

# INTRODUCING İSTANBUL



Browse for souvenirs at the sprawling Grand Bazaar (p72)

PHIL WEYMOUTH

First-time visitors often talk about that magical moment when İstanbul becomes fabulous rather than foreign, welcoming rather than overwhelming.

Walking the cobbled streets on either side of the Galata Bridge is a good example. On day one, most of your energy will be spent dodging carpet touts, being jostled by crowds and gaping at the visual magnificence of the minaret-studded skyline. Day two will be different, though. You'll veer away from the well-trodden tourist thoroughfares and find yourself nodding good morning to some friendly locals enjoying a game of backgammon and a glass of tea on the sidewalk. Or you'll walk around a corner and be confronted by the sight of a smiling street vendor dispensing delicious sesame-encrusted *simits* (bread rings) and homespun philosophy to a cluster of headscarfed housewives. On day three, you'll start to anticipate the melodious strains of the call to prayer and be seduced by the scent of apple tobacco issuing from tranquil *çay bahçesis* (tea gardens) on every street corner. Day four could see you sipping cocktails in a Beyoğlu rooftop bar, transfixed by the sight of ferries plying the waters between Europe and Asia. Or maybe you'll be drinking *rakı* (aniseed brandy) and sampling delectable meze dishes in a noisy *meyhane* (tavern) off İstiklal Caddesi. By day five, the die will be well and truly cast: *kismetse* (the intervention of fate or luck) will have ensured your life-long love affair with this extraordinary city.

## ISTANBUL LIFE

This meeting point of East and West has rarely been as full of confidence and hope for the future as it is today. In its guise as Constantinople the city was powerful and mysterious, but as the 21st century gets into the swing, modern İstanbul is revelling in unprecedented growth and prosperity.

The city's starring role as a European Capital of Culture has led to a massive program of heritage restoration in the Old City. Great monuments such as the imperial mosques have been given loving restorations, as have historically significant but hitherto neglected Byzantine monuments. New museums are opening as regularly as international art exhibitions, and the city's festival circuit is one of the busiest in Europe – İstanbullular are intent on showing the world just how exciting and eclectic their cultural landscape is.

The country's bid to join the European Union (EU) is spearheading much of this activity. Official accession talks kicked off in 2005, but the decision isn't due until 2013 at the earliest. To be honest, İstanbullular aren't all that fussed about the outcome. They know their city has a growing European flavour and they suspect that an EU membership isn't going to change its complexion or their lifestyles to a significant degree. Nor have they surrendered their pride in being inheritors of the glory of the Ottoman Empire, with its deep Islamic sensibility and self-conscious separation from the rest of Europe.

Some changes are inevitable as part of the bid for candidacy. Initiatives to bring the country into line with its European neighbours in the areas of human rights, environmental protection, economic management and freedom of speech are underway, but significant improvements are essential if membership is ever to be attained. There will also need to be a rapprochement between the ruling national Justice and Development Party (AKP), with its soft Islamist agenda, and the staunchly secular National Security Council (NSC).

These weighty issues aside, the city is supremely optimistic about the future that it has in store, and for good reason. Put simply, there's never been a better time to visit.

GEORGE TSAFOS



*So many choices! Sample a variety of dishes at a traditional meyhane (tavern; p144)*

# THE AUTHOR

## Virginia Maxwell



After working for many years as a publishing manager at Lonely Planet's Melbourne headquarters, Virginia decided that she'd be happier writing guidebooks than commissioning them. Since making this decision she's authored

Lonely Planet guides to Turkey, Egypt, Spain, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria and the United Arab Emirates. Virginia knows İstanbul well, and loves it with a passion. As well as writing the previous two editions of this city guide, she is also the author of Lonely Planet's *İstanbul Encounter* pocket guide and the İstanbul chapter of Lonely Planet's *Turkey* guide. She also writes about the city for a host of international newspapers and magazines. Virginia usually travels with her partner Peter and young son Max, who love the city as much as she does.

### VIRGINIA'S TOP İSTANBUL DAY

After popping into a local *börekçi* for a breakfast of freshly baked *ıspanaklı börek* (pastry stuffed with spinach) and a glass of tea, I saunter past the Blue Mosque (p56) and Aya Sofya (p49), and up Divan Yolu to the Grand Bazaar (p72). After assuring the good-humoured touts that I have no money to spend, I walk through the Sahaflar Çarşısı (Old Book Bazaar; p75) and around İstanbul University to the Süleymaniye Mosque (p76) so that I can marvel at Sinan's most wonderful creation. After this I join the sea of locals on the bustling streets

of Tahtakale, making my way past the shops and street vendors down towards Eminönü, where I catch a ferry to Kadıköy in Asia. My first stop there is for lunch at the fabulous Çiya Sofrası (p159), and then I wander for an hour or so around the vibrant fresh-produce market. Catching a ferry back to Karaköy, I recharge over a tea and a piece of the city's best baklava at Karaköy Güllüğü (p158), before walking up through the narrow streets of Karaköy and Tünel to İstiklal Caddesi for an hour or so of browsing in the book and record stores. Then it's on to meet friends for a drink at Leb-i Derya or Mikla (both p166), followed by dinner at Sofyalı 9 (p154) or Ece Aksoy (p153) in Asmalımescit. Raki, meze and good friends, all in the best city in the world – life doesn't get any better than this!

