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Istanbul modern

Istanbul as a place where East meets West is one of the biggest clichés in travel, but like all clichés, it's inarguably true. And now, more than ever, that cultural exchange is creating something unique, says *Anwer Bati*

Photography by Polly Tootal

When it opened in 1892, the Pera Palace Hotel was rightly hailed as a marvel of modern Istanbul.

The city's very first luxury hotel had been built with the European passengers of the newly established Orient Express in mind and it was truly state of the art: apart from royal palaces, it was the first building in the city with electricity, which powered everything from its magnificent chandeliers to the grand elevator. It also offered the only running hot water in town. No wonder it quickly established itself as the only address to be seen at for the most illustrious passengers of the rail route from Paris. French-Turkish architect Alexander Vallaury's vision was equally geared towards this new clientele: neo-classical and Art Nouveau styles combining to create the very first Western-style hotel to be built in Turkey.

Last year, the Pera Palace celebrated its 125th birthday and it remains one of Istanbul's most iconic landmarks – no mean feat given its aesthetic is so different to the one most commonly associated with the city. But in fact, those rich Ottoman influences, the Topkapi Palace and the soaring minarets and domes of the Blue Mosque, so often the focus of TV travelogues and travel articles,

represent only one facet of this fascinating place. Today, more than ever, Istanbul's unique geography, straddling both Europe and Asia, is expressing itself in all aspects of life, from food and culture to entertainment and infrastructure.

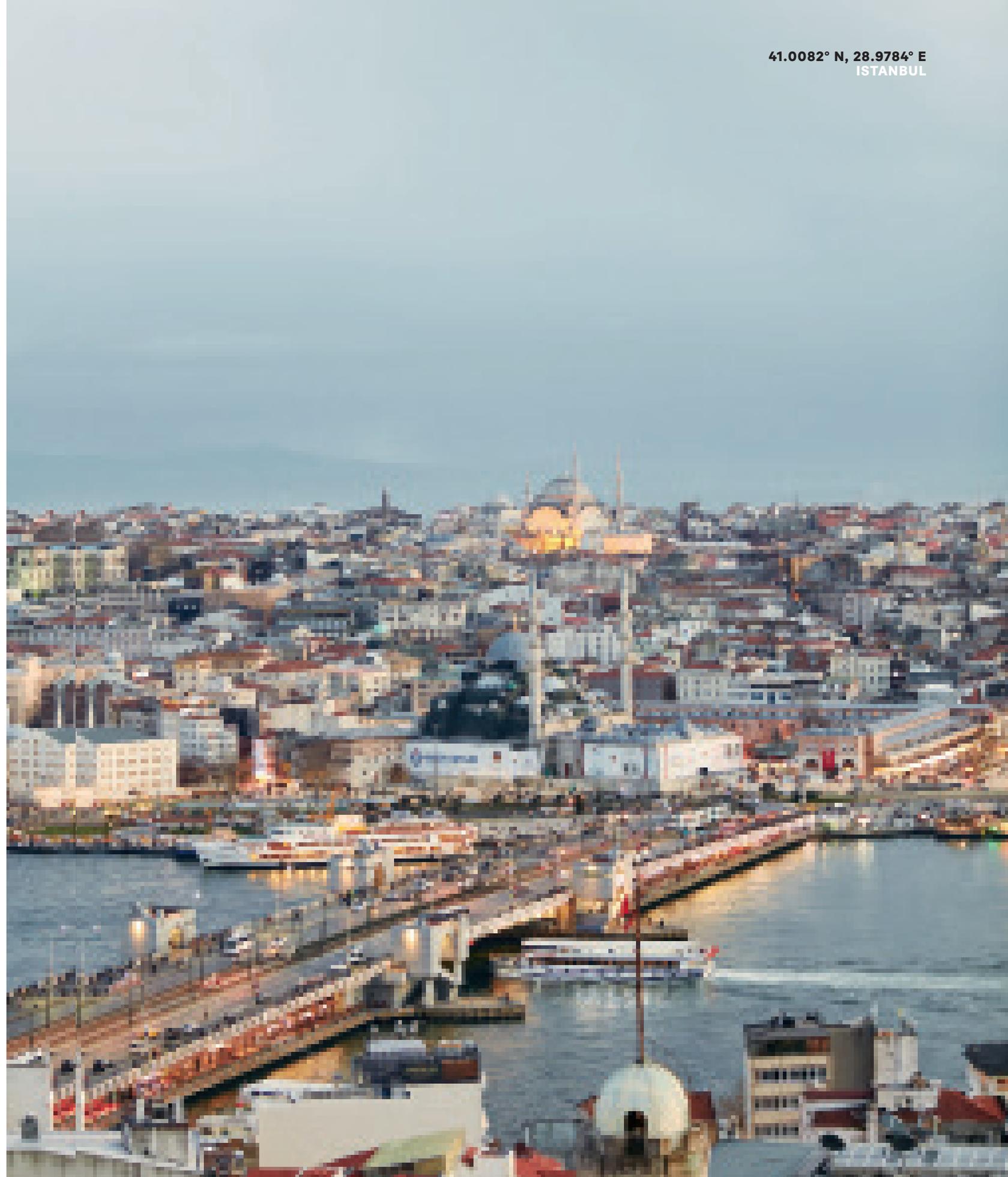
“The thing about Sultanahmet [the district once the seat of the Ottoman Empire where the more traditional architecture is found] is that it isn't a living place,” says John Scott, who's lived in Istanbul since the 1970s and is founder of *Cornucopia*, a magazine devoted to Turkish life and culture. “There are no residents, so you go there for the sights and don't see the real city, which is a great place to live. There has always been an incredibly advanced and modern view of life. In 1910 people even said it was the best city in the world to live in, a sort of Zurich of its time.”

