

GOING PLACES #2

JOHN COONEY



ISTANBUL

TURKISH DELIGHT



If you travel enough to places near and far, they start to look a bit the same. I mean, see one big city – you’ve seen them all. But not so this one. When you spot a forest of spiky minarets thrusting above the skyline ... when you hear the cry of *muezzins*, calling Muslim devotees to prayer ... when you pick up the tangy aroma of spice markets, and the smell of lamb-kebab roasting at kerbside rotisseries ... you know you’re in Istanbul!

There's something special about viewing a city from the sea. And watching from the deck-rail of our ship as Istanbul took shape through the early-morning haze was a truly magic moment. The harbour was waking up. Boats and barges large and small were poking about in the channel. The sun was reflecting here and there off the domes of huge mosques. And I felt a bit like Sinbad the Sailor in *Disney's 'Legend of the Seven Seas'* ...

(Yes, I know. That kids' cartoon is set in Persia, not Turkey. But why let the facts get in the way of a good story?)

Like other big cities in Europe, this is old (known as Istanbul for nearly 600 years, Constantinople for 1000 years before that, and Byzantium for 1000 years before that) – and full (10–12 million people, and growing fast). And like other big, old, full cities it has noise, chaos, pollution, traffic jams and high-rise buildings.

But Istanbul feels more exciting, somehow. More alive. More energetic. As one travel-book observes, *"Like strong Turkish coffee, Istanbul can be gritty. But its rich flavour is bracing!"*

That coffee, by the way, is brewed (sugar included) in narrow-necked, long-handled pots called *ibriks*, then poured (thick and black) into small cups. And, having learned the hard way, I should warn you: (i) let the dregs settle before you take a gulp, and (ii) don't stir, whatever you do!

The previous afternoon, we'd said goodbye to the Greek Isles in the blue Aegean Sea. And, during the night, our ship slipped quietly through the Dardanelles – the narrow strait that witnessed the siege of Troy way back in 1184 BC and the fateful battle between Anzacs and Turks during World War 1. (Some of us

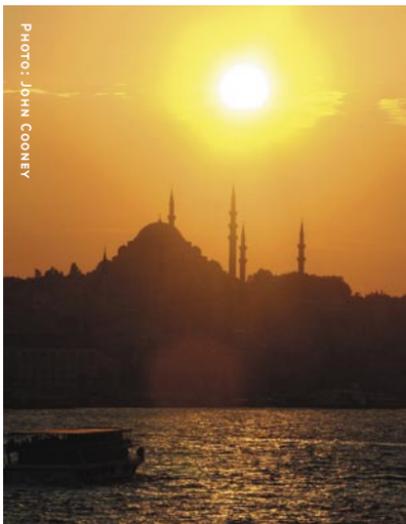


PHOTO: JOHN GOONEY

stayed out on deck till the wee small hours and watched the Gallipoli Monument glide slowly past in the dark distance – all lit-up and ghostly and thought-provoker.)

Istanbul straddles both sides of an even narrower strait, the Bosphorus. In fact, this vibrant city straddles two continents – Europe and Asia (which is more than enough straddling, I reckon).

After disembarking, cameras in one hand and water-bottles in the other, we headed for the landmark we'd spotted earlier across the waters. The vast, expansive Blue Mosque of Sultan Ahmet was built in the early 1600s – partly (at least) to show the Christians that the Ottoman culture could produce something as good as the Hagia Sophia (but more of that in a moment).

Visible from all over the city, it's studded with darkish domes, surrounded by six teetering minarets, and decorated inside with 20,000 shimmering blue Iznik tiles (from which it gets its name). Standing



PHOTO: CIGDEN METIN (DREAMSTIME.COM)



alongside one of the monstrous marble pillars and gazing into the beautiful echoing ceiling of the main dome made me feel slightly insignificant, I must confess.

Just a short walk away is another Istanbul biggie, the one-time royal residence of sultans and their harems: Topkapi Palace. This isn't a single-grand-building-type palace but a complex of courtyards, pavilions, fountains, armouries and living quarters. And those gloriously tiled walls could tell a few stories, I bet, of plotting rulers, scheming wives and treachery.

Topkapi today is Istanbul's most prized museum, crammed with bejewelled weapons, royal leftovers, diamonds the size of golfballs, and holy relics – including a letter said to be from the Prophet Muhammad (plus some of his whiskers), and a skull fragment said to be from headless John the Baptist.

But a confession: my wife and I get museumed-out quickly. And, when our noses led us to a café, we just-as-quickly grabbed a table and practised the ancient Turkish art of coffee-drinking. Mmm ...

Something else that makes Turkey different is its secular constitution. And our guide for the day – the charming, experienced Aydin – explained that Istanbul has achieved something few other cities can claim: Muslims, Christians and Jews have lived side-by-side for centuries. And it's not hard to find churches and synagogues in this mainly Muslim religious melting pot.

One famous example was next on our "don't-miss" list: the Hagia Sophia (or, in Turkish, *Aya Sofya* – Holy Wisdom). Built in 537 AD, it held pride-of-place as the Christian world's biggest basilica for 1000 years, until St Peter's overtook it in Rome. But when the Turks overran Constantinople in 1453, they wasted no time turning the church into a mosque, plastering over the Christian symbols and raising four minarets.

It has since been turned into a yet-another-museum, with faded bits of both traditions being lovingly restored. The day we were there, a gigantic scaffolding tower stood in one corner of the vast empty space, but it didn't spoil the impact as we stood beneath the massive soaring dome.



PHOTO: JOHN COONEY



You can't help getting a sore neck as you walk around Hagia Sophia, gazing heavenward at its galleries, mosaics and Arabic symbols. And you can't help wondering why the roof doesn't fall in. (It has, actually, three times, and been improved with each rebuild!)

There's so much more to sample in Istanbul. Like yummy Turkish Delight, a soft, chewy, jelly-like sweet (that's hard to stop eating once you start). Like the Grand Bazaar (or Grand Tourist Trap) where you can bargain-till-you're-broke (in more than 4000 shops) for gold, jewellery, ceramics, clothes, antiques, rugs and endless Turkish junk

(which looks utterly irresistible until you get it home: "Where on earth are we gonna put this?").

If you're so inclined you can take the plunge in an authentic Turkish Bath ... swivel your hips at a belly-dance class ... try a glass of raki (Turkey's national brew) with melon and feta cheese ... or even have a suck on a *nargile* or *hookah* (the long-stemmed waterpipe favoured by older Turkish men).

We had no time for such distractions, however. A fiery orange sun was trying to set over Istanbul, and our ship was about to depart.

Next time, maybe ...?



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