



Night view of Istanbul, Turkey.
Yusuf Anil Akduygu / iStockPhoto.com

PEOPLE & PLACES

Snapshot: Istanbul

Istanbul's vastly growing population and blending of cultures make it one of the most dynamic cities in the world.

By Lisa Lubin
Smithsonian.com, October 21, 2008

With a skyline studded with domes and minarets, Istanbul is one of the truly great romantic cities. In Turkey's largest city, the continents of Europe and Asia come together as West meets East, separated only by the 18 miles of the Bosphorus Strait that stretches from the Black Sea in the north to the Sea of Marmara in the south. And in the less literal sense, on the vibrant streets of this city of 12 million people, miniskirts and trendy boots mingle with colorful Muslim head scarves and prayer beads.

Origins:

Istanbul is a treasure trove of history still being uncovered. Archaeological remains show that people have inhabited the immediate area of present-day Istanbul for tens of thousands of years. In 2008, during the construction of the new Marmaray rail tunnel (connecting the European and Asian sides of Istanbul), a previously unknown settlement dating from 6500 BC has been discovered. In its long history, Istanbul served as the capital city of the Roman Empire (330–395), the Byzantine Empire (395–1204 and 1261–1453), the Latin Empire (1204–1261), and the Ottoman Empire (1453–1922). The city was recently chosen as joint European Capital of Culture for 2010. Istanbul has continued to expand dramatically; today its population is approximately 13 million and increases at an estimated 700,000 immigrants per year. Industry has expanded even as tourism has grown. It continues to be a city that creates its own history at the intersection where both continents meet.

Then and Now:

Istanbul's history traces back from Byzantium to Constantinople to its place as capital of the Ottoman Empire, the most powerful Islamic empire in the world. Today it pulsates as Turkey's cultural heart and business center. Urban sprawl has created an Istanbul larger in area than the state of Rhode Island and more populous than all of Greece or Belgium.

Turkey continues to be the center of news and some controversy. In October 2005 negotiations began between Turkey and the European Union for Turkey to be considered as a possible member of the EU in the future. A conflict persists between the 20-25% Kurdish population and the Turkish government. For many citizens, women's dress has become an issue that defines whether a Muslim is secularist or religious. Headscarves, worn by many women for religious reasons, are symbolic of a cultural clash in government between conservatives and modernists.

Appeal:

Istanbul is a jewel box of old and new. Skyscrapers and some of Europe's largest shopping malls cater to the more affluent set while the old quarter, parts of which are on the UNESCO World Heritage List, continues to dazzle locals and tourists alike with its cobblestone streets, awe-inspiring centuries-old mosques, and the grandeur of the Topkapi Palace which was the official and primary residence of the Ottoman Sultans, from 1465 to 1853. Considered to be the world's fourth largest cathedral, the magnificent Hagia Sophia museum was originally built by Byzantine Emperor Justinian in 537 AD. Originally a Byzantine church and later an Ottoman mosque, this marvel is universally acknowledged as one of the great buildings of the world. Across this growing city, you can explore the streets where crusaders once marched; admire mosques that are the most sublime architectural expressions of Islamic piety; peer into the sultan's harem; and hunt for bargains in the world's original shopping mall, the Grand Bazaar, one of the largest covered markets in the world with more than 58 streets and 6,000 shops, and between 250,000 and 400,000 visitors daily.

Who Goes Here:

PHOTO GALLERY



Snapshot: Istanbul
Explore more photos from the story

Istanbul's appeal among tourists is a result of the vibrant cultures that have flourished in the city and the melting pot of different religions that have existed side by side throughout history. In 2007, more than twenty-seven million tourists visited Turkey. In the lively and historical city of Istanbul, there are thousands of hotels and other tourist oriented industries in the city, catering to both vacationers and visiting professionals. As one of the world's fastest growing economies, and Turkey's financial capital, Istanbul has also become a large center for business and business travelers. According to Forbes magazine, Istanbul had a total of 35 billionaires as of March 2008, ranking 4th in the world behind Moscow (74 billionaires), New York City (71 billionaires) and London (36 billionaires).

Famous Sons and Daughters:

Elia Kazan (September 7, 1909 – September 28, 2003) was born Elias Kazanjoglou in the capital city of the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) to a Greek family. He was an Academy Award-winning film and theatre director, Tony Award-winning theatrical producer, screenwriter, novelist and cofounder of the influential Actors Studio in New York in 1947. He directed such Broadway plays as *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. He directed the film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *On the Waterfront*, and many other films.

Ferit Orhan Pamuk (born June 7, 1952 in Istanbul) is a Turkish novelist and professor of comparative literature at Columbia University. Pamuk is one of Turkey's most prominent novelists and his work has sold over seven million books in more than fifty languages, making him the country's best-selling writer. His fourth novel, *New Life*, became the fastest-selling book in Turkish history. Pamuk's novel *Kar* (English translation, *Snow*), explores the conflict between Islamism and Westernism in modern Turkey. The *New York Times* listed *Snow* as one of its Ten Best Books of 2004. Pamuk is the recipient of numerous national and international literary awards. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006, becoming the first Turkish person to receive a Nobel Prize.



Comments

Your enlightening report on Istanbul was most refreshing and up-to-date!! The fascination for Turkey and its array of fabulous cities (Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir in particular) grows as people are made more aware of what a trip to this area awaits them. Fortunately for my family, we had occasion to be stationed three times in this wondrous country -- twice to Incirlik Air Base in Adana and once at Cigli AFB in Izmir. The years there are priceless to us as our memories of that beautiful and historic country are forever embedded in our hearts and minds. We found the people to be friendly, courteous and the best of hosts. The whole area is rich in history and culture and everyone leaves after a tour there more enlightened and hungry to learn even more about Turkey. To us, it was a celebration of the very old and embracing of the new. You depart such a fascinating place with much regret and sadness having made great friends and learned more than you ever dreamed of. We all want to return one day and bask in the warmth and hospitality of some of the best friends America has!! Gule - Gule. The Leslie Morgan Family

Posted by Dottie Morgan on November 5, 2008 | 02:04PM