



**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Istanbul four ways, in four days

How do you manage a mega-city like Istanbul? Easy! Break it into bite-size bits. Our insider is your guide

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## Ferries and fish meals

For a taste of the exotic on your first night, the open-air fish market in Karaköy is pure theatre. Gulls swoop, cats growl over titbits and housewives argue prices with fishmongers. Seawater swishes over the displays as fishermen heave in boxes of tuna, clams and anchovies every few minutes, and to prove their freshness, every fish has its gills twisted inside out in shocking spirals of red.

Cut through the chaos to a trio of seafood restaurants, just past the market's final fishmonger. To call them low-key would be an understatement. They are cheap and bucolic, with plastic picnic tables slung under beech trees, paraffin lamps casting a glow. All overlook the Galata Bridge on the banks of the Golden Horn, the scimitar-shaped stretch of water that glows orange at sunset (hourly boat trips, £1, depart from the nearby Haliç ferry terminal). *Balikche* (Karaköy Balık Pazarı Sokak; mains around £2.50) is the best. It only began printing menus in 2010, with photos of seaweed-salad starters, tempura calamari and marinated mackerel; in times past you chose bream or bass off the BBQ, then chased it down with a can of Efes lager or a half-bottle of raki. White wine and Coke Light now grace the menu, demanded by shabby-chic Istanbulers who flood the place on Friday nights.

Morning is the best time to follow the city's seafood trail over the Galata Bridge, the blustery link between Istanbul's newer European quarters and the historic old city. Sun glints off the fishing boats that dot the Bosphorus Straits to your left – this mighty waterway separates the continents of Europe and Asia and flows two ways, creating a nutrient-rich soup for hundreds of species of fish.

As you cross the bridge, the fishermen's silvery lines pull up sardines, which are immediately made into sandwiches and sold on boats by the wharf – each sarnie brimming with onion, rocket and a squeeze of lemon (£1.50). You can smell sizzling mackerel or mullet from afar.

Half the city alights at Eminönü ferry terminal, a few steps past the Galata Bridge. First off are shoeshine boys from Asian Istanbul, who leap from the gunwales. Tourists head in the opposite direction on the Bosphorus Boat Tour ([www.ido.com.tr](http://www.ido.com.tr); £7), which departs from here daily at 10.35am. The three-hour voyage pitches between Europe and Asia towards the Black Sea, passing every Ottoman palace. Fortified with a glass of tea (20p), take in the old Rococo summer embassies of Egypt, Spain and France with the wind in your hair. Or dip below deck to sit beside picture

windows framing every Bosphorus village, from chic Çengelköy to pretty Kanlıca, where pots of creamy yoghurt (for which the town has been famous since Ottoman times) are brought on board. Time for a stroll and a fish lunch (try Yorus, Yorus Kulesi Sokak; 00 90 216 320 2148; mains around £3) at Anadolu Kavağı – a derelict castle wrapped in wild vines that once commanded the entrance to the straits – before the passage home.

## Nightlife and hookahs

Twenty years ago the tangle of streets centring on narrow Asmalımescit Sokak was a bit rough and ready. In the noughties, it had its renaissance. Low rents filled the crumbling mansions with hopping bars, and now, every Friday and Saturday night, patrons party on parquet under finely frescoed ceilings.

On the fringe of Asmalımescit district is low-key bar Bادهane (General Yazgan Sokak 5; 00 90 212 249 0550), one of the area's original colonists. Many winters ago, Istanbul sports rough tattoos and workers' caps would sit by its coal-fired brazier talking politics, while live folk music rang through the room. Today the establishment abuts a dozen others, their terraces spilling outdoors come spring, as bougainvillea flutters overhead. To sample somewhere typical of the current scene, scrum-it into Lokal (Müeyyet Sokak 5; 00 90 212 245 5744). Here, young Turks clink Caipiroskas – and the tattoo quotient is fashionably revealing.

