

13 THINGS TO DO IN ISTANBUL

Text & Images By Mike Smith

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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SULTANAHMET SQUARE HISTORICAL CENTER

Yes I know it's a cliché but East really does meet West and Europe does meet Asia and religions live side by side in Istanbul formerly known as Byzantium and Constantinople; now a cultural melting pot. Ancient traditions, an interesting cultural mix and modern infrastructure make Istanbul a Turkish delight. A great place to start a tour is Sultanahmet Square; packed with history and amazing architecture it is the heart of the tourist zone. The square itself, once a horse racing track still contains ancient columns and obelisks including The Theodosius Obelisk and The Serpentine Column.



SULTANAHMET MOSQUE OR BLUE MOSQUE

The pride of the square is Sultanahmet Mosque, popularly called the Blue Mosque because of its beautiful interior, with blue tiles dominating. Built in the early 17th Century it has six minarets. Dress conservatively and be prepared to queue. There is a small but high quality street of shops at the back of the mosque to buy souvenirs.





LUNCH

It gets pretty hot and dry in Istanbul in summer. I was there in Ramadan and was a little concerned it might be difficult to get lunch and alcohol. Fear not; life goes on as normal for those not fasting and Istanbul has a great selection of food. Fruit, breads, pastries and Turkey's answer to McDonalds - Donner Kebab all featured in my lunches most of which were taken al fresco.



THE GRAND BAZAAR

For a change of scene head to the Grand Bazaar, the largest covered market in Istanbul. I got hopelessly lost inside the 65 streets and over 3,000 shops but that just added to the fun. You have to haggle, even when buying a coffee or beer! I ended up with a lovely camel bone painted box featuring a harem and olive soaps in lovely tins!

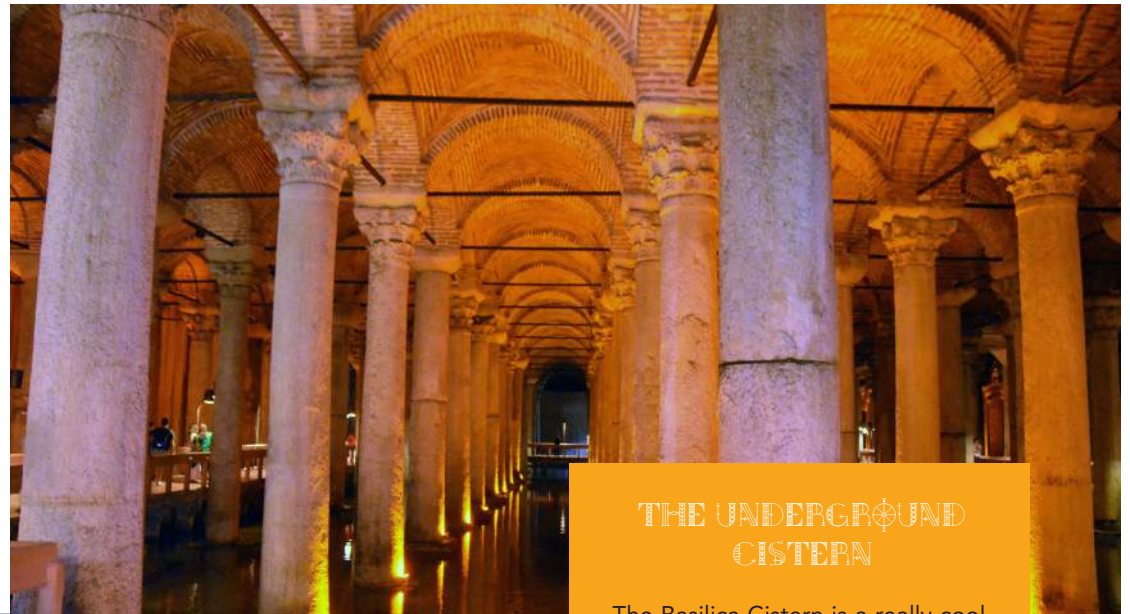


HAGIA SOPHIA

Hagia Sophia was once the world's greatest cathedral. Built in 537AD it was converted to a mosque after the Turkish conquest and is now a museum with vast open spaces and stunning mosaics on the ceilings.

SULTANAHHIETHMOSQUE OR BLUE MOSQUE

Topkapi Palace is number one on my list of places to visit in Istanbul. Topkapi Palace was the heart of the Ottoman Empire and home to Sultans and their harems! I arrived early in the morning and spent five hours admiring the various structures. This sprawling complex is "littered" with absolutely fantastic pavilions, kitchens, meeting places and terraces. The furniture and details of tiles and mosaics are superb. The Harem alone contains 250 rooms. Don't miss it. Let your imagination run wild!

