



Turkish Delight

Exploring exotic Istanbul
Text and photos by Rebecca L. Rhoades

IT'S ABOUT 5:30 A.M., and I'm jolted from a deep sleep by the melodic ululations of the muezzin echoing over the rooftops and still-dark streets. I had arrived at my hotel only 6 hours earlier after a grueling day of travel consisting of more than 10 hours in flight and an 8-hour layover in Munich, Germany. The cool November air wafting through the open windows had felt refreshing when I finally climbed exhausted into my bed. • Over the next week, I would come to love the daily *ezans*, or calls to prayer. Perhaps the defining sound of Istanbul, these vociferous wails of “*allahu ekber*” are both mournful and sensual, a song quite unlike anything heard in Western countries. But this

morning, as I stumble through a dark, unfamiliar room grabbing blindly for the windows, my heart beating wildly while my brain struggles to wake up, they remind me of how far away from everything familiar I truly am.

Before visiting Istanbul, I had heard it described as a legendary destination straddling two continents, where old meets new, East meets West, as well as a romantic city with many pasts and many possible futures. In fact, few places float so exotically in the imagination as Istanbul.

And it does not disappoint. From your first glimpse of the city born Byzantium and rechristened Constantinople, you're seduced by the minaret-studded skyline sprouting above the city's religious and tourist center: Sultanahmet.

But the city's real heart, according to its celebrated son, Orhan Pamuk, lies in its *huzun*, a Turkish word that describes a sense of melancholy, not so much a personal state as one shared by a society. In fact, Pamuk opens his Nobel Prize-winning novel *Istanbul: Memories and the City* with a quote



from Ahmet Rasim, another of Turkey's great writers: "The beauty of a landscape lies in its melancholy."

Most visitors like to recall that Istanbul is the only city on earth with one shore in Asia and the other in Europe. A drive across the Bosphorous Bridge—or a ferry ride across the Bosphorous Strait—allows travelers to visit two continents in one afternoon (although most choose to remain on the European side of the country because this is where all of the major tourism sites are found). Pamuk's *huzun* lies not in the geographic division, but in the division of old and new. And it is something that all visitors experience. Here, trendy outfits mingle with colorful *hijabs*, or headscarves; the rhythmic pulses of hip-hop blare from nightclubs along Istiklal Caddesi, in the city's Beyoglu district, the sounds blending with the evening *ezan*; and fashionable students sip espresso in chic boutiques, while older gentlemen share apple tea and waterpipes in small cafes.

To understand these changes, it is important to look at the city's history. Throughout the centuries, Istanbul served as the capital for three different empires—first among them: the Romans, then the Byzantine Greeks, who named it Constantinople. In 1453, Sultan Mehmet II conquered Constantinople, renaming it Istanbul and making it the final capital of the Ottoman Empire. This period lasted until 1922, when Mustafa Kemal (known as Ataturk) won the country's independence.

"Istanbul is a huge cosmopolitan city, and with a population of almost 16 million, it is even bigger than many European countries," says Ugur Yavuzturk, a licensed tour guide. "It also plays the most important role in the Turkish economy, as it is the trading center of Turkey. And of course, it is an important destination for foreign and Turkish tourists who visit its many historic sites."

Through all its changes, Istanbul has remained a chameleon, molding its identity to match its current ruler while preserving the architectural evidence of former incarnations. The most striking example of this is the

Ayasofya (Hagia Sophia), or "Church of Holy Wisdom." One of the world's greatest architectural achievements, the massive structure's watermelon-pink façade hovers silently over the Bosphorous, dwarfing the Sultanahmet district. A Christian church for nearly 1,000 years, it was converted by Mehmet II in 1453 into one of the world's most important mosques. In 1934, it was deconsecrated by Ataturk and turned into a museum. Today, visitors are awed by the building's overwhelming scale; the vast nave is covered by a huge dome reaching 184 feet high. Byzantine mosaics dating back to the 9th century decorate the walls, while eight 24-foot-diameter roundels hang overhead. These leather-wrapped wooden medallions, bearing the calligraphic names of Allah, Muhammed, the four caliphs, and Muhammed's grandchildren and Ali's sons, were added in the 19th century.

Directly across Sultanahmet Square is *Sultan Ahmet Camii*, also known as the Blue Mosque. Commissioned by Sultan Ahmet I, this celebrated building was constructed by imperial architect Mehmet Aga and is the last great mosque of the Ottoman period. Its six minarets and countless piled domes provoked great hostility at the time because a mosque with six minarets was considered an attempt to rival the architecture of Mecca itself. Inside, soaring surfaces covered in blue Iznik tile give the mosque its modern moniker.

"Istanbul has so much more to see than just the Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque," says Cindy Beals, a Portland, Oregon-based teacher who spent 10 months living and working in Istanbul as part of a Fulbright Classroom Teacher Exchange. "All within walking distance, you can find the largest covered bazaar in the world, golden mosaics of Christ next to script from the Qur'an inside one of the greatest buildings of all time, Roman ruins next to a head of Medusa, and the largest Bohemian crystal chandelier outside a Sultan's harem, among other sites."

