Turkey Excursions

Bosphorous Boat Tour
Every visitor to Istanbul wants to—and should!—take a Bosphorus cruise on the 32 km (20-mile)-long strait which joins the Sea of Marmara to the south with the Black Sea to the north of Istanbul.

Haghia Sophia
The Church of the Divine Wisdom (Hagia Sophia in Greek) in Sultanahmet, Istanbul, is one of the most impressive and important buildings ever constructed. Its wide, flat dome was a daring engineering feat in the 6th century, and architects still marvel at the building’s many innovations. Called Hagia Sophia in Greek, Sancta Sophia in Latin, Ayasofya in Turkish, it was built in 537 AD on the site of Byzantium’s acropolis by Emperor Justinian (527-65 AD).

Ayasofya was the greatest church in Christendom, and was meant to be. According to Prof. Robert Osterhout, it was built to surpass the gigantic Church of St Polyeuchtos erected by Julia Anitzia, scion of the line of Theodosian emperors. Julia meant her church, a "recreation" of the Temple of Jerusalem, to symbolize her wealth, power and legitimate claim to the throne of Byzantium. Justinian had to out-build her to establish his own legitimacy—and he did. His church remained the largest church ever built until St Peter's Basilica was constructed in Rome 1000 years later. (Julia’s church, by the way, was destroyed by an earthquake. You can see a few pitiful ruins of it near the traffic under/overpass between the Istanbul Belediye Sarayı [City Hall] and Aqueduct of Valens [Bozdoğan Kemerı].

Being the world's most impressive building, it's no wonder that Mehmet the Conqueror proclaimed it a mosque soon after his conquest of the city from the Byzantines in 1453. It served as Istanbul's most revered mosque until 1935 when Atatürk, recognizing its world-historical significance, had it proclaimed a museum, as it is now.

Everyone wants to see Ayasofya—it is the most-visited site in Turkey (3.57 million visitors in 2014). Even off-season the crowds of visitors are so large that you should consider buying an Istanbul Museum Pass to jump the line...and save money! (Tip: if you employ a private guide, you go right to the front of the line.)

Although most of the building is still a museum, a room on the east side was opened in 2007 as a prayer-place (İbadete Açık Kısımı), and the call to prayer is proclaimed from the minaret above it. Ayasofya is awe-inspiring—one of the first things to see when you’re in Istanbul. Luckily, it's right next to Topkapı Palace, the Blue Mosque and the Byzantine Hippodrome, and right across the street from Yerebatan Sarıncı, the Basilica Cistern.
Most of the 30 million gold tesserae (tiny mosaic tiles) which cover the church's interior—especially the dome—have recently been restored to the brilliance they boasted 1500 years ago. The interior was
filled with scaffolding for 17 years, until March 2012. The scaffolding was removed that year, but in 2013 some scaffolding returned so that work may continue.

Be sure to climb to the mezzanine level to see the splendid Byzantine mosaics. (Although the mezzanine used to have more limited visiting hours, now it is open during the same hours as the museum.) The Hürrem Sultan Hamamı (Turkish bath of the Ayasofya mosque complex), on the southwest side of Ayasofya next to the park with the fountain, was designed by master architect Mimar Sinan and built for Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent. It has been beautifully restored and is again in service as a hamam (Turkish bath). Ayasofya is one of the stops on Efendi Travel's Old Istanbul Walking Tour, a good way to have a look at the major sights.

**Blue Mosque**

Only after you enter the Blue Mosque do you understand the name. The inside is covered with 20,000 shimmering blue-green İznik tiles interspersed with 260 stained-glass windows; calligraphy and intricate floral patterns are painted on the ceiling. After the dark corners and stern faces of the Byzantine mosaics in Aya Sofya, this mosque feels gloriously airy and full of light. Indeed, this favorable comparison was the intention of architect Mehmet Ağa (a former student of the famous Ottoman architect Sinan), whose goal was to surpass Justinian’s crowning achievement (Aya Sofya). At the behest of Sultan Ahmet I (ruled 1603–17), he created this masterpiece of Ottoman craftsmanship, starting in 1609 and completing it in just eight years, and many believe he indeed succeeded in outdoing the splendor of Aya Sofya.

