

TURKISH DELIGHT

Exploring exotic Istanbul

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Istanbul. The name alone conjures up images of a legendary destination straddling two continents – a romantic city where old meets new and East meets West. In fact, few places float so exotically in the imagination as Istanbul. And it does not disappoint.

Most visitors like to note that Istanbul is the only city on Earth with one shore in Europe and the other in Asia. A drive across the Bosphorus Bridge – or a ferry ride across the Bosphorus Strait – allows travelers to visit two continents in one day.

It's also a place where the past converges with the future. On the streets, trendy outfits mingle with colorful hijabs, headscarves; the rhythmic pulses of hip-hop blaring from nightclubs near Taksim Square, the heart of modern Istanbul, blend with the evening ezan, or call to prayer; and fashionable students sip espresso in chic boutiques, while older gentlemen share Turkish coffee and water-pipes in small cafes.

To understand these juxtapositions, it is important to look at Istanbul's history. Founded in 667 B.C. as Byzantium, the city served as the capital for the Roman Empire, during which time it was renamed Constantinople, and later for the Byzantine Empire. In 1453, Sultan Mehmed II conquered Constantinople, renaming it Istanbul and making it the final capital of the Ottoman Empire. This period lasted until 1922 when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk won the country's independence and founded the Republic of Türkiye.

Historic Explorations

Today, Istanbul is the largest city in Europe and the second most-visited in the world. Much of its appeal is found in its historic sites. The most striking example is the Hagia Sophia, one of the world's greatest architectural achievements.

The massive watermelon-pink structure from 537 AD is a cultural and physical landmark that dominates the touristic Sultanahmet district. A Christian church for nearly 1,000 years, it was converted by Mehmed II in 1453 into one of the world's most important mosques. In 1934, it was deconsecrated by Atatürk and turned into a museum. The building's overwhelming scale is awe-inspiring. Its vast nave is covered by a huge dome reaching 184 feet high. Byzantine mosaics dated back to the 19th century decorate the walls, while eight 24-foot-diameter roundels hang overhead.

In 2020, President Recep Erdoğan reverted the Hagia Sophia back into a mosque. Directly across Sultanahmet Square is the Sultan Ahmet Camii, also known as the Blue Mosque. Commissioned by Sultan Ahmed I, this celebrated building with six minarets was constructed by imperial architect Mehmed Agha and is the last great mosque of the Ottoman period. Inside, soaring surfaces covered in blue Iznik tile give the mosque its modern moniker.

Shopper's Paradise

A 10-minute walk from Sultanahmet Square leads to the legendary Grand Bazaar. Established by Mehmed II shortly after his conquest of the city, this disorienting maze of more than 4,000 shops and stalls is a must-see, especially for first-time visitors. Go for the experience only, however, as this former shopaholic's paradise is now overrun with counterfeit luxury items and cheap mass-produced souvenirs. For more authentic artisan goods, head to the Arasta Bazaar, a smaller street market tucked behind the Blue Mosque. Here, visitors will find everything from the ubiquitous evil-eye talisman and Iznik tiles to luxe linens, pottery, and fine jewelry.

In the Eminönü district, on the shores of the Golden Horn, is another must-visit shopping destination. The Misir Carsısı (Egyptian Market), commonly known as the Spice Market, is the place to go for Turkish delicacies, including herbs, nuts, candies such as Turkish delight, and, of course, aromatic spices in brilliant shades of pumpkin, red and yellow. The square in front of the Spice Market is dominated by the Yeni Camii, or New Mosque.

Also near the Spice Market is Istanbul's most important mosque: the Süleymaniye Camii, or Mosque of Suleiman the Magnificent. Built by chief imperial architect Mimar Sinan between 1550-1557, the mosque is a fitting memorial to its founder that rivals the Blue Mosque in beauty and size.

Beyond Minarets

While its mosques may define the skyline, Istanbul offers a variety of other attractions designed to stimulate the mind and delight the senses. Following are five more must-visit sites.

Built between 1459 and 1465 by Sultan Ahmed II as his principal residence, the Topkapi 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 Spoonmaker's diamond.

Seen in the James Bond film *From Russia with Love*, Yerebatan Saray is one of the most unusual tourist attractions in the city. The vast underground cistern is supported by 336 columns, each more than 26 feet tall. Metal walkways float over pools of water, while the sounds of classical music and dripping water mingle in the air.

The Golden Horn's most recognizable feature, Galata Tower is 196-foot-tall and offers unparalleled panoramic views of Istanbul's skyline, cruise ships docking at nearby Karaköy, and even faraway Princes' Islands.

One of the most famous examples of European Orientalism architecture, Sirkeci Station showcases a pink Byzantine stone and brick facade and Muslim horseshoe arches around the stained-glass windows. Opened in 1860, it once served as the terminus of the historic Orient Express. Now it is home to nightly performances by the Mevlevi Dervish, or "Whirling Dervish."

A visit to Istanbul isn't complete without enjoying a traditional Turkish bath at Zeyrek Cinili Hamam. This 500-year-old masterpiece was built during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent by the great architect Sinan. Following a 13-year-long restoration, the hammam has been restored to its original marble and tile grandeur.

Learn more at www.goturkiye.com.

