



Inspirational

Istanbul

WITH hordes of persuasive, silver-tongued salesmen reluctant to take no for an answer and ‘special price’ offers galore, it would take a heart of stone to emerge from Istanbul’s Grand Bazaar without falling prey to at least one of them. Welcome to one of the great shopping experiences of the world.

Set in an amazing labyrinth of streets, passageways and alleys more baffling than any Hampton Court maze, the bazaar has at least 4,000 ‘shops’, with sections specialising in different merchandise.

Fancy an exquisite carpet or a ‘Cartier’ watch? Tempted by a glittering new necklace or a luxurious leather jacket? Maybe you are more interested in beautiful, hand-painted bowls, meticulously-carved pipes, polished brass lamps or a colourful, embroidered waistcoat? Whatever your heart desires, it seems it’s almost certainly on sale here. Bargaining is essential – and expected. However, if you’d like to see where a lot of the rugs and carpets come from before buying – and there are plenty of opportunities in Istanbul to do so – Wednesday is the day to go to the bazaar. That’s when the carpet

auction takes place and the dealers put in their bids, after checking out the merchandise on sale first.

And if you are tempted to take a carpet home (make sure you have your room measurements with you), you could also go to the Carpet Bazaar or several upmarket stores where they will take care of all the details regarding transporting your purchase back home.

Incidentally, if you’d like to find out more about carpets and why they are such an important part of Turkish culture, visit the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, which highlights carpet-weaving, the nomadic existence of the people of Anatolia, and what life was like in a 19th-century Istanbul house.

Less hectic than the Grand Bazaar is the Spice (or Egyptian) Bazaar. It was constructed in the 1660s and paid for with the taxes collected from Cairo for the trade in Egyptian goods such as herbs and spices – hence the Egyptian name – and is a heady mix of saffron, coriander and ginger aromas coupled with the vivid colours of the spice containers. Built for the mothers of Sultans Mehmet III and IV – and part of the complex that also includes the Mosque of the Sultan’s Mother – the bazaar overlooks the boats and ferries setting off up the Golden Horn or across the Bosphorus Strait.





Istanbul, a bustling, ramshackle city of 12.6 million inhabitants, has a foot in both Europe and Asia. The Old City and New City, both in Europe, are split by the waterway called the Golden Horn, and the Bosphorus river separates the two continents.

Istanbul is also this year's European Capital of Culture... and no wonder. With a dazzling array of sights (and sounds), it makes you wonder why it hasn't had the award before.

The hugely-impressive Blue Mosque – probably the most famous of Istanbul's almost 3,000 mosques – is a must-visit for any first-timer. A giant, 130ft-high dome surrounded by six minarets, it was completed in 1616 and gets its name from the 20,000 or so blue, glazed tiles that decorate the prayer hall. Donning plastic bags over your shoes – watched closely by blue-bereted “shoe police” – you are taken aback by the sight of the rugs for the faithful to kneel on that cover the floor of a building that can accommodate 5,000 worshippers.

“Guarded” by those six minarets, the Blue Mosque became the focus of religious activities in the city every Friday following its completion, when the Sultan's procession would make its way from Topkapi Palace. For almost 400 years, the palace was the private residence of the sultans and their families,

as well as the “White House” of the Ottoman Empire. Guides there regale visitors with tales of harems and eunuchs, sultans with four official wives, seven favourites and 250 concubines, and the fact that the three most important people after the sultan were the queen mother, the first wife to produce a son – and the Chief of the Black Eunuchs.

The emerald-studded dagger that was the object of desire in the 1960s film *Topkapi* is on show in the Treasury – built as summer palace for Mehmet II – which houses a superb collection of jewellery and the spoils of war from various military campaigns. Elsewhere, there are dazzling costumes – kaftans of satin, silk and velvet brocade, embroidered jackets and quilted turbans – sultans' thrones, and the 86-carat Spoonmaker's Diamond (one of the biggest in the world) and, in what were the palace kitchens, one of the world's finest collections of Chinese porcelain, all giving a revealing glimpse into the history of the country.

Also high on any visitor's list of places to see should be the magnificent Hagia Sophia Museum, which has, in its time, been both a church (the former “Church of Divine Wisdom”) and a mosque and is now listed as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site. Completed in five years in the sixth century for Emperor Justinian, it is regarded as an architectural masterpiece and was, for almost 1,000 years, one of the most important churches in Christendom.

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For a while, Hagia Sophia was the largest religious building in the world. It was a mosque from 1453 until 1934, when it became a museum and has, for the past 17 years, been subject to a course of renovation, just in time for Istanbul's reign as European Capital of Culture.

But not everything to see and do in the Turkish city is based on land. Sailing on the Bosphorus, between Europe and Asia, isn't bad either. Large, twice-a-day ferries make six-hour round trips, with several stops en route, but smaller, private operators offer three-hour cruises, which include an hour on land near Rumeli Hisari Castle.

