

MY KIND OF PLACE **ISTANBUL**



kisses of continents

Most love it, some hate it: Istanbul is a seething metropolis that straddles not just the continents of Europe and Asia across the choppy waters of the Bosphorus, but where ancient and modern collide. A city with a fast-forward, 21st-century mentality trapped in a crumbling medieval body. Above all, be prepared to be surprised, as alongside majestic mosques, the legendary Grand Bazaar and opulent palaces, Istanbul also offers seductively luxurious hotels, gourmet fine dining, haute-couture boutiques and chic nightclubs. Istanbul is booming thanks to a vibrant economy – the government has just announced plans for the groundbreaking Istanbul Canal, which will be bigger than Panama or Suez, while culture is still on a high after the immense success of its tenure last year as Cultural Capital of Europe. A dazzling jazz festival is planned for July and a cutting-edge arts Biennial in September. www.ist.org

A COMFORTABLE BED
 For the complete Istanbul experience, split

your visit between the city's two luxury Four Seasons resorts. Four Seasons Sultanahmet (www.fourseasons.com/istanbul; 00 90 212 402 3000), small and intimate, set in a grand Ottoman building, is perfect for visiting the sights around Topkapı, while Four Seasons Bosphorus (www.fourseasons.com/bosphorus; 00 90 212 281 8000), in the place to escape the seething crowds, lies by the pool beside the lapping waters of the Bosphorus and is pampered in a sumptuous spa and traditional marble-heated hammam. A double room costs from US\$725 (Dh2,670) including taxes. The hottest address to stay is the recently reopened Pera Palace (www.pera.com; 00 90 212 377 8377), restored to former 19th-century glory. While the rooms are now up to a five-star standard, with room rates starting from \$675 (Dh1,975) for a double, the real buzz is downstairs, hanging out with Istanbul's high society who flock to be seen taking afternoon tea in the magnificent Kibelli Salon or sipping drinks in the Oranî Bar, which was once a favoured haunt of Ernest Hemingway and Mela Hart.

FIND YOUR FEET
 Getting around Istanbul can be a nightmare. Rather than attempt to understand the bus and tram systems, hail a cab because taxis are plentiful, air-conditioned and inexpensive, though be prepared to spend time stuck in traffic. Stand in line by them for when the high-speed ferries, as the spectacular former church and mosque is one of the wonders of the world. Just opposite is the monumental Blue Mosque, and, nearby the vast Topkapı Palace, the residence of the Ottoman sultans for some 600 years, is now a fascinating museum. Leave the crowds behind and pay \$10 (Dh35) to visit the Harem's sumptuous saunas, by far the most interesting part of the complex. Then walk down to the Galata Bridge, jump on a Bosphorus Ferry and join the locals in a cup of scalding 'çay' or black Turkish tea. Hop on and off in Europe or Asia as the boat steams towards the Black Sea.

MEET THE LOCALS
 Every evening, what looks like the entire population of Istanbul goes for a stroll along the city's

main boulevard, İskitlî Caddesi, once known as La Grande Rue de Pera, lined with boutiques, restaurants and cafes. Istanbulis love strolling out on one of İskitlî's many rooftop bars, watching the sun set over the Golden Horn. For a quiet shisha pipe, locals choose Kallavi Café Terakki Kallavi Sokak, while the globalist prefer the exotic cocktails of the exclusive penthouse 360 Istanbul (360 İskitlî Caddesi). A favourite rendezvous for Sunday brunch is Onkaldı Squares, right on the Bosphorus, where weekenders cakes some olives, kebabs, eggs, local and honey while artisans set up a colourful market brimming with bargains.

BOOK A TABLE
 The chic rooftop restaurant, Mikla, Mezarlıkdı Caddesi (00 90 212 295 5554), offers the perked-up of a stunning panorama that runs from the Golden Horn to the Topkapı Palace with gourmet cooking from chef Mehmet Güzel who subtly mixes Turkish and Scandinavian flavours in sampling dishes such as cherrywood smoked lamb loin with walnut pesto. The ten-course \$90 (Dh320) tasting menu is a sublime experience. Set in an

wooden four-story Ottoman mansion, Abrakadabra, 31 Arnavitköy Caddesi (00 90 212 368 6087) has quickly become the hottest spot in town, where chef Dilan Erbay invents her own version of Turkish-Istanbul cuisine, blending traditional recipes with Lebanese, Thai and French twists. High above Abrakadabra in the hills of Üsküdar, 1 Ulus Parkı (00 90 212 295 4181), the ultimate fine-dining experience where every evening movie star and celebrity comes to be noticed. After midnight, the restaurant transforms into a pulsating nightclub that parties till dawn.

SHOPPER'S PARADISE
 The elegant streets of the Nevekes neighbourhood are lined with every luxury boutique imaginable, from Louis Vuitton and Gucci to Marni and Hermès. Don't miss the outstanding local designer, Gonul Paksoy (Feyzi Sokak), whose showroom exhibits not just unique Ottoman-inspired fashions but exquisite jewellery and accessories. Art lovers need to grab a cab to Anadolı where grandiose mansions have recently been taken over by hip art galleries and design studios. Skip off at Rampe, 21 Sarı Neşrin Caddesi, which represents Turkey's leading

contemporary artists, and across the street, Auto-bahn, one of the world's leading interior designers. And then there is the little matter of an assault on the Grand Bazaar (www.grandbazaaristanbul.org), a 500-year-old labyrinth of 4,000 shops selling everything from carpets to gold jewellery, antiques to ceramics. Post-parade, join madhouse, it really is better to hit yourself get lost and just window shop or at least expect to find a bargain. The exception is Ethnicon (www.ethnicon.com), which has a dazzling collection of ancient kilims redesigned into a patchwork of contemporary patterns, but be warned that there is no haggle over their fixed prices.

WHAT TO AVOID
 The Bosphorus is lined with mega nightclubs that attract thousands of partygoers every weekend, but avoid going before midnight to miss the equally magic traffic jams.

DON'T MISS
 A subterranean tour of the astonishing Byzantine Basilica Cistern, with hundreds of massive columns that seem to be magically floating on water.



Everything and more: The Grand Bazaar contains 4,000 shops selling everything from kilims to carloman