

INTRODUCING İSTANBUL



Get hot at the Spice Bazaar (p82)

Istanbul is hot. And we're not talking about the weather. These days, there are more happening restaurants, bars, galleries and clubs around town than there are exquisite Ottoman mosques (and that's a lot).

The international fashion and design press have been talking up Istanbul ad nauseam, but the most significant thing about the accolade 'World's Hippest City' is that Istanbul itself have come believe it. The creeping sense of decrepitude that had fallen like a pall over their once-all-powerful home town has vanished, replaced by a sense of energy and innovation not seen since the days of Süleyman the Magnificent.

The city's over-abundance of important historic buildings and exciting new art galleries and museums provides visitors with more than enough to see during the day, but it's at night that the place swings into high-velocity, mega-stylish action. Locals are flocking to see and be seen at an ever-growing array of bars, clubs and restaurants, bringing with them an infectious sense of *joie de vivre* and a discerning ability to judge these places on their standard of service, drinks, music and food as well as their position in the what's-hot-and-what's-not stakes.

That's not to say that the locals are turning their backs on much-loved city institutions such as the raki-soaked meyhane (tavern) or tranquil *çay bahçesi* (tea garden), because they wouldn't dream of doing anything so foolish. They know, after all, that such institutions are one of the reasons that their home is – and always has been – rightfully dubbed the 'City of the World's Desire'.

İSTANBUL LIFE

This meeting point of East and West has rarely been as full of confidence and hope for the future as it is today. In its guise as Constantinople, the city was powerful and mysterious, but as the 21st century kicks off, modern Istanbul is poised on the brink of a total rebirth and is joyfully shouting this news to the world.

The biggest change on the horizon is, of course, tied up in the country's bid to join the EU. Official accession talks have started, but the outcome sure ain't in the bag. Spain, Germany, the UK and Italy openly back Turkey's membership, but the Scandinavian countries have reservations mainly to do with human rights, France is frankly antagonistic and Greece (traditionally a foe) is unlikely to actively intervene on Turkey's behalf. Though optimistic, the Turks are nowhere near certain of success. To be honest, Istanbulers aren't all that fussed about the situation. They know their city has a growing European flavour and they suspect that an EU membership isn't going to change its complexion or their lifestyles to a significant degree. Nor have they surrendered their pride in being inheritors of the glory of the Ottoman Empire, with its deep Islamic sensibility and self-conscious separation from the rest of Europe.

Some changes are inevitable as part of the bid for candidacy. Initiatives to bring the country into line with its European neighbours in the areas of human rights, environmental protection, economic management, freedom of speech and the introduction of democratic processes are already underway, but significant improvements – particularly in the areas of free speech and human rights – are essential if the holy grail of EU membership is ever to be attained. The infamous Article 301 of the country's penal code (see p41), which has seen internationally famed writers Orhan Pamuk and Elif Şafak charged with 'insulting Turkishness' for raising the contentious issue of the alleged Armenian Genocide of the early 20th century, and which is thought to have triggered the assassination of Turkish Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007, will have to be binned if the country is ever to have its candidacy taken seriously. Similarly, the national furore over the Constitutional Court's contentious legislation banning the wearing of the headscarf in the country's schools, universities, parliaments and courts (see p40) will need to be resolved if the country is ever going to be truly unified in its bid.

At the moment, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is at the helm both nationally and in Istanbul; this worries the city's intelligentsia and business community, who fear that the party's hitherto-checked Islamist ideology might be let loose as a result of the party's emphatic win in the 2007 national election and subsequent ratification of AKP stalwart Abdullah Gül as the country's president.

These weighty issues aside, the city is supremely optimistic about the future that it has in store, and so it should be. After all, its standard of living is rising; it is home to an ambitious transport infrastructure project (see p234); its monuments are being restored to their former glory; and its novelists, fashion designers and artists are building international reputations. It's one heck of a town.



Ortaköy Camii (p120) can be seen from many angles

GETTING STARTED

WHEN TO GO

The best times to visit İstanbul are around spring (April–May) and autumn (September–October), when the climate is perfect. During July and August it is hot and steamy; a lot of İstanbullular head for the west and south coasts over these months. Biting winter winds and snow are common in winter.

