



istanbul

Tired of telling its tale of two continents, the bustling Turkish metropolis is rewriting itself as a coherent, up-and-coming capital. Rachel Howard **seeks out Istanbul's new must-see sights.**

When planning a weekend in Istanbul, most visitors focus on Sultanahmet, the historic heart of the city that's home to the Ayasofya, Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace, Grand Bazaar et al. Locals, however, tend to shy away from the area. "I was born in Istanbul but I've only been to Sultanahmet three or four times," says Tuncel Toprak, who has chosen the up-and-coming neighbourhood of Cihangir as the location for his first hotel, Witt Istanbul Suites. Designed by award-winning architects Autoban, this boutique bolthole is more of a nod to mid-century modern than old-school Ottoman. It sums up Istanbul's determination to shed the East-meets-West clichés and rebrand itself as a global style capital – an identity that should be cemented when Istanbul becomes one of the 2010 European Capitals of Culture.

Toprak likens Cihangir to New York's Meatpacking District. It's a tumble of narrow streets and crumbling apartment blocks between Taksim Meydanı and Istanbul Modern, the contemporary art museum with a waterfront restaurant to rival the exhibits. Hipsters with laptops hang out at the cafés clustered around Akarsu Caddesi, such as Cuppa, where you can brunch on beetroot juice and eggs Benedict – a far cry

from the traditional Turkish breakfast of menemen (spicy scrambled eggs) washed down with startlingly strong tea.

The boundaries of Cihangir blur with the equally intriguing area of Çukurcuma, – a warren of antique, vintage and design boutiques centred on Faik Pasa Yokusu. Antiquarian Erkal Aksoy seduces prospective shoppers with tea and pastries at A La Turca, a town house brimming with covetable kilim rugs, while across the street Mine Kerse handcrafts adorable felt and leather bags and hats. And further downhill is the tiny café Kiki Çay Evi, where herbal teas are served in vintage china.

Wherever you go in Istanbul, young men still slalom through traffic balancing trays loaded with dainty

glasses of çay (Turkish tea). And the city's modern mask slips a little further whenever the tomato-red tram rattles down Istiklal Caddesi with a gaggle of kids dangling off the back. This is the heart of historic Beyoğlu, the district immortalised by photographer Ara Güler, whose melancholy snapshots of a bygone era decorate Kafe Ara, an institution much loved by the intelligentsia.

The 19th-century Pera Palace hotel, originally built for *Orient-Express* passengers, is currently closed for renovation but the charming Pera Museum offers a glimpse into the grand days of the Ottoman empire,

before Kemal Atatürk founded the Turkish Republic in 1923 and embarked on a zealous modernisation programme. And although the Büyük Londra hotel has seen better days since opening in 1892, its idiosyncratic bar decorated with caged parrots and clashing wallpaper remains a delight – just the place for a pre-dinner drink. After which, head up the road to Moreish, a close-kept secret among local gourmets where chef Coskun Uysal's serves up a postmodern

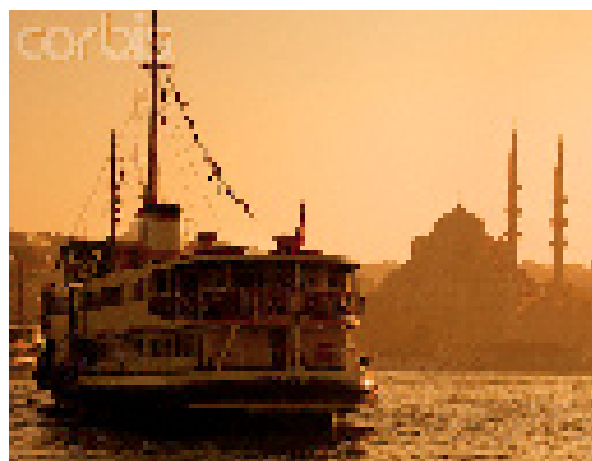
menu of smoked aubergine and chorizo soup and quail Bolognese.

For something more traditional, try one of the boisterous *meyhanes* along Sofyalı Sokak or Asmalı Mescit, where artists and intellectuals knock back rounds of raki with their meze. John Freely, author of *Strolling Through Istanbul*, is a regular at Asmalı Cavit, and no wonder. Sample samphire salad, fiery red pepper dip and aubergine purée – meze feasts are meant to be strung out over several hours but the uninitiated never leave room for a main course, which is a shame, as the grilled blue fish is divine.

