



ISTANBUL BY NIGHT: The Blue Mosque to the right and the Yeni Camii (New Mosque) to the left overlooking the sea

Istanbul - Capital of Culture 2010

Myrissa Luke enjoys the buzz, the sights, the treasures, and the rich cultural heritage of Turkey's European Capital of Culture

From the roof terrace at 360 Istanbul in Beyoglu's trendy Taksim district, there are 360° views across the city: to the Blue Mosque (Sultan Ahmed Mosque), Hagia Sophia, Topkapi Palace, bridges across the Golden Horn, and the Bosphorus strait. These are some of the sights my friend and I plan to explore during our week's visit to Istanbul.

The smart restaurant and club is buzzing with a cosmopolitan crowd; Istanbulites here for drinks after work, a wedding party, and visitors admiring the views. We enjoy chef Mike Norman's internationally inspired cuisine: jumbo prawns in cocoons of crisp pastry, followed by a selection of delectable desserts. The band tuning up on stage should be called "Bob Marley and the Supremes"; they give excellent renditions of popular hits by artists like Amy Winehouse, and Marley of course.

We look down on Istiklal Caddesi, a street lined with shops, cinemas, and restaurants, to see an excited crowd cheering loudly in nearby Galatasaray Square. Istanbul's now famous French Street (Fransiz Sokagi), created six years ago, lies behind Galatasaray School on the square.

In the 19th century, Istiklal Caddesi was called La Grande Rue de Pera and Istanbul was the "Paris of the East". Nearby is the Pera Palace Hotel, where it is said Agatha Christie found the inspiration to write *Murder on the Orient Express*. After extensive restoration, the hotel and its legendary Orient Bar reopens in September.

Istanbul 2010
Istanbul has a long history as the capital city of the Eastern Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman empires. Although it is no longer Turkey's capital, it remains its centre of culture and business.

This year, it is one of Europe's Capitals of Culture, with a programme of events, arts and cultural festivals, celebrating Istanbul 2010 in different areas of the city.

Fashion designer Hussein Chalayan has been "British Designer of the Year" twice; an exhibition of his work runs from July to October at Istanbul Modern Museum. Rock group U2 perform here in

September, during their 360° Concert Tour, and a film festival, "Istanbul Through Films", takes place in October.

The Whirling Dervishes perform their mesmerising religious dance every Sunday at Yenikapi Mevlevihanesi. "1910-2010", an exhibition reviewing a century of Istanbul's urban history, continues from earlier this year, and The Photograph Parade exhibition ends in December.

The Istanbul 2010 Agency focused on making urban improvements and developing the city's cultural and artistic attractions. Two examples are the restoration works at the Hagia Sophia Museum and the improvement of storage and display areas in the Topkapi Palace Museum.

Treasures of an empire
Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror built Topkapi Palace on the Seraglio Point promontory by the Sea of Marmara, after conquering Byzantine Constantinople in 1453; it remained the home of the Ottoman rulers for centuries.

After buying our tickets for the Palace Exhibition, we decide not to queue up for another ticket to tour the Harem. Instead, we explore the palace's other elegant buildings and the courtyards, kiosks, pavilions, and gardens.

The Imperial Treasury houses objects made from gold, silver, emeralds, rubies, pearls, and much more, including one of the world's largest diamonds.

In a glass case, surrounded by two rows of smaller stones, the "Spoonmaker's Diamond" is a pear-shaped 86-carat monster, radiating inner life and fire. It winks at you as you move about the room. Its origins remain a mystery, but it may once have belonged to the unfortunate Queen Marie Antoinette of France.

Sightseeing in Sultanahmet
Some of the most popular sights in Istanbul are in the Sultanahmet area. Our guide, Ayse, explains aspects of Islam in the courtyard of the mosque of Sultan Ahmet I before we enter. It is as if the sculptural domes and half-domes anchor the six graceful and slender minarets to the site, preventing them from rising to the heavens. Inside, stained glass

windows filter light onto the walls of the Blue Mosque, covered with thousands of Iznik tiles in white and every shade of blue.

Hagia Sophia is one of the world's greatest architectural spaces, retaining its wow factor after 1,500 years. First a great church, built by the Emperor Justinian, then a mosque and now a museum, the sight of the vast central domed interior space takes the breath away. It seems to be held up by nothing but a prayer. Imagine it in earlier times, lit by candles, with splendid golden mosaics casting a glow on worshippers, on patterned marble walls and floors.

