

Fresh Getaway

Fresh Trends, treats and tips for your life

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Dive into the past in a world capital that has been witness to the rise and fall of empires

Report Wahyuni Kamah

Istanbul is the only city in the world that sits on two continents — Europe and Asia. As Turkey's biggest city, it is every bit the modern metropolis, with constant traffic by bridge and ferry over the Bosphorus Strait that connects East and West. But it is the city's history that tourists come to experience, and they know just where to find it: Istanbul's Old City, Sultanahmet.

"Tourists visiting Sultanahmet say they have seen the real Istanbul," said Dilek, my Turkish guide. Located on Istanbul's European bank, the historical center is one of the city's most popular tourist attractions.

Along with Eminonu, Sultanahmet is the oldest and longest-inhabited part of modern Istanbul. It is a former capital of three great world empires: The Roman Empire (AD 330-395), the Byzantine Empire 295-1204 and 1261-1453 and the Ottoman Empire (1453-1922).

The Roman Emperor Constantine the Great established the city as new Rome in 330 and named it after himself, Konstantinopolis, or Constantinople in English.

During the Turkish Ottoman Empire it was called Kostantiniyye. In 1920, the Turkish authorities adopted Istanbul, a name that has existed since the 10th century, as the sole name of the city.

Istanbul's most ancient and historical buildings are concentrated in the Sultanahmet area. In 1985, it was added to the Unesco World Heritage List.

On a recent visit to the Old City, I found it to have a fascinating mix of modern and traditional life, a place where secular and religious life run in parallel.

The Sultanahmet area is named after Sultan Ahmet Khan I, the 14th sultan of the Ottoman Empire. During his reign, he built the Sultanahmet Mosque, between the years 1609 and 1616. It is popularly known as the Blue Mosque, because of the blue tiles that decorate the interior walls, and is considered a masterpiece of mosque architecture in Islamic history.

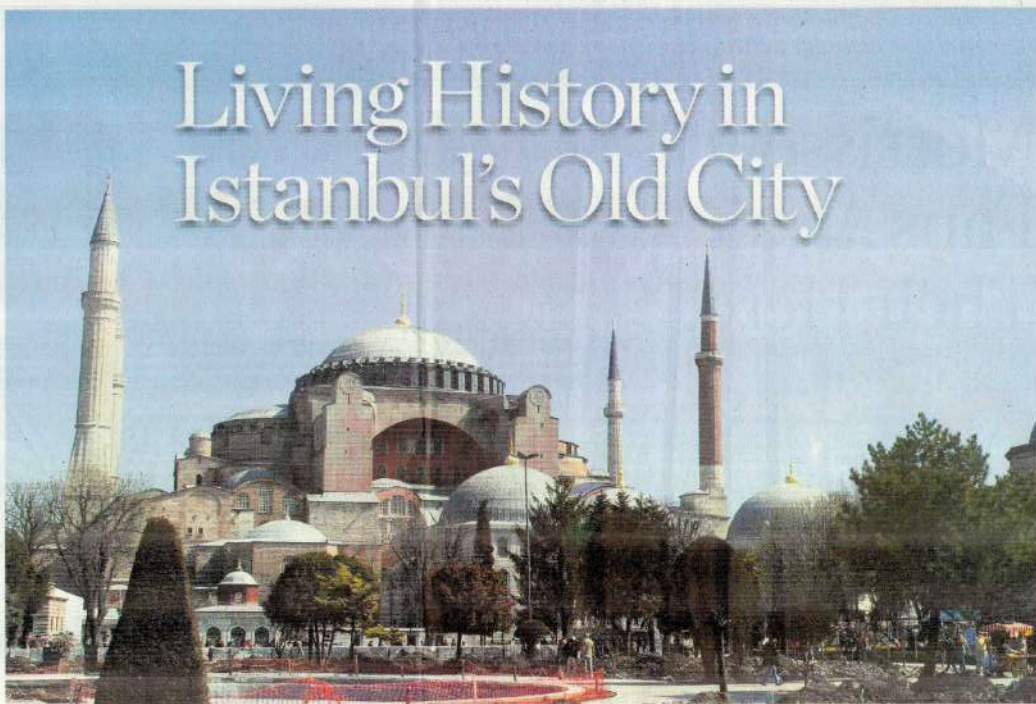
The mosque faces the Hagia Sophia, the world's largest cathedral for nearly a thousand years, built during the Roman Empire. In 1453, Turkish Ottoman Sultan Mehmet Path II conquered Constantinople and brought an end to the Byzantine Empire. During his reign, the Hagia Sophia was converted into the Ayasofya Mosque. The first Turkish president, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, converted it to a museum in 1935.

These days, the area between Sultanahmet Mosque and the Hagia Sophia Museum is crowded with tourists, open-air cafes, street food vendors and souvenir shops. Here, you can find tourists from many parts of the world.

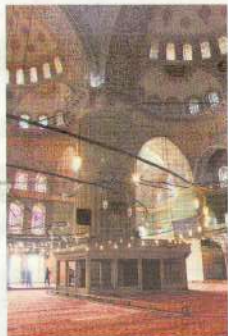
Just behind Sultanahmet Mosque there is a large square, which is popular with both tourists and locals. Sultanahmet Square was once a hippodrome, an arena for horse- or chariot-racing during the Roman Empire. Today, the only clues to this past are the monuments erected during the Greek and Roman eras, such as the Serpent Column, Obelisk of Theodosius and the Column of Constantine.

Sitting on a bench in Sultanahmet Square, I enjoyed observing these monuments as flocks of pigeons took to the air. From where I sat, I could even catch a glimpse of Sultanahmet Mosque with its six minarets, confirming my opinion that it is a beautiful structure from any angle.

