

A shared history

The Turkish capital of Istanbul offers visitors a cultural and historically significant experience.



View over the Golden Horn - Istanbul, Turkey



Blue Mosque (Sultanahmet Camii)

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*They shall grow not old, as we
who are left grow old: Age shall
not weary them, nor the years
condemn. At the going down of
the sun, and in the morning,
We will remember them.*

– Laurence Binyon

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO this April, the ANZAC landing on Gallipoli forged for Australia a patriotic spirit, camaraderie and legacy. We are not, however, the only people to lay nationalistic claim to this corner of the world. There is hardly a nation in the world whom the arm of Turkey's historical reach does not touch.

Literally bridging Europe and Asia, Istanbul and its surrounds were for millennia under a constant flux of attack, occupation and thoroughfare. Its strategic position drew armies from all manner and eras of civilization; from Alexander the Great, the Romans and the Ottoman Empire, to the Soviet Allies of WWI, until its eventual political stabilisation as the Republic of Turkey in 1923.

To understand Istanbul as it exists today, you must understand the diverse historical influences on its contemporary psyche.

It was once called Byzantium, colonised by Ancient Greek traders around 650BC. The city proved an important nexus between Europe and Asia for Alexander the Great during his campaign to conquer Persia and Asia Minor between 335 and 325BC.

In 330AD the Emperor Constantine relocated the Roman capital to the site, which was later renamed Constantinople. In 1435 the city fell to Ottoman rule and became the capital of the Ottoman Empire until the Republic of Turkey was established in 1923, and the city renamed Istanbul.

Inextricably linked to Turkey's contemporary identity is Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, whose governance led the nation into the modern age. His vision saw the reformation and secularisation of the government, the Romanisation of the

Turkish alphabet, increased literacy and full women's suffrage to the state. The name Ataturk means 'father of the Turks' and it is in this light that his memory remains.

The ages of social, political and religious turbulence have left a pervasive cultural and historical mark on the city. As a consequence, Istanbul's dynamic and sometimes paradoxical fusion of culture, history and religion packs layer upon layer of old and new into its every nook and cranny.

Tackle the city's oldest quarter – Sultanahmet – by foot; its maze of cobblestoned alleyways and old traditions will convey you to a world of intriguing complexity.

It starts with a call to prayer at dawn; large birds circle the Mosques' minarets and transport you to a medieval view.

They soar above the Bosphorus, the small channel which separates the two continents, and eye the water for their first catch, while small fishing boats make their daily journey north to the Black Sea, or south to the Sea of Marmara. Both reap an abundant harvest of fish, which are best grilled whole with a wedge of lemon from the fresh markets on the banks.

A short walk from the piers along the hand-hewn pathways of old lie the Hagia Sophia Church and the Blue Mosque, both iconic feats of architecture, and the heart of the old city.

Built in 537AD, the Hagia Sophia was constructed under the orders of Roman Emperor Justinian and served as an orthodox Christian Church for 900 years. In 1435 the Ottoman rulers converted it to a Mosque, and then in 1935 Ataturk proclaimed it a Museum of the Turkish Republic.

The cultural richness of the building is overwhelming; Islamic plaques hang alongside Christian mosaics and frescoes in a true amalgamation of heritage.

Viking graffiti from the Varangian Guard adorns a balustrade on the upper balcony, and one of the columns on the lower porticoes was pilfered from the ruins of Ephesus' Temple of Aphrodite, one of the twelve ancient wonders of the World.

The Hagia Sophia itself is a metaphor for the spirit of the Turkish Nation; what is left of an old civilization becomes the building blocks of its successor.

The Hagia Sophia is no longer a place of worship, but one of remembrance.

Opposite the Hagia Sophia stands the equally resplendent Blue Mosque. >>



View of the Galata Tower



Interior of the Hagia Sophia

Completed in 1616, it was built under the auspices of the Ottoman Sultan Ahmed I, who took the Hagia Sophia as his inspiration. It is a lavish construction, boasting nine domes, six minarets and more than 20,000 blue tiles on the interior. The effect is nothing short of staggering; it is impossible to wonder at the quality of workmanship without a humbling self-awareness. Its beauty lies in the lofty heights of the domes, lined with hundreds of windows. The light plays delicately on the tulip designs of the Iznik tiles, and creates an ethereal environment for silent contemplation.

A quick descent into the Basilica Cistern, just a few hundred metres from the Hagia Sophia, reveals relics of the city's ancient legacy.

The water storage unit was built on top of a 3rd Century Roman basilica of Commerce, Law and Arts. Though it would have been completely submerged when in use, it is now navigable via boardwalks above the natural water level.

Typical to the city's pattern of reusing old artefacts for new purposes, the cavity is home to a number of displays of Early Roman art. Shrouded in the darkness, a weight-bearing column features an intricate head of Medusa, while another sports an unusual 'hens-eye' pattern.

Commanding the attention of every visitor, the Grand Bazaar is a warren of thousands of stalls selling authentic (or sometimes not) wares.

Bartering is compulsory in these parts, as locals expect to sell their goods for at least half of what they ask for. Any trader worth his salt will invite you in for tea as you haggle.

You may not find everyone dressed in the embroidered shoes and Fez hats of your imagination, but the ornate decoration of every stall will have you dreaming with kaleidoscopic vision. Turkish rugs, lanterns, ceramics, fabrics, knock-offs, leather, 'genuine fakes' and lots more are sold in this old hub of barter and trade.

What the Grand Bazaar offers in sheer scale, the Spice Bazaar gives in sensory marvel. Dating to the 1600s, the covered market place is tucked behind the New Mosque and invites a heightened awareness.

The same fragrant smells of rose water, saffron, cumin, nuts and honey have occupied its walls for some 400 years.

Locals barter over the price of their wares and smoke aromatic tobacco from their hookah pipes. The scented vapour mingles with the taste of authentic Turkish delight and you discover the bazaars are a tactile realisation of your senses.

It is these same smells, sights, and sounds that have presided over the Bosphorus channel for the past 2000 years. It is the unsettled nature of Turkey's history which lends Istanbul its air of wisened prescience. Our ANZACS are now an irrevocable part of this world's history. Nothing grows old in the sphere of repurposed heritage, nothing can fall into time's amnesia. We cannot forget them, their legacy is now too densely woven into a much larger fabric of historical import. ●

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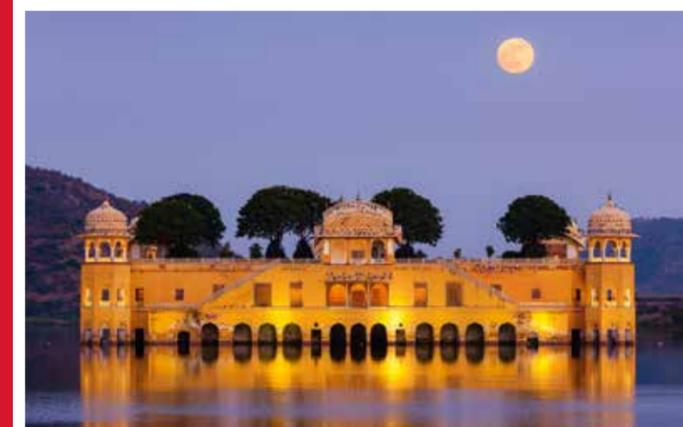


The Grand Bazaar

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