



Successive historical influences make the largest city in Turkey a fascinating destination, says **Rose Dykins**



Situated where east meets west, Istanbul's alluring architecture and air of mysticism make it unlike any other city. Despite being a desirable tourist destination, given the volatility of Turkey's neighbouring countries, and the recent political demonstrations in the city, it's worth consulting the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website (gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice) before you travel there.

Then again, a number of hotel groups have given the city their stamp of approval, with an abundance of luxury openings scheduled for next year. These include a 180-room Raffles hotel, a 66-room Viceroy property and a 118-room St Regis. The biggest-ever Soho House members' club – complete with 88 bedrooms – is also due to open in 2014, in a former US embassy building.

Here are just a few ways to soak up Istanbul's idiosyncratic character if you are spending the weekend there.

Hagia Sophia

The Blue Mosque on Sultan Ahmet Square has a beautiful interior, but the Hagia Sophia, at the other end of the plaza, is a far more fascinating structure. With Christian imagery displayed alongside calligraphic representations of the names of Allah and Muhammad, it is an embodiment of Istanbul's multi-layered past.

Originally built as a Greek Orthodox church in the sixth century, the commanding building was transformed into a mosque in 1453 when the Ottomans conquered Constantinople (as Istanbul was formerly known). As a result, it was given a rather drastic makeover. The altar was removed, the frescos of Christian icons were plastered over – along with millions of mosaics – and the floors carpeted to enable Muslim prayer. It remained a mosque until 1935, when Mustafa Ataturk, the first president of the Republic of Turkey, ordered for it to become a national museum. The plasterwork and carpets

Clockwise from main: Hagia Sophia; Museum of Innocence; a Christian mosaic in Hagia Sophia; Cukurcuma antique shop; Medusa column base in the Basilica Cistern; Basilica Cistern; Galata Tower

were removed, and the immaculately preserved frescos and floors were revealed beneath. Today, its Christian iconography and Islamic motifs are juxtaposed under the same roof.

The hybrid history of the building gives it an almost indefinable quality. There's something strangely gothic yet exotic about the ash-grey marble surfaces illuminated by Arabic lanterns, and the ghost-like paintings upon the rich yellow ceiling. Allow plenty of time to explore the building's sprawling structure and galleries, discover partially recovered mosaics and gaze in wonder at the magnificent 32-metre-wide dome surrounded by seraphim angels.

Open Tue-Sun 9am-7pm (Apr-Oct), 9am-5pm (Nov-Mar). Entry TL25 (£7). Sultan Ahmet Square; hagiasophia.com

Basilica Cistern

Not far from the Hagia Sofia, on the other side of Sultan Ahmet Square, the mysterious underground Basilica Cistern is another must-see – and a great way to escape the heat. Of Istanbul's network of underground cisterns built to collect and store rainfall to supply the city with drinking water, the Basilica Cistern is one of only two that are open to the public. It was constructed in the sixth century to provide water for the Great Palace during the rule of Byzantine emperor Justinian I.

Also known as the "Sunken Palace", the structure is a labyrinth of 336 marble columns supporting a ceiling that's dramatically illuminated by neon lighting, making it possible to survey even its darkest corners. Brown carp lurking in the water beneath the wooden walkways that cross the pools contribute to the ominous atmosphere, which lends itself well to the concerts and poetry readings that take place here from time to time. Look out for the two large Medusa-head column bases at the far end – one of them is upside down, while the other is on its side, and the reason for their curious positioning has never been explained.

Open daily 9am-6pm. Entry TL10 (£3). Yerebatan Caddesi 13; yerebatan.com

Cukurcuma

While Istanbul's vast Grand Bazaar is where you'd go to haggle for fake designer bags, and its colourful Spice Market is the place to pick up myriad flavours of Turkish delight, the district of Cukurcuma is where you're likely to find a more unusual souvenir.

Its hilly, cobbled streets are lined with independent antique dealers, their shops piled high with items from a cross-section of cultures and time periods. Their quality and authenticity can vary (and it's likely you'll come across a fair amount of junk), but there are some stores that are so full of curiosities that they feel more like hands-on museums than retail outlets. Intricate iron keys, an art nouveau mirror adorned with emeralds, and a Nazi passport were just a few of the things I encountered on my visit.

Reputable shops include A La Turca (alaturcahouse.com), Kayabek (Altıpatlar Sokak 19) and Karadeniz Antik (Firuzaga Mahallesi Cukurcuma, Caddesi 55). The last boasts a vast collection of gold-framed oil paintings, brass busts and glassware dating back to the Ottoman Empire. Most good dealers will be able to arrange to ship items back to the UK if you do end up falling in love with something bulky.

Museum of Innocence

"I think that if museums, like novels, were to focus more on private and personal stories, they would be better able to bring out our collective humanity," said Turkish writer and 2006 Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk in *Newsweek* last year, after opening the world's first museum to be inspired by a book.

