

Things To Do In Istanbul

Istanbul is where the West meets the exotic East in a riotous collision of cultures. Over the centuries, the city's strategic location has attracted marauding Greek, Roman and Venetian armies before the Ottomans finally succeeded in storming Istanbul. This intersection of cultures gives rise to many of Istanbul's points of interest.

The final leg on the legendary Silk Road, which connected a distant Asia with Europe, Istanbul soon emerged as a major trading hub. The cosmopolitan nature of its merchant visitors imbued the city with a delicious cultural diversity that survives to this day.

The Best Places To Visit In Istanbul

There are so many things to do in Istanbul that the hardest part is choosing what to see next. We bring you 15 of the best attractions in Istanbul

1. Topkapi Palace

To visit the Topkapı Palace is to be immersed in the sultan's world of empire. Here the sultans exercised their vast personal power amidst scheming courtiers, ravishing concubines and duplicitous eunuchs. Spanning the 15th to 19th centuries the heart of the Ottoman empire's court takes visitors on a journey through the palace's sumptuous pavilions, expansive Harem and jewel-filled Treasury, all the while providing a fascinating glimpse into their lives.

2. Aya Sofya

This most beautiful of Istanbul's monuments, the life of the Aya Sofya reflects Istanbul's own passage through the years. No Istanbul sightseeing trip is complete without a visit to this magnificent architectural gem. Commissioned by the Byzantine Empire's truly great emperors, Justinian, the Aya Sofya was consecrated as a church in 537 before being converted to a mosque by Mehmet the Conqueror in 1453 after the then Constantinople fell to the Ottomans. President Atatürk declared the Aya Sofya a national museum in 1935.

3. Süleymaniye Mosque

Crowning one of Istanbul's iconic seven hills, the Süleymaniye Mosque dominates the Golden Horn and is one of the city's major landmarks. Surely one of the grandest and most beautiful of Ottoman mosques, the structure is unusual in that

many of its original külliye buildings have survived the years and have been sympathetically adapted for contemporary reuse.

Construction lasted from 1550 and 1557 the mosque and its adjoining complex were designed by Mimar Sinan, perhaps the most renowned and gifted of all Ottoman architects. Sinan's tomb is to be found just outside the mosque's lovely walled garden.

4. Basilica Cistern

This enigmatic subterranean engineering marvel was commissioned by Emperor Justinian and built in 532. Today it is the largest extant Byzantine cistern in İstanbul. Visitors can see its 336 columns, many of which were salvaged from ruined temples and contain elaborately carved capitals. The cistern's delightful symmetry and sheer scale are quite breathtaking.

The Basilica Cistern was originally known as the Basilica Cistern as it lay beneath the Stoa Basilica, one of the first hill's great public squares. Designed to service the Great Palace and its complex of surrounding buildings, the great cistern was could store up to 80,000 cu metres of water fed through 20 kilometres of aqueducts from a reservoir near the Black Sea. It was closed when the Byzantine emperors relocated from the Great Palace and until being rediscovered in 1545.

Today, visitors walk along its network of raised wooden platforms, where the steady drip of water from the vaulted ceiling and schools of wraithlike carp glide through the water beneath, creating a unique atmosphere.

5. Blue Mosque

One of Istanbul's most selfi-friendly buildings was the grand project of Sultan Ahmet I. The mosque's divinely voluptuous exterior incorporates a torrent of domes set against six slim minarets. Tens of thousands of gorgeous blue Iznik tiles ornament the interior, complete with 260 windows giving rise to the building's unofficial name.

The mosque's architect, Sedefkâr Mehmet Ağa, created a visual tsunami echoing the nearby Aya Sofya's sublime interior. The Blue Mosques courtyard is the biggest of all of the Ottoman mosques.

6. Pera Museum

The Pera is a world-class museum and its pièce de résistance is undoubtedly its treasure trove of Turkish Orientalist paintings. On loan from Suna and İnan Kiraç's

majestic private collection, the displayed works provide an enchanting window onto the world of the Ottoman Empire from the 17th through to the 20th centuries. Here visitors will discover Osman Hamdi Bey's *The Tortoise Trainer* (1906) one of Turkey's most esteemed painting. Other floors are home to major temporary exhibitions and have played host to luminaries including Warhol, de Chirico and Picasso Botero exhibitions.

Permanent exhibits on the 1st floor showcase the brilliance of Kütahya tiles and ceramic works, together with a collection of ancient Anatolian weights and measures.

7. Kariye Museum (Chora Church)

As visitors would expect, Istanbul has no shortage of Byzantine architecture. However, few can rival the mosaics and frescos of this church. Nestling by Theodosius II's colossal land walls, the Kariye Museum is now one of Istanbul's most evocative museums. It offers fascinating insights into the soaring artistic heights achieved by Byzantine art. Originally called the Church of the Holy Saviour Outside the Walls (Chora means 'country'). When first built, the church lay outside Constantine the Great's original city walls.

