

# Istanbul <sup>36</sup>HOURS

CHRISTOPHER P. BAKER



*Istanbul Museum of Modern Art*



"CHRISTOPHER, YOU MUST COME!  
Istanbul is so cool!" my Turkish friend  
Nurşen Kaya pleaded.

Cool?

I hadn't imagined Istanbul to be  
avant-garde hip. My images of this exotic  
city had been fired by childhood tales of  
sultans' harems and Crusades against  
Constantinople and, ever since, Istanbul  
has beckoned as insistently as the calls  
to prayer from a minaret. Intrigued,  
when the chance came to shoehorn a  
three-day visit into a European trip,  
I seized the opportunity as eagerly as  
one would a morsel of Turkish delight.

Driving into downtown from the  
airport causes whiplash as Nurşen  
speeds past opulent 21st-century steel-  
and-glass towers and malls to join  
the throngs of BMWs and Porsches  
crawling past minimalist townhomes  
and über-chic sidewalk cafés. We're  
barely a mile – yet worlds away – from  
the Byzantine- and Ottoman-era mosques  
rising above the silver-blue Bosphorus –  
the legendary strait that separates  
Europe from Asia.

It's an instant insight into why  
one of the world's most ancient cities  
is today hailed by many as the coolest  
city in Europe. Down-at-the-heels  
neighbourhoods have been reborn  
as bohemian enclaves where swank  
restaurants and bars serve appletinis  
to the sounds of hip-hop and Lady Gaga.  
And traditional Anatolian houses have  
been transformed into exciting boutique  
hotels to rival the best of New York or  
London. All juxtaposed against ancient  
archaeological treasures and a variety  
of lifestyles that reflect Istanbul's  
exciting *meze* of cultures and styles.

**DAY ONE** Our first day is dedicated to  
Sultanahmet, Istanbul's ancient quarter.  
Pencil-thin minarets point us toward the  
Sultan Ahmet Mosque, or 'Blue Mosque,'  
named for its vast, serene blue-hued  
interior, its tiles adorned with delicate  
*cloisonné*. Outside, families picnic on  
lawns. Women in head-to-toe *chadors*  
sweep past fountains and pools that  
mirror the Aya Sofya, a huge mosque  
(originally a church that was once the  
centre of global Christendom) whose  
sea of domes and minarets became  
Istanbul's iconic religious template.

Next comes the Topkapi Palace,  
once the heart of the Ottoman Empire.  
Allow at least two hours to visit, ideally  
in early morning, when the peaceful  
courtyards are filled with the cooing  
of doves. I unveil its secrets on a tour

of the harem chambers, while the royal  
treasury holds me spellbound with  
jewels to outsparkle Aladdin's Cave.

Entering the Grand Bazaar, I sense the  
full magic of Istanbul's ancient mystique.  
It's easy to imagine camel caravans  
pushing through the teeming and dimly  
lit warren, cool beneath soaring arched  
roofs. Eager salesmen throw carpets  
at our feet as we pass. Others hawk  
jewellery, silk slippers and *nargiles*  
(water pipes). Tantalizing aromas of  
coffee, lavender and spices perfume  
the air, sweetened by mountains of  
Turkish delight.

My head is spinning like a whirling  
dervish after so many cultural treasures.  
Still, we add the 450-year-old Çemberlitas  
Hamami (perfect for a cleansing steambath  
and massage), the Cistern of 1001 Columns  
and Beyazıt Camii (one of the city's oldest  
mosques) to complete our exploration  
of the long-vanished past.

**DAY TWO** Crossing the Golden Horn  
from historic Constantinople is a form  
of time travel. Old (Eastern) meets new  
(Western) in trendy Beyoğlu – epicentre  
of Istanbul's gentrification.

Antique trams trundle by as Nurşen  
and I stroll İstiklâl Caddesi, a wide  
pedestrian boulevard lined with music  
shops and upscale fashion stores. I laugh  
watching elastic-like ice-cream being  
drawn into a metre-long rope with the  
tips of swords by vendors dressed in  
blood-red fezzes and embroidered vests.

Don't miss Çukucuma, Beyoğlu's  
old quarter, stuffed with dusty antique  
stores; and Fransız Sokakı (French  
Street), a short, steep, cobbled lane packed  
with charming cafés and open-air bars.  
Gas lamps and terraces spilling over  
with bougainvillea add to its Parisian air.

Downhill next, to the 62-metre-tall  
Galata Tower, built by the Genoese in  
1348 and a great place to watch belly  
dancers in its restaurant-bar. The tower  
anchors a piazza-like square at the heart  
of this revitalized quarter overlooking  
the Galata Bridge, the umbilical cord  
across the Golden Horn linking Galata  
to Sultanahmet.

Turning west onto Necatibey Caddesi,  
follow this snaking shorefront avenue past  
the Istanbul Modern Art Museum, the  
sumptuous Dolmabahçe Palace and the  
exquisite Ortaköy Mosque. Allow half  
a day. Buses and trams serve the route.

**DAY THREE** There's no better way to  
admire Istanbul's famous skyline than by  
taking a nostalgic cruise on a steamboat

down the Bosphorus and into the Sea of  
Marmara. Depart the Beşiktaş ferry  
terminal. Destination? Büyükdada, the  
last and largest of the nine Princes'  
Islands. It's a serene 90-minute journey.

The ferry is full of lovers and families  
alike escaping the city bustle for the pine  
forests, deserted sands and bucolic calm  
of Büyükdada, an old-fashioned island  
where mid-nineteenth-century summer  
mansions trimmed with gingerbread lend  
the ambiance of a Mediterranean Martha's  
Vineyard. Only bicycles, donkeys and  
horse-drawn carriages ply the hilly  
streets – no cars are allowed. We lose  
ourselves in the moment, freed from  
decisions other than which of the many  
seafront restaurants to lunch at.

On the leisurely journey back we snooze  
on wooden benches, our arrival perfectly  
timed to enjoy dinner at a waterfront  
restaurant (try Poseidon) serving  
mouthwatering *meze* appetizers and  
delicious seafood. We wind up a perfect  
day with cocktails at Reina, a blinged-out  
lounge with killer views of the Bosphorus  
Bridge floodlit in a lumiere of disco  
colours. The songs of Kanye West mingle  
with the distant chants of the *muezzins*.  
As the moon rises behind the floodlit  
minarets and mosques of Sultanahmet,  
I sense how this seamless melding of the  
secular and the spiritual, of East meets  
West, old and new, has transformed  
Istanbul into the European capital of  
culture for 2010.

**WHERE TO STAY** For an ultra high-  
end splurge, you can live like a sultan  
during your stay at the Çırağan Palace  
Kempinski, the only Ottoman imperial  
palace by the Bosphorus. The Sultan  
Suite, the second-largest in Europe at  
376 square metres, has hosted such guests  
as the King and Queen of Jordan and  
Oprah Winfrey, and offers a handmade  
marble *hammam*, a private steam room,  
unique masterpieces and 180° views of  
the Bosphorus. Old-world Hotel Yeşil Ev,  
in the heart of Sultanahmet, is a mere  
*muezzin* call away from the mosques.  
Furnished in palatial style with antiques,  
ornate chandeliers and gilt moulding, the  
rooms whisk guests like a magic carpet  
back to the era of the Orient Express.  
To feel like a sultan of swing, check into  
the W Hotel. Blending Turkish with  
avant-garde Western styling, this chic  
*seraglio* anchors a two-block cluster of  
19th-century townhouses transformed  
into an enclave of fashionable apartments,  
boutiques and cafés. The W's bathrooms  
are really mini-*hammams*. □