



Whirling Dervish Festival, Turkey

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Come come whoever you are
Whether you are a non-believer,
Whether you worship fire or an idol,
Whether you have repented a hundred times,
Whether you have broken a vow of repentance a hundred times,
This is not a vow of desperation;
Come however you are.

So Jelaladin Rumi encapsulated his religious philosophy in one of his poems, the philosophy which gave fame to the Sufi branch of Islam and brought about the order of whirling dervishes. And so thousands of people of all religious persuasions descend on the small Turkish town of Konya every year for a week in December to celebrate the death of the mystical poet known simply as Mevlana ('Our Lord' in Arabic).

Between 10 and 17th December every year, the Whirling Dervish Festival commemorates the death of the man looked on by many Muslims as a saint. The Dervishes dance in honour of their great teacher who believed union with God could be achieved through dance (the 'sema'). His poetry is prolific and profound, and, in its treatment of God as a lover, proving as popular and relevant today as it did in 13th century when it was written. Universally acknowledged as the greatest Sufi poet, Rumi's contemporary fans include Madonna - who has written lyrics inspired by his verse - and in recent years, he has been one of the bestselling poets in the US.

Quite an achievement for a man born in 1207 in Balkh, in present-day Afghanistan, then part of Persia. His family fled west before the Mongol invasions and eventually settled in Konya - then in its heyday as the capital of the Seljuks - where first his father and then he retreated more and more into meditation and study of the divine. His poetry has been described as an ocean, vast and boundless encompassing all the systems and creeds of lesser men within it. His first great work, the 'Mesnevi', contains 25,000 couplets (that's longer than the 'Faerie Queene', the longest poem in English) while 'Diwan e-Shams' is even longer still. It is his treatment of divine love that really sets his poetry apart, writing of the 'lover' and the 'beloved', the soul and its dissolution in the Divine.

He wanted his work to appeal to all men and a visit to Konya in December attests to his success as people from all over the world gather to attend the festival in his honour. On the snow-lined streets of Konya in December, there is a heightened sense of expectation. Most shop doorways display posters with dreamy graphics publicising the festival while lights in the outlined shape of a whirling dervish bedeck the streetlamps. Every shop and stall stocks little figurines of dervishes and their musicians while the main street is lined with coaches bearing hundreds of devotees from neighbouring Iran. Though the host of those gathered to pay

their respects to the Master are drawn from all over the world, most are Turkish. During the week of the festival, entrance to the Mevlana Museum is free and the throng pushing inside is here to empty their hearts in front of Mevlana's tomb, contemplate and pray. Though most of the Muslims here are not Sufis, they nevertheless regard Rumi as something of a saint and the wide-reaching appeal of his teaching is reflected in the number of Westerners also lost in silent contemplation before his beautifully ornate tomb.

The Sufis believe dance was created when the Universe came into being. The dance, the music, the listening and the spiritual experience are fused together during the dance of the dervishes. And so the audience packed into Konya's large sports stadium is fully expectant of a shared spiritual experience. The proceedings however, are heavy with the hand of the local government. The traditional band which plays and sings for an hour or so is sponsored by the government. The dervishes who then file out, first the large band of musicians, then the 20 or so who will whirl, all work for the government. And the programme is punctuated throughout by lengthy speeches delivered in Turkish and English, especially on the final night, the 'Nuptial Night', the anniversary of Mevlana's actual death, an event he saw as a marriage with God. However for all of this, the music is superlative, especially when the sema itself commences, the sound of the ney (reed flute) cutting straight to the heart. The ritual is filled with symbolism, as is the attire of the dancers. Their conical shaped hat represents a gravestone, their cloak a coffin and their white skirt a shroud, all symbolising the death of the ego so union with God can take place. As the dervishes begin to turn from right to left, they open their crossed arms, the right hand pointing up to receive God's goodness, the left hand pointing down to distribute it to the earth. By revolving around themselves, the dervishes participate in the revolution of the universe and desert their egos and find truth. The rows of dervishes fall into their own rhythm as they whirl, their skirts undulating around them, their eyes closed and their faces transported; they are a study of stillness in motion, peacefulness personified. And we the audience, sitting in the draughty stadium, are transported with them, these human spinning tops.