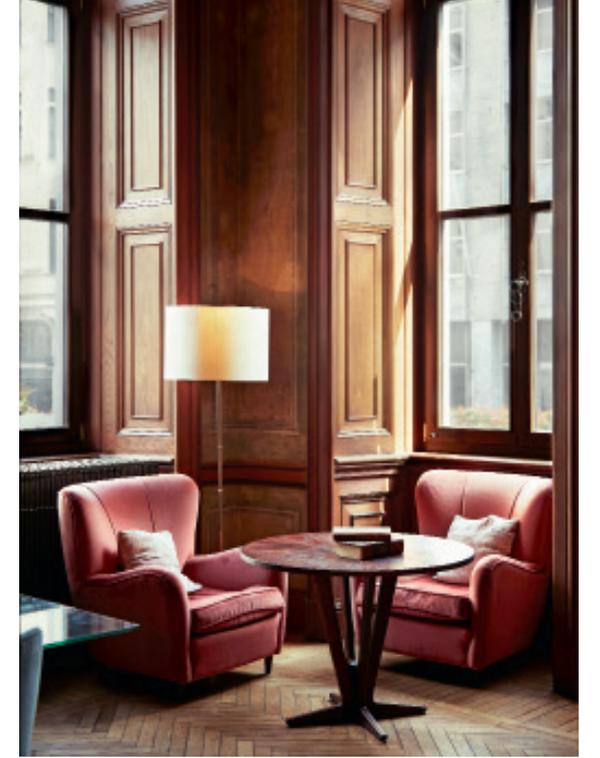
In particular, Scott is referring to areas such as Pera (now part of the Beyoğlu district), once described as “a suburb of Paris”, and still the most international part of the city, which is where the Pera Palace can be found.

The hotel was one of the results of the Tanzimat (“Reorganisation”) movement in the 19th century, a rapid and massive drive to modernise every aspect of the weakening Ottoman Empire – including the new rail links to the West used by the Orient Express – so that it could compete with the Occidental powers.

