

# BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

*Istanbul is doing an excellent job of preserving its rich legacy while embracing the modern world, writes HEIDI FULLER-LOVE, who is enchanted by the Turkish city's potent mix.*

Istanbul's Grand Bazaar houses a plethora of shops selling an array of merchandise from jewellery to antiques.



**T**he tale of the Turkish city that inspired Agatha Christie to write *Murder on the Orient Express* can be traced to when Istanbul – which was founded as Byzantium around 660 BC – enjoyed a glorious reign as the capital of three great empires, Roman (324-395), Byzantine (395-1453) and Ottoman (1453-1923). Fortunately, Istanbul is not the type of city to rest on its laurels.

In fact, it is busy reinventing itself to cater to Turkey's young residents – half the country's population is under the age of 29 – not to mention the Turks and foreigners who are investing in this vibrant city. In the words of award-winning local artist Genco Gulan: "Modern Istanbul has as much dynamism as New York." From ancient *yalis* (waterfront homes) to modern museums, from bustling bazaars to state-of-the-art hotels, this city strung out on a tightrope between Asia and Europe is successfully bridging the gap between old and new.

### Relive History

At the centre of its history is Suleymaniye, a UNESCO World Heritage district on the European side, which is home to three of the city's most precious architectural gems.

Head for The Topkapi Palace Museum (*Sultanahmet*, Tel: 90 212 512 0480), the seat of the Ottoman sultans for four centuries and now a museum, to gaze at one of the world's largest diamonds, the 86K Spoonmaker's Diamond. Its origin is shrouded in mystery, but according to one account, the diamond is named for the spoonmaker who found it on a rubbish heap in Istanbul in the late 17th century.

Then stroll through the luxuriant gardens to the Blue Mosque (*Sultanahmet*, Tel: 90 212 518 1319), built in the 17th century by Ottoman architect Mehmet Aga, to marvel at the azure Iznik tiles from

which the mosque derives its moniker. Just opposite is Hagia Sophia (*Aya Sofya Square, Sultanahmet*, Tel: 90 212 522 1750), the church inaugurated by emperor Justinian I in 537. It later served as the city's main mosque for five centuries following the Ottoman conquest in 1453.

From here, follow *Kucuk Ayasofya Caddesi* (*caddesi* is Turkish for avenue) – via the Kumkapi fishing district where fishermen sell their daily catch of rainbow trout – and head towards Suleymaniye Mosque situated on *Suleymaniye Caddesi*.

Designed by the Ottoman Empire's chief architect Mimar Sinan and built between 1550 and 1557, it is among the city's best-known sights. The vast complex has pencil-slim minarets that seem to touch the sky above the nearby Grand Bazaar ([grandbazaaristanbul.org](http://grandbazaaristanbul.org)), a labyrinth of cafes, restaurants, mosques, banks and stalls bathed in

the smells of shoe polish, cheap cigars and powdery, rose water-flavoured *loukoums* or Turkish delights.

*Cağaloğlu Hamamı* (34 *Prof Kazım İsmail Gurkan Caddesi*, Tel: 90 212 522 2424), the 300-year-old hamam (Turkish bath) where famous personalities ranging from England's king Edward VIII to Hungarian composer Franz Liszt once came to be rubbed and scrubbed is a few blocks away from the bazaar's riot of colour. Now a favourite with modern stars – pop diva Madonna and actor Pierce Brosnan are said to have visited – this cavernous steam room is still the best place in town to wash away the city's heat and grime. Don't worry about how much time to spend at this Turkish bath as Istanbul is not the sort of city where you want to hurry. With 39 districts strung out over some 5,000 sq km, getting around can be slow, which could be a welcome relief for visitors from bustling metropolises. ▶

**ABOVE:** Sunlight streams through the windows of Hagia Sophia, which was once used for religious purposes and is now a museum. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Crowds are a common sight along *Istiklal Caddesi*, a popular shopping street in fashionable *Beyoğlu* district.

