



LEFT: A view across the Bosphorus showing the elegant bridge Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge; RIGHT: Hagia Sophia interior (All images courtesy of Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism).

Istanbul: In the footsteps of the sultans

Hammams, meze, baklava, kebabs: Istanbul is a city of the senses. It also bridges the pious and the hedonistic, the Byzantine and the modern Turkish - and the landmasses of Europe and Asia. Heather Walker spent a few days in old Constantinople

by HEATHER WALKER

IF there is one place visitors to Turkey will make a point of seeing, it's Istanbul. It has long lured tourists with its exotic charm and minaret-studded skyline, and is a particularly popular destination for South Africans because it offers visa-free entry to those with a 'Green Mamba' (You may note with some glee that British passport holders have to get visas on arrival).

Istanbul is the only city in the world that straddles two continents - and you will see the influences of both Europe and Asia here. As the former capital of three world empires - the Roman, the Byzantine and the Ottoman, it has borne three names: Byzantium, Constantinople and Istanbul, each of which has inscribed its mark on the palimpsest of modern Istanbul. Today it is the vast, bustling home of 13 million residents, mainly moderate Muslims, who are fiercely proud of their rich heritage.

The best way to soak up a sense of the city's grandeur is by wandering the cobbled streets. Retrace the steps of the Byzantine emperors when visiting Sultanahmet's extraordinary monuments and marvel at the mosques built by the Ottoman sultans on the city's seven hills.

Probably Istanbul's most famous monument, the rust-hued Hagia Sophia is a former Orthodox church later converted into a mosque and now a museum. Its gravity-defying dome is an architectural marvel and its walls boast a handful of gold mosaic panels that survived the iconoclastic period, most notably the Deesis (Last Judgment) depicting Christ Jesus flanked by John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary.

Give yourself at least half a day to see the nearby Topkapi Palace, for 400 years the royal residence of Ottoman sultans. You can see,

among other treasures, the harem complex and some surprisingly fascinating rooms dedicated to collections of weapons, clocks, holy relics and jewellery.

If you're a museum junkie like me, you'll enjoy the archaeological museum, which much like the British Museum, contains many treasures plundered from other lands, such as what is believed to be the ornate sarcophagus of Alexander the Great, as well as fascinating artefacts from Istanbul's past.

The city has more than 3,000 mosques and there are several historic ones worth visiting. You need to take off your shoes before entering and women are obliged to cover their heads inside. Most close to visitors for lunchtime prayers.

The Blue Mosque, built by Sultan Ahmet to rival its neighbour the Hagia Sophia, gets its name from the thousands of decorated tiles that cover its walls - its intricately patterned dome is a sight to behold. The New Mosque is, in my opinion, more blue than the Blue Mosque and equally impressive, while Suleymaniye mosque, built by Suleyman the Magnificent, is much simpler yet just as breathtaking.

No matter where you happen to be at sunset, you are likely to be stopped in your tracks by the evening calls to prayer from one or more mosques in the vicinity. I find the wail of the muezzin mesmerisingly beautiful; others would say it's just plain annoying - but it's all part of Istanbul's unique character.

If it's gold mosaics you're after, the Chora Church has some of the finest in the world - its interior reminiscent of St Mark's Basilica in Venice (on a smaller scale). It's tucked away in the little-visited Western Districts but is easily reached by bus or taxi - and worth the effort.

Istanbul's famed Grand Bazaar is a great place to find gifts, scarves, trinkets, carpets and loukum (Turkish delight). Be sure to haggle and don't bother buying the flavoured tea - it may look beautiful but actually has no taste! If you find the Grand Bazaar overwhelming, try the nearby Spice Bazaar, it's a more manageable size and less crowded to navigate.

Pounding the streets looking at buildings can be thirsty work - and luckily around just about every corner there are little stalls selling freshly squeezed orange or pomegranate juice. I believe London would be a happier place if this trend started in Blighty.

For nightlife and a variety of decent restaurants, head across the Galata Bridge to Beyoglu, the modern heart of Istanbul. There are of course the ubiquitous kebab joints, but seafood is also fresh and abundant, or you could gorge yourself on plates of meze. Be sure to end the meal with a sticky helping of baklava.

A visit to a hamam is a quintessential Turkish experience. Most are open until late at night and are the perfect way to unwind after a long day. Istanbul boasts more than 80 old Ottoman baths where you will get naked (men and women in separate baths) and be scrubbed and rubbed to a degree of cleanliness you have never experienced!

When you're travelling on pounds, Istanbul's accommodation is great value for money. We had a pleasant stay at Hotel Amber, one of several Best Western hotels dotted across the city. The rooms were spacious and air-conditioned, and a sumptuous breakfast was served on the roof terrace with a gorgeous view of the sea.

Heather visited Istanbul courtesy of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

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