

ESSENTIAL TRAVEL GUIDE SERIES

ISTANBUL



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ISTANBUL, TURKEY: A GUIDE TO THE SULTANAHMET DISTRICT

Istanbul, formerly Constantinople, is one of, if not the oldest city in the world. It is rich in cultural history and straddles the continents of Europe and Asia. Located where the Bosphorus river meets the entrance to the Black Sea, this port town has been significant to trade for centuries. As the former heart of the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul is home to palaces, ancient religious buildings and some of the oldest streets and markets on earth.

Turkey has remained one of the top tourist destinations in the world. This could be because

the Turkish people are hospitable by nature. They want you to see everything that their cities and country has to offer, they want you to explore their culture and indulge in their food and drink. Turks are by nature generous and polite, but that does not mean that they don't expect you to bargain with them at the markets! This is an important cultural note that I will cover later on in this guide.

Many like to visit Turkey, in particular Istanbul, because it is a way of experiencing some of Middle Eastern and Muslim culture without having

to leave the confines of Europe. Turkey is to this day a NATO member country and many find comfort in that. It's also worth mentioning that most people in Turkey speak English, if not 3+ other languages as well.

I never once felt unsafe while visiting Istanbul but do keep your wits about you for pickpockets as you would anywhere else. There is no need to be paranoid, just don't act oblivious and without situational awareness.

How to Use This Guide

Istanbul is one of the more unique places that you may visit and so I have tried to make this guide as comprehensive as possible to make planning easier. Visiting Turkey should not

come as a complete shock, but there are definitely cultural differences worth noting and to be respectful of while you're there. This guide will focus mainly on visiting the Sultanahmet District or 'old town' in Istanbul, so please keep in mind that there is an entire modern city at your footsteps just waiting to be explored as well. It just isn't included in this particular guide.

Logistics: When to Visit, Where to Stay, How to Get Around

When to Visit

Istanbul is a beautiful city to visit any time of year. If you love to visit the beach and the seaside, then I recommend visiting in the summer



months. To avoid larger crowds, spring and fall are always great options and the weather should still be quite warm, even for beach visits. I personally prefer to visit in the cooler months as even the spring and fall months can be quite hot and muggy. I find that the cooler temperatures make getting around on foot and general sightseeing much more comfortable.

Where to Stay

There are many options for where to stay in Istanbul, but if this is your first visit, or you only have a few days in the area, I highly recommend staying in the old town. If you stay in the old town, you will be walking distance or a quick tram ride to all of the sites that you'll want to see. It will also provide you with close proximity to your hotel should you require a break during the day. Istanbul can get quite hot and humid and the ability to pop into your hotel for a quick shower and change of clothes is definitely nice to have. Some of the washrooms in the old town also feature plumbing that is quite old, so the ability to use your own is also a nice feature.

Something to note about staying in the old town is the noise you may hear each morning and evening as the local Imams sing their calls to prayer. You may even hear overlapping calls as there are a number of small and large mosques in this area. These songs should not be disruptive, but it is worth noting if it wakes you in the early morning and you aren't expecting it. Many hotels are quiet enough that you won't hear the calls to prayer.

It is also helpful to stay at a hotel that offers some kind of breakfast as it is not served very early at many restaurants like you would expect in North America. There are a few coffee and pastry shops around, but eating at your hotel before heading out is much easier.

Getting Around

If you plan on mainly exploring the old town, walking and using the local trams are the easiest ways to get to and from your destination. Do wear good walking shoes as many of the streets are at quite an incline and still feature

their ancient cobblestones. Taxis are another option for getting around Istanbul, although this method can get quite expensive and consume a lot of time as traffic can be quite heavy throughout the day. Be sure to negotiate rates with taxi drivers ahead of time.

Getting To and From the Airport: I recommend arriving and departing Istanbul either early or late in the day to avoid heavy traffic getting to and from the airports. There are a few major airports that you can fly in and out of, depending on your previous or following destination. Many hotels offer airport shuttles or can arrange a spot with a shuttle service for you to get to and from the airport, many of which are a fixed flat rate cost.

