

# Istanbul Inside Out

In the spice markets, palace restaurants, and neighborhood taverns of this enchanting Turkish city, the history of an entire region is there to savor.

**Lee Smith** heads out with the locals to taste where modern meets ancient and East truly meets West.

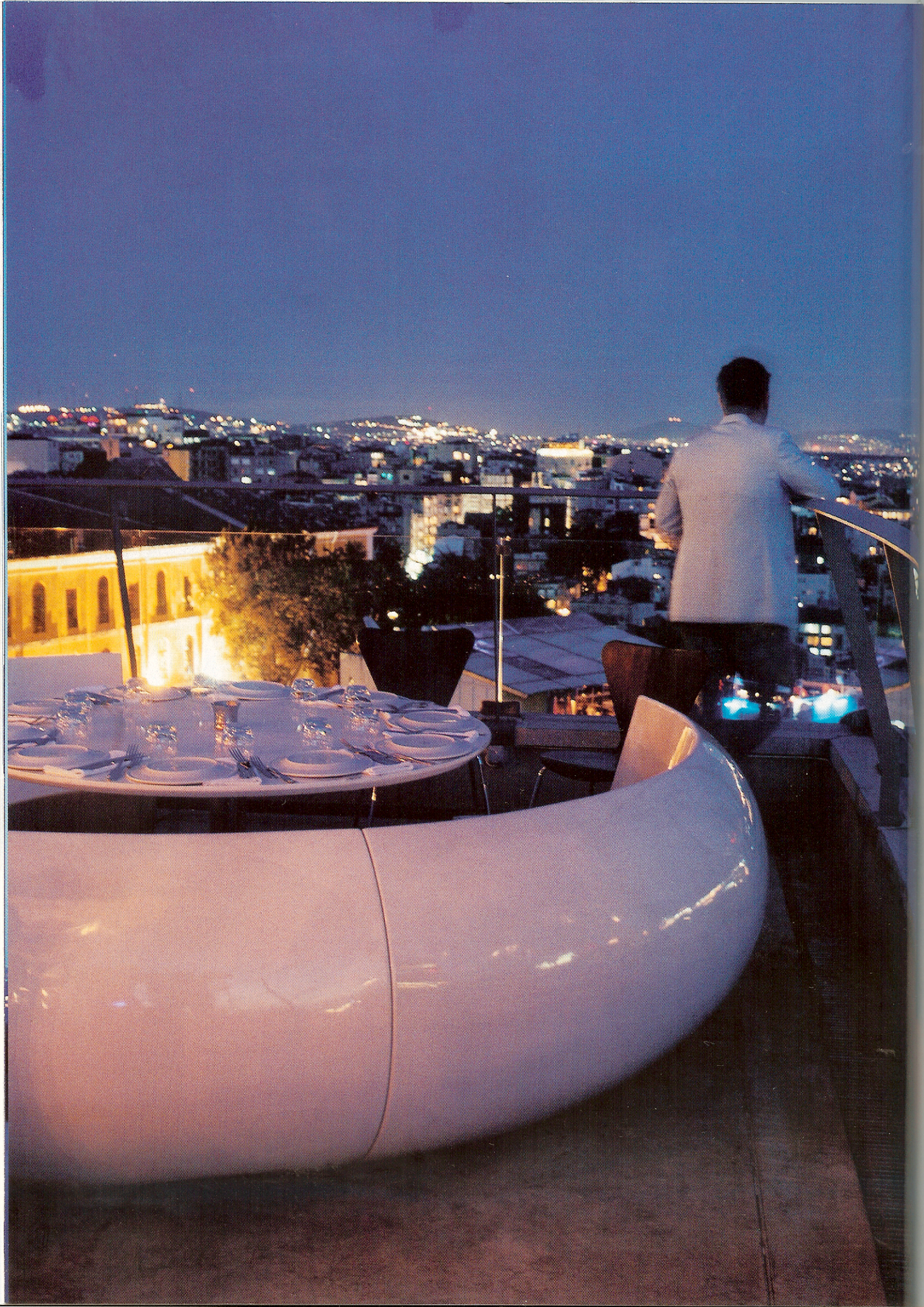






**THIS PAGE:**  
Istanbul's famous  
Blue Mosque  
by day. **OPPOSITE:**  
Ulus 29, one of  
the city's hottest  
restaurants,  
by night.







