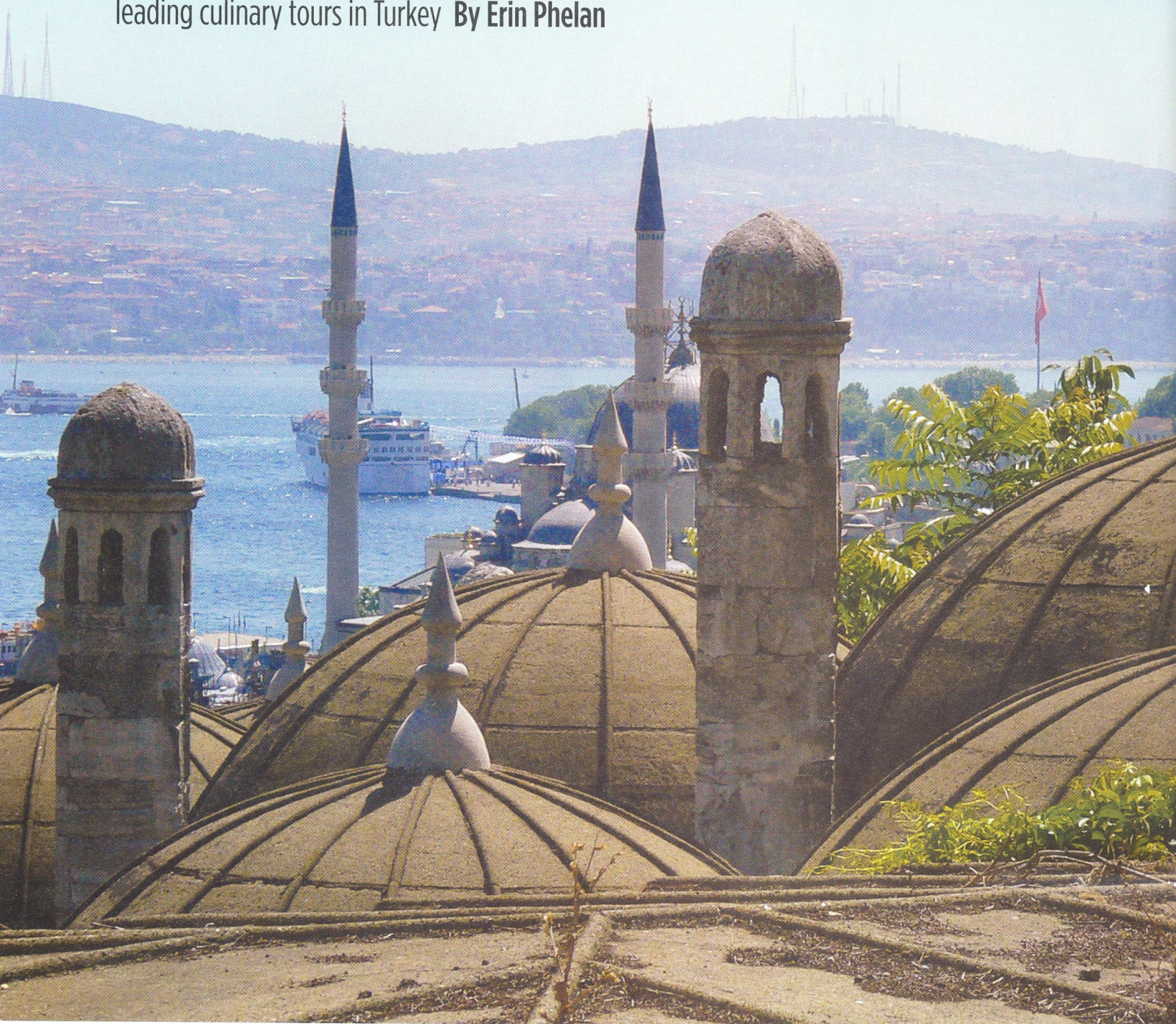


Taste for life

A burnt-out executive slows down and savours her new career leading culinary tours in Turkey **By Erin Phelan**





From left: The Bosphorus at Istanbul; Farrell rolling dolma; fresh figs, which are plentiful in Turkey. Below: Dried fruits and nuts for sale at an Ankara market.

