

TRAVEL

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Istanbul,

balanced between faiths and continents

IT'S more than a little embarrassing that one of our first experiences in Istanbul was being ripped off in a "rookie tourist sting." It happened to me, and my traveling mate, Emma, as we took a night cab back to our hotel, the Ciragan Palace Kempinski, on the western (European) shore of the Bosphorus.

Cabs were already proving expensive — the Ciragan is some way from the main sightseeing areas, and the traffic was particularly dire because our visit coincided with Istanbul's annual marathon.

As much as this made the city difficult to navigate, it was worth it to see the streets festooned with colorful bunting, bearing images of the national flag, team colors from Turkey's fanatical football fans, and most numerous of all, the much-venerated founder of the Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Alarm bells should have rung when the driver dropped us hundreds of meters from our hotel, abruptly swerving on to the curb. Then he insisted that the 50 lira (US\$34) note we'd given him for the 40 lira fare, was only a five and waved one under our noses to prove it.

Alone, at night, without speaking the language, it was hard to tell what exactly was happening as the driver became increasingly threatening, and demanded another 50 lira note. We told the hotel, but shamefully never made it to the police station to make an official complaint.

However, it would take more than one isolated incident to put us off a city as fascinating, idiosyncratic, as steeped in history and throbbing with vitality, as Istanbul. At once Muslim and Western-friendly, famously straddling two continents (there is a point on the Atatürk Bridge where you can have one foot in Europe, the other in Asia), and boasting centuries of culture, with its mosques, Ottoman palaces, hammams offering full-body salt scrubs and shopping bazaars, Istanbul takes a palpable pride in its place in the modern world.

Indeed, for all the ancient sights on offer, one of this year's EU Capitals of Culture is a fast-paced international-minded city, boasting hotels, art galleries, shopping parades, restaurants, nightclubs and bars — non-stop modernity swirling through the sense of history.

Even the things you might expect to find jarring, such as public Tannoys relating the call to prayer several times a day, end up being atmospheric punctuations to the Istanbul experience.

The Ciragan Palace, the only five-star hotel on the European side of the Bosphorus, turned out to be, well, palatial, boasting helipads, shops, gardens and even a ballroom. Essentially two hotels, the palace part is where Ottoman sultans used to live. If you wish to stay in the master suite, it will set you back 30,000 lira a night — a mere US\$20,400. But the standard rooms are luxurious enough — ours had a balcony overlooking the Bosphorus, a marble

bathroom, and handmade chocolates were delivered nightly.

Next door is a former harem, transformed into a high school. Buildings with strange histories seem to be par for the course in Istanbul — the Four Seasons hotel, where we sampled the fabled "afternoon tea," turns out to have been a notorious prison.

Finding ourselves imprisoned by the road-choking marathon, we ate lunch at the Ciragan's Gazebo Lounge and, later, dined at its flagship Tugra restaurant. With gorgeous views of the Bosphorus, the Tugra only offers Ottoman cuisine, and the silver platters and omnipresent waiters added up to a less than relaxing atmosphere. Exiting as gracefully as possible, Emma and I realized we'd spent the meal smiling so tensely we'd given ourselves cheek-ache.

This turned out to be our biggest culinary misstep. The cuisine in Istanbul is varied and glorious. There are upmarket establishments, such as the fashionable and grand Matbah in the old city, offering food "just as the sultans ate it," and stand-up lunches from street carts.

Istanbul's history as a trade route means the quality of its Indian cuisine is high. Dubb is considered the best Indian restaurant in the Sultanahmet, or old city (deservedly so; we couldn't resist dining there twice). The best tables are at the top of a long winding staircase, so don't drink too much: getting down is difficult enough sober. Once seated, you eat by candlelight, looking out over spectacular floodlit landmarks including the Blue Mosque and Ayasofya, the Church of the Divine Wisdom.

Ayasofya, once a church, then a mosque and now a museum, is no less impressive in the daylight. With entrance costing 20 lira (the standard tourist charge in Istanbul), and centuries of Christian and Muslim imagery jumbling together, this cavernous 16th-century building is seen as representative of Istanbul's harmonious melding of cultures.

Inside, people quietly mingled, taking photographs. As we left, some traditionally dressed women were crowding around the Weeping Column, pushing their hands against it. Legend says this is where St Gregory the miracle worker appeared, and the moisture from the column possesses curative properties. Emma and I dared each other to stick our hands in. Did it do swine flu, we wondered.

Close by is Topkapi Palace, which for several centuries served as Turkey's spiritual and political center. A maze of buildings and courtyards, Topkapi is too much for one visit. Some buildings were for state business, others for domestic purposes, such as kitchens or bakeries. One room houses likenesses of Ottoman sultans and dignitaries, all looking remarkably similar — sleek, well padded, pale. Portrait painters were clearly the Photoshop of their day, prone to flattering subjects with the same look.