It is midnight at Istanbul's most fashionable restaurant, 360, and the place is packed. But my friend Ozlem and I aren't inside fighting for room at the bar, which is three deep with revelers, nor are we at our table near the country's most famous actor and a group of models. We're out on the terrace of this restaurant known for its panoramic views of the entire city.

Ozlem is showing me her city's singular skyline, punctuated by minarets and the copper domes of its architectural masterpieces—Sultan Ahmet Camii, Suleymaniye, Hagia Sophia, and Topkapi Palace—reflected in the moonlight. Even from here, maybe a mile away and perched high above the city's seven hills, I imagine I can see the bats flying in the silhouette of the Blue Mosque. With all this modern glamour behind us in the restaurant and the ancient skyline in the distance, it's a stunning and disorienting moment. And it's one of the high points of my week in this great Turkish city, a place of contrasts and contradictions and some of the best food in the entire region.

"Don't you love my beautiful city?" asks Ozlem, whose name in Turkish means "longing." After a week of exploring the city's restaurants and nightlife, without a doubt I certainly do. I've lived in different parts of the Middle East the last several years, and I've long dreamed of visiting this romantic city that was once the center of the Ottoman Empire, which stretched from western North Africa to the Arabian peninsula. Saying that Istanbul is rich in history doesn't even begin to explain this complicated and enchanting place.

During my week here, I find that the food in Istanbul reflects the demeanor of the contemporary city and its current inhabitants—refined, experimental, and evocative of a proud multi-ethnic and multi-cultural history. After all, Turkey is located at one of the crossroads of civilization, linking Asia to Europe. There are hints of Greek influence in the alcohol, Persian touches in the richly scented pilafs, and an Arabic simplicity in ➤

**OPPOSITE: 360 restaurant before the night heats up.**  
**THIS PAGE: The crowd outside the Blue Mosque.**





the grilled meats and kebabs, all proof of Turkey's imperial past.

Ozlem is 34, has lived in Istanbul all her life, and now works in the communications industry. She and her friends are typical of a certain segment of the population in that she's young, politically liberal, and the kind of person who keeps restaurants like this one thriving. And at 360, where we eat spring rolls and drink Mojitos, you can find the sort of high-quality globalized cuisine available in good restaurants from Berlin to Boston. Then as the hour gets later, the nightlife scene heats up, just as it does in London or Los Angeles.

I came to Istanbul to see how a moderate Muslim state, which has at times struggled with fundamentalism, has turned a potential clash of civilizations into an international hub for tourism, art, and industry. But I also came for something different: I came to experience a modern and traditional city partaking of both the West and the East. And I found that understanding a culture's moment in time can be a simple matter of sharing meals.

Later that evening, after leaving 360, I walk with Ozlem and her friends along Istiklal Caddesi, Istanbul's Times Square and Greenwich Village rolled into one seemingly endless avenue. It's still crowded at two in the morning. Suddenly Ozlem takes my hand and leads us all into a dark alley where a somewhat sullen-looking figure is standing beside a barrel. Given the questionable setting and the man's unsettling countenance, I am scarcely relieved when I find the barrel is filled with food.

"Mussels!" says Ozlem, her eyes widening. "They're fished right out of the Bosphorus," she says, referring to the rushing strait that cuts through the city, connecting the Sea of Marmara to the south and the Black Sea to the north. The vendor breaks into a smile, scoops up some mussels, douses them with lemon juice, and hands them to us. The fresh surprise of it all—the food and the city, the flavor and the texture of them both at this late hour—makes it seem as though the night is starting all over again, and I am already filled with longing for this beautiful place.

### **Seafood pulled straight from the Bosphorus is a concept**

that's easy to grasp (fresh, local, and all that), but to understand the local food and its Ottoman roots completely, I needed an orientation in Turkish cuisine. And I had no better a guide than Engin Akin, perhaps the country's top food expert.