Mehmet Ağa actually went a little too far though, when he surrounded the massive structure with six minarets: this number linked the Blue Mosque with the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca—and this could not be allowed. So Sultan Ahmet I was forced to send Mehmet Ağa down to the Holy City to build a seventh minaret for al-Haram and reestablish the eminence of that mosque. Sultan Ahmet and some of his family are interred in the türbe (mausoleum) at a corner of the complex, although the tombs are closed for renovations until 2015.

From outside of the Blue Mosque you can see the genius of Mehmet Ağa, who didn't attempt to surpass the massive dome of Aya Sofya across the way, but instead created a secession of domes of varying sizes to cover the huge interior space, creating an effect that is both whimsical and uplifting.

**Basilica Cistern**

This subterranean structure was commissioned by Emperor Justinian and built in 532. The largest surviving Byzantine cistern in İstanbul, it was constructed using 336 columns, many of which were salvaged from ruined temples and feature fine carved capitals. Its symmetry and sheer grandeur of conception are quite breathtaking, and its cavernous depths make a great retreat on summer days.

Like most sites in İstanbul, the cistern has an unusual history. It was originally known as the Basilica Cistern because it lay underneath the Stoa Basilica, one of the great squares on the first hill. Designed to service the Great Palace and surrounding buildings, it was able to store up to 80,000 cu metres of water delivered via 20km of aqueducts from a reservoir near the Black Sea, but was closed when the Byzantine emperors
relocated from the Great Palace. Forgotten by the city authorities some time before the Conquest, it wasn't rediscovered until 1545, when scholar Petrus Gyllius was researching Byzantine antiquities in the city and was told by local residents that they were able to miraculously obtain water by lowering buckets into a dark space below their basement floors. Some were even catching fish this way. Intrigued, Gyllius explored the neighbourhood and finally accessed the cistern through one of the basements. Even after his discovery, the Ottomans (who referred to the cistern as Yerebatan Saray) didn't treat the so-called Underground Palace with the respect it deserved – it became a dumping ground for all sorts of junk, as well as corpses.

The cistern was cleaned and renovated in 1985 by the İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality and opened to the public in 1987. It's now one of the city's most popular tourist attractions. Walking along its raised wooden platforms, you'll feel the water dripping from the vaulted ceiling and see schools of ghostly carp patrolling the water – it certainly has bucketloads (forgive the pun) of atmosphere.

Topkapi Palace
This vast palace on Sarayburnu ("Seraglio Point"), above the confluence of the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn, was the residence of sultans and their harems, in addition to being the seat of Ottoman rule from the 1460s until the mid-19th century. Few other royal residences match this hilltop compound when it comes to mystery, intrigue, and the lavish intricacies of court life.

Sultan Mehmet II built the original Topkapı Palace, known simply as the New Palace, between 1459 and 1465, shortly after his conquest of Constantinople. Over the centuries, sultan after sultan added ever more elaborate architectural frills and fantasies, until the palace had acquired four courtyards and quarters for some 5,000 full-time residents, including slaves, concubines, and eunuchs. Many of its inhabitants lived their entire adult lives behind its walls, and the palace was often the scene of intrigues, bloodshed, and drama as members of the sultan's entourage plotted and schemed to advance their favorites, sometimes even deposing and assassinating the sultan himself. Topkapı was finally abandoned in 1856, when Sultan Abdülmecid I moved his court to Dolmabahçe Palace on the Bosphorus.

The main entrance, or Imperial Gate, leads to the Court of the Janissaries, also known as the First Courtyard, which is (and has always been) freely accessible to the general public. Today, the courtyard where these members of the sultan's guard once assembled is a tranquil green park full of tourist groups, and there is little to evoke the splendors and tragedies of the palace's extraordinary history. Off to one side is the large and modestly beautiful Aya Irini (Church of St. Irene, Hagia Eirene in Greek), an unadorned redbrick building that dates from the same time as Justinian, though it is believed to stand on the site of the first church of Byzantium. The church is usually closed, but is sometimes opened for special exhibitions and concerts.

