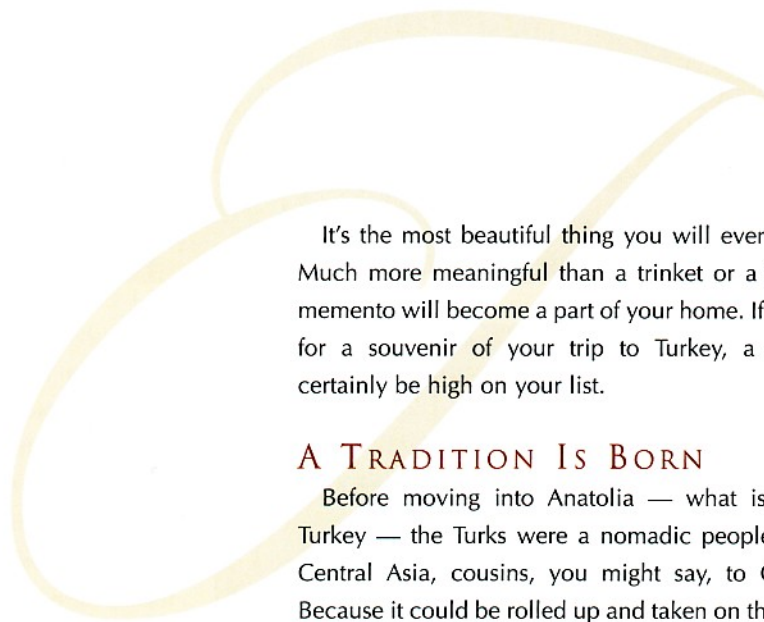


A SULTAN-SIZED SOUVENIR: BUYING A TURKISH CARPET

BY KEVIN REVOLINSKI



It's the most beautiful thing you will ever walk all over. Much more meaningful than a trinket or a tea towel, this memento will become a part of your home. If you're looking for a souvenir of your trip to Turkey, a carpet should certainly be high on your list.

A TRADITION IS BORN

Before moving into Anatolia — what is now modern Turkey — the Turks were a nomadic people who lived in Central Asia, cousins, you might say, to Genghis Khan. Because it could be rolled up and taken on the next journey, the carpet was perfectly suited to the nomadic life, and evidence of carpet-making dates as far back as the 4th century B.C. Durability and beauty were important as the rug was the literal foundation of the home, and each tribe developed its own patterns and methods. Even today, an expert can tell you the origins of a particular piece by closely examining the details of the craftwork.



Silk cocoons

Burning silk fibres will reveal authenticity.



Turkish rugs are not simply quaint leftovers from olden days that are sold to tourists as souvenirs. Many modern Turkish families maintain a carpet in their home. Some will tell you it was their grandparents' or great-grandparents', yet the brilliance of the colours and the condition of the fabric might make that seem impossible. But the truth is, a well-made Turkish carpet — even one subjected to moderate foot traffic in a living or dining room — should last several generations.

Traditionally the carpets were woven by women and carpet-makers with the greatest skill, attracting admiration and perhaps a good husband. Today, however, this is a strictly commercial venture, and those pieces that are still made by hand — and you should be sure of this before buying — are made by village women earning a wage, adapting styles and patterns to suit the demands of buyers.

The carpets are made on a loom. Knots are tied in rows across the *warp*, the vertical fibres of the base of the carpet,

while the *weft* is pulled down across each row of knots. The knots are then cut with scissors to give an even depth to the pile. The Turkish knot is a double knot that encircles two strands of the warp, as opposed to the single Persian knot, which only encircles one. The Turkish style, however, renders better durability.

HOW TO SHOP

If you want to buy a Turkish carpet, be prepared to drink some tea. There are the carpet-sellers who will try to “hard sell” you a rug, but more often than not, all negotiations or even just the “to look is free” showings typically begin with a friendly glass of traditional tea (or apple tea, a tourist favourite).

The best carpets are 100 per cent wool; cotton ones are cheaper and will not last. Check the fringes on the edge to be sure. Silk might also be worked into some carpets, giving them a nice sheen. Silk carpets can be stunning, but so can the prices. You can make sure you’re dealing with genuine silk or wool by burning a fibre. (Just make sure that fibre was plucked from the carpet right before your eyes.) Wool and silk will smoulder and give off a peculiar odour, like burnt hair. Cotton, however, will smell like burning paper and will catch fire easily.

Just as we proverbially “sweep things under the rug” to hide them, the true value of your carpet is also on its hidden side. To be sure that it has been hand-knotted on a loom, look for imperfections in the knots. Humans make mistakes; machines do not. Also, the knot count should be greater than 120 per square inch. The preferred symmetric Turkish knot will hide the warp and pull two strands of it together.

Colours should be as radiant as a Turkish spice market. Artificial dyes aren’t the end of the world, but their natural counterparts



Carpets are handmade on a loom.

tend to be more vivid. If on the bottom of the rug or in the depth of the pile you find a richer colour, the carpet may be faded. But don’t confuse colour variance within the pile with fading. Fluctuation in tone indicates natural pigments, while uniformity suggests synthetics. Natural dyes draw a higher price than chemical ones, as they retain their hues better over time.

Be aware of old rugs. Yes, with a good cleaning, even grandma’s old carpet can be sold as new to the unwary buyer. New rugs will show tight knots.

In the end, the real test of the carpet is this: Do you like it? Before your trip, measure the room in which you will use it and consider which colours will coordinate with your décor. Bringing along a photo is a good idea, and I have even emailed digital photos of carpets to friends and family back home, making it possible for them to purchase their own Turkish treasure through me, from halfway around the world.



GETTING THE MOST FOR YOUR MONEY

Remember, although you may end up drinking gallons of tea, you are never obliged to buy. The sellers may roll out dozens of carpets until the stack rises a foot above the floor, but there is really only one important rule of conduct: Do not haggle unless you intend to buy. When the seller finally accepts the price you offered, you should be prepared to put your money where your mouth is.

Prices can sometimes vary quite a bit. Certainly it depends on how much the original price was from the maker and how greedy or needy the seller is. Plus, if someone found you in the street, suddenly remembered that his uncle sells carpets,

and then takes you to the shop, you can bet that a commission will be figured into the price as well. Paying cash might also be cheaper because credit card sales sometimes incur an extra fee.

Make sure you know how much it costs to have your carpet shipped or how much you may have to pay at customs if you exceed your duty or tax exemption when you bring it home. You can trust your vendor if he tells you to simply fold the carpet up and take it home that way. Carpets won't be damaged by such treatment and actually fit quite nicely into special handbags that the shop will have on hand. If your vendor ships your carpet, it is advisable that you take a photo of it and get a receipt, just in case the wrong carpet arrives at your door or it doesn't show up at all.

*Don't buy anything
without a fair bit of haggling.*

*Options are endless when shopping
for carpets in Turkey.*



Steve Bly/Housestock