Be aware that during the five-day Kurban Bayramı (see p238) banks shut and ATMs can run out of money. During Ramazan (Ramadan; see p239) business hours can be erratic.

Hotel rooms skyrocket in price and are often overbooked during the Formula 1 Grand Prix in May.

FESTIVALS

During the warmer months İstanbul is awash with arts festivals and music events, giving the visitor plenty of choice when it comes to entertainment. Most of the big-name arts festivals are organised by the [Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts](#) (☎ 212-334 0700; www.iksv.org/english; İstiklal Caddesi, Luvr Apt No 146, Beyoğlu 80070), though [Pozitif](#) (www.pozitif-ist.com) organises its fair share. Tickets to most events are available from [Biletix](#) (www.biletix.com). For a list of public holidays refer to p238.

March

NEVRUZ

Locals celebrate this ancient Middle Eastern Spring Festival on 21 March with jolly goings-on and jumping over bonfires. Can-kurtaran (in the Sultanahmet neighbourhood) becomes one giant open-air party.

April

INTERNATIONAL İSTANBUL FILM FESTIVAL

www.iksv.org/english

The program features retrospectives and new releases from Turkey and around the world. If you're keen to see the cream of the latest Turkish cinema releases and a few local film stars, this is the place to do it. Venues are mainly on and around İstiklal Caddesi in Beyoğlu.

CHILDREN'S DAY

The national public holiday on 23 April is celebrated on Beyoğlu's İstiklal Caddesi with a morning parade. Children march, twirl batons, perform folk dances and make a racket with brass instruments, watched by crowds of parents and indulgent onlookers.

May

INTERNATIONAL İSTANBUL THEATRE FESTIVAL

www.iksv.org/english

Turkey's major theatre festival alternates every year with the [International Istanbul Biennial](#) (opposite), and is scheduled for 2008 and 2010. Big-name international companies share the stages with top local talent and the result is often inspired. Very few performances are in English.

INTERNATIONAL ÜLKER PUPPET FESTIVAL İSTANBUL

www.ulkerkuklafestivali.com

Turks take their puppetry seriously, and this one-week festival held at the start of May highlights Turkish *karagöz* (shadow) puppetry as well as international acts. Performances are at small venues and cultural centres throughout town.

ORTHODOX EASTER

www.ec-patr.org

The celebratory Easter Sunday Mass is the biggest event of the year at the home of the Greek Orthodox community in Fener.

June

EFES PILSEN ONE LOVE

www.pozitif-ist.com

This two-night festival features pop and electronic music. Up to 15,000 İstanbullular turn up to hear headline international acts such as the Beastie Boys and Neneh Cherry.

INTERNATIONAL İSTANBUL MUSIC FESTIVAL

www.iksv.org/english

The city's premier arts festival includes performances of opera, dance, orchestral

concerts and chamber recitals. Acts are often internationally renowned and the action takes place in [Aya İrini](#) (p188) in Sultanahmet and the [Atatürk Cultural Centre](#) (p188).

July

INTERNATIONAL İSTANBUL JAZZ FESTIVAL

www.iksv.org/english

This festival was once part of the International İstanbul Music Festival, but branched out on its own a decade ago and has subsequently gone from strength to strength. It usually runs for two weeks and programs a weird hybrid of conventional jazz, electronica, drum 'n' bass, world music and rock. Recent acts have included Norah Jones, Cassandra Wilson, Wynton Marsalis, Antony and the Johnsons, and Önder Focan. Venues include Cemil Topuzlu Open-Air Theatre (Cemil Topuzlu Açık Hava Tiyatrosu), the [İstanbul Modern](#) (p102), [Cemal Reşit Rey Concert Hall](#) (p188), the [İstanbul Jazz Center](#) (p182) and [Nardis Jazz Club](#) (p182).