We got to see the Topkapi Dagger, as well as the Spoonmaker's Diamond, the fifth-largest in the world. Also on display



Top: The Blue Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey. Above: Interior view of Ayasofya in Istanbul, Turkey. Below: Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, center, holds a wooden cross during the Epiphany Day ceremony in Istanbul, Turkey, on Wednesday. PHOTOS: EPA AND BLOOMBERG



Istanbul is one of the EU's 2010 Capitals of Culture, and a must-do city break. The metropolis' cafes and backstreet nightclubs are as enchanting as its famed palaces and mosques

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are eccentric-sounding religious relics such as the Footprint of Prophet Mohammed and the Sauceman of Abraham.

Annoyingly, you have to pay another fee for the Topkapi harem, and the queue was very long. It was disappointing not to view this scurrilous and highly political phenomenon (some sultans' favorites wielded significant power behind the throne). I tried to peek through a side window but could only spy a sliver of a mural — in the process disgracing myself as a kind of Ottoman Peeping Tom.

Topkapi is dwarfed by the 18th-century Dolmabahçe Palace, known as "the Versailles of Istanbul." Outside, soldiers were engaged in a changing of the guard. Inside, the obligatory guided tour snaked slowly up the ornate staircase. At Dolmabahçe, where Atatürk spent his final years, everything that's yellow is said to be real gold — and there is a lot of yellow. To protect the original parquet, you have to shuffle around in plastic shoe covers though seemingly endless throne rooms, ballrooms and state reception areas.

The nearby Blue Mosque, decorated with countless blue-hued mosaic pieces, is a stunning dome among Istanbul's many stunning domes.

At the Blue Mosque, all visitors are asked to remove shoes and females are asked to wear head scarves, though quite a few don't. Indeed, at times in Istanbul we got the feeling our dogged religious reverence was overdone. Outside the Blue Mosque, Emma was putting on a scarf, when a guard suddenly barked: "You can't go in like that!" She froze: "Why not?" "You're too sexy!" he grinned, then strolled away, laughing.

At night in Istanbul, there is a bustling alfresco culture of crammed pavement restaurants in areas such as Nevisade Sokak, Mayheme and Kumkapi. Be warned: quality is variable. One night, we ended up having such bad meze in a deserted side street in Kumkapi that we dumped the money we owed, fled and finished our meal at a more vibrant eatery in the next street.

There is much scope for entertainment in Istanbul. We tried but failed to visit DogStar, an intriguing-sounding "indie club" in the Asian quarter. There are umpteen nightclubs and bars, some posh, others makeshift, many playing live music, or holding impromptu discos.

One night, we found ourselves watching students bob about to Soft Cell and Oasis in Kulp, a "club" the size of a shoe cupboard. Another night was spent listening to horrific Muzak in an upmarket though hilariously awful mirrored confine I forget the name of. Best of all was Babylon, a nightclub with live music. The time we went, guitarist Justin Adams, and African musician Juldeh Camara played an astonishing set. Babylon, currently celebrating its 10th anniversary, has also hosted the likes of Grandmaster Flash, Patti Smith and Arrested Development.

European Capital of Culture or not, it was

time to utter the immortal phrase of every all-female city break since the dawn of time: "Let's go shopping!" Istanbul has a Harvey Nichols, and a pedestrian-only area in Taksim that could be London's Oxford Street (if Oxford Street had more antique bookshops).

In the less touristy back streets the scent of the city is strong, with street barbecues, bubbling coffee pots and thick cigarette smoke. In more upmarket areas such as Nisantasi and Tesvikiye, Emma tried on jewelry that should have had its own security guard.

No trip to Istanbul would be complete without a visit to the Grand Bazaar. It is the largest of its type in the world, and even reading the statistics is breathtaking: 60 streets, 4,000 shops, its own mosque, post office and bank, and even a health center.

I am too much of a wimp to haggle, though it is supposed to be welcomed here. But when Emma tried to haggle over some earrings, the stallholder told us to clear off. So much for joining in with the local customs.



The Bosphorus Bridge connects Europe and Asia. PHOTO: EPA

So complex and compelling is the bazaar, it is wise to factor in a second visit.

We were coming to the end of our stay, so the next morning we made sure to view the Istanbul Modern, a wonderful art space with an eclectic mix of traditional culture and modern works.

Just outside the gallery, we stopped at one of the *nargile* (water pipe) cafes.

These are enjoying a comeback among the young (with three universities, there is a huge student presence in the city). These days, the pipes are for tobacco, not opium, though there still seems something deliciously decadent about people lolling around on velvet chairs, sucking on bubbling water pipes.

Then it was time to say goodbye to Istanbul with a boat trip across the Bosphorus. We had no time for a guided two-hour cruise. In any case, the commuter boats are fast, cheap and fun.

Our unpleasant experience with the cab driver seemed a world away as we glided across the water, marveling once again at how the domes and turrets of old Istanbul nestle with the bustle of the modern city.

A city of culture, indeed; but also so much more.