

500

The length of the St Paul Trail in kilometres. The waymarked footpath starts from Perge, 10km east of Antalya, to Yalvac near Lake Egirdir and follows the reported route of the Christian Apostle

350

The length of the wall in metres that runs around the ruins of Selge. Walkers trekking up Koprulu Canyon on the St Paul Trail can still see what remains of the Roman city, with its impressive stone theatre

1207

The year that the Seljuk Turks took control of Antalya. The city came under Roman, Byzantine and later Ottoman control and its preserved ancient quarter, Kaleiçi, is a popular tourist attraction

A wild walk in Turkey



Above, the St Paul Trail skirts around Lake Egirdir, which today is popular with local and foreign tourists. Above, right, travellers on the trail must ford waterways such as the Degirmendere River. Photographs by Kate Clow for The National

Gill Charlton follows St Paul's path through Anatolia, cutting through the dramatic Taurus mountain range, visiting Greek and Roman ruins

Tourists exposing too much flab and flesh swarm the narrow streets of Antalya's walled Ottoman town. On the waterfront, an armada of wooden craft waits to take them back to hotels with as much character as multi-storey car parks. I can't wait to escape into the hills.

An hour's drive away is a very different world: one that has hardly changed since St Paul walked through the Taurus mountain range almost 2,000 years ago. Stone houses stand among wheat fields and orchards of apples and apricots; paved Roman roads lead to ruined temples and theatres, and ancient forests cloak mountains that still have snow-capped summits in June.

I am travelling in a small group of walkers; most in our middle years and seeking an active respite from hectic modern lives. Our leader is Mike Belton, a British tour guide who has lived in Turkey for 15 years and runs a highly-respected travel agency offering unusual and specialist tours. What Mike doesn't know about Turkey's history and culture really isn't worth knowing. He speaks the language fluently and doesn't mind being used as a cipher so we can engage with local people in this deeply traditional part of the country.

We begin our journey at Lake Egirdir, a popular weekend escape for Turks when the coast is overrun with tourists. The milky blue lake is encircled by forbidding limestone massifs. We hope Mike really does know the way.

As we get to know each other over a supper of fresh grilled trout at a lakeside restaurant, we compare fitness levels. Everyone claims to have taken hardly a day's exercise in the last few months – but I'm sure they're being economical with the truth.

And so it proves on our first climb across the flank of Mount Davras. June, well into her sixties, hops from rock to rock like a youngster. Belinda, a desk-bound thirtysomething at the BBC, keeps up with the long-legged men. I struggle to stay within sight, puffing away in the chest-aching 2,000-metre altitude. And I don't even smoke.

But there are rewards. After two hours of uphill we puff up to the pass and look out over a vast crumpled wilderness stretching away towards Asia. A shepherd has set up his summer home nearby and invites us into his lozenge-shaped yurt made up from lengths of woven black wool. The interior is white – a neatly sewed patchwork of grain sacks. A wood-burning stove pokes up through the roof. There are no windows.

Mike says we've been invited to tea – black, sweet and served in a glass as is the custom. But the rosy-cheeked shepherd and his wife insist we stay to lunch. A circular tablecloth is laid on the floor and piled with flat bread (like a robust Indian nan), bowls of walnuts and olives, and all kinds of home-made treats: yoghurt, honey, chilli salsa, hard and soft cheeses.

"However little they have, they share with travellers" says Mike. We contribute our shop-bought ricotta, too-pink pâté and bland white rolls. It seems a poor offering but Mike claims they appreciate the change.

The shepherd says he sets up camp on this site every year as his ancestors have always done. One disappointment is that his sheep have already eaten most of the wild flowers. But it's not all over: fresh thyme perfumes the warm air as it crushes underfoot, and I find a rare blue lily in bloom on the snowline.

Over the next seven days we will be following some 80km, in sections, of the St Paul Trail, Turkey's second long-distance footpath and the brainchild of English resident Kate Clow, who also thought up the coastal Lycian Way. It purports to follow the route St Paul took through the Taurus Mountains on his first "journey" preaching Christianity in Asia Minor. The trail was waymarked in 2003 but already some of the red-and-white painted rocks have tumbled away and Mike occasionally has to resort to his GPS.

After a night in a ski lodge, a minibus takes us down to a small village surrounded by damask rose bushes. It's only 8am but already old ladies and young boys (everyone else is working on the coast) are arriving back from the fields with donkeys laden with sacks of pink rose petals.

Beneath a shady oak tree sits a prosperous-looking man with a thick ledger and a set of scales. These sacks of petals will be pressed into rose oil and sold to top Parisian perfumers for US\$100 (Dh367) per thimbleful.



As we climb, we see an ugly white scar down the side of the mountain opposite. "That's a stone quarry," says Mike. "They're springing up all over the place and they don't need planning consent." I feel I share some of the guilt for this desecration because I installed a Turkish travertine floor in my bathroom only last month.

