The mood in Istanbul is melancholy. The feel is muted facades of houses and monuments, and is expected after a year or so of terrorist attacks, an attempted military coup, and economic strain brought by taking in almost 3 million refugees. This subdued feel is nothing new. Turkish people have long said Istanbul is heavy with history. There is a change though, from the last time I was here in 2012.

That summer, the Bosphorus sparkled and there was a lighter feeling to the streets. But in January of this year, grey skies added to the exhaustion and sadness that seemed to permeate the city. The feeling was surely exacerbated after several terrorist attacks throughout 2016, and one at the very start of the new year, during my stay.

It might come as a surprise then, that I am urging you to visit Istanbul as soon as you can. Spring and summer are beautiful and flights are currently cheap from the US. Despite the recent attacks, the odds are extremely rare. They’re one ten-thousandth of one percent, to be exact. Your odds of enjoying a city bursting with history, culture, beauty, and incredible food? I don’t have any numbers to give you, but I can assure you they are much, much higher.

“It is my home, and I see the beauty in it every day,” says Hicran Ozbsuk, the General Manager of Istanbul Convention & Visitors Bureau. “People see an attack on the news, and they think it is not safe, but it is. But when you live here, you just go about your day.”
walk out the door, you don’t feel unsafe.”

visited country in the world. More than 41 million foreign visitors flocked to historic cities and seaside resorts. In 2016, there were only 25 million visitors.

That’s a shame, because Istanbul is a place of such immense cultural and historic significance you could visit again and again and still not see it all.

Let’s start with that point. Istanbul is massive. It’s the seventh largest city in the world and has 15 million residents. “People just don’t appreciate how big it is,” Nathan Stevens, an aid worker who lived in Turkey for two years, recently explained.

His top tip?

“You absolutely need to get out of the main tourist areas and feel comfortable spending days just wandering, or you’ll tire yourself out.”

I agree. The best way to see most cities is to wander and appreciate, without agenda. Of course, if you have limited time and a lot you want to see, you’ll need to be a bit strategic.

Spend a day or two visiting the main tourist sites. Start at the Galata Tower and walk over Galatsky Bridge to Sultanahmet. Wander through the spice market, which is always packed. Be prepared for a lot of crowds here and in the Grand Bazaar, which is huge. You’ll find plenty of souvenirs, but also might get overwhelmed. In Sultanahmet you can visit the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia, which are even more mesmerizing in person than in the hundreds of photos you’ve probably seen.
Make sure to visit the Topkapi Palace and Basilica Cistern too. Depending on your timing, you might want to move west to Süleymaniye Mosque, which feels like a peaceful retreat atop the city.

Even farther, the Chora Church is small but decorated with some of the oldest Byzantine frescoes in the world. It’s also in a charming neighborhood fairly devoid of tourists and with some very pretty pink houses.
Back near Galata Tower, spend a day exploring around Istiklal Street, dipping into side streets and shops. Solera Winery is quiet and hip, and serves a great selection of Turkish wines and mezze, as does Sensus. Eat at Mikla, a modern Turkish restaurant with a wonderful tasting menu. Stop at Federal Coffee Company for Australian coffee, and 5 Cocktails and More for handcrafted cocktails in a cozy, hipster setting. For brunch in the area, go to Cafe Privato, where you can have a Turkish breakfast—an amazing spread of cheeses, olives, fruits, pastries, and more.

Make sure to explore the up and coming Karaköy neighborhood, which has a distinct European feel. Trendy boutiques and galleries line the narrow streets, with a few traditional bakeries and shops spattered between. Eat at Finn Karaköy, drink tea at Dem, eat baklava at Karaköy Güllüoğlu, and eat some more at Karaköy Lokantasi, a traditional spot serving mezze and fish.

Then there’s Besiktas, on the Eastern shore of the Bosphorus. This is a great neighborhood to stay in, by the way. It’s within reach of everything. The ferry to the Asian side is right outside the Shangri La Hotel, where I stayed, and it’s an easy walk or taxi ride to the rest of the city. Plus, the neighborhood itself is really cool. There’s the Naval Museum, which takes about 15 minutes to see but is a 15 minutes well spent to ogle the imperial caïques—elaborately decorated large wooden rowboats used by royalty in the 19th century. Go see the glamorous Dolmabche Palace, then walk along the water to Ortakoy, checking out the grand houses along the way. The Ortakoy Mosque is a beautiful baroque mosque with a pale pink hue and intricate windows.
If you keep walking you’ll hit Arnavutköy, a historic neighborhood where you’ll find a mix of wooden Ottoman mansions and fisherman. Unsurprisingly, there are great seafood restaurants here. Eat at Arnavutköy Balıkçısı if you can. Make sure to wander the side streets in Beşiktaş too. There are cafes and shops around every corner, like Minoa Cafe, which is also a bookstore with an English language section.

