ætla 01




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'ON TOP OF THE WORLD' BY PHILIPPE BLONDEL, PAGE 44

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‘LEARNING IN CAPPADOCIA’ BY ASHLEY PARSONS/QUENTIN BOEHM , PAGE 10

FOREWORD

As I write this, in late April, I can see civilisation from one window, and the woods from the other. It feels very inbetween. I should be being oh so British and writing about how Spring has arrived, and the mood is lifting. Except it hasn't arrived yet. The cold to the bones is continuing, a long pause in the natural world. Or, at least, that's how it feels for us; out of sync. The winds, the trees not budding, the over-enthusiasm of the pigeons, they're all working to their own rhythm. The one they've had to find for themselves in a changing world. We can't berate the lack of springtime optimism when we're holding so many of the keys.

As a multihyphenate, but always writer, I have learned to evolve as I go. Learning new things, asking awkward questions, being open to differing points of view and discovering progress along the way. This acceptance of change is what led to ætla, Fen + Field reimagined and all grown up. Not because Fen + Field was not a problem requiring a solution, but it did need me to listen to it – and our audience, and the new team that were coming on board. The word itself translates from Old Norse: to strive, to intend, to purpose, to think. These are the actions that underpin existence, that navigate the spaces between being and doing. Exploration is heritage in its form, and now it has evolved too. Life is moments of joy and sorrow and a thousand other things between. Exploring can be to the top of Mount Everest, cycling Cappadocia or finding the sisu and wild peace within. Ultimately, we find our way, sometimes home and often elsewhere. It exists between belonging and non-conformity. Enjoy the stories in ætla 01 – the spaces in between, the inspiration of the natural world, and a celebration of becoming.

Katie

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LEARNING IN CAPPADOCIA

WORDS: ASHLEY PARSONS PHOTOS: QUENTIN BOEHM







The biting cold had regulated everyone in Cappadocia to their firesides, except us. The vapor blew out of our mouths as we cycled through narrow canyons. The chimneys we saw were not exhaling trails of smoke. Instead, they were rock formations capped with a thin layer of snow. It shimmered in the bright winter sun. Our patience fading with the daylight we heaved our bikes up a path, hopeful it would lead us to a campsite with a view. Everywhere I looked, four words were seared into the landscape: This is not fun.

Two days prior, steam wafted off the plate of rice and vegetables in front of me. “Please, you will eat with me,” offered Ender. He opened his hand toward us in a common gesture of Turkish hospitality. Ender was helping us plan our cycling route around the Cappadocia region. With his long finger, he pointed to another spot on the map.

‘Around here is a thin trail you can take. You will pass many caves.’ A knowing smile crept across his face, ‘If you look for a campsite here you will find one. But really, you can camp anywhere. No one will bother you. Well, if a farmer sees you he will check that you are not too cold.’

At the mention of the temperature, I shot a glance at Quentin. His face was calm as he listened to Ender, his blue eyes giving nothing away. I was nervous though. More than a year had passed since we’d cycled out of our driveway in Provence and began our journey east. Last winter the coldest of nights the mercury brushed -4°C, but the days always warmed up to around 7-8°C. Here in Central Turkey, the nights promised to be between -7 and -12°C, and the days not much warmer.

Spread out in front of us lay a basic tourist map. Ender had drawn in the off-road trails and shortcuts. The names of the valleys, ‘Love, Red, White, Pigeon,’ were obscured by my notes: turn before the farmhouse, or, Byzantine church nearby.

We were not interested in cycling the world as fast as possible. But to skip exploring Cappadocia felt like a wasted opportunity. Thousands of years of erosion carved out the terrain. After that, centuries of humans followed suite, carving houses, tunnels, and even cities into the soft rock. Despite the cold, we’d decided to build our own ‘micro-adventure,’ in the region. Over the coming days we’d











take our time exploring the quiet corners of the canyons.

'I think you will have a very special time cycling right now,' Ender assured us. 'In the spring it is very beautiful too, but in winter it is different."

Cappadocia is not remote: you are never more than a few kilometers from a village and you always have cell service. But it is rustic in ways that make for good exploring. As soon as we left the asphalt road outside of Avanos, I felt my wheels spin under me, going nowhere. Only half joking, I called up to Quentin, 'Do they make snow chains for bike tires?' Ice covered the dirt path.

Love Valley lay below us. 'Fairy chimneys' grew out of the canyon floor, level with the cliff's edge. Pouring hot tea from my thermos, I unleashed a stream of phallic jokes about the shape of the rock formations. When we finished laughing, we settled back into the bike saddles.