What to Pack & What to Wear

Istanbul is a destination for which I recommend packing extra clothes in case you need to change throughout the day. Opt for breathable fabrics like cottons and linens as well as extra under clothes. Istanbul is one of the most

humid places I have ever visited and I often returned to my hotel for a quick shower and a change of clothes (at least once per day). I do keep mentioning that it does get quite hot and humid in Istanbul, but with the humidity and proximity to the water also comes a damp chill in the evenings, so pack a light sweater or jacket for after dinner or for a boat cruise on the Bosphorus.

Although Turkey is a secular country, you will likely be visiting some Muslim holy sites while in Istanbul so I recommend wearing shoes that come on and off easily. Many of the sites will require you to remove your shoes and carry them with you so something that slips on and off quickly will be most convenient in a crowd. Keep in mind that much of the old town is cobblestoned and many of the streets and walkways can be quite steep, so consider this with your choice of footwear as well.

For women, I recommend packing a light scarf as many of the sites require you to cover your head and shoulders. Communal scarves are of-



Taksim Tram Sultanahmet



Bosphorous Cruise

ferred at these locations, but I always prefer to have my own. Note that some of the holy places require you to cover your legs so you have a few options: opt to wear long pants or a long dress or skirt. If wearing pants or a long dress on a long, hot day is not appealing, you can always tie a long, light scarf around your waist to cover your legs over shorts or a shorter dress/skirt. This is perfectly acceptable. Keep in mind that Turkey is a secular country, so it is perfectly acceptable to wear shorts, dresses, skirts and tank tops, however, there is a rich Muslim heritage here, so always keep modesty in mind to be respectful.

Because of the heat and humidity, things can get a little muggy and that can cause chafing and skin irritations no matter what you do. Two products that I recommend for all travel (but especially to humid locations) are: Band-aid Blister Stick and Monistat Anti-Chafing Lotion. I suggest applying the blister stick to your inner arms and thighs as well as on any point of

contact on your feet for shoes as this will help minimize rubbing and irritation. If you do end up with any chafing, apply the anti-chafing lotion.

Shopping

I usually include the shopping section further down the list in my travel guides, but shopping is such a large part of the sightseeing in Turkey it is worth mentioning here. Istanbul features a ton of high-end shopping, particularly in the new city and on the Asia side of town. Like other European and Asian destinations, I often find that designer goods are less expensive in North America, so do keep pricing in mind.

There are many things to shop for and souvenirs that you will absolutely want to take home on this trip and many of them can be found throughout the 'Things to See & Do' section below. Items that I would be on the lookout for to purchase in Istanbul are:

- Food items such as Turkish Delights and Baklava, teas and spices. Any of these items can be vacuum sealed by the vendor for freshness and to be easily packed in your suitcase.
- Cotton items such as towels, face cloths, robes and tunics.
- Bath products, sea salt scrubs, essential oils and other personal care luxuries.
- Table linens, runners, cotton napkins and other white goods.
- Rugs and tapestries.
- Jewelry, handmade pottery and dishware, serving platters.
- Coffee and tea sets, serving dishes and candy jars.

The best places to purchase these items will be listed in the corresponding notes of the 'Things to See & Do' section below.

Things to See & Do

As I've noted above, there are so many different

things to see and do in this incredibly large city. This guide mainly focuses on the things to do when visiting Istanbul's more historic old town rather than the modern amenities of the new city. I've chosen to focus this guide here as this is most likely what you'll be interested in seeing and experiencing when spending time in Istanbul.

Visit a Rug Shop

Visiting a rug shop in Istanbul is an experience all of its own. You might be thinking 'but I don't want to buy a rug' but don't let that dissuade you from the experience. Here is a little bit of what you can expect: When you enter the shop, you will be greeted and seated on comfy cushions or chairs and offered tea, coffee and assorted sweets (remember what I said about hospitality?). They will then ask you about what sizes of rugs you might be interested in, what colors you like, if you prefer a traditional pattern, patchwork or something more modern.