Today we come across a family of nomads who herd unusual longhair grey goats. Their summer camp is beside a powerful spring that feeds a large tank fenced off from the animals. It has probably been here for millennia.

We stop for tea (it would be too rude to refuse) and another traveller arrives to drink, an old lady with a laden donkey. Solid gold coins dating from the Ottoman Empire are sewed into her headscarf. She quickly covers them up when she sees us.

The walking gets easier. It's surprising how quickly the human body adapts to altitude. My tight chest has gone and Mike has also got the measure of us, stopping a little more often and insisting on an hour's snooze in dappled shade after lunch.

We meander down through a beautiful mature forest, the Tota Yaylasi, protected because of its massive old pines and cedars and rare species of oak and juniper. In May, irises and peonies grow in abundance here.

In the village of Kasimlar, we are greeted by Abdulrahman and his wife, who lay on a feast of meze for dinner at their new guesthouse and pack us off the next morning with fresh bread baked with cheese and herbs.

Each day's walk is different. From ancient forests to vertigo-inducing defiles and from shiny limestone pavements to white water canyons. Today we enter the land of fairy chimneys, tall pinnacles of weathered limestone topped with a harder rock like a conical chimney cap. The most famous ones are in Cappadocia and are visited by many thousands of tourists each day. Here there is nobody else.

if you go



Source: Lycian Way

The flight Turkish Airlines (www.turkishairlines.com) flies from Abu Dhabi to Istanbul with connections to Antalya. A return fare costs from US\$513 (Dh1,885) including taxes

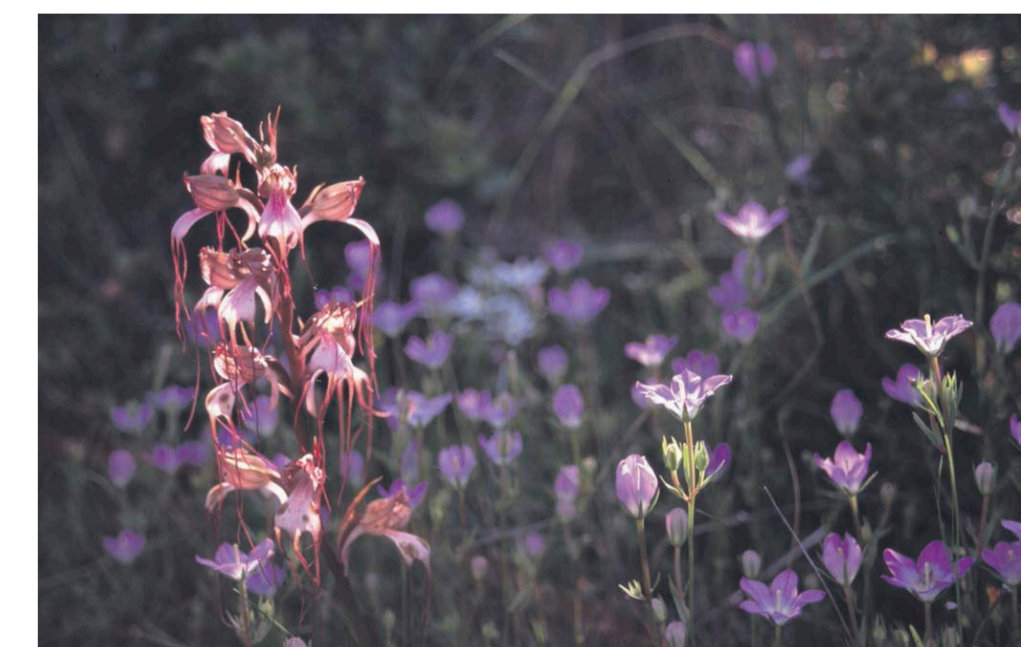
The trail A Wild Walk in the Taurus Mountains costs \$1,608 (Dh5,905) for nine days. The price includes guided walking, all accommodation, meals, soft drinks and entrance fees but not flights. To make a reservation, visit www.wildfrontiers.co.uk (0044 20 7736 3968). Mike Belton also runs Amber Travel (www.ambertravel.com), based in Kas on the Turkish coast. He can arrange guided and self-guided walking tours all over the country including the St Paul Trail and the coastal Lycian Way. For information about walking in this area of Turkey and to buy a map of the trail, visit www.lycianway.com



Rock-cut stairs lead up to tiny chapels cut in the cliffs overlooking Lake Egirdir.



The Roman theatre from the second century AD at Selge boasts a nearly complete seating area.



Komper's Orchid, left, an endangered species native to Turkey, may be spotted along the trail.



Some trail guides can arrange for local shepherds to prepare traditional meals for travellers.