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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# GETTING STARTED

## WHEN TO GO

The best times to visit Istanbul are spring (April to May) and autumn (September to October), when skies are clear and temperatures are moderate. In July and August it's hot and steamy; many locals head for the west and south coasts then and some businesses close. Biting winds and snow are common in winter.

Be aware that during the five-day Kurban Bayramı (see p225) banks shut and ATMs can run out of money. During Ramazan (Ramadan; see p225) business hours can be erratic.

Hotel rooms skyrocket in price and are often overbooked during the Formula 1 Grand Prix in June.

## FESTIVALS

In the warmer months Istanbul is awash with arts festivals and music events, giving plenty of choice when it comes to entertainment. Most of the big-name arts festivals are organised by the **Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts** (☎ 212-334 0700; [www.iksv.org/english](http://www.iksv.org/english)), though **Positif** ([www.pozitif-ist.com](http://www.pozitif-ist.com)) organises some. Tickets to most events are available from **Biletix** (☎ 216-556 9800; [www.biletix.com](http://www.biletix.com)). For a list of public holidays see p225.

### March

#### AKBANK SHORT FILM FESTIVAL

☎ 212-252 3500; [www.akbanksanat.com](http://www.akbanksanat.com)

Beloved by the black-clad Beyoğlu bohemian set, this arty film-culture event is held at the Akbank Culture & Arts Centre.

#### NEVRUZ

Locals celebrate this ancient Middle Eastern spring festival on 21 March with jolly goings-on and jumping over bonfires. The streets near the Armada Hotel in Cankurtaran (in the Sultanahmet neighbourhood) host a giant open-air party.

### April

#### INTERNATIONAL İSTANBUL FILM FESTIVAL

[www.iksv.org/english](http://www.iksv.org/english)

If you're keen to view the best in Turkish film and bump into a few local film stars

while doing so, this is the event to attend. Held early in the month in cinemas around town, it's hugely popular. The program includes retrospectives and recent releases from Turkey and abroad.

#### İSTANBUL INTERNATIONAL TULIP FESTIVAL

The tulip (*lale* in Turkish) is one of Istanbul's traditional symbols, and the local government celebrates this fact by planting over three million of them annually. These bloom in late March and early April, endowing almost every street and park with vivid spring colours and wonderful photo opportunities.

### May

#### ORTHODOX EASTER

[www.ec-patr.org](http://www.ec-patr.org)

The celebratory Easter Sunday Mass is the biggest event of the year at the home of the Greek Orthodox community in Fener.

### June

#### EFES PILSEN ONE LOVE

[www.pozitif-ist.com](http://www.pozitif-ist.com)

This two-day music festival is held at one of Istanbul's hippest art venues, **santralistanbul** (p179). International headline acts play everything from punk to pop, electronica to disco.

#### INTERNATIONAL İSTANBUL MUSIC FESTIVAL

[www.iksv.org/english](http://www.iksv.org/english)

The city's premier arts festival includes performances of opera, dance, orchestral concerts and chamber recitals. Acts are often internationally renowned and the action takes place in atmosphere-laden venues including **Aya İrini** (p181) in Sultanahmet.

### July

#### INTERNATIONAL İSTANBUL JAZZ FESTIVAL

[www.iksv.org/english](http://www.iksv.org/english)

This festival was once part of the International Istanbul Music Festival, but branched out on its own over a decade ago and has



gone from strength to strength. It usually runs for two weeks and programs a weird hybrid of conventional jazz, electronica, drum 'n' bass, world music and rock. Venues include the Cemil Topuzlu Open-Air Theatre (Cemil Topuzlu Açık Hava Tiyatrosu) in Harbiye, İstanbul Modern (p101), Cemal Reşit Rey Concert Hall (p181) and Nardis Jazz Club (p172).

## September

### INTERNATIONAL İSTANBUL BIENNIAL

[www.iksv.org/english](http://www.iksv.org/english)

The city's major visual-arts shindig takes place from early September to early November in odd-numbered years. An international curator or panel of curators nominates a theme and puts together a cutting-edge program that is then exhibited in a variety of venues around town.

### ROCK'N COKE

[www.pozitif-ist.com](http://www.pozitif-ist.com)

Turkey's largest open-air music festival rocks for two days, with past headliners including The Prodigy, Kaiser Chiefs and Jane's Addiction. It's held in İstanbul Park, the city's Formula 1 track, and crowds can hit 50,000.

