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PLACES TO STAY

The best hotels in Istanbul

From Ottoman palaces to sleek contemporary addresses, these are the best places to stay in Istanbul

BY LAURA FOWLER AND ZAHRA SURYA DARMA
13 May 2023

Astride the glittering Bosphorus, Istanbul is the hotspot where worlds, cultures, religions and empires collide. A unique fusion of East-West, ancient-modern, grit and grandeur. Old bohemian neighbourhoods thrum with new-wave chefs and contemporary artists. Exquisitely restored Ottoman palaces and mansions now house an abundance of top-drawer hotels – some all faded grandeur from a former heyday, others highly polished with next-level spas and rooftop pool terraces, where sundowner DJ sets float over the call of the muezzin from minarets haloed at golden hour. For the latest spots worthy of a stay, these are the best hotels in Istanbul.

EMRE DORTER

The Peninsula Istanbul

The Peninsula open so few hotels that when a new one appears you know it's going to be something very special. Nearly 10 years in the making, Istanbul is the group's 11th property, made up of four separate buildings – three of which are protected historical landmarks – sprawling across 250-metres of prime Galataport waterfront property taking in views of the Golden Horn, the Bosphorus, and the old city, including Topkapi Palace, the Blue Mosque, Hagia Sophia and Süleymaniye Mosque – the full picture-perfect postcard. Sublime views that can be soaked up over a menemen egg breakfast on the terrace; while taking laps of the pool; from the vast rooftop bar and restaurant, Gallada, helmed by two Michelin star chef Fatih Turak; and from the majority of the rooms, some of which have juliet balconies, terraces or gardens. The elegant contemporary interiors, designed by Zeynep Fadıllıoğlu, are impressive too: Marmara marbles, mother-of-pearl inlay, Iznik tiles and intricate hand-painted glasswork woven around a champagne backdrop and a carefully curated collection of Turkish artworks. Combined with The Peninsula's outstanding spa and ever-thoughtful service, a stay here is likely to leave you ruined for all other hotels. *Lee Cobaj*

Address: Kemankeş Karamustafa Paşa, Karaköy, Kemankeş Karamustafapaşa Mahallesi, Kemankeş Cd. No:34, 34425 Beyoğlu/İstanbul, Turkey

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Manolo Yllera

Mandarin Oriental Bosphorus, Beşiktaş

For timeless elegance

Time swallowed the remnants of an abandoned property only to be resurrected years later in summer 2021 by the same team behind Mandarin Oriental's Bodrum outpost. Nestled in Beşiktaş, this shorefront urban retreat is surrounded by a protected forest and waterside residences where you'll find fewer tourists and more locals out on morning jogs – offering a pitch-perfect balance of crowd-free, yet still close enough to the buzzy Old Town.

The 100 rooms, brilliantly concocted by Tihany Design, capture the essence of Istanbul: tulip-shaped tiles adorn the bathrooms, Ottoman çintamani emblems are in the mini bar and tree of life-inspired motifs plaster the walls. Wood coverings accompany the yacht-style interiors, subtly tying in with the ones floating by just outside your room. 80 of the rooms, which are spread across three floors, have widescreen Bosphorus views, allowing you to sleep in Europe and wake up to Asia with minaret towers graciously standing by iconic landmarks.

The dining scene here is as much for locals as hotel guests, with options ranging from refined Italian to Asian-Italian fusion, and Cantonese cuisine joining later in mid-2023 – all of which come with shorefront seats on the terrace where the lucky ones can spot dolphins swim by. The terrace also houses two pools, with the third one in the spa and wellness centre below ground. Speaking of the spa, there are 14 treatment rooms including head-to-toe marbled Hammams. The masseuses for your deep-tissues were trained from Turkey and Indonesia and the facials feature products from Barbara Sturm. There's also a gym studio with enclosed yoga, cycle and reformer pilates spaces.

Read our full review of Mandarin Oriental Bosphorus.

