

TRAVEL

Great  
Escapes

WEEK

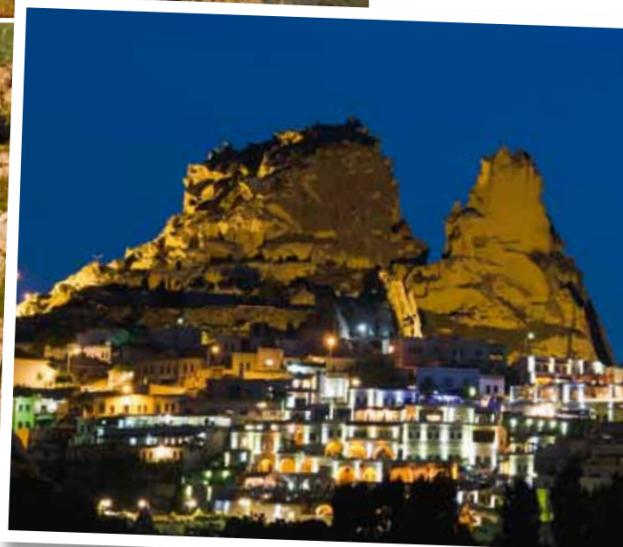
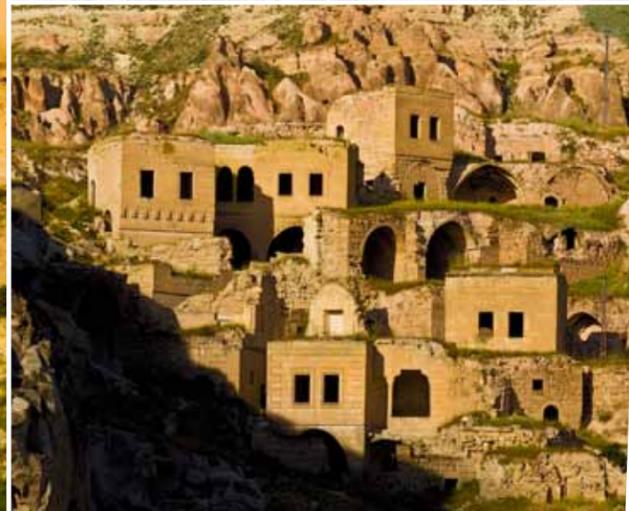
# Above and Beyond

WHETHER SEEN FROM A HOT-AIR BALLOON OR THROUGH THE LABYRINTHINE TUNNELS OF ITS BEGUILING UNDERGROUND CITIES, THE WONDERS OF **CAPPADOCIA** ARE RICH AND STRANGE, PAUL KAY DISCOVERS

## TAKE FLIGHT

On busy days, there can be close to 140 hot-air balloons in the sky above Cappadocia





**R**UMLING THROUGH THE DESERT in the netherworld between night and dawn, my weary eyes gaze out over the fantastical rock formations basking in the other-worldly light on all sides. It's a landscape that could have graced the cover of countless 1960s sci-fi pulp novels, especially when strange craft start to rise around us by the dozen, jets of flame intermittently lighting up their inhabitants as they hover above, seemingly suspended by an invisible force in the dusky sky.

It's 5am in Cappadocia, Central Turkey and, as they do every morning, a motley fleet of hot-air balloons is preparing to take the latest crowd of wide-eyed visitors on a voyage over one of the most spectacular landscapes on the planet. Emerging from our vehicle, we see our balloon straight ahead, the basket lying on its

side and fiery bursts of propane roaring out of the burner to transform the empty envelope into the giant bulbous shapes we spy levitating above the nearby valley sides.

The balloon inflated and the basket tipped, we embark with a little help from our guides and are greeted by Suat Ulusoy, the gregarious chief pilot at Royal Balloon. "The traffic is busy here at JFK; we're waiting in line," he jokes as we await a clear flight path. He also talks us through safety measures and reassures us of the security of the oldest form of human aviation, despite a fatal accident involving another operator here a few weeks before.

It's easy to feel in safe hands with Ulusoy. A veteran of an estimated 4,000 balloon flights (he says that he stopped counting at 3,000), he has ferried the likes of Martha Stewart, Rubens Barrichello, the King and Queen of Bhutan and, most recently, Boy George in his trusty craft. He tells us that there were only four balloons when

he arrived in Cappadocia 19 years ago; today there are close to 140 on a busy day. Unlike other tourist activities, where more is not merrier, the large number of balloons taking off together actually adds to the spectacle. So much so, in fact, that we almost don't notice that we have left the ground and are gently rising, bound for the wide blue yonder.

Cappadocia, in Turkey's Central Anatolia region, is fast becoming a must-see attraction for travellers of all stripes. Blessed with unique geology and a rich history, the area has attracted significant investment over the past decade and now boasts a growing selection of top-class hotels – many of which are carved into the rock in the tradition of the area's most compelling attractions. For, as spectacular as Cappadocia looks from the air, many of its greatest treasures can be found underground.

