

destinations

Ferries ply their busy trade on the Bosphorus in front of the Yeni Mosque.

TALKING turkey

From massive ancient walls on one side to a sparkling sea on the other, Diana Wemyss experiences the marvels of historic Istanbul



Street traders like this watermelon seller near the Topkapi Museum, do a roaring trade in summer.

It just happened that everywhere we went people mentioned Istanbul. It seemed to linger on the edge of consciousness, so when we were offered a holiday on the Aegean coast, we leapt at the chance to spend two nights in this intriguing city on the way there and two on the way back.

Arriving from the airport early in the morning, it was a pleasant drive in the shuttle bus to Taksim Square along the Bosphorus and then across the Unkapani Bridge over the Golden Horn. I love arriving in any city early in the morning because there's always a freshness and a sense of expectation coupled with an uncluttered view of things – before people stir for their daily activities.

My husband looked over the litter-strewn lawns and marvelled at the approach to the city between the seemingly endless, massive ancient walls on one side and a sparkling sea on the other. I, being a bit of an obsessive tidy-upper, was horrified by the mess, but thanks to the incredible energy and worker underground that exists in the city, within hours, the place we were to discover would be pristine for the coming day.

We quickly realised that Istanbul isn't for the feeble or faint-hearted, nor the unfit. It's pretty hilly and seethes with people – more than 25 million live there with millions more coming in each day to work, and several million more each day it



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Mama Shelter, the quirky hotel designed by Philippe Starck has a chicken theme.

up the Bosphorus. Despite the shipping traffic – everything from little yachts to great cargo boats and multi-storey cruise ships – we saw pods of porpoises leaping their way up towards the Black Sea.

Istanbul at once seemed familiar, Western, but always with that underlying hint of the exotic: women swishing by covered head to toe in black, their pink Nikes peeping out from under their skirts, the ice cream sellers dressed in red satin performing magic tricks for the children, paunchy men sitting on ridiculous little stools drinking tea at all hours of the day, and the haggling and jovial attempts to make contact, “Where are you from? Oh South Africa! I have an uncle, brother, cousin in Johannesburg...”

We found everyone to be extremely kind, from the woman on the packed tram who shuffled our luggage on board and elbowed out a space for us to stand, to the hotel owner, who when we were completely lost looking for the second of our accommodation stops, packed us into his van and drove us to our hotel, and the small gifts that were continually pressed on us: a lacy fan, a key ring with the omnipresent blue glass eye to ward off evil spirits.

Although we enjoyed the Beyoglu district, Sultanahmet, with its trees, cobbled streets, the Grand Bazaar and the Egyptian Spice Market (enormous amounts have been spent on preserving the old mosques and buildings) was enchanting.

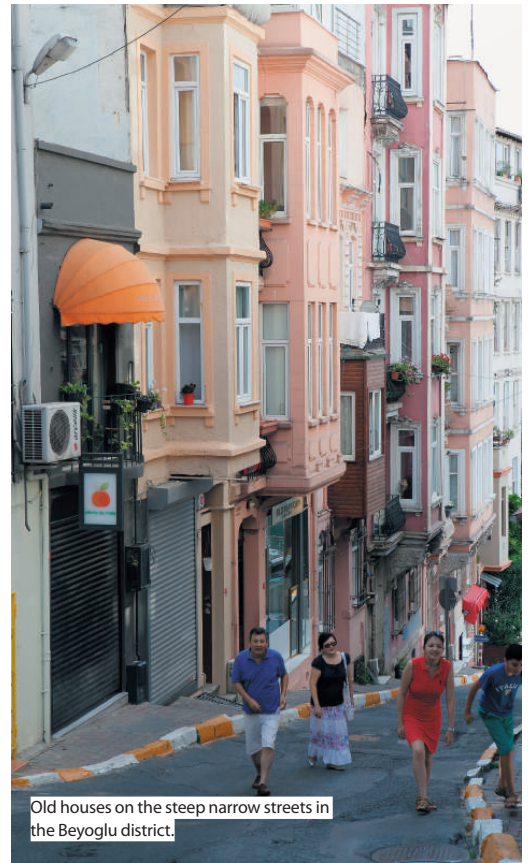
It wasn't until we toured Topkapi Palace, erstwhile home to the fabulously wealthy Ottoman sultans, that I was



The Blue Mosque

truly overwhelmed by a sense of wonder, imagining what life in the city must have been like 600 years ago. From the ornate beauty of the harem, the amazing clock collection, to the huge kitchen with its brick-domed ceilings where over a thousand meals were cooked every day in vast iron pots for the 4 000 inhabitants of the sultan's household – it was an awesome glimpse into the opulent life of that time.

There are displays of fabulous china – from China and France, as ornate as anything you could imagine and dinner services in high-Victorian decorative style. Thousands and thousands of tourists flow through this great complex of buildings and



Old houses on the steep narrow streets in the Beyoglu district.

shady garden courtyards, yet the numbers are regulated in a very laid-back manner.

Shopping in Istanbul is of course a dream – if you avoid all the tourist souvenirs. We did our serious shopping in the leather shops which are tightly packed together in the Grand Bazaar – coats, jackets, belts and handbags are the best you can buy and still affordable even with our weak rand.

There's no shortage of places to eat in Istanbul, but we tended to return to a restaurant on the shore called Fatih Belediyesi, which translated means, Fatih Social Centre. The food was excellent and very inexpensive and you can sit and watch the ships sailing up the Bosphorus. As it's subsidised by the town council, no alcohol is served. *Ayran*, a delicious yogurt drink, is no substitute for a beer or a glass of wine, but was pleasant enough on a warm summer's evening.

On a first visit it's only possible to scratch the surface of this huge city with its thousands of years of history, but four nights certainly gave us a fair idea of what to do and where to go next time. **GH**