Address: Kuruçeşme, Muallim Naci Cd. No: 62, 34345 Beşiktaş/İstanbul, Turkey

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Six Senses Kocatas Mansions, Sariyer

For the super-spa treatment

Sitting pretty beside the Bosphorus, Six Senses' Istanbul outpost has been created from two refurbished Ottoman mansions in the leafy, prosperous Sariyer neighbourhood, a private-boat-ride from the centre. It's deliciously elegant: creamy as lor cheese, inside and out. Vast windows let in beams of light, illuminating the soaring spaces of pale marble, delicately panelled walls and intricate cornicing, and allow Bosphorus views from the big brass beds in the best of the 45 rooms and suites. The sprawling spa opened late last year on a hill above the hotel, and has sensational views across the strait. Appropriately, treatments include East-meets-West options such as the traditional Hammam (a full-on scrub down from a local therapist) and the Alchemy Bar workshop (making your own products using organic ingredients from the garden). Indeed, Istanbul's unique east-west offerings are in evidence everywhere, from the ingredients in the two restaurants (pan-Asian and Italian) in colourful dishes artfully presented, the cultural experiences recommended by insiders, and the community-focused initiatives run by the hotel's Earth Lab, which runs educational eco workshops for guests.

Address: Merkez, Meserburnu Cd. No: 5, 34450 Sarıyer/İstanbul, Turkey

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Ecole St Pierre Hotel, Galata/Karaköy

For on-trend interiors with a rich history

A hotchpotch of cultures comes together beautifully at Ecole St Pierre Hotel, a 17-room boutique hotel which opened in September 2021 beside the Galata Tower. A former French Catholic school set in the gardens of an Italian monastery, it was designed by Italian architect Gaspare Fossati (who restored the Hagia Sofia in the mid 19th century), run by Dominican monks, and attended by pupils from all over Europe. The remains of the 13th-century Genoese ramparts of Constantinople form part of the restaurant; the monks' dormitory is now – mon dieu! – a café/lounge hangout with a cocktail bar in the garden. Louvred French windows open onto wrought iron balconies on galleried floors which run around a central courtyard. The original bones of the building, painstakingly preserved, now form the backdrop for zeitgeisty interiors trends – accents of colonial cane, inky-blue Venetian-tiled bathrooms, blond wood, exposed brick, statement contemporary lighting – to make what's inside as lovely as the pretty facade.

Address: Bereketzade, Galata Kulesi Sk. No:14 D:20, 34420 Beyoğlu/İstanbul, Turkey

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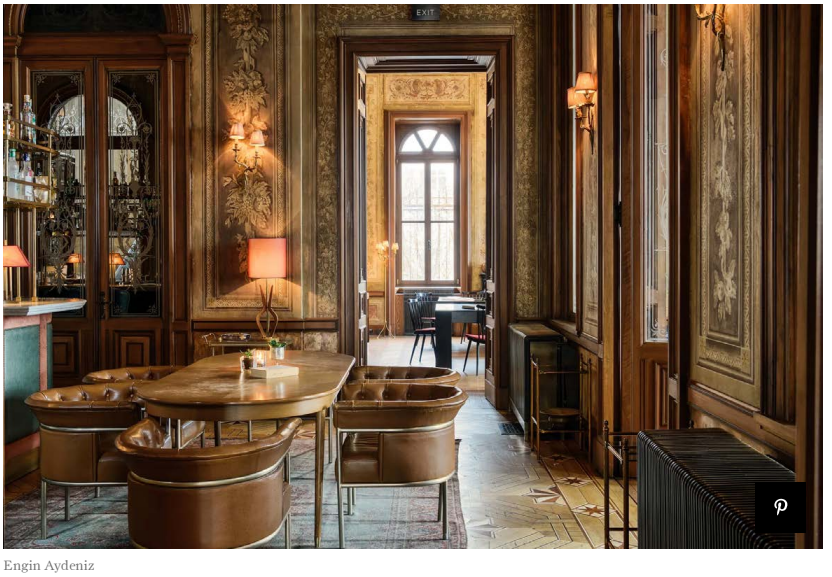

