



Photos by **KARLA HELD**/Herald-Zeitung

St. John the evangelist, is said to have come to Turkey at the end of his life and have written his gospel here on Ayasuluk Hill, which is now a site known as the Basilica of St. John, near the ancient city of Ephesus.

TURKEY

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Institute aims to foster dialogue

Dallas, Engin Mumcu, a master's student at the University of Texas at San Antonio, and Onur Kaya, a former journalist and resident of Istanbul.

The participants of the group came from different backgrounds and places in Texas. Among the group members were two Texas legislators and their wives, two police officers from San Antonio, two attorneys and myself.

Our itinerary was jam-packed as we visited museums, holy sites, and political places in Istanbul, Izmir, Antalya, Urfa and Ankara.

Our evenings ended with leisurely meals at a Turkish restaurant with local hosts or a local family's home.

Highlights included a cruise on the Bosphorus Sea at sunset, visiting the infamous Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace and underground cisterns of Istanbul, the spectacular city of Ephesus, the Basilica of St. John, the parliament in Turkey's capital, Ankara, and my favorite — the magical city of Urfa, the cave of Job and the cave in which Abraham was born.

More important than visiting such ancient places was the interaction we had with our guides, group and hosts as we explored history, religion, and politics throughout the course of our packed itinerary.

I began my trip with a vague knowledge about Turkey. I knew that it is the birthplace of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires and one of the oldest continually inhabited regions in the world. It enjoys a democratic and secular government and is both in Asia and Europe. But I couldn't have imaged the warm and hospitality of its people had I not gone there.

And I wasn't alone. "As Americans, we tend to be a bit reserved yet here in Turkey people have been so incredibly open — it's been amazing," said Maria



Members of the group who visited Turkey with the Interfaith Dialogue Institute stand in front of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. Pictured from left are Jose Bernal, Mike Burns, Karla Held, Jim Dunnam, Michelle Dunnam, Maria Elena Ramon, Pete Gallegos, Turkish guide Dogan Koc, Adrianna Bernal, and Turkish guides Engin Mumcu and Onur Kaya.

Elena Gallegos, an Austin attorney.

"We might have seen a little about Turkey on CNN in the context of bombings and anti-americanism yet in reality it's extremely modern and western. I don't feel a sense of anti-americanism here at all — I'm completely taken aback. I'm going to do a lot of pondering about things I haven't thought about in a long time."

State Rep. Pete Gallegos said when his father visited Turkey a few years earlier he told his son that all of history began in the country as Eastern Turkey includes the Tigris and Euphrates and the northern part of the Mesopotamian valley.

"As my father said, 'The whole world started here,'" Gallegos told his fellow travellers. "I think we've all been enlightened. We've felt at home here — the people of Turkey have made us feel comfortable. It is my hope that we can return to the (United) States and enlighten people."

Along with lessons in the country's open hospitality, members of our group also learned more troubling issues Turkey faces.

Members of our group not only were surprised to realize that most people from Turkey are open to the

American people and culture, but also that Turkey fights terrorism as well. In any given day, you can read about Turkey's struggle with the terrorist activities of the PKK, a Kurdish group that, at times, is at the root of terrorist activities such as bombings.

Such realizations drove home what Fikret Sonmez, the former minister of Education, of Ankara told us: "We all pray to the same God — and we come from the same father, Adam," he said. "We're on the same ship."

It was touching to see that this trip had inspired many of us in our group to rethink certain beliefs we held. After having visited the parliament at the capital city of Ankara, and having listened to the deputy chairman of the Justice and Development Party, Eyup Fatsa, tell us that his belief that, "Conflict exists between countries, not people. As long as we continue dialogue, all our problems can be solved."

There was a moment when I looked down on Turkey's capitol, Anaraka, from Atakule Tower (Turkey's answer to the Tower of Americas in San Antonio), I realized that, as simple as it is, there is truth to Eyup's statement.

"As I knelt down to reflect on my experience and role as the only Jewish person on this 'interfaith dialogue' trip, it occurred to me that ... it's important to acknowledge our ... shortcomings as a religion."

— **Karla Held**
staff photographer

the cave to pray.

As I knelt down to reflect on my experience and role as the only Jewish person on this 'interfaith dialogue' trip it occurred to me that as we take time to take a deeper look at our religion, our own upbringing, and the present political and religious battles going on in the world today — it's important to acknowledge our personal shortcomings and shortcomings as a religion.

It occurred to me then to see the ways in which my own religion has been, in certain instances, intolerant.

As I slowly left the warmth of the cave, I knew this trip to Turkey was well worth it.

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