

Getting to the heart of Mexican Los Angeles via the narcocorrido — the 'rap of modern Mexico' — as it moves through this sprawling, multilayered city.

Songs Without Borders

BY LAWRENCE DOWNES

CHALINO'S Bar looked promising. We walked under its arching neon sign, past the steel-bar door into pulsing darkness. It was after 10, still early. The place was mostly empty; couples here and there shared private islands in the gloom. Pablo, Omar and I got Tecates and a table. The jukebox was playing banda, Mexican brass music in the Sinaloa style, an oom-pah band wailing away in waltz time.

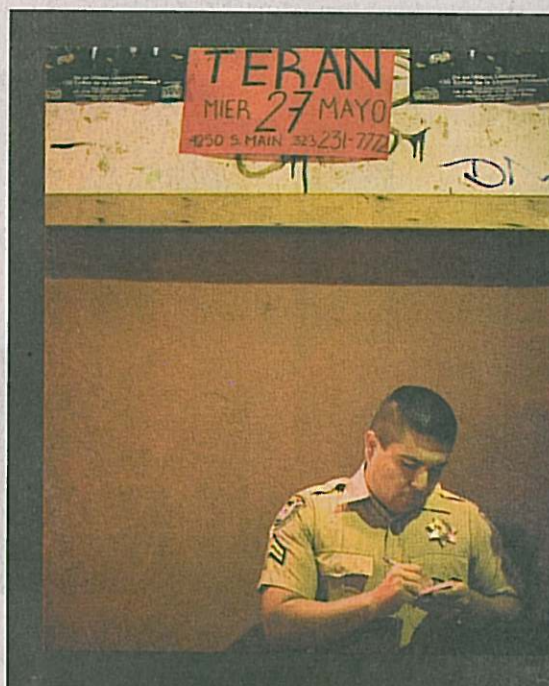
It was enjoyable — a toe-tapping beat at bone-shaking volume — but we wanted live musicians. The only performers there were hostesses, lined up at the bar waiting to trade close attention for expensive drinks. After a while I went out for air, and started talking with two men smoking by the back door. We had a short Spanish discussion about the situation. No bands were playing tonight, the men said, but we could try the El Dorado Night Club, a couple of miles away, in South-Central Los Angeles. After politely cautious small talk — no, I wasn't with Immigration — they suggested we go together. With that we followed our new friends along wide, dark boulevards — across Florence Avenue, up South Broadway to South Main Street, through a low-rise industrial terrain of concrete and stucco, past empty strip malls and auto shops, our route stitched by the glow of light poles, which far outnumbered royal palms this far south of downtown.

It was a short ride deep into the heart of Mexican Los Angeles, never far from the long shadow of Chalino Sánchez.

There are many ways to know a city — through its restaurants or museums, its landmarks or outdoor spaces. But one way to get to a city's heart is to immerse yourself in its music. You might think that would be impossible to do in

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RIGHT CENTER Pedro and Jenni Rivera; CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Security guard at El Dorado; Chalino's Bar; the musician Manuel Torres; late night at a taco stand.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIC GRIGORIAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES. BOTTOM LEFT, J. EMILIO FLORES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

