



Istanbul

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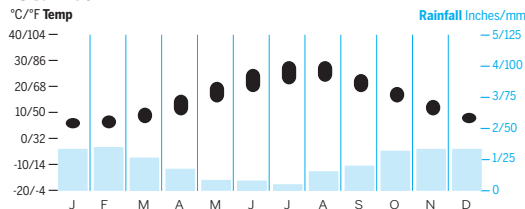
Why Go?

Some ancient cities are the sum of their monuments. But others, such as İstanbul, factor a lot more into the equation. Here, you can visit Byzantine churches and Ottoman mosques in the morning, shop in chic boutiques during the afternoon and party at glamorous nightclubs through the night. In the space of a few minutes you can hear the evocative strains of the call to prayer issuing from the Old City's tapering minarets, the sonorous horn of a crowded commuter ferry crossing between Europe and Asia, and the strident cries of a street hawker selling fresh seasonal produce. Put simply, this marvellous metropolis is an exercise in sensory seduction like no other.

Ask locals to describe what they love about İstanbul and they'll shrug, give a small smile and say merely that there is no other place like it. Spend a few days here, and you'll know exactly what they mean.

When to Go

Istanbul



Apr Sunshine and balmy breezes usher in the colourful İstanbul Tulip Festival.

Jun & Jul Atmospheric venues around town host the high-profile Music and Jazz Festivals.

Sep Heat disperses and locals enjoy the season for *levrek* (blue-fish), a favourite local fish.

History

BYZANTIUM

Legend tells us that the first historically significant settlement here was founded by Byzas, a colonist from Megara, a port city in Attica. Before leaving Greece, he asked the Delphic oracle where to locate his new colony and received the enigmatic answer: 'Opposite the blind'. When Byzas and his fellow colonists sailed up the Bosphorus in 657 BC, they noticed a small colony on the Asian shore at Chalcedon (modern-day Kadıköy). Looking left, they saw the superb natural harbour of the Golden Horn (Haliç) on the European shore. Thinking, 'Those people in Chalcedon must be blind', they settled on the opposite shore and named their new city Byzantium.

Byzantium submitted willingly to Rome and fought its battles for centuries. But it finally got caught out supporting the wrong side in a civil war. The winner, Septimius Severus, razed the city walls and took away its privileges in AD 196. When he relented and rebuilt the city, he named it Augusta Antonina.

CONSTANTINOPLE

Another struggle for control of the Roman Empire determined the city's fate for the next 1000 years. Emperor Constantine pursued his rival Licinius to Augusta Antonina, then across the Bosphorus to Chrysopolis (Üsküdar). Defeating his rival in 324, Constantine solidified his control and renamed

Augusta Antonina 'New Rome'. He laid out a vast new city to serve as capital of his empire and inaugurated it with much pomp in 330.

Constantine died in 337, just seven years after the dedication of his new capital, but the city continued to grow under the rule of the emperors. Theodosius I ('the Great'; r 379–95) had a forum built on the present site of Beyazıt Meydanı (Beyazıt Square), while his son Theodosius II built his self-titled walls in 413 when the city was threatened by the marauding armies of Attila the Hun. Flattened by an earthquake in 447 and hastily rebuilt within two months, the Theodosian Walls still surround the Old City today.

Theodosius II died in 450 and was succeeded by a string of emperors, including the ambitious Justinian (r 527–65). Three years before taking the throne, Justinian had married Theodora, a strong-willed former courtesan. Together they further embellished Constantinople with great buildings, including the famous Aya Sofya, built in 537. Justinian's building projects and constant wars of reconquest exhausted his treasury and his empire. Following his reign, the Byzantine Empire would never again be as large, powerful or rich.

Much of ancient Constantinople's building stock remains, including churches, palaces, cisterns and the Hippodrome. In fact, there's more left than most people realise. Any excavation reveals ancient streets, mosaics, tunnels, water and sewage systems,

İSTANBUL IN...

Two Days

With only two days, you'll need to get cracking! On day one, visit the **Blue Mosque**, **Aya Sofya** and the **Basilica Cistern** in the morning and follow our walking tour of the **Grand Bazaar** in the afternoon. Enjoy dinner somewhere in Beyoğlu.

Day two should be devoted to **Topkapı Palace** and the Bosphorus. Spend the morning at the palace, then board one of the private excursion boats at Eminönü for a **Bosphorus cruise**. Afterwards, walk up through Galata to **İstiklal Caddesi**, have a drink at a **rooftop bar** and enjoy dinner at a **meyhane** (tavern).

Four Days

Follow the two-day itinerary, and on your third day visit the **İstanbul Archaeology Museums** or **Museum of Turkish & Islamic Arts** in the morning, and the **Süleymaniye Mosque** in the afternoon. For dinner, sample the succulent kebabs at **Hamdi** or **Zübeyir Ocakbaşı**. Day four should be devoted to a Golden Horn cruise; on your way back from Eyüp get off at Ayvansaray and walk uphill to visit the Byzantine mosaics and frescoes at the **Kariye Museum (Chora Church)**. Back in Sultanahmet, shop for souvenirs at the **Arasta Bazaar** before hitting the bar, restaurant and club scenes on the other side of Galata Bridge.