SHOPPER'S PARADISE

I decide to take an afternoon stroll through that large



covered bazaar, the legendary Grand Bazaar. Established by Mehmet II shortly after his conquest of the city, this disorienting maze of more than 4,000 shops and stalls offers something for everyone, from the ubiquitous evil-eye talisman to gold and silver jewelry to cheap T-shirts and plastic souvenirs. And carpets. Lots and lots of carpets. Depending on your shopping style and needs, the Grand Bazaar is either a shopaholic's paradise or a tacky nightmare of sensory overload. Either way, it's a must-see, especially for a first-time visitor to the city.

Haggling is also a must, whether you're shopping for the smallest souvenir or vintage Turkish carpets. I am searching

for a soccer jersey for a friend, and after passing rows and rows of merchants, I stop at a shop that displays a large selection of jerseys. "I have best shirts," says the shop-owner, immediately producing a colorful array of jerseys. "And for you, best price."

"How much?" I ask, fingering a Besiktas team jersey.

"Fifty lira."

I laugh; that's almost \$30. The price drops. Forty lira. Thirty.

I shake my head and begin to walk away.

The shopkeeper calls after me. "Okay, 15 lira! You won't find better price!"

I smile and slowly turn around. Sold!

With shirt in hand, I make my way north towards the Golden Horn and more bargain hunting at *Misir Çarsisi* (Egyptian Market), commonly known as the Spice Market. Here, narrow streets throng with shoppers seeking everything from household goods to clothes, flowers to pets, as well as herbs, meats, nuts, candies and, of course, spices in bright shades of pumpkin, red and yellow. I ask a shopkeeper if I can photograph some of his spices, and I am invited inside for a cup of hot apple tea, served in a tiny hourglass-shaped glass.

"Turkey has a strong tea culture," says Beals. "You'll find

MORE THAN MINARETS

WHILE ITS MOSQUES may dominate its skyline, Istanbul offers a variety of other attractions designed to stimulate the mind and delight the senses. Following are 10 of the city's best attractions that every visitor should experience.

Topkapi Palace: Built by Sultan Ahmet II as his principle residence, the palace is a series of pavilions and massive courtyards, filled with endless museum exhibits and priceless artifacts (such as the Topkapi Dagger and the 86-carat Spoonmakers diamond). Don't miss the famous Harem and its stunning Imperial Hall, accessible only with a separate tour.

Yerebatan Saray (Basilica Cistern): Seen in the James Bond film *From Russia with Love*, this is one of the most unusual tourist attractions in the city. The vast underground cistern is supported by 336 columns, each over 26 feet tall. You'll tread on walkways (warning: these can be slippery) over pools of water, while the sounds of classical music and dripping water mingle in the air. Be sure to check out the two columns that are resting on

Medusa head bases.

Hippodrome: You may be surprised to see an ancient Egyptian obelisk in the center of Sultanahmet, but you'll find it in this public garden that was once home to a gigantic stadium that held up to 100,000 people. Walk the roads surrounding the square, which almost directly follows the line of the long-gone chariot-racing track.

Sogukçesme Sokagi: Squeezed between the outer walls of Topkapi Palace and the Hagia Sophia, this narrow cobbled lane offers an up-close view of traditional 18th-century Ottoman houses. Renovated in the 1980s by the Turkish Touring and Automobile Club, the houses are painted in an array of pastel shades and are popular with tourists.

Istanbul Archeological Museums: This museum complex near Topkapi Palace is actually made up of three separate museums: the Archaeological Museum, Museum of the Ancient Orient and the Museum of Islamic Art. Together, they house more than one million artifacts spanning more than 5,000 years of

history. A highlight of the collection is the group of sarcophagi from the royal necropolis at Sidon.

Istanbul Crafts Centre: If you're interested in Turkish crafts, this is the place to visit. This former Koranic college now houses the workshops of skilled artisans, and you can find everything from ceramics and calligraphy to exquisite dolls and jewelry. It is run by the Turkish Touring and Automobile Club.

Sirkeli Station: This distinct pink structure near the Golden Horn is one of the most famous examples of European Orientalism, with Byzantine stone and brick courses and Muslim horseshoe arches around the windows. Opened in 1860, it once served as the final destination of the historic Orient Express. Today, visitors can relax in the station's café or enjoy evening performances by members of the Mevlevi Dervish.

Cagaloglu Baths: After a long day of touring, enjoy a traditional Turkish hamam, or steam bath, at this most sumptuous of Turkish bathhouses, built by Sultan Mahmut I in 1741. There are separate bathing areas for men and women, but if

a session of vigorous soaping and massaging isn't for you, you can still check out the main entrance hall and courtyard.

