



Getting Around in Istanbul – A Tale of Transportation

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Istanbul. The city's been around for over a thousand years and has long since developed into a hub of economic trade, tourism, religion, and culture in general. It's a sprawling metropolis where old and new merge, [attracting people from all over the globe](#) to mingle with the 15 million residents (some estimates exceed this) of the city.

That's a lot of people. People have things to do. Places to go. People to see. People need to get around. In a city that straddles Europe and Asia (yes, we've mentioned that cliché), it can be somewhat overwhelming for a foreigner to find your way around the city if you're not familiar with Istanbul's transportation systems and trends.

For a city with this many people and a myriad of varying districts and neighbourhoods, there's a proportionate number of transportation methods available. We'll break it down for you, providing you with your definitive guide to exploring Istanbul like a local.

First Stop – The Airport(s)



The new Istanbul Airport (IST) – Image by Frank Beckmann (Tripsters)

Touching Down in Europe

Everyone's favourite veteran, Atatürk Airport, recently closed down in April 2019. The new Istanbul Airport (Airport code: IST) opened its doors to the city in the latter part of 2018. Located on the European side of Istanbul, in the Arnavutköy district, İstanbul Airport has made quite an [entrance](#) to the international press with its size, capacity and expenses. While Atatürk Airport was known to be far away to the centre, rapid urbanisation means that the old airport on the city's European side is now in a relatively central location in the city.

Note: The Arnavutköy district is different from the upmarket neighbourhood located on the Bosphorus.

So, how do you get to the city centre from Istanbul Airport? There's currently a subway line being constructed that will connect the airport to the city, which is set to become its primary means of access. There's still a while to go until its completion, but reaching the airport now is simple, nonetheless.

It's always possible to take a taxi from Istanbul Airport to the centres of the European side, to places like Sultanahmet in the Old City and Taksim Square in the New City. This costs approximately 110-120 Turkish Liras (TL or TRY). A word of warning, however – be cautious when taking a taxi when going to or leaving from the airport. As in all metropolises of this scale, taxi drivers would take the chance to swindle, hoodwink, or extort the unwitting tourist.

Fear not, for there are cheaper alternatives! Busses that commute between Istanbul Airport and many central areas of the city are available (known as the Havabus). Their prices are regulated by the government, and any Istanbulite or foreigner can use them.

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Depending on the area you're travelling to, the bus fare costs approximately 18TL. That's a big jump – we said we'll teach you how to explore like a local, didn't we? To use this bus, you need to pay with in cash. It's easily available to purchase at the airport and it's one of your most valuable assets to travel on almost all forms of public transportation while exploring Istanbul.

For the Istanbul Airport bus transfer schedule, [click here](#).



The Istanbul streets

Crossing Continents – Arriving and Departing in Asia

The Istanbulite's second love is Sabiha Gökçen Airport (Airport code: SAW), located on the city's Asian side.

Fun fact: The airport was named after Atatürk's adopted daughter, who became the world's first female fighter pilot at the age of 23.

The airport is situated on the outskirts of the city and serves both Istanbul and its neighbouring cities well. Compared to Atatürk Airport, Sabiha Gökçen is relatively new and quickly became a favourite for locals due to the more reasonable ticket prices that airlines offered when flying to and from this airport.

Although it appears less central, transportation opportunities are quite similar to those of the new Istanbul Airport. You're easily able to travel to and from Sabiha Gökçen Airport with the Havabus, which stops at numerous central areas on both Istanbul's Asian and European sides. In this case, once again, you will pay in cash.

For the Havabus bus transfer schedule and prices, [click here](#).

It's also possible to use the [city busses](#) to reach Sabiha Gökçen Airport. This is an alternative method, for which you'll need to use the Istanbul Card for payment. Hopping onto the [E9](#) bus, you can reach Bostancı, one of the centres of the Asian side, while the [E10](#) will take you to Kadıköy, the Istanbul's main centre on the Asian side.