You will begin to experience the grandeur of the palace when you pass through the Bab-üs Selam (Gate of Salutation). Süleyman the Magnificent built the gate in 1524 and was the only person allowed to pass through it on horseback; others had to dismount and enter on foot. Prisoners were kept in the towers on either side of the gate before they were executed next to the nearby fountain—a handy arrangement that made it easy for executioners to wash the blood off their hands after carrying out their orders.
The Second Courtyard, once the administrative hub of the Ottoman empire, is planted with rose gardens and ornamental trees, and filled with a series of ornate köşks, pavilions once used for the business of state as well as for more mundane matters, like feeding the hordes of servants. To one side are the palace's kitchens, where more than 1,000 cooks once toiled at the rows of immense ovens to feed the palace residents, whose numbers sometimes swelled to 10,000 on special occasions. The cavernous space is being restored and when it reopens it will display one of the world’s best collections of porcelain, much of it amassed over years of Ottoman rule when powers from China, Persia, and Europe bestowed gifts on the sultans. Straight ahead is the Divan-ı Hümayun (Assembly Room of the Council of State), once presided over by the grand vizier. When the mood struck him, the sultan would sit behind a latticed window, hidden by a curtain, so no one would know when he was listening, although occasionally he would pull the curtain aside to comment.

The Harem, a maze of 400 halls, terraces, rooms, wings, and apartments grouped around the sultan’s private quarters, evokes all the eroticism of Orientalist fantasies of the Ottoman Empire. Yet seeing the 40 or so Harem rooms that have been restored and open to the public brings to mind not just luxury but also the regimentation, and even barbarity, of life in this enclosed enclave. A separate ticket must be purchased to visit the Harem.

The first Harem compound you see housed about 200 lesser concubines and the palace eunuchs, in tiny cubicles, like those in a monastery. As you move into the Harem, the rooms become larger and more opulent. The chief wives of the sultan (Islamic law permitted up to four, though the sultan could consort with as many concubines as he wished) lived in private apartments around a shared courtyard. Farther in are the lavish apartments, courtyard, and marble bath of the valide sultan (queen mother), the absolute ruler of the Harem. Finally, there are the sultan’s private rooms—a riot of brocades, murals, colored marble, wildly ornate furniture, gold leaf, and fine carving. The fountains that splash throughout the Harem were not only decorative: they also made it hard to eavesdrop on royal conversations.

Beyond the Harem is the Third Courtyard, shaded by regal old trees and dotted by some of the most ornate of the palace’s pavilions. (From the Harem, you enter to the side of the courtyard, but to see this beautiful space to best advantage, make your way to its main gate, the Bab-üs Saadet, or Gate of Felicity, exit, and reenter—and consider yourself privileged to do so, because for centuries only the sultan and grand vizier were allowed to pass through this gate.) Foreign ambassadors once groveled in the Arz Odası (Audience Chamber), but access to the courtyard was highly restricted, in part because it housed the Treasury, four rooms filled with imperial thrones and lavish gifts bestowed upon generations of sultans, and spoils garnered from centuries of war and invasions. The glittering prizes here are the jewels. The most famous pieces are the 86-carat Spoonmaker’s Diamond and the emerald-studded Topkapı Dagger. Two uncut emeralds, each weighing about eight pounds(!), once hung from the ceiling, but are now displayed behind glass. Other pavilions show off a curious assortment of treasures, among them relics of the prophet Muhammad (including hair from his beard), considered especially holy by Muslims, and sultans’ garments, from the lavish wardrobes of the first to the last ruler. Some of these robes are bloodstained and torn from assassins’ daggers; other garments are stiff with gold and silver thread, tooled leather, and gold, silver, and jewels.

The Fourth Courtyard, more of an open terrace, was the private realm of the sultan, and the small, elegant pavilions, mosques, fountains, and reflecting pools are scattered amid gardens that overlook the Golden Horn and Bosphorus. The octagonal Revan Köşkü, built by Murat IV in 1636 to commemorate a military victory in eastern Anatolia and the Caucasus, is often referred to in Ottoman histories as the Turban Room (Sarık Odası) because it is where the sultan used to keep his turbans. In the İftariye (Golden Cage), also known as the Sofa Köşkü, the closest relatives of the reigning sultan
lived in strict confinement under what amounted to house arrest—superseding an older practice of murdering all possible rivals to the throne. Just off the open terrace with the wishing well is the lavishly tiled Sünnet Odası (Circumcision Room), where little princes would be taken for ritual circumcision during their ninth or tenth year.

