Istanbul Travel Guide

Discover Istanbul: Where East Meets West

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Things to do in Istanbul

Landmarks & Monuments

Istanbul's skyline is defined by magnificent architectural masterpieces that have stood for centuries. These **iconic landmarks** represent the city's rich history as the capital of three great empires.



Must See

Hagia Sophia

1.5-2 hours No Booking Needed

Map

A **breathtaking architectural wonder** built in 537 AD, the Hagia Sophia has served as a church, mosque, museum, and now a mosque again. Its massive dome, stunning mosaics, and intricate Islamic calligraphy create a unique blend of Christian and Muslim artistry. The *imperial gate*, marble columns from ancient temples, and the famous weeping column are must-sees. The upper gallery contains Byzantine mosaics, including the Deësis; it is not a panoramic-view deck.



Must See

Blue Mosque (Sultan Ahmed Mosque)

45 minutes - 1 hour No Booking Needed

Map

Named for its **exquisite blue İznik tiles** adorning the interior, this 17th-century mosque is an active place of worship and architectural masterpiece. Six minarets pierce the sky, while the interior features 20,000 handmade ceramic tiles in tulip designs, 200 stained glass windows, and magnificent cascading domes. Visit during *non-prayer times* and dress modestly. The courtyard with its central fountain offers spectacular photo opportunities, especially at sunset when the mosque is illuminated.



Must See Book Ahead

Topkapi Palace

2.5-3 hours Book Ahead

Map

The **opulent residence** of Ottoman sultans for 400 years, this sprawling palace complex offers a glimpse into imperial life. Explore the Harem quarters, Imperial Treasury featuring the famous Topkapi Dagger and 86-carat Spoonmaker's Diamond, Sacred Relics including Prophet Muhammad's belongings, and stunning courtyards with Bosphorus views. The intricate tile work, ornate chambers, and vast collection of Ottoman artifacts make this a must-visit. Allow plenty of time to explore the four courtyards and various pavilions.



Top Pick Book Ahead

Galata Tower

1 hour Book Ahead

Map

This **medieval stone tower** built by the Genoese in 1348 offers panoramic 360-degree views of Istanbul from its observation deck. Standing 67 meters tall, the tower has served as a fire watchtower and now provides stunning vistas of the Golden Horn, Bosphorus, and old city. The climb involves stairs and an elevator. Visit at *sunset for magical views* or at night when the city lights sparkle. The surrounding Galata neighborhood is perfect for exploring cafes and art galleries afterward.



Top Pick Book Ahead

Dolmabahçe Palace

1.5-2 hours Book Ahead

Map

A **stunning blend of European and Ottoman architecture**, this 19th-century palace showcases the empire's final grandeur. The palace features 285 rooms, 46 halls, ornate Bohemian crystal chandeliers including the world's largest, and lavish interiors with gold leaf, crystal staircases, and European furniture. The *Ceremonial Hall's* chandelier weighs 4.5 tons. Atatürk spent his final days here. Tours are guided and photography inside is prohibited. The waterfront location on the Bosphorus makes it especially picturesque.

Tips for Landmarks & Monuments

- **Skip-the-line tickets:** Book online in advance to avoid long queues, especially for Topkapi Palace and Hagia Sophia
- **Dress code:** Modest clothing required for mosques (shoulders and knees covered, headscarves for women)
- **Photography:** Generally allowed outside, but restricted inside palaces and during prayer times in mosques
- **Combined visits:** Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque are walking distance apart in Sultanahmet Square

Museums & Galleries

Istanbul's museums house **extraordinary collections** spanning millennia, from ancient artifacts to contemporary art. These institutions preserve and showcase the city's rich cultural heritage.



Top Pick

Istanbul Archaeology Museums

2-3 hours No Booking Needed

Map

A **treasure trove of ancient artifacts** comprising three museums in one complex. The collection includes over one million objects, featuring the stunning Alexander Sarcophagus, Kadesh Peace Treaty (oldest known peace agreement), and artifacts from Troy, Babylon, and ancient Anatolia. The *Museum of the Ancient Orient* displays Mesopotamian artifacts, while the Tiled Kiosk showcases Ottoman ceramics. This is essential for history enthusiasts and rivals world-famous archaeological museums. The beautifully landscaped grounds add to the experience.



Notable

Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum

1.5-2 hours No Booking Needed

Map

Housed in the **16th-century Ibrahim Pasha Palace**, this museum displays an exceptional collection of Islamic calligraphy, Qurans, carpets, ceramics, and metalwork. The carpet collection is particularly outstanding, featuring rare Seljuk and Ottoman pieces. Ethnographic displays show traditional Turkish nomadic life. The palace itself is magnificent, with a beautiful courtyard overlooking the Hippodrome. The *carpet section* traces weaving traditions from the 8th century onwards. Perfect for understanding Islamic artistic traditions and Ottoman domestic culture.



Notable

Istanbul Modern

2 hours No Booking Needed

Map

Turkey's **premier contemporary art museum** reopened in 2023 in a stunning new Renzo Piano-designed building on the Bosphorus. The collection features Turkish modern and contemporary art from the 1950s to present, including paintings, sculptures, photography, and video installations. Rotating exhibitions showcase international artists. The museum offers spectacular waterfront views, a cinema, library, and an excellent restaurant. It's a *must-visit for contemporary art lovers* and provides insight into Turkey's modern artistic movements.



Notable

Pera Museum

1.5 hours No Booking Needed

Map

Located in a **historic building in Beyoğlu**, this private museum houses an impressive collection of Orientalist paintings, Anatolian weights and measures, and Kütahya tiles and ceramics. The star attraction is the *Tortoise Trainer* painting by Osman Hamdi Bey. Rotating exhibitions feature international artists and themed collections. The museum café is charming, and the building's architecture is noteworthy. Excellent audio guides enhance the experience, making it accessible to all visitors interested in 19th-century art.

Tips for Museums & Galleries

- **Museum Pass:** Consider the Museum Pass Istanbul for savings and skip-the-line access to major museums
- **Free entry days:** Some museums offer free admission on specific days - check individual websites
- **Guided tours:** Many museums offer audio guides or guided tours for deeper understanding
- **Monday closures:** Many museums are closed on Mondays - verify hours before visiting

Religious Sites

Istanbul's religious architecture reflects its diverse history. **Magnificent mosques, churches, and synagogues** showcase Byzantine, Ottoman, and other architectural traditions, many still active places of worship.



Top Pick

Süleymaniye Mosque

1 hour No Booking Needed

Map

Designed by the legendary architect Sinan, this **16th-century masterpiece** is considered the most beautiful mosque in Istanbul. Commissioned by Süleyman the Magnificent, it features perfect proportions, stunning İznik tiles, magnificent calligraphy, and four minarets. The complex includes tombs, a library, hospital, and schools. The courtyard offers breathtaking views over the Golden Horn. Less touristy than the Blue Mosque, it provides a *more authentic spiritual atmosphere*. The acoustics are extraordinary, making prayer calls especially moving. Visit the nearby cemetery for panoramic city views.



Top Pick

Chora Church (Kariye Museum)

1-1.5 hours No Booking Needed

Map

This **Byzantine gem** contains some of the finest Byzantine mosaics and frescoes in the world. Originally an 11th-century monastery, the interior is covered with stunning gold-background mosaics depicting biblical scenes with remarkable detail and artistry. The *Anastasis fresco* in the burial chapel is particularly breathtaking. Though now functioning as a mosque again, the artwork remains visible. Located in the historic Edirnekapı district, it's worth the journey for art and history lovers seeking Byzantine masterpieces.



Notable

Eyüp Sultan Mosque

1.5 hours No Booking Needed

Map

One of **Islam's holiest sites** in Turkey, this mosque complex honors Eyüp Sultan, a companion of Prophet Muhammad. Built after the conquest of Constantinople, it's an important pilgrimage site for Muslims. The ornate tomb, beautiful courtyard with fountains, and spiritual atmosphere make it special. The surrounding area features traditional Ottoman houses and the historic Pierre Loti Hill café with stunning Golden Horn views accessible by cable car. Visit on *Fridays for the most authentic experience*, but be respectful of worshippers.



