

## Istanbul, Here I Come

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I'm writing this on a lap-top in the back seat of an Opel Vectra saloon – the wheels of choice amongst the young cognoscenti here. The car is chauffeur driven, I'm in traffic, and the lady beside me has two mobile phones, a fax and e-mail going, ALL at the same time.

Where am I? Istanbul, of course. Home of the greatest traffic jams since Hannibal blockaded the Alps and gave French truckers a great idea.

My friend Ebru is a 29-year-old entrepreneur-ess. She, and hundreds of others like her, is the new face of Turkey – well Ankara and Istanbul at least.

Why am I in her car (which incidentally has both street cred and caché and costs a lot of moolah here on the Golden Horn)? Why am I in traffic? Easy, we are trying to get to work.

For her, a two hour commute is the norm. In fact you can two hour commute anytime in a given 24 hours – even at three in the morning. So, a fully fitted and kitted out mini-limo is the only way to travel. The only downside is that by the time you get where you're going it's too late and you end up going somewhere else instead. This means you live in your limo.

The mobile office isn't alive and well in The Valley or The City, it's real place is in the teeming streets of Istanbul.

Ebru is a human resources (HR) consultant. She went to the UK and the US to learn stuff – as did all her friends. Now Turkey has HR consultants up the wazoo. Amazing when you consider that five years ago they didn't have any consultants at all and they didn't know what HR was. Oh, and they weren't knee deep in very female thirty-somethings talking on two mobiles at once in the back of mini-limos either.

To me Istanbul has always had a buzz about it. Not the one you get in the Big Apple or Rio or Hong Kong, but a real sense that the mystic East is meeting the pedantic West. It was once described to me as the last place going East where you could hire a lawyer who wouldn't bilk you. You know the next line don't you? I have never met a lawyer who wouldn't ... but let's leave that for another time.

Most of us think of Istanbul as the Grand Bazaar and the Blue Mosque, with the treasures of Topkapi thrown in. How wrong! The new entrepreneurs, the rafts of young consultants, haven't been down that part of the city for years. They are holed up in the trendy, glitzy restaurants like Changa, Le Cigar and Paper Moon, where the food is, frankly frightful, but the contacts are impeccable. My favourite is Mezzaluna, where the phrase "a pizza to die for" takes on wholly new connotations.

My Turkish may be limited to a grunted "please" and "thank-you", but get the ear tuned in and you can soon follow whole segments of conversation. Into that strange language – that always sounds to me like a Russian on LSD - you get "networking," "portal", "e-everything", "new-economy", "ISP" and "IPO." String them together, like a join up the dots puzzle and you are on your way.

And we don't hang out over cups of thick Turkish coffee either. It's lattes and designer style yoghurt drinks – oh, and Perrier has a new market to dominate. In fact, it's all a bit like Mrs T's London of a decade and half ago – with mobile phones thrown in.

But there are a couple of differences. In consulting at least (advertising, publishing and management development too), it's the female that is making the running. Long on the soft, interpersonal skills, they dominate the new economy.

This isn't the Turkey of the travel posters with wrinkled old ladies in their black widow's weeds. Black is there all right. But it's a knock-off of a little Chanel suit, or better still for Johnny foreigners like me, the black leather, in vogue from November to April.

So here I am in an Istanbul traffic jam, in a black mini-limo, with a lady in black leather called Ebru. We are on our way to yet another meeting: we will meet a thirty-year old (bet she's in black leather too) who runs tankers up the Bosphorous to exciting places I can't pronounce. Never mind what the song says, this truly is the city that never sleeps, at least where the young entrepreneur-esses hang out. And that's where, like Tony Bennet, I want to wake up.