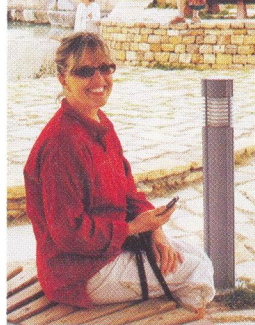
It's June 2007 and Brenda Farrell and I are meandering through the streets of Istanbul at night. I can't help but feel that this isn't the same city I experienced a few hours earlier. By day, Istanbul is beautiful, loud and demands your attention, shouting, Look at my mosques! Look at my palaces! Smell my spices! At night, though, the city is different...calmer. The soft hues accent the architecture, lights gently illuminate the minarets and the Bosphorus, and you are allowed to immerse yourself in its tranquility.

But I'm not in Turkey for the sights alone. I'm here to spend time with Farrell and hear her story: one of a woman who, zapped of energy, revamped her life and rediscovered her true passions.

That same morning, our first full day in Istanbul, we were woken by the eerily beautiful call to prayer from a mosque. Then we spent the day taking in this historic city where East meets West. We admired the famous Blue Mosque and marvelled at the Aya Sofia; we bartered with merchants in the Grand Bazaar and sought out carpet shops. Most importantly, we strolled the markets, and feasted. Farrell, who lives in West Vancouver and is head of a chapter of the Slow Food movement there, gave an impromptu →



PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: JON SUNDERLAND (2); MASTERFILE (2)



From left: Fish for sale in Istanbul; Farrell takes a break in Pamukkale; Faith Market in Istanbul.

talk about how important fresh foods are. “They aren’t processed,” she explains, “and they taste like they should taste.” When Farrell was invited by some women to help them roll dolma—vine leaves stuffed with fragrant rice—for their restaurant, she happily pitched in. “I couldn’t understand a word of what they said,” Farrell told me later, laughing, “but we spoke the universal language of food.”

Farrell is attuned to Istanbul’s heartbeat, and no wonder—she’s now North American representative for Tribe Travel Tours, a job that allows her to spend a few weeks a year

the moon rise, Farrell, 59, unravels the tale of what led her to this place. On the eve of the new millennium, the divorced mother of two grown daughters was at the helm of a market research company and worked 70 hours a week. “I lived, breathed and slept with my business. It was a very unhealthy relationship; it consumed me. I hit a wall and I said, ‘So, this is it? Life is going to be about money?’”

Just after her 50th birthday, she decided to try to do what so many of us would love to do: revamp her life. She closed her business. By then remarried, she volunteered with street kids and spent 30 to 40 hours a week helping new immigrants build an organic coffee company. She took consulting positions, and dabbled with hobbies. But a few years passed and she still wasn’t satisfied.

One of the things that helped Farrell find her passion was to get involved in the Slow Food movement. A few years before closing down her business, she had read an article about the grassroots organization that began in Italy in the 1980s. Slow Food promotes the celebration of food, taking time to enjoy eating together with friends and family, as well as the sustainability of food production. As a child, Farrell spent summers in

Then she took a trip to Turkey in the fall of 2005 with a childhood friend. “From the moment I got off the plane, it felt like I’d come home. I can’t explain it,” she says, her eyes smiling.

What is it about Turkey?

“Well, first it was the food,” she says with a belly laugh. “The Turkish people spend hours sharing mealtimes. I think we’ve lost a sense of that in North America.” Farrell adds that the people here drew her in. “They are so open and warm. I met Omer through a common friend and we just clicked. I was talking about Slow Food and he told me his dream of showing people the real Turkey that tourists don’t always see, and it dawned on me: I could help him realize his dreams, and start the next chapter of my own life.”