Optional

Neve Shalom Synagogue

45 minutes Book Ahead

Map

Istanbul's **largest and most prominent synagogue**, serving the Sephardic Jewish community since 1951. The beautiful interior features traditional design elements, a grand ark, and impressive chandeliers. The synagogue represents Istanbul's diverse religious heritage and centuries-old Jewish community. Visits require advance permission for security reasons, but the experience provides valuable insight into *Jewish life in Istanbul*. The Jewish Museum nearby offers additional context about the community's 500-year history in the city.

Tips for Religious Sites

- **Dress modestly:** Cover shoulders, knees, and hair (women) when visiting mosques

- **Prayer times:** Mosques close to tourists during five daily prayer times - plan accordingly
- **Shoe removal:** Remove shoes before entering mosques; plastic bags usually provided
- **Respectful behavior:** Maintain silence, avoid pointing at worshippers, and don't visit during Friday noon prayers
- **Free entry:** Most mosques are free to enter, though donations are appreciated

Ancient & Historical Sites

Beneath modern Istanbul lie layers of **ancient civilizations**. Byzantine cisterns, Roman walls, and archaeological sites reveal the city's 2,600-year history as Byzantium, Constantinople, and Istanbul.



Must See Book Ahead

Basilica Cistern

45 minutes - 1 hour Book Ahead

Map

The **largest of Istanbul's ancient underground cisterns**, this 6th-century Byzantine marvel features 336 marble columns in an atmospheric subterranean chamber. Built by Emperor Justinian, it stored water for the Great Palace. The mysterious Medusa head column bases, classical music, dramatic lighting, and walkways over water create an unforgettable experience. The cistern has been featured in films including *From Russia with Love*. Restored in recent years with new lighting and exhibitions, it's a cool respite from summer heat and a glimpse into Byzantine engineering genius.



Notable

Hippodrome of Constantinople

30 minutes No Booking Needed

Map

Now Sultanahmet Square, this was the **ancient stadium** where chariot races and public events occurred for over 1,000 years. Three original monuments remain: the Egyptian Obelisk from 1500 BC, the Serpent Column from Delphi, and the Walled Obelisk. The bronze statues that once adorned the stadium are now in Venice. Though only traces remain, the historical significance is immense riots here changed empires. The *German Fountain* at one end is a beautiful late addition. It's a pleasant public space connecting major Sultanahmet attractions.



Notable

Theodosius Cistern

45 minutes No Booking Needed

Map

A **recently opened Byzantine cistern** from the 5th century, less crowded than the Basilica Cistern but equally impressive. Features 32 marble columns across 1,000 square meters, with beautiful illumination and walkways. The cistern hosts art exhibitions and cultural events. The *modern restoration* includes interactive displays about Byzantine water systems. It's quieter and offers a more intimate experience than its famous neighbor. The combination of ancient engineering and contemporary presentation makes it a fascinating visit for architecture and history enthusiasts.



Notable

Walls of Constantinople

1-2 hours No Booking Needed

Map

The **legendary Byzantine walls** that protected Constantinople for a thousand years stretch 6.5 kilometers from the Sea of Marmara to the Golden Horn. Built in the 5th century and reinforced over centuries, these massive fortifications withstood numerous sieges until 1453. The Theodosian Walls feature double layers with towers and gates. Key sections to explore include the Yedikule Fortress (Seven Towers) and sections near Topkapı Gate. Walking along the walls offers *unique perspectives* on Byzantine military architecture and the city's defensive history.

Tips for Ancient & Historical Sites

- **Cistern combo:** Visit both Basilica Cistern and Theodosius Cistern for contrasting experiences
- **Best lighting:** Cisterns are stunning in late afternoon when less crowded
- **Wear comfortable shoes:** Can be slippery in underground areas
- **Wall walking:** Some sections of the Byzantine Walls are in residential areas - be respectful of locals

Squares & Streets

Istanbul's **vibrant streets and squares** pulse with life. From historic pedestrian boulevards to bustling bazaar lanes, these public spaces offer shopping, dining, and people-watching opportunities.



Must See

Istiklal Avenue

2-3 hours No Booking Needed

Map

Istanbul's **most famous pedestrian boulevard** stretches 1.4 kilometers through Beyoğlu, packed with shops, restaurants, historic buildings, churches, and cultural centers. The nostalgic red tram runs the length of the avenue. Art Nouveau and Neo-Classical architecture lines the street, including foreign consulates, the historic Çiçek Pasajı (Flower Passage), and trendy boutiques. Streets branching off lead to hidden gems rooftop bars, authentic meyhanes (taverns), and bookshops. *Evening is magical* when street musicians perform and the avenue buzzes with energy. It's Istanbul's social heart.



Must See

Grand Bazaar

2-3 hours No Booking Needed

Map

One of the **world's oldest and largest covered markets**, with 61 streets and over 4,000 shops spread across 30,000 square meters. Dating to 1461, the bazaar sells carpets, jewelry, ceramics, spices, leather, and souvenirs. The vaulted ceilings, painted domes, and maze-like alleys create an intoxicating atmosphere. Haggling is expected and part of the experience. Don't miss the *Old Book Bazaar* section and historical hans (caravanserais). Early morning visits are less crowded. Allow time to get lost and discover hidden courtyards and traditional craftsmen's workshops.



Top Pick

Spice Bazaar (Egyptian Bazaar)

1-1.5 hours No Booking Needed

Map

A **sensory explosion** of colors, scents, and flavors, this 17th-century covered market specializes in spices, dried fruits, nuts, Turkish delight, teas, and souvenirs. The L-shaped building features 85 shops under vaulted ceilings. The aromas of cumin, saffron, and cinnamon fill the air. Less overwhelming than the Grand Bazaar, it's perfect for buying edible souvenirs and experiencing traditional trading culture. Nearby streets offer *more authentic shopping* and food stalls. The market is adjacent to the New Mosque, creating a beautiful architectural complex.



Notable

Taksim Square

30 minutes No Booking Needed

Map

The **modern heart of Istanbul**, this major plaza is a transportation hub and gathering point. The Republic Monument commemorates the founding of modern Turkey. Taksim connects to Istiklal Avenue and offers access to hotels, restaurants, and nightlife. Gezi Park adjacent to the square provides green space. While not historically significant like Sultanahmet, Taksim represents *contemporary Istanbul's energy*. Street vendors, political rallies, New Year celebrations, and daily life converge here. It's the starting point for exploring modern Beyoğlu district.

Tips for Squares & Streets

- **Bargaining:** In bazaars, start at 50-60% of asking price and negotiate respectfully
- **Avoid Sundays:** Grand Bazaar is closed on Sundays and religious holidays
- **Cash preferred:** Bring Turkish Lira for better prices, though cards are accepted
- **Watch belongings:** Crowded areas attract pickpockets - keep valuables secure
- **Tea invitation:** Accepting tea doesn't obligate you to buy, but declining is also acceptable

Neighborhoods & Districts

Istanbul's diverse **neighborhoods each have distinct character**, from historic Sultanahmet to trendy Karaköy, bohemian Cihangir to Asian-side Kadıköy. Exploring these districts reveals the city's multifaceted personality.



Must See

Sultanahmet (Old City)

Full day No Booking Needed

Map

The **historic peninsula** where Istanbul's greatest monuments cluster. Home to Hagia Sophia, Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace, Basilica Cistern, and the Hippodrome. This UNESCO World Heritage Site represents layers of Byzantine and Ottoman history. Cobblestone streets lead past restored Ottoman houses, traditional restaurants, and carpet shops. While touristy, it's essential for first-time visitors. Early morning offers the best experience before crowds arrive. The neighborhood's *concentrated historical significance* is unmatched, allowing you to walk through 1,500 years of history in one afternoon.