Engin Aydeniz

Soho House Istanbul, Beyoğlu

For groovy grandeur

A 19th-century Italianate palazzo-turned-US Consulate lends itself perfectly to the Soho House aesthetic. When it opened, Soho House Istanbul was the group's most ambitious yet, and for many, it's still the most beautiful, all the original detail preserved: painted and panelled-oak walls, frescoed and embellished ceilings, intricate Art Nouveau ironwork and marble staircases the colour of tobacco... It's an altogether grand, grown-up backdrop for the group's clubby decor – mid-century furniture, armchairs in leather, velvet and cane – mixed up with elements from the locale: antique Turkish rugs, and hamams in the spa. Up top, the palazzo sprouts a green crop of trees offering sun-dappled shade over Apheleia Terrace, its brand-new rooftop restaurant, where Mykonos chef Athinagoras Kostakis has devised a menu of punchy Mediterranean mezzes with a Mexican twist. Fittingly it's bang in Beyoğlu, the bohemian neighbourhood where Orhan Pamuk set his novels, vibrant with restaurants and bars, independent galleries and boutiques.

Address: Evliya Çelebi, Meşrutiyet Cd. No:56, 34430 Beyoğlu/İstanbul, Turkey

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RAMSEY QUBEIN

Sumahan on the Water

For an architectural fix

In this city of a thousand palace hotels, Sumahan is a fresh take on a luxury stay: a strongly contemporary architectural reimagining of an 1820s waterfront distillery, which once turned bargefuls of figs into suma, the spirit used to make raki. The property has belonged to the same family for generations, and early this century owner Nedret Butler and her husband Mark, both architects, oversaw its transformation into a sophisticated hotel, with some help from their designer daughters. As a result, there's a personal, homely feel to the place. Thirteen light, lofty rooms and suites (some with private hamam) are pared back – to what feels like relative Scandi parity in this much-embellished city – and named after local neighbourhoods, every one with a view of the Bosphorus, where dolphins can be spotted in early summer; in winter, real fires are lit in every room. In the riverside garden, Adirondack chairs are set in the shade of palms and fruit trees and pink oleander.

Address: Çengelköy, Kuleli Cd. No:43, 34684 Üsküdar/İstanbul, Turkey

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MAHMUT CEYLAN

Splendid Palace Hotel, Büyükada

For time-worn charm

Istanbul has its own archipelago – who knew? The Princes' Islands, where unpopular royals (and also, incidentally, Leon Trotsky) were once exiled. By the 20th century the archipelago had become a summer retreat for wealthy Istanbulites swapping city swelter for the Ottoman palaces and Belle Epoque mansions set on its green and peaceful shores. Perhaps the most magnificent of them all is the Splendid Palas Hotel on car-free Büyükada (the only traffic are bicycles and horse-drawn carriages). It's film-set striking, inside and out – a 1908 symphony of Western art nouveau and Eastern embellishment in the colours of the Turkish flag, topped with twin onion domes. Bolts of brilliant red – shutters, screens, stair runners – blaze against the all-white building, like an Anish Kapoor installation.Interiors are a little touched and faded just-so, original detailing intact, from the piped-icing frippery of ceilings to the wooden lobby desk and 1920s pineapple lamp. Three galleried stories of 69 rooms wrap around a tiled courtyard, with its fountain and grand piano, potted palms and cane furniture; and red-and-white striped sun loungers line the pool terrace.

