



Where Europe meets Asia



Istanbul is the unofficial capital of Turkey, and the only city that can claim to be part of two continents, Europe and Asia. At already over 15 million inhabitants, it still keeps growing as you can see from the 600 new car registrations every day!

Istanbul still has its quiet places, untouched by the hectic ongoing in the city, and still undiscovered. Sultanahmet is where all sightseeing excursions start. Albeit extremely touristy, this district includes several architectural monuments which are not to be missed. At the centre of Sultanahmet is the historical triangle of the Blue Mosque, Saint Sophia's Cathedral, and the Topkapi Palace. The *Hagia Sophia* (Cathedral of St Sophia) represents the different periods of medieval history in Istanbul like no other place. It was built in 537 as the centre of the Byzantine Church. After Constantinople fell to Sultan Mehmet, St Sophia's was used as a mosque for five centuries, until Kemal Atatürk turned it into a museum in 1934.

Sultan Ahmet Camii (the Blue Mosque) stands just across the street from St Sophia's. When this mosque was built in 1609, Sultan Ahmet wanted it to be even larger and more beautiful than St Sophia's. The third and most beautiful monument in this area is *Topkapi Sarayi* (Topkapi Palace).

If the tourist bustle around the Blue Mosque is not your kind of thing, then *Sultan Suleymaniye Camii* may be more to your liking. This mosque, half a mile northwest of Sultanahmet in Beyazit district, is almost as beautiful as the Blue Mosque, but far less crowded. You may also like to explore the outer parts of Sultanahmet around the Hippodrome.

The Golden Horn bay separates Sultanahmet from Istanbul's second historic centre, Galata and Beyoglu districts. Once you have crossed Galata Bridge, you enter a different world. No more great squares and splendid Ottoman architecture; instead there are small steep alleys, surrounded by medieval houses and the remains of the old Genoese city walls. Indeed this quarter was built by Genoese salesmen in the

10th century and very much resembles a medieval European town.

Beyoglu has its own small Bosphorus harbour, *Kabatas*. Boats depart from here to the *Virgin Tower*, which stands on a rock in the middle of the Bosphorus. The Virgin Tower was only opened to visitors in autumn 2000, and a museum will soon follow suit on this site. The view from the Virgin Tower is one of the most spectacular in Istanbul, and a prime insider tip. Although the Lonely Planet mentions it in its March 2001 online update, it is yet to appear in any printed travel guide, and thus completely tourist-free.

North of Kabatas harbour stretches the Bosphorus with its splendid coastline on the European side. The slopes of the hills which form *Besiktas* district lead directly to the waterline of the Bosphorus. Situated in this beautiful setting are Istanbul's two most magnificent city estates, the *Dolmabahce Palace* and the *Ciragan Palace*. North of Besiktas and directly underneath the first Bosphorus bridge lies *Ortaköy*, which locals call "The Village". Ortaköy is comprised of small streets with several nice antique shops. Next comes *Bebek*. This district has two sides to it: uphill Bebek is home the peninsula north of Bebek marks the narrowest part of the Bosphorus and is overlooked by the mighty castle of *Rumeli Hisari*. If you have any extra time, you may like to take a boat tour along the Bosphorus

Istanbul is a perfect place for fish eaters. A good choice of local fish would be sole, swordfish, sea trout or, in the spring, turbot. In Turkey fish is usually served grilled and without any sauces in order to keep the original taste, only with lemon, garlic and red onion. You should also try the octopus salad as a starter. As for meat, of course you must try the typical kebab (lamb), which comes in dozens of varieties, grilled, baked or cooked. Once you get tired of Turkish food and want to try something completely different, check out *Rejans*, a Russian restaurant on Beyoglu pedestrian zone.



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