

# 48 HOURS in istanbul

— BY VANESSA MURRAY —

*Situated on the cusp of Asia and Europe, Istanbul has always been marked by contrasts – old and new, east and west, secular and sacred. It is cutting-edge and conservative, and though at least two millennia old, thrillingly hip. Here, highlights of a two-day trip.*





## Day One

### 08.30

Istanbul is sprawling, and one of the best ways to get some perspective is from above. We enjoy a traditional Turkish breakfast on the rooftop of the Deniz Konak Hotel. From here, we have a view out over the tumbling rooftops of the ancient, tourist-friendly heart of the old city, Sultanahmet, to the Black Sea beyond. Breakfast is hearty and delicious: a cheesy potato dish called *kremali patates*; hard-boiled eggs sprinkled with flaked red pepper, peppermint and thyme; meats; sliced cucumber and tomato; bread and butter dripping with honey, and scalding, sweet tea.

### 09.30

The autumn sun is shining, so we head out to explore Sultanahmet, which is perfect for follow-your-nose wandering. We make our way north up narrow, cobbled streets, stopping to take in the grandeur of the Hagia Sophia – a basilica turned mosque turned museum – and the Blue Mosque, which sit opposite each other and are the jewels in Istanbul’s historic crown. A little further on and we are in the leafy, well-kept grounds of the Topkapi Palace complex, a vast compound that was once the primary residence of the Ottoman sultans for 400 years of their 624-year reign.

### 11.00

We consider visiting the palace itself, but the queue is literally hundreds deep (best to fast-track by booking tickets in advance), so we opt for the relatively undiscovered crumbling grandeur of the Istanbul Arkeoloji Muzeleri, the city’s complex of archaeological museums. Home to three gallery spaces (the Archaeological Museum, the Museum of the Ancient Orient and the Museum of Islamic Art), it holds more than one million

objects from almost all eras and civilizations in world history, and is a treasure trove for history buffs and ingenues alike.

### 13.00

There are food options a-plenty in this part of town, but the delicious kebabs at Hamdi, a small restaurant staffed by a friendly team, are hard to pass up. We follow our lunch with a small, strong coffee, which sets us up for the afternoon ahead.

### 14.00

The 550-year-old Grand Bazaar and the 430-year-old Egyptian Spice Market are nearby. We visit them both and get drawn into the touting and haggling that characterises Turkish market life. The stallholders proceed with charm and finesse; one could be mistaken for thinking the many salesmen working the streets of this city – Europe’s third largest – are in training for an elite sport.

