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CLOSE UP: ISTANBUL, TURKEY

Though it is often remarked that Turkey straddles Europe and Asia, it's really the city of Istanbul that does the straddling. European Istanbul is separated from its Asian suburbs by the Bosphorus, the narrow channel of water that connects the Black Sea, north of the city, to the Sea of Marmara in the south. What will strike you more than the meeting of East and West in Istanbul, though, is the juxtaposition of the old and the new, of tradition and modernity. Office towers creep up behind historic old palaces; women in jeans or elegant designer outfits pass others wearing long skirts and head coverings; donkey-drawn carts vie with shiny BMWs for dominance of the streets; and the Grand Bazaar competes with Western-style boutiques and shopping malls. At dawn, when the muezzin's call to prayer rebounds from ancient minarets, there are inevitably a few hearty revelers still making their way home from nightclubs while other residents kneel in prayer.

SIGHTS

Arkeoloji Müzesi (*Archaeology Museum*; \$). Step into this vast repository of spectacular finds from the civilizations that have thrived for thousands of years in Turkey. The most stunning pieces are tombs that include the so-called Alexander Sarcophagus, carved with scenes from Alexander the Great's battles and once believed, wrongly, to be his final resting place. An excellent exhibit on Istanbul through the ages shows off artifacts from prehistory through the Byzantines and Ottomans.

Another building in the courtyard of Topkapı Sarayı houses the **Eski Şark Eserleri Müzesi** (*Museum of the Ancient Orient*; \$), where the mosaics, obelisks, and other artifacts are from Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and elsewhere in the Arab world, and date from the pre-Christian centuries. A particularly intricate tablet is the Treaty of Kadesh from the 13th century BC, perhaps the world's earliest known peace treaty, recording an accord between the Hittite king Hattusilis III and the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II. The Çinili Köşkü (*Tiled Pavilion*) is a bright profusion of colored tiles. Inside are ceramics from the early Seljuk and Ottoman empires, as well as tiles from Iznik, the city that produced perhaps the finest ceramics in the world during the 17th and 18th centuries. ☒ *Güllhane Park, next to Topkapı Sarayı.*

Aya Sofya (*Hagia Sophia, Church of the Holy Wisdom*; \$). This soaring edifice is perhaps the greatest work of Byzantine architecture and for almost a thousand years, starting from its completion in AD 537, was the world's largest and most important religious monument. Only St. Peter's in Rome, not completed until the 17th century, surpassed Aya Sofya in size and grandeur. The Emperor Justinian commissioned the church and, in response to his dictum that Aya Sofya be the grandest place of worship ever built, craftsmen devised the magnificent dome.

Mehmet converted the church into a mosque when he took the city in 1453, and succeeding sultans added its four minarets. In the 16th century Süleyman the Magnificent ordered the church's Byzantine mosaics to be plastered over in

accordance with the Islamic proscription against the portrayal of the human figure in a place of worship. The multicolor tiles that cover parts of the cavernous interior weren't rediscovered until after Atatürk made the Aya Sofya into a museum in 1936. Today, mosaics and frescoes of saints, emperors, and Christ enliven the vast space. ☒ *Aya Sofya Sq.*

Blue Mosque (*Sultan Ahmet Cami*). Only after you enter the Blue Mosque do you understand why it is so named. Inside, 20,000 shimmering blue-green Iznik tiles are interspersed with 260 stained-glass windows. After the dark corners and somber faces of the Byzantine mosaics in Aya Sofya, this light-filled mosque is positively uplifting. Such a favorable comparison was the intention of architect Mehmet Aga, known as Sedefkar ("Worker of Mother-of-Pearl"), whose goal was to surpass Justinian's crowning achievement. At the bequest of Sultan Ahmet I (ruled 1603–17), he spent just eight years creating this masterpiece of Ottoman craftsmanship, beginning in 1609. ☒ *Sultanahmet Sq.*

Grand Bazaar (*Kapalı Çarşı*). Take a deep breath and plunge into this maze of 65 winding, covered streets crammed with 4,000 tiny shops, cafés, restaurants, mosques, and courtyards. It's said that this early version of a shopping mall is the largest concentration of stores under one roof anywhere in the world, and that's easy to believe; it's also easy to believe that some of the most aggressive salesmanship in the world takes place here. Originally built by Mehmet II (the Conqueror) in the 1450s, the Grand Bazaar was ravaged twice by fire in relatively recent years—once in 1954 and once in 1974. In both cases, the bazaar was quickly rebuilt into something resembling the original style, with its arched passageways and brass-and-tile fountains at regular intervals. A sizable share of the goods are trinkets tailored for the tourist trade, but a separate section for antiques at the very center of the bazaar, called the *bedestan*, always has some beautiful items on offer. ☒ *Yeniçeriler Cad. and Fuatpaşa Cad.*