On the Road
With Storm Chasers

36 Hours in Warsaw:
Still Cheap, But

In Germany,
A Baron's Castle

SAVE OR SPLURGE

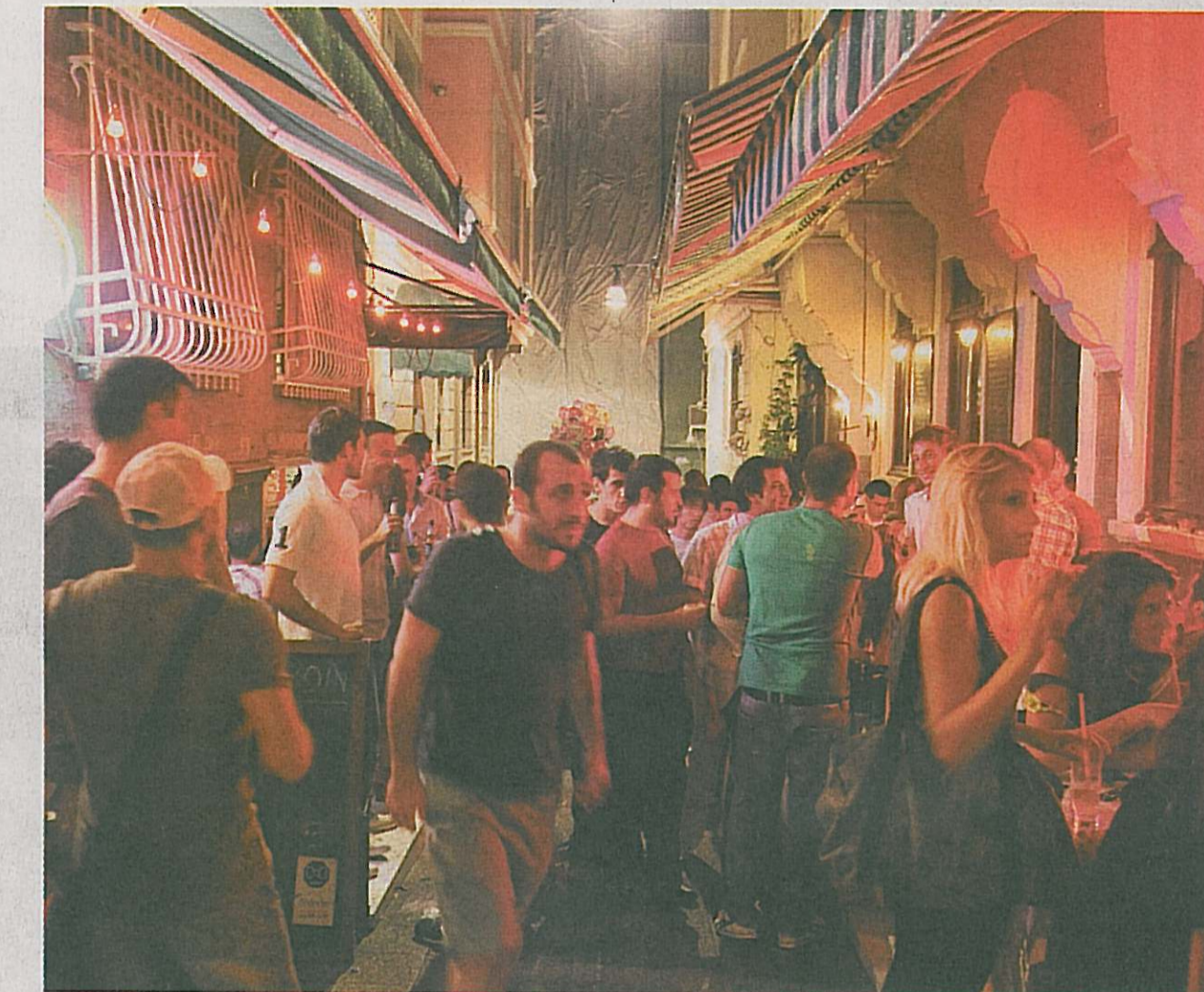
Istanbul on . . .

. . . \$250
a Day

By SETH SHERWOOD

SLEEP With its Roman ruins, Byzantine-era churches and medieval Ottoman mosques, Istanbul's storied Sultanahmet district is the moth-eaten fossil of a long-vanished past. Alas, the area's many run-down budget hotels fit that description, too. Opened in 2008 and just steps from the Grand Bazaar, the **Hotel Kupeli** (Eminsinan Mahallesi Gedikpasa Hamam Caddesi 4; 90-212-458-5650; www.hotelkupeli.com) is a needed addition to a neighborhood rife with sagging beds and worn carpets. The rooms are new and clean if unspectacular — smooth, vaguely Scandinavian wood surfaces and few decorations — but impressive amenities include flat-screen TVs with cable, free Wi-Fi and a free breakfast on the roof terrace. Best, if you book three or four nights, the hotel provides free airport pickup. Booking five or more nights gets round-trip airport transfers. Doubles from \$50 in the low season.