Address: Büyükada-nizam, Yirmiüç Nisan Cd. No: 39, 34970 Adalar/İstanbul, Turkey

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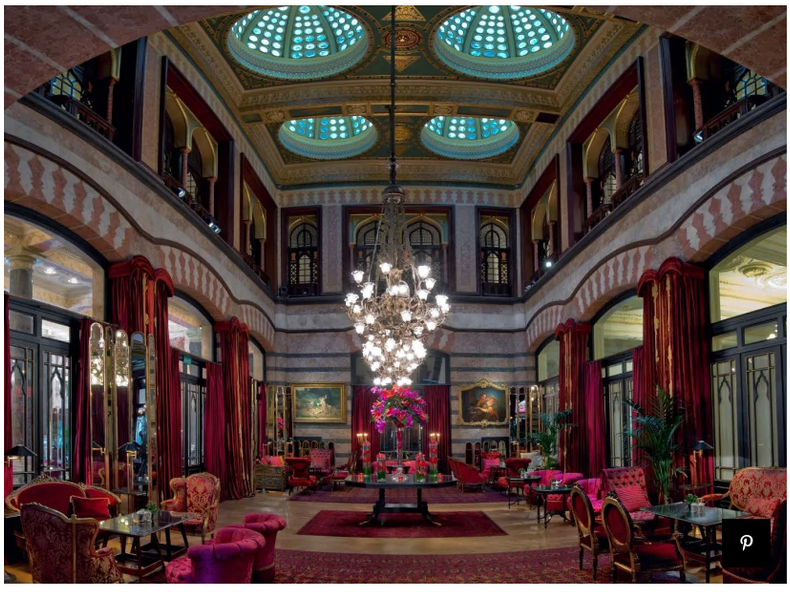

Pera Palace Hotel

For jazz-age glamour

Pera Palace is to Istanbul what The Savoy is to London – a grande dame of the Belle Epoque, favoured haunt of old Hollywood, royals and literati whose high heels and polished correspondents have clicked, clacked and Charlestoned across its chequerboard marble floors ever since it opened in 1895. Queen Elizabeth II, Greta Garbo, Jackie Onassis and Mata Hari have all stayed, along with various emperors, kings, and shahs – and, it goes without saying, Ernest Hemingway. Agatha Christie wrote *Murder on the Orient Express* in Room 411 – and indeed the hotel was built to accommodate passengers of the iconic train at the end of their journey. Rooms are trad, polished, and much-beswagged, with views of the Golden Horn or of Pera, once known as Little Europe. Afternoon tea in the sugar-pink patisserie is more English than the Savoy itself.

Address: Evliya Çelebi, Meşrutiyet Caddesi, Tepebaşı Cd. No:52, 34430 Beyoğlu/İstanbul, Turkey

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Paul Thuysbaert

Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Sultanahmet

For a historic stay

The Four Seasons has not one but two palacial properties in Istanbul, on either side of the Golden Horn. Take your pick – both are glorious, their settings knock-out. Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at the Bosphorus, created out of an Ottoman Palace, does breezy waterside glam to a T, and in summer, it's hard to imagine a lovelier place to be than its terrace, all red and white striped cabanas between the blues of pool and sea. Over in Istanbul's ancient heart, Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Sultanahmet has a weightier romance about it. The historic building was once a prison which housed the dissident literati in the Ottoman era; now highly polished and deeply luxurious, its arresting facade painted a happy yellow, it's hard to imagine ever wanting to escape. Modern Anatolian dishes are beautifully presented in the jasmine-scented courtyard garden. Rooms are generous; kilims, neoclassical furniture and woven Turkish textiles replace the usual 4S creamy-classic palette. Its neighbours are the Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace and Hagia Sophia, whose minarets and domes tower over the hotel as though keeping a saintly eye on the incumbents.

