



T H E N E W T R O G L O D Y T E S

Below its sublime landscape of towering chimneys and rocky crags, Cappadocia is home to a hidden world of opulent cave hotels and underground hospitality

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Views of Ortahisar Castle from Hezen Cave Hotel



Rustic luxury at Hezen Cave Hotel

The ancient Hittites were the first to put the soft volcanic tuff stone of Cappadocia to good use, realising the possibility of carving shelter out of the countryside itself. Then, during the Byzantine era, this region's sinuous valleys became home to early Christian communities who burrowed into the rock, creating church complexes and monasteries, and digging out cavernous tunnel-ridden underground towns to hide from attack. The people who have lived in this part of central Turkey have

always sculpted their homes out of the land; today this region's traditional architecture has found a new lease of life with a clutch of luxe boutique hotels offering accommodation with a troglodyte twist.

The farmland surrounding the village of Ortahisar is studded with curious thin metal flues thrusting out of the ground. These ventilation pipes are part of this small settlement's major industry, leading to vast underground cave warehouses used to store the abundance of citrus fruit from Turkey's

Mediterranean coast. Hezen Cave Hotel sits hewn into the cliff face amid the oldest part of the village, surrounded by a meander of narrow roads still ruled by old tractors and skittering chickens. "It's not a typical location for a luxury hotel," owner Hakan Güzelgöz says as we sit on the terrace. "But, when I saw the view I knew it would work."

Presiding over the panorama is the honeycombed crag of Ortahisar's ancient castle. In the Roman period, local inhabitants relocated to this rock-pinnacle fortress when



Hot air balloons float over the landscape



Splashes of colour in Hezen's contemporary lobby



Volcanic eruptions created Cappadocia's unique landscape

Persian or Arab armies invaded. A tumble of crumbling stone houses cling to the crinkled furrows of the slope below, but their stone façades cannot begin to hint at what hides behind the village's thick wooden doors. Like nearly all of Cappadocia's villages, homes here boast a sunken world of cave rooms chipped out of the hillside itself.

"We incorporated the same local architecture into the hotel, but that's where the similarities stop; Hezen isn't like a normal Cappadocian cave hotel," Hakan explains. Spilling out onto a cascade of courtyards, the 14 rooms here are the essence

of casual glamour. Turkish interior decorator Halide Didem eschewed the cosy and traditional Cappadocian aesthetic to stamp her quirky style across the rock-cut rooms, updating caveman living for the 21st century. Sweeps of bold colour and silvery accents lend a chic, bohemian edge to the decoration. Clever lighting highlights the ripple texture of the rock walls, making the cave-cut rooms themselves the real focal point.

Surfacing from the cave rooms, you can't help but be drawn to the view. Even after dark, the castle still dominates. Lit up, the buttery yellow glow cast across its

pockmarked exterior deepens the craggy silhouette of the rock, dwarfing the needle minaret of the village mosque. Cappadocia's surreal natural and manmade vistas have drawn visitors for years. For a long time though, this was backpacking territory, serviced by simple accommodation and known for adventurous pursuits. It's one of those adventure sports that led to the region being firmly stamped on the luxury travel map and experiencing it means a very early morning wake-up call.

Just after dawn an aerial traffic jam of hot air balloons hovers over the crimped

and folded arteries of canyons, floating downwards to skim near the tops of whimsically shaped rock crags (nicknamed fairy chimneys) which stud the valleys. From high above, the countryside reveals its curvaceous secrets, spooling out towards the horizon. Shaped by multiple layers of solidified volcanic ash (called tuff), the land has been slowly sculpted by millennia of wind and water erosion to create a storybook backdrop of diving and dipping formations.

Viewed from this aerial perspective, the checkerboard squares of Cappadocia's agricultural core secreted within the

plunging valleys can easily be seen. Before tourism came to the region, many families survived on subsistence farming and locals still tend their fields and orchards harvesting the produce. Long rows of grapevines stretch out across the land. The Cappadocian wine industry may be little known outside of Turkey, but viticulture here has a long and illustrious history.

Kocabag Winery in the village of Uçhisar looks over a billowing cliff face pitted by abandoned pigeon cotes. Once central to the success of local farming, pigeon guano was harvested to help fertilise the region's

dry volcanic soil. It's this dry soil coupled with Cappadocia's steppe climate that allows grapevines to flourish.