August

ELECTRONICA GLOBAL GATHERING

www.electronicafest.com

This three-day festival features international DJs and live electronica acts duelling it out on eight open-air stages. A huge crowd gets its fill of trance, house and mashup.

September

INTERNATIONAL DESIGN WEEK

www.istanbuldesignweek.com/main_eng

This festival showcases the city's vibrant design world with exhibitions, workshops and loads of glamorous openings. Venues are offbeat – the 2007 festival was held on the [Old Galata Bridge](#) (Map pp46–7)!

INTERNATIONAL İSTANBUL BIENNIAL

www.iksv.org/english

The city's major visual-arts shindig takes place from early September to early November in odd-numbered years. An international curator nominates a theme and puts together a cutting-edge program, which is then exhibited in venues around town. In 2003 paintings, sculpture, installation and multimedia work by some 85 artists from 42 countries was on show in a range

of venues including [santralistanbul](#) (p186), the [Atatürk Cultural Centre](#) (p188) and the [İstanbul Modern](#) (p102).

ROCK'N COKE

www.pozitif-ist.com

Turkey's largest open-air music festival rocks for two days, with past headliners including The Smashing Pumpkins, Manic Street Preachers and Franz Ferdinand. Crowds can hit 50,000.

October

AKBANK JAZZ FESTIVAL

☎ 212-252 3500; www.akbanksanat.com

This older sister to the International İstanbul Jazz Festival is a boutique event, with a program featuring traditional and avant-garde jazz, as well as Middle Eastern fusions and a special program of young jazz. Venues include [Aya İrini](#) (p188) the [Cemal Reşit Rey Concert Hall](#) (p188), [Babylon](#) (p180), and [Q Jazz by Les Ottomans](#) (p182). Recent headline acts have included the Archie Shepp Quartet, Mark Murphy and the Phil Woods Quintet.

November

ANNIVERSARY OF ATATÜRK'S DEATH

At 9.05am on the 10th of November a minute's silence is held to commemorate the death of the nation's revered founder. Sirens blare and the city comes to a standstill, with people, cars and buses literally stopping in their tracks.

ADVANCE PLANNING

Two Months Before You Go If you're travelling in spring, autumn or over Christmas, make your hotel booking as far in advance as possible. The good places book up quickly!

One Month Before You Go İstanbul's big-ticket festivals sell out fast, and for good reason. Check the festival list above to see what tempts your fancy, and then book ahead.

Two Weeks Before You Go Book a table for dinner at [Mikla](#) (p165), [Hamdi et Lokantası](#) (p161), [360](#) (p165) or [Changa](#) (p165).

One Week Before You Go Sign up to the weekly email service by [My Merhaba](#) (see p18) for the latest openings and events in the city.

December

EFES PILSEN BLUES FESTIVAL

www.pozitif-ist.com

This two-day İstanbul event in October or November has been entertaining fans of the blues since 1990. Headline international acts have included names such as Long John Hunter & the Bad Blues Band, Philadelphia Jerry Ricks and the Zydeco Brothers.

AKBANK SHORT FILM FESTIVAL

☎ 212-252 3500; www.akbanksanat.com

Beloved by the black-clad Beyoğlu bohemian set, this artsy film culture event is held at the Akbank Culture & Arts Centre.

COSTS & MONEY

The Turkish lira has been going from strength to strength in recent years, and is now considered relatively stable. In this book we have given hotel and tour prices in euros, as this is the currency that hotel owners and tour operators work with. All other prices are given in Turkish New Lira (YTL), and reflect the reality on the ground at the time of research.

Though İstanbul is no longer the bargain travel destination it was in the past, it still offers good value for money. A three-star hotel room for two can cost as little as €45 in Sultanahmet and you can enjoy a decent evening meal for YTL15 to YTL30. Public transport is both efficient and dirt cheap, and many sights – in particular the city's wonderful array of historical mosques – are free. Others are relatively inexpensive, with the average museum entry being YTL10.