Address: Sultanahmet, Tevkifhane Sk. No:1, 34122, Turkey

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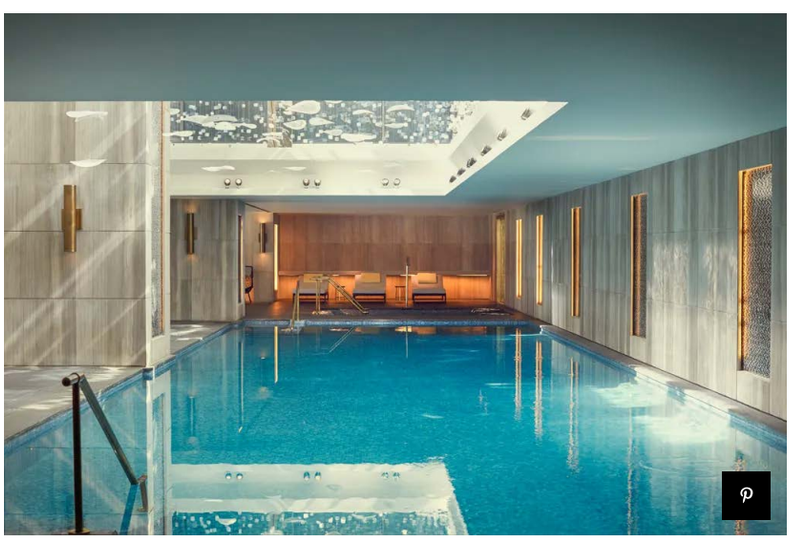

Raffles Istanbul, Besiktas

For contemporary luxury

What's this? A five-star Istanbul hotel with not a jot of faded Ottoman splendour to be seen... Yet Raffles is Istanbul through and through – a new moneyed side to the city that's all gilt glass and Gucci, set as it is within the Zorlu Center (a sort of Dubai-does-Westfield on a giant scale) on a hilltop in Besiktas. Overstated glamour is the name of the game here. Vast crystal chandeliers dominate its sparkly atria and gourmet restaurants. Swimming pools glitter inside and out – in the extensive spa and in Lounge 6, a summertime rooftop pool bar showcasing long-reaching views and the work of the world's leading cosmetic surgeons. The Long Bar is a wine-red Turkish take on the Singapore original which, as well as the signature Sling, shakes up uniquely Istanbul concoctions (the bourbon, cumin and baklava Topkapi Palace, for example). 181 contemporary rooms and penthouse suites, all with butler service, are stacked in high-rise towers, the best with views across the city to the strait beyond. Rest assured, the helipad is heated in winter.

Address: Levazım, Zorlu Center, Koru Sokağı, 34340 Beşiktaş/İstanbul, Turkey

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The Bank Hotel Istanbul, Karaköy

For good-value style

When it opened as House Hotels' Vault Karakoy, this smart little hotel was one of the pioneers of Istanbul's new wave of contemporary boutique stays. Now it's joined Marriott Bonvoy, but thankfully its understatedly stylish bedrooms remain unchanged, with wooden desks in every room, old iron radiators and arched windows overlooking the affluent Karakoy street. It was once a bank built in the 19th-century in Eclectic style, and elements of its original incarnation survived the careful restoration – spot cash registers, a safe-turned-drinks cabinet in the bar, and a wine cellar in the original vault.

Address: Azapkapı, Bankalar Cd. No:5 D:1, 34421 Beyoğlu/İstanbul, Turkey

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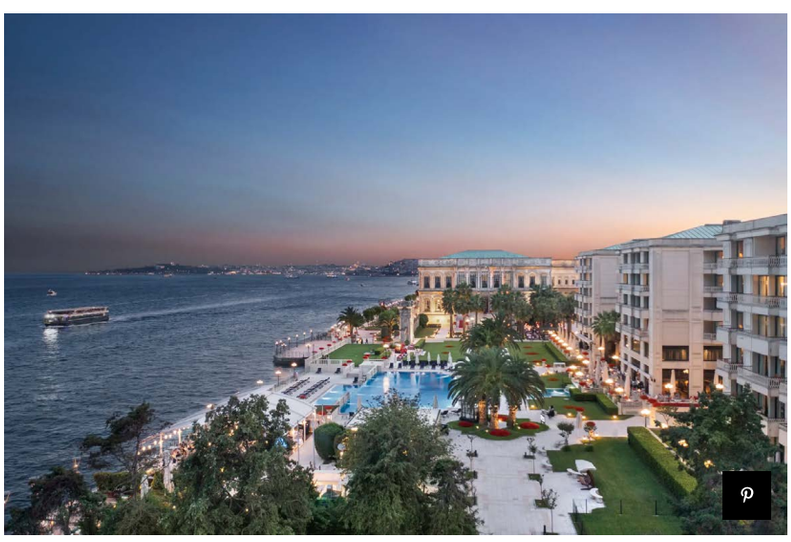