There's every opportunity to see buildings both ancient and modern – as well as the homes of some of Istanbul's 12 million inhabitants – as you cruise close to both banks. And, over a relaxing drink by the Rumeli Hisari Castle, it is highly likely you will be amazed by the sheer size of the passing tankers as they make their way towards the Sea of Marmaris.

Back on land, in Istikal Cadessi (Independence Avenue), one of the most famous streets in Istanbul, the locals stroll up and down the avenue, deliberating over which cinema, bar, club or restaurant to frequent that evening.

There's a buzz in the air and, wandering along the avenue, you can't help but be caught up in the infectious atmosphere.

For a last look at Istanbul by night, head for the Tepe Lounge at the top of the Marmara Hotel where, drink in hand, you look out over the sparkling lights of Taksim Square. Magic.

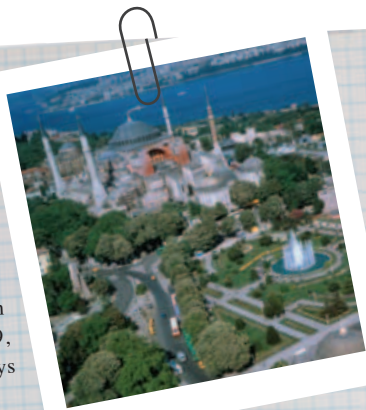
Neil Murray

FACT FILE

Four days/three nights B&B with Cresta (www.crestaholidays.co.uk, 0844 879 8014) at the four-star Orsep Royal Hotel in Istanbul costs from £269, flying with British Airways from Heathrow.

TIPS

- For more information on Istanbul and Turkey, contact the Turkish Culture & Tourism Office, 4th Floor, 29-30 St James Street, London SW1A 1HB, call 020 7839 7778, or log on to www.gototurkey.co.uk
- If fish is your dish, head for Kumkapi – a former fishing village now known as the “Fish Street” – where, it is claimed, there are 50 restaurants to choose from, all eager for your custom.
- If time is tight, opt for the three-hour Bosphorus cruise rather than the six-hour-stopping service. There are also guided cruises on offer.
- You will need to get used to the call to prayer, which rings out five times a day from pencil-slim minarets, drawing the locals to the city's mosques.
- The Danube Express's (www.danube-express.com, 01462 441400) new Istanbul Loop gives passengers the option to go all the way by rail from London St Pancras, travelling on the Danube Express from Budapest to Istanbul and back again without having to board an aeroplane.



TRAVEL NEWS

VOYAGES OF THE MIND

If it's better to travel hopefully than to arrive, it might be even better to stay at home and read about potential destinations. And it's certainly cheaper! If you're going to be an armchair traveller this summer, we have an ideal companion. Illustrated by award-winning photographer Craig Easton, *52 Weekends by the Sea* is bound to be one of the most beautiful travel books of the year. From the thrill of wild camping on a remote Scottish beach to sunset picnics in a Welsh landscape, it's packed with varied and exciting ideas for weekend breaks. Whether you're with or without children, a gastronome, a pampered metrosexual or a wild-haired outward-bound adventurer, there's something to tempt you out of your front room.



WIN!

We have five copies to give away, so if you'd like one, please send your name, address and telephone number to:

52 Weekends Competition

Society Magazine

The Brewery House

74 High St., Marlow SL7 1AH

or email competitions@totallymedia.net

HOLIDAYS FOR HEALTH

For the Brits, the medical holiday is a bit of a new departure. But if you can combine your dental work



with a winter sun break and still pay a fraction of what it would have cost in the UK: well, it's an offer you can't refuse, isn't it? And it's not just the dentists: cosmetic surgery, fertility treatment and, of course, traditional health resorts and spas are drawing us abroad in ever increasing numbers. But this is one area where it pays to get your information straight before hand. Destination Health is a trade show dedicated to medical tourism, and offers the prospective patient the chance to talk face-to-face with over 100 overseas practitioners, and attend free seminars on popular fields. The aim is to help you compare options and make informed choices between destinations and facilities. The exhibition is at Olympia, London from 17th-18th April. Best of all, admission is free if you register in advance at www.destinationhealth.co.uk.

LONDON PRIDE



It's almost a cliché: the French never go up the Eiffel Tower, the Greeks are always meaning to visit the Parthenon and, as for us... well, be honest. How old were you when you last went to Westminster Abbey? It was a Year 6 school trip wasn't it? The cultural wealth of one of the greatest cities on earth is sitting on our doorstep, so it's worth a weekend. And here's a good way to make it affordable. The London Sightseeing Pass has always been promoted to foreign tourists, but now the organisers are encouraging us locals to use it as well. Starting at £39 for a child for a day, it gives free (and queue-free) admission to 55 top attractions ranging from Shakespeare's Globe to the Cabinet War Rooms. You can combine it with a travelcard, and, particularly if you're introducing the young'uns to Our Glorious Heritage, it could save you a fortune. Details at www.londonpass.com.

Photographs courtesy: London Turkish Tourist Office www.gototurkey.co.uk and Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture Agency www.istanbul2010.org