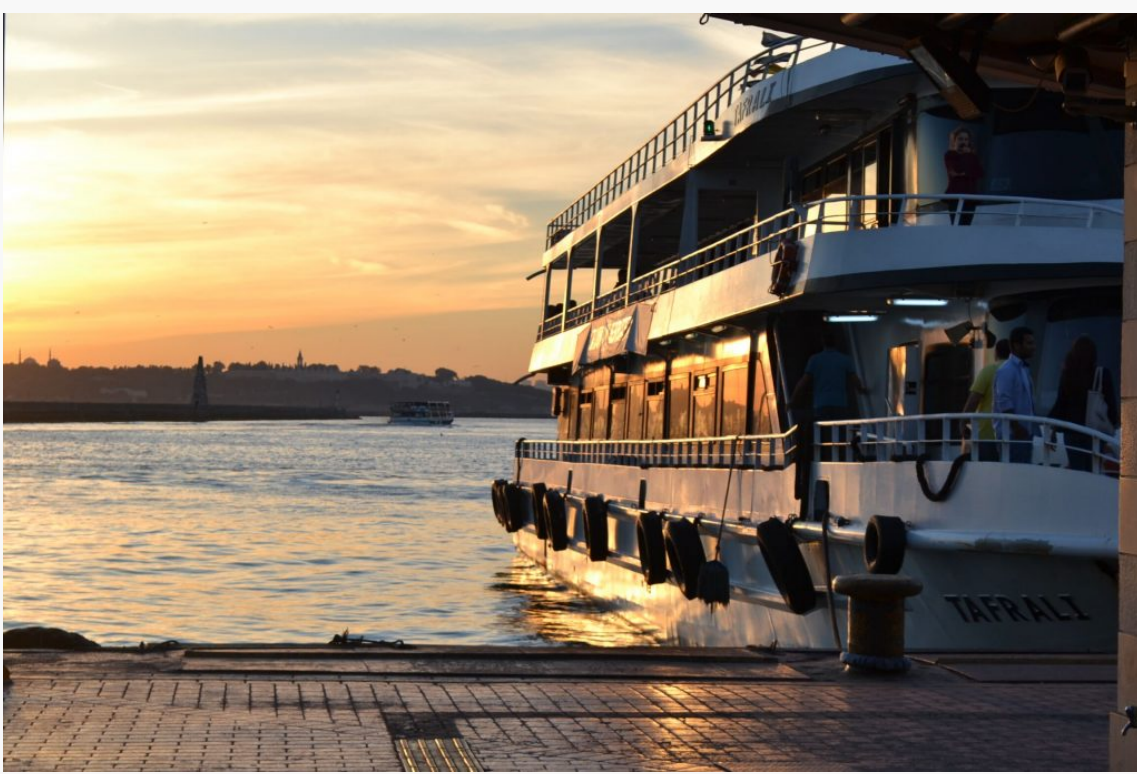
And of course, hailing a taxi is an option, as well. It will set you back around 150-200TL from Sabiha Gökçen Airport to Taksim, and approximately 80-120TL to Kadıköy.



Where food and transport come together in the historical hub of Istanbul

Tired of Traffic? Catch the Ferry, Take the Train!

How to avoid the world-renowned Istanbul traffic when getting between the city's central areas? Without a doubt, the subway and ferries are your friends.



At the ferry station, Bosphorus, Istanbul

Raving About Rail – The Underground and Up Above

Istanbul's subway network is vast, allowing you to travel virtually anywhere in the city using the [Istanbul Card](#) which needs to be pre-loaded with credit. The Istanbul Card can be used on almost any method of public transport, except the yellow dolmuş and blue minibuses. The opening of the Marmaray – the subway tunnel under the Bosphorus that connects the Asian side to the European – in late 2013 has contributed to this immensely.



On the metro, Istanbul.

You'll also find the tramway line which begins at Kabataş and goes all the way to the Bağcılar area. When staying in and touring around the Historical Peninsula (Sultanahmet, the Grand

Bazaar, Hagia Sophia, etc.), this form of transportation is a nifty way of getting around. Also called the T1 line, this tramway is a great way to navigate your way through and acquaint yourself with the crowded centre.

Exploring on foot is always the best idea, but if you find yourself dead on your feet, this mode of transport is a lifesaver which comes with a gorgeous view when it crosses the Galata Bridge.

The older, iconic and nostalgic red tramway, which has become synonymous with the city, can be caught between the top of Istiklal Street at Taksim Square on the European side and takes you the end of the famous boulevard.



