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Travel

Finding Paradise in Turkey's Munzur Valley

Deep in the rugged heart of eastern Anatolia, the resilient Alevi Kurds open their hearts and homes to a visitor.

by Michael Benanav

First two paragraphs:

Deep in the rugged heart of eastern Anatolia, the Munzur River flows from the base of a skyscraping limestone massif, wending its way into the world across a grassy valley cradled between dog-toothed peaks and forested hills. The water is impossibly clear and numbingly cold and, to most of those who visit its source, sacred. “It’s easy to feel close to God here,” I was told by one follower of the mystical Alevi religion, who, like hundreds of other women, men and children, had come to the springs — called Munzur Gozeleri — on a scorching July afternoon.

They had come to pray and light candles in the nooks of boulders, and to immerse themselves in the bracing waters. They had come to sacrifice sheep and goats on a hill above the river, blessing new marriages, honoring dead relatives, hoping to help heal sick children. And they had come to eat: Each family that brought an animal to slaughter took its freshly butchered meat down to the riverside, where it was roasted or stewed over an open fire, served under shade trees with flatbreads, cheeses, olives and tea, and shared with friends and strangers alike. The scene was informal and festive, like a community picnic, striking an easy balance between the spiritual and the recreational.

Last two paragraphs:

It was easy to understand their ardor, even without sharing their unique spiritual relationship to Munzur. Many times, when nothing remarkable was going on, I was struck by moments of pure bliss. Just walking between villages at dusk — with the high peaks shrouded in smoky violet, shepherds ambling through the fields with their flocks, bells a-jingle, and the first stars sparkling in the sky over a dark and ragged horizon — was as extraordinary as it was mundane. It was obvious that the essence of this generous and open-minded culture was somehow infused with, and perfectly attuned to, the essence of the place. They seemed inseparable.

The day I spoke with the Hayri Dede at the source of the Munzur, he ended our conversation by reciting a poem he had written. Near the end, his eyes filled with tears. Serde translated the last two lines: “When I die, burn my body and scatter me over Munzur.” It was a love poem to the valley.

His heaven, clearly, is here on earth.

Michael Benanav is the founder of Traditional Cultures Project and the author of “Men of Salt: Crossing the Sahara on the Caravan of White Gold.”

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