



Turkish culture

Amanda Harley explores the appeal of a city that spans two continents and

Istanbul is known as a cosmopolitan melting pot of cultures, races and religions – a vibrant city that spans the two continents of Europe and Asia.

Successive Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman empires have bestowed Istanbul with a rich cultural heritage and architectural marvels such as the Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque and Topkapi Palace.

Vibrant bazaars, narrow cobbled streets, palaces, cathedrals, mosques and Ottoman mansions along the shores of the Bosphorus add to the exotic attraction. But Istanbul is more than a cliché of East meets West, as it fast gains a reputation as a luxury city break destination, with stylish bars, restaurants and boutique hotels.

The city attracts a steady stream of celebrities: Luciano Pavarotti, Mike Tyson, Bill Clinton and Harvey Keitel have all enjoyed stays at Kempinski's Ciragan Palace hotel (www.ciragan-palace.com). Cameron Diaz, Charlize Theron and Demi Moore are reputed to have preferred the elegant Four Seasons hotel (www.fourseasons.com). The luxurious 244-room Ritz-Carlton has the award-winning Laveda Spa (www.ritzcarlton.com).

According to Turkish tourism officials, much of the recent growth in Turkey's bed capacity has been at the top end of the market and 10 international hotel chains will open properties in Istanbul in 2007, including Four Seasons and W Hotels. Many exclusive hotels have opened over the past year or so, including boutique hotels such as Les Ottomans (www.lesottomans.com), the Ajia (www.ajiahotel.com) and Sumahan (www.sumahan.com). Singapore-based hotel chain Shangri-La and Far Eastern Mandarin are also planning to come to Istanbul.

As well as a growing trend for luxury travel, the economic boom has prompted European fashion outlets, including Harvey Nichols, to open up stores in the city, with others such as Cartier and Ermenegildo Zenga set to follow.

Late last year, the London Turkish Culture and Tourism Office launched a UK press advertising campaign focusing on Istanbul as a city break destination. Director Serin Ozduran, says: "The substantial number of international companies investing in luxury hotels shows great confidence in the market and in Turkey's ability to attract a new generation of upmarket tourists."

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Above: Ciragan Palace Kempinski, Besiktas



PHOTOGRAPHICREDIT

trail

which maximises its mixed heritage

In 2010, Istanbul's image will receive a further boost when it showcases its cultural heritage as European Capital of Culture.

Andrew Lee, owner-manager of Exclusive Escapes, says: "Istanbul offers the latest of trends, whether it be food, accommodation or the arts. From the moment you arrive, you feel a sense of vibrancy and excitement that underlies a city bursting with culture."

The increasing numbers of visitors has promoted calls for a third airport in Istanbul. A recent study rated Istanbul's Ataturk Airport as the 14th busiest in Europe, used by more than 21.1 million passengers in 2005. Six suitable locations have been pinpointed for a new airport.

Turkish Airlines, now one of the fastest-growing airlines in Europe, is set to become a member of the Star Alliance, with Istanbul providing a gateway to Central Asia and the Middle East, but also a link to new destinations in Turkey. The country's low-cost scheduled airline, SunExpress, has launched a twice-weekly service between Stanstead and Antalya on the coast.

A project is also under way to upgrade existing rail networks and provide a new Bosphorus crossing, by tunnels that will link the European and Asian side of the city.

WHAT'S NEW TO DO

Live life in the fast lane as Istanbul's Formula One roars into town in the height of summer. Now in its third year at the all-purpose track on the Asian side of the city, the Grand Prix will see some of the biggest names in motor-racing battle it out for pole position. The race takes place on 24-26 August. www.formula1.com

Be part of a snapshot in time when Istanbul Modern celebrates the 60th anniversary of Magnum Photos (below), one of the world's foremost photo agencies, with an

Gumball, annually attracts rock stars, supermodels, billionaires and assorted eccentrics. Drivers tackle a 3,000-mile round trip from London to Asia and back in eight days. A total of 120 supercars (below), including Ferrari Enzo's, Lamborghinis and seven Bugatti Veyrons, will

8,000sqm, stocking high-end brands. www.harveynichols.com

The new, eagerly awaited awaited Four Seasons Bosphorus in Besiktas is due to open at the end of this year. Final details are yet to be revealed, but the hotel, set on the water's edge, will have around 166 rooms, with 25 suites, its own spa, dock and outside venues. www.fourseasons.com

