

# Travellers' Tales

The Diary of the Beekeepers Safari to Turkey 2010

Brian Sherriff

**T**HE Beekeepers safari to Turkey was full of interest and included many apiary visits, from the mountains to the Steppes of the north, to the forests and honeydew sites of the south. We saw queen production, honey production and honey markets and passed through 8 cities and numerous villages. Sight-seeing was definitely on the agenda and ranged from a monastery cut into a high cliff to a large dam which was under construction, two ancient cities and a tea factory.

## 25th July 2010 – day one

On our first day we had 4 breakfasts! One (a submarine sandwich) given to us at 5am by the hotel, another at the airport, another on the plane and the last when we met our host Ali Nihat Gokyigit who introduced us to members of his team and his brother. His opening comment was "I am 84 and am 2 years older than the eldest in your group" We all looked at each other – there were only four of us and we never knew who he was talking about!

Breakfast here was by a fast flowing river in the wooded mountains and by some trout tanks.

We walked to the Sumela monastery which was high in the cliffs of Mount Mela. It was started in the 4th century by two Greek monks and the church still had original fresco panels. Next we travelled on the shores of the Black Sea (which was blue) to Trabzon and a tea factory after passing many tea plantations on the steep mountainside; then on to have tea with a beekeeper who, because the mountain is so steep, uses a cable system to get his bee equipment from his home to his hives and bee house high in the mountain. This was the first of many glasses of tea offered to us by many beekeepers; in small glasses, no milk, just weak tea and sugar and very nice. We stayed the night in the town of Ayder.

## 26th July 2010 – day two

The next morning we made a short detour to see some local log hives which were about 100ft up in a pine tree. We asked why the hives were so high up and they told us that it was to protect the hives from bears which are similar to the grizzly bears of North America.

We had a demonstration showing us how the log hives, made from the trunk of a lime tree were opened. One end of the hive had the bee's entrance and the back had a panel that

could be removed, exposing the honey comb.

This beekeeper had his log hives in an open shelter and to smoke them he burnt corn husks in a metal tray below the hives which were on shelves above. He also had some Dadant hives and the whole lot were protected by a wire mesh fence to keep bears out. The forage here was mostly from hazelnut and chestnut and we were told that it was a poor year for honey as heavy rain had washed out the flowers.

This beekeeper had a large wooden Swiss style chalet which was supported by stilts because the mountainside was so steep. We were given tea and small sugary cakes. The Turkish people are very friendly and when visiting beekeepers we often had tea, cakes and fruit.

En route through the heavily forested and steep mountains we stopped by an Ottoman bridge – a one span bridge in stone built around 1500 and spanning a fast flowing river.

We travelled on a motorway along the Black Sea coast to Artvin and had lunch in a mountain resort called Konagi and nearby we visited Echo Hill. Here we found a platform sticking out over a steep and wooded valley with waterfalls coming down the mountainside. We had tea and biscuits on the platform which Nihat Gokyigit and his Tema foundation had erected 2500 metres up from the valley floor (on the trees we noticed beetle traps).

Our next stop was at an apiary for queen rearing, with 134 queen producing hives and 500 nucleus boxes producing 2000 queens per annum, all 80% Caucasian bees foraging on three species of rhododendron, lime, wild flowers and blackberries.

In the evening we headed up and over the pass of the Karchal Mountains. Niwat Gokyigit travelled in the bus – a comfortable 13 seater – and explained what we were going to see in Camili and also played on the car radio music with Tefken Philharmonic Orchestra, comprised of musicians from 23 countries, in a programme called "Soloists of Three Seas". Several of the players had instruments typical of their home country and Gokyigit set this up to help promote world peace and cultural integration. Some players were from areas of conflict such as Israel and Palestine, Turkey and Greece.

We arrived in Cameli in the dark and did not realise how torturous the road was until we returned. Our accommodation was in a large wooden chalet type guest house nicely

appointed with a good restaurant.

## 27th July 2010 – day three

The Camili Valley is surrounded by high forested mountains and is home to a special honey bee; *Apis mellifera caucasia*. This is a pure line of honey bee discovered by Professor Ahmet Inci in 2006. Because of the nature of the terrain the high forested mountains are inaccessible for about 5 months of the year, and because of the high snowfall on the pass of the only road in no other bees have entered the valley.

At the back of the guesthouse there were beehives for breeding queens and drones and we were invited to look at the combs and to see the local beekeeper grafting, using a suction tube to transfer eggs to artificial queen cells.

We then went to the bee laboratory and saw the queens being artificially inseminated. They use a queen of 5 days old and a drone 12-15 days old. In 5 days the queen puts on 225mgs in weight. 7500 queen bees are produced annually and this gives employment to 20 local people. Queen bees are distributed all over Turkey and each queen can produce 50 more queens. These bees are so popular that they cannot meet the demand.