Memduh Erdoan's family produced their first bottle of wine under the Kocaba label in 1986. Anatolia though, he tells me, was the first place in the world to ever produce wine. Winemaking here dates right back to the early Bronze Age when wine was used in religious ceremonies by the people of Anatolia. When waves of conquering Greeks (and afterwards, Romans) swept through the land, they were introduced to this local drink and took vines back west with them,



Argos is nestled in the village of Uçhisar



The wine cellar at Argos



Suites at Argos preserve the original architecture

introducing the grape to Europe. Determined to preserve the integrity of this region's viticulture history, all the 13 wines Kocaba produces are made using endemic grapes. "These varieties are some of the most ancient in the world," Memduh says. "We don't want to grow chardonnay or shiraz, which people can get anywhere. We want to concentrate on our local grape varieties."

The indigenous emir and narince grapes are used in Kocabas white wines, while öküzgözü and boğazkere are two of the varieties used for the reds. "These are the grapes that have been lost from the world wine scene and we

want to bring them back," Memduh explains. At their main wine production centre in Gülşehir, surrounded by their expansive vineyards, they have also put the traditional architecture of the region to good use. Kocaba's wine is stored and aged in a cave cellar they converted from an old pigeon house, keeping the wine at a continuous eight to 10 degrees Centigrade all year round.

The Erdoan family aren't the first to have cleverly realised the advantages of the region's natural cave cellars. Winemaking prospered here during the Byzantine era when the monastic communities utilised

the cool, stable climate of the caves for the produce of their own grape harvest. One of the largest of these original wine cellars can be seen by guests at Uçhisar's Argos in Cappadocia hotel.

Designed by renowned Turkish architect Turgut Cansever, Argos has retained all of the boutique charm of the region's small hotels, but on a larger scale. Created by restoring a neighbourhood of decaying village houses, including an ancient monastery, the honey-stone mansions cascade down the hillside with a restaurant that overlooks a rolling sweep of caramel-tinged rock valley.



Spectacular views from the restaurant at Argos



Fairy chimneys dominate the skyline

THEGOLDENBOOK

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“Like nearly all of Cappadocia’s villages, homes here boast a sunken world of cave rooms chipped out of the hillside itself”

The cave rooms blend contemporary and traditional, festooned with colourful Turkish textiles, minimalist furnishings and just a scattering of antiques, while the suites contain their own indoor pools.

It’s Argos’ subterranean world though that charms guests. A winding staircase leads down to the cavernous wine cellar. Where monks once hoarded their seasonal efforts from the grape harvest, visitors can now sip and sample a plethora of local and international wine.

These fascinating cave complexes weren’t just about wine though. Back in the Byzantine period, when the religious communities and villagers here whittled out these vast bunkers under the land, there were far more important uses for them than just storage.

Caught at a crossroads of competing empires, much of Cappadocia’s human history has been turbulent for the people who chose to live here, subjected to frequent raids and bloody invasions. Just as the craggy rock castle of Ortahisar provided some refuge from attack, so did tunnelling underground.

Of the many underground cities that hide below Cappadocia’s surface, Derinkuyu is one of the most famous. This labyrinthine cave hideout, connected by narrow tunnels and rock-cut stairs, is seven levels deep, plunging to 60 metres below the surface with a chapel, kitchen, stables and living areas. It’s thought it could shelter up to 20,000 people in times of strife.

Visiting is an experience best left to the non-claustrophobic. The daylight slowly recedes behind me as I shimmy through a

sequence of increasingly narrow tunnels deeper into the ground. Despite the sunshine outside, the cave is cold and its cloying musty fragrance makes me shiver as I traverse the skinny staircases between the connecting rooms. This ancient refuge is a stifling yet compelling experience that gives some inkling of the calamities above that made people retreat underground.

Back in Hezen Hotel’s courtyard, watching the sunset as it rolls over the village and shades the landscape in soft pastel hues, I reflect on caves old and new. The soft tuff rock once provided a place of sanctuary amid the empirical turmoil of the Anatolian plains. It now provides a wondrous and rather whimsical playground for grown-ups looking for a unique escape. Underground living has never looked so inviting. ■