This bohemian quarter is called Tünel, after Europe's shortest subway, which was built in 1875. It takes all of 90 seconds to jiggle down to Karaköy, a grubby dock with a fabulous fish market. Choose a fish to be grilled, nab a stool on the grassy banks of the Golden Horn and watch seagulls duck and dive against the silhouetted minarets of the mosques on the opposite shore.

For a more upscale version of the experience, feast on grilled baby octopus and stuffed calamari at Cibalikapi, a rickety tavern overlooking the Golden Horn. A meandering inlet that divides the European side of Istanbul, the Golden Horn has stubbornly resisted gentrification. But a flurry of activity to upgrade the area in time for

Above: False Ceiling by Richard Wentworth is part of the Istanbul Modern collection. Below: a ferry chugs across the Bosphorus.



Istanbul's stint as Capital of Culture is under way: the conversion of the Sütluçe slaughterhouse into a cultural centre, new galleries under the old Galata Bridge and a fleet of glass-roofed boats providing a link to the Asian district of Üsküdar.

Santral Istanbul has already put suburban Alibeyköy on the map. Housed in the city's first power station, it's Istanbul's answer to Tate Modern. Brushed concrete galleries feature work by the likes of Martin Parr but the main attraction is the machines themselves, which were in operation until 1983: giant turbines and a control room straight out of *Dr No*. Two warehouses have also been turned into stylish café-bars: *Otto*, which dishes up pizzas by day and top DJs by night, and *Tamirane*, where satsuma caipirinhas are served by sassy waitresses in overalls.

Forbes magazine reckons there are 34 billionaires in Istanbul, ranking fourth behind Moscow, New York and London. Perhaps this explains the boom in shopping malls such as Kanyon in Levent, which is home to Harvey Nichols and Hakkasan. You won't see many women wearing headscarves in chichi Nisantasi either – they're more likely to be sporting Gucci or Armani, whose flagship stores you will find in the art deco Maçka Palas alongside the new Park Hyatt. It's a slick, 90-room affair with a dramatic sky-lit lobby, rooftop pool, steakhouse and



showroom. Then stroll along the boardwalk past the fancy restaurants of Bebek to the 15th-century fortress of Rumeli Hisari.

Boat trips are a good way of bypassing traffic jams too. In 1980 the population of Istanbul was less than 5m; today, it's more than 12.5m, which has created chronic congestion. Though, by 2011, the opening of the Marmaray railway, the world's deepest underwater tunnel which will link Europe with Asia beneath the Bosphorus, should go some way to alleviating the problem.

Until then, join the crush of commuters piling onto the ferries that crisscross the straits to visit the bustling Asian district of Kadıköy. The food market on Güneşlibahçe Sokakı (Sunny Garden Street) puts the Spice Market to shame. From lamb heads



spa. Walnut and bronze bedrooms combine state-of-the-art gadgetry with antique mirrors and chandeliers, and many have their own steam room and Turkish bath.

Europe's first W hotel has taken over another historic landmark: the Akaretler Row Houses in Besiktas. The former officers' residences now also house luxury labels such as Marc Jacobs, Marni and Lanvin. With moody lighting and glitzy interiors, the

The music of Istanbul draws you in: the distorted wail of the muezzin, a shoe-shiner's radio, seagulls squawking overhead.

W feels more like a nightclub than a hotel. The Lounge bar is jammed with glamorous socialites, while movers and shakers cut deals over sashimi and samosas in Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Spice Market restaurant.

Not to be outdone, Four Seasons has supplemented its Sultanahmet property with an outpost right on the Bosphorus – zap open the remote-control blinds to reveal this stunning stretch of water. If you can tear yourself away from the view, there's a lavish spa with three hammams, and a gleaming marble terrace with a pool and a private dock for guests' yachts. Don't have one? Speedboats are on hand to whisk you to the swanky coastal clubs.