Istanbul's nostalgic, red tramway in Taksim

This tramway stops at the bottom of Istiklal Street, arriving at the Tünel square, where you'll find another historic mode of transport – the nostalgic funicular. After the subway in Paris, it's the second oldest in the world (another fun fact). It's a particularly helpful tool to get around, especially if you're hesitant to climb up the steep hill that connects Karaköy to the Tünel-Pera area near the Galata Tower.

We suggest you take the funicular when you need to walk up, because the stroll downhill is a pleasant one, taking you through arty shops and boutiques with the Galata Tower as your backdrop. On the Asian side, this nostalgic red tramway climbs up to Moda from the Kadıköy ferry station area and is definitely worth a ride.

Be careful on both areas of people potential commuters running alongside it to hop on, though! [Click here](#) for a list of the subway and tramway schedules and stops.

Continental Hopping– Across Istanbul and Back Again by Water

Arguably, the most beautiful way to travel within the city is by ferry. The Istanbul Card works here, or you can buy ad-hoc tokens to go through the turnstile at the ferry station.

When the weather is a good, a simple ferry ride of 15-20 minutes from Karaköy to Kadıköy, for example, can be seen used as an alternative to the tourist-driven boat tour of the Bosphorus. It's an easy way to cross from the Asian side to the European side, or vice versa, allowing you to visit the distinctly different neighbourhoods and areas of the city.

The Bosphorus coastline is stunning and presents a host of attractions, and you can jump on one of the city's ferries for a day-trip to the Princes Islands, located away from the bustle of central Istanbul. The 5 small islands that make up the Princes Islands are definitely worth a visit in the summer, especially if you want to take a swim or laze along a beach. The ferry is your only way to and from these islands from central Istanbul.

For Istanbul's ferry schedule, [click here](#).



A view of Galata Tower from the ferry – Image by Ece Mese (Tripsters)

Uber or Adventure? Istanbul's Rideshare Experiences Offer So Much More

If the city's public transport isn't enough for you and you find that it necessary to take a taxi during your visit, the Turkish mobile app [bitaksi](#) is at hand. Hail a legitimate taxi using the app and get an idea of the roads taken for your trip, as well as the approximate price that you'd be expected to pay. A note for the wise: taxi shifts change at 3 p.m. so it might be a bit more difficult to find one around that time of day.

Unfortunately, Uber no longer functions in Istanbul, following a controversial few years that involved taxi driver strikes. As of the 31st of May, 2019, Uber now only functions as an application to call yellow and blue taxis, the more luxurious and expensive kind. Still, when you're in a bind or crave that luxury touch when navigating the city, this will come in handy.

Urban Motorcycle Meanders

For the more adventurous among us, **Scotty** is another rideshare app used by Istanbul locals. Look at it as the motorbike version of Uber, used to defeat Istanbul's traffic problems. During peak traffic, when it's impossible to move or find a taxi, Scotty drivers come to your rescue. They provide all necessary safety equipment, including a helmet and kneepads, so you've got no worries there. Scotty gives you options – choose an everyday motorcycle or scooter, like a Vespa, or opt for something more comfortable with a satisfying purr, like a chopper. Just like Uber and bitaksi, you're able to first view the approximate rates, agree upon a route for your driver to take, and rate your driver. After the strikes against Uber, Scotty's worth the experience, but check up on current news about the app's operation in the city before you hail a ride.

Note: Scotty offers the app in English, while their website is currently only in Turkish.

Minibus Alternatives – Take the Local Road

Two other forms of public transport that do not use the Istanbul Card are the Sarı Dolmuş (Yellow Dolmuş) and the minibus. For the local, these are invaluable when moving deeper into and further away from the centre of most districts, or, in the case of the dolmuş, past midnight when other forms of transport have shut down until morning.



When traffic calms, Istanbul

The Yellow Dolmuş – All Day and All Night

The Dolmuş is a lifesaver, especially if you're looking to travel directly from the centre of the European side, Taksim Square, to Asian hub, Kadıköy. Dolmuş, which means "has been filled" usually only sets off once the small bus is full. Very reasonably priced, this will only set you back around 8TL per person and the driver will stop for you to jump off anywhere along his route, as well as to pick up an extra passenger if there's an empty seat.

The dolmuş runs 24/7, so when you're out for a late night or you're partying over on another continent, this is the pocket-friendly way to travel.