Check out the Genghis Khan and his Heirs exhibition. Artefacts and treasures from the Mongul Empire are on



exhibition featuring legendary names such as Robert Capa. The show, which opened in February and remains on view until 13 May, will be Magnum Photos' first large group exhibition in Turkey. www.istanbulmodern.org

The celebrity supercar rally known to many affectionately as

drive off Antonov cargo planes at Istanbul Sabiha Gokcen Airport on 30 April. Cars will be put through their paces at the F1 track, before the party heads off to the Cirigan Palace, followed by drinks onboard a superyacht and dinner at the Reina Club. www.gumball3000.com

Shop till you drop at stores such as Harvey Nichols, which has opened its first Turkish store in Istanbul at the Kanyon Shopping Mall, a state-of-the-art complex boasting 160 stores. The store is spread out over



display until 8 April, some for the first time, at the Sakıp Sabancı Museum in Emigran, one of the villages on the shores of the Bosphorus. Make time for lunch at Muzedechange (above), a new restaurant voted best new restaurant in Istanbul by *Wallpaper** magazine. muze.sabanciuniv.edu, www.changa-istanbul.com

HOTELS

As well as the fresh crop of luxury hotels that are springing up across the city, some of the old favourites are undergoing a facelift and others reopening under different owners.

The famous Pera Palas Hotel, which has hosted the likes of Agatha Christie, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Greta Garbo, has closed down while it undergoes extensive renovations. The hotel has been bought by the Besiktas Group, which is investing \$20m (£10.25m) in the renovation work, which is set to start this spring and will be finished by the end of next year (www.perapalas.com).

The Ciragan Palace has temporarily closed its palace section, while extensive interior renovation is carried out; meeting rooms will continue to function (www.ciraganpalace.com.tr). Starwood is set to take over the running of the existing Istanbul Princess Hotel, which will reopen as the Sheraton Istanbul Maslak in the middle of this year, following an extensive renovation programme. The 30-storey hotel, in Maslak, the centre of Istanbul's new business district, will include a parking area, fitness centre and spa, indoor swimming pool, business centre, club lounge and gift shops (www.starwood.com).

The historic Macka Palace will be given a makeover by New York-based architect firm Gerner, Kronick and Valcarcel (GKV) and reopen as a luxury boutique hotel, the Park Hyatt Maçka Palace later this year. The Sofa Hotel, which opened in March 2006, has joined Great Hotels (www.ghotw.com/sofa-hotel).

W Hotels Worldwide has revealed plans for a new 130-room hotel in Besiktas, the city's most fashionable shopping district. Starwood will manage the hotel, scheduled to open late 2007. Ross Klein, president of W Hotels, says Istanbul's mix of history and modernity make a fantastic backdrop. "The surfacing of world-class restaurants, art galleries and luxury retailers in the city contribute to Istanbul's emergence as a favourite international business and leisure destination." (www.starwoodhotels.com/whotels)

Hotel chain Mövenpick is opening a second hotel in the city, the Suites & Spa Istanbul. Due to open in the Etiler district by mid-2008, the five-star hotel will offer 102 suites a spa and leisure centre (www.moevenpick-hotels.com).



Top: Sumahan, Cengelkoy; above: the Ajia lobby; below: Les Ottomans, Kurucesme

BEST ROOM IN THE HOUSE

Room 10

Ajia, Kanlica

Client fit: Contemporary couples

Why: Minimalist, with a mezzanine level free-standing bath and bed looking out across the Bosphorus. A private yacht ferries guests to the city.

Price: From €600 (£396)

www.ajiahotel.com

Oriental Presidential Suite

Four Seasons Hotel, Sultanahmet

Client fit: Sightseers

Why: Set in an historic former prison, next door to the Hagia Sophia. Opulent, Oriental furnishings and three private terraces from which to admire the breathtaking view.

Price: From \$3,500 (£2,313)

www.fourseasons.com/istanbul

Sultan suite

Ciragan Palace Kempinski, Besiktas

Client fit: Big spenders

Why: The second largest suite in Europe is furnished fit for royalty, with cavernous rooms, sumptuous decor, marble bathrooms and gold-plated taps.

Price: From \$15,000 (£7,656) per night

www.ciraganpalace.com.tr

Diamond Suite

Les Ottomans, Kurucesme

Client fit: Jetsetters

Why: Extravagant Ottoman-style opulence, with gold ceilings, lavish furnishings and a hotel spa offering treatments, including vinotherapy.