Today the Chora consists of five main architectural areas, the nave, a two-storied structure added to the north, the inner and the outer narthexes and a chapel for tombs to the south. One of the museum's most expressive mosaics is to be found above the door to the nave in the inner narthex. It depicts Theodore offering the church to Christ.

8. Istanbul Archaeology Museums

This magnificent museum showcases the remarkable archaeological and artistic treasures sourced from the Topkapı collections. Housed in a complex of three buildings, its exhibits span ancient artefacts, classical statuary and an exhibition outlining Istanbul's historical arc. One of the collection's many highlights is the sarcophagi from the Royal Necropolis of Sidon which is indisputably spectacular.

The complex comprises three core areas: the Museum of the Ancient Orient (Eski Şark Eserler Müzesi), the Archaeology Museum (Arkeoloji Müzesi) and the Tiled Pavilion (Çinili Köşk). These museums house the palace collections brought together during the late 19th century by Osman Hamdi Bey director of the museum, artist and archaeologist.

9. Grand Bazaar

A riot of retailing bedlam, the Grand Bazaar is one of the best attractions in Istanbul. Set in the very heart of İstanbul's Old City, the Grand Bazaar has been unfolding its unique form of domestic chaos for centuries. Beginning as a small vaulted warehouse built by Mehmet the Conqueror in 1461, the Grand Bazaar eventually grew to sprawl over a vast area as lanes between the warehouses, neighbouring shops and caravanserais were roofed over and the market morphed into the sprawling labyrinth it is today.

Be sure to look through its multitude of doorways to discover hidden treasures, stroll down its narrow lanes watching artisans work their traditional crafts and explore its main avenues to seek out bargains. It's mandatory to drink copious cups of tea, compare prices and test your bargaining skills against masters of the craft. Allow yourself a minimum of least three hours to fully explore this unique experience.

10. Dolmabahçe Palace

Exuberant edifices such as the Dolmabahçe Palace have endured a downturn in architectural fashion. Not for them the rigid less-is-more aesthetic. This imperial pleasure palace with its neoclassical exterior and seriously over-the-top interior are striding heroically to turn the tide. Sultan Abdül Mecit I (1839–61), decided to move his imperial court from the Topkapı Palace to a lavish new palace set on the idyllic shores of the Bosphorus.

Looking to reflect his modernization efforts, Sultan Abdül Mecit I commissioned imperial architects Nikoğos and Garabed Balyan to design an Ottoman-European style palace that could rival those enjoyed by European royalty. Traditional Ottoman palace architecture made way for interior layouts by the designer of the Paris Opera. Construction was finally completed in 1854, and two years later the sultan and his family took up residence.

Sadly, Abdül Mecit's extravagance in executing the opulent project instigated the empire's bankruptcy, signalling the beginning of the decline of the Osmanlı dynasty. During the early years of the newly formed Turkish republic, President Atatürk used the palace as his Istanbul base, eventually dying there on the 10th November 1938.

11. Istanbul Modern

This imposing and innovative museum displays an extensive collection of Turkish art complemented by a constantly changing program of mixed-media exhibitions featuring major local and international artists.

12. Museum of Turkish & Islamic Arts

This splendid Ottoman palace was built in 1524 for İbrahim Paşa, the childhood friend, brother-in-law and grand vizier of Süleyman the Magnificent. On display is a magnificent collection of artefacts, including a fabulous world-class antique carpet collections complemented by sublime examples of ornate calligraphy. This collection on its own is sumptuous with its prayer rugs, intricate palace carpets, and glittering ornaments highlighted by a 17th-century Ottoman incense burner.

Objects in the museum's collection date from the 8th to the 19th century and span the Middle East. They include müknames (scrolls proclaiming an imperial decree) featuring the sultan's calligraphic signature, Iranian book-binding from the Safavid period (1501–1722), 12th and 13th-century wooden columns and doors from Damascus and Cizre, carpets from Holbein, Lotto, , Uşhak, Iran, Konya and Caucasia and even a snip from the Prophet's beard.

13. Aqueduct of Valens

Rising imperiously over the congested traffic on Atatürk Bulvarı, this immense aqueduct is one of Istanbul's signature landmarks. Initiated by Emperor Valens and finally completed in AD 378, the aqueduct connected the third and fourth hills and transported water to Beyazıt Meydanı before finally terminating at the Great Palace of Byzantium.

The aqueduct was one of the greatest hydraulic engineering feats of ancient times. It eventually linked more than 250 kilometres of water channels, 30 bridges and over 100 cisterns within the sprawling city walls. Following the Conquest, the aqueduct supplied water to the Old and Topkapı Palaces.

14. The Hippodrome

The Byzantine emperors loved their chariot races. At its peak, this vast rectangular arena beside Sultanahmet Park was decorated with statues and obelisks, a few of which have miraculously survived the vicissitudes of history through to today. Now re-landscaped, the Hippodrome it is one of the Istanbul's most popular meeting spots and a haven for people watching.

