

# Istanbul: Turkey's capital of culture

**The EU's new label for this beautiful city is, if anything, an excuse to go there, then go back, again and again**



Is there anyone who doesn't know that Istanbul is a place of wonder and beauty, that it has fabulous mosques and churches, and staggering museums? For those who might still need to have this drawn to their attention, the EU has made the city one of its three Capitals of Culture for 2010 (making it a tough year for Pecs in Hungary and Essen in Germany to dazzle). But if the cultural capital label is good for anything, it is an excuse to go, then go back, again and again. That, of course, is part of the joy of Istanbul. No matter how many times you have been, there is always more to see. Always something old and something new.

No matter how sated your appetite for exotic architecture and bling, the Topkapi is one of the city's major attractions. But before you walk through the palace of the Ottoman sultans, step even further back in time and away from the crowds, at the adjacent archeological museum. It is home to some serious antiquities, including treasures excavated in the 1880s at Sidon, in Lebanon — though the so-called Alexander Sarcophagus may not have been the last resting place of the Macedonian hero. From there, walk over to the Topkapi, lingering in its harem and treasury, and then head to the Konyali restaurant (rather than the nearby cafeteria) at the end of the palace gardens.

From the back garden of the sultans, as you look out onto Asia and watch shipping clog the artery of the Bosphorus, you can consider things seen — the exquisite chambers of the harem, the baskets of emeralds and diamonds, the jewel-studded thrones, swords and boxes, the staff of Moses and hair from the beard of the Prophet. Not a bad haul at about £8 for an entrance ticket and another £6 for the harem.

You can also consider what is still to be seen and, as the city spreads out below you, muse on the fact that most of it does not appear on your visitor's map. Old Istanbul, the Istanbul most of us travel to see, was home to some hundreds of thousands. The modern city is home to well over 12m. These young millions are giving Istanbul its latest burst of energy and 2010 will see them at play as never before.

Try strolling down Istiklal Caddesi one evening. It is a couple of miles long and there is no better place to watch modern Istanbul at play: millions (yes, millions) of city folk walk up or down the hill each day, passing fashion stores, grand 19th-century buildings and some hip bars (360, one of the hippest is on the top floor of No 311; [360istanbul.com](http://360istanbul.com)). There's no shortage of restaurants here, from the simple fish tables along Balik Pazari, the fish market, to the extreme sophistication of Mikla, on top of the Marmara Pera Hotel ([istanbulyi.com](http://istanbulyi.com)).

At its lower end, Istiklal runs into a lively area called Tunel: be sure to take a stroll along Sofyali Sokak, an alley lined with bars and restaurants, from the newcomer music bar Otto ([ottoistanbul.com](http://ottoistanbul.com)) to the old-time pleasures of Refik's ([refikrestaurant.com](http://refikrestaurant.com)), a meyhane (literally "wine house") serving meze and lashings of raki in its small dining rooms or out in the alley if weather is good. Lunch costs £10-£20 a head, unless you want to grab a fresh fish sandwich off one of the boats at the Golden Horn waterfront, beside the Galata Bridge (50p). Dinner with drinks will cost £15-£40.

In 2010 one of the city's slumbering giants will awaken: 1890s grande dame, the Pera Palas ([perapalاس.com](http://perapalاس.com)). The hotel was created to accommodate passengers from the Orient-Express; Agatha Christie was a regular. But it has long been in need of attention and has had a complete makeover.

Next year will see many other openings: there will be more hotels, restaurants and bars, and some sights. The great Ottoman architect Sinan's masterwork, the Suleymaniye Mosque, built for Suleyman the Magnificent in the 1550s and still dominating the city skyline, has been closed for two years but will reopen. As befits a European Capital of Culture, there will be a year-long string of events, a series of art projects and a new arts centre over on the Asian side. Perhaps best of all, just a short walk off Istiklal Caddesi, will be the Museum of Innocence. Inspired by the Turkish Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk's latest novel (to be published in Britain in January 2010), it will reflect his obsession with life and culture in the city since the 1950s.

Should you find yourself tiring, you could take yourself off to Pecs or Essen. Or you could follow the crowd down Istiklal Caddesi to the Bosphorus, smell the brine, feel the breeze and be swept up in the ever renewing drama of this most remarkable and rewarding city.

*British Airways (0844 493 0787, [ba.com](http://ba.com)) flies to Istanbul's Ataturk airport from Heathrow, as does Turkish Airlines (0844 800 6666, [thy.com](http://thy.com)), which also flies from Birmingham, Dublin, Manchester and Stansted. EasyJet ([easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)) flies from Luton and Gatwick to Sabiha Gokcen airport. Five nights B&B at the Pera Palas Hotel with Steppes Travel (01285 880 980, [steppestravel.co.uk](http://steppestravel.co.uk)) will cost from £1,275pp including flights, transfers and two days with a guide. More information at [en.istanbul2010.org](http://en.istanbul2010.org)*