Formed from volcanic eruptions three to nine million years ago, the region is replete with

a soft rock composed mostly of volcanic ash. Above ground this has led, through erosion, to the creation of the "fairy chimneys" and other distinctive rock formations that pepper the landscape. Below these oddly beautiful landmarks, however, the easily dug material has allowed humans to carve complex underground cities, some of which date back more than three millennia.

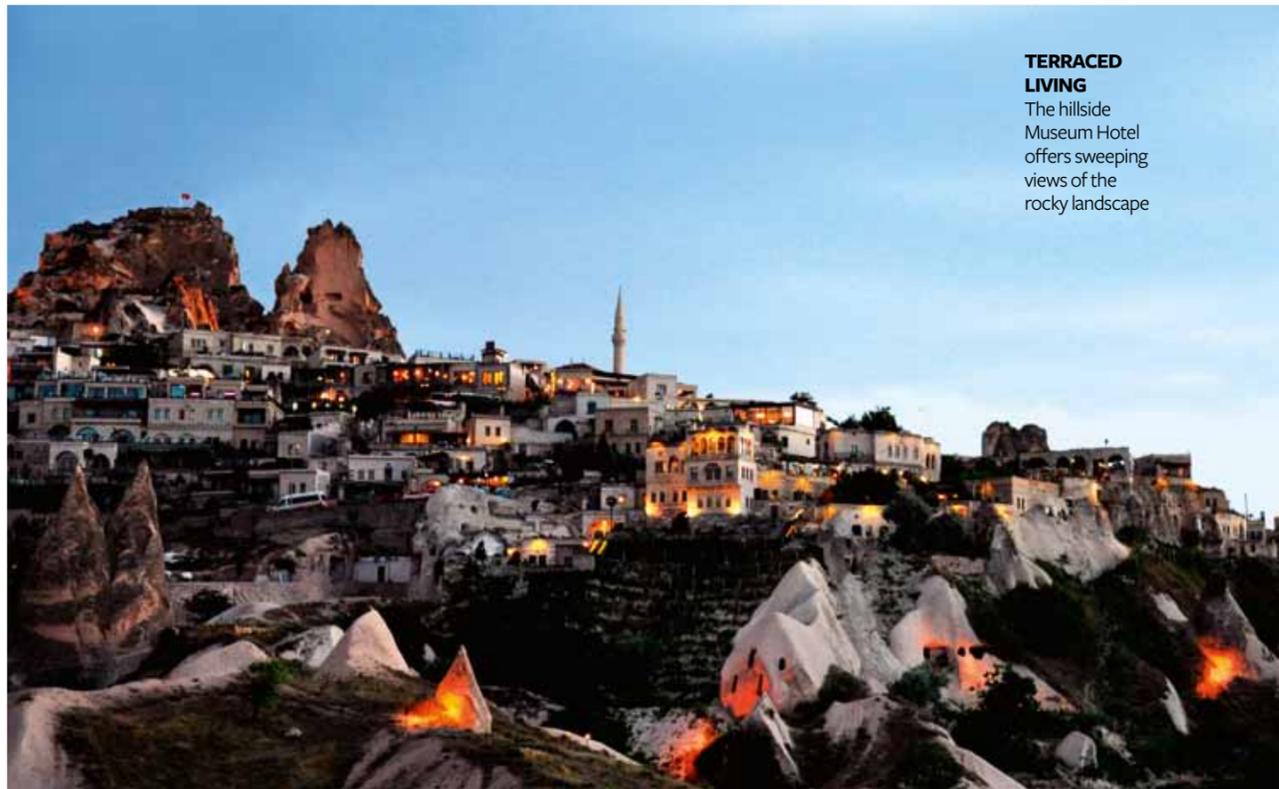
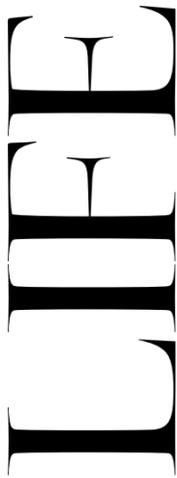
The largest and most popular of the underground cities are Kaymakli and Derinkuyu, although about 40 have been unearthed to date and historians believe there may be as many as 100 in total. Not ideal for claustrophobes, the cities are nonetheless fascinating, with tunnels snaking up to eight storeys underground and featuring a host of differently carved rooms, from stables and wine cellars to chapels and living quarters. Believed to have been started by the Hittites as far back as the 12th century BC, the underground cities were not permanent

**ROCK OF AGES**

**CLOCKWISE**

**FROM LEFT**

The region is replete with a soft rock composed mostly of volcanic ash; erosion of the rock has led to the formation of "fairy chimneys"; Uchisar by night; houses and churches are carved into the rock

**TERRACED  
LIVING**

The hillside  
Museum Hotel  
offers sweeping  
views of the  
rocky landscape

## *Taking their cue from the underground cities, Cappadocia abounds with cave dwellings and cave hotels*

settlements but places of refuge for villagers during times of strife. Expanded through the years, most notably by early Christians seeking to escape Roman persecution, the largest of the subterranean metropolises may have held a staggering 20,000 people at their peak.