We're walking through Fatih Kadin Pazari, or the Women's Bazaar, so named because this is where women slaves were bought and sold centuries ago. The history of the place makes it an especially strange backdrop for this best-selling cookbook author, TV personality, and mother of three, who in food circles commands as much respect as a sultan.

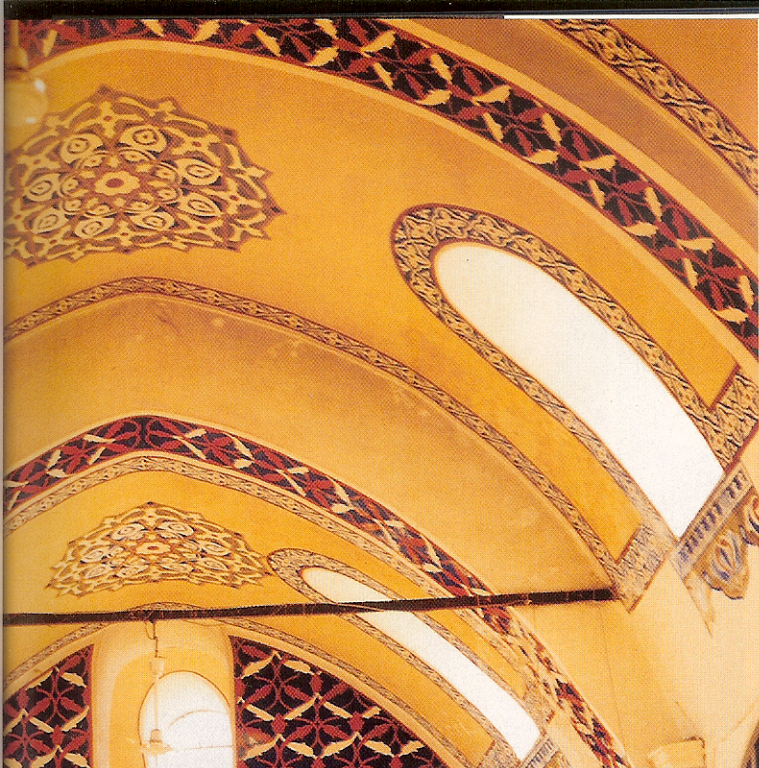
"What's unique about Turkish cuisine," says Akin, "is that it wasn't imposed from above—as French cuisine was." Rather, it was part of an organic process. "Turkish cooking," she explains, "took ingredients, techniques, and recipes from all the various parts of the Ottoman Empire."

To prove her point, we stop at an outdoor stand to try some *cig kofte*, a lettuce-wrapped rustic steak tartare mixed with ➤

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Turkish food celebrity Engin Akin (check out her recipes on page 138); saffron-marinated lamb with fennel and chickpea stew at Tugra; the Grand Bazaar, Istanbul's vast indoor market.**









bulgur and peppers. It's by far the hottest dish I've had from this cuisine, which tends to be milder. "See," says Akin, "it's originally Kurdish."

Akin is concerned that her countrymen are in danger of forgetting their culinary history, so one of her counteroffensives is to make sure that Istanbul restaurants serve Turkish coffee, not just espresso and Nescafé. Unfortunately, that de-Turkification has become emblematic of late, with home cooks making substitutions for the traditional ingredients: Margarine replaces butter; sugar stands in for honey. As modern-day Turkey abandons its Ottoman heritage, Turkish food loses its roots. To put this in perspective, remember that the Ottomans used to control the most important piece of land in all culinary history: the Spice Road.

Still, the Women's Bazaar is virtually paved with spices: Huge tubs of saffron, cumin, pepper, and paprika are laid out everywhere. The bazaar is the other Turkey, the one constituting the vast majority of this nation of 70 million, the Turkey without upscale restaurants and nightclubs. The women aren't sipping cocktails but wearing veils, and the men sport full-length beards. More than

**HUNGRY FOR MORE?**

For a podcast with Engin Akin on Turkish food, go to [bonappetit.com/podcasts](http://bonappetit.com/podcasts).







FROM LEFT: Ottoman ice pilaf at Tugra; the Spice Market; Refik Arslan, proprietor of Refik, one of the city's most beloved restaurants.