**BELOW:** Istanbul Modern showcases modern and contemporary works by artists from Turkey and around the world. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Diners enjoy a meal with a view at a restaurant in the Cihangir area.

## Over the Bridge

Eminonu, a major transport hub, is a short walk from Cagaloglu Hamami. Follow the flow of bikes, carts and cigarette vendors over the Galata Bridge, which was built in 1994 to link the old city of Stamboul with modern Istanbul.

The road named Kemeralti Caddesi on the other side leads to the Tophane district, where a spate of gallery openings – boosted by the donations of Turkey’s powerful industrial dynasties – is the clearest indication of the city’s changing face.

The groundbreaking Istanbul Modern ([istanbulmodern.org](http://istanbulmodern.org)) is the city’s first private museum dedicated to modern and contemporary art. Housed in a renovated shipping warehouse alongside the Bosphorus, it opened in 2004 to showcase the work of Turkish artists. Internationally renowned hyperrealist painter Taner Ceylan and filmmaker Kutlug Ataman are just a few of the artists whose works are displayed here.

Follow the Bosphorus until Tophane morphs into Cihangir, the bohemian neighbourhood with terrace

cafes and shops selling secondhand books and vintage clothes lining its streets. It’s also where Turkish novelist and Nobel laureate, Orhan Pamuk, lives. Shop for scented oils and herbal teas at La Vie en Rose (50A Yeni Yuva Sok, Tel: 90 212 252 090) and sip thick Turkish coffee in Kahvedan ([kahvedancafe.com](http://kahvedancafe.com)), a quaint cafe where locals sometimes spend the afternoon playing backgammon.

From Cihangir, keep following the Bosphorus (or double back to Eminonu and hop on a ferry) to reach Besiktas.

The Besiktas district is a delightful clutter of wooden yalis, craft shops, open-air cafes and food markets. The

main landmark here is the opulent Dolmabahce Palace ([www.millisaraylar.gov.tr](http://www.millisaraylar.gov.tr)). Enormous Bohemian- and Baccarat-crystal chandeliers, one of which was a gift from England’s queen Victoria, light the lavish interior of this Baroque and Rococo-styled 19th century palace. Home to the last six sultans of the Ottoman Empire, the palace also served as the last residence of the country’s first president, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Now a museum, the clocks inside the palace were stopped at 9.05am to commemorate the time of his death on November 10, 1938. ▶



## GOOD EATS

*Genco Gulan, acclaimed local artist and founder of the online art exhibition Web Biennial, picks his three favourite food haunts in Istanbul.*

### GULLUOGLU

Situated at the heart of the Egyptian Bazaar, also known as the Spice Market, this is the best pastry shop in town to savour honey-soaked baklava while taking in the 17th century market’s unique atmosphere. [gulluoglu.com](http://gulluoglu.com)

### NEVIZADE RESTAURANT

This meze restaurant is down an alley near bustling Beyoglu district’s fish market. Try the dolmas (stuffed vegetables), cerkez tavugu (chicken with a walnut and garlic sauce) and cacik (cucumbers in a yogurt sauce). **12 Nevizade Sokak, Tel: 90 212 251 1634**

### LUCCA

This bright and breezy cafe in the laid-back coastal resort of Bebek attracts a modish crowd who come here to sip on owner Cem Mirap’s bistro-style snacks and enjoy views of boats bobbing on the water. [lucastyle.com](http://lucastyle.com)



ABOVE: Sample dry baklava on quince puree with Turkish cream at Muzedechange. OPPOSITE PAGE: The luxurious decor of the Orient Bar at the legendary Pera Palace Hotel.

## Retail Therapy

You will find some of the city's classiest shops grouped around the glamorous and quirky W Istanbul hotel ([wistanbul.com.tr](http://wistanbul.com.tr)) and along the streets surrounding the new Rampa art gallery ([rampaistanbul.com](http://rampaistanbul.com)). Tastefully renovated a few years ago, Akaretler, a row of 19th century houses that were originally built for royal staff from the Dolmabahce Palace, is now the headquarters for Turkey's top artists.