## October

### AKBANK JAZZ FESTIVAL

☎ 212-252 3500; [www.akbanksanat.com](http://www.akbanksanat.com)

This older sister to the International İstanbul Jazz Festival is a boutique event, with a program featuring traditional and avant-garde jazz, as well as Middle Eastern fusions and a special program of young jazz. Venues are scattered around town.

## November

### ANNIVERSARY OF ATATÜRK'S DEATH

At 9.05am on 10 November, a minute's silence is held to commemorate the death of the nation's revered founder. Sirens blare and the city comes to a standstill, with people, cars and buses literally stopping in their tracks.

## December

### EFES PILSEN BLUES FESTIVAL

[www.pozitif-ist.com](http://www.pozitif-ist.com)

This long-running event tours nationally, keeping blues fans smiling and leaving

an echo of boogie-woogie, zydeco and 12-bar blues from Adana to Trabzon. It stops for a two-day program in İstanbul. The main venue is the Lütfi Kırdar Concert Hall (p181).

## COSTS & MONEY

After years of instability, the Turkish lira is now considered relatively stable. In this book we have given hotel and tour prices in euros, as this is the currency that hotel owners and tour operators work with. All other prices are given in Turkish Lira (TL), and reflect the reality on the ground at the time of research.

Though İstanbul is no longer the bargain travel destination it was in the past, it still offers good value for money. A three-star hotel room for two can cost as little as €60 in Sultanahmet and you can enjoy a decent kebap meal for TL20 to TL25 (without alcohol). Public transport is both efficient and dirt cheap, and many sights – in particular the city's wonderful array of historical mosques – are free. Others are relatively inexpensive, with the average museum entry being TL15.

This isn't to say that everything in the city is a bargain. If you decide to have a night on the town and hit the bars in Beyoğlu and nightclubs along the Bosphorus you'll need to be cashed up – nightclub entries can be as high as TL50 and a drink in these places will cost at least TL20; a glass of wine in one of the glam rooftop bars in Beyoğlu will set you back TL15. And shopping at the new generation of malls such as **Kanyon** and **İstinye Park** (boxed text p142) is no different to blowing your budget in Knightsbridge or on Rodeo Drive – this is designer turf and is priced accordingly.

### HOW MUCH?

Litre of unleaded petrol TL3.30

Litre of bottled water TL1

Efes Pilsen (bar prices) TL4-8

Ticket on public transport TL1.50

Fish sandwich TL4

Glass of çay (tea) TL1-1.50

Taxi ride from Sultanahmet to Taksim TL12-14

Movie ticket TL9-15

Nargileh (water pipe) TL12-15

English-language newspaper TL1.50

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## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Cornucopia** ([www.cornucopia.net](http://www.cornucopia.net)) The online site of the glossy 'Connoisseurs of Turkey' magazine has a handy arts diary as well as exhibitions listings and blogs.

**Hürriyet Daily News** ([www.hurriyetdailynews.com](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com)) Website of the Opposition-leaning English-language daily newspaper.

**İstanbul Şehir Rehberi** (<http://sehirrehberi.ibb.gov.tr>) Online maps of the city.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Check out the Thorn Tree bulletin board to find out what city discoveries are being made.

**Ministry of Culture and Tourism** ([www.turizm.gov.tr](http://www.turizm.gov.tr)) Government information on tourism, culture, archaeology and history.

**Ministry of Foreign Affairs** ([www.mfa.gov.tr](http://www.mfa.gov.tr)) Up-to-date visa and security information.

**My Merhaba** ([www.mymerhaba.com](http://www.mymerhaba.com)) Aimed at expats, but has lots of general information that's of use to visitors too, including entertainment listings.

**Time Out İstanbul** ([www.timeoutistanbul.com/english](http://www.timeoutistanbul.com/english)) The online site of this excellent monthly magazine has a good listings section.

## ADVANCE PLANNING

**Two months before you go** If you're travelling in spring, autumn or over Christmas, make your hotel booking as far in advance as possible. The good places often book up quickly!

**One month before you go** İstanbul's big-ticket festivals sell out fast, and for good reason. Check the festival list in this chapter to see what tempts your fancy, and then book ahead.

**Two weeks before you go** Book a table for dinner at Mikla (p152), Cercis Murat Konağı (boxed text p160), Changa (p152) and other top-end restaurants reviewed in this book.

**One week before you go** Check the *Time Out* website (see left) for information about openings and events in the city.

**Today's Zaman** ([www.todayszaman.com](http://www.todayszaman.com)) Website of the AKP-leaning English-language daily newspaper.

**Turism Turkey** ([www.tourismturkey.org](http://www.tourismturkey.org)) Government website containing a grab bag of articles and information.

**Turkey Travel Planner** ([www.turkeytravelplanner.com](http://www.turkeytravelplanner.com)) An ever-growing site about travel throughout Turkey put together by well-known writer and Turkey expert, Tom Brosnahan.

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