### 16.30

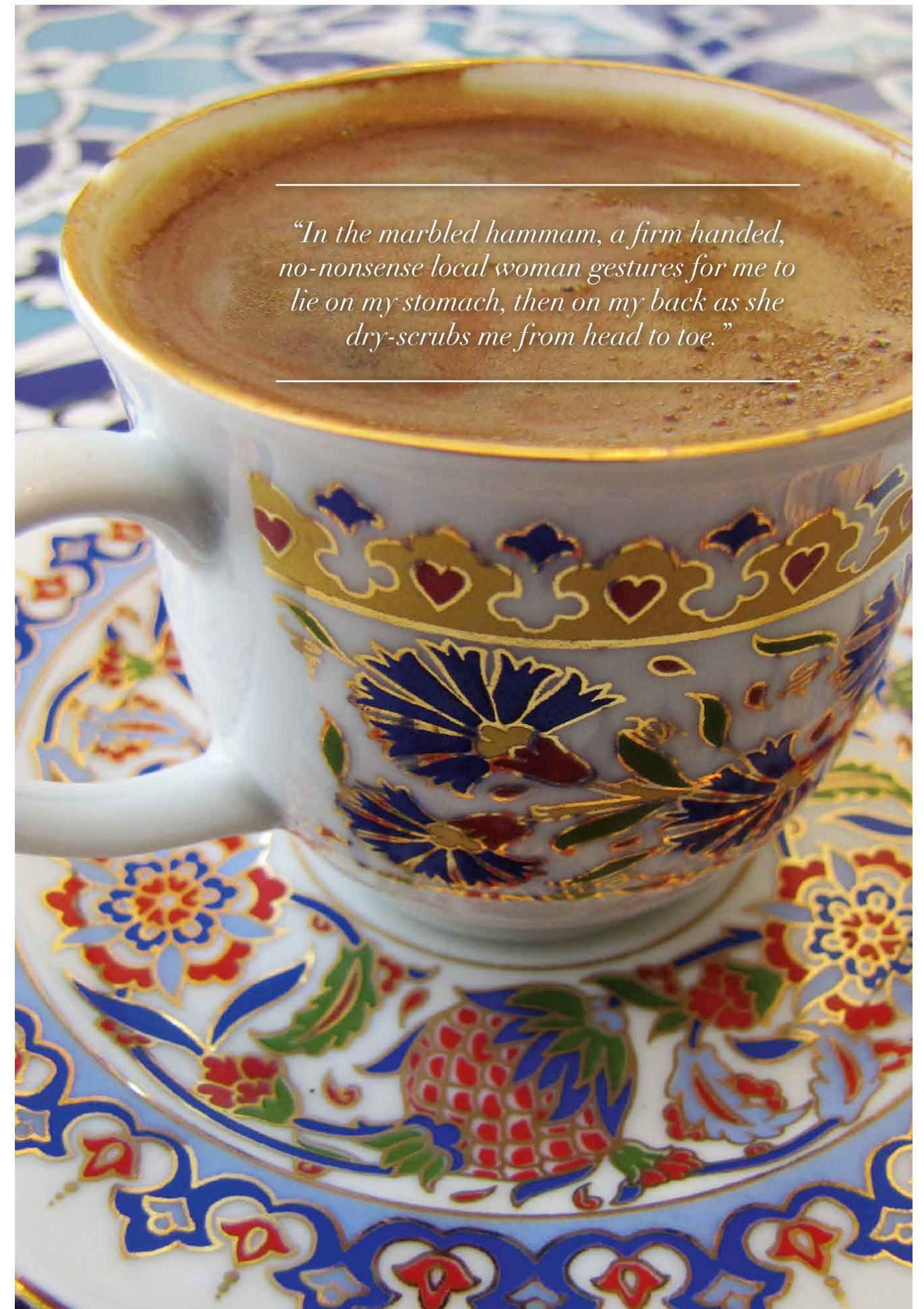
We pay an indulgent visit to the Cemberlitas Hamami bathhouse, which operates in much the same way as it did when it was designed and completed in 1584 by the royal architect Sinan. This means separate, equally opulent quarters for men and women, and it means bathing in your birthday suit in public. First, I spend 20 minutes of pore-opening relaxation on a large hot stone in a circular room beneath a vast and echoing domed ceiling. Next, a firm-handed, no-nonsense local

