

Istanbul Travel Tips

Istanbul, the very name conjures up images. It is vibrant, colorful, mysterious, it is loud and proud, it is magical. It is a fusion of cultures, the only city in the world to span two continents.

It can be overwhelming and yet peaceful in the same breath, and if you're planning a visit, then it can be difficult to know where to start in such a huge and diverse city as Istanbul.

This article will offer you advice and tips to make the most of your visit.

What to expect

It is difficult to express in words just what to expect from Istanbul. It really must be experienced to be believed; it isn't something that words can express. The city feels unique, in fact it feels unique twice, it feels like two cities. Separated by the mighty Bosphorus Straits, the two continents meet, and the collision of cultures has created a city like no other on earth.

It is this contrast in styles that make this one of the most visited cities in the world.

But is it safe?

It's a difficult question, particularly in the uncertainties of this day and age. Naturally, Istanbul has its fair share of crime, but what city hasn't. Then there was the recent terrorist attacks, but once again many cities have had similar attacks.

In my own personal experience, I always found the locals to be extremely friendly and helpful.

Of course, the current political situation is tense, so a prudent approach is always to check on current travel advice.

Apart from that, take the same precautions as you would visiting any large city and you shouldn't have any problems.

How long should I visit for?

While it is possible to have a long weekend city-break and still get a full flavor of the whole Istanbul experience, the longer you can visit for the more you will get out of your trip.

A five-day trip would be a reasonable timescale to take in most the worthwhile sights and experiences including a trip to the Asian (or European) side of the city.

Travel Tip

Having a good guidebook, or increasingly an app, is a great way of making sure you get to see all the experiences you fancy during the trip. There are a host of them

available and some of them cater for visitors with particular interests in mind, for example history or shopping.

It might seem obvious but having a plan before you arrive will help maximize your whole experience.

What to do in Istanbul?

I'm not going to pretend I could even cover half of what there is to see and do in Istanbul, the list would be huge. But a few of the must-sees are listed below in no particular order.

A good place to start is the historic Fatih district, situated in the Old Centre of Istanbul, there are plenty of fabulous buildings to explore and sights to see,

The Hagia Sophia

Now a museum, it was for a long time the largest church in the world. A spectacular building with a fascinating history that mirrors the history of the city. It's been a museum since 1935 and in 2019 was Turkey's most visited tourist attraction.

A couple of points worth mentioning is that at the time of writing the interior of the building was undergoing renovation and clad in scaffolding. Also, it can be a bit of a queue to obtain entrance, due to its popularity.

Blue Mosque

Still a functioning mosque it also attracts flocks of tourists. Inside the walls are adorned with hand-painted blue tiles, at night the mosque is illuminated by blue lights which highlight the six minarets and its many domes.

Although visitors are welcome, it is a functioning mosque and visiting time excludes prayer times and all visitors must remove their shoes at the entrance.

Topkapi Palace

Located to the north of the Hagia Sophia, this place was once the main residence and administrative headquarters of the ruling Ottomans. Construction, which was begun in 1459 and over the centuries the building expanded to its current size.

A must visit for a glimpse of the sheer opulence that the sultans lived in, and the gardens are truly spectacular too.

Grand Bazaar

This is an absolute must. The oldest and one of the largest indoor markets in the world, it is housed in 61 covered streets and boasts over 4000 shops. It can attract up to half a million visitors daily. It is possible to buy just about everything imaginable here.

Don't be afraid to barter either, in fact it's expected, it isn't unusual to get the price halved!

Galata Bridge

The bridge, which spans the Golden Horn, has featured heavily in Turkish literature. It is a two-deck bridge with the top level for foot and road traffic and the bottom layer is a market and restaurant area.

There has been a bridge here for at least 1500 years, and the bridge seems to be woven into the fabric of the city, day or night the bridge is bustling. It's like the city itself in microcosm.

Taksim Square

This is a major tourist hotspot in the city. A leisure district crammed with shops, hotels and restaurants. From here you can catch the famous vintage trams that run continuously along Istiklal Caddesi, Istanbul's main pedestrian street. The street is lined with shops, cinemas, and cafes.

A network of side streets is filled with quirky little antique shops and bars. And for magnificent views of the Bosphorus you really need to check the rooftop eateries.

Taking a boat trip across the Bosphorus

How could you not come to such a place and take a quick cruise from Europe to Asia. There are literally hundreds of providers available to choose from with cruises of various lengths to pick from. Whatever you do, if you want to see the city from the sea, and I would highly recommend it, then a cruise is a must.

Exploring the Asian side of Istanbul

And since you took the boat then why not spend a few hours exploring the Asian side of the city. It is so different from the European side; you would swear you were on a different continent! Which of course you are.

The shops are different, the atmosphere is different, but it still has that same constant buzz of excitement that seems to infect the whole city.

Sightseeing from on-high

If you're not afraid of heights, then a trip to the top of Galata tower is a must. The panorama of the city is simply breathtaking. The scale of the city is mind-blowing when viewed from this height. However, it can get busy so expect a queue and a wait of half an hour or so at busy times.

And if you want to eat while you take in the view, try the restaurant at 360 Istanbul, not the cheapest option for a meal, but worth going even if just for a coffee or a quick drink.

Food Drink and Nightlife

The Turkish love to eat, and generally the food is delicious. Although vegetarians might feel left out of place at some of the local eateries, there are hundreds of

contemporary restaurants offering the same choice of menus and budgets as in any large city.

The local food is delicious though, and who could come to Turkey and not try Turkish Delight? And of course, the sticky sweet baklava must be tried.

And since you're out for that meal why not combine it with a spot of nightlife. Visit the Nevizade Sokak area for a taste of cities vibrant nightlife. The whole area is seemingly where Istanbul meets each evening. If you're into a spot of people watching, then you won't be disappointed.

Where to stay in Istanbul?

Impossible to write a comprehensive list, but from personal experience here is a couple of my own recommendations.

Hotel Miniature

As the name suggests this is a historic boutique hotel located in the heart of the Sultanahmet area of the city. Within easy walking distance of the Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque and a host of other tourist attractions.

The interior is quaint and cozy, and a small roof top terrace is a perfect way to take relax in the evening.

Karakoy Rooms

Located on Galata Sarap Iskelesi Street, this beautifully renovated hotel is perfectly placed to act as a base to explore the city from. The Beyoglu area has plenty of restaurants nearby and the rooms are clean, large and bright.

If you are lucky with your room you might end with a view of the Bosphorus too!

Summary

Istanbul should be on everyone's bucket list; it is simply one of the most vibrant places on the planet. A cosmopolitan city with something for everyone.