

Europe to Asia. In 1973, the iconic suspension bridge was inaugurated, and since then, has stood as a symbol of exchange between the two continents. As the family rolled across the bridge in their truck, the Bosphorus Strait revealed itself, crisscrossed with passing cargo ships. On both sides of the bridge, the breathtaking skyline of Istanbul came into view, with its distinctive blend of historic buildings and mosques and modern skyscrapers. The atmosphere on the bridge was lively and bustling as vehicles came and went.

Their journey then led them far inland, to the surreal landscapes of Cappadocia in Turkey's Central Anatolia Region. Here countless rock formations, known as fairy chimneys, towered high into the sky, the result of centuries of erosion. An underground city stretches beneath the distinctive rocks, with some of the formations housing cave dwellings and churches carved into the tuff stone. This area was once a significant center for various cultures and civilizations, including the Hittites, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, and Ottomans. Today, Cappadocia is a popular tourist destination, renowned for its unique landforms, historic sites, and breathtaking hot-air balloon rides over the scenery. It was thrilling for the family to be awakened early in the morning by the sounds of hot-air balloons drifting overhead.

On their way eastward into Iran, the trio passed through the cities of Erzurum and Erzurum. The weather was in transition, no longer winter but not yet summer. Some days, the sun shone from a cloudless, blue sky, while on others, snow and icy temperatures prevailed, especially in the higher elevations. Gradually, gently rolling hills gave way to vast plains and agricultural fields, while further east, the land became increasingly mountainous. Standing at 16,854 feet (5,137 meters), Greater Ararat, the highest peak in Turkey, soon dominates the vista.

In Turkey, the Akela crew quickly discovered, hospitality is not just an idea, but a way of life. Just before the border town of Doğubayazıt, they camped near the Ishak Pasha Palace, which perches precariously on a rock ledge. Built over the 17th and 18th centuries by a Georgian family dynasty, it spoke of former greatness and power. However, it was not the palace that captured the trio's attention so much as a Kurdish shepherd named Ahmed, who lived in a humble dwelling nearby. A spontaneous conversation turned into a heartfelt invitation to dinner, during which the shepherd spoke of the hardships faced by the Kurdish minority in Turkey.

Yet anyone who assumes that Turkish (or Kurdish) hospitality is unparalleled has never been to Iran. The family was overwhelmed by the efforts of ordinary Iranians to welcome their foreign guests, and invitations to tea or dinner were often extended. A particular

highlight of their time in Iran was Nowruz, the Persian New Year festival, which occurred while the family was in Tabriz, in northern Iran. The holiday, which usually falls around March 21, marks the beginning of spring and the new year in the Persian calendar, and is traditionally celebrated with various rituals and festive activities, including the ceremonial cleaning and decorating of homes, the preparation of traditional dishes, the lighting of fires, visits from friends and relatives, and the exchange of gifts. Often, these festivities include picnics in the park under the first warming rays of the sun. Chicken skewers with lavash—an Iranian flatbread perfect for wrapping food—are typically served, along with a rich dessert buffet filled with aromatic and traditional delicacies.

After days of celebration, the road beckoned once more. From Tabriz there was a brief stopover in the capital, Tehran, before the journey took Akela on through the semiarid Iranian Plateau, marked by plains and gentle hills interspersed with dry riverbeds. The cities of Isfahan and Yazd shimmered in the landscape; like improbable oases, these places have flourished thanks to agricultural production and artificial irrigation systems. The architecturally stunning historic buildings and well-preserved old towns made strolling a pleasure, even in rising temperatures. The final stop on the mainland was the port city of Bandar Abbas in southern Iran, from where it is possible to take a ferry to nearby Qeshm Island, home to a UNESCO Global Geopark, among other attractions.

The further south they traveled, the drier and hotter the climate, and the more desert-like the landscape became. At one point, Akela got stuck in the sand of Dasht-e Lut, one of the largest salt deserts in the world—it took hours for the family to dig the truck out. They were fortunate it wasn't summer, as Dasht-e Lut's temperatures can reach upwards of 159 degrees Fahrenheit (70 degrees Celsius), making it one of the hottest places in the world. It's a surreal and otherworldly landscape characterized by vast salt flats, sand dunes, barren mountains, and geological formations known as *kaluts*. The colors in this wild, lunar place vary depending on the time of day and range from the bright-white tones of the salt flats to the warm hues of the dunes and the darker shades of the surrounding mountains.

Though finally back on the road, the family was denied entry visas to Turkmenistan, which meant a detour of almost 2,000 miles (3,219 kilometers) to stay on course. But while the flow of life in this part of the world can be unpredictable, for good or ill, it reaffirmed the fact that with some help, ingenuity, and serious determination, there is usually a work-around.