Blue Minibuses for a Truly Turkish Experience

The minibuses, mostly blue-coloured, and be found in every central area and travel to the neighbourhoods close by in their district from the centre. Every district has its own minibus, and will stop along the way if you need to jump off, just like the dolmuş does. It's also possible, and common, to catch a minibus on its route, hop on, and go to or away from a central location. However, unlike the dolmuş, minibuses have a standing section, as well as a seated one, so be prepared for a jam-packed ride with little room for movement during peak times.

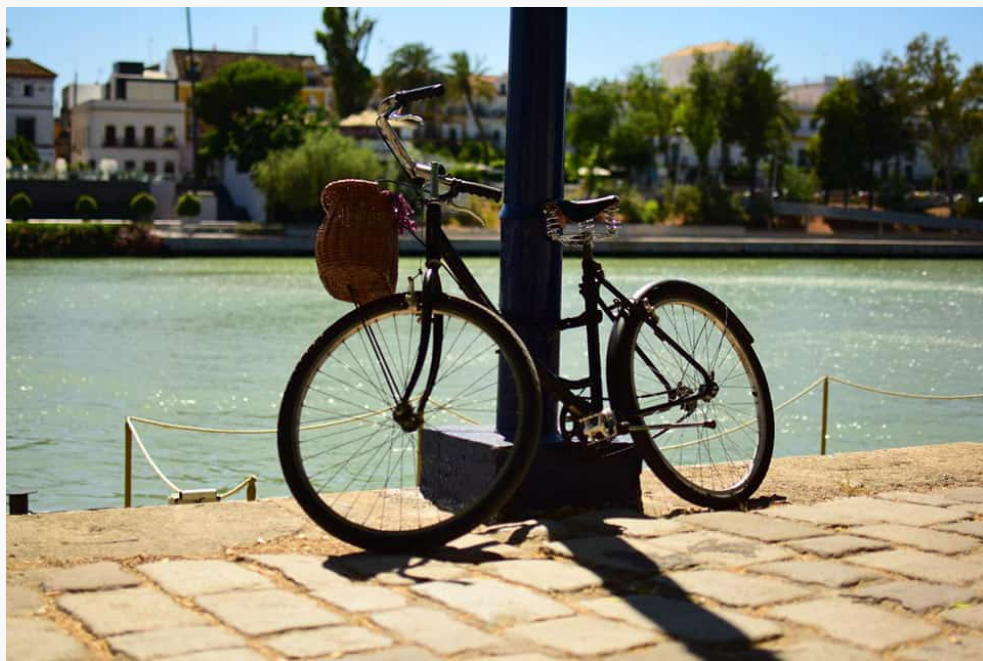
Unlike the dolmuş, however, the minibus does not run 24/7. Locals usually know which the first and last station of a given minibus is, so it's always a good idea to approach a local in the neighbourhood that you find yourself in before getting on.

For a little extra help with the minibus, an app called [Citymapper](#) displays minibus hours and details from time to time.

When paying on the dolmuş and minibus, only cash is accepted. Pay as you get on or off, but you'll find that the locals use a more streamlined process of making the transaction. So as not to hold up the dolmuş or minibus while getting off or on, locals either know or ask another passenger how much the fare is, and then take out the appropriate change and pass it forward, signalling to the passenger in front of them how many people the fare covers. If you need change, your change will be sent back to you from the driver or driver's assistant.

Cycling – Make Your Trip Be-spoke

If you're looking to cycle around the city, not every area in Istanbul is all that bike-friendly. Traffic and infrastructure simply don't allow for it, in many places (this doesn't mean that you won't see anyone opting to move around on a bicycle). Rental bikes are available in some seaside areas, where you can quickly hire a bike and drop it off once you're done at one of the appropriate [drop-off points](#) along the coastline.



Cycling by the seaside

Istanbul on Foot – Maximising Discovery

Most areas in Istanbul are pedestrian-friendly, but keep in mind that there are many hills and some of them can be steep! Still, getting lost in the city on foot, during the day in central areas, is the best idea for any explorer. You might find your new favourite bakery or a great local restaurant that you'll want to find again. Always be mindful of your surroundings – since Istanbul is a sprawling metropolis, it does have some downsides – just like other big cities around the world.

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Becky Gordon says:

Reply

September 10, 2019 at 10th September, 2019

I visited Istanbul this spring and struggled to find my way round the city... I wish I had read this blogpost before I visited the city as it has a lot of essential info and is really well researched.

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