



The Dolmabahçe Palace and ornamental garden.



A captivating blend of history, incredible architecture, and cultural marvels make Istanbul an enticing draw for the learned spirit.

The call of Istanbul

BY MYRNA KATZ FROMMER & HARVEY FROMMER

It was a bright and beautiful Wednesday in August 2001, the afternoon of our first day in Istanbul. We emerged from the Divan Hotel into a high-end neighborhood of late 20th century buildings and crossed a wide boulevard teeming with traffic.

On the opposite side, in a municipal park the size of a large city block, rose bushes were in bloom and the fragrance of honeysuckle was so strong, it was almost dizzying—as were the crowds of pedestrians.

A city of comfortable contrasts

Long-legged, bare-headed young women in mini-skirts and high-heeled shoes strode by ageless women, their heads covered with the traditional hijab, or scarves, who shuffled along in black coats that reached down to their ankles.

A woman in a chador (traditional head-to-toe veil) peered out from the secret interior of her shapeless garment. Serious-looking men in business attire were trailed by noisy shoe-shine boys. Vendors steamed ears of corn in big pots, sold ice cream, proffered cherries from big wooden crates reclining in wheelbarrows, and hawked lottery tickets.

Taksim Square leads to Istiklal Street, a broad and lively byway of shops, restaurants and cafés, and offices and embassies housed in an assortment of 19th century buildings that stand shoulder to shoulder along an avenue closed to all traffic save a one-car trolley that winds its way up and down the single track in its centre.

This is the heart of Beyoğlu, a neighbourhood that a century ago had been the mercantile centre of European Istanbul, where a multitude of nationalities lived, conducted business, and frequented the area's sophisticated hotels, theatres, cafés, and shops.

To this day the diversity of the region's churches, synagogues, and mosques cannot be equalled anywhere in the world.

The smells of coffee and tobacco and a melding of music wafted out from doorways. We heard the strains of "Tumbalalaika," an Eastern-sounding lullaby a favourite uncle used to sing, blaring American rock, and Arabic and Greek songs all competing with street musicians playing accordions and different kinds of pipes.

Then suddenly in the midst of all the cacophony, a high, unaccompanied voice pierced the air with an Oriental melody sung with great feeling and vibrato. Around us, people continued about their business seemingly unmindful of the song that seemed to be floating above the rooftops.

"It is the call to prayer," our guide Hasan told us, indicating the mosque at the end of the street.

Looking up toward the minaret, we saw a man in a white robe surrounded by four loudspeakers into which he sang sequentially. "This happens five times a day in every mosque," Hasan said.

In the week that followed, the call to prayer would accompany us, stopping us from whatever we were doing, compelling us to listen. It punctuated our days with the reminder of how strong a current of spirituality runs through the veins of this many-faceted city.

Icons of local architecture and beauty

"O Solomon, I have surpassed you," declared Emperor Justinian in 537 at the inauguration of the largest church in the world. It has subsequently been surpassed in size by St. Paul's in London, St. Peter's in Rome, and the Duomo in Milan, but for sheer grandeur and majesty, the Hagia Sofia remains unequalled.

Although the Ottomans con-



A grand view of the famous Dolmabahçe Palace in the foreground with modern skyscrapers behind it; old and new comfortably coexist in Istanbul.

verted the church into a mosque, whitewashed its Christian paintings and mosaics and removed its icons and statues, the structure, which became a museum in 1935, speaks to any faith.

The morning of our visit, hundreds of people roamed its vast interior. Yet despite the multitudes, the immensity of the place made it possible to feel alone. Light filtered into the cool darkness through hundreds of arched, stained-glass windows. The enormous central dome, surrounded by pairs of semi-domes and six smaller domes, seemingly soars up to heaven from its rectangular basilica.

One hundred and seven columns brought from all parts of the ancient world support the domes' great weight; some are from the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus. Their carved decorations, the church's great bronze doors, and the painting and mosaics depicting Biblical scenes and Byzantine royalty represent Byzantine art at its most exquisite.

A long plaza separates the Hagia Sophia from the Blue Mosque, named for its interior of blue and white Iznik tiles. The long stretch of greenery that runs alongside the Blue Mosque was once the Hippodrome, where chariots raced in ancient times.

Today, a 10th century stone pillar, a bronze column from the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, and an obelisk commemorating a pharaoh's victory in 1550 B.C. immerse one in the spell of antiquity.