#### FULL CIRCLE

**Below:** The dramatic dining room at 360 restaurant.

**Right:** Turkish coffee as it should be: strong, short and scalding.

**Opening spread:** Madien’s Tower sits on a small islet at the southern entrance of the Bosphorus.

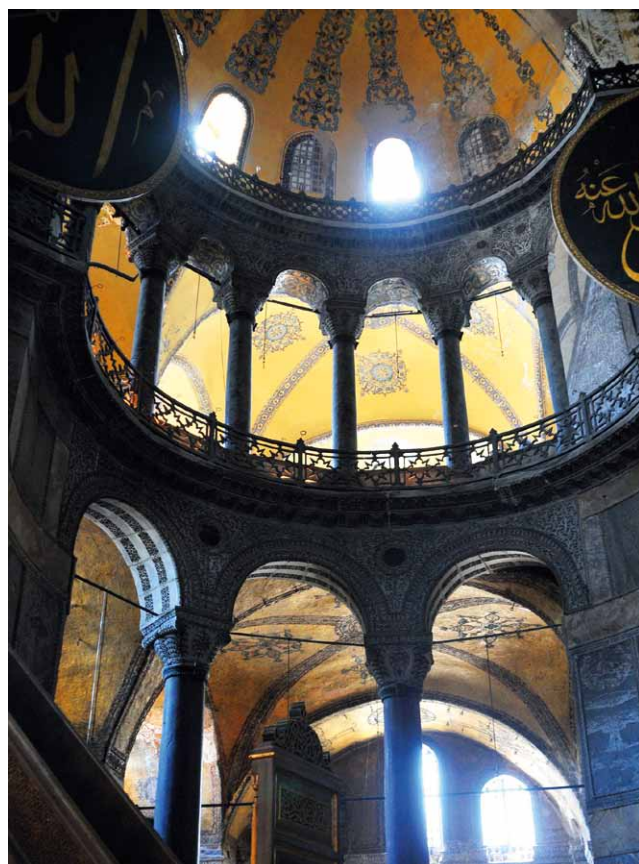


*“In the marbled hammam, a firm handed, no-nonsense local woman gestures for me to lie on my stomach, then on my back as she dry-scrubs me from head to toe.”*





woman gestures for me to lie on my stomach, then on my back as she dry-scrubs me from head to toe. Then she pours a bowl of warm water over my head, lathers me with soap and scrubs me down again. The scrub and the oily massage I opt for afterwards leave my skin looking and feeling amazing, and is one of the most profoundly invigorating and oddly comforting experiences I've ever had.



#### TURKISH DELIGHTS

**Clockwise from left:** Bath time at Cemberlitas Hamami; iskender kebab is a Turkish staple; fine dining at 360 restaurant; lights on display at the Grand Bazaar; Istanbul's stunning Hagia Sophia basilica.

#### 19.30

We float out of the baths and back down the streets to Dede Efendi House, where we attend a Sufi music concert and whirling dervish ceremony. Men dressed in long white gowns and tall brown hats enter the room and proceed through a precise ritual of sound and movement – it's an enchanting insight into the beauty and mysticism of Sufism (a branch of Islam). The longest and most intriguing stage is the four *sals*, in which the men spin on their left heels, raise their right palms to the sky and their left pointing towards the ground in a representation of the spiritual journey that every believer goes through.

#### 20.30

Watching all that twirling has really worked up our appetites. We follow our concierge's advice and drop in to Balıkcı Sabahattin, a simple wooden restaurant with a reputation for serving some of the best fish in Istanbul. It's a warm and pleasant evening so we dine alfresco in the leafy courtyard, selecting red sea bream and a range of salads. The fish comes whole from the grill and is crisp on the outside and tender on the inside – perfect. We follow it with two tall, thin glasses of *raki*, a traditional anise-flavoured clear spirit that turns a cloudy white when iced water is added.

## Day Two

#### 08.00

For centuries, this city – which has been known by at least 10 other names, including Byzantium and Constantinople – has been a major European trading port. It still is, so we start the day with a cruise tour on the Bosphorus Strait that runs between the Black and Marmara Seas. The Bosphorus quite literally cuts Istanbul in two: on one side is the fast-paced European metropolis; on the other the quieter, but no less sprawling Asian side. The tour takes around four hours and gives an excellent, wind-blown sense of Istanbul's vast old world grandeur. It also includes a quick stop at the Spice Market, where we pick up fresh, still-warm pastries for breakfast.

#### 12.00

The tour driver would've happily taken us back to our hotel, but we're not far from the thriving, modern heart of this huge metropolis, and we're keen to check it out. We buy a token and jump on board a passing tram, disembarking near Istiklal Street in the historic Beyoğlu district. An elegant, three-kilometre-long pedestrian street, Istiklal boasts music and bookstores, fashion boutiques, art galleries, libraries, cafés, restaurants, pubs, nightclubs... and what we're really after, historic patisseries and chocolateries. It's okay to have cake for lunch when you're on holiday, right? Right. So we call in to a local institution, Saray Muhallebisi, and sample delights including *lor tatlısı*, a sweet pastry made from soft uncured

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cheese, and *tavuk gogsay*, a pudding made with rice flour and very finely chopped chicken breast (yes, chicken breast). Never fear – if you're not such a sweet tooth, they also have a fantastic range of savoury dishes.