We then had a picnic by a fast moving river followed by a meal at a beekeepers home and saw his valley apiary. On the way back one of the Turkish members of our party was violently ill and was taken to the local hospital for the night – he had enjoyed too much rhododendron honey – probably *rhododendron luteum* which is very nice in small quantities but one shouldn't have too much! He was well recovered the next day!

The day finished with a visit to the local mosque, believed to be the oldest wooden mosque in Turkey, and a short walk – about 50 yards to the border with Georgia and an armed guard. After the evening meal we had entertainment with folk dancing to an accordion. The District Governor was on a visit and when he left he shook hands with us all and I didn't wash my hand for a week!

## 28th July 2010 – day four

This morning we visited the apiary of a lady beekeeper. She owns an apiary of 77 colonies and 300 mating nuclei and is also a housewife with cows and 2 children to look after! Her queens are marketed by Tema who help her with the queen production. All her family are



1 & 2 Lime Tree Log Hives 3 Corn Husk Smoking 4 Lady beekeeper transferring Queen cells 5 Ani Bridge and Gorge 6 Migratory beekeeper holding full comb organic honey

inspired to raise queens and there are 6 more producers in the area. The government gives aid in this area to produce good queens and if there are more than 3 hives, the government gives 5 Turkish Lira for each hive. The local income in the valley is about 2000 TL but this lady now earns 17-18000 TL net after 15000 TL expenses. She has a house in Borca which she uses in the winter and her husband works in a tea factory.

We were told that some beekeepers damage the edge of a worker cell with an egg inside and the bees will repair it and give it some royal jelly; they will damage it again several times and bees will repair it and give it more royal jelly then seal it and a queen emerges.

We had our second breakfast here, and moved out of the valley along an unmade road, wide enough for one vehicle, with a steep cliff on one side and a sheer drop on the other! After lunch by a trout farm we saw a dam being built which will be 249 metres high and will be the 3rd highest concrete dam in the world. Ash from factories is mixed with concrete and 3500 tons will be used and the concrete is kept cool in an ice station. We saw a hopper on a cable carrying 28 tons of concrete at a time.

We had a surprise when we stopped at a large roadside vegetable stall and were treated to hot buttered corn on the cob! Our night was spent in individual Swiss type chalets in the Sahara National Park with wonderful open scenery. I was advised not to walk too far because of dogs in the area, however I did see eagles flying and many colourful wild flowers.

#### 29th July 2010 – day five

On the road again heading for Kars we saw

lots of white geese, flocks of sheep and herds of cattle with the owners nearby.

High on the Steppes we were taken to an area covered with all sorts of wild flowers and here we saw about 100 colonies owned by six beekeepers producing organic honey in Dadant hives. They were migrant beekeepers and as the Steppes are too cold in the winter, they move here in June and then move down lower in the winter and spring for the forage of chestnut, other trees and wild flowers. They expect to get 17 tons of organic honey from wild flowers. Tema supply organic foundation and their hives are checked every 2 weeks with a technician visit and they extract honey independently.

At Ardahan we visited a government gene centre for production of Caucasian honey bees where work was being carried out to educate people and discover the productive capacity of bees, disease prevention, etc. They had 600 colonies for selective queen breeding and honey production. The government funded the provision of hives for poor people.

At the next apiary of migratory beekeepers we were shown hives with covers dented by hailstones that had fallen the previous week, which were said to have been the size of golf balls.

That evening we arrived in Kars and had a tour of the city with its Citadel and Turkish baths. Kar is the Turkish word for snow and winters here are long and hard.

#### 30th July 2010 – day six

This was a sightseeing and travel day. Our first stop was to visit the ruined city of Ani overlooking a gorge with the Barley River (Arpa Cayi) at the bottom and Armenia on

the other side. This was a city on the silk route which, after surviving several invasions, was devastated in 1319 by an earthquake. It was very hot during our visit and we were given sun umbrellas, black on the outside and white on the inside.

The cathedral is the main building still standing and is very impressive although the spacious dome fell down centuries ago. There are the remains of several churches and a mosque from which you can look down into the gorge and see the remains of a bridge that once had a span of 32 yards.

There was a border post on the other side of the gorge and there were Russian and Armenian flags flying, also a Russian patrol looking at us through binoculars!

We stopped to see some local beekeepers who were not expecting us but we were made very welcome.

Near Ani we stopped to look at a monument set up in memory of a whole village that had been massacred within living memory by the Armenians.

In Ezurum, which is a large city of 250,000 people and situated 6,560 feet high on the Steppes, we visited a honey market of several honey shops selling bottle honey, a lot of comb honey, some of it in round combs from log hives, beeswax and pollen and small cakes and delicacies made with honey.

That night we spent in a very nice ski lodge and had a traditional Turkish meal sitting on cushions in a very old restaurant, followed by a tour of the city in the dark.

