so to see the haunting ruins of Ani, an important trading stop on the Silk Road and the 10th-century capital of a medieval Armenian kingdom. Unfortunately, there’s no easy way to travel the 42km to Ani without a private car, though a municipality-run shuttle service is scheduled to start this summer. But the trip is well worth the effort and the expense.

Imposing basalt walls bring an end to a long, rutted road that passes through tiny villages, seemingly little changed since Ani’s heyday. Beyond the massive main gate, stone churches, palaces, mosques, caravanserais and hamams rise up out of the overgrown grass like islands in the sea. Down in a steep canyon, what’s left of an ancient bridge hangs over the Aras River separating Turkey and Armenia, its impassable state reflecting the closed border between the two neighbours.

I can feel the small bird trembling as I hold it in my cupped hands and walk outside the weathered metal trailer to release it. Bits of feathers explode off its back as it hurriedly takes flight in the crisp, clean air of remote north-east Turkey.

Inside the trailer, Sedat blows gently on the underside of a penduline tit, ruffling the bird’s feathers back from its belly to reveal a tiny round bulge beneath the skin. ‘It’s going to be a mother,’ he says with a smile.

The area around Kars has a bleak reputation, in part due to Orhan Pamuk’s dark portrayal in his acclaimed novel, ‘Snow’. And while winters are indeed harsh, with up to four months of snow and temperatures plummeting as low as -40°C, the vast landscape of high plateaus and green lowlands vividly comes to life in the spring.

Foals and calves totter on shaky legs in lush mountain meadows where nomadic herders pitch their tents. Delicate purple crocuses and bright red poppies – the colour of the traditional bridal veil that gives them their Turkish name, gelincik – burst from the earth. And thousands of migratory birds stop over at Kuyucuk Lake and the Aras River wetlands, where local environmentalists running field research stations have spotted more than two-thirds of all the bird species recorded in Turkey.

Russian and Armenian heritage
Unlike their avian counterparts, few human visitors to Turkey make it as far as Kars. Most who do come do so to see the haunting ruins of Ani, an important trading stop on the Silk Road and the 10th-century capital of a medieval Armenian kingdom. Unfortunately, there’s no easy way to travel the 42km to Ani without a private car, though a municipality-run shuttle service is scheduled to start this summer. But the trip is well worth the effort and the expense.

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IInto the wild
The spectacular landscapes around Kars beckon birdwatchers, nature-lovers and history buffs. Words and photography by Jennifer Hattam

Unlike their avian counterparts, few human visitors to Turkey make it as far as Kars.
Kars’ queen bee

A Colorado native, Catherine Jaffee turns to an ancient trade to help local women gain employment

When I first quit my job to move to Kars, Turkey, almost every person I met would ask me: why would you ever move to a rural place like Kars? At first I could tell by their looks that they were suspicious. Are you here to write a book? Are you here to study politics and the Armenian issue? Are you a spy, an agent, a fraud? With Turkey’s beautiful seas, massive west coast tourism industry and Istanbul, why, why, why would you ever go to Kars and, gosh, stay?

I am here to study honey. I would reply confidently.

Immediately, their faces would shift. Anyone who really knows Turkish honey understands that north-eastern Turkey has one of the most established beekeeping and honey traditions on earth. It is the birthplace of the original Caucasian bee, with an ancient trade culture around honey and local products spanning hundreds of years back to the Silk Road. Even today, with the endemic bee population over 2,000 local flower species – resulting in a floral blend of so many different honey flavours, it is a wonder to think that wine tasting – in which 75 percent of wines are made from one grape type – has dominated most tasting adventures instead.

The market opportunity of honey tasting in a place like north-eastern Turkey is substantial: a unique culinary travel experience that is environmental, family-friendly and offered nowhere else. Its greatest potential, however, lies in how it can shift circumstances for local women to become rural entrepreneurs.

My team and I are starting Balyolu: The Honey Road to do just this. We are the first honey tasting walking tour of its kind, led and inspired by women in north-eastern Turkey. More than 10 million women live in rural parts of Turkey, and although the country has one of the world’s lowest employment rates for women (22 percent), women are working full-time (albeit unpaid) while they care for their large families and run small family farms. But in these remote villages, they are cut off from the city centres, so there are limited opportunities to translate this labour into income, education opportunities or professional development.

Organic beekeeping, particularly in rural, untouched areas such as north-eastern Turkey, is an ideal livelihood for women because women are stable (and therefore not moving their bees into areas with harmful crops or pesticides) and beekeeping can be done right in their backyards without stable (and therefore not moving their bees into areas with harmful crops or pesticides) and beekeeping can be done right in their backyards without moving them.

We are targeting (those at the bottom of the pyramid) do not have an education past the sixth grade – it is hard for them to compete in a domestic market full of honey.

Subsidising honey production with compelling nomadic travel experiences that are full of authentic cultural interactions such as bread-making workshops with a local villager, or birthing with a local non-profit, we hope to use travel to create a mobile marketplace of ideas and cultural exchanges that lead right to a woman’s village. True to the Silk Road model, we are harnessing walking routes in rural areas to shift the dynamics of poverty, particularly for women. With Balyolu, over 70 percent of trip funds are reinvested directly back into local communities through organic beekeeping, hospitality and marketing trainings, as well as incubation of new green small businesses.

Now, almost a year later, instead of people asking me ‘why would you ever go to Kars?’ the much more frequent question is ‘when can I book a trip?’

For more information, visit www.balyolu.com.