Must See

Beyoğlu

Half to full day No Booking Needed

Map

The **cultural and entertainment hub** centered around Istiklal Avenue and Taksim Square. This district features Art Nouveau architecture, trendy boutiques, international restaurants, rooftop bars, art galleries, and nightlife. Historic passages house atmospheric restaurants and shops. The area reflects Istanbul's cosmopolitan character and was historically home to European communities. *Endless exploration possibilities* include hidden streets like Çukurcuma (antiques), Asmalımescit (dining), and Cihangir (bohemian cafés). Evenings bring street musicians, vendors, and vibrant energy that defines modern Istanbul culture.



Top Pick

Karaköy

Half day No Booking Needed

Map

A **hip waterfront neighborhood** transformed from a working port district into Istanbul's trendiest area. Industrial buildings now house boutique hotels, specialty coffee shops, contemporary art galleries, and innovative restaurants. The neighborhood maintains authentic character with fish markets, ship chandlers, and longshoremen alongside new establishments. Don't miss the *street art*, vintage shops on Kemeraltı Street, and waterfront promenade. Karaköy connects via Galata Bridge to the old city and is perfect for experiencing Istanbul's creative renaissance while sampling world-class dining and nightlife.



Top Pick

Kadıköy

Half day No Booking Needed

Map

The **vibrant heart of Asian Istanbul**, offering authentic local life away from tourist crowds. The neighborhood centers around a bustling market area with produce stalls, street food, bookshops, and cafés. Moda, the coastal district within Kadıköy, features tree-lined streets, seaside promenades, and relaxed tea gardens. The area is known for *alternative culture*, live music venues, meyhanes (traditional taverns), and a younger, artistic crowd. Tuesday and Thursday street markets are excellent for fresh produce. Take a ferry from European side for scenic arrival and experience where Istanbulites actually live.



Notable

Ortaköy

2-3 hours No Booking Needed

Map

A **picturesque Bosphorus neighborhood** famous for its baroque mosque directly on the waterfront with the Bosphorus Bridge backdrop. The square hosts a weekend arts and crafts market, while the streets are lined with cafés and restaurants. Famous for kumpir (stuffed baked potatoes) sold by vendors. The area mixes Ottoman heritage with contemporary lifestyle, attracting locals and tourists. Stunning *sunset views* make it romantic. Sunday brunches are popular, and the promenade is perfect for walks. Easy access by bus or dolmuş from Beşiktaş, combining well with palace visits.



Notable

Balat

2-3 hours No Booking Needed

Map

A **colorful historic neighborhood** that was once the Jewish quarter, now Instagram-famous for its rainbow-painted houses. Cobblestone streets wind past antique shops, vintage cafés, contemporary art spaces, and authentic local life. The area maintains traditional character despite growing popularity. Byzantine churches, synagogues, and Ottoman houses create architectural diversity. *Bulgarian Church of St. Stephen*, an iron church, is a highlight. The neighborhood offers authentic Turkish breakfast spots, secondhand bookshops, and unrestored Ottoman buildings showing the city's layers. Gentrification is ongoing visit before it completely transforms.

Tips for Neighborhoods & Districts

- **Ferry connections:** Use ferries to reach Asian side neighborhoods for scenic Bosphorus crossings
- **Walking shoes essential:** Istanbul's neighborhoods are hilly with cobblestone streets
- **Local timing:** Neighborhoods come alive at different times Karaköy for brunch, Beyoğlu for evening
- **Respect residents:** In residential areas like Balat, be mindful when photographing homes

Parks & Gardens

Amidst the urban intensity, Istanbul offers **beautiful green spaces** for relaxation. From Bosphorus-side parks to historic gardens, these areas provide peaceful retreats and stunning views.



Notable

Gülhane Park

1-2 hours No Booking Needed

Map

The **former outer garden of Topkapi Palace**, this historic park offers shaded pathways, rose gardens, and panoramic views over the Bosphorus and Sea of Marmara. Ottoman sultans once strolled these grounds. Today it's a peaceful escape from Sultanahmet's tourist intensity. The park features a Science and Technology Museum in Historical Tanks, the Istanbul History Museum, and several cafés. Spring brings tulips and blossoms making it particularly beautiful. The *Alay Köşkü* (parade pavilion) offers great photo opportunities. Perfect for picnics or afternoon rest between sightseeing. Free admission and ideal for families.



Notable

Emirgan Park

2-3 hours No Booking Needed

Map

A **magnificent Bosphorus-side park** spanning 117 acres with historic mansions, ponds, walking paths, and spectacular gardens. Famous for the annual Tulip Festival in April when millions of tulips bloom in dazzling displays. The park features three 19th-century pavilions (köşks): Yellow, Pink, and White, now functioning as cafés. Centuries-old trees, manicured lawns, and children's playgrounds make it perfect for families. The *upper terraces* provide stunning Bosphorus views. Weekends bring picnickers and families. Located in Sarıyer district, it's worth the journey from central Istanbul for nature lovers.



Optional

Yıldız Park

2-3 hours No Booking Needed

Map

A **sprawling hillside park** that was once the garden of Yıldız Palace. This 120-acre green space features walking trails through forests, historic pavilions including the Şale Köşkü (Chalet Pavilion), lakes with bridges, and spectacular city views. The park maintains a wilder, more natural character than formal gardens. Several cafés offer refreshments, including the historic Malta Köşkü. The *upper sections* are less crowded and provide peaceful walks. Adjacent to Çırağan Palace and easily accessible from Beşiktaş, it's a favorite among locals for jogging, picnics, and weekend outings.



Optional

Fenerbahçe Park

1-2 hours No Booking Needed

Map

A popular **waterfront park on the Asian side** offering Sea of Marmara views, walking and cycling paths, playgrounds, and sports facilities. The park includes a marina, swimming areas in summer, and the iconic Fenerbahçe Lighthouse. Perfect for sunset watching and picnics. The *seaside promenade* is excellent for jogging or leisurely walks. Numerous cafés and restaurants line the park. It's a favorite among local families and less touristy than European side parks. Combine with visits to Kadıköy or Moda neighborhoods. Great for experiencing authentic Istanbul leisure culture.

Tips for Parks & Gardens

- **Best seasons:** Spring (April-May) and autumn (September-October) offer ideal weather and blooms
- **Tulip Festival:** Visit Emirgan Park in April for the spectacular Istanbul Tulip Festival
- **Picnic supplies:** Parks allow picnics grab supplies from local markets
- **Free entry:** All major parks are free to enter

Fountains & Public Art

Istanbul's streets feature **ornate Ottoman fountains and contemporary public art**. These elements add beauty to public spaces and reflect centuries of artistic tradition.



Optional

German Fountain

15 minutes No Booking Needed

Map

A **neo-Byzantine style gazebo fountain** in Sultanahmet Square, presented by German Emperor Wilhelm II, who visited in 1898; the fountain was completed in 1901. The octagonal domed structure features beautiful mosaics, gold-leaf decorations, and intricate columns. It's a popular meeting point and photo spot. The fountain represents *Ottoman-German relations* at the turn of the 20th century. While not ancient, it's become an iconic landmark in the historic square. The location makes it a natural stop while exploring nearby monuments like Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque.



Optional

Tophane Fountain

15 minutes No Booking Needed

Map

An **exquisite 18th-century Ottoman fountain** in Karaköy, built by Sultan Mahmud I. The baroque-style structure features elaborate marble decorations, calligraphy, and traditional Turkish rococo elements. The fountain's ornate facade showcases the height of Ottoman decorative arts. Located near the *Nusretiye Mosque* and Tophane tram stop, it's in a neighborhood transforming into a hip arts district. The fountain represents Istanbul's tradition of public water sources as charitable works. Excellent example of monumental Ottoman fountain architecture, less crowded than Sultanahmet attractions.

