

ISTANBUL





Sea of the Marmara and the Golden Horn

The mighty Walls of Theodosius kept the city safe from everybody from Attila the Hun to the all-conquering Muslim Arabs for a thousand years before falling to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Running some 6.5 kilometres (four miles) across the spine of the peninsula from the Sea of Marmara to the Golden Horn, these late-Roman walls have survived remarkably well.

Walk through neighbourhoods virtually untouched by tourism, past hole-in-the-wall restaurants, smoky tea shops and cottage gardens in the wall moat. Key sights include the Church of St Saviour in Chora (Kariye Museum), famed for its mosaics, the beautiful Ottoman Mihrimah mosque and the for-





Balat and Fener

The narrow, cobbled streets of these two districts, tumbling down the hillside to the Golden Horn waterfront, were once the preserve of the city's Jewish, Armenian and Greek communities. Some of the crumbling late-19th-century European-style terraced houses are being bought up and gentrified, with a plethora of new vintage-style cafés springing up around St George Greek Orthodox Cathedral. It's a great area to just wander, but don't miss the recently restored and quirky cast-iron Bulgarian church of St Stephens.





Bazaars

The Grand Bazaar with its 4,000-plus shops and the more intimate Spice Bazaar may be touristy, but these domed temples to late-Medieval consumerism still draw plenty of visitors. Dive into the maze of the Grand Bazaar for everything from fake designer jeans and handmade Turkish rugs to leather jackets and traditional gold jewellery. The Spice Bazaar does exactly what it says on the tin – in addition to dried fruits, nuts and the ubiquitous Turkish delight.



Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque

Over a thousand years of history separates these two monumental and iconic buildings, rising proudly some 500 metres (1,640 feet) apart in the heart of Sultanahmet. Start with the Hagia Sophia, or Church of the Holy Wisdom, built in 527 at the behest of Justinian (an important emperor of the Byzantine Empire).

Today a museum, it is one of the world's truly great buildings, with its awe-inspiring central dome and gold mosaic-covered interior. A short stroll across a green and fountain-adorned square brings you to the domed Blue Mosque (Sultanahmet Camii), built deliberately opposite the Hagia Sophia to emulate the wonders of the earlier structure. It gets its name from the largely blue Iznik tiles, over 20,000 of them, that adorn its interior.



Interior view of Hagia Sophia, showing Christian and Islamic elements.





Interior view of Blue Mosque, featuring the prayer area and the main dome.

Topkapı Palace

The Topkapı Palace is a whole series of buildings set amongst gardens, rather than a Versailles-style edifice, and a half-day visit is barely sufficient to do it justice. From here, assorted Ottoman sultans ruled an empire stretching from the Balkans to Arabia and from North Africa to Crimea. There are tiled kiosks, pleasure gardens, armouries and vast kitchens to explore – and the views across the Bosphorus to Asia are second to none.

