

Turkey Trekking

Tucked away in the north east of Turkey, close to the border with the former Soviet republic of Georgia, the Kackar Mountains offer some of the most remote treks in Europe.

Simon Birch reports.

If you've never heard of the Kackar Mountains, don't worry, as virtually nobody outside of Turkey has heard of them either.

Tucked away in the far north east of Turkey, the Kackar range forms the highest part of the rugged Pontic Alps which hug Turkey's Black Sea Coast.

With their remote Alpine Valleys, hidden glacial lakes and spectacular mountain scenery, the Kackars are quite simply a trekkers' paradise. The range itself runs in an east-west direction for around 100km and forms an effective barrier to the mist and torrential rain that continually rolls in off the Black Sea some 40km to the north.

Trekkers on these northern slopes are guaranteed to get a soaking as this is the wettest part of Turkey with an annual rainfall of a staggering five metres. The southern slopes and mountains, which lie in Kackar's rain shadow are by contrast, usually much drier.

Fortunately, Middle Earth Travel, the small trekking company that I was travelling with had the good sense to route most of the 14 day trek that I'd signed up for through this relatively rain-free-zone.

Most treks on this southern start from Barhal, a tiny mountain village which is a four-hour drive from the nearest airport in Erzurum in the south.

The weather was behaving itself with the baking sun already high in the sky as we fuffed about with our packs outside our pension in Barhal one morning last August.

The rather excellent news on this front was that I wasn't going to have to carry my rucksack – Jennifer was.

When I first set eyes on Jennifer though I wasn't sure that she was up to the job, what with her girlie blonde fringe blowing in the breeze. But then after I checked out her four, stumpy little legs, I knew that she'd be perfect.

Named after Jennifer Lopez by Selcuk, her young local pony-driver, Jennifer was one of the three, small ponies that would thankfully be carrying all our rucksacks, camping and cooking clobber.

Soon we were ready to head off and we were quite a little expedition what with five trekkers, two guides, three mule drivers – plus of course Jennifer and her two other four-legged mates.

The thing about trekking in Turkey is that it's quite unlike trekking anywhere else in Europe. To begin with there are – amazingly – virtually no other trekkers around and another is that there no purpose-built walking trails. Instead we walked on ancient mule-trails that have been built to link up the remote summer villages called yaylar that exist high up in the mountains.

“The yaylar form the backbone of traditional Turkish mountain life and there are dozens of these yaylar scattered throughout the Kackar Mountains,” explained Kerem, the ever-smiling boss of Middle Earth Travel who joined us for the first week of the trek.

“The yaylar are only occupied during the short summer months though when the winter snows have melted, the villagers move up the valleys with their cows and sheep to graze in the alpine meadows.”

It's the fact that that we were able to walk through these centuries old yaylar, meet their friendly inhabitants and get a glimpse of life that really sets trekking apart from other treks in Europe.

For the next five days we walked under cloudless skies through half a dozen yaylar, across alpine meadows, dropping down into remote valleys before climbing up again over dramatic passes.

The good news was that with Jennifer taking the toil out of the trekking, the walking was a complete joy and not at all difficult and most days we'd be walking for just around six hours or seven hours at the most covering anything from 10km to 15km.

Everywhere we walked we were surrounded by swathes of wildflowers and an equal flurry of butterflies whilst overhead the skies were filled with soaring eagles, vultures and alpine choughs.

Other wildlife made its presence known as within a short distance of leaving Barhal we came across fresh bear poo that had been dumped obligingly in the middle of the trail.

The Kackar Mountains are an important stronghold for the European brown bear and although I was slightly alarmed with the prospect of a bear sniffing around my tent at night, Kerem reassured us all that bears preferred berries to backpackers.

The good weather also meant that we camped out under staggeringly starry skies in the most awesome locations with our first night's camping setting the standard for the rest of the trek.

Satibeg is a long, narrow grassy ridge, which pokes out just high enough above the tree-line to give campers sensational views of the surrounding mountains and valleys. Suffice to say that it was quite easily one of the most idyllic spots that I've ever camped in.

By day six we began to swing north and started to head towards the high point of the trek, the great, brooding hulk of Kackar Dagi, which at 3,932m is the fifth highest mountain in Turkey.

As if on cue the mist rolled in and spilled over the mountains giving us what turned out to be our only downpour of the trek and we spent a damp, cold night at Dilberduzu, a tiny alpine meadow that's used as the base camp by trekkers aiming for Kackar Dagi.

Incredibly though, the next morning dawned bright and clear and we were able to make our ascent in dazzling sunshine, climbing past glistening glacial lakes before carefully kicking steps in the still frozen snowfields.

It was an easy, but steep, walk to the summit with the only issue being the altitude, which meant that we had to take the last couple of hundred metres at a heart-poundingly slow pace.

Once we'd taken our summit snaps we wasted no time in heading back down as the mist was already boiling up from the north threatening to engulf everything.

Luckily though this turned out to be an idle threat and we continued to enjoy glorious sunshine right up over the last pass before dropping down into the mist and gloom of the bustling yaylar of Ayder where I sadly bade farewell to Jennifer.

It had been an incredible journey but somehow trekking would never be quite the same again, as not only would I forever miss Kackar's endlessly empty trails and mountains, if I was being honest, what really made the trip was having somebody else carry my pack.

I was already missing Jennifer.

More Info:

A two-week trek in the Kackar Mountains costs 800 Euros and includes all food and accommodation and transfers.

A one week trek costs 410 Euros.

For details contact: www.middleearthtravel.com

A return flight from London to Erzurum via Istanbul with Turkish Airlines costs £298 including taxes.

Contact Turkish Airlines for details:

Tel: (020) 7766 0300 www.turkishairlines.com

Suggested reading:

The Mountains of Turkey

Karl Smith, Cicerone Press £14.99