80 years ago Mustafa Kemal Atatürk set his country on a path of secularism and modernization. Although Istanbul is unmistakably a Middle Eastern city, it is also a global metropolis, and one facing west.

Later Akin and I move on to Beyoglu, a small and trendy artists' neighborhood, for lunch at Refik. It's a small *meyhane*, or neighborhood tavern, and famous for its simple good food and drink. The beverage of choice is either Refik's own homemade wine, or *raki*, an anise-flavored liqueur that is the Turkish equivalent of ouzo, but which, of course, Turks say is preferable to the better-known version made by the Greeks, their historic rivals.

Refik Arslan is one of the few restaurateurs undeniably happy to see Akin, but then again the sturdy 84-year-old knows that Akin loves his food. And apparently generations of writers and artists have loved it, too—their photographs, paintings, posters, newspaper clippings, and letters attest to the popularity of this relatively modest establishment. We walk to the back and Akin orders several dishes from what is essentially a lunch counter. There's nothing fancy about this cuisine. We get a full-flavored pilaf studded with chickpeas and a lamb stew. I also order a plate of the largest artichoke hearts I've ever seen—each roughly the circumference of a softball. And everything is absolutely delicious.

"Refik's food has roots," Akin says. "He knows what he's doing, how it's supposed to taste. His mother made it; his grandmother made it. There are lots of people who don't know how Turkish food tasted because they're cut off from its roots, which is basically the family kitchen." ➤



And beyond the family kitchen is the palace kitchen, the culmination of millions of family kitchens throughout the former Ottoman Empire. During the 17th century, when the city's Topkapi Palace was the center of the empire, its kitchen had a vast staff of hundreds of cooks, each one specializing in various courses and dishes: There would be an expert in mezes (the little side dishes and salads that start the meal), another in kebabs, yet another in pilafs, in baklava, and so on. If you're the sultan and you want an apple to snack on, there's an entire empire to choose from, so why not go for the best?

We save a meal fit for a sultan for last. It's evening and as the sun sets behind the Bosphorus, I'm sitting right by that great body of water at one of the city's great restaurants, Tugra. Located in the Ciragan, a 19th-century palace (which is now a magnificent luxury hotel), Tugra is the distillation of Ottoman splendor. Young women in long evening gowns are seated in the restaurant's anteroom playing traditional Ottoman music. We've ordered a bottle of one of Turkey's tastiest red wines, a varietal called Kalecik Karasi made from grapes grown in the central part of the country.

To illustrate the refinement of palace cuisine, Akin orders plates of mezes. She points out a dolma, which is a grape leaf stuffed with sautéed rice, pine nuts, currants, spices, and herbs. "Maybe the sultan didn't want to put a large dolma in

his mouth," she says. "So he demanded the dolma be smaller, like this one." Akin holds up the most refined version of what I'd gotten used to eating on mixed appetizer platters from the Middle Eastern fast food joints in my old Brooklyn neighborhood. "It's more appropriate for his station."

Finally, after the *cig kofte* and other street foods, and a workingman's lunch at Refik, I've gotten to the top level of Turkish food. "Palace cuisine is the trunk of the tree, while all the other influences constitute the tree's roots," says Akin.

**Now that I've sampled my way through the history** of Turkish food, it's back into the night with the new sultans, the young Turks who are reinventing the restaurant scene on their own terms. My guides are thirtysomething entrepreneurs Levent Demirel and Eren Ulusahin, who first bring me to yet another old Ottoman palace, Sait Halim Pasa, that's been converted into a restaurant and special-event venue right on the water.

Next, there's dinner at Ulus 29, high in the hills, with a perfect view of the Bosphorus Bridge. I'm looking through the menu and one of my dining companions compliments me on my cuff links, which have a replica of the sultan's seal; I'd just bought them earlier that day in the Grand Bazaar. "You are starting to get a feel for the Ottomans," she jokes. Yes, I agree, but not so much that I won't accept advice on what to order here, which is in some way the same kind of riff as my fashion statement. The mezes and appetizers are slightly modernized versions of classic dishes like *manti*, a sort of Turkish dumpling.

