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## Promenade

### *Istanbul: From Occident to Orient*

Few places in the world find themselves on the cusp of two civilisations, but none more than Turkey and within Turkey, Istanbul is the place where East meets West, literally.



As is the case with practically any nation with a history that goes beyond a couple of millennia, in Istanbul, too, the ancient, the old, the recent and the modern find themselves cheek by jowl. Walking in the 'old' quarter of the city, every now and then you come across something absolutely modern or not so old at all.

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The commercial capital of Turkey is rather well spread out, with a number of attractions for a visitor, but perhaps the most interesting and historical part is Sultanahmet, adjacent to the Bosphorus Straits, the water body that demarcates Asia from Europe.

Sultanahmet has served as capital for the various empires, including the Byzantine, Roman and Ottoman. At their times, the empires were amongst the most powerful in the whole world and certainly the most dominant Eurasian powers, with a lot of wealth, some of which was used to build some magnificent monuments. One can find a melange of these distinct cultures and their heritage.



### Dolmabahce Palace

We start our promenade from this impressive palace, built in the 19th century. Dolmabahce that served as the administrative centre of the Ottoman Empire as well as the residence of the last Ottoman Sultan, is one of the most glamorous palaces in the world. After the foundation of the Turkish Republic in Ankara, the father of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, used to stay at the Dolmabahce Palace. It also began to be used for hosting foreign guests of state besides organising

prestigious national and international conferences. The beautifully landscaped gardens of the Palace, on the Bosphorus, offer a setting suitable for hosting receptions for the visiting heads of States, even today.

From the Palace grounds, we move towards the next monument, the Topkapi Palace. Incidentally, as you exit the Palace, you see the signages for the home stadium of Galatasaray, the most famous football team of the country, which also has actually won a European championship title, the UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) Cup, to its credit.

### **Galata Tower**

Before crossing the narrow ledge of the Strait separating the Dolmabahace from Sultanahmet area, we cross the Galata Tower. Built in 1348, it was part of Genoese colony within Istanbul and offers a nice view of the straits and Sultanahmet. The tower is open to visitors everyday and the entrance fee is about INR 350.

### **Sulemaniye Mosque**

Crossing over the Galata bridge, the first structure on your right is one of the largest and best maintained mosques, the Sulemaniye Camii that was designed by Ottoman architect Sinan for the Sultan, after whom the mosque was named. The mosque has recently been restored entirely and reflects the original beauty. Besides the prayer times, the mosque is open all day as well.

Across the Sulemaniye is Sultanahmet Meydani, which is essentially today the Blue Mosque along with several monuments in the surrounding park. The Meydani was built on what was initially the Roman Hippodrome and Grand Palace, which fell into ruins with the advent of the Islamic rule. In the Meydani, you will also find an obelisk from Egypt and a unique, spiral column from Greece.

### **Blue Mosque**

Dominating the Meydani is the Blue Mosque or Sultanahmet Camii, that gets its English name from the blue tiles posed on the walls.

Built over the period of seven years, between 1609 and 1616, during the rule of

Ahmed I, the mosque is a key piece of the Ottoman heritage here. It is a rare mosque to have six minarets and has become a landmark in any photograph of Istanbul. Though very high on the tourists' itinerary, the Blue Mosque is a living mosque and has regular prayers five times a day. The best perspectives of the mosque are visible if approached from the western side of the monument.

### **Topkapi Palace**

This was the place where the Ottoman rulers resided and is certainly one of the most important places for a tourist. The palace is surrounded by lush and well-kept gardens in the courtyards. The entrance looks more like a castle than a palace, but as you go around it, the place definitely looks fit to welcome the greatest rulers of Europe. The Palace has an immensely rich collection of jewellery and gems that can stand up to almost any other royal treasury around the world. It also has a Turkish bath that looks extremely inviting enough for a visitor to get in and of course the harem, the most secretive part of the palace, which used to house the queens and concubines of the Sultans. The palace also offers enchanting views of the Strait and Marmara. The palace is open to visitors from Tuesday to Sunday at entrance costs about INR 700.

### **Hagia Sophia Museum**

As you exit the palace, you almost walk into another very famous and historic monument in Turkey, the Hagia Sophia mosque. Built as a cathedral during the Byzantine empire, Hagia Sophia has had many transformations of usage. In 1453, when the Ottomans conquered Constantinople, the Turkish ruler, Mehmet II, converted the cathedral into a mosque, thus protecting a monument which was being pillaged by the victorious army. The succeeding monarchs added new structures to the building and in the 16th century, the ruler, Suleiman, installed two huge candles that he had brought from Hungary and which were placed in the mosque. After the formation of the Turkish republic, the mosque was converted into a museum.

### **Grand Bazaar**

No visit to Istanbul can be complete without

the Grand Bazaar, one of the largest covered markets in the world. It is a city within a city, with 60 streets housing over 5000 shops. The streets run like a maze and you need an excellent sense of direction or a very modern GPS system to find your way in, out and about the Bazaar. It is perhaps this maze-like structure of the Bazaar that makes it very popular amongst filmmakers from around the world. The Grand Bazaar is also the shoppers' heaven, with a wide variety of Turkish and indeed regional products, ranging from cutlery, handicrafts, jewellery and a whole lot of other products.

Needless to say bargain and bargain hard when you purchase something. But it is worth exploring the market thoroughly before zeroing in on a product or deciding to purchase. The Grand Bazaar square also has some very nice cafés and restaurants, offering a mix of European and Turkish cuisines.

### **Chora Church**

It may be a bit out of the way and rather not too easy to find the direction, but the Chora Church is another monument, like the Hagia Sofia that has been converted several times over from a church to a mosque to a museum. Following a recent comprehensive renovation that it received, it offers a magnificent window to the famed Byzantine splendour, with its walls and ceilings adorned with glittering mosaics and amazing frescoes.

Walking the city can easily take two days, especially if you are the sort to linger in the museums and admire urban architecture. In the spring or autumn, the promenade is extremely refreshing due to the reasonably good tree cover in Sultanahmet and surrounding areas. The weather along with decent and affordable Turkish tea houses and restaurants will replenish your body to the same levels as your mind and soul; letting you immerse into the delightful fusion of the East and the West that Istanbul is.



### How to reach

The national carrier of the country is Turkish Airlines that offers several flights to Istanbul. Majority of the flights from major cities are directly connected to two airports of Istanbul, namely Ataturk Airport and Sabiha Gokcen Airport. Turkish Airlines and Air India provide direct flights from India to Istanbul. Indirect flights can be availed from the airports of Delhi, Mumbai and other major Indian cities like Lucknow, Pune, Thiruvananthapuram, Calcutta, Bengaluru and Chennai. Carriers offering indirect flights include Air Arabia, Lufthansa, British Airways, Singapore Airlines, Emirates and Qatar Airways.

### Where to stay

There are budget, mid-range, and luxury hotels but to experience the historic landmarks of old Istanbul, stay in Sultanahmet, Gülhane, or Sirceki. For a taste of Istanbul's modern world, stay in Beyoğlu's Galata, Cihangir, or Taksim.

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