Tips for Fountains & Public Art

- **Photo opportunities:** Ottoman fountains are beautifully decorated great for architectural photography
- **Neighborhood context:** Fountains often mark important intersections or neighborhood centers
- **No longer functional:** Most historic fountains are preserved monuments, not drinking sources

Transportation

Istanbul's **extensive public transportation system** includes ferries, trams, metros, buses, and historic funiculars. Getting around is part of the experience, especially scenic Bosphorus ferries.



Essential

Bosphorus Ferry

15 minutes to 2 hours No Booking Needed

Map

The **iconic way to experience Istanbul**, public ferries crossing between Europe and Asia offer stunning views of palaces, mosques, fortresses, and waterfront mansions. Short crossings (15 minutes) connect Eminönü-Kadıköy or Karaköy-Kadıköy. Long cruises travel the full Bosphorus to the Black Sea. Ferries are inexpensive, frequent, and used by locals daily. Grab *tea or simit* (sesame bread rings) from vendors onboard. Upper decks provide best views. Sunset cruises are magical. The ferry is transportation and attraction combined essential Istanbul experience offering perspectives on the city's geography and beauty.



Essential

Istanbulkart

N/A No Booking Needed

Map

The **essential transportation card** for Istanbul's public transit. This rechargeable smart card works on metros, trams, buses, ferries, and funiculars, offering significant discounts versus single tickets. Purchase at major transit stations from vending machines or kiosks. One card can be shared by multiple people. The card costs a small deposit plus initial credit. *Saves time and money* essential for any visitor using public transport. Can be recharged at machines or kiosks throughout the city. Makes navigating Istanbul's transit system seamless and affordable.



Useful

Historic Tünel Funicular

2 minutes ride No Booking Needed

Map

The **world's second-oldest underground railway** (1875), this short funicular connects Karaköy at sea level to upper Beyoğlu/Galata area. The short ride climbs a steep hill, saving considerable walking effort. The vintage cars and historic stations are charming. Use your Istanbulkart for access. It's a *practical and atmospheric* way to reach Istiklal Avenue from the waterfront. Combine with Galata Tower visits. The engineering marvel represented Ottoman modernization efforts and remains a beloved local transportation option and historical attraction.



Optional

Nostalgic Tram (İstiklal)

15 minutes No Booking Needed

Map

A **charming red vintage tram** running along Istiklal Avenue from Taksim to Tünel. Originally operated from 1871-1966, the line was restored in 1990 with historic tram cars. While primarily touristic and often crowded, it's a fun way to experience the famous avenue. The 1.6-kilometer journey offers photo opportunities and nostalgic atmosphere. *Morning rides are less crowded*. Use Istanbulkart for payment. Many choose to walk the avenue and take the tram one direction. It's become an iconic symbol of Beyoğlu district and Istanbul's blend of historic and modern.

Tips for Transportation

- **Get Istanbulkart immediately:** Purchase at airport or first transit station for convenience
- **Ferry timing:** Check schedules as frequency varies by route and time of day
- **Avoid rush hours:** 8-9am and 5-7pm are extremely crowded on all public transit
- **Download apps:** Moovit or Google Maps work well for Istanbul transit directions
- **Taxi alternatives:** Use BiTaksi or Uber for reliable metered taxi service

Tours & Activities

Beyond monuments, Istanbul offers **unique experiences** from hammam rituals to cooking classes, boat cruises to food tours, providing deeper cultural immersion.



Must See Book Ahead

Bosphorus Sunset Cruise

2-6 hours Book Ahead

A **magical way to see Istanbul** from the water as the sun sets behind minarets and palaces. Various options exist from public long cruises (6 hours) to private yacht charters. Cruises pass under bridges, by Dolmabahçe and Çırağan palaces, Ottoman mansions (yalıs), Rumeli and Anadolu fortresses, and waterfront neighborhoods. Evening cruises often include dinner and entertainment. The *golden hour lighting* transforms the city. Public ferries offer budget options, while private boats provide romantic experiences. See both European and Asian shorelines, understanding why the Bosphorus defines Istanbul's unique geography and identity.



Top Pick Book Ahead

Turkish Bath (Hammam) Experience

1.5-2 hours Book Ahead

An **essential Ottoman wellness tradition**, the hammam ritual includes steam room, exfoliation scrub (kese), foam massage, and relaxation. Historic hammams like Çemberlitaş (1584), Süleymaniye, and Ayasofya Hürrem Sultan offer authentic experiences in stunning settings with marble interiors and domed ceilings. The process is therapeutic and cultural. Choose between tourist-focused or more local hammams depending on comfort level. *Allow 1-2 hours* for the full experience. Book ahead, especially for private sessions. Bring swimwear or use provided coverings. A memorable, relaxing cultural immersion you'll remember forever.



Top Pick Book Ahead

Food Walking Tours

3-4 hours Book Ahead

Taste your way through Istanbul with guided tours exploring markets, street food, and local eateries. Typical tours include stops for simit, börek, lahmacun, kebabs, baklava, Turkish tea and coffee, and regional specialties. Guides explain food history, ingredients, and cultural significance. Tours often visit neighborhoods like Kadıköy, Balat, or around the Spice Bazaar. *Excellent introduction to Turkish cuisine* and food culture while exploring areas you might not find independently. Great for adventurous eaters. Come hungry portions are generous. Vegetarian and dietary-restricted options available.



Notable

Turkish Cooking Class

3-4 hours Book Ahead

Learn to prepare authentic Turkish dishes with local chefs in hands-on classes. Typical menus include mezes (appetizers), dolma (stuffed vegetables), kebabs, börek (savory pastries), and baklava or other desserts. Classes often start with market visits to select fresh ingredients, then cooking instruction in traditional or modern kitchens. You'll learn about spices, techniques, and Turkish food culture. *Finish by enjoying your creations* with wine or rakı. Classes accommodate dietary restrictions. Perfect for food lovers wanting deeper cultural connection. Take recipes home to recreate dishes and remember Istanbul's flavors.



Notable

Whirling Dervishes Ceremony

1-1.5 hours Book Ahead

Witness the **mystical Sufi ritual** called Sema, where dervishes in white robes spin in meditative prayer. This UNESCO-recognized tradition represents spiritual journey toward perfection through music and dance. Several venues offer performances, including Hodjapasha Cultural Center and Galata Mevlevi Lodge Museum. The *authentic religious ceremony* occurs at specific locations on certain days. Tourist performances are more accessible but less spiritual. The haunting music, spinning motion, and spiritual atmosphere create an unforgettable cultural experience. Photography often restricted. Shows last 60-90 minutes. Recommended for those interested in Turkish mysticism and cultural traditions.

Tips for Tours & Activities

- **Book in advance:** Popular tours and experiences fill quickly, especially in high season
- **Read reviews:** Choose reputable operators for authentic experiences
- **Dress appropriately:** Modest clothing for cultural/religious experiences
- **Tip guides:** 10-15% gratuity is standard for quality tour guides
- **Private vs group:** Private tours offer flexibility; group tours are more economical

Day Trips & Excursions

Istanbul's location makes it perfect for **exciting day trips**. Explore islands, ancient cities, beach towns, and Ottoman palaces within easy reach.



Top Pick

Princes' Islands (Büyükada)

Full day No Booking Needed

Map

A **car-free archipelago** in the Sea of Marmara, offering peaceful escape from urban Istanbul. Büyükada (largest island) features Victorian mansions, monasteries, beaches, and pine forests. Transportation includes bicycles and electric public vehicles; horse-drawn phaetons were abolished. Visit Aya Yorgi Church on the hilltop for panoramic views, explore charming streets, swim at beaches, and enjoy fresh seafood. The *nostalgic ferry ride* is half the experience. Other islands like Heybeliada and Burgazada are quieter alternatives. Perfect for summer day trips. Pack swimwear and rent bikes to explore fully. Escape the city chaos.