All that said, the time-honoured nightly tradition of the travelling troubadour is still alive at the local meyhaneler – Turkish taverns set in bourgeois mansions, serving platters of grilled fish to tables full of friends, invariably with a bottle of raki split between them. Peek out from bay windows and watch troupes of musicians jobbing from bar to bar, armed with violas, mandolins and a flower in every buttonhole. As the music starts, entire tables sway in their seats, clapping for more. The atmosphere is best at Yakup 2 (Asmalımescit Sokak 37; 00 90 212 249 2925; mains around £6), a haunt of bawdier starlets from Istanbul's stage and screen. Later on, Babylon (Sehbender Sokak 3; [www.babylon.com.tr](http://www.babylon.com.tr); from £6) hops to house music, while Indigo (Acara Sokak 1; free) bops to a blend of Blur and Dexys Midnight Runners.

Many of Istanbul's elite won't set foot in Asmalımescit, lest they get cat-called by a prostitute or have to drink from chipped china. Instead, from 9pm onwards, they hit the waterfront suburb of Kuruçeşme, where a strip of superclubs lines the Bosphorus and valet parking is the norm. Reina (Muallim Naci Caddesi 44; [www.reina.com.tr](http://www.reina.com.tr); admission varies) has worn the district's diamond tiara for a decade, thanks to the celebrity patronage of the likes of Bono and F1 star Mark Webber. To step inside is to witness the fact that Turkey just overtook Holland as the world's 16th biggest economy: beautiful people from Brazil, Moscow and the Middle East flirt on the alfresco dancefloor to the deafening thump of Euro house and Lady Gaga-esque pop.

Still on the banks of the Bosphorus, midway between Asmalımescit and Kuruçeşme, the once-gritty district of the Tophane docks area reclines under a scented cloud of water-pipe smoke. Younger patrons prefer the fruit-gum sprinkle of coloured beanbags in the cafes by Istanbul's Modern art museum (Meclis-i Mebusan Caddesi; [www.istanbulmodern.org](http://www.istanbulmodern.org); £5).

On balmy summer evenings they fling the backgammon dice so hard that they might land in an opponent's apple tea at any moment. More mature smokers shun this zone, preferring to puff in peace just south of the museum by Tophane's Bosphorus shoreline. It's the perfect place to watch one of the world's busiest shipping lanes: brightly lit cargos are carried to Odessa and Novorossiysk, as glittering cruise ships from P&O and Royal Caribbean moor next door. Meanwhile patrons order a pot of çay (tea) and catch up on the weekend papers – of which

Turkey has nearly 30 – or indulge in a chapter of Stephen King or Orhan Pamuk. Water-pipe purists

will order mandarin or mango tobacco. Asking for a simple apple-flavoured one will mark you out as a novice, but you'll be welcomed all the same.



Istanbul's Grand Bazaar (Helen Cathcart)

## History and mystery

The finest way to begin a Sunday stroll through decadent history is to take tea – cucumber sandwiches, Turkish pastries – at the Kubbeli Salon in the Pera Palace Hotel. The elegant

establishment was built in 1895 to wow travellers who went 'all the way' to Constantinople on the Orient Express.

Accommodation at the Pera was necessarily well appointed. Most suites boasted a bodyguard annexe – a must-have for visiting royalty (Edward VIII), arms dealers (Basil Zaharoff) or members of the espionage fraternity (Mata Hari or a dozen others). Little wonder that Agatha Christie was so inspired when she supposedly penned *Murder on the Orient Express* here in the early 1930s.

It's symbolic of Istanbul's resurgence that the Pera reopened after a three-year overhaul in 2010 as the city celebrated its European Capital of Culture year. Timeless touches remain, including period furniture and the gilded cage lift, which qualified as the Ottoman Empire's first elevator.

Contemporary additions include a basement swimming pool and an inspired cocktail menu at the brand-new Orient Terrace bar.

