HIGHLY COMMENDED
TEACHER CATEGORY

A Story in Miniature

The savvy traveller

Blair Mahoney, Melbourne High School

He was finally where Europe and Asia meet: the city that was once Byzantium, that was once Constantinople, the centre of empires that had lasted for centuries. It had been a long journey but after checking into his hotel and seeing the remnants of Ottoman grandeur in the ornate fittings and soaring ceiling he was starting to feel pretty smug.

The self-satisfaction only increased after his visit to a hammam, where a man aged about seventy and clad only in what appeared to be a large tea towel around his waist, instructed him through a series of mystifying yet strangely pleasurable procedures before pummeling him into submission with the most vigorous massage the traveller had ever experienced. That the masseur spoke no English and had the most back hair he had ever witnessed on a human being only served to increase the feeling that this was 'Authentic' (with a capital A), not just one of those 'tourist' experiences.

He had considered giving the Blue Mosque and the Hagia Sophia a miss: too popular, the kind of thing that everybody did when they went to Istanbul. Surely there were plenty of more niche mosques for the discerning that he could visit instead. In the end he decided that no, he would show that he wasn't perverse by going after all, but he would book in a guided tour and get these things out of the way in one morning so he could then concentrate on curating a more boutique travelling experience for the remainder of his time here.

He had to admit that these structures were quite impressive, but what pleased him even more was that the group he was with were almost all Americans. No doubt a bunch of gullible fools who had ended up here by accident after getting on the wrong cruise ship and were making the most of their few hours here before returning to their onboard entertainment and sugary cocktails as they set off to their next destination.

Afterwards, dithering outside the entrance to the Archaeology Museum (you wouldn't find many Americans there!) he found himself in conversation with a middle-aged man, a local business owner. See: this was exactly the kind of authentic experience those rubes would never have, he thought, as he accompanied the man into his nearby rug emporium. And there was no way he would buy a rug, despite sampling the man's apple tea. And he cleverly resisted buying a scarf for his partner, saying he would 'think about it' and return later (fat chance). He felt almost sorry for these people, thinking he was an easy mark. He would throw them a bone by sampling some items from the sweet store they also owned and buying a few Turkish delights and some tea. No need to check the price: how much could it come to?

The burn of humiliation he felt upon checking the receipt later could only be dealt with one way: he must write about it.

1/134–136 Cambridge Street,
Collingwood, VIC, 3066
ABN 22 667 468 657 Inc. No. A0013525E

© Victorian Association for
the Teaching of English 2026
Reproduced by permission of the author.

VATE
VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH