

Mosques, Mosaics & Minarets:

# Two Days in Istanbul

Istanbul is a cultural montage, a heady mix of the hip and the classical, the ultramodern and the ancient. East and West and secular and Islamic all meet here, and the combination of flavours makes for one delicious mouthful. You could spend months admiring every square of Byzantine mosaic, haggling for spices in the bazaars or watching the world go by while puffing apple tobacco from a *nargileh* pipe – but you haven't seen today's Istanbul until you've joined the throngs partying in the alleys of Beyoglu or shopped in the boutiques of Taksim in the heart of the modern city. Roll up your sleeves and dive in.

## SULTANAHMET SURPRISES

Many tourists never make it outside the Old Istanbul area of **Sultanahmet**, which is a shame. While following this itinerary you won't make that mistake, but with so many world-famous spots you simply have to spend at least a morning here. You'll only touch on the riches on show, but there's too much to see elsewhere in the city. **Aya Sofya** (Aya Sofya Square) is possibly the world's most beautiful building. Its magnificent domed ceiling and precious mosaics will literally stun you into silence.

Head away from the crowds to the **Hippodrome**, for 1000 years the centre of Byzantium's life. It's a riot of ancient columns and obelisks and a good spot to contemplate the thrilling chaos of history around you.

End your morning with a reviving tea at the **Orient Express Restaurant** on Platform 1 of **Sirkeci Railway station** (Sirkeci Istasyonu; Ankara Caddesi), still humming with faded glamour; it was once the terminus for the great trains arriving from Europe.

In the afternoon, go to Asia. The ferry from **Eminönü** to **Üsküdar** must be the shortest, cheapest, most romantic boat ride in the world. Take a taxi up the hill to the **Camlica Restaurant** (Turistick Camlica Caddesi), located at the highest point in the city and much beloved by Istanbulus. From its terraces you'll see the minaret-filled skyline of Old Istanbul, as well as the Bosphorus winding its way to the Black Sea.

After the sightseeing of the morning, do nothing more taxing in the afternoon than stroll the waterside to **Haydarpaşa Station**, where trains leave for exotic destinations all over eastern Turkey and points south and east. On the way, you'll pass the evocative **Kiz Kulesi** (Maiden or Leander's Tower) – it's one of the city's most distinctive landmarks. Ferries head back to Sultanahmet from Haydarpaşa.

**Arasta Bazaar**, next to the **Blue Mosque**, is the perfect place to shop for those traditional carpets, spices and curios. Haggle hard, then settle in for an evening rubbing shoulders with tourists and locals alike in the sunken courtyard of **Café Meşale** (Utangaç Sokak). Nargileh and live music set the mood and the raucous, centuries-old clamour will be the soundtrack to your evening.

## THE ISTANBULLUS' ISTANBUL

Unless you've shoved some *baklava* in your ears you'll wake early to the Muezzin's call – take heed and head into the Istanbul few tourists see.

The **Western Districts** follow the Golden Horn north and inland of Sultanahmet. The area contains the remains of once-large Greek and Jewish communities, and on the streets you'll notice people are more conservatively

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dressed than elsewhere in the city. You'll spot a few *chador*-wearing women amongst all the headscarves.

There are ancient wonders nestled throughout the Western Districts. If you thought Aya Sofya had wondrous mosaics, wait until you get to **Kariye Müzesi** (Kariye Müzesi Sokak). This building has been a Constantine-built church and a mosque, and is now a little-visited museum.

The area is also home to two magnificent mosques. **Fatih Camii** (Mosque of the Conqueror; Fevsi Paşa Caddesi) and **Eyüp Sultan Camii** (Mosque of the the Great Eyüp; Camii Kebir Sokak) are unmissable testaments to the area's historical importance.

After marvelling at mosaics, frescoes and minarets consider stopping for lunch at the excellent **Asitane** (Kariye Camii Sokak 18). Once you've eaten and drunk your fill of Ottoman delicacies and culture, hop on a ferry zigzagging its way in the sunshine back down the Golden Horn to **Eminönü**.

Stroll across the **Galata Bridge**, with fishermen, traffic and astonishing views for company to spend the rest of the day in air-kissing, latte-sipping **Beyoğlu**. Here smart boutiques and decadent patisseries sit side-by-side with raki-soaked *meyhanes* (a lively Turkish version of a tapas bar).

Once you've seen more spectacular panoramas from **Galata Tower** (Galata Meydani), built by Genoese traders in the 14th century, take the **Tunel**, one of Europe's oldest underground railways, rather than hike the hillside. There are upmarket shops and people-watching opportunities galore along **İstiklal Caddesi**. Don't forget to stop for tea at the **Pera Palas Hotel** ([www.perapalas.com](http://www.perapalas.com)). The legendary Atatürk often stayed here, and left his slippers and silk pyjamas in Room 101. Staff are happy to show you, if you're curious to see what the father of a nation slept in.

There's nowhere better in Istanbul to eat and drink than Beyoğlu's **Nevidade Sokak**, buried in the jumble of streets behind Cicek Pasaji on İstiklal Caddesi. On summer evenings the area literally heaves with people looking for a table, grabbing a beer or raki at one of the bars or just wandering past. The streets around **Amalimescit Sokak** are a good bet too, especially on Friday and Saturday. You'd be mad if you didn't end your trip by joining them.

## SLEEPING

### Budget

Side Hotel & Pension ([www.sidehotel.com](http://www.sidehotel.com); ☎ 517 2282) Cheap, clean and comfortable, in a great location overlooking Aya Sofia and the Blue Mosque.

### Midrange

Hotel Empress Zoe ([www.emzoe.com](http://www.emzoe.com); ☎ 518 2504) The epitome of Sultanahmet chic, this fabulous place offers beautiful rooms and a flower garden to breakfast in.

### Top End

Bentley Hotel ([www.bentley-hotel.com](http://www.bentley-hotel.com); ☎ 291 7730) Classy, indulgent and luxurious, this is the place to crash after a shopping spree in the Nisantasi area of Beyoğlu.

For more reviews of Istanbul accommodation, check out the Sleep section on [www.lonelyplanet.com/accommodation](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/accommodation).

By Tom Hall

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