

# The Energy of *Istanbul*

Busy, buzzy, full of noises, colours and flavours, Istanbul is the only city in the world that covers two continents; one side of the Bosphorus laps on European shores and the other touches down in Asia. *GABRIEL O'RORKE* explores

**B**ridges flanked by fishermen link the two sides of the city where East meets West and the skylines on either side are dotted with minarets rising up from the city's 3,000 mosques. "The first famous thing about Istanbul is the traffic!" says Ufuk, manager at Matiana Travel and our guide for the next few days.

Slowly, we make our way along the sea-strait and arrive at the Four Seasons Bosphorus, a converted 19th century Ottoman palace sitting right on the waterfront. The sun is setting and we find ourselves struck down by flight fatigue so we head to the spa. Spacious, with plenty of delicious nuts and Turkish delight to nibble on, the spa has a Balinese feel with bamboo shoots lining the walls. With the help of a sauna, swim and Jacuzzi, the plane journey soon fades away. I decide to have The Cure facial and leave with a new glow, ready to head into town. We catch a taxi to Taksim Square. "It's a place for everyone," declares the taxi driver. "If you are very rich or very cheap you will find something!" Deciding not to take offence, we jump out and start exploring the capital of the Ottoman Empire.

Stalls selling roasted chestnuts cast sweet smells through the air and the streets are full of people of all ages; couples, groups of friends and families wander through the evening air buying baklava or stopping to sip tea and watch the world go by.

The next morning Ufuk picks us up at 10am. There's a lot to see and we just have two days. The Turkish coffee from breakfast kicks in and we're raring to go. "Rome has seven hills, Istanbul has seven hills," says Ufuk as we walk through Sultanahmet Square. "[The Emperor] Constantine wanted Istanbul to be the new Rome." The Blue Mosque stands tall at one end of the square and the Hagia Sophia squares up to it from the other. We walk through what was the Hippodrome of Byzantium (where chariot races took place for 1,000 years) and admire the Luxor temple which Constantine brought here from Luxor in an effort that took six months.

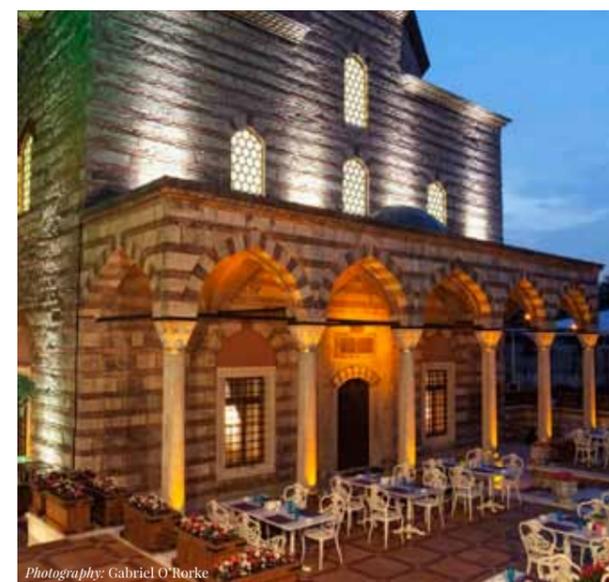
At Ufuk's heel, we skip the long queue outside the Hagia Sophia (one of the many perks of being looked after by Matiana Travel) and enter the 1,400 year-old church-mosque. The current Hagia Sophia is, in fact, the third of its type as the first two were burnt down. Built in the 6th century using nothing but man power, this colossal construction claimed the title of world's biggest cathedral for 1,000 years – today, it is the fourth largest after St Peter's in Rome, St Paul's in London and the Duomo in Florence. ▶



Photography: Matiana Travel



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► As we admire the 12th century gold mosaics, Ufuk tells us that according to legend, the circles on the imperial gates were taken from Noah's Ark. From the towering mosque, Ufuk leads us underground (stopping en route for a pomegranate juice made by a young street vendor) to the Basilica Cistern which was built by the Emperor Justinian in 532 but is recognised by most thanks to James Bond who boated through its 336 columns in *From Russia With Love*.