The Museum of Innocence was first published in 2008, and tells the love story of a young couple growing up in 1970s Istanbul. In April 2012, he opened a museum in Cukurcuma, where each of the 83 display boxes corresponds to the 83 chapters of the book, presenting everyday objects that Pamuk sourced to bring the storyline of his novel to life.

It's amazing how well these objects alone reveal the book's narrative as you walk from one box to the next, so it isn't necessary to have read it before your visit (though there are copies available in

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the museum's exhibition space, and it's possible to pre-book a place on guided tours for TL5 (£1.50) if you'd like more clarification about the plot).

The plain crockery, simple butterfly-shaped earrings and cigarette butts wouldn't seem up to much in any other museum, but their significance for the protagonist is revealed in the novel, and on their own they paint a surprisingly vivid picture of the lives behind them. Pamuk captures the way that our subconscious attaches memories and feelings to objects, and the exhibition makes you feel more mindful of this in your own life. With one exhibit being a newspaper from the 1970s, visitors also gain insight into how the era was a transitional time for Istanbul, as Western values and ways of living began to clash with Turkish and Islamic traditions.

Open Tues-Sun 10am-6pm (9pm on Fridays). Entry TL25 (£7.70). Cukurcuma Caddesi; masumiyetmuzesi.org

Galata

For a birds-eye view of Istanbul, take the elevator up the nine-storey Galata Tower (you have to walk up the final two floors) to its 360-degree panoramic balcony. Erected in 1348, the stone structure stands proudly in the peaceful cobbled district of Galata and, on a clear day, the views across the Golden Horn are well worth the climb.

Galata's compact feel and romantic charm have attracted an influx of trendy boutiques in recent years, with many of them popping up inside century-old buildings that were formerly apartment blocks, their iron balconies and patterned lino floors still intact. For artwork, homeware and designer clothing, there's Atelier 55 (Serdar-i Ekrem Sokak 55; atelier-55.com/tr) and Simay Bulbul (Sahkulu Bostan Sokak 22) for edgy women's wear. Robinson Crusoe bookstore (Salt Galata, Bankalar Caddesi 11) is full of Turkish tomes translated into English, while Aida Pekin (Serdar-i Ekrem 44A; aidapekin.com) sells abstract statement jewellery.

Entry to Galata Tower is TL13 (£4); open daily 9am-7pm.

■ Visit gototurkey.co.uk



WHERE TO EAT

Top row: Matbah Bottom row: Agatha restaurant in Pera Palace Hotel Jumeirah

AGATHA RESTAURANT

Agatha Christie penned *Murder on the Orient Express* while she was staying at the Pera Palace hotel in the 1930s. The historic property is now part of the Jumeirah Group, and its elegant signature restaurant combines the cuisines of three major cities served by the Orient Express in its hey-day: Istanbul, Paris and Venice. Pressed octopus and shrimp cocktail with avocado tartare and grapefruit salsa (TL42/£12) followed by duck breast with pomegranate seasoned couscous and quince confit (TL48/£14) are among the inventive, immaculately prepared dishes. Opt for a seat by the window to enjoy sunset views over the Golden Horn.

Mesrutiyet Caddesi 52; tel +90 212 377 4000; jumeirah.com

MATBAH RESTAURANT

A short walk from the Basilica Cistern lies Matbah, which serves dishes that follow authentic recipes served at the Tokapi Palace during the Ottoman era. The cuisine is an intriguing fusion of Middle Eastern, Middle Asian, Balkan and European culinary styles, typified by rich meaty dishes seasoned with dried fruit, nuts and spices. Try the baked lamb shank on a bed of puréed aubergine served in a pastry bowl (TL52/£16) – it is prepared the same way as it was in the 1400s. Take a seat on the open-air, summer garden terrace to enjoy views over a sea of rooftops and domes in the heart of the city.

Caferiye Sokak 6/1, tel +90 212 514 6151; matbahrestaurant.com

G BALIK RESTAURANT (SUADA)

Hop on a boat from the mainland at Kurucesme (on the European side of Istanbul) and in a couple of minutes you'll reach Suada, a floating luxury beach club in the middle of the Bosphorus. Here you'll find G Balik restaurant, where you can enjoy freshly caught fish in a vibrant cosmopolitan setting. Skewers of delectable grilled seafood and substantial salads make this a great spot for a languorous lunch (two courses with wine costs TL120/£38). Follow up with a dip in Suada's Olympic-sized outdoor pool, which is surrounded by sun loungers and offers a striking view of the Bosphorus Bridge (entry TL50/£15 on weekdays, TL80/£24 on weekends).

Suada Club, Galatasray Adasi, Kurucesme; tel +90 212 263 65 56; gbalik.com