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Essential Istanbul

The country code is 90.

Hit the water. A boat ride up the busy Bosphorus is the best way to get oriented and take in the sweep of history and the dazzling architecture hugging the shores of this fabled city.

Experience a sacred space. There is a reason the Hagia Sophia merits a whole chapter in college art-history textbooks—the 6th-century church/mosque/museum remains an architectural wonder and an active presence in Istanbul.

Sweat it out. Visit a proper Turkish hammam—such as the centuries-old Çağaloğlu (cagalogluhamami.com.tr) or Çemberlitaş (cemberlitas-hamami.com.tr)—for a cleansing and relaxing scrub and steam.

Witness a culture clash. European luxury meets Asian opulence at Dolmabahçe Palace (212-236-9000; dolmabahce.gov.tr), the over-the-top 19th-century extravaganza that was home to the last Ottoman sultans.

Shop till you drop. The seemingly endless domed-and-vaulted roof of the Grand Bazaar (grandbazaaristanbul.org) and its surrounding streets shelter roughly 4,000 vendors. It's the ultimate mix of high and low, with everything from vintage diamonds and antique rugs to ceramics, souvenir-trinkets, textiles, and T-shirts. For the culinary equivalent, check out the nearby Spice Bazaar.

What to See

Istanbul Archaeology Museum, Osman Hamdi Bey Yokuşu, Gülhane, 212-520-7740: A huge array of classical artifacts, including pottery, statues, and the Alexander Sarcophagus.

Kanyon, Büyükdere Caddesi 185, Levent, 212-353-5300; kanyon.com.tr: A sleek high-end shopping mall.

Rüstem Paşa Mosque, Hacırahırcılar Caddesi, Eminönü: The interior of this 16th-century mosque by renowned architect Sinan is inset with thousands of brilliant Iznik tiles.

Santralistanbul, Kazım Karabekir Caddesi 2/6, Eyüp, 212-311-7809; santralistanbul.com: A power plant turned art space that has become a favorite of the cultural elite.

Topkapı Palace, Sultanahmet, Eminönü, 212-512-0480; topkapisarayi.gov.tr: This palace museum's courtyards and pavilions house treasures (emerald-encrusted daggers and caftans of silk and gold) and, of course, its famed harem.

Where to Stay

Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Sultanahmet, Tevkifhane Sokak 1, Sultanahmet, 212-402-3000; fourseasons.com/istanbul: The most luxurious address amid the old town's palaces and monuments; or try the new Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at the Bosphorus for its pampering spa.

Hôtel Les Ottomans, Muallim Naci

Caddesi 68, Kuruçeşme, 212-359-1500; www.lesottomans.com: Updated Ottoman style in an intimate *yalı*—the type of ornate wood homes that line the Bosphorus.

Park Hyatt Istanbul—Maçka Palas, Bronz Sokak 4, Şişli, 212-315-1234; istanbul.park.hyatt.com: Spacious suites with hammam-style baths ideal for in-room spa services.

W Istanbul, Süleyman Seba Caddesi 22, Akaretler, Beşiktaş, 212-381-2121; whotels.com/istanbul: The first W in Europe brings luxe accommodations to a central location.

Witt Istanbul Suites, Defterdar Yokuşu 26, Beyoğlu, 212-393-7900; wittistanbul.com: Seventeen stylish rooms kitted out by Turkish design darlings Autoban in trendy Cihangir.

Where to Eat

360 Istanbul, İstiklal Caddesi, Mısır Apt. 311, Beyoğlu, 533-691-0360; 360istanbul.com: The fun of finding this glam, hopping restaurant atop a nondescript apartment building is just the beginning of a lively night.

Develi, Gümüşyüzük Sokak 7, Samatya, 212-529-0833; develikebab.com: There are several locations, but foodies deem this one the best for kebab.

The House Café Corner, Teşvikiye Caddesi 146, Teşvikiye, 212-327-1774; thehousecafe.com.tr: Design firm Autoban strikes again at this expanding chain of casual-chic cafés.

Kantin, Akkavak Sokağı 30, Nişantaşı, 212-219-3114; kantin.biz: Bright and airy lunch spot serving a seasonal menu. Don't miss the new terrace in back or the patisserie downstairs.

Lacivert, Körfez Caddesi 57A, Anadolu Hisarı, 216-413-4224; lacivertrestaurant.com: Spectacular seafood in a magical setting on the Asian side.

Lucca, Cevdet Paşa Caddesi 51B, Bebek, 212-257-1255; lucicastyle.com: Burgers and scrumptious pastas from 10 A.M. to 11 P.M. at the de facto clubhouse for Bebek's smart set.

Mikla, The Marmara Pera Hotel, Meşrutiyet Caddesi 15, Beyoğlu, 212-293-5656; miklarestaurant.com: Mehmet Gürs's refined modern cuisine and the breathtaking views draw a hip crowd.

Müzedechanga, Sakıp Sabancı Caddesi 22, Emirgan, 212-323-0901; changa-istanbul.com: Outpost of the popular restaurant Changa that spills into the gardens at the Sakıp Sabancı Museum.

Pandeli Restaurant, Mısır Çarşısı 1, Eminönü, 212-527-3909: World-famous eatery above the Spice Bazaar with a drop-dead tile interior.

Sultanahmet Köftçisi, Divanyolu Caddesi 12, Sultanahmet, 212-520-0566; sultanahmetkoftesi.com: Known for the city's best köfte (savory spiced meatballs).

Where to Shop

Abdulla, Grand Bazaar, Halıcılar Caddesi 62, 212-527-3684; abdulla.com: Elegant all-natural soaps, plush towels, and more for the bath and home.

Alaturca, Faik Paşa Yokuşu 4, Çukurcuma, 212-245-2933; alaturcahouse.com: Erkal Aksoy's townhouse showroom brims with kilims, hand-hammered copper, and select antiques.

Arzu Kaprol, Atiye Sokak 9, Nişantaşı, 212-225-0129; arzukaprol.net: Home of the Turkish little black dress.

Bebek Badem Ezmesi, Cevdet Paşa Caddesi 53C, Bebek, 212-263-5984: Family-owned sweets shop selling marzipan and other treats since 1904.

Galeri Kayseri English Bookshop, Divanyolu Caddesi 58, Sultanahmet, 212-516-3366; galerikayseri.com: Guidebooks and stunning volumes on the region's art, architecture, religion, philosophy, and gastronomy.

Gürger Watch & Jewelry Co., Grand Bazaar, Cevahir Bedesteni 203, 212-526-2334: An astounding array of jewelry and vintage watches in the heart of the antiques bazaar.

Orient 100, Nuruosmaniye Caddesi 100, Çağaloğlu, 212-520-0300; orient100istanbul.com: Perhaps the country's largest selection of carpets from Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Sivasli Istanbul Yazmacısı, Grand Bazaar, Yağlıklar Caddesi 57, 212-526-7748: Fabrics both antique and new, including ikats, velvets, and silks.