The Archaeology Museum, The Tiled Kiosk, and the Museum of the Ancient Orient make up the Istanbul Archaeology Museums. The latter shows fascinating links between ancient Sumerian, Hittite, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian cultures, like the "first" peace treaty - between Egypt and Babylon during the reign of Ramses II.

We stop for a rest and a drink in the tea garden near The Tiled Kiosk, under a shady tree, surrounded by ancient sculpture, including a glum-looking head of Medusa. She must be missing her sisters.

Cool or chill

In a corner of The Basilica Cistern (another of Justinian's lavish projects) are two giant Medusa heads: very similar in style, size, and shape, to the head in the garden. The cistern was built to store water during long sieges, and columns and sculptures were recycled from older buildings. The heads are used as bases for columns - one on its side, the other upside down - to prevent Medusa's stare from turning human flesh to stone.

The 335 columns, low levels of lighting, background music, sound of dripping water, and carp swimming below the wooden walkways create an otherworldly atmosphere. It is a cool retreat on a hot summer's day.

However, it is not quite as cold as the new permanent ice museum, Magic Ice, opened earlier this year in Forum Istanbul shopping mall. Visitors are given special Eskimo coats to wear, because the interior is kept at a permanent temperature of minus five



Scenes of daily life in Istanbul; in the background is the beautiful new mosque Yeni Camii

degrees Celsius to prevent the ice sculptures from melting.

Bazaar shopping
Istanbul's bazaars are lively and colourful, providing an easily accessible taste of the country's culture. Abdulla's shop in the Grand Bazaar sells specially selected local textiles and natural soaps. There is a lifelike bust of Pericles moulded from soap, fine silk scarves the colour of saffron, and a one-of-a-kind lace bedspread from Anatolia, pleading to be touched.

Bargaining is the normal way of doing business in the bazaar, but Abdulla does not wish to acknowledge this. A deeply pained expression settles over his face when a customer tries to bargain with him. "There's a price marked on everything in this shop," he says, before finally reaching an amicable agreement.

Weight for weight, saffron spice is more expensive than gold. There are three types of saffron on sale in Hayat Kuruyemis in the Spice Bazaar. "The Iranian saffron is the best," we are assured. One breath of the unforgettable, concentrated aroma from the tiny and ruinously expensive container proves this. The shop also stocks caviar and exclusive "sultans perfumes". Genuine lokum, or Turkish Delight, is available in different varieties to taste before you buy.

Bosphorus views

There are beautiful panoramic views of the Bosphorus from the Ritz-Carlton hotel. One morning, a sky darker than the distant mountains on the Asian shore delays our day's outing with dramatic thunder, lightning, and a brief deluge. Watching big tankers, ferries, and smaller boats sail to and from the Black Sea becomes a favourite pastime, at breakfast, dinner, or any time of day.

The Bosphorus beckons from Eminonu ferry station, the starting point for cruises. On board are tourists, families on pleasure trips, and people going about their daily business. We criss-cross the Bosphorus, stopping at various places.

On the European shore we see Dolmabahce Palace, last home of Kemal Ataturk, founder of modern Turkey. On the Asian side are many expensive residential properties, including colourful wooden Ottoman yalis, and the hospital where Florence Nightingale cared for soldiers from the Crimea, in the Selimiye Military Barracks at Uskudar.

Later that evening, we join a group of beautiful party people for a short boat ride to Suada, a romantic "beach" island in the middle of the Bosphorus. We sit next to the pool, watching the sun set from the 360 Restaurant, with views in all directions. Boats sail past as we dine, lights change colour up on Fatih Bridge, and the music is as cool as the evening breeze.

Myrissa Luke caught the travel bug at an early age: she is a travel writer whose work and photographs have been published in the UK, America, Australia, and Canada.

Further Information

Getting there
Myrissa Luke flew to Istanbul from London Stansted Airport, courtesy of Pegasus Airlines (www.flypgs.com/en).

Where to stay
The writer was a guest of the Ritz-Carlton Istanbul - www.ritzcarlton.com
Tel: 0(212) 334 44 44

Where to eat
360 Istanbul Taksim and 360 Istanbul Suada - www.360istanbul.com

Find out more
Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture - www.istanbul2010.org

Turkish Culture and Tourism Office - www.gototurkey.co.uk

Further reading
The Lonely Planet guide to Istanbul is a handy guide book - www.lonelyplanet.com



A 14th-century mosaic of Christ in Hagia Sophia Museum



Head of Medusa in the Istanbul Archaeological Museums gardens



Dried fruit, snacks, and spices for sale in the Spice Market