

## **The Via Eurasia - Creating a Cultural Route between Europe and Turkey**

Ever since 1987, when the Camino de Santiago was recognised as a European Cultural Route, pilgrimage routes have been growing in popularity. More European routes have been opened – the Via Francigena, St Olaf's route, the route of St Martin de Tours; and other variations developed – the Cluniac sites and the Cistercian Abbeys routes connecting religious establishments. No-one in the EU refers to these routes as having religious affiliations – they just praise their cultural and spiritual properties - but since Christianity is a predominant religion within the EU it helps promote the routes within the region.

For many years the European Institute of Cultural Routes (EICR) has nursed an ambition to link Rome to Jerusalem via a pilgrimage route. Over the years, various individuals and small groups have attempted the journey, and a search of the Internet reveals various blogs and websites from groups and individuals who have walked the roads to Jerusalem – or, as much as is possible to walk given the current state of conflict in the Middle East. Small islands of expertise have grown up – a nunnery in Antakya, Turkey, for example, where pilgrims could rest and get information.

During the last few years, independent groups have researched sections of the route. The Via Francigena, which runs from Canterbury to Rome, is being extended southwards towards the Adriatic ports of Bari and Brindisi – crossing points to the Balkans. A Dutch group walked, mapped and wrote a guidebook to the Via Egnatia, the Roman road which crosses the Balkans from Dürres in Albania to İstanbul in Turkey. So far they have completed the first half – about 500km from Dürres to Thessaloniki. The Abraham Path initiative attempted to set up routes in all the places which Abraham is believed to have visited, including south-east Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Palestine as well as Israel. Political tensions made it impossible to continue and these initiatives have split into independent units. So now, there are national trails under independent management in Palestine and Jordan, and also one in Sinai in Egypt and another in Lebanon.

In the meantime, we (the Turkish Cultural Routes Association), started developing routes in Turkey and we now have about 17 different routes in various parts of the country. Simultaneously, the EICR started to fast-track route implementation, with the purpose of extending Cultural Routes towards Eastern Europe and the Middle East. China and central Asian countries enthusiastically adopted the UN Silk Road initiative as a cultural companion to new Chinese overland transportation links along the line of the ancient trade routes across the roof of the world.

The Turkish government, enmeshed in the effects of the Syrian War, ignored all these initiatives, so it was left to us, as a society, to get something moving.

We won a year's funding to start work on a project called 'Europe to Turkey on Foot' – the precursor of the Via Eurasia route. In partnership with the European Association of the Via Francigena, we have spent the last year importing European Cultural Route practises into Turkey. The principal feature of their working model is that all the management of the route, the accommodation and services along it as well as much of the marketing of the route, is devolved to the local and provincial authorities along the route.

As a small society without much regular income, this appealed to us. We had tried involving the Ministry of Culture and Tourism without success – they were not even able to register and conserve the existing routes. We had appealed to the larger provinces, also without success – they are only interested in urban activities. So, for this project we chose three medium-size municipalities along the routes in Turkey. We planned to link up the Turkish routes to make a continuous route of over 1000km from the Greek-Turkish border to the town of Demre, on the Mediterranean coast. We wanted to show our municipalities how the Italians manage their routes, where the pilgrims stay, what they eat, how the routes are physically managed. Then we wanted to help them implement the same thing in their areas.

The project has been very rewarding – a melding and mixing of cultures and ideas. The trip to Italy was a great success, mainly because the six people from our municipalities were so uninhibited and curious. We fielded constant questions about whether the meals contained pork, and where they could smoke. Most of the group had never seen a church before, so Italy's multitude of richly decorated masterpieces amazed them. So did the idea of nuns running hostels for walkers. And when they took ten minutes out to make their Friday prayers on the terrace outside a country bar, our hosts were also amazed.

We visited mayors, tourism offices, agricultural cooperatives, hoteliers associations and many types of accommodation. We ate wonderful meals, walked in lush countryside and admired castles and museums. In spite of the language difficulties, the questions came thick and fast and we, and our Italian hosts, were kept busy translating and explaining. It was a delightful experience, which will provide a foundation for the future development of the route.

A few months later, we brought a group of Italian Cultural Heritage students to Turkey to walk our routes. They loved the villages and their inhabitants, who welcomed them enthusiastically into their homes and farms. Turkish hospitality is always freely given and, as a citizen, I take it for granted. The Italians were amazed that the farmers encouraged them to pick whatever fruit they wanted from the orchards, that they never paid for tea or coffee in the village teahouses, and that the forestry workers begged them to share their kebabs. During a rain shower, we

sheltered in a village hall, where a group of women were making flat bread. Soon we were eating hot, fresh bread as we dried ourselves around their stove.

As well as these small moments of joy, we also tried to familiarise Turkish townspeople with the idea of walking for fun. We made a photo exhibition and a short film; we produced a guidebook to one section of the route as a prototype to encourage the municipalities to develop their own; we wrote a comprehensive guide to making a cultural route; and a technical paper suggesting legal changes to protect Turkish cultural routes.

Now this stage of the project is complete (and the money is spent) – it remains to finalise the website for the new route and manage the media to continue to promote it. We hope soon to enrol more Turkish municipalities in the master plan. I walked one of the ‘missing links’ to establish a short section between two existing routes. This is the part I love best – discovering 2000 year-old Roman roads passing through forests, mountains and small villages, purposefully and efficiently linking ancient settlements.

Soon we hope that the whole route will be usable so that – with a smart-phone app and a guidebook – anyone can walk from Canterbury in England, via Rome, across the Balkans to Turkey and its Mediterranean coast – a journey of over 4000km. From there, they could take a boat to Cyprus and from Cyprus to Lebanon or Israel. And that is as far as our ambition goes.

Here, in Antalya, Turkey, where the sound and fury of the Syrian war is reflected only in the individual trauma of our Syrian friends, we are largely ignorant of the devastation inflicted on the other side of Turkey’s southern border. But they have taught us something important. Before the war, Syria was a rare and precious thing – a truly multicultural country, where Sunni and Shia Muslims, Orthodox and Catholic Christians and Jews lived together without even noticing their differences. We wait together for the day when it is all over and a hopeful revival can begin.

We hope that walkers don’t see the new Via Eurasia as a pilgrimage route – that would be too exclusive. We much prefer to call it a route of cultural exchange. Along it, walkers will receive a welcome from each and every host culture they pass through, irrespective of the religion of the host or of the walker. How sad that this route can not, in the foreseeable future, link Rome to Jerusalem. How sad that this route will only ever be a pale reflection of the courtesy and culture that was Syria before the war.

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[www.cultureroutesinturkey.com](http://www.cultureroutesinturkey.com)

[www.facebook.com/CultureRoutesSociety](https://www.facebook.com/CultureRoutesSociety)

[www.viaeurasia.org](http://www.viaeurasia.org)

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Project Partner: The European Association of Via Francigena

The European Association of Via Francigena is the managing body of the Via Francigena, which is a long distance cross border cultural route accredited by the European Institute of Cultural Routes (EICR). [www.viefrancigene.org](http://www.viefrancigene.org)

[www.facebook.com/viafrancigena](https://www.facebook.com/viafrancigena)

Our Associates: İnegöl Municipality (Bursa-Evliya Çelebi Way), Eğirdir Municipality (Eğirdir-St Paul Trail), Demre Municipality (Antalya-the Lycian Way)

There are now about 3 million Syrians living in Turkey, of whom nearly 500,000 are in refugee camps.