

Street food outside the magnificent Hagia Sophia

Istanbul delights



A city that lies both on Asia and Europe, Istanbul is a fusion of culture and contrast. Lauren Hills took to the cobbled city streets to experience delicious delicacies amid incredible architecture.

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Meandering down the streets of Sultanahmet, the historical heart of Istanbul, there is a pulsing street life that speaks not only of the here and now, but of the grand European and Middle Eastern rulers that once made this city their kingdom.

From the narrow, multi-storey houses that fit like jigsaw puzzles along the streets to the breathtaking Hagia Sophia, Blue Mosque and Sultan Mehmet's Top Kapi Palace, the city is bustling with everyday action that takes place on a grand and historic stage.

Monuments, elaborate mosaics and cathedrals punctuate the city as a reminder of the Roman Catholic Empire before the fall of Constantinople, and the Arabic and Middle Eastern influences mingle with the European styles in exciting ways; giving visitors a taste of Sultan Mehmet's great influence over the city.

While the sights and sounds of Turkey's largest city envelope and enchant you, it is the food (and the great hospitality that goes with it) that really brings the city together. There is an abundance of street food available at every turn and the pavements are lined with funky cafes, wine bars and roof-top dining treasures that leave a lasting impression in your mouth and mind.

In areas like Sultanahmet and Taksim Square, the street food is not only quick, cheap and tasty; it is an indulgent feast for the senses. Vendors stack their carts daily with enticing snacks, such as corn on the cob (grilled or steamed), freshly roasted chestnuts and towers of warm, pretzel-like bread rings called simits. A sesame-sprinkled simit with a smattering of butter and jam makes for a tasty continental breakfast on the run, and a perfect

addition to your strong morning brew of Turkish coffee.

For the hungry, streets are lined with markets selling kofte; grilled skewers of mincemeat shaped as a sausage and wrapped up in soft Arabic bread, and the gozleme or 'Turkish pancake', which is created on a large stone table while you wait, and filled with a variety of ingredients including spinach, cheese, pine nuts and lamb.

With the Bosphorus strait running through Istanbul and dividing Asia and Europe, fresh seafood is abundant in the city. Near the ferry stations on the water's edge you can enjoy a freshly prepared fish sandwich from the enterprising boatmen, who not only catch the fish, but grill it in herbs and serve it in a crusty, salad-filled bread loaf straight from the docks.

For the more adventurous seafood lovers, midye dolma – mussels stuffed with rice, raisins, pine nuts and fresh herbs – are on offer too.

While street food is a convenient and tasty way to fend off hunger pangs while sightseeing, your Istanbul cuisine experience wouldn't be complete without venturing into one of the many rooftop terrace restaurants and cafes that offer diners a unique Turkish taste experience amid breathtaking views of the city.

For a quick stop, Turkish coffee and tea bars – especially in the tourist hubs – are a great place to sit, rest your feet and enjoy a delicate glass of spicy apple tea or a dark, aromatic Turkish coffee. A shisha (flavoured water pipe) is the perfect accomplice to these steaming refreshments. Indulge in