Notable

Bursa

Full day minimum No Booking Needed

Map

The **first Ottoman capital**, Bursa offers rich history, thermal baths, silk markets, and famous İskender kebab. Major sites include the stunning Green Mosque and Tomb with exquisite tiles, Ulu Cami (Grand Mosque) with 20 domes, and historic bazaars. Take the cable car up Uludağ mountain for views (or ski in winter). Traditional Ottoman houses line old neighborhoods. The city is famous for *thermal springs* and hammams using natural hot water. Reach Bursa by ferry and bus (2.5 hours) or car. Consider overnight stays to fully experience this historically significant city.



Optional

Şile

Full day No Booking Needed

Map

A **charming Black Sea coastal town** on Istanbul's Asian side, famous for pristine beaches, lighthouse, and handwoven cotton fabric. The dramatic coastline features cliffs, sandy beaches like Ağlayan Kaya and Uzunkum, and the photogenic 19th-century lighthouse on a rocky island. The town maintains traditional character with wooden houses, local markets, and seafood restaurants. Try famous *Şile cloth* (şile bezi), a gauzy cotton textile. Perfect summer escape with swimming, hiking, and fresh fish. About 70km from central Istanbul (1.5-2 hours by car or bus). Combine beach relaxation with cultural exploration of this authentic fishing village.



Optional

Edirne

Full day minimum No Booking Needed

Map

The **former Ottoman capital** near the Greek and Bulgarian borders, featuring spectacular mosque architecture. The Selimiye Mosque, designed by Mimar Sinan and considered his masterpiece, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site with stunning interior and soaring minarets. Other highlights include Eski Mosque, colorful bazaars, and the historic Kırkpınar oil wrestling festival grounds. Edirne is famous for *liver dishes and almond candy*. The city offers a quieter, more provincial Ottoman experience. Located 235km from Istanbul (2.5-3 hours by car/bus). Best as overnight trip to fully appreciate the architecture and atmosphere.

Tips for Day Trips & Excursions

- **Ferry schedules:** Check return times for Princes' Islands to avoid getting stranded
- **Start early:** Day trips require early departure to maximize time
- **Weather dependent:** Island and beach trips best in good weather (May-September)
- **Guided vs independent:** Some destinations easier with organized tours; islands manageable independently

- **Overnight options:** Consider staying overnight in Bursa or Edirne for relaxed exploration

Food & Dining

Real, highly-rated Restaurants in Istanbul, sourced from Google Places (rating above 4★).



Golden Horn Terrace Restaurant★★★★★ 5 (1,524)

1-2 hours

Map

Golden Horn Terrace Restaurant is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 5★ from 1524 reviews. Located at Binbirdirek, Binbirdirek Meydanı Sok. No:1, 34400 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 7:30 AM – 11:00 PM
- Tuesday: 7:30 AM – 11:00 PM
- Wednesday: 7:30 AM – 11:00 PM
- Thursday: 7:30 AM – 11:00 PM
- Friday: 7:30 AM – 11:00 PM
- Saturday: 7:30 AM – 11:00 PM
- Sunday: 7:30 AM – 11:00 PM



Hidden Garden Restaurant Sultanahmet★★★★★ 4.9 (20,975)

1-2 hours

Map

Hidden Garden Restaurant Sultanahmet is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.9★ from 20975 reviews. Located at Binbirdirek, Peykhane Sok. No: 14/A, 34122 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Tuesday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Wednesday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Thursday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Friday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Saturday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Sunday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM



Mivan Restaurant & Cafe★★★★★ 4.9 (8,939)

1-2 hours

Map

Mivan Restaurant & Cafe is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.9★ from 8939 reviews. Located at Emin Sinan, Piyer Loti Cd. No:34, 34130 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 8:30 AM – 12:00 AM
- Tuesday: 8:30 AM – 12:00 AM
- Wednesday: 8:30 AM – 12:00 AM
- Thursday: 8:30 AM – 12:00 AM
- Friday: 8:30 AM – 12:00 AM
- Saturday: 8:30 AM – 12:00 AM
- Sunday: 8:30 AM – 12:00 AM



Garden 1897 Restaurant★★★★★ 4.9 (21,276)

1-2 hours

Map

Garden 1897 Restaurant is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.9★ from 21276 reviews. Located at Inside of Garden House Hotel, Küçük Ayasofya, Şht. Mehmetpaşa Sok. No5, 34122 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 12:30 PM – 12:00 AM
- Tuesday: 12:30 PM – 12:00 AM
- Wednesday: 12:30 PM – 12:00 AM
- Thursday: 12:30 PM – 12:00 AM
- Friday: 12:30 PM – 12:00 AM
- Saturday: 12:30 PM – 12:00 AM
- Sunday: 12:30 PM – 12:00 AM



Suad Restaurant kebab&fish& steak house★★★★★ 4.9 (1,956)

1-2 hours

Map

Suad Restaurant kebab&fish& steak house is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.9★ from 1956 reviews. Located at Alemdar, Bestekar Osman Sk. no:10, 34110 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 9:00 AM – 12:30 AM
- Tuesday: 9:00 AM – 12:30 AM
- Wednesday: 9:00 AM – 12:30 AM
- Thursday: 9:00 AM – 12:30 AM
- Friday: 9:00 AM – 12:30 AM
- Saturday: 9:00 AM – 12:30 AM
- Sunday: 9:00 AM – 12:30 AM



Pleasure terrace roof top restaurant★★★★★ 4.9 (8,953)

1-2 hours

Map

Pleasure terrace roof top restaurant is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.9★ from 8953 reviews. Located at Hoca Paşa, Hüdavendigar Cd. No:4 Kat:5, 34112 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 12:00 – 11:30 PM
- Tuesday: 12:00 – 11:30 PM
- Wednesday: 12:00 – 11:30 PM
- Thursday: 12:00 – 11:30 PM
- Friday: 12:00 – 11:30 PM
- Saturday: 12:00 – 11:30 PM
- Sunday: 12:00 – 11:30 PM



Carlos Terrace Restaurant İstanbul★★★★★ 4.9 (5,766)

1-2 hours

Map

Carlos Terrace Restaurant İstanbul is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.9★ from 5766 reviews. Located at Sultan Ahmet, Akbıyık Cd. No:75, 34140 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 12:00 PM – 2:00 AM
- Tuesday: 12:00 PM – 2:00 AM
- Wednesday: 12:00 PM – 2:00 AM
- Thursday: 12:00 PM – 2:00 AM
- Friday: 12:00 PM – 2:00 AM
- Saturday: 12:00 PM – 2:00 AM
- Sunday: 12:00 PM – 2:00 AM



The Ottomans Kitchen Cafe Restaurant★★★★★ 4.9 (8,908)

1-2 hours

Map

The Ottomans Kitchen Cafe Restaurant is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.9★ from 8908 reviews. Located at Sultan Ahmet, Akbıyık Cd. No:70, 34122 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 8:30 AM – 2:30 AM
- Tuesday: 8:30 AM – 2:30 AM
- Wednesday: 8:30 AM – 2:30 AM
- Thursday: 8:30 AM – 2:30 AM
- Friday: 8:30 AM – 2:30 AM
- Saturday: 8:30 AM – 2:30 AM
- Sunday: 8:30 AM – 2:30 AM



Glamour Rooftop Restaurant★★★★★ 4.9 (2,210)

1-2 hours

Map

Glamour Rooftop Restaurant is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.9★ from 2210 reviews. Located at Hoca Paşa, Vezir Cami Çk. No:8, 34110 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Tuesday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Wednesday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Thursday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Friday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Saturday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Sunday: 11:00 AM – 12:00 AM



Food Palace 1981 Anatolian Restaurant★★★★★ 4.9 (7,018)

1-2 hours

Map

Food Palace 1981 Anatolian Restaurant is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.9★ from 7018 reviews. Located at Binbirdirek, Peykhane Sok. No: 14B, 34122 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 9:00 AM – 2:00 AM
- Tuesday: 9:00 AM – 2:00 AM
- Wednesday: 9:00 AM – 2:00 AM
- Thursday: 9:00 AM – 2:00 AM
- Friday: 9:00 AM – 2:00 AM
- Saturday: 9:00 AM – 2:00 AM
- Sunday: 9:00 AM – 2:00 AM