#### 14:00

Istanbul is often referred to as the Gateway to the East, and one glance at its hilly banks reveals why – all over the city, the domes and minarets of Istanbul's 2,600 mosques dominate the skyline. Many are open to visitors, and once back in Sultanahmet we pay a visit to the stunning and iconic Sultanahmet Camii, or Blue Mosque. Built between 1609 and 1616, it is considered the last great mosque of the classical Ottoman Empire. It is still a place of worship, shutting for half an hour or so during each of the six daily prayers.

#### 16:00

It's time to upgrade, so we head back into the city – in a taxi this time – and check in to our new hotel, the TomTom Suites. Located in the Galata district, the building was once a home for French nuns but today has been renovated into a comfortable modern hotel with 20 suites and a panoramic view of the old town.

#### 19:00

As Istanbul straddles two continents, it seems appropriate to check out the European-Asian fusion food scene. We dine at Changa, a fashionable restaurant headed by Kiwi chef Peter Gordon and spread across four floors of an Art Nouveau building – we love the glass-ceilinged kitchen you can walk across and peer into. It's not especially Turkish or especially cheap, but it is especially good. After an indulgent three-course dinner – the standout dish for me was the wasabi and salmon tortellini with sautéed porcini mushrooms and a creamy lemongrass sauce – we make sure to swing by Taksim Square, where the Cumhuriyet Aniti, or Monument of the Republic, resides. Inaugurated in 1928, the monument commemorates the fifth anniversary of the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, following the Turkish War of Independence.

#### 22:00

Istanbul is famous for its nightlife, and Galata is just the district for it. We head to 360 Istanbul, a restaurant, bar and club all in one (though admittedly, in separate rooms) with stunning views of the city and the Bosphorus Strait. We have cocktails in the bar until the nightclub opens, around midnight – the beginning of a long and fun night partying with locals and fellow tourists alike. •

Photography by Vanessa Murray and courtesy of Turkish Tourism, 360 Istanbul, Cemberlitas Hamami and gototurkey.com

SPIRE CALLING

Above: Unbroken views over the city from the 360 restaurant rooftop.



## travel facts

### GETTING THERE

Asiana flies to Istanbul via Seoul, South Korea. 1300-767-234; [au.flyasiana.com](http://au.flyasiana.com)

Emirates flies regularly to Istanbul from Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney. 1300-303-777; [emirates.com](http://emirates.com)

Etihaad Airways flies to Istanbul from Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney. 1300-532-215; [etihad.com](http://etihad.com)

### WHEN TO GO

Summer can be hot and muggy, winter cold and snowy in Istanbul, making spring (April through June) and autumn (October through November) the best times to visit. Istanbul's lively arts and culture scene kicks off in spring with the Istanbul Film Festival in April, Theatre Festival in May, Music Festival in June, and Jazz Festival in July. The seven-week-long International Istanbul Biennial begins in April and takes place in odd-numbered years.

### GETTING AROUND

The Greece and Mediterranean Travel Centre offers guided tours around Turkey, including Istanbul. 61-2/8388-6900; [grecemedtravel.com](http://grecemedtravel.com)

### WHERE TO STAY

- Deniz. 90-212/518-9595; [denizhouses.com](http://denizhouses.com)
- Hotel Sultania. 90-212/528-0806; [hotelsultania.com](http://hotelsultania.com)
- Neorion Hotel. 90-212/527-9090; [neorionhotel.com](http://neorionhotel.com)
- TomTom Suites. 90-212/292-4949; [tomtomsuites.com](http://tomtomsuites.com)

### FURTHER INFORMATION

There is no official tourist body for Turkey in Australia. The tourism website is [goturkey.com](http://goturkey.com)

[vacationsandtravelmag.com](http://vacationsandtravelmag.com)

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