Price: From €3,500 (£2,313) per night

www.lesottomans.com

Emirgan

Sumahan on the Water, Cengelkoy

Client fit: Honeymooners

Why: Split over two levels, with double doors that open on to the garden and its own Turkish hamam.

Price: From \$360 (£183)

www.sumahan.com



CLIENT Q&A
PETER BOXER
 SENIOR CIVIL
 SERVANT

When did you last visit Istanbul?

My first visit to Istanbul was about 10 years ago. I went there to learn Turkish and quickly fell into the rhythm of the city. I sipped tea on the ferry, ate kebabs and aubergine salad inside street cafés and went window shopping in the bazaars. Returning late last year with my partner, I experienced a different Istanbul from those budget-driven days.

What is the attraction?

Istanbul has always been a special place for me. Where else can you dine in Europe and walk to Asia for a nightcap? As a regular business traveller, I am fastidious with my choice of hotels and prefer smaller places with an emphasis on style and service. Istanbul has a good choice of quality boutique hotels.

Where did you stay?

I settled on the Sumahan (www.sumahan.com) on the Asian side. Despite being further from the main sites of interest in Istanbul, all the rooms look out over the Bosphorus, with spectacular views of Istanbul and a romantic night-time skyline.

What did you do while you were there?

As it was my partner's first visit to Istanbul, we spent our three days visiting the sites. We took Sumahan's own boat across the water and went everywhere by foot. With just a long weekend, we concentrated on the top tourist spots, and wandered through the streets of Beyoglu, Sultanahmet and the Balik Pazar, discovering something new and interesting with every step.

Where did you eat out?

We found great eateries, but the culinary highlight was the quirky Eski Ingiliz Karakolu restaurant, also known as Galata House, (0090 212 245 1861, www.thegalatahouse.com). Set in a townhouse that was previously a prison under British rule, owners, Mete and Nadire, serve up great Turkish food with a Georgian twist. If she is in the mood, Nadire will play the piano and treat you to an Edith Piaf programme.

Will you be going back?

I was sad to leave Istanbul at the end of the weekend – so much city and so little time. We are now planning our next holiday in Marrakech. But I am sure we will go back to Istanbul. We still need to spend a day visiting the beautiful, small, wooded and car-free Princess Islands and an afternoon eating seafood with a cold beer.



Top: Oriental Suite, Four Seasons Sultanahmet; above: the 360 Istanbul, Beyoglu

INSIDER'S GUIDE
ANDREW LEE
 OWNER AND
 MANAGER,
 EXCLUSIVE ESCAPES



Istanbul is a complex city full of contradiction. I defy anyone to go there and not wish to return.

A wide variety of hotels provide the highest levels of service and friendliness, including the five-star **Four Seasons** (www.fourseasons.com) and **Ciragan Palace** (www.ciraganpalace.com) and the more bohemian, quirky and interesting properties such as the **Empress Zoe** (www.emzoe.com), **Sari Konak** (www.sarikonak.com) and **Armada hotel** (www.armadahotel.com.tr) in **Sultanahmet** – the old city.

Some upmarket boutique hotels such as the **Ajia** (www.ajiahotel.com) and **Sumahan** (www.sumahan.com) on the Asian side are now appearing. However, these are not so ideally positioned for the tourist highlights. One of the joys of exploring the city is the vast number of roof-top terraces from which to catch spectacular views.

Once the usual tourist attractions have been covered, the areas of **Ortakoy**, **Bebek** and beyond provide a slightly different flavour of Istanbul.

Ortakoy, with its weekend craft markets and waterside cafés, makes for a relaxing morning. Slightly further on is the picturesque village and lazy atmosphere of **Bebek**, with its trendy coffee shops.

The upmarket area of **Nisantas** with high-profile fashion shops such as **Harvey Nichols** and **Stella McCartney** has some interesting restaurants and jazz bars to offer. For a guaranteed good night, **Beyoglu** is a good area to head for. The main road of **Istiklal Caddesi** is fun to walk down, venturing into any number of bars or restaurants hidden down the many side streets or roof terraces above. A firm favourite is **360** (www.360istanbul.com), popular for its cuisine, service and views.

www.exclusiveescapes.co.uk □