



# ISTANBUL, NOT CONSTANTINOPLE

From Byzantium to Constantinople and then Istanbul, explore the chaotic history of Turkey's most famous city through some of its best known monuments

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Istanbul is a divided city in more ways than one. With the blue waters of the Bosphorus strait flowing through the middle, it is the point at which Europe meets Asia, the west meets the east and, looking back, where Christianity and Islam so often merged.

Its fascinating confusion of cultures and religions makes Istanbul a haven for anyone with even an inkling of interest in history. The city has had many names. One of its earliest incarnations was Byzantium, the birthplace and centre of the Byzantine empire from the seventh century BC. By 330AD, Constantine the Great had declared the city as the new capital of the Roman Empire, which

was soon renamed Constantinople after the man himself. Following that were the Ottoman Turks, who finally took control of Istanbul in the fifteenth century, making it the centre of the powerful Ottoman Empire until it collapsed in the 1920s and the city was stripped of its title as capital.

As the capital of three epic empires it's little wonder that Istanbul has featured in the top three destinations in the Travels' Choice Awards, by Trip Advisor, for the last two years.

Ancient ruins and imposing historical monuments can be found everywhere in the city centre and it is through these monuments that the city's chaotic past can be best understood.



Previous page: First a cathedral, the Hagia Sophia was converted to a Mosque by the Ottomans

Left: The Galata Tower looks out over the Bosphorus and Istanbul

Below left: Sultan Ahmed Mosque is famous for its thousands of blue tiles

Below right: Ancient columns and carvings of Medusa are found in the Basilica Cistern

**Basilica Cistern**

Although essentially an underground reservoir, the Basilica Cistern is impressive not only for its age – work began on it in 532AD – but also for the 336 columns that hold it up and the two daunting stone Medusa heads that are found resting at odd angles at one end. Built by one of the most famous Byzantine leaders, Emperor Justinian, to serve the nearby palace, the cistern was left abandoned during the Ottoman Empire until the twentieth century when it was rediscovered and renovated.

**Hagia Sophia**

No architecture in Istanbul embodies the city's past better than Hagia Sophia, (otherwise known as the Aya Sofya). As Ugur Ördök, an Istanbul tour guide for Helen Holidays, says, "It's the mother of constructions, the greatest architectural beauty of the Byzantium and Ottoman Empires. Once the greatest church and then becoming the greatest mosque."

Clearly determined to impress, in 537 AD Emperor Justinian invested in the towering cathedral, complete with domes more than 50 metres high and more than 100 columns. It's said that it took approximately 1,300 workers to build.

In 1453, it was transformed into a mosque after Mehmet the Conqueror, as his name suggests, conquered Constantinople and brought it under Ottoman Empire rule. Rather than destroy the Christian frescos, Mehmet covered them with wooden slabs. As such, the monument is not only a fantastic example of Byzantine and Ottoman architecture but the contemporary Christian and Islamic styles as well.

**Galata Tower**

Just across the water from the Hagia Sophia is Galata Tower, jutting up and above its surroundings. A simple stone structure built in 1348 as a watch tower by the Genoese community, it may not be ornate but even today it gives visitors 360-degree views across the Bosphorus and Istanbul's historic centre. It was fortunate to survive the conquest of the Ottoman Turks in the fifteenth century.





The Topkapı Palace was the centre of the Ottoman Empire for close to five centuries

### Grand Bazaar

Now one of the world's top tourist attractions and largest covered markets boasting over 4,400 shops, it's hard to believe that the Grand Bazaar began life as a small wooden structure built under the order of Mehmet the Conqueror in 1461 – just a matter of years after invading the city.

“Each street of the bazaar was for one particular material,” explains Ugur. “On the street of the leatherworkers only leather shops were allowed, on the goldsmiths street were jewellery shops.”

As the years and decades passed more streets were added. This development can be seen in the different architectural styles and details found throughout the long corridors and archways in this labyrinth of sights, smells, sounds and vibrant stalls.

### Topkapı Palace

Under Mehmet the Conqueror – clearly keen on construction – work on the Topkapı Palace began in the late fifteenth century. For almost 500 years, it was the seat of Ottoman Empire, home to the ruling sultans, their courtiers as well as their hundreds of concubines, who resided in the harem. Like the Grand Bazaar, a variety of architectural styles can be found among the series of gateways, courtyards and chambers.

### Sultan Ahmed Mosque

Its more common name the Blue Mosque comes from the thousands of beautiful blue iznik tiles that adorn what is a great example of Ottoman architecture as well as a leader's desire to show off.

Ugur explains, “Sultan Ahmed I had the aim to build a great mosque as big as

the Hagia Sophia and to make his name known in history.”

Built between 1606 and 1616 by the royal architect Mehmet Aga, the cascade of domes and six minarets make it worthy competition to the Hagia Sophia, which stands opposite. According to the tour guide, the story goes that “in that period there was only one mosque that had six minarets and that was the Masjid al Haram in Makkah. To be respectful to that mosque the sultan had one more minaret built and sent to Makkah.”

Sadly the patron did not have long to enjoy it as he died about a year after completion – his tomb can still be found on the site.



Turkish Airlines offers twice-daily flights to Istanbul Atatürk International from Dubai International. [turkishairlines.com](http://turkishairlines.com)