EAT They're still partying like it's 1888 at **Haci Abdullah** (Atif Yilmaz Caddesi 9A; 90-212-293-8561; www.haciabdullah.com.tr), which was opened that year with a license provided by Sultan Abdul Hamid II. The Ottoman emperors may be gone, but this convivial throwback restaurant still serves some of Istanbul's best Ottoman-era cooking. The scores of cold appetizers include a slow-cooked and ultrasoft grilled whole eggplant — topped with caramelized onions and soaked in olive oil — while a favorite main dish features a succulent lamb



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHAWN BALDWIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The evening scene at Otto, a cocktail lounge in the up-and-coming Asmalimescit night-life district.

shank blanketed with cooked eggplant strips. An unctuous rice pudding and tangy pomegranate juice offer a fine conclusion. No alcohol. Cost: A three-course meal for two runs about 80 Turkish lira, or roughly \$53 at 1.51 lira to the

dollar.

SHOP If you don't have time for the hammam, you can bring the hammam into your home courtesy of **Dervis** (Halicalar Caddesi 51; 90-212-528-7883; www

.dervis.com). Nixed amid the thousands of shops in the Grand Bazaar, this hole-in-the-wall is stocked floor to ceiling with hammered metal washing bowls (25 lira), rough linen gloves for exfoliation (10 lira) and other staples of

the Turkish bath. Best are the ropes hung with thick disks of soap (20 lira) — orange, rose, lavender — and circular blue and white nazar boncugu medallions, better known as the evil eye charm. You'll be protected from far more than just dirt. Cost for all three: 55 lira.

PARTY A newcomer to the fast-rising Asmalimescit night-life district, **Otto** (Seyhender Sokak 15; 90-212-292-7015; www.ottoistanbul.com), a cocktail lounge, serves up gorgeous low lighting and neo-industrial interiors that are as sultry as a harem girl and as sleekly sophisticated as almost anything you'll find in South Beach. Under vintage vinyl beats spun by a corner D.J., the black-clad cool cats and dolled-up P.R. girls sip drinks from a creative libation list that encompasses everything from ginger-basil mojitos to black mulberry cairoskas. Cost for either: 20 lira.

SAVE Istanbul's best lira-to-leisure ratio can be found aboard the **ferry boats** that depart multiple times daily from the pier at Kabitas (90-212-444-4436; www.ido.com.tr/en/index.cfm). For a mere 2.8 lira, you can cruise down the Bosphorus Strait past Istanbul's most famous monuments — including the Galata Tower, the Hagia Sophia cathedral and the Blue Mosque — into the shimmering Sea of Marmara and out to a small nearby archipelago known as the Princes' Islands. Ninety minutes and a few stops later, the ferries pull into Buyukada, the last and largest of the islands. Full of middle-class day-trippers enjoying cheap seafood meals at waterfront shacks, the bustling carless streets suggest a Turkish answer to Martha's Vineyard. Wait for one of the night boats to return to Istanbul. The panorama of illuminated mosque domes and glittering hills will burn in your memory long after your stay. Cost 2.8 lira.

TOTAL COST 157.8 lira (\$104.50), plus \$50, or \$154.50.