#### 31st July 2010 – day seven

We flew from Ezurum to Istanbul and had lunch



Sales Girls



Comb honey



Village lady rolling baklava

in a very nice open air restaurant overlooking the Bosphorous with lots of shipping and ferries passing to and fro from Europe to Asia and a large cruise liner setting off. Then to a large mosque and the spice bazaar selling spices, nuts, honeycomb, olive oil soaps, dried fruits and Turkish delight. Although we travelled mostly in our own little bus, the transport system is quite impressive, with special bus lanes in between the main motorway. The buses had their own 'stations' at regular intervals with articulated buses, sometimes with two trailers.

Our next flight took us to Dalaman and then an hour's coach ride to Marmaris on the Mediterranean coast.

#### 1st August 2010 – day eight

Bees have been kept at Marmaris since 500 AD and beekeepers did migratory beekeeping, taking bees to the high mountains for the floral honey and also for honeydew from the red pines. From 1300 -1900 the Ottoman Empire hives were numbered and the crop was reported to the government. This area is very suitable for bees with good weather and forage. Fire is the most dangerous threat to the red pine trees which can grow up to 80 ft, but the pine cones can resist fire up to 100 degrees centigrade and the trees are under the protection of the government.

We passed a marshy area which had been planted with Eucalyptus trees to get rid of the mosquitoes. We went to see an old 'Bee house' which consisted of a high stone walled area about the size of a cottage, which used to be roofed, so that the hives within would be protected from bears and other predators.

The bus was parked by the side of a river bed full of tennis ball sized boulders and when we returned from the bee house we found that the driver had tried to turn in the boulders and was hopelessly stuck, as was a large lorry that had tried to pull it out. A large cement mixer lorry also had trouble but managed to pull away without the lorry it was trying to help. In the end a big digger with a large bucket pulled everyone out and we were able to continue our travels. After passing a cliff with small caves which used to be used to store coffins, we pulled in for lunch at a restaurant by the side of a slow flowing river and we all enjoyed mullet caught that day, and watched large white geese on the water.



Is this a red B J Sherriff bee suit?

Near Mugla we stopped at a very well stocked honey shop with plenty of round and rectangular comb honeys, jars of well labelled honey, also honey cakes and Turkish delight. After that came another highlight – beekeepers producing pine honeydew honey. At a clearing in the forest we came upon literally hundreds of blue painted beehives placed in rows and each hive only a few inches apart.

Turkey is the world's largest producer of pine honeydew honey and we were shown the pine tree parasite *Marchalina hellenica* on a branch of one of the red pines surrounding the beehives. This insect produces a cottony mass under which it lays 200-300 eggs and when these hatch the young insects feed on the saps of the plant and later produce a sugary substance called honeydew which the honey bees collect. We had another unexpected surprise when passing through a small village; we stopped and joined a group of beekeepers. Soon out came the tea and fruit and we learned that in this village of 100 families, 70% of the population kept bees. They were migratory beekeepers with no static hives and the government tells them, via the leader of the village, where to put the hives. They averaged 26kg per hive and packed the honey in 28kg tins. Amongst the group were two small girls who showed us their school paintings!

#### 2nd August 2010 – day nine

Another day and something quite different; we were invited into a private house where the lady of the house showed us how to make Baklava which consists of pastry sheets soaked in sugar or honey syrup and stuffed with walnuts. The samples were much appreciated! We then moved on to a factory where we saw piles of beeswax ready to be made into foundation and



Village beekeepers

in an adjoining building there was a production unit making 28kg honey tins. Near Kusadasi, where we spent the night, we visited the apiary of 2000 hives managed by a father with 2 sons and a son-in-law each managing 500 hives. These Dadant hives were placed very close together in rows in a site by the red pine trees. The combs we saw were well covered with bees and plenty of honey. We had tea with the father and his family in the village square and they also joined us at mealtime in our hotel at Kusadasi.

#### 3rd August 2010 – day ten

Today we went to the 3000 year old city of Ephesus and the House of the Virgin Mary. No bees that day!

#### 4th August 2010 – day eleven

We returned to Istanbul and met Ali Nimat Gokyigit again and after a very good meal in the Sahan restaurant he took us to his botanical garden. He developed this garden in memory of his wife and it is placed in the wasteland of a motorway intersection and consists of 8 islands with car park and administrative offices, a rock garden, hedged garden, crevice garden, fruit and vegetable garden and perennial borders, also a picnic garden, medicinal plants and dye and edible plants garden, a hydrangea collection, arboretum, ponds and lots more. There are many threatened species in the garden and there is also a children's gardening project. I would like to have more time to explore this garden and it made a fitting end to the safari.

This safari was arranged by "Bees for Development" and "Tema" and was an exceptional visit. The organiser looked after us very well indeed with plenty to do and see at all times. Congratulations to all concerned.