

Journal of Gallipoli trip

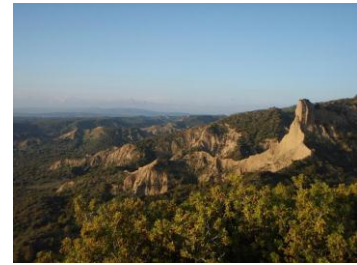
16-29 April 2011

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Introduction

I completed my seventh trip to Turkey for the Simpson Prize as battlefield tour guide on 16 to 28 April 2011. As this was my final tour with the Simpson Prize, this report will focus on any key organisational aspects of the trip for future planning. Stuart Baines from the Australian War Memorial accompanied the group and now has developed a good understanding of the role of tour guide. The report will also highlight some of the key events and issues for consideration in planning and organisation of future trips. For more information on the day-today experiences of the group see the blog at <http://simpsonprize2011.wordpress.com>



Preparations

Contact with John Waller from Boronia Travel is often the first activity in the process, with discussion on the basic outline of the itinerary occurring in November or December. At this early stage we are usually considering any implications of departure and return dates, changes to flight times and number of days for the trip. Depending on the days of the week that the tour is in Istanbul, there can be changes required if some venues are closed.

This year I was unable to meet the students in Canberra, however Stuart Baines covered all aspects of the trip with the group. This introductory session is always an important part of the trip, to pass on information, deal with any immediate questions and establish a contact person for the students and their parents. Stuart covered the preparation for soldier presentations and any research required.

Contact with Department of Veterans Affairs prior to the trip is important. They need the names of students, teachers and guide to issue the VIP passes for the Anzac Day services. They also are a key liaison point for media enquiries. There was some discussion prior to the trip on the students attending the rehearsal for Lone Pine service, which seems to be scheduled for 23 April each year, though this date needs to be confirmed.

Travel

The travel to Turkey was completed without any issues. Some of the student's flights into Sydney were delayed and there is always the challenge of making sure all students are met at their gate on arrival. It is important to have back-up plan for students if there is no one at their gate and mobile contact numbers at this point are very important.

Boronia Travel, in partnership with KD Travel in Turkey, continues to provide an excellent service. Everything is well organised and I was able to have regular contact with John Waller and his staff before and during the trip. The group was provided with a very experienced Simpson Prize Turkish guide, Ozgur (Fred) Erdogan. Fred relates very well to the students and understands the need to provide them with enough information to peak their interest but not over-load them.

Accommodation

The Antik Hotel in the old part of the city, close to the Grand Bazaar, was the accommodation again. This is an excellent location as it gives ready access to many of the key sites we visit, such as the Hagia Sophia and Topkapi Palace. Service and catering here is high quality. The Hotel Kum was our accommodation again for Gallipoli and was excellent as usual. Wi-fi access in all areas, improved café facilities and plenty of great Turkish food.

Itinerary

The itinerary had an extra day this year, which allowed for a more relaxed trip, with less time pressure to squeeze in site visits, particularly in Istanbul. This is important as the travelling in the bus through traffic can often take up a lot of time. The length of the trip often depends on available flights, however a slightly longer itinerary is a distinct advantage. The transport museum in Istanbul was a new venue in the itinerary and I would recommend it stays in the schedule.

The itinerary had the usual good coverage of key sites but with flexibility to alter and change as needs require. Particularly at Gallipoli, the tour is always at the mercy of changes to access to sites. One distinct advantage of travelling with Boronia and KD Travel is we are always well informed before-hand on such issues and can avoid most disruptions.

Anzac Day

The VIP passes from DVA issued before leaving Australia, gives us access to reserved seating at the Dawn Service and easy access to dressing rooms at the Lone Pine Service. Contact with DVA staff both before and during the trip was regular and always helpful for me and the group.

The Dawn Service access was simple, leaving the Kum Hotel at 1.00am and arriving at the site not long after. Attendance numbers were low, so there were no queues coming in through security checks. It was very cold this year and essential to have the sleeping bags for students and teachers.

This year we did a full rehearsal of the Lone Pine service, so were able to confirm arrangements for the wreath-handling and had the order of wreaths. As always, the students acquitted themselves extremely well in their duties, including Tanvi Karnik who did the reading, and all were complemented by many DVA staff and visitors. The ABC broadcast the service live in Australia, which allowed parents and friends back home to see the students in action.

Student presentations

As with previous years, the student presented soldiers at various cemeteries on the peninsula. Most of the students chose their soldier, but not many had photos to accompany. Where possible, I think it is good to have a laminated photo of the soldiers in order to leave at the site so other visitors can see them.

Media/Blog

The media interest for the SP was strong this year, with Channel 7 interviewing the students at Beach Cemetery on their first day on the peninsula. Channel 9 filmed and interviewed the students at Lone Pine and as mentioned previously, ABC television covered the Lone Pine service which provides good exposure of the students. There were two radio interviews that students completed via phone from the Dawn service site.

I set up another Wordpress blog to document the trip (simpsonprize2011.wordpress.com) The blog does require a certain amount of effort to make sure entries are made each day, either getting students to complete or writing it myself, and getting pictures to include. This was again very successful, with many family members and friends back home following the posts. The blog included 22 posts, received 4692 page views and 55 comments. The site will remain on the web for the next year, and I would recommend it be archived in some way for future reference.

Technology

The HTAA computer was very helpful. It allowed for improved communications and made posting blog entries very simple. The computer also provided file backup for student

photographs. As mentioned previously, the wi-fi connection at the Hotel Kum assisted greatly with maintaining the blog.

Students and teachers

There were no issues for me with either the students or teachers. All participated well in the trip, looked out for each other and cooperated with all aspects. I would continue to push for taking teachers who haven't had many travelling opportunities and at least one who is at the beginning of their teaching career. One of the teachers on this trip, for instance had retired the year before and this seems to me a wasted opportunity for inspiring students.

The reactions of the students' experience to the Simpson Prize trip can also be viewed at the blog, as most sent through a post on their return home.

Battlefield Tour Guide

I was very pleased to have the opportunity to lead my final Simpson Prize tour. Having taken Stuart Baines on the trip this year, I believe he will do an excellent job in future trips. He understands the need to create a fun, relaxed and informal atmosphere for the students and teachers that enhances their enjoyment of the trip and results in positive team environment. It has been a great experience for me over the last 7 years to lead the groups of students and teachers.

Summary

Overall, it was a very successful trip. There is no doubt the experience is a very rewarding and memorable one for all concerned. Comments on the blog from previous SP students highlight the ongoing impact that the trip has on their lives. The trip is always well organised and the suggestions and changes I would make are fairly minor to the overall excellent result we achieve each year.

Andrew Gray
19 May 2011