She returned to B.C. and busied herself with presentations to travel agencies. Then last year, she brought her first group of women, mostly from the Vancouver area, on a tour of Turkey that highlighted fresh food.

Each part of Turkey is renowned for different flavours, and if our time together is an example, my food memories will linger: At the coast we have fresh sea bass, simply done in salt, pepper and lemon; en route to the Ephesus ruins we sample *gözleme*, a thin cheese-stuffed pancake. And we always have a supply of fresh figs, cherries and nuts.

We spend a few days exploring the countryside—visiting museums, touring an eco-farm where the peaches are a few weeks away from their prime—and take a trip to mystical Cappadocia, some 700 kilometres southeast of Istanbul. Millions of years ago, volcanoes erupted, spewing ash over the vast Anatolian land and forming a layer of tufa, a soft rock. Over time, erosion led to the creation of a landscape of conical spires with mushroom-cap tops, and caves that, until recently, were still inhabited. There we enjoy a hot-air balloon ride over the →

Brenda Farrell finally had to stop and ask herself, “So, this is it? Life is going to be about money?”

here. She and her friend Omer Yapis, Tribe Travel’s owner, zipped me along, chatting almost incessantly. It’s clear she has discovered what she truly loves to do.

Now it’s evening, and as we sip fresh orange juice in an outdoor café and watch

Italy making squid-ink pasta from scratch with her grandmother, so she was drawn to Slow Food, but hadn’t had time to explore getting involved. But once she no longer had a business to run, Farrell was able to start Slow Food Lions Gate, providing her with the leadership role she loved.

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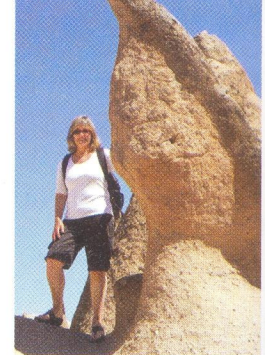


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A woman sells fresh cucumbers and peppers at Faith Market in Istanbul; Farrell in the land of conical spires at Cappadocia.

remarkable terrain, and Farrell's eyes twinkle as we snap photographs.

We then set off for a cruise on a wooden boat, or gullet, with Farrell's husband, Jon Sunderland, as well as Omer and a few other couples. By day two we are completely relaxed, playing backgammon in the sun, stopping to pick wild oregano on tiny islands. I invite Farrell to snorkel with me in the crystal sea, but she shakes her head. That afternoon, over coffee, she tells me she prefers to feel the ground under her feet.

Throughout our travels, Farrell has been keeping a journal so she can provide updates for her Slow Food blog, "Fresh,"

"There's something very beautiful about this age," says Farrell, "where wisdom is not something we talk about—it's how we live our lives."

which focuses on organic and local food, environmental issues and culinary travels.

"For me," says Farrell, "this point in my life is the coming together of all my passions: food, travel and writing." Farrell has realized she's not driven by money. She's also learned a few other things: that it is

possible to find happiness at different stages; that women define themselves through roles—mother, wife, boss, employee; that finding a new identity requires a hard look inside; and that changing your life is a process.

"Sometimes I think of all those years I could have been using this wisdom. But it has come at this age. That is what is so amazing, because every woman dreads their 50s: You worry you're going to get old and fat, you worry about your health, your kids leave home—then you become a grandmother, which brings about a whole other series of assumptions. But there is something very beautiful about this age where

wisdom is something we live, not something we talk about. It's how we carry on our lives."

Farrell emails me from the bustling town of Fethiye a few days after I return home to Canada. She has returned to the Mediterranean coast to check

out new hotels for her tours, and wants me to know she's taken the plunge: She's finally gone swimming in those crystal-clear waters.

"If you live a life in fear, your life is never lived," she writes. "I'll never sit in a rocking chair and say I wish I'd done this or that. I am on a path to do everything I want to do." □