Enthralling as these underground settlements may be to explore, they can't match the visual wonder of Cappadocia's cave churches and monasteries, most of which congregate in the Goreme Open-Air Museum. Little more than roughly hewn doorways from the outside, these ancient places of worship are filled with centuries-old frescoes of biblical scenes enlivened by vibrant colours and intricate details. Anglophiles will note that St George slaying the dragon (or serpent) is a recurring motif – his father was a Cappadocian.

Perhaps most impressive of all is the Tokali Kilise opposite the museum, with its soaring dome, multiple archways and delightful frescoes. Unfortunately, photography is not allowed within the cave churches, and guides are forbidden from explaining the frescoes until you get back outside. It's a strange scenario, but admittedly it does make for a more pleasant viewing experience.

Taking their cue from the underground cities, and providing respite from the searing midday sun, Cappadocia also abounds with cave dwellings and cave hotels. Many of these are clustered in touristy Goreme, but more stylish lodgings – and better views – can be found in bijou Uchisar, which overlooks the Goreme Valley from its prime hilltop location about 5km away. Here you can find a clutch of charming boutique hotels where you can experience the quirky romance of a well-appointed cave without sacrificing luxury.

We stayed at The Museum Hotel, a Relais & Chateaux property and pioneer of luxury hospitality in the area. Featuring 30 completely individual cave rooms and suites, some featuring private spa facilities, sizeable wine cellars and even free-flowing local wines on tap, the hillside hotel also has sweeping views of the landscape. And it lives up to its name with museum-quality pieces of local art and artefacts on display in the rooms and public areas, while it also aims to preserve local culture by sponsoring restoration work at the Tokali Kilise. There are many other eccentric touches, from the family of peacocks that live in its lush gardens to the traditional

**BOOK NOW**

Most visitors travelling to Cappadocia from far afield will have to fly through Istanbul, from where Turkish Airlines ([www.turkishairlines.com](http://www.turkishairlines.com)) flies twice daily to Nevsehir Kapadokya Airport. The former Ottoman capital is, of course, a must-see destination on its own and, if you have a day to kill between flights on the way in or out, the airline offers complimentary guided tours that take in some of the ancient city's leading sights, including the Blue Mosque, the Topkapi Palace and the majestic Hagia Sophia.

For more information about ballooning in Cappadocia visit [www.royalballoon.com](http://www.royalballoon.com) or The Museum Hotel, [www.relaischateaux.com](http://www.relaischateaux.com).

# TRIP



## TIMELESS DISTRACTIONS

### CLOCKWISE

#### FROM TOP LEFT

The hotel has one of the region's best spas; it also has 30 cave rooms and suites; a harpist performs by the pool terrace; gentlemen can enjoy a traditional morning shave

water ceremony performed on departure. It also has one of the region's best spas and, for the gentleman, getting a traditional morning shave on the pool terrace while looking out over the Goreme Valley with the sun on your face and Mozart's Clarinet Concerto playing in the background is a pleasure not to be missed.

Close to the hotel is the best spot in Cappadocia from which to view the sunset, Uchisar Castle. Looking like the creation of some prehistoric Frank Gehry, the craggy formation contains hand-carved rooms and passages that allow visitors to make it to the very top for views that are unrivalled without taking to the air.

Back in the balloon, Ulusoy takes us surprisingly close to the rock formations, almost within touching distance at times, and down into small valleys to point out various geological features and local fauna. Home to foxes and the occasional wild boar, Cappadocia's most noticeable non-human residents are its pigeons, for which countless "pigeon houses" have been carved into the upper reaches of the larger rocks. Pigeon droppings, as our host explains, were once used for fertilizer, making the man-made perches a valuable resource for those savvy enough to carve them. As we snap away furiously with our cameras, Ulusoy tells

us we'll have to shoot faster if we want to beat the National Geographic photographer who took almost 3,000 pictures on one recent flight. In the distance we can see Mount Erciyes, a dormant volcano partially responsible for the terrain and at 3,916m the highest mountain in the region. It's possible to ski there in winter, and Ulusoy tells us we must return one day at that time of year to see the entire landscape covered in snow.

As we're pondering this slightly bizarre prospect, the full glory of the sunrise illuminates the horizon and the intermittent bursts of warmth on the backs of our necks from the burner are matched by the beatific glow of the sun on our faces. Colourful balloons hover at different heights in every direction, hanging in the sky like the notes in some epic symphony of the gods.

Finally, as the other balloons start to descend and land, we begin to climb higher and higher. In a few minutes we're soaring at 1,900ft, the only craft in the air. With the other balloons gone and the vast landscape stretching out far below us, my exhilaration makes way for a feeling of calmness and rapturous serenity. Soon it will be time to return to earth, but for now it's easy to believe we own the sky. ■

IMAGES: AFP PHOTO; SARAH COTTEE; COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM HOTEL