

Welcome to İstanbul

*This magical meeting place of East
and West has more top-drawer
attractions than it has minarets
(and that's a lot).*

Living History

İstanbul's strategic location has attracted many marauding armies over the centuries. The Greeks, Persians, Romans and Venetians took turns ruling before the Ottomans stormed into town and decided to stay – physical reminders of their various tenures are found littered across the city. And the fact that the city straddles two continents wasn't its only drawcard. This was the final stage on the legendary Silk Roads that linked Asia and Europe, and many of the merchants who came here liked it so much that they, too, decided to stay.

Art & Architecture

The conquering armies of ancient times tended to ransack the city rather than endow it with artistic treasures, but that changed with the Byzantines, who adorned their churches and palaces with mosaics and frescoes. Miraculously, many of these are still here to admire. Their successors, the Ottomans, were quick to launch an ambitious building program after their emphatic arrival. The magnificently decorated imperial mosques that followed are architectural triumphs that together form one of the world's great skylines. And in recent years, local banks and business dynasties have reprised the Ottomans' grand ambitions and endowed an impressive array of galleries, museums and festivals.

Culinary Heritage

'But what about the food?' we hear you say. We're happy to report that the city's cuisine is as diverse as its heritage, and delicious to boot. Locals take their eating and drinking seriously – the restaurants here are the best in the country. You can eat edgy fusion creations, aromatic Asian dishes or Italian classics if you so choose, but most visitors prefer to sample the succulent kebaps, flavoursome mezes and freshly caught fish that are the city's signature dishes, washing them down with the national drink, rakı (grape spirit infused with aniseed), or a glass or two of locally produced wine or beer.

Local Life

Some ancient cities are the sum of their monuments, but İstanbul factors a lot more into the equation. Chief among its manifold attractions are the locals, who have an infectious love of life and generosity of spirit. This vibrant, inclusive and expanding community is full of people who work and party hard, treasure family and friendships, and have no problem melding tradition and modernity in their everyday lives. Joining them in their favourite haunts – *çay bahçesi* (tea gardens), *kahvehane* (coffeehouses), *meyhanes* (Turkish taverns) and *kebabçısı* (kebab restaurants) – will be a highlight of your visit.



Why I Love İstanbul

By Virginia Maxwell, Author

Why do I love this city? Let me count the ways. I love the locals, who have an endless supply of hospitality, good humour and insightful conversation at their disposal. I love the fact that when I walk down a city street, layers of history unfold before me. I love listening to the sound of the *müezzins* duelling from their minarets and I love seeing the sun set over the world's most beautiful skyline. I love the restaurants, the bars and the tea gardens. But most of all, I love the fact that in İstanbul, an extraordinary cultural experience lies around every corner.

For more about our author, see p256.