the walls. I think for a while we were all overwhelmed by the beauty of the interior and just stared up at the dome with its intricate designs and absorbed the peaceful ambience of the mosque. There was something incredibly spiritual about the atmosphere and we felt a sense of serenity and calm wash over us and it was hard to drag ourselves away from the mosque when the time came.

For our guided tour we headed to The Sultan Ahmed Mosque or more popularly known as the famous Blue Mosque. In fact the Suleymaniye Mosque was completed in 1558 and is older than the Blue Mosque which was built in 1616 and commissioned by Sultan Ahmed I. With its slender minarets and cascade of domes, the Sultan Ahmed Mosque is an architectural wonder and very popular with tourists including us.

Before we entered the courtyard (which is the same size as the actual interior) we could see rows and rows of taps outside for performing ablutions before prayers. We were led through the expansive area of the courtyard into the mosque and it was heaving with not just worshippers but visitors.



Blue mosque.

Somehow this made the mosque far less serene and peaceful than the Suleymaniye Mosque.

The layout of the forecourt leading into the mosque was very similar to the Suleymaniye and seems to be a template for many of the mosques built during the Ottoman Empire. Once inside, we could see why the mosque had acquired the name of being the Blue Mosque. The ceramic tiles covering most of the interior were the blue and white tiles made specially in Iznik and no cost had been spared by the Sultan for the 20,000 tiles lining the walls. The intricate patterns were mesmeric. Our guide told us that each individual tile was now worth tens of thousands of dollars as these handmade tiles are no longer manufactured.

He also informed us that during the time the Blue Mosque was being built, it was unheard of to have a mosque with six minarets as it was thought to be trying to rival the Masjid al Haram or Grand Mosque in Mecca and the issue was only resolved when an additional minaret was built to add to the existing six minarets in the Grand Mosque.

The tour then took us a few minutes away to one of the world's greatest architectural achievements, the famous Hagia Sophia (locally known as Aya Sofya) or the 'church of holy wisdom'. It was awe inspiring to think that the monument standing in front of us was built over 1,400 years ago and had suffered through fires and earthquakes and seen the rise and fall of the Byzantine Empire and the Ottoman Empire. The Aya Sofya served as an Eastern Orthodox Cathedral, a Roman Catholic Cathedral and then a mosque until it was secularised and opened to the public as a museum in 1935.

Built over two previous churches and inaugurated in 537 AD by Emperor Justinian it really is a true testament to the outstanding architecture and sophistication of the 6th century Byzantine capital. The only remaining evidence of the earlier structures (possibly from AD 415) seems to be a Byzantine frieze depicting some sheep situated in front of the entrance. What is now the public entrance into the church used to be the Imperial gate and used solely by the emperor and his entourage.

If we thought the Suleymaniye and Blue mosque were big, this was colossal. For Emperor Justinian, it was a vanity project where he wanted to build the largest cathedral in the world and for a while he succeeded with its dome a staggering 55.6 m high. Walking through the Aya Sofya was like going back in time. The interior had become time worn over the centuries but every nook and crevice was oozing with history.

The Aya Sofya seems to reflect Istanbul's past and present with the edifice combining a bit of east and west. There are mosaics depicting Christ, the Virgin Mary and also the six winged Seraphim sitting side by side with Quranic scriptures adorning the walls. What is wonderful about this is that despite the cathedral being turned into a mosque, it was done with respect and rather than destroying the original feature, the mosaics were just plastered over thus preserving them for posterity. As we walked around we could see a mix of both the Byzantine and Ottoman influence pervading the museum. The 'mihrab' and the 'minbar' or pulpit for the Imam had been added on by the reigning Sultan thus making it more of a mosque like as were the minarets. Despite the scaffolding on one side and the faded interior, it really was a wonder to behold.

With the ever growing population and urbanisation in Istanbul, I fervently hope that these gems of history will be treated with the respect they have been so far and that our great grand children will be able to stand in the these magnificent mosques one day.