



Left: The Blue Mosque
Right: Spice Bazaar



WHERE *Europe* MEETS *Asia*

ISTANBUL'S JOURNEY FROM ANCIENT CAPITAL TO MULTICULTURAL MODERN METROPOLIS BY AMBER GIBSON

The capital of both the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, Istanbul has for more than 2,500 years been one of the most important cities on Earth. Even its underground cisterns, built to store aqueduct water, have a nuanced majesty about them. Several are open to visitors, including the newly restored Đerefiye or Theodosius Cistern in Fatih, on Istanbul's historic peninsula.

The old city (about nine square miles) boasts Turkey's two most visited museums: Topkapi Palace and the Hagia Sophia—the latter built in just five years and the largest domed church in the world when it was completed in the 6th century. As a Byzantine Greek Orthodox cathedral transformed into an Ottoman imperial mosque, the Hagia Sophia features Christian mosaics side by side with Arabic names of holy characters—a fitting reminder that, despite President Erdogan's hard-right politics, Turkey is a secular nation and its people are generally friendly, welcoming, and accepting, particularly in this cosmopolitan city.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Turkish Airlines is the most comfortable and efficient way to get to the city from any of its eight American hubs: New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Houston, Miami, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. You'll land at the new Istanbul Airport, just opened in April and sporting the world's largest terminal under one roof. The Turkish Airlines business class lounge features a gallery with pieces from the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art's collection, plus excellent made-to-order delicacies like *mantı* and *gözleme*, the latter a buttery flat-bread stuffed with cheese and herbs.

Business class on Turkish Airlines is among the best, with noise-cancelling headphones, a great entertainment system, and free WiFi. Dinner by candlelight on transatlantic flights includes sesame-encrusted simit bread with olive oil and hummus, plus traditional dishes like *dolma*, bulgur salad, and juicy lamb. The Turkish coffee served with other national delights is excellent, but strong, so moderate if you're hoping to actually use that lie-flat bed. (A partnership with Dr. Oz includes specialty teas designed to help with digestion and relaxation.)

It's also worth noting that this airline flies to more countries and international destinations than any other in the world, and has a great stopover program for passengers with layovers to explore Istanbul. Business class passengers connecting through the city receive two complimentary nights at a five-star hotel.

The "European" side of the city is home to all of its major tourist attractions and internationally branded luxury hotels, but you'd be remiss not to also visit the Asian side, which, until the Bosphorus Bridge was built in 1973, was just a collection of small villages. Here you'll find a more laid-back, bohemian vibe, where old men sit in crowded cafes playing backgammon and children pick fruit from the public gardens. It's easy to cross the Bosphorus (traditionally a continental boundary between East and West) via public ferry or by car.

ATTRACTIONS

SÜLEYMANIYE MOSQUE

The city's Blue Mosque might be better known, but it can also be overcrowded, whereas this one, commissioned by Süleyman the Magnificent and designed by Mimar Sinan, is more tranquil, with its walled garden and domed fountain. Sinan was the most prolific and talented imperial architect at the height of the Ottoman Empire, designing more than 300 buildings, and this marble and sandstone complex is elegant in its simplicity, and lit by hundreds of oil lamps at dusk. Be mindful of etiquette, including standards of dress (more gentle for tourists). **Süleymaniye Mah, Prof. Sıddık Sami Onar Cd. No:1, 34116 Fatih**

SPICE BAZAAR

The sights, smells, and tastes here can easily be overwhelming for newcomers, with dozens of different flavors of Turkish delight (*lokum*), spice blends in every color of the rainbow, nuts, dried fruits, Turkish coffee, and herbal teas. The honey sesame pistachios are especially addictive. Head to Ucuzcular Spices (stand number 51) for the best Iranian saffron and exclusive spice blends that home cooks will cherish. Turkish cheeses and *basturma* (a seasoned, air-dried cured beef) are also available, along with fresh-squeezed pomegranate juice. **Rüstem Paşa Mahallesi, Erzak Ambarı Sok. No:92, 34116 Fatih**

WHERE TO STAY (Rates are per night for late-August stays, and may vary)

CIRAGAN PALACE KEMPINSKI ISTANBUL

This imperial Ottoman palace on the Bosphorus dates back to the 17th century, sprawling across eight football field lengths of prime riverfront. Ornate Baroque-style design and a heated outdoor infinity pool are hallmarks, and sunset views from room balconies are breathtaking. Most of the 282 rooms are located in a newer building constructed in the palace gardens, but 11 suites, including the extravagant Sultan's Suite, are in the original palace. The private hammam at Sanitas Spa is glorious. Lay on warm marble for a bathing ritual that includes a head-to-toe scrub, fragrant bubble massage, and hydrating honey and rosewater milk. Rates start at \$375. **Yıldız Mh., Çırağan Caddesi No 32, 34349 Beşiktaş, kempinski.com/istanbul**