Exit, via the revolving doors, into the midday sun to explore a bourgeois neighbourhood also known as Pera. Here you'll find the old reinvented in novel ways. In a townhouse lies the Pera Museum (Meşrutiyet Caddesi 65; [www.peramuseum.org](http://www.peramuseum.org); £3), where portraits of Istanbul chart the city's history from Byzantine bastion to Europeanised showpiece. Next door is the Istanbul Culinary Institute (Meşrutiyet Caddesi 59; 00 90 212 251 2214, [www.istanbulculinary.com](http://www.istanbulculinary.com); mains around £3), a cook-school-cum-restaurant. As well as running day classes in local flavours, it serves Turko-Italian fusion lunches on the very same spot where once the city's Genoese community held sway.

Testament to the former grandeur of this European enclave is Tünel funicular station (£1 per ride) on nearby Istiklal Caddesi, the city's principal boulevard. This imposing terminus marks the world's second underground service (after London's), sweeping passengers majestically to the Bosphorus far below.



Navigating the steep descent on foot takes you past the Galata Tower ([www.galatatower.net](http://www.galatatower.net); £4), a former fire lookout point. Climb to the top and edge your way around the vertiginous balcony for 360° views over every major mosque and museum in the metropolis – the watery backdrop shines in the afternoon sun. Whichever way you descend, don't do an Ahmed Çelebi. This 'Istanbul Icarus' donned wings and apparently swooped from the tower across the straits in 1632. (The ever-cautious sultans banished him to Algeria, lest the concept of flight subvert their grip on power.)

The Sultans also pooh-poohed Leonardo da Vinci's plans for a bridge between European Istanbul and historic Sultanahmet. Not until 1845 did the Galata Bridge take form. Italian travel writer Edmondo De Amicis described the action 30 years later: 'Your guide warns you that a Wallachian, a Serbian, a Montenegrin, a Cossack of Ukraine, an Egyptian, a native of Tunis is passing by... [alongside] the faces and costumes of Cyprus and Candia, of Damascus and Jerusalem, the Druze, the Kurd, the Maronite, the Croat'. At this crossroads of Europe and Asia, a similar scene plays out today.

A tramline (fare £1) stops at both ends of the Galata Bridge before running beyond the city walls and all the way to the airport. Peek from the picture windows as you trundle along and you'll see Istanbul's colourful history laid out in one neat line from the Blue Mosque (At Meydanı; £2 donation advised) to the Grand Bazaar.

Or alight at the pink wedding cake that is Sirkeci Station (Hocapaşa Mahallesi), final call on the Orient Express. Bond fans may recall our hero and his friend Kerim Bey boarding for Venice here in *From Russia With Love*. One tram-stop further on is Topkapı Palace ([www.topkapi.sarayi.gov.tr](http://www.topkapi.sarayi.gov.tr); £7), home of Istanbul's sultans for centuries. Take an evening walk under the tall trees of its bustling gardens (free entrance) and you'll find parakeets screeching overhead – part, no doubt, of a long-lost imperial menagerie.

## Bazaars and boutiques

It is said that you should come to Istanbul with an empty bag. The even wiser arrive with no bag (or shoes, belts or jewellery), for Europe's biggest city is also its greatest emporium – especially on a Saturday, when stores, malls and markets lay on extra staff, as stylish Istanbulites drive in from the suburbs.

Unsurprisingly for a trading empire, one of the greatest architectural legacies of Ottoman times is mercantile. For much of the past five-and-a-half centuries the Grand Bazaar (closed Sundays and bank holidays; [www.grandbazaaristanbul.org](http://www.grandbazaaristanbul.org)) has been the world's largest mall. It's a city within a city, with banks, mosques and teashops, and enough restaurants to feed its 20,000-strong workforce. We recommend Fez Café (Ali Baba Türbe Sokak 25-27; 00 90 212 528 1613; mains around £4).

In the early days, goods arrived by caravan, including silks from Central Asia and dates from Damascus. Ming Dynasty porcelain was also popular, not least as it was believed that the china's celadon glaze would change colour on contact with poison – a story that no doubt shifted a few more caravan-loads of cups and bowls. Then – as now – the gold market was a safe haven, the precious metal a sanctuary for savers in times of woe. In the recent financial crisis, this bit of the bazaar resembled a stock market, as prices were bellowed out by gold merchants to crowds of buyers, many holding two or three mobile phones as they shored up the finances of their family business.