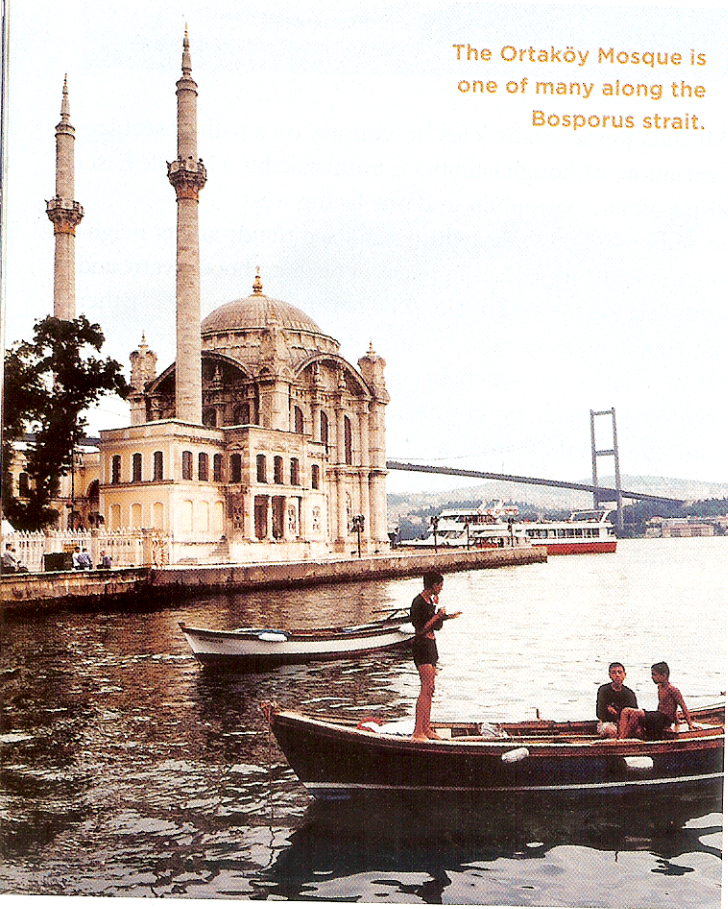
We move on to a club called Samdan. There's so little room to move that most people are just bouncing in place to a full array of Western music—pop, hip-hop, techno—until a Turkish song comes on that I've been hearing now for the past week, and the crowd shouts wildly and starts making a vaguely snake-like gesture with their hands. At last I throw my hand in as well and sing along. "Of, Of," the song goes. It's what you say to complain about love, Demirel explains to me. Ulusahin suggests it's what you say when you're disgusted, and yet another tells me that it just means "enough."

So we pack back into the car for one more late-night meal, the second tonight, but my first sampling of one more Istanbul classic. It seems that the city is awash with famous dishes, and in a week I've only just scratched the surface. This one is called *iskembe*, a tripe soup in a rich, buttery broth, a sort of Middle Eastern *menudo*. Not my first choice for a last meal.

"No Istanbuler who eats *iskembe* before going to sleep," Demirel says, "wakes up with a hangover."

True, I say, trying to delay the inevitable first bite, but then again, I've learned on my trip, no one really comes to Istanbul to sleep. And I dig in. ■

Lee Smith has written for GQ, Travel + Leisure, The New York Times, and numerous other publications.



The Ortaköy Mosque is one of many along the Bosphorus strait.



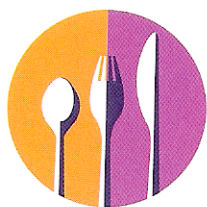
# Istanbul | A Grab-and-Go Guide



## GO

### ATATÜRK INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Both Delta and Turkish Airlines fly daily nonstop flights from JFK to Istanbul. Turkish Airlines also flies nonstop from Chicago. Most of the major European carriers, like KLM, Lufthansa, and Alitalia, have fares for U.S. cities to Istanbul with a connecting flight out of their respective hubs. Visas for U.S. citizens are \$20 and available at the airport.



