TRAVEL DESTINATIONS A-Z

Istanbul Travel Guide

By **Katie Nadworny** | Published on August 16, 2021

PHOTO: ALEXANDER SPATARI/GETTY IMAGES

There is nowhere in the world quite like Istanbul. Spread across two continents, Istanbul is a city of layers and contrasts. With historical sights like the Hagia Sophia and Topkapi Palace brushing up against buzzing bars and lively cafes, with Ottoman-era mosques a short walk from contemporary art museums and galleries, with traditional carpet shops around the corner from trendy boutiques, Istanbul is a city of old and new coexisting. The city never stops moving.

Istanbul is the cultural capital of the country, with a plethora of independent galleries and inventive restaurants, as well as its transit hub, with flights going all over Turkey and all over the world. Each neighborhood has its own distinct identity and vibe, and it's easy to spend weeks in Istanbul without ever seeing everything. But that is what makes it so fascinating—there will always be something calling you back for more. So order a cup of Turkish coffee and a piece of pistachio baklava, and get ready to delve into this fascinating metropolis.

Time Zone

Turkey's time zone is GMT+3 year-round, and is also called TRT (Turkey Time). Turkey does not do daylight savings.

Best Time to Go

Spring (April-May) and autumn (September-October) are the perfect times to visit Istanbul, when the weather is bright and mild. During the month of April is the city-wide Tulip Festival, when the parks and green spaces in the city are bedazzled with the colorful bulbs. In the summer, the city becomes sticky and very hot, and most residents flee to the beaches in the south as soon as they can, but the streets are alive all night when the air cools off a little. Winter is gray and rainy, showing Istanbul at its most moody and evocative.

Things to Know

The main language in Istanbul is Turkish, though with a large international presence in the city, don't be surprised to hear chatter in English or Arabic or Farsi as you explore. Turkish people are generally quite helpful, even if you don't speak any Turkish, and shop owners (especially in Sultanahmet, the historic center) will often invite you to sit down and share a *çay,* a tiny tulip-shaped cup of strong black tea. Personal space is often a luxury in this crowded city, so don't be surprised if you feel someone is standing too close to you as you wait for a bus or in a line—it's normal here.

Don't mistake the water that bisects the city for a river. The Bosphorus Strait connects the Sea of Marmara (and, by extension, the Mediterranean) with the Black Sea, and is therefore a major global shipping route. It's not unusual to see massive container ships floating by your commuter ferry.

While Istanbul is the largest city in Turkey, the capital city is actually Ankara, in central Anatolia. But the palaces that dot the Bosphorus, left over from Istanbul's status as the capital of the Ottoman Empire, might make you think otherwise. The politicians might do their business in Ankara, but Istanbul feels like the center of the world.

Currency: Turkish Lira (TL)

(Check the current exchange rate)

Language: Turkish
I don't speak Turkish: Türkçe bilmiyorum.
I'm lost: Kayboldum
Can I have...?: ...alabilirmiyim?
Where is...?: ... nerede?

Calling Code: +90

Capital City: Ankara

How to Get Around

Intricate interlocking transportations—both official and informal—make it easy to navigate around Istanbul. There are multiple metro lines with clear signage and modern cars that connect to an above-ground tram line and two funiculars. The Marmaray, a cross-continent metro line that passes under the Bosphorus Strait, connects the metro system on the European and Asian sides of the city, and has recently expanded to run all the way into the suburbs on both sides of the city. Otherwise, the best way to cross from Europe to Asia and back is by ferry, with multiple ferry lines running between stations on a regular schedule all throughout the day.

The gaps are filled by city buses, which are paid for by the same IstanbulKart that gets you onto the metro, Marmaray, and ferries. And if there is no bus that runs to your destination, there might be a *dolmuş*, a yellow van that runs on a fixed route but stops whenever a passenger requests it and leaves whenever the van is full. There are also light blue minibuses that run on various routes throughout the city. Dolmuş and minibuses are paid in cash, with the price depending on the distance you go.

Taxis are plentiful, especially around touristed areas. Apps like BiTaksi can be useful to call taxis directly, and hotels are also usually happy to order a taxi if you can't flag one down.

Best Hotels

Ciragan Palace Kempinski

PHOTO: COURTESY OF CIRAGAN PALACE KEMPINSKI

Address: Ciragan Caddesi 32
34349 Istanbul
Phone: +90 212 326 4646
Website

Housed in an ornate former Ottoman palace on the shores of the Bosphorus Strait, the Ciragan Palace is the ultimate luxurious hotel in Istanbul. The Ciragan boasts an outdoor infinity pool, an exquisite spa with a Turkish hamam, and high-end restaurants. If you want to experience Istanbul like Ottoman royalty, the Ciragan is the place to do it.