Start your day at 9am, as the market kicks off, and allow four hours for a thorough rummage. Carpets line the first few lanes after the main Nuruosmaniye Gate entrance, by the Beyazıt Grand Bazaar tram stop. The savviest shoppers spurn invitations to 'just look' and head to a trusted rug emporium, say, Şişko Osman (00 90 212 528 3548), in the Zincirli Han. On the right is the small silver and watch market. Sit down to weigh up a 1950s Omega (£500-£1,000) and the trader will

push a secret button under the counter – a tray of tea will magically arrive a few minutes later and the bargaining can begin.

A number of Turkmenistani traders set up shop along Yağlıkçılar Sokak in the 1990s. This area is now full of rare Uzbek kaftans and highly collectable ceramics from the USSR, the latter from £10 upwards. Tight on time? Eye for the unusual? Personal shopper Kathy Hamilton (00 90 536 884 9226, [www.istanbulpersonalshopper.com](http://www.istanbulpersonalshopper.com); small group tours around £150) knows every character (and price) in the bazaar. If you'd rather DIY, caution is advised. Traders have generations' worth of snappy one-liners, in half-a-dozen languages. A personal favourite is the good-cop-bad-cop routine. You'll be settling on a price when the 'store owner' arrives to berate his assistant for selling so cheaply. You'll pay the boss in stony silence then skip away, still convinced that you've bagged a bargain.

For a more refined shopping experience, taxi to Nişantaşı. This bourgeois quarter is Istanbul's Chelsea, with just as many small dogs, one-off boutiques and places for ladies who lunch (including Beymen Brasserie, Abdi Ipekçi Caddesi 23; 00 90 212 343 0443; mains around £12).

You won't sniff out a bargain, but back home you will have the opportunity to utter nonchalantly 'Istanbul', when asked where you got your chic gloves/necklace/hammam towels. Try 39 (Süleyman Nazif Sokak 39; [www.nr39.com](http://www.nr39.com)) for shoes with a touch of Alice In Wonderland from £85; couture designer Arzu Kaprol (Atiye Sokak 9; [www.arzukuprol.net](http://www.arzukuprol.net)) for dresses from £250; or the flagship store of Ela Cindoruk and Nazan Pak (Atiye Sokak 14; [www.elacindoruknazanpak.com](http://www.elacindoruknazanpak.com)) for feather-light earrings and pendants from £30.

## Hotels with heritage

Memories of ritzy Istanbul – including Orient Express ticket stubs – are displayed in glass cabinets at the timeless Pera Palace Hotel (Meşrutiyet Caddesi 52; 00 90 212 377 4000, [www.perapalace.com](http://www.perapalace.com); doubles from £180, room only; pictured above). Nearby, Tomtom Suites (Tomtom Kaptan Sokak; 00 90 212 292 4949, [www.tomtomsuites.com](http://www.tomtomsuites.com); doubles from £180, B&B) occupies a former Franciscan monastery. It's a first-rate design hotel awash with modern art and Carrara marble, where guests may browse the morning news on a complimentary iPad. The utterly sumptuous but resolutely friendly Four Seasons at Sultanahmet (Tevkifhane Sokak 1; 00 90 212 402 3000, [www.fourseasons.com/istanbul](http://www.fourseasons.com/istanbul); doubles from £443, B&B) lies between Hagia Sophia, Topkapı Palace and the Blue Mosque. This grand establishment had austere beginnings, too – it was the city jail. Also in Sultanahmet is the Ayasofya Konakları (Sogukçesme Sokak; 00 90 212 513 3660, [www.ayasofyapensions.com](http://www.ayasofyapensions.com); doubles from £108, B&B). This row of Ottoman wooden houses became Turkey's first boutique hotel when it opened in the late 1980s.