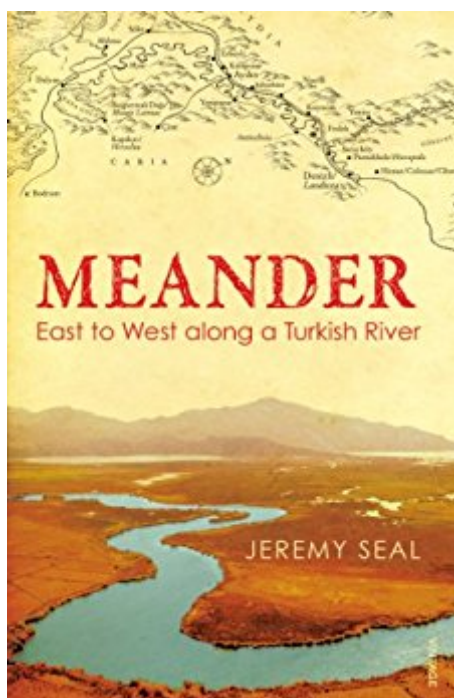


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Meander: East To West Along A Turkish River



Synopsis

The course of the Meander is so famously indirect that the river's name has come to signify digression - an invitation Jeremy Seal is duty-bound to accept while travelling the length of it in a one-man canoe. At every twist and turn of his journey, from the Meander's source in the uplands of Central Turkey to its mouth on the Aegean Sea, Seal illuminates his account with a wealth of cultural, historical and personal asides. It is a journey that takes him from Turkey's steppe interior - the stamping ground of such illustrious adventurers as Xerxes, Alexander the Great and the Crusader Kings - to the great port city of Miletus, home of the earliest Western philosophers. Along the way Seal unpicks the history of this remarkable region, but he also encounters a rich assortment of contemporary characters who reveal a rural Turkey on the cusp of change. Above all, this is the story of a river that first brought the cultures of East and West into contact - and conflict - with one another, its banks littered with the spoil of empires, the marks of war, and the detritus of recent industrialisation. At once epic, intimate and insightful, Meander is a brilliant evocation of a land between two worlds.

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Customer Reviews

The Meander River runs through a long fertile valley in western Turkey, in the region of Anatolia. The valley produces a great number of fruits and vegetables, including tree fruits, as well as nuts and grains. The rocky hillsides are dotted with olive groves, and the river and lakes once teemed with fish. Little wonder then that over many millennia various groups of people have invaded and settled in the area. The Meander valley has also been a fault line in the battles between European and near Eastern powers: ancient Greeks and Persians, Christendom and the Saracens, Byzantium and the Ottomans, modern Greeks and Turks. Religion has also been the cause of violence and conquest here. The region once worshipped the Hittite fertility goddess, then Apollo the sun god, Christianity was brought by St Paul (a native of this region), then quickly eclipsed by the rise of Islam. When Turkey became a republic in 1923, the new regime imposed a secular constitution, but in recent years Islam has had a moderate resurgence in politics, and tourists have returned to engage in sun worship. The head of the Meander is only a little over 500 kilometres from its outlet into the Aegean Sea, and it falls by about one kilometre in elevation, but it is notorious for the long and winding road it takes to reach its final destination. The verb 'to meander' in English means to wander in a circuitous way, often with the connotation of doing so aimlessly, and this meaning derives directly from the course of this river. Jeremy Seal has a long-standing interest in Turkey and is fluent in the language. His previous book, *A Fez of the Heart* (1996), was an affectionate account of the country and its people so I was pleased to see that he had written a new travel story. Seal decides to follow the course of the Meander from its source to the sea. There are few maps of the river and the ones he takes with him are somewhat less than reliable. They disagree on quite a few points. The source of the river is in a lake on the plateau above the valley, a common entry point for invading armies. This is a good body of water and Seal takes a small bottle of it to accompany him on his journey, intending to pour it into the Aegean. However, problems quickly arise. From the lake the river and its tributaries disappear into a number of sinkholes, running as underground streams until they re-enter the valley. He realises his canoe is redundant so he follows the railway line built by the British in the 1850s along the lake and down into the valley. The river reappears near the town of Dinar, but it takes him a while to find a navigable section. Further on there are rapids, fallen trees, weirs and a series of dams that obstruct his way. At many points the river is filthy with pollution, and here and there it disappears, only chemical pools and abandoned bridges identifying its original course. The Meander is far from displaying its ancient glory and the diversion and contamination of the waters endanger the valley's fertility and its role as a food bowl. Already the fishing industry has disappeared. Along the way, Seal reminds us of the complex and turbulent history of this region. In many places he finds ancient and more modern relics of populations long

gone, and devotes a couple of chapters to the shocking conflicts that arose in the wake of World War I as various European powers competed for control of the land. In many cases, invading groups obliterated all vestiges of those whom they replaced - especially where religion was involved - but many interesting buildings and ruins remain, and Seal is wonderfully informative about the history. A striking element of the story is the generosity and friendliness of the Turkish people he meets along the way. In the headwaters of the river, Seal has achieved a small notoriety thanks to local television coverage of his launch onto the river. News is scarce in rural Anatolia, so the prospect of an eccentric Englishman paddling in what everyone knows to be little more than a series of puddles is an ideal story to break the boredom. Seal is surprised a few times when people greet him and already know who he is. All along the river, whether people are poor or not, they give him food and drink and ask him to chat (he consumes so much tea that he could change his name to Ern). When there are no guesthouses or hotels, people put him up in their homes. His speaking Turkish obviously helps, but there is a strong tradition of hospitality to strangers in this country and that comes through in his description. How many other places would you come across a roadside shelter with an armchair and a free water container to allow any passing traveller to take a rest? As he nears the coast, Seal is able to do more canoeing than walking. He also encounters many tourists, mainly from Europe, and is offended by their negative view of the Turkish people who have been so solicitous and welcoming to Seal on his journey. At the mouth of the river he goes to a museum and sees a statue of the river god, Meander, and gives thanks for his safe trip. He then paddles out into the Aegean and pours out the water that he has brought from the river's source. The modern state of the river is pitiful compared to its heyday, but in recounting the history of this region Seal has shown that the local people are resilient and ingenious. You have to feel optimistic. Turkey is a bridge between Europe and the near East. It hosted a significant empire under the Ottomans and is currently undergoing a revival as a regional power. The Turks would like to be part of the European Union, but realise that their prospects of entry are poor: European racism dies hard. Seal provides us with an insightful look into the history and people of the Meander valley, and the reasons behind some of the regional antagonisms that still erupt from time to time. Comic and lyrical, and always learned, Seal's travel record is a wonderful way to see this place and to deepen our understanding of it. Definitely worth going for a wander.

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