Corinne Hotel

Address: Kuloğlu Mah., Turnacıbaşı Caddesi 41
34433 Beyoğlu/İstanbul
Phone: +90 212 293 94 94
Website

Located in the heart of Beyoğlu, Istanbul's nightlife and entertainment district, the Corinne Hotel is an ideal base to experience the energy of the city. The boutique hotel is in a lovingly restored late-Ottoman neoclassical building, with trendy and contemporary amenities alongside a winding marble staircase. Don't miss out on its rooftop terrace, the perfect place to sip a cocktail and watch Istanbul sparkle below.

Sirkeci Mansion

Address: Taya Hatun Sokak 5
34120 Sirkeci/Istanbul
Phone: +90 212 528 43 44
Website

Nestled in the heart of Sultanahmet, Sirkeci Mansion is walking distance from the Hagia Sophia, Gulhane Park, and Topkapi Palace. The hotel contains 32 spacious rooms, a spa, and an on-site restaurant. Relax at the hotel's Turkish hamam, or head up to the hotel's rooftop, with its sweeping views of the old city.

Pera Palace Hotel

Address: Mesrutiyet Caddesi 52
34430 Tepebasi/Istanbul
Phone: +90 212 377 4000
Website

Modern luxury and Turkish history entwine at the Pera Palace hotel, a grand Art Nouveau beauty that was built for travelers on the Orient Express and over the years has hosted illustrious guests that include Agatha Christie, Ernest Hemingway, and Queen Elizabeth II. The Pera Palace is located close to Istiklal Caddesi, Istanbul's main thoroughfare. The five-star hotel has 115 rooms, multiple restaurants and bars, and a fully-equipped spa and fitness center.

The Bank Hotel

Address: Azapkapı, Bankalar Caddesi 5/1
34421 Beyoğlu/İstanbul
Phone: +90 212 283 00 55
Website

Located in a reappropriated late-Ottoman-era bank in the Karakoy neighborhood, The Bank Hotel is a trendy boutique hotel located between the historic peninsula and the nightlife of Istiklal Caddesi. The eclectic design mixes the modern and the historic bones of the building throughout the hotel's 62 rooms. The restaurant on the rooftop offers splendid views of the city.

Splendid Palace Hotel

Address: Büyükada-nizam, Yirmiüç Nisan Caddesi 39
34970 Adalar/İstanbul
Phone: +90 216 382 69 50
Website

This striking hotel on Istanbul's biggest island is full of early Republic charm, somehow both modern and nostalgically vintage. A highlight is the outdoor pool, where it's easy to while away the day in the sunshine. The 60 rooms and 9 suites are bright and breezy, perfect for an island escape in the middle of the city.

Best Restaurants

Mikla

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MIKLA

Address: The Marmara Pera
Meşrutiyet Caddesi 15
34430 Beyoğlu/İstanbul
Phone: +90 212 293 5656
Website

The creation of lauded Turkish-Scandinavian chef Mehmet Gurs, Mikla has long had a reputation as one of the best restaurants in Istanbul thanks to its creative twist on traditional cuisine. Located on the roof of the Marmara Pera Hotel, the views are as exquisite as the food. Try the tasting menu to get a sense of the scope of Mikla's creative culinary creations. Reservation is recommended. Indoor and outdoor dining is available.

Ciya Sofrasi

Address: Caferağa Mah. Güneşlibahçe Sokak 43
34710 Kadıköy/Istanbul,
Phone: +90 216 330 3190
Website

This unassuming restaurant in the heart of the Kadikoy neighborhood's market street belies its reputation as an Istanbul powerhouse. With cuisine drawn from various regions across Anatolia, especially its diverse southeast region, the menu is constantly shifting and incorporating seasonal produce. In the summertime, try the cherry kebab; in the springtime, don't miss the lamb stewed with *erik*, Turkish sour plums. Indoor and outdoor dining is available.

Akin Balik

Address: Azapkapı, Gümrük Han, Fermeneciler Caddesi 40/A
34420 Beyoğlu/İstanbul
Phone: +90 212 244 97 76
Website

This seemingly ramshackle restaurant comes alive at night, glittering with strings of lights and lanterns. Perched right at the edge of the water in the Karakoy district, this is an evocative place to have the Turkish *meyhane* experience, with small plates of meze dotting the table and *rakı* (an anise liquor) flowing all night. Make sure to try the *atom*, thick yogurt mixed with hot dried peppers, and the catch of the day. Reservation is recommended, especially on weekends, and most dining is outdoors.

