

Istanbul: Magical union of East and West

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Europe and Asia meet in Istanbul: a magical union of East and West. It's a transcontinental city by virtue of crossing a continental boundary. A city of 14.4 million, Istanbul is a vibrant city, with centuries-old mosques, churches and bazaars happily co-existing with modern restaurants, galleries and nightclubs.

Tourists should plan on visiting a hamman (traditional Turkish bath) — for about \$20 your skin will be scrubbed clean and I mean really scrubbed.

The most famous mosque in Istanbul is Sultan Ahmed Mosque, popularly called the Blue Mosque because of the blue tiles adorning the walls of the interior. Built from 1609 to 1616, it is still used for prayers. Besides being a tourist attraction, it's also an active mosque. Hence it's closed to non-worshippers for a half hour or so during the five daily prayers. Visitors going to the Blue Mosque should check visiting hours to avoid long waits.

Muslims pray five times a day with the first call to prayer at sunrise and the last one at nightfall. Blue Mosque closes for 90 minutes at each pray time. Visitors should especially avoid visiting the mosque Friday midday or within a half hour after the ezan is chanted from the mosque minarets.

Blue Mosque officials are well prepared for hundreds of visitors who come to view the mosque every day. Everyone is directed respectfully where to go. Since visitors have to remove their shoes to enter the mosque in accordance with the Islamic tradition, everyone is provided with a plastic bag for shoes, which can be returned at the exit. Female visitors are provided with a scarf to cover their head. If you happen to visit during praying hours, you will notice worshippers washing their feet at a special area provided for the purpose.

One of the distinguished visitors to the mosque has been Pope Benedict, who visited the Sultan Ahmed Mosque in 2006, marking the second papal visit in history to a Muslim place of worship. The Pope removed his shoes and closed his eyes in silent meditation, standing side by side with the mosque's imam and other officials.

Istanbul's Grand Bazaar will provide one of the most exciting shopping experiences. According to Wikipedia, it is one of the largest and oldest covered markets in the world, with 61 covered streets and over 3,000 shops, attracting between 250,000 and 400,000 visitors daily. In 2014, it was listed number one among world's most-visited tourist attractions with 91,250,000 annual visitors.

Today, Grand Bazaar stands as one of the major landmarks of Istanbul, competing successfully against the city's modern shopping malls. Here visitors can buy jewellery, ceramics, carpets, textiles, spices, etc.



PHOTOS BY MANSOOR LADHA

The famous Blue Mosque is one of the most popular sites for visitors to Istanbul, Turkey.

Bargaining is common in Istanbul, so one has to haggle the price before buying it. The trick is to bid low and increase your price until it's mutually agreed. Although colourful, gigantic and impressive, westerners unaccustomed to huge crowds and noise will find the Grand Bazaar chaotic and the salesmen a nuisance.

Not as grandeur and famous as the Grand Bazaar, but equally important and worth visiting is the Spice Bazaar or the Egyptian Spice Bazaar. Spice Bazaar has 85 shops selling Turkish delight, jewellery, souvenirs, dried fruits, nuts and of course spices.

Some tourists may find the size of Spice Bazaar more manageable and the prices cheaper than the Grand Bazaar.

“Much better than the Grand Bazaar which is touristy. This may have fewer shops, but people here are more likely to bargain and the prices start out at half the price of what they are at the Grand Bazaar. Also, the location is much better — right next to the Yeni Mosque (new mosque) and the waterfront,” confirmed one tourist from Doha, Qatar.

Turkish cuisine is a mixture and refinement of food of Central Asia, Middle East and Balkan areas. Turkey has a variety of vegetables in its cooking. Some vegetable

dishes have meat in them while others are just cooked in olive oil. Among the most common and best-known Turkish dishes are kebabs, doner and kofte. Meat is placed around a skewer and grilled over a charcoal fire for kebabs. Doner, which can be commonly found also in Canada, is beaten pieces of meat seasoned with local herbs and spices. In Izgara Kofte, which is the most common dish, meat mixture (lamb or mutton) is grilled and served with green peppers, chopped parsley and served with rice or bread on the side.

One of the most popular Turkish dishes is the pilaf. Turkish cuisine offers a great variety of pilaf — rice cooked with eggplants, chickpeas, meat or chicken, mixed with spices like cinnamon, pepper and cumin added. Most restaurants in Istanbul display hot and mouth-watering dishes so passersby can select their choices.

All the shops in the bazaar sell the same things at different prices and there have been cases when tourists have found similar things cheaper near their own hotels. However, I definitely recommend one short visit while in Istanbul.

A famous landmark in Istanbul is the Bosphorus Bridge, which links Europe and Asia. It was the fourth-longest suspension bridge span in the world when completed in 1973 and the longest outside the United States. Today, it holds the distinction of being the 22nd-longest suspension bridge span in the world. A Bosphorus cruise, offered during the day and at dinner, is a must because you'll see the European and Asian sides. Usually the bridge is closed to pedestrians but it opens each October for the Istanbul Eurasia Marathon — the only marathon that goes from one continent to the other.

To get a taste of Turkish culture, we attended the Sultana's which Turkish cultural dances, including folk dancing and belly dancing. You can't leave Istanbul without seeing a belly dancing show. We were served with the finest Turkish Ottoman cuisine, with two complimentary beverages, before the show started. A touch of class was that the waiter asked each patron where they came from and within minutes, miniature



A man in traditional Turkish attire.

flags of Turkey and the patron's country were prominently displayed on the table. Another perk thrown in with the price of the ticket was that they pick you up and drop you back at your hotel — thus allowing patrons to enjoy worryless evening. As one magazine described it: Sultana's is “an ideal venue to sample Turkish culture and food in one place.”

Whenever I am visiting a foreign country, I usually make it a point to learn a few choice local words. When I use the local language, the locals would give me a broad smile and a handshake expressing delight and offering a friendly handshake. For my journey to Istanbul, I asked the friendly Turkish Airline stewardess on Turkish Airlines to give me some commonly used words and she gracefully obliged. Here is a list of words that should help those visiting Istanbul.

Hello – Merhaba; Good-bye – Gule Gule;

How are you – Nasilsin; Please – Lutfen;

How much does it cost – Ne kadar; Excuse me – Afedersiniz; Yes – Evet; No – Hayir;

Okey/Alright – Tamam; Welcome – Hos Geldiniz.

These introductory words should be enough to get you around with a friendly reception in Istanbul. Happy traveling.

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A sales girl at a sweet mart selling Turkish delights and other sweets.