Recently renovated, the Pera Palace is also back to its glamorous best. You can stay in room 411, once Agatha Christie's roost, or in rooms celebrating guests such as Greta Garbo and Ernest Hemingway. But its most important guest was Kemal Atatürk – revered leader of the Turkish >

Previous pages The restored Pera Palace (left); artist Alejandro Almanza Pereda's sculpture at the Pera Museum
Right Galata Bridge at dusk





republic after the Empire collapsed following World War I – whose suite is preserved as a public museum, his presence at the hotel enshrined by displays of his clothes and other memorabilia. Atatürk, himself a product of Tanzimat, led a second phase of modernisation through new reforms such as female suffrage, western dress and the use of the Roman alphabet.

The Pera Palace may be Istanbul's oldest hotel, but next door is one of its latest, Soho House. It's a compelling juxtaposition: the city's grande dame hotel sitting comfortably next to one of the hippest lifestyle brands on the planet. The creative and casual vibe is a given, but not the dissonant splendour of the setting, one of the grandest buildings in the city. The magnificent marble Palazzo Corpi with its frescoed ceilings, was built in 1873 by a Genovese ship owner and later became the American embassy. Now it plays host to influencers and jetsetters. It says everything about the way that East and West, old and new, can combine in

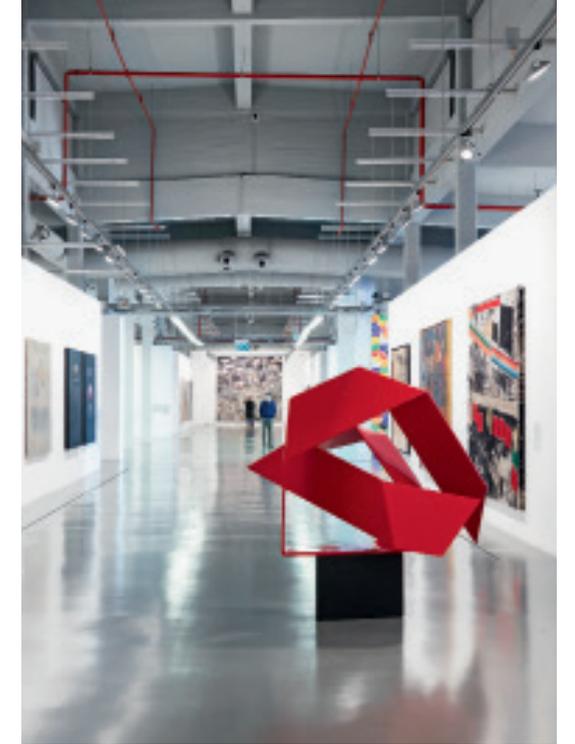
pleasing, unique ways in the city. The hotel is in an annexe, set in a garden, with rooms that feel like arty apartments. Guests can enjoy the club's impressive facilities, including a rooftop terrace with splendid views of Sultanahmet. Cecconi's, the club's Italian restaurant, has become one of Istanbul's most fashionable tables.

The nearby Pera Museum, one of Istanbul's newest attractions, is also housed in a neo-classical building. The fine permanent exhibition dramatically demonstrates the exchange of East and West through paintings by European artists of ambassadors to the Ottoman Empire in their finery. The museum's upper floor stages many important special exhibitions, and is a centre of the prestigious Istanbul Biennial of contemporary art. The elegant Art Deco ground floor cafe is another draw.

In the new Istanbul, art has found a unique voice, too. Down the hill from Pera towards the Bosphorus is the formerly run-down port area of Karaköy. Historically one of Istanbul's most cosmopolitan districts, it is now becoming rapidly gentrified, with numerous fish restaurants, bars and boutique hotels replacing old workshops in its maze of narrow streets. Drawing an intellectual, media and hipster crowd, Karaköy is also the focal point of the city's art scene, with the opening of several galleries following the foundation of the Istanbul Modern on the shores of the Bosphorus in 2004. Turkey's main museum of modern and contemporary arts is housed in a glass-fronted former warehouse, and has had a major impact both locally and internationally with its permanent collection (mainly Turkish, although with a few foreign stars including Anselm Kiefer) on the >

From left Istanbul's first electric elevator at the Pera Palace; the hotel's resident patissier Nurten Palavuz; the lounge at Soho House

"In 1910, Istanbul was considered the world's best city to live in – a sort of Zurich of its time"



From left Rooftop restaurant Mürver; the Bosphorus view from the Four Seasons; sculpture at Istanbul Modern

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ground floor, and notable temporary exhibitions – particularly during the Biennial, which draws large crowds – in the basement.