Aheste

PHOTO: BARIS OZCETIN/COURTESY OF AHESTE

Address: Mesrutiyet Caddesi 107/F
34430 Beyoglu/Istanbul
Phone: +90 212 243 2633
Website

This cozy bistro in the Pera neighborhood, walking distance from Istiklal Caddesi, combines Turkish, Persian, and Middle Eastern influences in its inventive cuisine. Make sure to try the dudi Persian rice speckled with ruby-red barberries. Reservation recommended, only indoor dining.

Things to Do

Hagia Sophia

PHOTO: DANNY HU/GETTY IMAGES

Address: Ayasofya Meydanı 1
34122 Fatih/İstanbul
Phone: +90212 522 17 50
Website

The Hagia Sophia is a building that has held many identities: from a Byzantine church to an Ottoman mosque to a secular museum, and now back to a mosque again. Visitors will need to respect the rules of the mosques in Turkey and dress appropriately, but there is no longer a fee to experience the ultimate palimpsest of a building. While some of the famous mosaics and frescoes are covered, many are still visible.

Topkapi Palace

PHOTO: BOB KRIST/GETTY IMAGES

Address: Cankurtaran Mah.
4122 Fatih/Istanbul
Phone: +90 212 512 04 80
Website

Construction on Topkapi Palace began in 1453, when the Ottomans took Constantinople, and was the primary seat of imperial power for nearly four hundred years. The Harem requires an additional ticket, but it's worth it, with its magnificent blue-tiled walls and chambers.

Galata Tower

Address: Bereketzade, Galata kulesi
34421 Beyoğlu/İstanbul
Phone: +90 212 245 4141
Website

Built by the Genoese in the 14th century, Galata Tower is an iconic part of the Istanbul skyline. Climb to the top for some of the best views of the city—especially at sunset.

Suleymaniye Mosque

PHOTO: KEVSER SALIH/GETTY IMAGES

Address: Süleymaniye Mah, Prof. Sıddık Sami Onar Caddesi 1
34116 Fatih/İstanbul
Website

Suleymaniye Mosque is considered Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan's most splendid Istanbul mosque, and the architect himself is buried in a tomb on the site. With its intricate tiles, massive dome, and sweeping view of the city from its courtyard, Suleymaniye is a gem among Istanbul's imperial mosques.

Kilic Ali Pasa Hamam

Address: Kemankeş Mah. Hamam Sokak 1
34425 Tophane Karaköy/İstanbul
Phone: +90 212 393 80 10
Website

The full *hamam*, or Turkish bath, experience is particularly luxurious at the Kili Ali Pasa Hamam. Sweat out on a marble slab in the elegantly restored historic building, and get scrubbed squeaky clean.

Best Shopping

Grand Bazaar

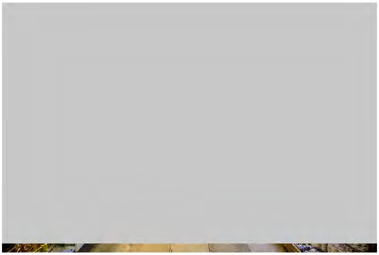

PHOTO: EDWIN REMSBERG/GETTY IMAGES

Address: Beyazıt, Kalpakçılar Cd. 22
34126 Fatih/İstanbul
Phone: +90 212 519 12 48

Istanbul's Grand Bazaar is one of the largest and oldest covered markets in the world, encompassing an entire buzzing hive of artisans and merchants spread across 60 streets and 4000 shops. Come for traditional Turkish carpets, gold and silver jewelry, leather goods, and more—and make sure to sit, share a tea, and haggle.

Spice Bazaar (Egyptian Bazaar)

PHOTO: IRINA_TIMOKHINA/GETTY IMAGES

Address: Rüstem Paşa, Erzak Ambarı Sokak 92
34116 Fatih/İstanbul
Phone: +90 212 513 65 97

Built in the 17th century, this fragrant covered market brims over with spices, from tangy sumac to smokey urfa pepper to Turkish saffron. Vendors also sell Turkish delight, ceramics, and other non-spice items.

Arasta Bazaar

Address: Kabasakal Caddesi
34122 Fatih/İstanbul

This market street in the heart of the Sultanahmet neighborhood historically housed shops whose rent helped pay for the maintenance of the nearby Blue Mosque. Now, vendors sell hand-woven pestamel (Turkish towels), ceramics, carpets, and more.

Souq Dukkan

Address: Büyükdere Caddesi 185
34330 Şişli/İstanbul
Phone: +90 555 030 82 32
Website

Souq Dukkan began as an artisan's bazaar in the trendy Karakoy neighborhood before recently relocating to Kanyon in Levent. Featuring the work of local designers, creators, and artists, Souq Dukkan is the place to find unique Turkish items from some of the city's most creative minds.