One day, take a ferry to Kadıköy on the Asian side. Eat your way through the markets and stop in the numerous cafes and shops. Try balık ekmek, a simple sandwich of grilled fish and onions.
Spend time in the Moda area along the water, where in the summer patios fill with people drinking and watching sunset. Bagdat street is pretty and popular for luxury shopping, but not especially interesting. Visit Maiden's Tower, a Byzantine tower on a small island, where you can sip coffee and take in views of Istanbul’s skyline. If you have time, you can take a ferry to Princes’ Islands. Vehicles are banned on the islands, which are full of beautiful gardens and Victorian houses, and offer a tranquil respite from the city.

After full days of exploring you’ll want a hotel that offers relaxation. Back at the Shangri La each day I was in heaven in the beautiful bath tub and plush beds. I loved waking up each morning to views over the water, watching the sunrise as I sipped coffee.
When in Turkey, a Turkish bath is a must-do experience. I've done it in a bath house and more recently at the Shangri La, and I have to say there's a reason people spring for spa treatments. The private hamman at the hotel was by far one of the best spa experiences I've ever had. First of all, the tiled room is beautiful and serene. The masseuses are extremely professional, so it doesn't feel weird that you're lying naked getting scrubbed down with buckets of warm water poured over you. In fact, it feels like the most natural and relaxing thing in the entire world. Scrubbed and rinsed, you'll be rubbed with lotion and settled into a cozy towel on a comfortable bed in a dark room, where someone will bring you mint tea and let you drift into blissful relaxation, ignorant of time. While more authentic hammans are fun, the privacy, cleanliness, and expertise the hotel brings can't be matched. There's also a nice gym adjacent to the spa, which was appreciated after days of eating. Speaking of eating, Shang Palace restaurant in the hotel is some of the best high-end Chinese food I've ever had. The Sichuan crispy fried sliced beef and roasted Peking duck are especially delicious, as are the dumplings. The large breakfast buffet each day was beautifully presented and full of healthful, sweet, and savory options. Basically it had everything you could ever want, all served by the friendliest staff. If you're concerned about safety, staying in a nice hotel with extra security helps too.

I know you might think it strange that I was gushing about a Chinese restaurant in Turkey, but that brings me to another point. Istanbul is a huge, international city with incredible food from many regions. It's like New York or Paris in that sense. While Turkish food is one of my favorite cuisines, don't feel the need to eat authentic Turkish all the time. Pizzeria Pera in Istiklal was some of the best Italian pizza I've had outside of Italy, for example. And Giritli, a Cretin restaurant in a beautiful courtyard near the Blue Mosque, is one of the best restaurants in the city. Of course you'll want Turkish too, and if you need more options for that you can try Beyti, Meşhur Filibe Köftecis (get kofte), or Asmalı Cavit among many, many others. Oh, and definitely do eat the oysters and rice served on the street. "They won't get you sick, they're delicious, and they're great drunk food," says Nathan. The roasted chestnuts are pretty great too.
Other things to keep in mind:

- Taxis are cheap, but it’s helpful if you have a map or know some nearby landmarks to try and give directions. There’s Uber too, which can be easier if you’re going somewhere obscure and don’t know how to explain the address with limited Turkish/English communication.

- Istanbul is safe, but like any big city if you’re truly concerned you should avoid open, crowded areas. This is hard to do if you want to visit famous sites. I would say visit them anyway. The odds are on your side.

- There are a lot of hills, and eventually they’ll wear on you. They make for a great workout when walking around the city, but also mean things that look close on a map take longer to reach than you think. They’re also why you shouldn't try to pack too much into each day, and should instead wander side streets and take a more local approach.

- Like any major touristy city, it can be easy to get ripped off. Ask your hotel how much taxis should cost, be skeptical when buying souvenirs, and don’t give into people on the street trying to sell you services or ask for money. It’s also easy to get ripped off by going to very touristy restaurants. Like everywhere, if the menu is in more than two languages, or if you only see other foreigners, it’s probably not a great choice.

- Don’t be afraid to ask people for advice or directions. Talking with people from a city often gives the best experiences.

- Wear comfortable walking shoes and bring along a scarf or sweater to wear inside mosques.