

An Anzac pilgrimage

New Zealand journalist SONIA SPEEDY spent last weekend at the Anzac commemorations in Gallipoli and discovered a scene vastly different from the grim battlefield of 89 years earlier.

The circus has arrived in town — the Turkish town of Ecebat, near Gallipoli, to be precise. The performers are several thousand young Antipodeans keen to experience what has become one of the fashionable must-dos on the Kiwi-Aussie travelling hitlist — Anzac Day at Gallipoli.

Almost 90 years since the disastrous landing of Australian and New Zealand troops at Anzac Cove, this is one of the places for the discerning traveller to be seen on April 25 — it's up there with the running of the bulls at Pamplona in Spain and Oktoberfest in Munich.

Our home for the few nights we are here is behind the somewhat run-down Boomerang Bar, found on a fairly grotty strip of beach on the Dardanelles. Bus load after bus load of boardshort and Kathmandu-clad young Antipodeans pile out of the buses, survey the area around them and begin banging in tent pegs, until a sea of tents smothers the beach, dotted between the mud puddles and random pieces of rubbish scattered along the foreshore.

Once the accommodation is erected, the thirsty Antipodeans are soon in the bar, jostling for the five toilets and two showers, and bottles of the popular local brew Efes Pilsen.

Ecebat, population 5000, is one of the nearest towns to Anzac Cove where travellers can stay.

It's a long way from being a wealthy town. Many buildings are dilapidated, standing at precarious angles and badly in need of an encounter with a demolition ball. The beach is littered with rubbish, as are the streets. A grinning Turkish man is making a few million extra Turkish lira giving tourists rides up the road in his horse and cart. The locals and their children go through the camp rubbish bins collecting empty beer bottles which they get paid to recycle. But they are cheerful and keen to have the visitors in town and to talk with them.

While Ecebat gives the impression of being a sleepy destination, for a few days this week, the joint is pumping, the bars and internet cafes (yes, they have a couple) are heaving.

The circus at the Boomerang Bar and the nearby Vegemite Bar, and other hostels and hotels, is only a sideshow to the April 25 dawn service.

Buses and cars begin pulling up outside the commemoration area well before kick off. We arrive around 10pm on April 24 in the hope of getting a good spot. We are told that 9km of buses have already snaked their way up the narrow roads. Security is tight and we are dropped off well before the entrance, walking several kilometres along the road, which is lined with gun-bearing Turkish soldiers, to the security area where we are checked for weapons and explosives.

It is a great turnout despite the

repeated warnings from the Australian and New Zealand governments against non-essential travel to the event, which reaches record levels of about 12,000 for the dawn service.

Our tour guide tells us that about 10,000 Turkish soldiers are hidden in the bushes and on the ridges, as well as lining the roads. Ironically, there are more Turkish soldiers near Anzac Cove for the 89th commemoration than on the day the Anzacs landed in 1915.

By midnight the commemoration area is full of snoring and chatting sleeping bags. It is freezing cold and making it to the portaloos involves a flashlight pilgrimage while trying not to stand on the heads, hands or feet of those sleeping.

Despite attempts to snatch some sleep, party tunes pump out of the area's sound system, with the sound of Bic Runga and Crowded House drifting out across Anzac Cove.

Former Nelsonian Michael Baker, who is now based in London, is one of those here for the first time, saying he came to Gallipoli because it fitted in with his travel plans for the Middle East. However, once he knew he was coming, he began studying the events at Anzac Cove and researching family members who served there and in other areas.

"For some people, going to Gallipoli will be something they just tick off on their travel list, even though they won't know a lot of what actually happened out there," Baker, 26, says.

He is happy to attend despite the security warnings.

"I only thought about the terrorist threat occasionally. It wasn't going to stop me coming. We can't let terrorists take over our plans."

Jeremy Millichip, formerly of Christchurch but now based in London, takes a similar view.

"Living in London I'm used to living with terrorism anyway. If it's going to happen, it's going to happen and if you are in the wrong place at the wrong time, anywhere in the world at the moment, you can be at risk."

Millichip, 32, believes past problems of drunk Antipodeans attending the services, with the minute's silence punctuated by the sound of drunken vomiting, are now largely sorted out.

"People have started to think of it as a commemoration rather than a celebration, where in the past they were going there for a party rather than to remember what their ancestors did there in the war."

While both thought the services lacked the intense emotion they were expecting, their lasting memory is of New Zealand servicemen performing the haka and the importance of the day to the Turks, who also arrive en masse, and sit among the Antipodeans.