

In the Steps of Florence Nightingale

By Alex Attewell

Standing on the spot where something important in history took place can have a powerful and emotional effect. During the past few years, I have experienced the magic of place by taking groups of nurses to visit Scutari, the army hospital in Turkey where, between 1854 and 1856, Florence Nightingale nursed the sick and wounded of the Crimean War.

Scutari was a military barracks before it was temporarily employed as a hospital, and it has reverted to that role again. I step into the corporate military atmosphere of a modern headquarters. I stand on white marble tiles and gaze down a long corridor. Then I realize the corridor is only half the full length of the corridors Nightingale managed — and there were four miles of them.

At that time, the floors were wood, which absorbed all sorts of waste. Many of the patients lay on rotting floorboards when Nightingale and her 38 nurses arrived on Nov. 4, 1854.

During the war, wounded officers avoided the hospitals, but more than 2,300 ordinary soldiers packed Scutari the first winter. The smell and noise must have been unbearable as amputations took place in crowded, filthy conditions.

Nightingale's own statistics after the war showed that the main base hospital at Scutari killed more British soldiers than the fighting itself. Nightingale skillfully presented data demonstrating pre-20th-century poor sanitation — not the bullet or sword — was the soldier's worst enemy.

I am always interested to see people's reactions to Scutari. Most stand in awe of its sheer scale; it takes a few moments and some reflection to understand the challenges faced by Nightingale's nurses.

Although I admire Nightingale immensely, I am far from uncritical. I enjoy historical debate of her methods with my traveling companions as we sit in a tea shop in the Grand Bazaar or while sailing down the Bosphorus on a sunny afternoon. It is always a pleasure to share the experience of visiting Istanbul with its richly layered history, from the golden mosaics of the Byzantine churches to the intrigue of the harem at the Topkapi Palace — places that Nightingale hardly had time to contemplate, let alone visit. On the other hand, as I shop for a Turkish lantern, the closest thing to her famous lamp, I feel I am genuinely treading in Nightingale's footsteps.

As a person who has spent nearly 20 years working on all things Nightingale, I encourage nurses to take those same steps and gain a fascinating glimpse into the life and work of one of the world's greatest nursing pioneers.

Alex Attewell, a writer and tour leader, is a museum curator and former director of the Florence Nightingale Museum in London, where he spent 18 years.

All photos courtesy of Jon Baines Tours

From top: View of the northern tower of Scutari • The Grand Bazaar in Istanbul • Sailing down the Bosphorus • A view of Istanbul and the Blue Mosque

For more information about the next In the Steps of Florence Nightingale tour, March 27 to April 5, 2011, visit jonbainestours.co.uk/fnus.

