Can you name all the countries that border Turkey (not all obvious from the map)?
Notice how mountainous the country is!

Turkey after Iraq: May 18-June 9

Diyarbakir (May 18-21)

Diyarbakir (on map, go straight up from the “A” in “Syria”) feels less developed, further away, and less familiar than any place yet on this trip. It’s the “capital” of Kurdish Turkey, and it is much bigger and seems much less prosperous than Mardin or Şanlıurfa. There is also less English—virtually no English—compared to any other place, even including Iraqi Kurdistan. I need my tiny Turkish vocabulary for survival and could benefit greatly if I practiced even to recover what I knew years ago.

At my hotel (and about every other I’ve seen) the lobby is filled with men, presumably local and not guests of the hotel, who just sit and occasionally sip tea. If a new man enters, he then shakes hands with each of the others—maybe as many as 15 or 20—before sitting down. There seems to be little talking or activity of any kind. I was invited to sit down and they seemed disappointed when I eventually got up to leave even though we had no common language for conversation. (Of course we had already gone through the ritual of pointing to a shoe and saying “Bush” and mentioning Obama with some unexcited reactions.)

Reactions to “America” seem decidedly less enthusiastic than in Iraqi Kurdistan, for obvious reasons. America is still not popular in Turkey the way it was 20 years ago. Polls when Bush was president showed the lowest approval rating for the United States in Turkey among all countries, and the attitudes in the Kurdish areas and under Obama have probably not turned around significantly. I think it’s “wait and see.”
Though western Turks think Diyarbakir is just a haven for PKK terrorists, I find three main themes: beautiful old architecture, poverty, and children. (Apparently many are street kids or so I’ve read.)

Mostly the kids were friendly, but one warned me not to go further toward the river because of poor kids snatching things from visitors. (At least that’s what his gestures indicated, and I later met a man who had a similar experience.) The girl in the horizontally striped shirt followed me around for quite awhile, was definitely friendly, and wanted her picture taken. I can’t help but think of how beautiful Diyarbakir could be if the Turkish government made the efforts it has made to “improve” Istanbul. I think this has been done in Istanbul without spoiling its traditional character, but if others disagree, they can definitely still find the old, authentic, and unspoiled-by-tourism Turkey (Kurdish style) in Diyarbakir. I have not seen a single picture postcard.
Not quite my vision of the famous Tigris River
In Bitlis, on the way to Lake Van, the source of one of the pleasures in Turkey, *ekmek* (bread):

Unfortunately, hotels often serve a generic white bread rather than a distinctively Turkish kind.
Although the southeast is Turkey’s poorest and least developed region (with few tourists), there is no lack of natural beauty. Right below, Nemrut Dağı (near Tatvan… there are two “Nemrut Dağları”)

Very scary drive up to crest of crater and down into it with both cool and warm lakes inside crater.

Akdamar, island on Lake Van. Ferry runs from south shore.
After using buses the first part of my trip, I rented a car in Diyarbakir. (It took two hours to get my credit card processed and another two hours to get things squared away when I returned the car in Erzurum, but as usual the Turks were warm and friendly even if not Western-efficient.) I was a bit disappointed with the drive to Hakkari (not quite what *Lonely Planet* suggested), but it was interesting in two ways. One was that unlike in other Kurdish cities like Mardin, women in Hakkari were out at night and often uncovered. The city was much less religious than others.

There have been frequent and recent PKK-related incidents near Hakkari; for example, a shelling of suspected PKK sites from Iran. There were many military checkpoints, and I had to get out and fill out forms each way. The soldiers refused my request to take a picture of the road sign pointing to “Iran,” the entrance to which is nearby. However, I met a group of Iranians whose bus stopped on the roadside. We talked a bit about Obama, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad, and we exchanged currencies and hopes for peace.

I gave up driving in the city of Van and ended up staying at a “luxury” hotel outside town. What a waste of money! All luxury hotels are the same; I could have been anywhere. The room cost about $70 instead of the usual $30-35 (with breakfast).
The road from Van to Doğubayazıt (the “ğ” is not pronounced) skirts the Iranian border, and just about at that point I took this photo:

Later, while I was taking another photo by the road and facing the opposite way, these two girls ran from their home just to greet me.

The children are one of the great delights in Turkey. But as I noted on Facebook, I wonder what kind of life these playful girls will have in conservative southeast Turkey? Will they be able to choose an education? What choices will they have if their husbands are not good to them? Am I being ethnocentric?
On to Kars…

Made famous (to me) by Orhan Pamuk’s novel, *Snow* (I listened to the part describing Kars while driving there), Kars is infamous for its weather. Sure enough, it was cold, raining, and muddy when I arrived, but it brightened after that, and the city is more cosmopolitan and intellectual than many of the others, and I had a great Turkish meal that was *not* a kebab.

The next day I drove to Ani, delightfully untouristy for such a major site. I understand that the Turks had not been eager to promote Armenian historical sites but have recently realized they have tourist potential. Ani is right on the border: the lower-right portion of the photo is in Armenia, but you can’t cross over.

Into the mountains.

Driving wasn’t the most fun, but it was great to get to an area for hiking. It cleared the next day, and I went on a fine, steep, 10-mile hike. Unfortunately, Turkey has few actual hiking trails.
June 3: drive to Erzurum, last stop before Istanbul and where I returned the rental car. Four years ago I was here and accidentally left my camera in a shop. When I came back later, the workers immediately handed the camera to me. I took pictures of them and promised to mail them, but I lost the address. Within 5 minutes I found one of the guys (by asking and showing the photo). His shop had closed, and he was now driving a taxi, and he was obviously surprised to get the photograph.

Much of Erzurum is modern and undistinguished, but the Seljuk architecture is wonderful and the people, as always, warm and welcoming.
I might have considered a long, 30-hour train ride from Erzurum to İstanbul—the idea of a sleeper car through Anatolia was very alluring to me—but having driven more than 4 hours the day before, I didn’t want to be confined for that long and, truth to tell, I didn’t want to miss Obama’s important speech to the Muslim world, the speech of his, more than any, that I was looking forward to.

**Last stop: Return to İstanbul June 9-12**

There seem to be more tourists flooding the streets than a month ago, and the weather is not so pleasantly cool and refreshing as before, but the city is as vibrant and beautiful as ever, especially the Bosphorus. I have mostly been re-visited my favorite things and touching on some new areas. Photos below are the view from my room at the Empress Zoe, exterior of the Yeni Cami (new mosque), interior of the tiled Rüsta Paşa Cami, and a feeble attempt to try to capture the six minarets of the Blue Mosque at night.