Mevlevi Lodge: Tucked away on a side street in the city's Beyoglu District, this monastery is home to one of the most famous sects of Sufis: the Whirling Dervishes. On the last Sunday of each month, the dervishes unfurl their circular skirts and whirl on a beautiful 18th-century wooden dance floor. Tickets for these events go fast, so be sure to ask your hotel concierge about how to purchase them as soon as you check in.

Bosphorous Cruise: Whether you take a two-hour sightseeing trip or a full-day cruise to the Black Sea, any trip to Istanbul should include time on the water. "There's no better way to see the city's skyline and appreciate its beauty," says Cindy Beals, a Portland, Oregon-based teacher who worked in Istanbul. "As a bonus, if you take a ferry ride, you'll get to see how the common Turk commutes from the more residential Asian side to the heart of the city on the European side." Simply head to the waterfront in Eminönü, and look for signs advertising day trips.



that having a cup of tea in a shop goes a long way toward getting a good deal and getting past some of the aggression [that comes with haggling] as they start to see you as a guest as much as a customer.”

I leave with a box of pistachio treats and some fragrant cinnamon tea.

The square in front of the Spice Market is dominated by *Yeni Cami*, or New Mosque. One of the latest examples of traditional-style Ottoman mosques, the New Mosque was started in 1597 by Safiye, the mother of Mehmet III, and completed in 1663 under the direction of Turhan Hadice, the mother of Mehmet IV.

Outside, hundreds of pigeons swarm the square and entrance to the mosque. I watch as a young brother and sister chase the birds, laughing as they create a cloud of wings and feathers around passersby. Near the front stairs, an elderly woman sells pigeon feed to tourists.

Also near the Spice Market is Istanbul’s most important mosque: the *Süleymaniye Camii*, or Mosque of Süleyman the Magnificent. Built by chief imperial architect Sinan between 1550-1557, the mosque is a fitting memorial to its founder that rivals the Blue Mosque in beauty and size. The complex also houses the tombs of Süleyman and his wife Roxelana, as well the coffins of two of his successors, Süleyman II and Ahmet II. As I wander through the graveyard behind the mosque, I notice a single rose, still blooming in the cool November air, its dark red petals a stark contrast against the white grave markers.



an elevator), you’ll have unparalleled panoramic views of Istanbul’s skyline, cruise ships docking at nearby Karakoy, and even faraway Princes’ Islands.

Tired and cold, I make my way back to the bottom of the tower. On the plaza outside, a street vendor is grilling meat. The aroma is mouthwatering, and while I don’t know what exactly he is cooking, I place an order. He speaks no English, but he appears tickled that a lone female tourist is requesting one of his sandwiches. He smiles, and with a wave of his knife, he whips up a spicy pepper-filled meal. For a drink, I wander to a nearby corner shop for a fresh-squeezed glass of pomegranate juice (*taze nar suyu*). For two lira, I am given a cold glass (yes, served in a glass container) of the most refreshing, tangy juice I’ve ever had. Hooked, I proceed to seek out pomegranate juice vendors throughout the city.

TASTY DELIGHTS

For the best view of Sultanahmet and its many architectural wonders, cross the Galata Bridge. All along its railings, men stand elbow-to-elbow, fishing lines dangling in waters below, hoping to make a catch. Restaurants and cafés line the bridge’s lower level, serving drinks and seafood to tourists who watch the parade of ferries shuttling past.

The bridge touches down on the northern bank and leads to the Beyoglu District. Here, at the top of steep, narrow cobblestone streets, you’ll find the Golden Horn’s most recognizable feature: the 196-foot-tall Galata Tower. From the top (don’t worry, modern renovations include

From the ubiquitous *donar kebab* (lamb meat cooked on a vertical spit and sliced off to order), *kumpir* (stuffed baked potatoes) and *simit* (dark rings of sesame-covered bread, often served still warm) to roasted nuts and a variety of fresh-squeezed fruit juices, a satisfying meal can be found at pushcarts and stalls throughout the city. While in Sultanahmet, make sure to stop at Sultanahmet Köftçisi, near the Blue Mosque. This restaurant is known for one thing: *köfte*, or meatballs. In fact, there is only one other item on the menu, lamb shish kebabs, and oftentimes the waiters don’t even bother asking which item you’d prefer. The meatballs are served with a flavorful sauce of crushed dried pepper, and even locals line up for this tasty dish. For something more upscale, head back to the Beyoglu district and Mikla at the Marmara Pera hotel. Here, innovative fish and lamb dishes are enhanced by the stunning views that stretch from Topkapi Palace to the Süleymaniye Camii and beyond. A taste of modern Istanbul illuminated by the beauty of the old.

“Istanbul really is the cradle of Western civilization with an exotic Eastern flair,” says Beals. “And all of this is only enhanced by the fabulous cuisine and hospitable culture.”

Byzantium, Constantinople, and even for a time Old Stamboul. The name may have changed, but the glory that is Istanbul endures. ●



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