This underworld lay undiscovered for a century after the Ottoman conquest but was rediscovered when the powers that be discovered that people were lowering buckets through the basements of their houses to retrieve water and fish. Up on pavement level again, we decide it's time for some lunch and head to Matbah Ottoman Palace. This relatively unknown eatery has great views of the city and unusual Ottoman cuisine, such as dried fruit with lamb. We finish with coffee and baklava; the latter is essential: "Here, it is", says Ufuk "like a symphony."

During lunch a call to prayer sounds through the air and we decide it's time to visit the Blue Mosque. Still a practicing mosque (unlike the Hagia Sophia) we cover

## The Basilica Cistern, built in 532, is recognised by most thanks to Bond's *From Russia With Love*

our heads and take off our shoes before entering the expansive blue-tiled building.

Our next stop is the Topkapi Palace, built by Sultan Mehmet II in the 15th century, and one of the imperial family homes until World War I when the Ottoman dynasty lost its empire and ended up fleeing to France. Among the many jewels, thrones, daggers and weapons on display, the most regal of all is the Spoonmaker's Diamond. Thought to be the fourth largest diamond in the world, this 17 gram pear-shaped jewel lived in Sultan Mehmet IV's jewellery box in the 17th century.

After spending most of the day on our feet, Ufuk drops us off at the Hurrem Sultan Hammam so we can be scrubbed down and spruced up before supper. We choose the Zevk-i Sefa (Extravagant Pleasures) treatment, wrap ourselves in *pestamals* (traditional silk pashmina-style bath wraps) and enter the large marble hammam. Our treatment starts by being sloshed with warm water from a gold Ottoman-style bath bowl. Soon dignity evades us and we find ourselves standing stark naked being exfoliated from head to toe and everywhere in between.

Next we lie down on the warm marble, bubbles are poured over us, and a gentle massage is administered; the light, soft bubbles gently cover my body in a blissful

Photography: Gabriel O'Rorke



sensation. Finally, we have redbud essence massages and step back out into Sultanahmet Square ready for some food. There are two Four Seasons hotels in Istanbul and for supper we head to the second one which is just off Sultanahmet Square; it's hard to imagine that this neoclassical yellow building used to be a prison.

Today, harsh memories have been laid to rest; we discover a charming hotel which creates a warm glow. The food is delicious (as are the cocktails; we go off menu and order lychee martinis) with freshly made bread and a mixture of local and international cuisine. The style is more traditionally Turkish and after supper we play backgammon by the fire. "How do you say thank you in Turkish?" I ask our waiter as he delivers our grilled octopus leg and cheese souffle starters. "Tesekkür ederim," he replies, before seeing my face and taking pity. "Just say "tea sugar... a dream" – it means thank you."

The next day is market day and we start out at the spice market, before heading to the local market. "You can get everything here," says Ufuk as we walk past wooden spoons, baskets and metal popcorn makers. "If you can't get it here, you can't get it in Turkey." For a spot of culture in between shopping, we head to the 11th century Church of St Saviour in Chora. The Byzantine mosaics are incredibly detailed and they shine down from the ceiling gilded with gold.

Our experience, however, is made by Ufuk who talks us through the biblical story with boundless enthusiasm. "It's like a movie", he enthuses, as we strain our necks upwards. For our last lunch we head to Sardunya Restaurant. All the fish on the menu is from the waters of the Bosphorus beside us. We begin with mezze dishes – the vine leaves stuffed with lamb are especially good – before lemon sole and finally, orange crème brulee.

With time for one more stop – and a sugar rush spurring us on – we head to the Grand Bazaar. This is the world's biggest and oldest covered market, and the stalls and shops spread out as far as the eye can see. Our bargaining powers are no match for these pros but we come away happy with beautiful pottery bowls, glass lamps and a backgammon set. Exhausted, still full, and inspired by the endless beauty and energy of Istanbul, we head home. There's still so much more to see but a weekend in Istanbul is a weekend very well spent. ■



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A night at the Four Seasons Bosphorus ([fourseasons.com/bosphorus](http://fourseasons.com/bosphorus)) starts from £304.98, based on two people sharing. For tours with Matiana Travel ([matiana.com.tr](http://matiana.com.tr)) email [dmc@matiana.com.tr](mailto:dmc@matiana.com.tr). Turkish Airlines (twice named Europe's Best Airline by Skytrax) fly to more than 200 destinations and have direct routes between Istanbul and Heathrow, Gatwick, Birmingham, Manchester and Edinburgh.

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