

How Turks Do Turkey

*Check out my blog for photos: <http://thedinnertable.wordpress.com/category/not-around-sf/>

Points of Interest in and around Istanbul (aside from the obvious like Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque):

1. **Spice Bazaar vs. The Grand Bazaar.**

If you only have time for one, I recommend the Spice Bazaar. It is smaller than The Grand Bazaar (yet still has a ton of little shops) but I find it more charming. I also prefer the neighborhood the Spice Bazaar is in. The Grand Bazaar is in an area that looks very European. The Spice Bazaar, however, is in an area that is very Ottoman. It is right next to a gorgeous mosque with a large historic compound. The prices at the Spice Bazaar are also more reasonable. The Grand Bazaar is overpriced because it is such a tourist attraction.

2. **Boat tour on the Bosphorus.**

If the weather permits, it is worth it. I suggest a shorter tour. In the summer, there are 1.5 hour, 3 hour and 6 hour tours. I'm not sure if all tours include stopping to get lunch. My family and I took the 6 hour tour (pretty lengthy) but we enjoyed the lunch immensely. It was the best fish we had while in Istanbul. From the boat, you see several palaces, the old fortress walls, and multi-million dollar homes. Apparently, real estate on the Bosphorus is amongst the most expensive in the world. Homes go for about 100 million US dollars.

3. **Topkapi Palace.** (closed on Tuesday)

Istanbul's version of Versailles. The exhibits at the palace range. When we were there, we were able to see the harem. I think the harem is the most beautiful and ornate part of the palace. If it is still open, I highly recommend it. The palace also contains several items that belonged to the Prophet Muhammad.

4. **Turkish bath:** <http://www.ayasofyahamami.com/en/index1.html>

The Ayasofya hamam is a historic hamam, built in 1556, and is one of the oldest (if not the oldest) in Istanbul. It reopened about two years ago after being closed for years of restoration. It is about 90 euros for a traditional Turkish bath. You can find cheaper in Turkey, but cheaper could mean not as clean and not as beautiful. It is a great way to end a day of walking around. My family and I toured the Blue Mosque and the Hagia Sophia then went to the hamam (located right in between the two mosques) to freshen up before dinner. Even though the location is touristy, even locals come here because of its reputation and beauty. I recommend making a reservation.

Tip: You should be completely naked for the bathers to be able to scrub you down. Technically, you can be as naked as you are comfortable with but it is weird to wear a full on bathing suit. Locals go naked. Don't be shy!

5. **Galata Tower**

Offers a great view of Istanbul from the top. The area is also very charming.

6. **Prince Islands**

A chain of 9 islands off the coast of Istanbul. Great day trip from Istanbul, just a short ferry ride away. You can get there by boat from Eminonu. There are a lot of nice old Turkish houses on the island and cars aren't allowed so you get around with horse and cart.

7. **Milli Saraylar Palace:** <http://www.millisaraylar.gov.tr/portalmain-en/default.aspx>
If you have time to see another palace, this one is a favorite of mine because it still has the beautiful rugs, ornate chandeliers, and some furniture. It also has a very different feel than Topkapi Palace and is right on the Bosphorous.

My two favorite restaurants in Istanbul:

1. <http://www.turkeytravelplanner.com/go/Istanbul/Sights/asia/ciya.html> Çiya or Chiya restaurant in Kadıkoy is small and has tables directly on the street but offers many unique vegetarian and meat dishes that many restaurants don't. It was one of our best meals in Istanbul. The area is also very charming and contains many cafes, spice shops, olive stores, fish markets, etc.
2. Şenol Kolcuoğlu, or Shenol Kolcuoglu, in Göztepe (Anatolian side of Istanbul). I couldn't find an English website for this restaurant. This restaurant is fine dining and the service is very dramatic. This place serves 6 foot long kebabs and takes half a dozen men to carry the kebabs to the table. I recommend dressing up for this place as it is on the nicer end of restaurants (and Turks like to dress up).

My aunt's recommendations on where to eat (she lives in Istanbul):

- 1) Hamdi in Eminonu - Turkish food
- 2) Sultanahmet Kofteci (Turkish meatballs) in Sultanahmet
- 3) Fish in Kumkapı
- 4) Many restaurants in Beyoglu
- 5) Many restaurants on Bagdat street
- 6) Many cafe & restaurants (with nice view while looking at the Bosphorus) in Ortakoy.
- 7) In Anadolukavag, in the Anatolian side, there are several fish restaurants. The boat rides on the Bosphorus take you here.