Don't miss Haremlique ([www.haremlique.com](http://www.haremlique.com)), a boutique that sells exclusive textiles and accessories. Also drop by Autoban ([autoban212.com](http://autoban212.com)), a design studio – with a gallery showroom – run by a group of architects and interior designers. Autoban's 1960s leather sofas and insect-inspired light fittings were used to furnish the stylish House Hotel Nisantasi ([thehousehotel.com](http://thehousehotel.com)). The 45-room luxury boutique property is located in the fashionable Nisantasi district, home to international couture brands such as Prada and Juicy Couture.

You would probably have worked up an appetite

by now, so satisfy your hunger at Muzedechange ([changa-istanbul.com](http://changa-istanbul.com)), a cosy eatery with brass-and-oak decor inside the Sakip Sabanci Museum ([muze.sabanciuniv.edu/homepage](http://muze.sabanciuniv.edu/homepage)). Kiwi fusion cuisine chef Peter Gordon mentors the eatery's chefs who produce subtle and surprising dishes. The restaurant's specialities include lamb chops served on a bed of harissa-spiced bulgur pilaf, Turkish cheese-stuffed zucchini flowers and Turkish coffee ice cream doused in bitter almond liqueur. Pop into the museum after your meal to view its displays of calligraphy and Ottoman art.

For your next stop, go to the city's most famous pedestrian-only avenue, Istiklal Caddesi. Over the past decade, locals and a handful of foreigners have been buying up the rundown properties and turning them into organic grocers, trendy shops, patisseries, art galleries and hip nightclubs. Fashionable cafes line the alleys around Tunel Square at the southern end.

Cicek Pasaji (Flower Passage), a short stroll away, is home to dozens of traditional Turkish restaurants that serve good value home-cooked mezes (small

dishes). Try Imroz (24 Nevizade Sokak, Tel: 90 212 249 9073) for bite-sized chunks of stuffed cabbage, grilled sardines and smoked eggplant, but if you are seeking something more substantial, try Mikla ([miklarestaurant.com](http://miklarestaurant.com)). Recently opened on the roof garden of the 18-storey Marmara Pera Hotel ([themarmarahotels.com](http://themarmarahotels.com)), the menu concocted by Finnish-born chef Mehmet Gurs is a fusion of local and Nordic influences. The dishes include a fragrant rose-scented chicken and feather-tender lamb entrecote loin baked with molasses.

Keep on walking and you will find Taksim Square, known locally as the Times Square of Istanbul, and 360 Istanbul ([360istanbul.com](http://360istanbul.com)), a glass-walled nightclub on the top floor of a 19th century building. The club offers panoramic views over the Bosphorus and is the best place to watch the beautiful people who flock here to see and be seen.

By now it's time for bed, so head for the legendary Pera Palace Hotel ([perapalace.com](http://perapalace.com)), which is also the last stop on the Paris-to-Istanbul Orient Express line and where Christie is said to have penned Murder

on the Orient Express. Luxuriously refurbished with Carrara marble, Murano glass chandeliers and handwoven Usak carpets, this historic hotel combines age-old atmosphere with modern creature comforts to create that potent blend, which Istanbul does so well. ■

## fast facts

### CURRENCY

Turkish Lira  
US\$1 = 1.81 TRY

### VISA

Requirements vary. Visit [mfa.gov.tr/visa-information-for-foreigners.en.mfa](http://mfa.gov.tr/visa-information-for-foreigners.en.mfa) for details.

### BEST TIME TO VISIT

The milder weather from April to mid-June and from September to early November makes these

months more pleasant for visitors to Istanbul. Be prepared for crowds, dust and heat if you visit during late June to mid-September.

### HOW TO GET THERE

Singapore Airlines flies 5 times weekly from Singapore to Istanbul.

**MORE INFORMATION**  
[goturkey.com](http://goturkey.com)