To feel the atmosphere of ancient times, I decided to take a walk to the area just next to Sultanahmet Mosque, where shops, hotels, restaurants, cafes, galleries and travel agents are concentrated. Once a residential area, it has now been converted



Living History in Istanbul's Old City



Clockwise from main: The Hagia Sofia, a former church and mosque and now a museum. A cobblestone street in the Sultanahmet area of Istanbul. A view of the Marmara Sea. The inside of Sultanahmet Mosque. JG Photos/Wahyuni Kamah



into a commercial and business district. But its ancient atmosphere remains intact with its narrow, undulating cobblestone streets, hemmed in by old buildings. Some roads are so narrow that only one car can squeeze through at a time. A newcomer like me could easily become lost among the labyrinthine alleyways.

As I walked, I saw many old houses that had been converted into commercial sites like hotels or cafes. Even these old buildings were equipped with modern apparatus like CCTV cameras. Only a few people still live in the area.

Since the Sultanahmet area is situated on a hill, it offers a dazzling view of the Marmara Sea. Most hotels or restaurants have open terraces on the top for customers to enjoy the sea view. Because of its location, the room prices in this area are higher than elsewhere in the city, although several lodgings for backpackers can also be found.

Despite its commercial and touristic

atmosphere, I was still able to get a glimpse of normal Turkish life in the morning, as street vendors sold Turkish bread from their open carts and shoes polishers set out to work in Sultanahmet Square.

The best way to explore the Sultanahmet area is by foot. The area is clean and there is a lot to see along the way. Just be wary of shop attendants who invite you in for tea just to make you feel obliged to buy something.

On my way back, I stopped by the tomb of Sultan Ahmet, next to

Sultanahmet Mosque, to pay my respects. Other sultans from the Ottoman Empire and their family members are also buried in this beautiful mausoleum.

I thought about the 120 emperors and sultans who had ruled the city over 1,600 years and felt humbled to be standing in the midst of such greatness.

Who would have thought that in a modern city of 11.5 million people I could learn about the might and power of some of the world's greatest and most powerful empires in history.

Street vendors sold Turkish bread from their open carts and shoes polishers set out to work

Pace Yourself Through Latvia's Countryside to Enjoy the Castles, Manors and a Ghost

Latvia is not a place for people in a hurry.

There are drivers who will go speeding down the highway and people who happily race through the streets of the capital city of Riga. But those who head out to the countryside should take their time and allow themselves the luxury of relaxation. If they do so, it is the best way to make one discovery after the other off the beaten path. It might be an old manor house, a small castle or palace filled with history, a lovely garden — or armies of white storks.

There are many storks in the middle of Gauja National Park in the northern province of Vidzeme, near the city of Cesis. In Arnas, a hamlet reached after several kilometers of driving along gravel roads, one sees three storks sitting in a nest, with a fourth circling overhead.

These grand birds strut casually on their long legs across the fields, seeking food. There is scarcely a house that does not have a stork's nest perched atop a telephone pole or high up in a dead tree nearby. They start their clattering at sunrise — often the only sound which gently awakens a visitor.

The night before, that same visitor to the forest estate is lulled to sleep by the chirping of the crickets. Those who come to this spot do it for the quiet and a chance to slow down.

Unhurried, and of course to the accompaniment of the chattering storks, is the atmosphere in Ungurmuiza, north of

Cesis. The lord manor house Orellen, from 1732, dates back to a period when nobody in Latvia was permitted to build with stones. So the owner, Baltasar von Camperhausen, built his entire two-story abode from pine wood.

"When I first saw the house in 1952, it was in ruins," recalls Ivar Zemlits, who leads visitors through the baroque-style building that was partially restored in 1992. "We are happy that we are far enough along that we can show the house again to our guests."

Proceeding from the great hall on the ground floor, a lily-lined pathway lined cuts through a garden dotted with ancient oak trees to a tea house. Like the manor house, the tea house is painted bright red. It is not only in the Orellen estate, but everywhere in Latvia where one sees evidence of the locals' love for blossoming flowers, growing in every home garden or standing in vases.

And so visitors to the Dikli Castle, north-west of Valmiera, also experience the scent of white lilies. The castle, built in neo-baroque style in 1896, is often referred to as one of the most beautiful of Latvia's country estates. Impressive are the some 20 fireplaces and tiled ovens, which today's owners collected largely in Riga, and then after renovating them installed them in many rooms. Only three of the owners belong to Dikli's original inventory, with one of them standing in the rustic, black alder- and pinewood-paneled foyer with its divided winding wooden stairway.



This feature can thank its original-looking condition to the Soviet-era when the estate was used as a sanatorium. "As was the case in every well-run Soviet country, the wood was given a new coat of paint every autumn," says Ineta Lette, director of a luxury-class hotel integrated into the castle.

The first manor house was set up here as early as 1493, and in the mid-18th century it belonged to a noblewoman named



Charlotta von Rozen. Hotel director Lette whispers that, "with any luck, you can still meet her here." Those who claim to have seen Charlotta — chiefly in rooms 11 and 12 — describe a transparent-looking figure in a turquoise-colored garment.

Closely linked to the Russian czars is the history of Rundale Castle. With 138 rooms, it is considered the most splendid baroque castle of the Baltic region and is used for, among other things, state receptions.

The three-winged complex was built in the style of Versailles between 1736 and 1740 as a summer residence for Ernst Johann Biron. As the Duke of Courland in western Latvia and a confidante of Czarina Anna Ivanovna, his job was to keep the region under Russian control. DPA

'When I first saw the [Orellen] house in 1952, it was in ruins.'

Ivar Zemlits, tour guide

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