Ciragan Palace Kempinski

For regal Ottoman splendour

You might recognise Ciragan Palace's own marble arch: ornately carved, white stone framing the blue Bosphorus, it's the star of a gazillion Instagram posts. And yet it's dwarfed by the vast and completely breathtaking Ciragan Palace itself. Built as a Sultan's residence – the last palace of the Ottoman empire – it sits above the water, as ivory and fanciful as a wedding cake, with its columns and classic Ottoman decoration. After a fire in 1910 it lay in ruins until the 1980s, when restoration began; and now it shines once more. Inside, embellishment from top to toe: domed, corniced ceilings; Moorish painted walls; marble doorways and balustrades and pillars so intricately carved they might be paper cut-outs. There are shiny marble atria, stately drawing rooms, ballrooms, several restaurants, from a street-food truck in the garden to posh Tugra, serving Ottoman dishes on a terrace beneath the marble pillars overlooking the Bosphorus. The best bedrooms are in the palace itself (just 11 of them; the other 299 rooms are in modern neighbouring blocks), wrapped in mahogany and with canopied emperor beds fit for a sultan.

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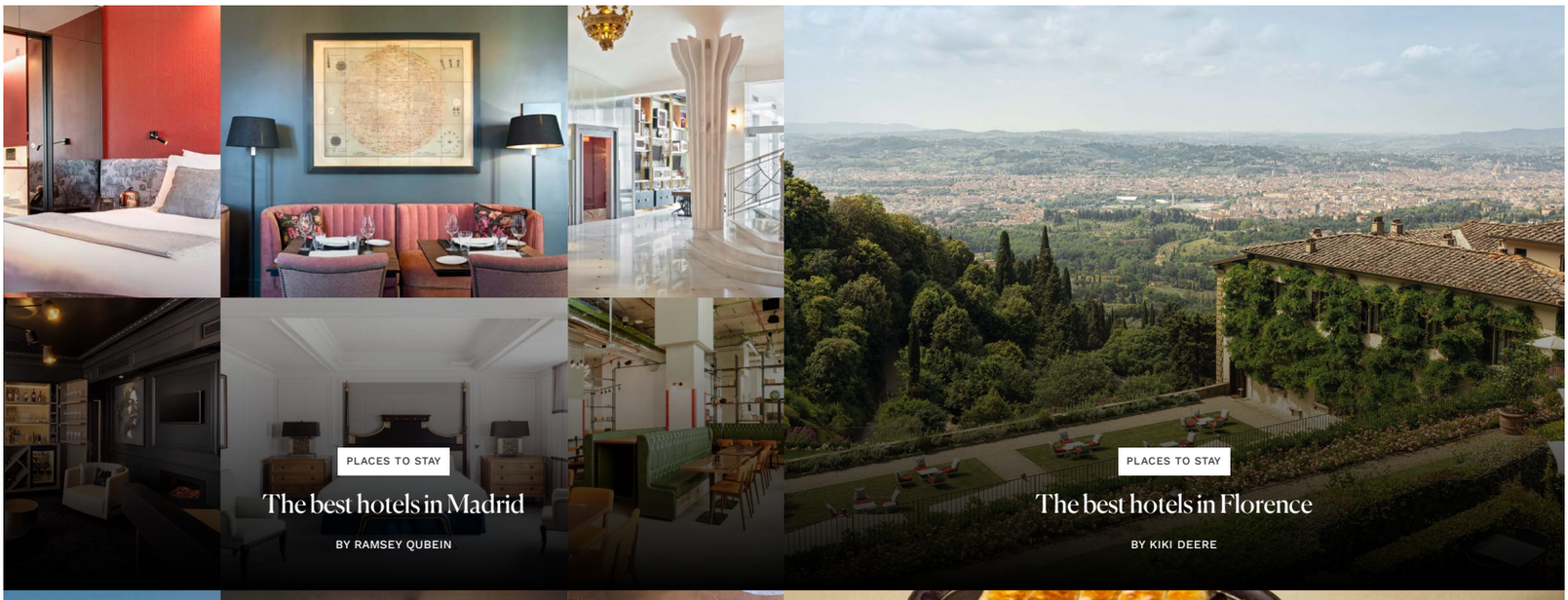

