Istanbul: Dining at the Crossroads
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Istanbul, the city perched on the leafty, hilly banks of two continents, practically invented fusion cuisine. Locals credit the cultural cross-pollination of three world empires—Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman—each of which left its mark in religion, architecture and of course, food. For centuries its bustling heart has been the maze-like, 4,000-shop covered market known as the Grand Bazaar. Today, Istanbul is Europe’s fastest growing economy teeming with glam restaurants and cultured venues.

Asitane Restaurant provides an unforgettable homage to the far-flung Ottoman Empire with its setting adjacent to a Byzantine church. Chef/engineer Batur Dinmey spent years seeking intricate and largely unwritten recipes from the old palaces and near-obscure ingredients in Istanbul’s aromatic Spice Bazaar. He now offers menus with titles like “Main Courses from Topkapı Palace” with dishes first concocted in 1539 for the sons of Suleiman the Magnificent. Order almond soup, veal in apples and cinnamon liver patties; then sit back and dine like a sultan.

For more modern fusion, tuck in at Gaia on the 14th floor of Swissotel The Bosphorus Istanbul. Chef James Wilkins, a veteran of kitchens from London to Japan, travels with a team of chefs who have a real passion for the local markets.

“The produce and fish here are among the best I’ve seen in the world,” he says. “particularly the summer fruits, morel mushrooms in autumn and wild fish from the Black Sea.” Upstairs the Gaja Sky Bar offers wines, cocktails and mezze with a panorama of the Bosphorus, Marmara Sea and Golden Horn.

Chef Hiroki Takemura, formerly of London’s Nobu oversees Sunset Bar & Grill with “a dream to make a revolution in Turkish cuisine,” he proclaims. His sushi bar has enjoyed a 16-year success by stealing the Spice Bazaar for new twists on Japanese standards melded with Turkish favorites.

As for venues, meet Libby Perkowski, destination executive with the DMC VIP Tours. Libby, know
any good places for groups to experience the heart and soul of Istanbul?

"Where else can you host dinner and a fashion show in a 4th century Byzantine cathedral?" she replies. "Or a private party on an island between two continents, or a dinner in a converted Ottoman mansion along the Bosphorus?"

So there you have it. A surprising number of historical sites and palaces, some dating from Greek and Roman times, are available for private events. If you're seeking palaces, Berkowski favors the Sahin Hat Pasa Mansion, an Empire-Baroque masterpiece on the Bosphorus with a dining hall, a hunting hall and an (empty) barn, as well as excellent catering. For an ancient Roman setting, visit Bindirli Isleten, built around 300 to stage the first of Istanbul. The underground reservoir, decorated with 224 marble columns and a capacity of 10 million gallons of water, is now filled with private parties, catering extravaganzas and any number of concerts.

For more modern settings, ride the ferry to Guada, a floating beach club with linen-covered beds by the Olympic pool in the middle of the Bosphorus. For eats, G Balık is a local fave, and count on feeling welcome. A Turkish proverb proclaims that all guests are a gift from God, which you'll experience viscerally in Istanbul's generous hospitality and cultured cuisine.

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