In *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, novelist Orhan

Pamuk writes, "To be travelling through the middle of a city as great, historic and forlorn as Istanbul, and yet to feel the freedom of the open sea – that is the thrill of a trip along the Bosphorus." There really is nothing like it. What was once a string of Greek fishing villages is now a chain of chic seaside suburbs. Children feed the pigeons on the jetty at Ortaköy, while celebrities check each other out over the robata grill at Zuma. Arnavutköy's sleepy backstreets are lined with colourful wooden houses, from whose pulpit balconies residents gossip. Try new-wave meze such as salmon

köfte with wasabi and courgette blossoms stuffed with bulgur at Abracadabra, a four-storey restaurant decorated like a Designers Guild

and artichoke hearts, to dripping slabs of honeycomb and pungent olives, this is where Musa Dagdeviren sources many ingredients for his phenomenally popular restaurant, Ciya, which now has three branches side by side. Two are paeans to the humble kebab, while the third has an ever-changing menu of regional dishes such as lamb braised with quince and perde pilavi, a pastry pyramid you crack open to reveal a steaming mound of chicken pilaf studded with raisins, almonds and pine nuts.

As the return ferry pulls into Karaköy, the flush of dusk spreads across the hazy outline of domes and minarets. The music of Istanbul draws you in: the distorted wail of the muezzin from Yeni Camii mosque, the twang of a shoe-shiner's radio, seagulls squawking overhead, foghorns of ships passing below, the thrum of traffic pounding over Galata Bridge. Sultanahmet stretches before you, full of promise. The lure of the old city – and actually, you shouldn't miss it – may just prove irresistible after all. ♦

THE HIT LIST

HOTELS

Prices are for a double room per night with breakfast.

Four Seasons at the Bosphorus,



Çiragan Caddesi 28 (+90212-381 4000; www.fourseasons.com/bosphorus), from €400. **Park Hyatt**, Bronz Sokak 35 (+90212-315 1234; www.istanbul.park.hyatt.com), from €378. **W Hotel**, Suleyman Seba Caddesi 22 (+90212-381 2121; www.starwoodhotels.com/whotels), from €232. **Witt Suites**, Deftardar Yokusu 26 (+90212-393 7900; www.wittistanbul.com) from €150.

RESTAURANTS

Prices are for a three-course meal for one with half a bottle of wine.

Abracadabra, Arnavutköy Caddesi 50/1 (+90212-358 6087), TL55 (about £24). **Asmalı Cavit**, Asmalı Sokak (+90212-292 4950), £20. **Cibalikapı**, Kadir Has Caddesi 5 (+90212-533 2846), £22. **Çiya**, Güneşlibahçe Sokak 43 (+90216-418 5115), £10 without

wine. **Moreish**, Mesrutiyet Caddesi 67 (+90212-245 6089), £45.

BARS AND CAFES

Büyük Londra, Mesrutiyet Caddesi 117 (+90212-293 1619). **Cuppa**, Yeni Yuva Sokak 22 (+90212-249 5723). **Kafe Ara**, Tosbaga Sokak 8a (+90212-245 4105). **Kiki Çay Evi**, Faik Pasa Caddesi 30a (+90212-244 8759). **Otto**, Kazım Karabekir Caddesi 1 (+90212-427 1889). **Tamirane**, Kazım Karabekir Caddesi 1 (+90212-311 7309).

SIGHTS

Istanbul Modern, Meclisi Mebusan Caddesi, Antrepo No 4 (+90212-334 7300); Tues-Sun 10am-6pm, Thurs 10am-8pm. **Pera Museum**, Mesrutiyet Caddesi 65

(+90212-334 9900); Tues-Sat 10am-7pm, Sun 12pm-6pm. **Santral**, Kazım Karabekir Caddesi 2/6 (+90212-311 7809); Tues-Sun 10am-8pm.

SHOPPING

A La Turca, Faik Pasa Yokusu 4 (+90212-245 2933). 679). **Mine Kerse**, Faik Pasa Yokusu 1 (+90212-249 3561).

LESS THAN AN HOUR AWAY

A ferry ride from Sirkeci dock, the sleepy villages and

sheltered coves of Princes' Islands offer welcome respite from Istanbul's traffic jams: cars are banned. Büyükdada is the busiest and prettiest, with the hilltop Monastery of St George providing unforgettable views and a rustic café.

WHEN TO GO

Aim for spring or late summer as winters are wet and cold, and high summer can be humid.

HOW TO GET THERE

Rachel Howard was a guest of Four Seasons at the Bosphorus. **British Airways** (0844-493 0787; www.ba.com) flies twice daily from Heathrow, from £137. **EasyJet** (0871-244 2377) flies daily to Sabiha Gökçen (1 hour from Istanbul) from Luton, from £78.