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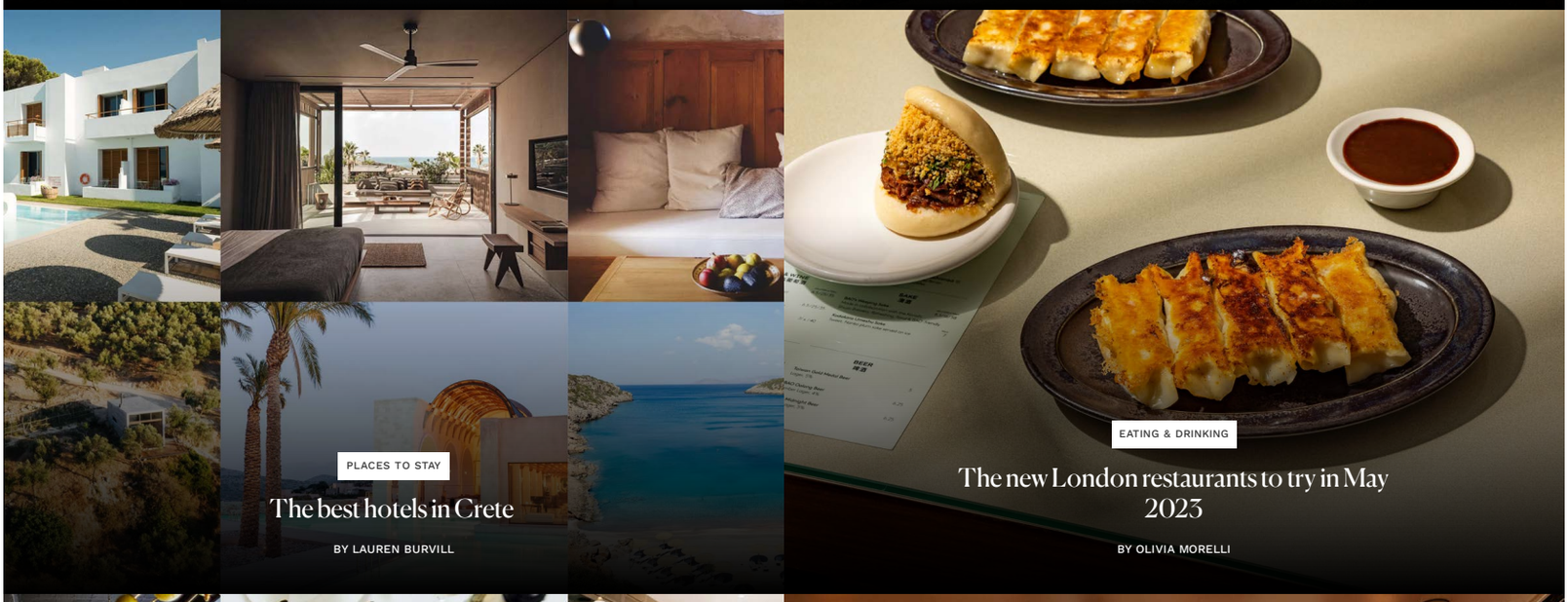

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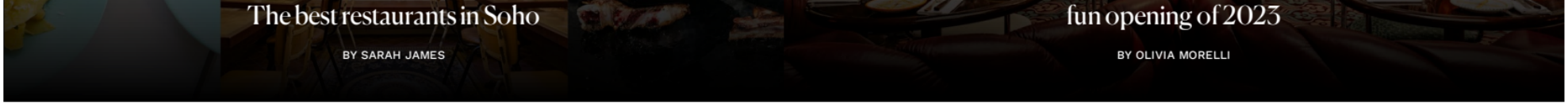

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