Massa Bistro★★★★★ 4.9 (3,976)

1-2 hours

Map

Massa Bistro is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.9★ from 3976 reviews. Located at Sultanahmet near tramway station İstanbul, Alemdar, Hacı Tahsin Bey Sk. 11 a, 34110 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 9:00 AM – 1:00 AM
- Tuesday: 9:00 AM – 1:00 AM
- Wednesday: 9:00 AM – 1:00 AM
- Thursday: 9:00 AM – 1:00 AM
- Friday: 9:00 AM – 1:00 AM
- Saturday: 9:00 AM – 1:00 AM
- Sunday: 9:00 AM – 1:00 AM



Turgut Kebab Restaurant -Sultanahmet-★★★★★ 4.8 (27,371)

1-2 hours

Map

Turgut Kebab Restaurant -Sultanahmet- is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.8★ from 27371 reviews. Located at Sultan Ahmet, Akbıyık Cd. No:64, 34122 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: Open 24 hours
- Tuesday: Open 24 hours
- Wednesday: Open 24 hours
- Thursday: Open 24 hours
- Friday: Open 24 hours
- Saturday: Open 24 hours
- Sunday: Open 24 hours



Hanzade Bosphorus Restaurant★★★★★ 4.8 (17,757)

1-2 hours

Map

Hanzade Bosphorus Restaurant is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.8★ from 17757 reviews. Located at Hoca Paşa, İstasyon Arkası Sk. No:37, 34110 Fatih, Hoca Paşa, 34110 sirkeci/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 12:00 – 11:00 PM
- Tuesday: 12:00 – 11:00 PM
- Wednesday: 12:00 – 11:00 PM
- Thursday: 12:00 – 11:00 PM
- Friday: 12:00 – 11:00 PM
- Saturday: 12:00 – 11:00 PM
- Sunday: 12:00 – 11:00 PM



Galeyan Restaurant★★★★★ 4.8 (3,401)

1-2 hours

Map

Galeyan Restaurant is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.8★ from 3401 reviews. Located at Alemdar, Ticarethane Sk. No:13/B, 34110 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 9:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Tuesday: 9:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Wednesday: 12:00 PM – 12:00 AM
- Thursday: 9:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Friday: 9:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Saturday: 9:00 AM – 12:00 AM
- Sunday: 9:00 AM – 12:00 AM



Deraliye Terrace★★★★★ 4.8 (1,817)

1-2 hours

Map

Deraliye Terrace is a highly-rated restaurant in Istanbul, rated 4.8★ from 1817 reviews. Located at Alemdar Mahallesi Ticarethane Sokakk. No:10 Teras Kat, Alemdar, 34122 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye.

Opening Hours

- Monday: 11:30 AM – 12:00 AM
- Tuesday: 11:30 AM – 12:00 AM
- Wednesday: 11:30 AM – 12:00 AM
- Thursday: 11:30 AM – 12:00 AM
- Friday: 11:30 AM – 12:00 AM
- Saturday: 11:30 AM – 12:00 AM
- Sunday: 11:30 AM – 12:00 AM

Practical Information

Getting Around Istanbul

Istanbulkart: Essential rechargeable transit card for metros, trams, buses, ferries, and funiculars. Purchase at airport or transit stations (small deposit plus credit). Significant savings versus single tickets. One card shareable among travelers.

Metro & Tram: Extensive network connecting major districts. M1 serves the former Atatürk Airport; Istanbul Airport is served by M11, T1 tram covers Sultanahmet-Beyoğlu-Kabataş. Clean, efficient, and air-conditioned. Operating hours typically 6am-midnight.

Ferries: Iconic transportation across Bosphorus and to islands. Bosphorus ferries connect Europe-Asia in 15-20 minutes. Long cruises available. Operated by Şehir Hatları (public) and private companies. Most scenic transport option.

Buses: Comprehensive coverage including night buses. Can be crowded during rush hours. Metrobüs (BRT) is fast for long distances along main arteries. Use Istanbulkart for all buses.

Funiculars: Tünel (Karaköy-Beyoğlu) and two modern funiculars connecting Kabataş-Taksim and Karaköy-Galata are time-savers on steep hills.

Taxis & Rideshare: Yellow taxis abundant but use BiTaksi or Uber apps for transparency. Ensure meter is running. Expect traffic congestion. Short trips often better on foot or transit.

Walking: Many areas like Sultanahmet, Istiklal Avenue, and waterfront neighborhoods best explored on foot. Wear comfortable shoes hills and cobblestones common.

Tip: Download Moovit or use Google Maps for real-time transit directions. Avoid rush hours (8-9am, 5-7pm) when possible.

✈ Airport Transfer

Istanbul Airport (IST) to city center:

- **M11 Metro:** M11 runs from Istanbul Airport to Gayrettepe in about 30 minutes; allow extra time for the transfer to M2 and onward travel, connecting to the M2 for the city center, check the current fare
- **Havaist Airport Bus:** Frequent coaches to Taksim or Sultanahmet in 70 to 90 minutes depending on traffic, around 250 Turkish lira
- **Taxi:** Metered ride to Sultanahmet or Taksim takes 45 to 60 minutes and costs roughly 1300 to 1600 Turkish lira
- **Private Transfer:** Pre-booked door to door car service to the old city in about 50 minutes, fixed rate near 45 euros

Tourist Passes

Museum Pass Istanbul

Provides **The current pass covers 13 listed museums for five days; it does not include Hagia Sophia. Check the official list and each site's current status, Istanbul Archaeology Museums, Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum, and Chora Church. Valid for 5 consecutive days from first use. Significant savings if visiting multiple sites. Purchase online or at participating museums. Check the current price on the official site.** ***Must-have for museum enthusiasts*** **visiting major attractions. Does not include mosques (free entry) or private museums.**

muze.gov.tr

IstanbulKart

Not a tourist pass but the **essential public transportation card**. Works on all metros, trams, ferries, buses, and funiculars. Rechargeable at machines or kiosks throughout the city. You pay a small deposit plus credit, and each journey costs a low, distance-based fare, depending on transfers. *Saves significant money* versus single-ride tickets (single tickets cost more). One card can be used by multiple people passing it back. Available at airport immediately upon arrival. Absolutely essential for any visitor using public transit. Can also be used at some museums for minor discounts.

www.istanbul.com

Currency & Money

Currency: Turkish Lira (₺ or TRY). Euro and USD widely accepted in tourist areas but at poor exchange rates. Best to use local currency.

ATMs: Widely available throughout the city. Use bank ATMs rather than independent machines for better rates and security. Notify your bank before traveling to avoid card blocks.

Credit Cards: Visa and Mastercard accepted in most hotels, restaurants, and shops. American Express less common. Small vendors and street food stalls prefer cash.

Exchange: Currency exchange offices (döviz) offer better rates than airports. Banks also exchange currency. Avoid exchanging at hotels. Compare rates before exchanging large amounts.

Tipping: 10-15% in restaurants if service charge not included. Round up taxi fares. Tip hotel staff a small amount; hammam attendants expect a tip.

Tip: Keep small bills (₺5, ₺10, ₺20) for tips, street food, and small purchases. Many vendors can't break ₺200 notes.

Safety & Health

General Safety: Istanbul is generally safe for tourists. Use common sense precautions. Watch for pickpockets in crowded areas like Grand Bazaar, Istiklal Avenue, and public transit.

Scams to Avoid: Beware of overly friendly strangers inviting you to bars (bill scam), taxi drivers taking longer routes, and carpet shop pressure tactics. Always agree on taxi price or ensure meter is running.

Water: Tap water is chlorinated and safe but most locals drink bottled water. Restaurants serve bottled water. Stay hydrated, especially in summer.

