



The Beat Goes On

The syncopation of Istanbul's rhythm catches visitors by surprise.

BY LISA MATTE

Renowned jazz artist Dave Brubeck said it was the rhythm of Istanbul that inspired his groundbreaking composition “Blue Rondo à la Turk” in the late 1950s. I’m no music expert. I didn’t pay much attention in music class. And I certainly can’t read sheet music. But I know what I like, and I know when I hear a melody that captures the essence of a place.

“Blue Rondo à la Turk” does just that.

Those of you with more music knowledge than I will ever possess will likely understand references to the arrangement starting in 9/8 time before segueing seamlessly into a more traditional Western jazz melody and back again. The result is a track that precisely mirrors my experience in Istanbul with its surprising twists and turns, even 50 years after the song debuted.

Preparing for my trip, I pored over guidebooks and websites in a vain attempt to locate a map that put the whole city on the table, clearly showing how neighborhoods and districts connect to one another. With just three days to explore, I wanted to make the most of every minute. I discovered instead that the city is so diverse, it’s almost impossible to connect the dots.

So, on to Plan B: Wing it.

I was staying at the almost-brand-new Park Hyatt Istanbul in what I had seen described as the “fashionable” Nişantaşı district; so fashionable, it seemed, it lay beyond the outer borders of the city landscape as shown on any map I could find. Jetlagged to the point of semi-consciousness, I barely noted the neighborhood upon arrival, so I was more than a bit surprised when I emerged fresh from a short nap a few hours later to discover I had inadvertently landed in Paris — or so it seemed.

Contrary to my expectations, I wandered for blocks passing by the highest of high-end designer shops, swank sidewalk cafés where nattily-clad residents chatted over cappuccino or sipped wine, and confectionery shops that would make even Willy Wonka swoon. Cautioned by well-meaning advisors to dress modestly and keep my arms covered at all times, I wore a long-sleeved shirt on an unseasonably warm November afternoon while strolling side-by-side with women, young and mature, who looked stunning in short, sleeveless sheaths and ultra-high heels.

STREET BEAT: *Street vendors in Taksim*

PHOTOS: ALLIE CAULFIELD

I had stumbled smack-dab into the middle of Brubeck’s “Blue Rondo à la Turk.” I could almost hear the cool jazz melody playing in my head — but what about the frenzy of Istanbul?

Ah, that was yet to come.

The next morning I hopped in a cab for the short ride to the InterContinental Ceylon Istanbul to meet friends who had spent the previous afternoon exploring the Taksim neighborhood while I wandered around Nişantaşı. When I arrived, they were bursting with enthusiasm, ready to share their discoveries. We had only walked for half a block before I was channeling Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*: “Toto, I have the feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

A few miles made a world of difference. While Nişantaşı is quietly elegant, Taksim is bursting with in-your-face energy. Restaurateurs popped from doorways in an attempt to lure us into their eateries; vendors hawked trinkets and toys in a carnival-like atmosphere.

En route to Istanbul’s well-traversed pedestrian avenue, Istiklal Caddesi, we crossed the wide-open expanse of Taksim Square, where a little girl wearing a bright red coat chased pigeons with infectious glee. My friends, Lenny and KC, warned me to brace myself for a crowd scene, but it was still early in the morning. Instead of the sea of people they had encountered the previous afternoon, we found an enticing street scene: Fishmongers were just laying out the catch of the day, shop doors were just beginning to yawn open, and Saturday shoppers were gathering their fortitude with a strong cup of Turkish coffee here or a quick shoe-shine there.

We joined the locals for a cup of coffee before moving on to the Grand Bazaar to haggle for pashmina wraps and jewelry. Bracing ourselves for the rush we expected upon entering the cavernous labyrinth, we were almost deflated

to find a relatively organized shopping center — think modern mall meets *Arabian Nights*. Gold jewelry glittered under display lights in shop

JAZZ IT UP: Lamps at the Grand Bazaar

PHOTO: KC BUCHANAN



windows. Well-dressed rug merchants politely invited us to sip sweet apple tea while viewing their kaleidoscopic inventory of hand-made carpets. We shopped at leisure under no pressure, real or perceived, until our growling stomachs told us it was time for lunch.

THIS WAY AND THAT: *The crowd along Istiklal Caddesi*

PHOTO: JOHN PICKEN

Lulled into a sense of complacency by our relaxed shopping experience, we decided to throw caution to the wind and plow straight through the streets connecting the Grand Bazaar to the waterfront restaurant we had selected, rather than follow the round-about route our concierge had advised.

Within minutes we were swept into a crowd more intense than I had ever experienced. While we did our best to keep sight of one another’s heads bobbing atop the sea of people, I marveled at burka-clad women, showing only their eyes through tiny slits in the black cloth, skillfully maneuvering infants and toddlers in pastel-colored strollers with an ease that belied the threat of a crowd that at times seemed ready to crush us.

The current eventually spit us out at the waterfront, where we made our way to Hamdi, a Bosphorous-view eatery known for its kebabs. Throughout our stay, the dichotomy of Istanbul revealed itself in unexpected ways. An evening stroll along Istiklal Caddesi presented such a contradiction to our early-morning exploration that Lenny stopped dead in his tracks amid thousands of pedestrians to wonder out loud, “*Where* are they all going?” The peaceful quiet inside the Blue Mosque was a stark contrast to the hawkers shouting at tourists from their stalls outside the gates. The expansive green courtyard inside Topkapi Palace was a place for quiet reflection, while the cacophony of amplified voices beseeching passersby to board tour boats at the waterfront reverberated through our consciousness.

On our final night in Istanbul, we boarded a rickety elevator for a ride to the Fifth Floor, a little-known gem of a restaurant offering al fresco dining on a deck strung with hundreds of tiny white lights — and an amazing view of the Bosphorous Bridge connecting Istanbul’s European side to its Asian counterpart. In our scenic perch we decided to sit back, relax and — citing another Dave Brubeck classic — “Take Five.” 🎷