Hagia Sofia



Turkish Rug Shop

Then the show will begin!

Shop workers will proceed to unroll and re-roll a series of different rugs that they will stack and place before you to look at. Often they will place the rug in front of you to view, and then pick it up and spin it around so you can see all of the different angles of the piece. The beauty of these rugs is that they look different in varied light and from different sides. The workers will gauge your reaction and interest and bring out other rugs that are of similar styles to try and best accommodate what you're looking for.

If you choose to purchase a rug, be sure to barter the price as best you can. Prices are often quoted in USD and include FedEx shipping right to your door, so you don't have to worry about taking it home on the plane. The shop owner will let you know if a rug is hand or machine woven, its origins and any other history the rug may possess. The prices of these rugs can be quite high, although it is important to remember that these are heirloom pieces that can be passed down from generation to gen-

eration. Consider how long some of the rugs have been in sites such as Blue Mosque or Hagia Sofia.

My favorite rug shop can be found near the Blue Mosque. It is called Ottomania: Oriental Rugs Gallery and their owner Nuri Sahin will be delighted to serve you! Address: Sultanahmet Mahallesi Tavukhane Sokak No: 17 34122 Istanbul – Turkey

The Grand Bazaar

The Grand Bazaar in Istanbul is one of the largest and oldest covered markets in the entire world with over 4,000 shops occupying over 61 streets. Shopping at the Grand Bazaar can be a really interesting experience. This is a great place to stroll through the tea and spice stalls, purchase scarves and jewelry, Turkish linens and tea sets.

Be sure to negotiate prices for everything at the Bazaar. Quoted prices are a jumping off point for bargaining and haggling and it is ex-

pected in these markets. With that in mind, it is important to not be rude to the shop owners either, so bargain within reason. Most tourists will pay sticker price for items without question.

The Grand Bazaar is where you will find many Turkish rug shops where you may experience the same kind of 'performance' as mentioned above. What I did notice about the rug shops at the Bazaar versus those found in other areas of town is that their goods are much more expensive as they are catering to a tourist crowd that may not be willing to venture a street or two away from the beaten path. Some of the rug shops within the Bazaar require you to head down a hallway or up or down some stairs to get to their main show room – this is perfectly safe, so please do not be alarmed if shop owners ask you to follow them off the main Bazaar street.

Note that there is a large section of the Bazaar where you will find knock-off designer goods and made-in-China knickknacks and the like.

Again, be sure to always ask a shop owner if something is Made in Turkey as even the locals will try to pass off the occasional Made in China item as authentically Turkish.