RAFFLES ISTANBUL

This modern hotel is located in the city's business district, adjacent to a world-class performing arts center and the trendy Zorlu shopping mall with its mix of global and Turkish luxury brands. Raffles Club access includes complimentary laundry, local limousine service, and even a blow dry or shave at the salon. Raffles Spa is simply an urban oasis; melt into its warm marble loungers after a rose crystal lymphatic facial. The 185



rooms include 21 Bosphorus Suites that don't seem as much hotel designs as private residences, complete with furnished wraparound terraces. The breakfast buffet is especially impressive, and butler service goes beyond to surprise and delight, along with thoughtful amenities customized for each guest. Rates start at \$500. **Levazım Mahallesi, Zorlu Center, Koru Sokağı, 34340 Beşiktaş, raffles.com/istanbul**

FOUR SEASONS HOTEL ISTANBUL AT SULTANAHMET

At the heart of the city's historic center, the Four Seasons—a neoclassical building that was formerly a prison for political dissidents—is just a few minutes walk from its biggest attractions: Topkapı Palace, Hagia Sophia, and the Blue Mosque. With just 65 rooms, this property feels more like a boutique hotel than a typical Four Seasons. Meals take place in the courtyard (previously the prison yard), now lushly landscaped and serving Mediterranean cuisine. Pick up a souvenir after watching artists working on delicate embroidery or elegant cal-

igraphy in the lobby pop-up shop. Rates start at \$465. **Sultanahmet, Tevkifhane Sk. No:1, 34122 Sultanahmet/Fatih, fourseasons.com/istanbul**

DAY TRIPS AND TOURS

BOSPHORUS BY BOAT

Istanbul is the only city in the world that spans two continents, and a leisurely river cruise is the best way to experience both the Asian and European sides at once. The latter has long been the economic and cultural center, but some of the wealthiest locals have summer and weekend riverfront mansions on the Asian side. You'll see royal mosques, Sultan Abdulmecid's hunting lodge, and Turkey's top military high school here, along with the medieval fortress of Rumelihisari, several embassies, and trendy waterfront restaurants on the European side. You might even glimpse playful dolphins if lucky. Waterfront hotels like Ciragan Palace and Four Seasons Bosphorus can easily arrange for pickup upon disembarking.

KADIKÖY FISH MARKET

Cross the Bosphorus to the Asian side and explore the narrow alleys of Kadıköy's central market. There's not only fish here, but also fresh vegetables, charcuterie, cheese, honey, and various restaurants. It's helpful to have a guide to direct you to the best places for delicacies like *midye dolma* (stuffed mussels), lamb intestines, hummus, and *lahmacun*—Turkey's paper-thin flatbread that's topped with a thin spread of spiced lamb. Taste fresh mulberries if they're in season, or order a cup of pickles in brine to snack. For something a little more universally appealing, try buffalo milk yogurt drizzled with honey and a sprinkle of bee pollen.

DINE AND DRINK

MIKLA

Arrive early for your reservation at Turkey's only restaurant on the World's 50 Best list and enjoy a drink on the rooftop and panoramic city views. Chef Mehmet Gürs helped define contempo-



Facing page: Raffles Istanbul's Raffles Suite
This page: Mikla restaurant's Octopus Tarhana

rary Turkish cuisine, and has more than a dozen restaurants and cafes across the city. Mikla is his crown jewel, where traditional Turkish dishes like manti dumplings, braised lamb and aşure pudding are respectfully reimaged for the jet-set. Fruity but bitter unripe almond is served in almond milk with lightly pickled bonito, while lamb heart is dressed with sumac, pomegranate vinegar, and morel mushrooms. Desserts here are excellent, too—sour cherries with pistachio butter and clotted cream ice cream is a flavorful but light concluding note. **The Marmara Pera, Meşrutiyet Caddesi 15, 34430 Beyoğlu, miklarestaurant.com**

TUĞRA RESTAURANT

This is the closest you'll come to dining like the sultan—enjoying traditional Ottoman Empire classics in the sultan's former palace with views across the Bosphorus. A plethora of hot and cold mezze tempt the tastebuds before a main course of Testi lamb casserole, a signature dish cooked slowly in a sealed clay pot (to protect the sultan from being poisoned) that's shattered tableside for dramatic effect. The tender lamb shoulder is rivaled only by whole Aegean sea bass cooked in a salt crust. **Ciragan Palace Kempinski Hotel, Ciragan Caddesi 32, Çiragan Cd, 34349 Besiktas, kempinski.com/en/istanbul/ciragan-palace/dining/tugra**

KARAKÖY GÜLLÜOĞLU

If you like baklava, this is the best in the city. Even if you don't, you'll change your mind after biting into the delicate, crunchy version here, with a dollop of clotted cream and sprinkle of crumbled pistachios. This, owner Nadir Güllü says, is the proper way to savor baklava and its 40 layers of phyllo dough filled with pistachios, walnuts, or hazelnuts, then drenched in boiling sugar syrup. Tour operator Crystal Concepts can arrange an interactive factory tour that instills a deep appreciation for the finesse required to make this uniquely Turkish sweet. **Kemankeş Caddesi Katlı Otopark Altı No: 3-4, 34425 Beyoğlu, karakoygulluoglu.com, crystalconcepts.com.tr** ■