

Understand İstanbul

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Levels of cultural and infrastructure investment are nearly as high as the population figures, and that's really saying something...

HISTORY 182

Few cities have a history as long, complex and eventful as İstanbul née Constantinople née Byzantium.

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Ottoman mosques, Byzantine fortresses and cutting-edge art galleries jostle for attention in the streets of this architecturally splendid city.

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Writers and directors often use İstanbul as an evocative setting – we list our favourite novels and films set in the city.

Istanbul Today

As the 21st century gets into gear, this meeting point of Europe and Asia is revelling in the unprecedented growth and prosperity it has achieved over the past decade. It's also getting larger – the official population is 14 million, but most locals think that 20 million is a more accurate estimate, leading to huge problems with urban sprawl and inadequate infrastructure.

Best in Music

Mercan Dede A major name on the international World Music scene, Dede's distinctive Sufi-electronic techno-fusion is showcased in his albums *Sufi Dreams* (1996), *Journeys of a Dervish* (1999), *Sayahatname* (2001), *Nar* (Fire; 2002), *Sufi Traveller* (2003), *Su* (Water; 2004), *Nefes* (Breath; 2006), *800* (2007) and *Dünya* (Earth; 2013).

İlhan Erşahin The Turkish-American jazz saxophonist and composer is a big name in both New York, where he resides, and İstanbul, where he and his İstanbul Sessions ensemble regularly play at the Nublu venue in Karaköy. Their two albums are *İlhan Erşahin's İstanbul Sessions with Erik Truffaz* (2009) and *Night Rider* (2012).

Fazıl Say The internationally renowned pianist and composer has innumerable compositions and recordings to his credit, including the 2007 violin concerto *1001 Nights in the Harem* and 2010 *İstanbul Symphony*.

Sezen Aksu The queen of Turkish pop; *Öptüm* (2011) was her first international release.

Too Many Tourists?

Tourism is booming. Turkey is now the sixth-most-visited tourist destination in the world, and İstanbul is the country's number-one destination for visitors. At present, the city hosts nearly 12 million visitors per year, and while this brings prosperity, it also brings challenges. Chief among these are the detrimental effects that crowds can have on the physical condition of ancient monuments such as Aya Sofya and Topkapı Palace, which together host nearly seven million visitors per year.

Civil Unrest

When İstanbul hit the international headlines in mid-2013, it wasn't because of the tourist boom. Anti-government demonstrations had been triggered by a decision to hand over one of Beyoğlu's few public green spaces, Gezi Park near Taksim Meydanı (Taksim Sq), to developers but swiftly developed into a much larger movement protesting at what the largely secularist and left-leaning protesters saw as an increasingly autocratic style of leadership by then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and a crackdown on democratic rights including freedom of speech and the press by the ruling AKP party. Riot police brought the Gezi protests to a violent end, but anger at Mr Erdoğan and the AKP continues unabated among a vocal sector of the city's population.

Infrastructure Upgrades

Over the past two decades the constantly growing population has placed a huge strain on the city's public transport system. Fortunately, the local authorities and Ankara anticipated this problem and in 2005 commenced works on the Marmaray project, a hugely ambitious transportation infrastructure program that is ongoing. Works have included building an underwater railway link between the European and Asian suburbs, erecting a railway bridge over the Golden Horn and integrating