Healthcare: Excellent private hospitals with English-speaking doctors. Public hospitals crowded but adequate. Travel insurance recommended. Pharmacies (eczane) well-stocked and pharmacists helpful.

Emergency Numbers: Police 155, Ambulance 112, Fire 110, Tourist Police 153 (English-speaking help).

Women Travelers: Istanbul is relatively safe for solo women travelers. Dress modestly in conservative areas. Harassment can occur but is usually verbal. Use official taxis or ride-hailing apps at night.

Language & Communication

Official Language: Turkish. English widely spoken in tourist areas, hotels, and restaurants. Less common in residential neighborhoods and among older generations.

Useful Phrases:

- **Merhaba** - Hello
- **Teşekkür ederim** - Thank you
- **Lütfen** - Please
- **Evet/Hayır** - Yes/No
- **Ne kadar?** - How much?
- **Hesap lütfen** - Bill please
- **Affedersiniz** - Excuse me
- **İngilizce biliyor musunuz?** - Do you speak English?

Internet & SIM Cards: Free WiFi available in most hotels, cafés, and restaurants. Purchase local SIM card (Turkcell, Vodafone, Türk Telekom) at airport or mobile shops. Requires passport registration. Tourist SIM packages offer good data rates.

Where to Stay

Sultanahmet (Old City): Best for first-time visitors. Walking distance to major monuments. Traditional Ottoman hotels and budget guesthouses. Can be touristy but convenient.

Beyoğlu/Taksim: Modern Istanbul with nightlife, dining, and shopping. Good transport connections. Lively atmosphere. Better for repeat visitors seeking local vibe.

Karaköy/Galata: Trendy waterfront area with boutique hotels, great restaurants, and artistic character. Walking distance to both old city and Beyoğlu.

Beşiktaş: Local neighborhood near palaces and Bosphorus. Good value. Less touristy but still convenient. Popular with business travelers.

Kadıköy (Asian Side): Authentic local experience. Excellent food scene. Requires ferry commute to European side attractions but offers real Istanbul life.

Tip: Book accommodations near tram or metro lines for easy transport. Check if breakfast (kahvaltı) is included Turkish breakfast is substantial and delicious.

Food & Dining

Must-Try Dishes:

- **Kebabs:** İskender, Adana, Şiş - various grilled meat preparations
- **Mezes:** Small appetizers like hummus, ezme, haydari, stuffed vine leaves
- **Balık Ekmek:** Fish sandwich from street vendors near Galata Bridge
- **Börek:** Savory pastries filled with cheese, meat, or spinach
- **Lahmacun:** Thin flatbread with minced meat topping
- **Pide:** Turkish pizza with various toppings
- **Baklava:** Sweet pastry with nuts and syrup - try Karaköy Güllüoğlu
- **Turkish Delight (Lokum):** Soft candy in various flavors
- **Simit:** Sesame-covered bread rings sold by street vendors
- **Turkish Tea (Çay):** Strong black tea in tulip glasses

- **Turkish Coffee:** Thick, strong coffee served in small cups

Dining Tips: Lunch is main meal (12-3pm). Dinner late (7-11pm). Service charge (servis ücreti) sometimes included in bill. Tap water free but bottled water charged. Street food is safe and delicious. Try local lokantas (simple restaurants) for authentic, affordable meals.

Dietary Restrictions: Vegetarian options available but not always clearly marked. Vegan more challenging. Halal food everywhere. Inform restaurants of allergies (alerji).

Shopping

What to Buy:

- **Turkish Carpets & Kilims:** Hand-woven rugs - quality varies greatly, bargain hard
- **Ceramics & Tiles:** İznik and Kütahya pottery with traditional designs
- **Turkish Tea & Coffee:** Excellent souvenirs, widely available
- **Spices:** Saffron, sumac, cumin - buy from Spice Bazaar
- **Turkish Delight:** Hafız Mustafa and Hacı Bekir are top brands
- **Evil Eye (Nazar Boncuğu):** Blue glass amulets for protection
- **Leather Goods:** Jackets, bags, shoes - quality leather at good prices
- **Textiles:** Silk scarves, cotton towels (peştemal), traditional fabrics
- **Backgammon Sets:** Beautiful handcrafted boards
- **Olive Oil & Soap:** Natural Turkish products

Shopping Areas: Grand Bazaar for souvenirs and traditional goods. Istiklal Avenue for modern shopping and international brands. Nişantaşı for luxury designer boutiques. Karaköy for vintage and independent designers. Local markets (pazar) on different days in each neighborhood for fresh produce and local products.

Bargaining: Expected in bazaars and small shops. Not appropriate in modern stores with price tags. Start at 50-60% of quoted price. Be polite and walk away if price too high - often brings better offers.

Cultural Etiquette

Mosque Visits: Remove shoes before entering. Women should cover head, shoulders, and knees. Men should cover shoulders and knees. Scarves often provided at entrance. Don't visit during prayer times. Speak quietly and don't point at worshippers.

Dress Code: Istanbul is cosmopolitan and dress is generally casual. Conservative attire required for mosques. Beaches and tourist areas more relaxed. In conservative neighborhoods, modest dress shows respect.

Greetings: Handshakes common in business. Cheek kissing among friends (right-left-right). Wait for women to extend hand first. Elders highly respected - offer seats on public transport.

Dining Etiquette: Wait for host to start eating. Say 'Afiyet olsun' (bon appétit). Bread eaten with meals. Don't refuse tea - accepting shows friendship. Split bills common among young people but older generation often insists on paying.

Gestures: Avoid pointing with finger - use whole hand. Don't show sole of shoe - considered rude. OK sign considered offensive. Clicking tongue means 'no'.

Photography: Ask permission before photographing people, especially women. No photography inside mosques during prayer or in some museums. Military installations and police are off-limits.

Tea Culture: Turkish tea (çay) is social lubricant. Offered everywhere as sign of hospitality. Accepting creates friendly atmosphere. Refusing might seem cold but is acceptable.

Staying Connected

WiFi: Free WiFi available in most hotels, cafés, restaurants, shopping malls, and airports. Quality varies. Many require registration or password.

SIM Cards: Tourist SIM cards available at airport and mobile shops. Major providers: Turkcell (best coverage), Vodafone, Türk Telekom. Requires passport. Packages vary by operator and data allowance. Valid 30 days.

Internet Cafes: Less common now but still exist in tourist areas. Most people use mobile data.

Apps to Download:

- **BiTaksi/Uber:** Taxi and ride-hailing
- **Moovit/Google Maps:** Public transport navigation
- **İBB İstanbul:** Official city app with transport info
- **Yemeksepeti/Getir:** Food delivery
- **Google Translate:** Turkish language support
- **XE Currency:** Currency conversion

Airport Information

Istanbul Airport (IST): Main international airport on European side, 40km north of city center. Opened 2019, modern and massive. Metro M11 line connects to city (low fare; 45 minutes to Gayrettepe, then change to other lines). Havaist airport buses to major areas (check the current fare). Taxis to city center (30-60 minutes depending on traffic). Pre-book transfers for better rates.

Sabiha Gökçen Airport (SAW): Secondary airport on Asian side, 50km from city center. Budget airlines. Havabus to Kadıköy and Taksim (check the current fare). Taxis to the European side. Consider staying on Asian side if arriving here late.

Airport Services: Both airports offer currency exchange (poor rates), ATMs, SIM card shops, duty-free, restaurants, and tourist information desks. Free WiFi available. Istanbul Airport has hotel for transit passengers.

Tip: Get Istanbulkart at airport to use public transport immediately. Have some Turkish Lira for immediate needs. Allow extra time for traffic - Istanbul traffic is notoriously heavy.

Visa Requirements

E-Visa System: Turkey uses electronic visa system. Many nationalities can obtain e-visa online before travel at www.evisa.gov.tr. Process takes minutes, costs vary by nationality (costs vary by nationality). Valid for 180 days, allows stays up to 90 days.