A short walk away is the SALT cultural centre, opened in 2011, with gallery spaces housing impressive contemporary exhibitions and a significant art library. Symbolic of the changes in the area, it's housed in the palatial 19th-century former headquarters of the Ottoman Bank, and like many of Istanbul's museums, including the Modern, it is funded by big business. It also houses Neolokal, one of Istanbul's best restaurants since it opened in 2014, where chef Maksut Aşkar serves modern Turkish food, enhanced by the majestic views across the Golden Horn.

Cultural exchange is not limited to the arts. Istanbul's new generation of creative chefs combine cutting-edge recipes and presentation with Turkish traditions. And Karaköy is becoming the place to find them. "They've developed modern meze," says author Andrew Finkel, who has lived in Istanbul for almost 30 years. "Looking at what Turkey does well, then broadening it."

The hottest new spot is Mürver, which opened last summer, the brainchild of Mehmet Gürs, a chef with an international reputation at his other restaurant, Mikla. It's in an unprepossessing street, currently a building site, but like Mikla, it's on the roof of a hotel, with stunning views from the open-air terrace. Head chef Yılmaz Öztürk's vibrant seasonal food – such as smoked veal tongue with pickled apples – is mainly cooked over wood. Mürver is packed with smart movers and shakers for dinner, but go for a drink, and try some of the excellent new Turkish wines.

Istanbul is the engine of Turkey's wealth, or as Andrew Finkel puts it, "the population and GDP of Istanbul is much bigger than Hungary's". You have only to stroll through the leafy, upmarket Nişantaşı area with its Art Deco architecture and elegant avenues to see the city's prosperity. Despite the lovely Neo-Baroque Teşvikiye mosque, it's a largely secular place of stylish shops, fancy cars, and department stores. You could be in any smart district in Western Europe. "It's very continental," says John Scott, whose office is in the area. "It has its swanky side, Maçka, which is Bond Street, and then it has a sort of Left Bank side, with studios and cafes, and the very European mosque."

Of course, progress – at least in the form of globalisation and gentrification – is not always welcomed. "They scrapped most of the old ferries," says John Scott, "for little more reason than that they were old." Some of them have been replaced by modern, air-conditioned vessels, which he describes as "ghastly, horrible little things".

But there's no denying the benefits that it has imbued on Istanbul. The boom has meant that Istanbul has one of the highest concentration of billionaires of any city in the world, all choosing to live away from the centre, by the water, while new money has led to many other changes, including much needed improvement of the city's transport, with expanding new metro and tram systems, express buses with dedicated lanes, and more bridges across the Bosphorus. And it has led to a proliferation of new five-star hotels, including the splendid Four Seasons at the Bosphorus, a local byword for luxury, with the scent of lemongrass wafting through the immaculate public areas. Its

facilities, service and beautifully appointed rooms are enough to satisfy the most pampered plutocrat. You too can get a taste of the billionaire lifestyle and savour the view, without breaking the bank, by going for a drink on the massive marble terrace, or go for the hotel's tempting Sunday buffet brunch at the Aqua restaurant.

The Four Seasons, along with the equally grand but longer established Çırağan Palace, pretty much next door, is where visiting heads of state stay. The celebrated Tügra restaurant at the latter is a pioneer in the re-discovery of lavish Ottoman imperial cuisine, forgotten until recently. Both hotels are partly housed in 19th-century palazzos next to the magnificent Dolmabahçe Palace, guarded by immaculately drilled soldiers but open to the public. The French-educated Sultan Abdülmecid moved there in 1856 from the traditional pavilions of the Topkapi. Designed in Baroque and Neoclassical style, it is a key monument to Tanzimat, built to demonstrate that the Empire was both modern and European.

Today, it stands as a monument to Turkey's past, a testament to something unique to the city. It's a template that continues to prosper in this 21st-century melting pot. ■

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