This isn't to say that everything in the city is cheap. If you decide to have a night on the town and hit the bars in Beyoğlu and nightclubs in Ortaköy you'll need to be cashed up – nightclub entries can be as high as YTL50 and a drink in these places will cost at least YTL20; a glass of wine in one of the glam rooftop bars in Beyoğlu will set you back YTL15. And shopping at the new generation of malls such as Kanyon (p143) is no different to blowing your budget in Knightsbridge or on Rodeo Drive – this is designer turf and is priced accordingly.

HOW MUCH?

Litre of unleaded petrol YTL2.90

Litre of bottled water YTL1-1.50

Efes Pilsen (bar prices) YTL4-7

Ticket on public transport YTL1.30

Fish sandwich YTL3

Glass of çay (tea) Around YTL1.50

Taxi ride from Sultanahmet to Taksim YTL8-10

Movie ticket YTL10-15

Nargileh YTL8-9

Copy of an English-language newspaper YTL1.50

INTERNET RESOURCES

Expatriate Turkey (www.expatturkey.com) Expat's travel advice including jobs, working visas, classified ads, and eating, drinking and sleeping recommendations. The occasional cattiness makes for great reading.

İstanbul Şehir Rehberi (<http://sehirrehberi.ibb.gov.tr>) Online maps of the city.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Check out the Thorn Tree bulletin board to find out what city discoveries are being made.

Ministry of Culture and Tourism (www.turizm.gov.tr) Government information on tourism, culture, archaeology and history.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (www.mfa.gov.tr) Up-to-date visa and security information.

My Merhaba (www.mymerhaba.com) Aimed at expats, but has lots of general information that's of use to visitors too, including entertainment listings.

The New Anatolian (www.thenewanatolian.com) Website of the English-language daily newspaper.

Time Out İstanbul (www.timeout.com.tr) The online site of this excellent monthly magazine has a good listings section.

Today's Zaman (www.todayszaman.com) Website of the English-language daily newspaper.

Turism Turkey (www.tourismturkey.org) Government website with a grab-bag of articles and information.

Turkey Travel Planner (www.turkeytravelplanner.com) An ever-growing site about travel in Turkey put together by well-known writer and Turkey expert, Tom Brosnahan.

Turkish Daily News (www.turkishdailynews.com.tr) Website of the long-standing English language daily newspaper.

THE AUTHOR

Virginia Maxwell



After working for many years as a publishing manager at Lonely Planet's Melbourne headquarters, Virginia decided that she'd be happier writing guidebooks rather than commissioning them. Since making this decision

she's authored Lonely Planet books to Turkey, Egypt, Spain, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria and the United Arab Emirates. Virginia knows İstanbul well, and loves it to bits. As well as authoring the previous edition of this city guide, she has also covered İstanbul for Lonely Planet's *Turkey* guidebook and for a host of international newspapers and magazines. She usually travels with her partner Peter and young son Max, who have grown to love the city as much as she does.

VIRGINIA'S TOP İSTANBUL DAY

After popping into a local *börekçi* for a breakfast of freshly baked *ıspanaklı börek* and a glass

of tea, I saunter past the Blue Mosque and Aya Sofya, and up Divan Yolu to the Grand Bazaar. After assuring the good-humoured touts that I have no money to spend, I walk through the Old Book Bazaar and around İstanbul University to the Süleymaniye Camii so that I can marvel at Sinan's most wonderful creation. After this I join the sea of locals on the bustling streets of Tahtakale, making my way past the shops and street vendors down towards Eminönü, where I catch a ferry to Kadıköy in Asia. My first stop there is for lunch at the fabulous Çiya Sofrası, and then I wander for an hour or so around the vibrant fresh-produce market. Catching a ferry back to Eminönü or Karaköy, I recharge over a tea and a piece of the city's best baklava at Karaköy Güllüglü, before walking up through the narrow streets of Karaköy and Tünel to İstiklal Caddesi for an hour or so of browsing in the book and record stores. Then it's on to meet friends for a drink at Leb-i Derya Richmond or 360, followed by dinner at Sofyali 9 in Asmalimescit or at one of the rowdy places on Nevizade Sokak. Raki, meze and good friends, all in the best city in the world – life doesn't get any better than this!

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