Konya is one of Turkey's most devout and conservative towns and visitors coming from Istanbul find themselves in a different world. Alcohol is not readily available and many more women here observe the Islamic dress code. However, Konya is still animated by the spirit of Mevlana and attitudes are tolerant, though it is important as a western visitor to remember that this is a Muslim country and show sensitivity to this. It is a good idea for women to carry a headscarf that they can don going in to see Mevlana's tomb and mosques and try not to wear clingy or very short outfits. Konya is an ancient town struggling to find its modern identity in 21st century Turkey and still leads a more traditional way of life than cities such as Istanbul. The town came to prominence as the capital of the Seljuk Sultans in 1076 when the Seljuks took control of Anatolia, though the area's roots go back much further. In 1960s, on the plains just 65km from Konya, archeologist James Mellaart uncovered what turned out to be one of the world's first urban cultures dating back to 7th century BC at Çatal Höyük. The sophisticated network of houses and temples revealed the first community to domesticate animals and display high aesthetic sense in the wall paintings found.

Many more civilizations swept over the region before the Seljuk Turks arrived in the 11th century. The first Turkish people to settle in Anatolia, they ruled their Empire of Rum with a tolerant hand and Konya, in the 12th and 13th centuries, became a refuge for artists and men of learning, fleeing the depredations of the Mongols and the Crusaders from all over the Middle East and Muslim Asia. Konya was a showplace of Turkish architecture, with a collection of mosques and schools that made the city a rival of Istanbul and Bursa. It was in this atmosphere that Jelaladin Rumi studied under his father Bahaeddin Veled, a great scholar and, on his death, also started teaching. He taught complete tolerance, positive thinking and awareness of God through love. He also believed a union with God could be achieved through dance. Thus the Mevlana followers have been performing this religious 'whirling' dance for the centuries since.

There are many stories about how the Mevlana himself, as he was wandering through the bazaars of Konya, would hear the sound of a hammer on a copper pot and would be transported by the rhythm of the beat and begin whirling on the spot. Although this dance was first seen in Baghdad some 200 years before Mevlana's birth, it was his teaching that transformed it into a religious experience. After the Mevlana's death, his followers formalised the rituals that now form the 'sema', the whirling dance of the dervishes which represents the abandonment of the self set into motion.

Although the Mevlana's tomb, housed in the Mevlana Museum in Konya, is a pilgrimage site for people from all over the world, it is no longer possible to see the mystical dances performed in this convent itself. After Mevlana's death, his disciples set up the processes that noviates had to complete in order to become a dervish. The orders were led by sheikhs and, as this education system flourished, so the convents also spread throughout Turkey. The order found favour with the Ottoman Sultans (a 16th century miniature in the Topkapi Palace Museum reveals the Sultan and his court watching a sema performance) who bequeathed the lodges land and wealth and trusted dervishes as close advisers. Such was their influence that in 1919, Konya elected the sheikh to represent it in the first Turkish National Assembly. However, all this power and influence came to an end with Atatürk's dissolution of the orders in 1924 and the closing of the lodges, in his bid to separate religion from politics. In 1926, the convent in Konya became a museum, the dervish cells preserved for examination by tourists, Mevlana's splendid tomb wept over and prayed over by visitors from all corners of the world. Even now, though dervishes abound in Turkey, and they continue to practise their ceremonies, they must still celebrate the anniversary of Mevlana's death by performing the sema in an unatmospheric sports stadium.

FACTFILE

- Turkish Tourist Office in London: 020 7629 7771
- Turkish Airlines: 020 7766 9300
- Konya Tourist Office can get you tickets to the Mevlevi performances. T: 00 90 332 351 1074
- Hotel Bera is the only four-star hotel in town. T: 00 90 332 238 1090; F: 00 90 332 238 1099; www.bera.com.tr