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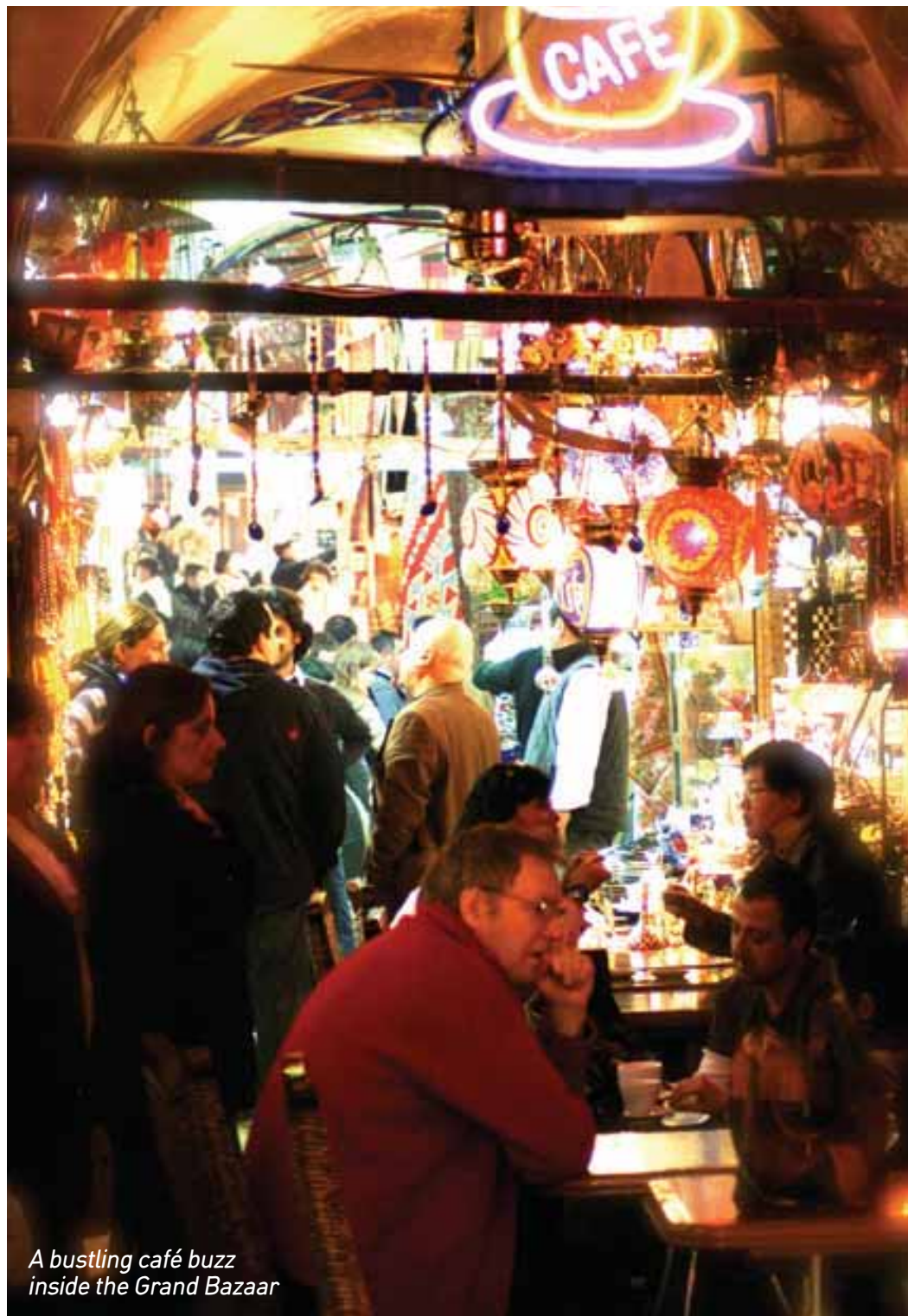
a sweet, cherry-flavoured shisha to heighten and sweeten the bitterness of the coffee.

If you are looking for fine dining in an authentic Turkish restaurant setting, Rami's Restaurant could not be a better choice. Conveniently located in Sultanahmet, Rami's is a beautifully restored multi-levelled Ottoman house created in honour of the famous Turkish impressionist Uluer Rami, whose work adorns the walls. The intimate interiors are packed with antique wooden tables and you sit a cosy arm's length away from your neighbouring diners.

The menu boasts a large variety of authentic Turkish cuisine; one particular favourite is a delicious vegetarian dish consisting of a juicy, grilled and stuffed aubergine (patlican dolmasi), cooked in a herb, onion and garlic-infused sauce and served on a bed of Turkish rice. And if you are in the mood for continuing the authentic Turkish experience, order a bottle of the Kavaklidere Yakut, which is a Turkish red wine with a rich and fruity flavour.

Another must-try restaurant in the Sultanahmet area is Seven Hills. One of the tallest roof-top restaurants in the city and just a four-minute walk from the Blue Mosque, the restaurant boasts 'the best view in Istanbul'.

From the top terrace you look over the Bosphorus strait, a mesh of brightly-coloured roof tops and you have a perfect view of the Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque and Top Kapi Palace in the distance. The ultimate time to experience Seven Hills is at sunset, where you can enjoy a mezze platter and a glass of wine as you watch the sun disappearing



A bustling café buzz inside the Grand Bazaar

behind the blue mosque as the evening call to prayer echoes through the city.

A trip to Istanbul wouldn't be complete without tasting the handmade chocolates, the Turkish delights or the baklava. Shop front windows will lure you inside with layers of peanut brittle, brightly-coloured gems of Turkish delight and soft nougat dotted with almonds. Sample different flavours and textures, choose your selection and have them packaged

by the shopkeeper for the perfect gift to take home.

The syrupy, buttery baklava is perhaps the most renowned sweet treat of Istanbul. With flavours ranging from chocolate and mocha to almond and pistachio, these rich morsels are best eaten in small, sumptuous bites with a glass of strong, sugarless Turkish tea.

Just outside Taksim square you'll find one of the oldest confectionary shops in Turkey, the Karakoy Gulluoglu, with black and white

tiled floors, pink walls, marble countertops and counters packed with baklava. While away the hours listening to tales of the city told by welcoming restaurateurs.

From the street food and coffee bars to traditional fine-dining experiences and sweet, delicious afternoon treats, Istanbul is an adventure for the palate; enhancing the sights and sounds of the city and introducing visitors to great Turkish hospitality and an infectious love of good food.