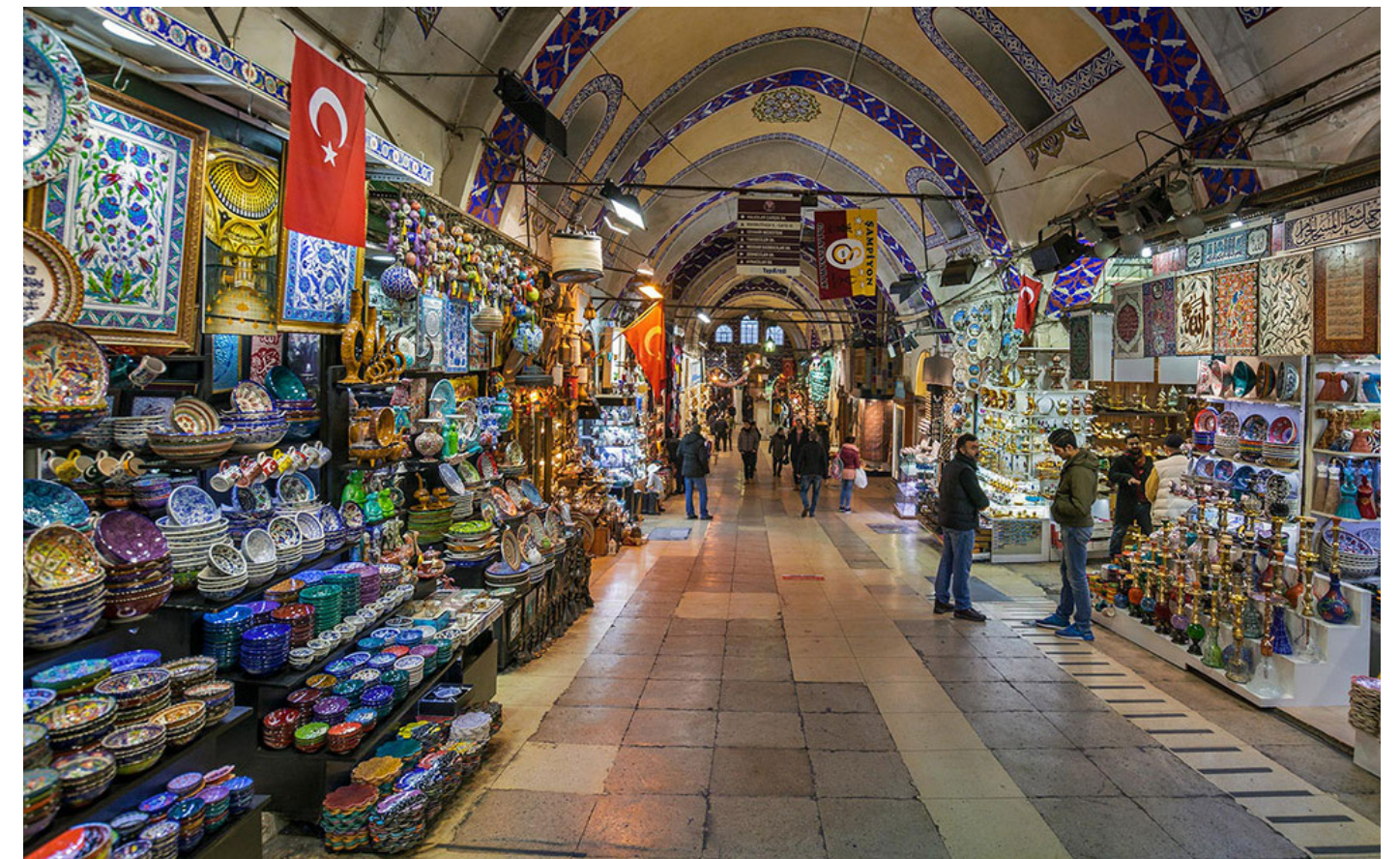
The Grand Bazaar is located uphill from Blue Mosque, the Hippodrome and a few other sites and there is a tram you can take to get there quite easily from the main area of the old town. There are also a number of restaurants and food stalls where you can grab a bite to eat, so if you're planning on spending the majority of a day, or even a half day at the Bazaar, you'll be able to grab lunch quite easily.

Main Square

The Main Square in the heart of the Sultanahmet District or old town and is surrounded by major monuments and sites that you will want to visit. This is where you'll find access to bath houses, Hagia Sophia, Blue Mosque and Dervish Café (details below). In the evening the square will be quite busy with people heading to and from dinner, sights of dervish dancers



Grand Bazaar Entrance



Grand Bazaar Inside

Whirling Dervish



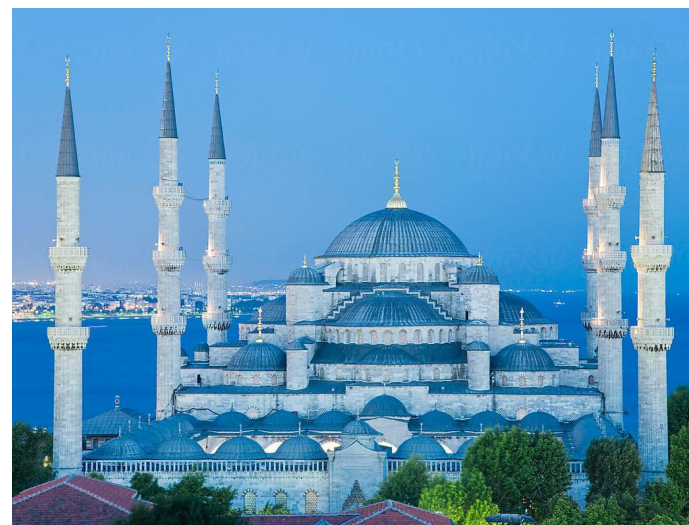
and street performers as well as local vendors selling wares and street food.

