

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. The security situation is not as stable as the government would like, though.

HISTORY 188

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 contemporary 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 hits its stride, İstanbul is in an economic and political holding pattern. Two decades of growth and prosperity brought with it a number of challenges, chief among which was strain on the city's transport infrastructure by the growing population. While government has improved the city's roads and public transport, it still has a long way to go before the notorious traffic gridlock, which contributes to significant air pollution, is resolved. Even more challenging is the unsettled political environment, with a spate of bombings and an unsuccessful military coup d'état occurring here in 2016. Ramifications for the city's vital tourism industry has been disastrous.

Best in Music

BaBa ZuLa These darlings of the local alternative music scene play traditional Turkish instruments to create their unique sound, which melds electronica, reggae and dub. Their best known album is 2005's *Duble Oryantal* and their most recent release is 2014's *34 Oto Sanayi*.

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*, the 2010 *İstanbul Symphony* (*Symphony No 1*) and the 2015 *Grand Bazaar Rhapsody for Orchestra* (*Opus 65*).

İlhan Erşahin The Turkish-Swedish jazz saxophonist and composer performs and records with his Istanbul Sessions ensemble. Their five albums are *Istanbul Sessions featuring Erik Truffaz* (2010), *Istanbul Sessions: Bosphorus* (2010), *Istanbul Sessions* (2011), *Night Ride Remixes* (2012) and *Istanbul Underground* (2015).

Mercan Dede Known for his distinctive Sufi-electronic techno-fusion, Dede's albums include *Sufi Traveller* (2003), *Su* (Water; 2004), *Nefes* (Breath; 2006) and *Dünya* (Earth; 2013).

Civil Unrest and the Security Situation

The ramifications of the unsuccessful military coup d'état staged in July 2016 have been severe, with any opposition to the ruling AKP party and its leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, being emphatically suppressed. AKP supporters see the defeat of the coup as a triumph of democracy, but many secularist, left-leaning and Kurdish members of the community hold grave fears that free speech, independent media and basic human rights including the right to peaceful protest will fall victim to post-coup politics.

At the same time, political tensions within the country and the region have led to terrorist incidents including bomb attacks in areas frequented by tourists, resulting in a dramatic drop in tourist arrivals. This has had a devastating effect on the local economy. Visitors should monitor their country's travel advisories and stay alert at all times.

Infrastructure Upgrades

Over the past two decades the 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 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 the new rail and metro lines with other city transport options. Construction has been slowed by constant archaeological discoveries, but the first phase of the project opened at the end of 2013; a third bridge was completed over the Bosphorus in 2016; and a huge new international airport is scheduled to open in 2018. Newly announced projects include a metro link between Kabataş and Mahmutbey (due for completion 2017), a traffic tunnel under the