**Grand Bazaar**

Take a deep breath and plunge into this maze of 65 winding, covered streets crammed with 4,000 tiny shops, cafés, restaurants, mosques, and courtyards. It's said that this early version of a shopping mall is the largest concentration of stores under one roof anywhere in the world, and that's easy to believe; it's also easy to believe that some of the most aggressive salesmanship in the world takes place here, which is why you should take that deep breath and also put up your guard before entering. Oddly enough, though, the sales pitches, the crowds, and the sheer volume of junky trinkets on offer can be hypnotizing, and you'll probably find it hard to spend less than a couple of hours wandering through the maze. Originally built by Mehmet II (the Conqueror) in 1461 over the main Byzantine shopping streets, the Grand Bazaar was ravaged twice by fire in relatively recent years—once in 1954 when it was almost destroyed, and previously in 1943, in a smaller conflagration. In both cases, the bazaar was quickly rebuilt into something resembling the original style, with its arched passageways and brass-and-tile fountains at regular intervals.

The amazingly polylingual sellers are all anxious to reassure you that you do not have to buy...just drink a glass of tea while you browse through leather goods, carpets, fabric, clothing (including counterfeit brand names), brassware, furniture, ceramics, and gold and silver jewelry. A sizable share of the goods are trinkets tailored for the tourist trade, but a separate section for antiques at the very center of the bazaar, called the iç bedestan—once a secure fortress in the heart of the bazaar for the most expensive items—always has some beautiful items on offer; look for the double-headed Byzantine eagle over the door. Outside the western gate of the bazaar and through a doorway is the Sahaflar Çarşısı, the Old Book Bazaar, where you can buy new editions as well as antique volumes in Turkish and other languages. Remember, whether you're bargaining for a pair of shoes or an antique carpet, the best prices are offered when the would-be seller thinks you are about to slip away.

To help find your way around, look at the signs overhead, which state where you are and what streets and exits are in which direction—though you'll inevitably get lost, so don't worry too much.

**Cappadocia Excursion**

The Hittites settled Cappadocia from 1800 BC to 1200 BC, after which smaller kingdoms held power. Then came the Persians, followed by the Romans, who established the capital of Caesarea (today's Kayseri). During the Roman and Byzantine periods, Cappadocia became a refuge for early Christians and, from the 4th to the 11th century, Christianity flourished here; most churches, monasteries and underground cities date from this period. Later, under Seljuk and Ottoman rule, Christians were treated with tolerance. Cappadocia progressively lost its importance in Anatolia. Its rich past was all but forgotten until
a French priest rediscovered the rock-hewn churches in 1907. The tourist boom in the 1980s kick-started a new era, and now Cappadocia is one of Turkey’s most famous and popular destinations.

As if plucked from a whimsical fairytale and set down upon the stark Anatolian plains, Cappadocia is a geological oddity of honeycombed hills and towering boulders of otherworldly beauty. The fantastical topography is matched by the human history here. People have long utilized the region’s soft stone, seeking shelter underground and leaving the countryside scattered with fascinating troglodyte-style architecture. The fresco-adorned rock-cut churches of Göreme Open-Air Museum and the subterranean refuges of Derinkuyu and Kaymakli are the most famous sights, while simply bedding down in one of Cappadocia’s cave hotels is an experience in 21st-century cavern dwelling. Whether you’re wooed here by the hiking potential, the history or the bragging rights of unique accommodation, it’s the lunarscape panoramas that you’ll remember. This region’s accordion-ridged valleys, shaded in a palette of dusky orange and cream, are an epiphany of a landscape – the stuff of psychedelic daydreams.

**Culture of Culinary Traditions – Turkey**

The Turkish cuisine is considered to be one of the richest kitchens in the World. This is no wonder if one thinks about all the geography where the Turks lived and build an empire during their history. From the Danube and the Balkans to the Arabic Peninsula and the northern shores of Africa, different cultures and their tastes blend in with the Turkish heritage and built an inspiring cuisine. Half day course for an amazing journey through the Turkish culture and cuisine. We will prepare a 5 course menu, including classics of the historical Ottoman cuisine and favorites of the traditional Turkish home and enjoy our fresh prepared meals for lunch or dinner along with refreshing drinks and Turkish coffee.

**Mevlevi Dance performance**

The Mevlevi Sema Ceremony is known worldwide for its whirling dances and dervishes, featuring a complex musical repertoire called "ayin". The ceremony represents the mystical journey of man’s spiritual ascent through mind and love to perfection. It is one of the most important richness and heritage of Turkish Culture as a tradition of 800 years old. This unique traditional ritual is proclaimed as Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005. Program starts with the classical Turkish music concert performed by a traditional orchestra for 15 minutes. Then after The ceremony starts and lasts about 45 minutes under the amazing lighting and mystic atmosphere of Hodjapasha.