'We should start looking for somewhere to camp,' I said to Quentin.

'We'll go to that spot in Red Valley that Ender recommended,' he smiled, reassuring me that he was tired too. Fatigue and satisfaction swirled in my body, battling for center stage. Our adventure in Cappadocia was going exactly according to plan.

And then it wasn't.

'I think we entered the valley by the wrong side,' yelled Quentin, shaking his head while looking at the map. I craned my neck to see him in front of me, twenty meters below.

'Well, what do we do?' I asked, knowing the answer.

'Do you want to climb back up where we came in?' His sarcasm stung.

Neither of us wanted to climb back up the slippery, narrow trails we'd wiggled through to reach our current location. Each descent was a loosely controlled fall.

I took a deep breath and plunged forward, pointlessly squeezing the brakes on my bike. At the










THE NORTH FACE



bottom of the gully, the air was still. Frost that had not melted from the night before crunched under my feet.

Time froze for an instant; a sandy red flash rustled in the bushes. A brambling flew out, followed by another. Were they hunting? Playing? I exhaled and shivered. Reality came back into focus, but I felt a shift. I was here, just as much as the migratory brambling was here. Whether we'd entered the valley from the right or wrong end didn't make any difference.

What did matter was finding a campsite with a view. Leaving my bike at the base of the cliff, Quentin tugged and I pushed his bike up to the outcropping of a cliff. The spot was positioned at the edge of Red and Rose Valley. Repeating the effort to bring my bike to the top, we unloaded our bags and made camp as fast as we could.

The sun sank lower, bathing the edges of both valleys in a pale pink light. I laughed at the surreal landscape, the frigid cold, and ridiculousness of wanting so badly to feel a sense of wonder and appreciation for this place. What I felt was cold. It was already below freezing. Sweat from the day's effort was cold on my back.

Brushing my teeth outside before bed, I tried again to appreciate the moonlit vista surrounding me. 'Cold, cold, cold,' repeated in my mind. I fled back into the tent.

Thoughts I didn't dare say out loud filled my head: 'Why are we here? It's too cold to have fun. It's too cold for anything. What good is it camping somewhere mythical if you're freezing and all your body parts ache?'

A noise woke me up. It was a steady rush of air, but sounded like small waterfall. I peeked over at Quentin who was awake too, blinking back at me. As I sat up, ice rained down on us, the condensation of our breathing frozen to the tent's sleeping chamber. Quentin groaned and hid his face in his sleeping bag.

The noise grew loud enough that we mustered up the courage to slip on our socks, gloves, hats and down jackets. As I unzipped the tent flap, a long-awaited scene unfurled. Like baubles in the sky, the famous hot air balloons of Cappadocia had taken flight. This accounted for the waterfall noise.

The first rays of sun crested in the east. In an instant, the valley was illuminated in sherbet orange. Dozens of balloons hung in the air. Some passed so close to our tent we waved at the passengers in their baskets.

The balloon's hum took second stage to the chorus of winter birds. Within seconds of the sun touching their hidden roosts, they peeked out. And then opened their beaks to sing their salutations. I felt a kinship with these birds, as they celebrated the end of another cold night. Like them, I was just passing through for the winter, and like them, I was joyous to feel the warmth of a new day. Despite myself, I felt like singing along, grateful to be just where I was.

Brushing the frost off our bikes, we broke camp. Joyriding downhill to continue our micro-adventure the bikes accelerated on their own. I threw my legs out beside me to steady myself, but didn't bother braking. The cold night was over, day two was now. No matter how many times I'd slipped and fallen on the trail yesterday, I was up today, and ready to see more.

Before continuing east, we cycled around the region for three more days. Looking back, our detour in the region was one of the most mentally and physically tough excursions of the year. But it helped me hone my endurance, gratitude, and ability to celebrate little victories, like being able to feel my fingers and toes again. For these lessons, you don't have to cycle to Cappadocia; you can learn them wherever you are.

I never became comfortable with the cold, nor with lugging my bike up trails thick with ice and mud. Did I have fun? Can fun encompass learning to appreciate the pockets of clarity hidden in the big vistas? Or the feeling of solidarity while singing with the birds to celebrate surviving another night? Or the altered perspective of observing the intricacies of a rosehip tree from inside its thorny branches when you've slid too fast down a precarious cliff?

I guess I did have fun.





