



ISTANBUL

If you are looking for an interesting overseas city in which to spend a few days, you could do a lot worse than Istanbul. It is the largest city in Turkey, although not the capital, which is Ankara. Turkish Airlines fly to Istanbul from Gatwick, four times a day, in less than four hours.

You possibly know the old song, ‘Istanbul, not Constantinople, now it’s Istanbul...’. The



The Blue Mosque on a snowy day

name was changed in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Attaturk, ‘the founder of modern Turkey’. The original name was Byzantium, but this was changed to Constantinople in 330, by the Roman Emperor Constantine, on his conversion to Christianity. For over 1,100 years the city was the capital of the Byzantine empire and the centre of the Greek Orthodox church. It was conquered by the nomadic Turks in 1453, and became the capital of the Ottoman Empire, with a change in religion from Christian to Muslim. The Ottoman empire ended with the first world war, leading to the modern country, which is a

‘secular republic’. However, the ‘call to prayer’, which the muzzein make five times a day from the many mosques in the city, reminds you of the strength of Muslim influence.

There are three ‘must see’ sights in Istanbul, and countless other places worth visiting. The oldest of the ‘big three’ is the Hagia Sophia, built as the Cathedral of St Sophia in 537, on the orders of the Roman Emperor Justinian. It became a mosque after the Turkish conquest, but the building was left largely intact, and it became a museum in 1935. It is famous for the huge central dome, surrounded by smaller domes, and for the many fine Christian mosaics. It has four minarets, which were added after it became a mosque. The other two major tourist destinations date from the Ottoman Empire. The Blue Mosque is one of the finest buildings in the world. Although it



Decorative tiles in the Topkapi Palace

is a working mosque, visitors are permitted at certain times (and entrance is free), but visitors must remove their shoes and conform to the Muslim dress code. Again, there is a huge central dome with smaller domes around it. Being Muslim, there are no depictions of humans or animals, but instead large areas of exquisite tiles, many of them blue, hence the name of the mosque. The Topkapi Palace completes the trio of important sites. It consists of a large number of interconnected buildings, containing numerous treasures and works of art. The best known of these is the ‘Topkapi dagger’, studded with huge emeralds and made

famous by the comedy heist movie ‘Topkapi’ in the 1960s. The palace also includes an extensive Harem, for which there is an additional charge.

Unusually for a tourist destination, all three of these important sites are very close to each other, surrounding the Sultanahmet park. If you are lucky enough to get a hotel in this area, sightseeing becomes very easy.



The underground Roman cistern

and which divides the historic city from the ‘new’ city, which has streets filled with hotels, shops and restaurants. The centre of the new city is Taksim Square, which has seen many protests and demonstrations, some of them violent, over the years.

As well as the ‘big three’ tourist sites, other places well worth a visit include the underground water cistern, built by the Romans, the Chora church and museum, the huge Grand Bazaar and the Galata tower. There are also many other museums, and very many mosques, although not all are open to non-Muslims. You are spoiled for choice for places to visit!

Istanbul is fortunate in having an efficient modern transportation system, consisting of both trains and trams. Payment is for a single journey of any length, but if you have to change, for example from a train to a tram, you have to pay again. There are two methods of payment—plastic tokens known as jetons, or a pre-paid card similar to the Oyster card in London. Both may be purchased from machines at stations and tram stops.

Prices of most things are not very different from those in Britain, although you are expected to barter for tourist items, which you can usually get for about half the original asking price! In any tourist area, friendly people will come up and chat to you—“Where are you from? ... are you enjoying your visit? ... would you like to come to my carpet shop? ...” and so on. Unlike some countries, however, they are happy to accept ‘no’ as an answer! The Turkish people are very friendly and helpful, even when they are not trying to sell you something. A fascinating tourist destination, and highly recommended.



The Galata tower

Wendy and Mike Whittle