Dining Out Tips:

1. Turkish beer is awesome but Turkish wine is not. If you're a wine drinker, it's time to get reacquainted with beer.
2. Turks mostly eat Turkish food so other cuisines are not very popular there (nor do they taste authentic so I would just avoid them).
3. Tipping 20% is not expected in Turkey. It's more like 5-10% if you're generous but basically a couple of extra bucks is fine.
4. If you get friendly with any locals, see if anyone can read your Turkish coffee cup and tell your fortune. A fun tradition!
5. If you're vegetarian, no problem! Plenty of dishes to choose from! If you are a meat eater, don't shy away from the lamb because Turks don't prepare it like Americans do. It is the main meat in nearly every dish, often used ground up.
6. You can eat the fried fish whole, bones, head and all. It's delicious!
7. If you don't know what to order from the menu, tell them that and just ask for a mezze spread (specify if you want vegetarian or meat or both). Turks, like the Italians, eat late and take their time with their meals so it's common to be at dinner for hours (like four). It's a major culinary

experience as they bring plate after plate to the table until they are stacking them 3 to 4 layers high. Sit back and enjoy! Take breaks if you have to and then go for that fifth serving.

Other cities worth checking out in Turkey (of course, there are more but these are my fav!):

1. **Cappadocia:** Known for its “fairy chimneys,” a remarkably beautiful and unique natural wonder. Google it for images. Hot air balloon rides are popular here for obvious reasons.
2. **Ephesus:** Turkey used to be part of the Greek and later Roman empires and the Greek and Roman remains at Ephesus are unbelievable. The tomb of the Virgin Mary is also near Ephesus and worth checking out even if you aren’t religious.
3. **Bodrum:** Where Turks (and most of Europe) summers. If you want to get some swimming and beach time in, this is the place to be. I highly recommend renting a private sailboat for a day. They take you to beautiful bays to swim and prepare a fantastic lunch for you on the boat.

Spending money:

1. You can have lunch for approximately \$20 per person in nice restaurants for dinner and if you get alcohol, it is approximately \$30-35 per person. In big shops, restaurants, cafes American credit cards are accepted, but in smaller places, cash is best.
2. ATMs are everywhere and offer the best exchange rates.
3. While you shop, don’t forget to **bargain!** They will automatically overcharge you because you are a tourist. They give different prices to locals. Counter with about 30% less than asking price (my aunt’s approach). Some people are bolder and immediately cut the asking price in half (my father and I both do this). They will pretend it’s insulting but they still want your business. Inch up from the halfway point to a price you are comfortable with. If you really want the item and they are not budging on the price, pretending to leave the shop is a great maneuver! They will start slashing prices to keep you in the store.
4. Turkey is known for its high quality leather and rugs. If you want a new purse, a new leather jacket or a rug (silk or wool), this is the place to shop for it!

Comfort and Safety:

1. As Westerners in a Muslim nation, remember that Turks are secular and thus feel free to show some skin (wear shorts, dresses, etc). Just cover up the shoulders, back and chest when you enter a mosque. (Note: The women you see completely covered up in a full hijab, niqab and jellaba are not Turks, they are usually from Saudi Arabia.)
2. I’m sure you’ve heard of the protests happening in big cities all over Turkey (if you haven’t: basically Turks are protesting a more conservative and religious government than they are used to. Turkey was founded as a democratic, secular Republic in 1923.) Turkey isn’t Syria so don’t worry about being shot! But if you check out a protest, be smart about it: stay a safe distance away and don’t approach if tear gas has been released.

3. Watch out for pickpockets! Especially in crowded areas. Zip up or buckle up those purses and keep them in front of you. If you're wearing a backpack, I recommend turning it around so it's on your belly in really crowded places like bazaars. There are pickpockets in every major city in the world and Turkey is no exception (although the only time I've ever been robbed was in Zurich, supposedly the safest city in the world so you can never be too careful!). I recommend registering with the US Embassy before you go (helpful if you lose your passport) and making a photocopy of your passport and driver's license and keeping those copies separate from the real documents.
4. Turkey is HOT during the summer (can be up to 115 degrees). Wear sunscreen, drink lots of water (we often poured whole bottles of water on our heads) and wear a hat.

Public transit:

1. Traffic can be heavy in Istanbul so public transit is quicker. When you come to Istanbul, you can get on the metro from airport to Sultanahmet or Eminonu or they can get on a bus called Havatash from airport to Taksim (you can find this shuttle in front of the exit gate of airport all day. When you get on the bus, get tickets inside of the bus from a salesman-price is approximately 10 dollars per person)
2. In Eminonu, you can buy an Istanbul card to travel on all transports (metro, bus, railway, boats). It can be filled with money. Filling this card is possible in every station by machines & you can find ticket offices in main stops like Taksim, Kadıkoy, Eminonu..