Visa-Free Entry: Citizens of many countries (including EU members, UK, Japan, South Korea) can enter visa-free for tourism up to 90 days within 180-day period. Check current requirements for your nationality.

Passport Validity: Passport must be valid at least 6 months beyond your planned departure date from Turkey.

Entry Requirements: Return ticket and proof of accommodation may be requested at immigration. Travel insurance recommended but not mandatory.

Tip: Apply for e-visa at least 48 hours before travel. Print copy and keep on phone. Immigration usually quick at Istanbul airports.

Electricity & Plugs

Voltage: 220V, 50Hz (same as most of Europe)

Plug Types: Type C and Type F (European two-pin round plugs). If traveling from UK, US, or other regions, bring universal adapter.

Adapters: Available at airports, electronics stores, and some hotels. Better to bring from home.

Charging: Most hotels provide hairdryers. USB charging ports common in modern hotels. Bring power bank for long sightseeing days.

Budget Guide

The Turkish lira loses value quickly, so lira prices go out of date fast. Compare current prices on booking sites, the Istanbulkart fare tables and the museums' own websites before you budget.

- **Budget:** hostel or budget hotel, street food and lokanta lunches, Istanbulkart transit, a mix of free and paid sights.
- **Mid-range:** 3-star or boutique hotel, sit-down restaurants, some taxis, and several museums or tours.
- **Luxury:** 5-star hotels, rooftop dining, private transfers and guided tours.

Money-Saving Tips: Use the Istanbulkart for all public transport, eat where locals do, and take the ferry instead of a taxi.

Festivals & Events

Istanbul Tulip Festival (April): Millions of tulips bloom across city parks, especially Emirgan Park. Free, family-friendly, peak spring event.

Istanbul Music Festival (June): Classical music performances in historic venues. International orchestras and soloists. Tickets required.

Istanbul Jazz Festival (July): Two weeks of jazz, blues, and world music. Indoor and outdoor concerts across city.

Istanbul Biennial (Sept-Nov, odd years): Contemporary art exhibitions in venues citywide. Major international art event.

Ramadan & Eid: Holy month with special atmosphere. Many restaurants closed during day. Iftar (breaking fast) creates festive evenings. Eid celebrations follow with family gatherings and holiday atmosphere.

New Year's Eve (Dec 31): Major celebrations in Taksim Square, Istiklal Avenue, and along Bosphorus. Fireworks, parties, street celebrations.

Republic Day (Oct 29): National holiday celebrating founding of Turkish Republic. Parades, ceremonies, fireworks.

Emergency Contacts

- **Call 112 for emergencies; Turkey consolidated emergency numbers under 112.**
- **Ambulance:** 112
- **Call 112 for emergencies; Turkey consolidated emergency numbers under 112.**
- **Tourist Police:** 153 (English-speaking assistance)
- **Coastguard:** 158
- **International Operator:** 115

Tourist Information: +90 212 233 0592 (Istanbul Tourism Office)

Embassies: Most embassies located in Ankara (capital), but major countries have consulates in Istanbul, primarily in Beyoğlu district. Search '[Country] Consulate Istanbul' for specific contact.

Medical Emergencies: Private hospitals recommended for tourists. Many have 24/7 emergency departments with English-speaking doctors:

- American Hospital: +90 212 444 3777
- Acıbadem Hospitals: +90 444 2554

- Memorial Hospitals: +90 444 7888

Sample Itineraries

Day 1 - Classic Istanbul

- **Morning:** Hagia Sophia → Blue Mosque → Hippodrome (allow 3-4 hours)
- **Lunch:** Local restaurant in Sultanahmet
- **Afternoon:** Topkapi Palace (2-3 hours) → Gülhane Park rest
- **Evening:** Basilica Cistern → dinner near Grand Bazaar

Day 2 - Bazaars & Modern Istanbul

- **Morning:** Grand Bazaar shopping (2-3 hours)
- **Lunch:** Spice Bazaar area → balık ekmek at Galata Bridge
- **Afternoon:** Walk up to Galata Tower → Istiklal Avenue
- **Evening:** Dinner in Karaköy → sunset at waterfront

Day 3 - Bosphorus & Asian Side

- **Morning:** Ferry to Asian side → Kadıköy market exploration
- **Lunch:** Authentic lokanta in Kadıköy
- **Afternoon:** Bosphorus cruise (long tour) or palace visits (Dolmabahçe)
- **Evening:** Ortaköy waterfront → kumpir dinner

Day 4 - Culture & Relaxation

- **Morning:** Süleymaniye Mosque → Istanbul University area
- **Lunch:** Traditional Turkish in Süleymaniye
- **Afternoon:** Turkish bath experience (hammam) 2-3 hours
- **Evening:** Whirling Dervishes ceremony → dinner in Beyoğlu

Day 5 - Hidden Gems

- **Morning:** Balat colorful neighborhood → Bulgarian Church
- **Lunch:** Trendy café in Balat
- **Afternoon:** Chora Church mosaics → Eyüp Sultan Mosque → Pierre Loti Hill
- **Evening:** Return to favorite neighborhood for farewell dinner

Flexibility: Adjust timing based on your pace. Allow buffer time for getting lost (part of the fun!), traffic delays, and spontaneous discoveries. Istanbul rewards wandering.

Seasonal Tips

Spring (April-May): Pack layers - mornings cool, afternoons warm. Umbrella for occasional rain. Perfect for outdoor activities. Book accommodations ahead for Tulip Festival period. Longer daylight hours great for sightseeing.

Summer (June-August): Light, breathable clothing. Sunscreen and hat essential. Carry water bottle. Seek shade during midday heat. Many locals leave for vacation - some smaller businesses closed. Beaches and Princes' Islands ideal. Night activities more comfortable than day.

Autumn (September-November): Similar to spring with golden light perfect for photography. Light jacket for evenings. Fewer tourists than summer. Harvest season means fresh produce at markets. Ideal walking weather.

Winter (December-March): Warm coat, waterproof jacket, umbrella essential. Rain common. Snow occasional (beautiful but disruptive). Indoor attractions perfect. Hamams especially appealing. Cheaper hotels and fewer crowds at major sites. Holiday atmosphere in December.

Accessibility Information

Mobility: Istanbul's historic areas have cobblestones, steep hills, and uneven surfaces challenging for wheelchairs. Modern areas like shopping malls, new museums, and hotels are generally accessible.

Public Transport: Newer trams, metros, and ferries have wheelchair access. Older vehicles and stations may lack elevators. Some stations have lifts (asansör). Check İBB Istanbul app for accessible routes.

Accessible Attractions: Major sites like Hagia Sophia, Blue Mosque (main floor), and newer museums have ramps and elevators. Topkapi Palace challenging due to terrain. Galata Tower has elevator but limited space. Call ahead to confirm access.

Taxis: Standard taxis not wheelchair-accessible. Some accessible taxi services available - book through hotels or specialized companies.

Assistance: Tourist information centers can help arrange accessible tours and transportation. Many hotels offer assistance and accessible rooms - specify needs when booking.

Best Photo Spots

- **Sultanahmet Square:** Blue Mosque with Hagia Sophia in background - early morning or sunset
- **Galata Bridge:** Fishermen with mosques in background, best at golden hour
- **Galata Tower Top:** 360° panoramic city views
- **Pierre Loti Hill:** Golden Horn views, sunset ideal
- **Ortaköy Mosque:** Waterfront mosque with Bosphorus Bridge backdrop
- **Balat Streets:** Colorful houses, Instagram-famous
- **Süleymaniye Mosque Courtyard:** City views over Golden Horn
- **Maiden's Tower:** From Üsküdar or Salacak waterfront
- **Rumeli Fortress:** Medieval walls along Bosphorus
- **Çamlıca Hill:** Highest point in Istanbul, panoramic views
- **Bosphorus Ferry:** Moving shots of waterfront palaces and bridges

Golden Hour: Sunrise around 6-7am, sunset around 6-8pm depending on season. Mosques beautifully lit after dark. Blue hour creates magical atmosphere.