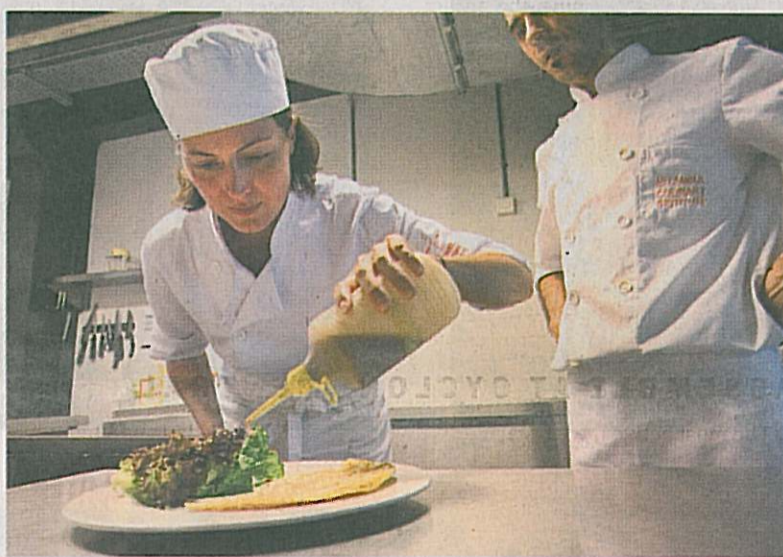
. . . \$1,000 a day

SLEEP Combine Turkey's hottest interior-design group (Autoban) with Istanbul's coolest emerging bohemian district (Cihangir) and the result is arguably the city's most stylish new crash pad, the 15-room **Witt Istanbul Suites** (Defterdar Yokusu 26, Cihangir; 90-212-393-7900; www.wittistanbul.com). If you can, shell out the money for one of the sea-view suites. Sprawling some 600 square feet, they combine Autoban's smooth, organic wood furnishings with killer views of the Bosphorus strait. The scene will look all the sweeter after you've rubbed down with the Molton Brown toiletries, poured yourself a coffee from the Nespresso machine and cued up your favorite soundtrack using the iPod docking station. Cost for a suite: 259 euros, or about \$376 at \$1.47 to the euro.

EAT Though barely into their 30s, the chefs Esra Muslu and Coskun Uysal have created something truly special at **Moreish** (Tepebasi Mesrutiyet Caddesi 67, Boyoglu; 90-212-245-9146; www.moreishrestaurant.com), which opened

in late 2007 (it is closed for the summer but will reopen in the fall). Featuring an airy white interior and abstract contemporary paintings, the intimate space feels more like the dining room of a hip art-collector friend than a restaurant, but it's the relentlessly inventive Aegean-fusion menu that really sparkles. Aubergine-chorizo soup with poached quail egg? Lamb chop with tahini hummus and cognac-plum purée? Asparagus and satsuma risotto? They're all here, rounded out with desserts made from the likes of black-olive caramel and Turkish coffee ice cream. Cost: A three-course meal for two, without wine, is around 150 lira, or about \$100 at 1.51 lira to the dollar.

SHOP The Ottoman Empire strikes back in the townhouse boutique of **Asli Tunca** (Nuru Ziya Sokak 34-20, Galatasaray; 90-212-251-7057; www.aslitunca.com). Formerly one of Turkey's top fashion designers, Ms. Tunca now creates "the haute couture of furniture," as she puts it: handmade one-of-a-kind pieces inspired by the intricately



A student dresses a salad at the Culinary Institute of Istanbul.

wrought antiques of the Ottoman aristocracy. While it might be impractical to fill your luggage with marquee items like tables inlaid with mother-of-pearl, more portable items abound. A plush red tubular cushion — covered in embroidered 19th-century Anatolian velvet — instantly transforms any living room into a sultan's salon. Cost: 190 euros.

PARTY Only a flying carpet could deliver a more jaw-dropping panorama of the city than **Ulus 29** (A. Adnan Saygun Caddesi 71, Ulus Parki; 90-212-358-2929; www.club29.com), a blinged-out restaurant-bar-club whose knockout views have drawn Prince Albert of Monaco, Kate Moss, Michael Douglas and plenty of other personalities from the pages of

Hello! and US magazines. The pre-party starts in the cool black lounge, where high-heeled socialites sip prosecco, six-figure couples feed each other sushi with chopsticks, and cocky wheeler-dealer types puff Cuban cigars. After midnight, the club area begins to boom with R&B, funk, hip-hop and Turkish pop, transforming the dance floor into a sea of booze-filled modern-day dervishes. Cost for that glass of prosecco: 30 lira.

SPLURGE As true gastronomes know, Turkish cooking means way more than just kebabs. Courtesy of the Ottoman Empire's far-flung territories, the national cuisine is a melting pot of flavors and accents from the Balkans, the Mediterranean, Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. And there's no better way to master it than with a personal instructor from the **Istanbul Culinary Institute** (Mesrutiyet Caddesi 59, Beyoglu; 90-212-251-2214; www.istanbulculinary.com). A one-on-one three-hour lesson with one of their chefs will indoctrinate you into everything from veal stew with grape molasses and apples to Halva with pine nuts. Contact the director, Banu Ozden, at least one week in advance. Cost: \$250 per person.

TOTAL COST 180 lira (\$119) plus 499 euros (\$734) plus \$250, or \$1,103.

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