15. The Obelisk of Theodosius

In the very centre of the Hippodrome, sits this fabulously well-preserved Egyptian pink granite obelisk. Exquisitely carved during the reign of Thutmose III (1549–1503 BC) it was set up in the Amon-Re temple at ancient Karnak. Theodosius the Great (379–95) shipped it from Egypt to Constantinople in AD 390. On the

marble podium below the obelisk, visitors will discern carvings of Theodosius, his wife, his sons, and various state officials and bodyguards, all watching the chariot-race action from the Imperial box.

Things To Do In Istanbul

Visitors to the city are never short of ideas for what to do in Istanbul. Here are four fun things to do in Istanbul:

1. Hamam

Visiting an authentic Turkish hamam (Turkish bath) is an indispensable part of any visit to Istanbul. There is at least one historical hamam in each neighbourhood. Most hamams will offer a scrubbing and or a massage. Simply enjoying a sauna in a hamam is bound to be one of any visitor's most enduring memories of Istanbul.

2. Nargile

Traditionally, the nargile, or Turkish water pipe, lay at the heart of Istanbul's social and political life. Today many of Istanbul's locals still view a nargile as one of life's simple pleasures. Most of the venues where you can experience smoking a nargile are in Yeniçeriler Caddesi, near the Grand Bazaar.

3. Shopping In Istanbul's Historical Bazars

Shop for everything from authentic Turkish Delight and Turkish Tea to rugs and kilims, through to chalcedony semi-precious gemstone from the nearby town of Chalcedon.

Istanbul's historical bazaars sit on the peninsula of the Old City exude a vibrant oriental energy all their own and make for a delightful stroll. Formerly the Silk Road's western termini many of the bazaars date back to Ottoman era.

4. Walk Theodosia's Walls

During the reign of Theodosius, Constantine's original city walls were replaced by a monumental structure. Beginning in 408 AD these walls became a bulwark of Orthodox Christian civilization against its enemies. Today, they remain mostly intact, with some sections being renovated in the early 1990s. These imposing walls delineated the western border of the Old City.

A 7-kilometre walk along these remnants of the city wall offers a window into the minds of the city's ancient defenders and framing Turkey's historical legacy.

Places To Visit In Istanbul At Night

Istanbul is a city that rarely seems to sleep. From chic nightclubs and fine dining to a romantic cruise on the Bosphorus, here are four great places to visit at night in this magical city.

1. Sunset Bosphorus Cruise

If you want to see the glory that is Istanbul at its romantic best, hop on a sunset Bosphorus cruise. Watch this eternal city of exotic palaces and grand mansions on both the European and Asian shores drift quietly by as you see this great city from an entirely different perspective.

With options for a short cruise to the second suspension bridge and return, a longer cruise one all the way to the Black Sea and back, and a romantic sunset option, there are plenty of choices.

2. Stroll Across The Galata Bridge

If you are looking to experience Istanbul at its most magical, take a sunset stroll across the Galata Bridge. As the sun sets its dying rays illuminate the historic Galata Tower silhouetting the city's iconic mosques against a softly blushing sky.

Underneath, restaurants and cafes come alive providing the perfect spot to enjoy a beer and nargile while watching the busy ferries going to and from the Eminönü and Karaköy docks.

3. Surrender Yourself To Istanbul's Sublime Cuisine

Istanbul's cuisine is as diverse as its heritage. Whether you're grabbing a classic Döner or a Balık-Ekmek fish sandwich or sampling one of the city's many fine dining restaurants, you'll discover something for every palate and pocketbook. Freshly caught fish headlines the city's signature dishes. Try washing them down with a glass or several of local wine or rakı the national drink.

4. Plunge Into Istanbul's Seething Nightlife

If its nightlife you're after head to Beyoğlu. The suburb is renowned for its nightlife. It's bursting with cafes and bars and heaving live music venues, while Nişantaşı is a hotspot for artists and upwardly mobile young entrepreneurs.

If you want to see Istanbul's locals at play, Kadıköy has an easy-going chilled style of nightlife, with local pubs, wine houses and traditional meyhanes dominating the scene.

Final Point

Istanbul is one of the world's truly great cities. Strategically straddling both sides of the Bosphorus Strait separating Asia from Europe it lives between two continents. Its old quarter, with its exotic oriental domes and soaring minarets together with its confined cobbled streets lined with charming old wooden houses, rests on a peninsula overlooking the straits towards Asia. North, across the sinuous sweep of the Golden Horn, beckons the modern skyline and bright lights of Beyoğlu the vibrant entertainment quarter.

Whether it's soaking up the best attractions in Istanbul, enjoying the view and a drink at a chic roof-top bar, dining at a superb water-front restaurant or indulging in a nargile water pipe in the shadow of an ancient mosque, you'll never be short of things to do in Istanbul.