Neighborhoods to Know

Sultanahmet: Seemingly every block in this neighborhood has something historical poking out. The central square is dominated by the twinned Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque, and the streets hold other imperial Ottoman-era mosques, Byzantine cisterns, and the remains of a hippodrome. This is the main place visitors to Istanbul come, and with good reason—the layered empires that dominated Istanbul have all left their mark right here.

Kadıköy: Located on Istanbul's Asian shore, Kadıköy is the neighborhood of artists and creatives. Bright colorful murals decorate the walls of buildings, while the streets brim with vibrant bars, sleek third-wave coffee shops, trendy boutiques, and al fresco dining. Kadıköy has a long stretch of seaside that is filled on summer nights with locals enjoying a beer at sunset. Only a picturesque ferry ride away from the city center, Kadıköy is the neighborhood to visit to see how Istanbul's cool kids live.

Cihangir: This trendy neighborhood, just a few blocks from Taksim Square, is the place to see and be seen. With cutting-edge boutiques, moody bistros, colorful bars slinging cocktails, and stylish cafes, Cihangir has long been the scene where hip Turks and foreigners mingle.

Beşiktaş: Located on the European Bosphorus shore just a short walk from Dolmabahçe Palace, Beşiktaş is a rowdy neighborhood famed for its passionate support of the local football team and its plethora of pubs. Explore the rollicking side streets spilling over with people enjoying the night time energy.

Karakoy: Formerly a forlorn strip of shipping warehouses and camping shops, the Karakoy neighborhood has blossomed in the last decade into a colorful strip of restaurants, boutiques, and art galleries. One building houses five of Istanbul's premier private galleries, while mere steps away is the splendid Kılıc Ali Paşa Mosque and its luxurious hammam.

Nişantaşı: For luxury and high-end experiences, Istanbul's elite come to upscale Nişantaşı. Here's where you can find haute couture boutiques, luxury brands like Prada and Louis Vuitton, and elegant restaurants. Just nearby is Maçka Park, one of the few parks in central Istanbul and an ideal place to stroll.

The Princes Islands: The Princes Islands, called *Adalar* in Turkish, are nine islands in the sea of Marmara, with four open to the public. Cars are not allowed on the islands, so it's best to get around by bicycle, by foot, or by horse-drawn carriage. With its charming white wooden houses and lush bougainvillea, the islands are an escape from the city within the city. The four islands (Büyükada, Heybeliada, Burgazada, and Kınalıada) can be reached by regular ferries from the mainland.

Balat: The twinned neighborhoods of Fener and Balat, historically home to large Greek and Jewish populations, are some of the most picturesque in Istanbul, with colorful wooden houses lining hilly cobblestone streets. Balat has erupted in recent years, easily claiming its place as one of Istanbul's most interesting up-and-coming neighborhoods. Explore the antique shops that dot the area or stop at one of the many cafes and new restaurants that line the streets.

Weather

Winter: Istanbul winters are gray and constantly rainy, with weather hovering around 45°-50°F. While it's not ideal weather, the city is evocative and somehow cozy, with vendors selling roasted chestnuts on the street corners and steaming tulip-shaped cups of tea on offer at every restaurant.

Spring: In the springtime, the sun comes out and the weather warms up to a comfortable 65°-70°F. Flowers bloom all over the city, from fragrant jasmine to hot pink petals bursting from Judas trees. The early end of spring can still be a little chilly, but everyone still sits outside to soak in the sun.

Summer: The long, sticky, crowded days of Istanbul's summer usually have temperatures around 85°F with 70% humidity. The saving grace is the water that surrounds the city—the breeze off the Bosphorus on a transcontinental ferry ride or a swim in the Sea of Marmara from Istanbul's islands takes the edge off the muggy heat. And the endless summer nights, often spent sitting around a long *meyhane* table sipping a cold glass of anise-flavored *raki*, make it all worth it.

Fall: Autumn in Istanbul is warm and comfortable. The humidity comes down, as does the temperature, lingering around a comfortable 65°F in the early autumn and slipping around to 60°F in the later part. This is the best time to come to Istanbul.

Apps to Download

BiTaksi: Local taxi-hailing app
iOs | Android

Uber: International taxi-hailing app
iOs | Android

Trafi: Live traffic updates
iOs | Android

Moovit: Transportation schedule aggregator
iOs | Android

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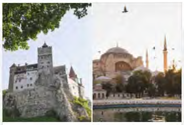

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