The unexpected

We stopped for lunch at a place on Sultanahmet Square. It was "The World Famous Pudding Shop," familiar to many an American

backpacker from the 1960s and 70s who used Istanbul as a midpoint in a journey across Europe and Asia.

This was the place where they got together to drink Turkish coffee, sing along to guitar music, collect mail, and plan routes. Since those days, the place has expanded into a four-star boutique property named the Blue House Hotel.

The Blue House's rooftop restaurant commands stunning views of the confluence of the Golden Horn, Bosphorus and Marmara Sea. From our table on the roof's edge, one of us faced the Blue Mosque, the other the Hagia Sophia.

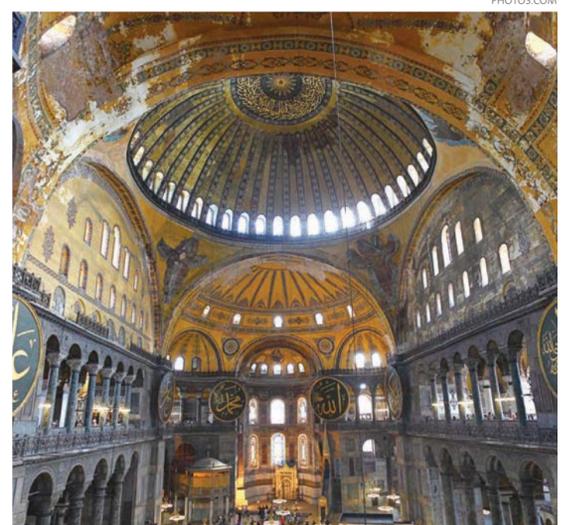
We watched darkness fall, the moon rise, the Blue Mosque become illuminated by blue and white lights in turn, and the red stone of the Hagia Sophia become bathed in gold.

Directly below us was a smoke shop, where visitors smoked water pipes and drank Turkish tea. A trio composed of a kind of tomtom drum and two long and flat stringed instruments was playing traditional Turkish music.

Suddenly three men dressed in white caftans with cone-shaped head coverings stepped onto a little patio, crossed their arms, placing each hand on the opposite shoulder, and began to slowly spin around.

As the music's tempo quickened, they raised their arms above their heads and twirled faster and faster until they looked like spinning tops.

When it seemed they could go no faster, the tempo began to decrease as did their rate of spinning until both came to a halt. Unexpectedly, we had witnessed the dance of whirling dervishes.



An interior view of the magnificent Hagia Sofia, originally a Byzantine Church, then an Ottoman mosque, and now a landmark museum.

Royal opulence

The next morning we returned to Sultanahmet to see the actual jewelled treasures of the famed Topkapi Palace.

Set amid gardens on the top of gently sloping hills, surrounded by Byzantine sea walls on one side and Ottoman land walls on the other, this complex of pavilions, apartments, courtyards, and kiosks served as royal residence, seat of government, and the symbol of the Ottoman Empire for 400 years.

Arranged around a vast open space are a multitude of buildings that lead into courtyards, domed pavilions, and octagon-shaped kiosks—all of great detail and beauty.

A tour of Topkapi Palace provides an interesting insight into the direction of the Ottoman Empire over time. How, as the centuries passed, the sultans became more enamored of European tastes, and how Arabic design gave way to western arts and artifacts—particularly in the latter-day affection for crystal chandeliers.

Surely this shift had something to do with the decision to ultimately abandon Topkapi and relocate the imperial residence and offices to the other side of the city, the more modern, more European part of Istanbul. Coincidentally or not, the move coincided with the beginning of the end of the Ottoman Empire.

In step with the imperial chro-

nology, we taxied back across the Golden Horn and followed the shoreline north to the site of Dolmabahçe Palace. It was completed in 1854 at a cost of five million gold pieces and is often compared to Versailles.

The chandelier hanging in its great reception hall, a gift from Queen Victoria to Sultan Abdulmecid, is the largest in the world. It is but one of 36 fabulous fixtures of Baccarat, Bohemian, and Murano design in this palace of 285 rooms and 43 reception halls. The interior décor was, in large measure, the work of the man who designed the Paris Opera.

A call to return

In a single week, we had seen many of Istanbul's famed sites and had gotten to know a people we'd had little contact with before, people who were warm, hospitable, gracious to strangers, and anxious to share the wealth of their history and culture.

More than a decade has passed since that journey and much has changed. Yet the call to prayer we heard our first afternoon in Istanbul lingers. It remains a call to return.

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