



ISTANBUL UNFOLDED

Tales of Streets, Seas, and Centuries

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A JOURNEY BEGINS: AN UNEXPECTED ADVENTURE IN ISTANBUL

Istanbul greeted me in April 2017 with a curious mix of familiarity and wonder. I had just completed a 25-day backpacking journey across Europe, departing from Paris for the final leg of my adventure. Flying with Turkish Airlines, which always connects Europe to Dhaka via Istanbul, I decided to turn this stopover into a five-night stay — the perfect finale to a journey that had already reshaped my worldview.

I didn't have a Turkish visa, but with valid Schengen and US visas in my passport, I was eligible for an e-visa on arrival. At the airport, the sleek, human-less digital kiosks seemed straightforward — until I realised they didn't accept euros, only US dollars or credit cards. Exhausted and clutching my carry-on backpack, I wondered if bureaucracy would derail my plan.

As if travel itself had a sense of timing, help appeared: a friendly Australian traveller offered to pay the visa fee with his card in exchange for euros. A small act of kindness, yet monumental in that moment. Finally, the process was complete, and the immigration officer stamped my passport, officially welcoming me to Türkiye.

At baggage claim, my 70 litre backpack was missing. After a tense hour, I discovered it patiently waiting in the "Oversized Baggage" section — a modest 13 kilograms, yet a small

Tower, a 14th-century medieval structure offering sweeping views of the Golden Horn. Narrow streets lined with cafés and boutiques buzzed with life, balancing old-world charm with modern energy.

Taksim Square, Istanbul's vibrant heart, offered a contrasting pulse. Street performers, neon lights, and the aroma of döner kebabs and baklava filled the air. A friendly street cat weaving between my feet reminded me of Istanbul's thousands of strays, cared for by locals, embodying a unique harmony between humans and animals.

A DAY IN SULTANAHMET: WONDERS OF FAITH AND HISTORY

The next morning, I explored Sultanahmet early, before the crowds. The Blue Mosque, with its six towering minarets and thousands of hand-painted tiles,



PHOTO CREDIT: BAYRAM YALÇIN

to prayer — history alive in motion.

TOPKAPI PALACE, THE GRAND BAZAAR, AND SULTAN SULEIMAN'S MOSQUE

The following day, I revisited Topkapi Palace in detail, indulging in its architecture, gardens, and carefully curated courtyards. Wandering the Grand Bazaar afterwards, I was immersed in over 4,000 shops: vibrant spices, Turkish delight, handwoven carpets, and the playful banter of vendors. At a juice stall, freshly crushed pomegranate juice offered a tart, refreshing interlude amid the labyrinthine alleys.

By evening, I visited Süleymaniye Mosque, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent's legacy. Perched on Istanbul's Third Hill, its domes and minarets provided a spiritual counterpoint to the city's imperial and commercial grandeur. Attending the Esha prayer there, I felt enveloped in quiet devotion and timeless architecture.

BOSPHORUS CRUISE: CONTINENTS, HISTORY, AND SEA

The next morning, I boarded a motorboat for the Bosphorus. The wind carried the scents of salt, seaweed, and simit, while dolphins leapt alongside, celebrating the journey. The floating lighthouse, marking the meeting point of the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, reminded me of Istanbul's centuries-long maritime significance.

Passing the Florya Atatürk Marine Mansion and Mehmed II's fortress, I imagined Ottoman cannons blocking European ships during the conquest of Constantinople — history palpable along the strait. The Bosphorus Bridge came into view, a striking juxtaposition of modern life and historic continuity, with waterfront mansions, hidden gardens, and palaces lining the shores.

Returning along the waterfront, the golden light of sunset softened the city's contours. Fishermen prepared for the night, seagulls wheeled overhead, and the lighthouse stood as a silent witness. Disembarking, I paused to watch a man casting nets, a quiet testament to Istanbul's enduring rhythm of life, where history, culture, and daily routines flow together seamlessly.

STREETS, STORIES, AND SERENDIPITY

The following day, I explored Istanbul on foot, slower, noticing details missed earlier. Locals greeted me warmly, a distinct hospitality compared to Europe. A memorable encounter involved a young cobbler dropping his brush near me. I returned it, resisted his offer to polish my shoes, and later realised it was a common tourist scam. Small moments like these underscored the value of vigilance.

By the waterfront, fishermen lined the bridges. One old man, white-haired and puffing a cigar, moved methodically among rods, a living emblem of patience and dedication. Evening brought golden light on the cobblestones, street aromas, and a delicious dinner of freshly grilled fish, crusty bread, tangy salad, and ayran — the perfect close to a day of walking and discovery.

FAREWELL, ISTANBUL: FROM AIRPORT TO SKIES

On the final day, I took a shared shuttle to the airport. Despite a long immigration queue, the sprawling terminal and vibrant airport life kept my mind occupied. The shuttle to the aircraft was crowded and longer than any other international ride I had taken, leaving me restless as my sugar dipped.

Boarding Turkish Airlines, I requested a chilled drink, expecting

delay or refusal. To my quiet surprise, the crew served it promptly and checked in later, attentive yet unobtrusive — a subtle reminder of thoughtful service.

As Istanbul receded beneath the clouds, I reflected on five nights where history, culture, and human warmth intertwined. From bustling streets to quiet alleys, imperial palaces to vibrant bazaars, and Bosphorus cruises to heartfelt encounters, Istanbul had

revealed itself as a living, breathing story. The journey back to Dhaka felt reflective, carrying memories that would linger long after landing — a city that exists simultaneously in history, present, and imagination.

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PHOTO CREDIT: MERUYERT GONULLU



Golden Horn of the Bosphorus, Istanbul

adventure in itself. With my bag in hand, a few euros exchanged for lira, and a metro card secured, I stepped onto the tram toward Sultanahmet, anticipation building for the city's streets, history, and flavours.

EXPLORING THE HEART OF ISTANBUL: STREETS, FLAVOURS, AND STORIES

By the time I reached the city centre near the Grand Bazaar, the sun cast a golden glow over bustling streets. I found a tucked-away hostel, welcomed by a warm Syrian manager who shared his story of displacement and resilience with quiet optimism. He offered detailed directions to food spots in Eminönü and tips for reaching Taksim Square, turning a brief interaction into a memorable connection.

At Eminönü, I savoured freshly grilled fish tucked into crusty bread, accompanied by the crisp Bosphorus breeze — simple yet unforgettable. From there, I wandered toward Galata

created a serene, almost meditative atmosphere. Nearby, Hagia Sophia carried centuries of layered history: Byzantine mosaics coexisting with Islamic calligraphy, echoing stories of faith, conquest, and coexistence.

Topkapi Palace, the opulent seat of Ottoman sultans, revealed imperial life through serene courtyards, the Divan Hall, the Harem, and grand kitchens capable of feeding thousands. A small museum displaying relics associated with Prophet Muhammad (swt) added a profound spiritual layer to the experience. From the palace balcony, I gazed at Europe and Asia across the Bosphorus, a reminder of Istanbul's role as a bridge between continents.

The Archaeology Museum and the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts further deepened my appreciation of Istanbul's rich cultural heritage. Pausing at a small café for çay, I watched the city's rhythm unfold: trams threading narrow streets, locals chatting, and the distant call