Whirling Dervish Show at Dervish Café

I highly recommend visiting Taksim Square for a Whirling Dervish show in the evening. Opt to have dinner at the Dervish Café, take in the show and then walk through the main square where local vendors set up tables selling hand-crafts, linens and other local goods. Some of the other ‘dervish restaurants’ will be open early for coffee and pastries around breakfast time which is convenient if you are visiting the Blue Mosque or Hagia Sofia first thing in the morning.

Blue Mosque

The Blue Mosque is one of my favorite spots in all of Sultanahmet. Its formal name is the Sultan Ahmet Mosque but it was nicknamed be-



Blue Mosque

cause of the blue tiles surrounding the walls of its interior.

Although it is a popular tourist spot, the mosque itself is still operational for daily prayers (note

Hippodrome



prayer times on their website to avoid visiting during closures). Please note the dress code and my advice found in the ‘What to Pack’ section of this guide. You will also be required to remove your shoes and keep them with you.

There are many ways to experience the architecture of this great building, but its most popular entrance is to approach it from the Hippodrome (on the west side). You can also approach from the side of Taksim Square. You may find local vendors offering to give you a guided tour of the mosque and to help you ‘jump the line’ if you promise to visit their shop following the visit. This is totally okay, but as intimidating as the lines look, they move quite quickly. I recommend visiting mid-morning.

Hippodrome

The Hippodrome in Istanbul is now a town square that feature a series of ruins from its original form. In its prime, the Hippodrome, or circus, was a sporting center where sports and other social entertainment events took place. This is an easy landmark to take in as you pass from the Blue Mosque to other sites.

Little Hagia Sophia & Hagia Sophia Museum
The Hagia Sophia Museum was originally made famous by its massive dome that was said to have changed the history of architecture. It was a marvel of the Byzantine empire and still stands today. Once a Christian Church, a Greek Orthodox Cathedral, an Ottoman Mosque and



back again, the Hagia Sophia now serves as a museum in Istanbul. This great museum is where you will be able to see and learn about some of the world’s oldest history through this marvel of lasting architecture. The most visited site in all of Istanbul, the Hagia Sophia is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Basilica Cistern

Basilica Cistern is the largest of several hundred ancient cisterns that lie beneath the city of Istanbul. It is located within 150m of the Ha-

Dolmabahçe Palace



What is impressive about this particular palace is how modern its amenities were for the time it was built. Stroll through the various rooms and 'houses' on site, sit and enjoy the birds in the large courtyard and enjoy views of the sea.

I suggest taking a half day (morning preferred) to explore the palace buildings, stopping for lunch at the onsite restaurant that overlooks the sea. Note that the palace is up quite a large hill and does provide for beautiful views of the city and the sea, but this also means that it is a bit of a hike to get up to.

Dolmabahçe Palace

Dolmabahçe Palace is located outside of the Sultanahmet District, but still on the European side of the city, right on the coast. This lavish seaside palace is a can't miss for lovers of history and architecture. Stroll through the main palace and its many buildings learning about the Ottoman Empire and the history of Atatürk's life. Tours are available, but you are welcome to guide yourself as well.

Eminönü Neighborhood

The Eminönü Neighborhood is a seaside district of Istanbul that falls under the province's

Topkapi Palace



gia Sofia, so I suggest visiting both at the same time. The cistern is impressive as it showcases just how modern the city of Constantinople was for its time as it provided fresh filtered water to Topkapi Palace and the people of the city. This particular site has been featured in various films, novels and video games.