Ibrahim Paşa Sarayı (*Ibrahim Paşa Palace*; \$). Süleyman the Magnificent commissioned the great architect Sinan to build

this stone palace, the most grandiose residence in Istanbul. The palace now houses the Türk Ve Islâm Eserleri Müzesi (*Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts*), where you can learn about the lifestyles of Turks at every level of society, from the 8th century to the present. ☒ *Atmeydanı 46, Sultanahmet.*

Süleymaniye Cami (*Mosque of Süleyman*). Perched on a hilltop near Istanbul University, the largest mosque in Istanbul houses Sinan's tomb, along with that of his patron, Süleyman the Magnificent, and the sultan's wife, Roxelana. The architectural thrill here is the enormous dome. The soaring space gives the impression that it's held up principally by divine cooperation. The complex still incorporates a hospital, a caravansaray, a huge kitchen, several schools, and other charitable institutions that mosques traditionally operate. ☒ *Süleymaniye Cad., near Istanbul University's north gate.*

Topkapı Sarayı (*Topkapı Palace*; \$). This vast palace on Seraglio Point was the residence of sultans as well as the seat of Ottoman rule from the 1450s until the middle of the 19th century.

Sultan Mehmet II built the original Topkapı Palace in the 1450s, shortly after his conquest of Constantinople. Over the centuries sultan after sultan expanded the palace until some 5,000 full-time residents lived here, including slaves, concubines, and eunuchs. Topkapı was finally abandoned in 1853 when Sultan Abdül Mecit I moved his court to the palace at Dolmabahçe on the Bosphorus.

The main entrance, or Imperial Gate, leads to the Court of the Janissaries, also known as the First Courtyard, today converted into a parking lot. You will begin to experience the grandeur of the palace when you pass through Bab-ı-Selam (*Gate of Salutation*).

The Second Courtyard is filled with a series of ornate *köşks*, pavilions once used for the business of state. To one side are the palace's kitchens, where more than 1,000 cooks once toiled at the rows of immense ovens to feed the palace residents, whose numbers sometimes swelled to 15,000 during special occasions. The space now displays one of the world's best collections of porcelain. Straight ahead is the Divan-ı-Humayun (*Assembly Room of the Council of State*), once presided over by the grand vizier. When the mood struck him, the sultan would sit behind a latticed window here, hidden by a curtain, so no one would know when he was listening.

The Harem, a maze of 400 halls, terraces, rooms, wings, and apartments grouped around the sultan's private quarters, evokes all the exoticism of the Ottoman Empire. The first Harem compound housed about 200 lesser concubines and

the palace eunuchs. As you move into the Harem, the rooms become larger and more opulent. The chief wives of the sultan lived in private apartments around a shared courtyard. Beyond are the lavish apartments of the *valide* sultan (queen mother), the absolute ruler of the Harem, and finally, the sultan's private rooms—a riot of brocades, murals, colored marble, wildly ornate furniture, gold leaf, and fine carving.

Beyond the Harem, access was restricted to the Third Courtyard, in part because it housed the Treasury, filled with imperial thrones, lavish gifts bestowed to sultans, and the spoils of war. Two uncut emeralds, each weighing about 8 pounds (!), once hung from the ceiling, but are now displayed behind glass. Other pavilions show off Turkish and Persian miniatures; relics of the prophet Muhammad (including hair from his beard); and sultans' robes.

The Fourth Courtyard was the private realm of the sultan, and the small, elegant pavilions, mosques, fountains, and reflecting pools are scattered amid the gardens. In the İftariye (*Golden Cage*), also known as the Sofa Köşkü, the closest relatives of the reigning sultan lived in strict confinement under what amounted to house arrest—superseding an older practice of murdering all possible rivals to the throne. ☒ *Topkapı Sarayı, Gülhane Park, near Sultanahmet Sq.*

SHOPPING

Istanbul has been a shopper's town for, well, centuries, but this is not to say that the city is stuck in the past. Along with its colorful bazaars and outdoor markets, Istanbul also has a wide range of modern options. Whether you're looking for trinkets and souvenirs, kilims and carpets, brass and silverware, leather goods, old books, prints and maps, or furnishings and clothes (Turkish textiles are among the best in the world), you can find them here. **Nuruosmaniye Caddesi**, one of the major streets leading to the Grand Bazaar, is lined with some of Istanbul's most stylish shops, with an emphasis on fine carpets, jewelry, and antiques.

The Arasta Bazaar (☒ *Sultanahmet*) is one of few markets open on Sunday; you can get a lot of the same items here as at the Grand Bazaar, but the atmosphere is much calmer. **The Egyptian Bazaar** (☒ *Eminönü*) is definitely worth seeing. Also known as the Spice Market, it has stall after enticing stall filled with mounds of exotic spices and dried fruits. **Sahafkar Çarşısı** (☒ *Grand Bazaar*) is home to a bustling book market, with old and new editions; most are in Turkish, but English is represented, too. The market is open daily, though Sunday has the most vendors.