## EAT

**FLAMM** One of the Beyoglu neighborhood's newer entries (right next door to Refik), with updated and upscale versions of Ottoman and Turkish cuisine, is best enjoyed after nine—still early for an Istanbul evening, but the crowd is beginning to warm up. (**Sofyali Sokak 16/1, Asmalimescit, Beyoglu; 011-90-212-245-7604**)

### MUSSELS AFTER MIDNIGHT ON ISTIKLAL CADDESİ

Maybe you've already walked off your big meal touring the city at night, or danced it away, and want something to eat before sleeping, or heading out to another party. Stay along

Istiklal and ask someone where you can find mussels, or just look for a man and a large black steel barrel.

**REFİK** Simple, down-to-earth, and delicious, it's understandable why so many eat here every day for the best Turkish home cooking you'll find outside a Turkish home. (**Sofyali Sokak 10-12, Asmalimescit, Beyoglu; 011-90-212-243-2834**)

**360** Dinner for two at this extremely popular restaurant, including alcohol, is about \$80. (**Istiklal Caddesi 309, Beyoglu; 011-90-212-251-1042; 360istanbul.com**)

**TUGRA** The culmination of Turkish and Ottoman cuisine, this is one of the country's great restaurants, located in the Ciragan Palace Kempinski overlooking the Bosphorus. (**Ciragan Caddesi 32, Besiktas; 011-90-212-326-4646; ciraganpalace.com**)



## DRINK

**CEZAYİR** Situated in the middle of a thriving artists' neighborhood, Cezayir offers a mellow alternative to wild Istanbul nights. You can sip a cocktail at their long bar and take in the scenery, or have a quiet dinner in a secluded room. (**Hayriye Caddesi 16, Galatasaray, Beyoglu; 011-90-212-245-9980; cezayir-istanbul.com**)

### SAIT HALIM PASA

Where to party outside in the summertime as the city

moves down to the waterside. Best way to get there is by boat along the Bosphorus.

(**Koybasi Caddesi 117, Yenikoy; 011-90-212-223-0566; saithalimpasa.com**)

**SAMDAN** Come dressed to kill because this classic Istanbul nightspot is home away from home for Turkey's film, fashion, and media elite. (**Nispetiye Caddesi 30, Etiler; 011-90-212-263-4898**)

**ULUS 29** A beautiful view, beautiful people. (**Adnan Saygun Caddesi, inside Ulus Park; 011-90-212-358-2929; club29.com**)



## SHOP

### THE GRAND BAZAAR

Known in Turkish as Kapali Carsi, or Covered Market, it is perhaps the oldest enclosed bazaar in the world, with over 4,000 shops in one huge building and more than 60 streets with 22 entrances. Most famous are the gold and jewelry sellers, but there are also large areas specializing in leather goods, carpets, glassware, and ceramics.

### ISTIKLAL CADDESİ

The city's main street, lined with clubs, restaurants, galleries, and all sorts of shopping—from Turkish clothing designers to old Oriental prints or maps of the Ottoman Empire at its height.

### THE SPICE MARKET

This market, also called the Egyptian Market, is at the southern end of the Galata

Bridge on the Golden Horn in the Eminonu, right next to the New Mosque. Spices, dried fruits, nuts and seeds, and, of course, Turkish delight.



## SLEEP

### CIRAGAN PALACE KEMPINSKI

As a former palace of the sultan, this was once the center of the Ottoman Empire. Now it is the summit of Turkish elegance, right on the Bosphorus. Rooms with a waterfront view cost more and are worth every penny. (**Ciragan Caddesi 32, Besiktas; 011-90-212-326-4646; ciraganpalace.com**)

### FOUR SEASONS HOTEL ISTANBUL

A five-star hotel that was once an Ottoman prison. It's situated in the city's main tourist district and in the shadow of the Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque, which should properly be seen at night in silhouette from the hotel's rooftop bar. (**Tevkifhane Sokak 1, Sultanahmet-Eminonu; 011-90-212-638-8200; fourseasons.com**)

### THE MARMARA

One of the finest chains in the country, with two reasonably priced hotels located in the center of the city. The Marmara Istanbul is in classical late Ottoman style. (**Taksim Meydani, Taksim; 011-90-212-251-4696; themarmarahotels.com**) The Marmara Pera offers a hipper, younger alternative. (**Mesrutiyet Caddesi, Tepebasi; 011-90-212-251-4646; themarmarahotels.com**)