Topkapi Palace

Topkapi Palace is one of the oldest remaining palaces in the world and was where Sultan's harem would live. The palace is also known as the Seraglio and once served as the administrative headquarters for the Ottoman Empire.

Hamam Turkish Bath



capital district. It is located in one of the oldest parts of the city and is home to many historic and religious sites. What's interesting about visiting Eminönü is its seaside location and unique history. This area is a foodie's paradise featuring local food vendors and restaurants. It is also where you'll find the city's Egyptian Bazaar or Spice Bazaar that offer spices, teas and fruits rather than some of the other goods found that the Grand Bazaar.

Hamam or Turkish Bath House

Hamams or Turkish Baths are popular for both tourists and locals. It is important to note the differences in styles for each type of establishment so you know what to expect. Many hotels offer Turkish Bath facilities which are more commonly hot and cold rooms for relaxation and bathing. Visiting a traditional Hamam is a unique way to experience Turkish culture and relax after a long travel day!

Here is a little bit of what you can expect: First you will need to select a service – either self-service, where you bathe yourself, or a tra-

ditional-style service where an attendant will wash and massage you. Some hamams offer additional treatments such as reflexology, aromatherapy, masks and additional massages. Some facilities require you to be nude where others offer bath wraps. All facilities are separated by gender. Often you will begin in a hot room to sweat and relax, then an attendant will come in for the service after which you will be sent to a cold or intermediate temperature room.

Hamams can be found throughout the city, but some of the most popular are found around the main square in Sultanahmet. For more information on the hamam experience, please see this article.

Taksim Square

Taksim Square is another great part of old Istanbul where you will find plenty of shops, restaurants and hotels. It is near the old part of the city, but not walking distance to the main sites. It is known as a leisure area for locals and tourists alike. Spending an afternoon or evening in this area is a must as there is plenty to see and do.



Boat Cruise on the Bosphorus

A boat cruise on the Bosphorus is a lovely thing to do when visiting Istanbul. It's a great way to see some of the main sites and gorgeous buildings and mosques from the river as well as a way to see both the Asian and European sides of Istanbul. I personally recommend taking a dinner or sunset cruise as this is a beautiful time to take in the city in both the day and night.

There are two easy ways to book a boat cruise on the Bosphorus. You can book through your hotel concierge or search online for a vendor. This is also a way to find a dinner cruise which I personally prefer over the other boats which often double as fishing boats during the day. Dinner cruise vessels are often cleaner and a little more upscale, although you will pay a premium for this.

A less expensive way to find a boat cruise is to look for vendors in Taksim Square, the main square in Sultanahmet or even take a stroll down to the nearby docks to see who is selling open spots on tours. Keep in mind that with anything else, you can barter the price of these tours with the vendors. These less expensive boat cruises are often less organized and a bit more chaotic than a formal dinner cruise or trip booked through an online vendor or hotel concierge.

Where & What to Eat

Oh, the food! The food is fantastic anywhere you go in Istanbul, but I do believe that some of the best authentic Turkish cuisine can be found in the old town. Food isn't very expensive in Istanbul, however, if you visit a more upscale restaurant, expect to pay a higher price. Meal costs at a nice restaurant are comparable with



those in North America. I recommend enjoying at least one nice dinner out at a kabab restaurant in the old town where you can sit on cush-

ions on the floor. It's a really neat experience.

Street food is something to be enjoyed in Istanbul and you will see many vendors selling things like corn on the cob, roasted nuts and freshly sliced fruit. You will also see countless places selling Turkish Delight and Baklava in little bodegas, markets and designated boutiques. Even if you aren't usually a fan of either dessert, do try them in Istanbul as they are very fresh!

You will see a number of coffee cafés around as Turkish coffee is a big part of the local culture. There are also a few 'dervish cafés' including the original Dervish Café in Sultanahmet and around Taksim Square. This is a great place to enjoy dinner in the evening and enjoy a whirling dervish show, something traditional to Turkish culture.



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