**İstanbul Foundation for Culture & Arts**

İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSV) is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation founded in 1973 by seventeen businessmen and art enthusiasts who gathered under the leadership of Dr. Nejat F. Eczacıbaşı, with the aim of organising an international arts festival in İstanbul. The Foundation's initial goal was to offer the finest examples of art from around the
world, while at the same time promoting the national, cultural and artistic assets of Turkey, by using arts to create an international platform of communication.

The first International İstanbul Festival, organised in 1973 on the 50th Anniversary of the foundation of the Turkish Republic, covered a period of one and a half months and focused mainly on classical music. Soon after, it included other artistic fields in its programme such as film screenings, theatre productions, jazz and ballet performances, and art exhibitions held in historic venues. As public interest grew, groups of events organised in different artistic disciplines gradually evolved into distinct festivals.

Presented as a separate section under the name "International İstanbul Filmdays" in 1983, the film week transformed into the International İstanbul Film Festival in 1989; 1987 marked the beginning of the International İstanbul Biennial, and in 1989 the International İstanbul Theatre Festival was initiated.

In 1993, after Dr. Nejat F. Eczacıbaşı passed away, Şakir Eczacıbaşı became the Chairman of the Board of Directors. Since then, the Foundation took serious steps on the path of institutionalising and strengthened its position in Turkey’s cultural and artistic life.

The International İstanbul Jazz Festival was initiated in 1994, the same year that the International İstanbul Festival changed its name to the International İstanbul Music Festival. Thus, İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts became an institution that organises five international festivals.

On the occasion of its 30th anniversary, the İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts initiated a social responsibility project and founded the İstanbul Friends of Culture and Arts Tulip membership programme with the intention of protecting cultural heritage and fostering the development of arts. Continuing today under the name of Tulip membership, the programme gathers art enthusiasts under one roof, and provides its members a variety of privileges during İKSV-organised events including the İstanbul Festivals.

The same year, İKSV made a decision to organise innovative, smaller events in addition to the İstanbul Festivals. Beginning with Filmekimi (a week of film screenings in October) in 2002, The Foundation continued to add brand new events to its portfolio such as Phonem by Miller (alternative rock and electronic music performances in November) and Minifest (3 days of children’s activities in the summer) in 2003. In 2006, İKSV assumed the organisation of the bi-annual Leyla Gencer Voice Competition, from its 4th edition onward.

The Foundation has been committed to bringing together different cultures and contributing to the creation of a platform for multicultural dialogue. In this respect, İKSV organises a series of international festivals in major European cities. This journey began in 2004 with "Şimdi Now" in Berlin and continued with "Şimdi Stuttgart" in 2005, "Turkey Now" in Amsterdam and Rotterdam in 2007 and 2008, Russia in 2008, and Vienna, Austria in 2009. The "Cultural Season of Turkey in France" activities held between 1 July 2009 and 31 March 2010 were also organised by İKSV, in collaboration with Culturesfrance. İKSV has been organising the Pavilion of Turkey at the Venice Biennale since 2007.

İKSV collaborates with several organisations and networks that form the EU’s cultural policies and is also the head of the Turkish network of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation.
İKSV also realises special events, in addition to its five festivals. On the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the birth of Mawlana Jalal-aldin Rumi, İKSV welcomed Béjart Ballet Lausanne, the troupe of originally creative choreographer Maurice Béjart, for a special performance entitled "Best of Béjart & Rumi" in İstanbul in 2007. In 2008 and 2009, İKSV continued to bring world famous artists and groups such as Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, R.E.M., KODO, Santana, Leonard Cohen, George Dalaras and U2, together with the İstanbulites.

2009 marked a turning point in İKSV’s history as the headquarters moved from its home on the historic İstiklal Street in Beyoğlu to another historical building, Deniz Palas, in Şişhane. Together with its new building, İKSV realised a long time dream and launched its own performance venue, Salon, in which it does not only organise, but also host cultural and artistic events.

In addition to such happy developments, the beginning of year 2010 also brought sorrow, as Şakir Eczacıbaşı, who had been the Chairman of the Board of Directors for 16 years passed away. In February 2010, Bülent Eczacıbaşı was elected as the Chair of the Board of Directors. İKSV, a pioneer in the field of culture and arts, continues and strengthens its creative, constructive and innovative role for culture and arts in Turkey, by continuing İstanbul Festivals and introducing brand new events such as the İstanbul Design Biennial.