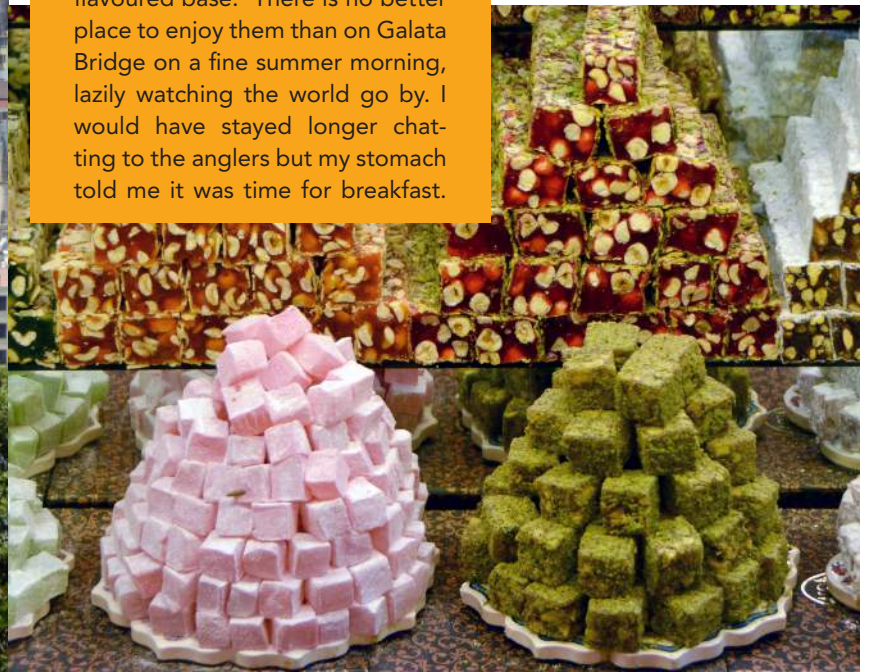
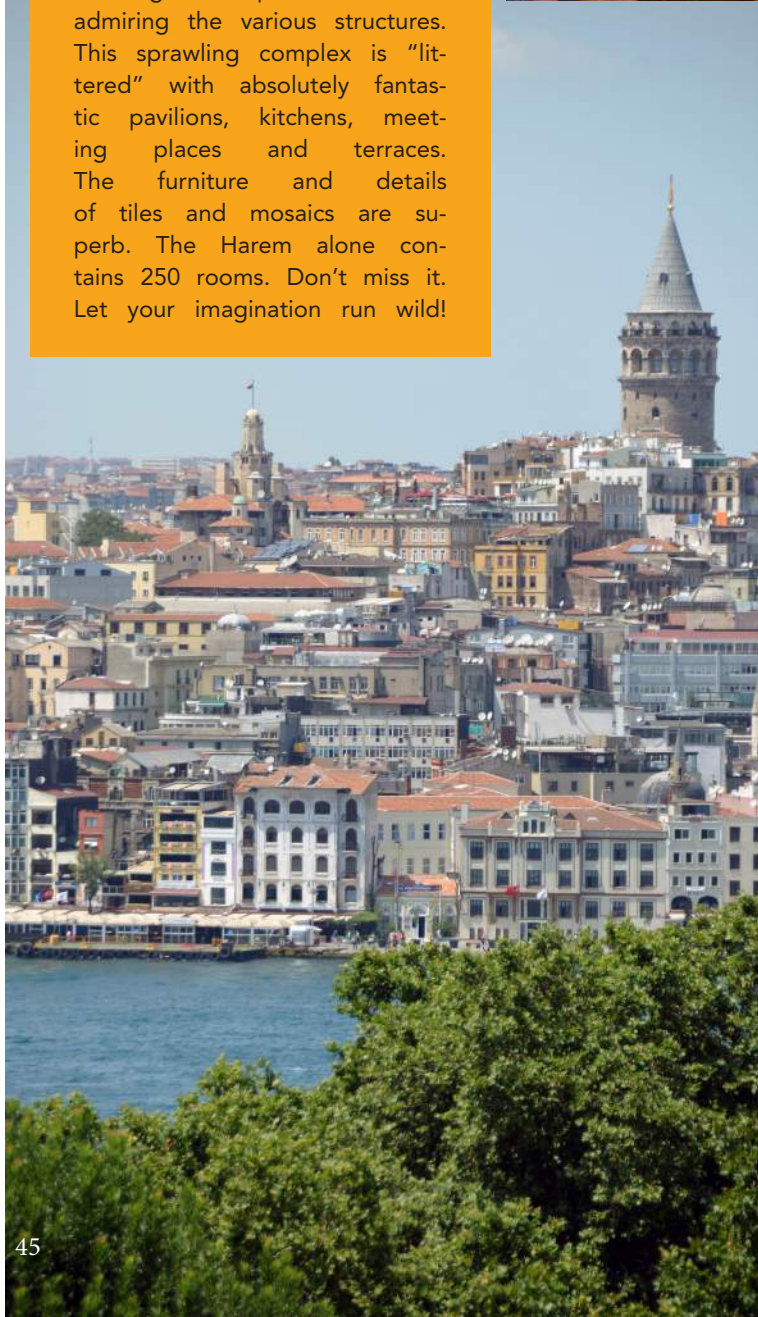


THE UNDERGROUND CISTERN

The Basilica Cistern is a really cool place, literally and figuratively. The still, underground ponds and 336 columns were constructed by the Romans to ensure drinking water supply during a siege. Of particular note two of the columns have carved Medusa heads at the base.

GALATA BRIDGE

I love the soft, chewy taste and texture of Turkish Delights, particularly the premium varieties containing chopped dates, pistachios and hazelnuts in the sweet jelly, fruit flavoured base. There is no better place to enjoy them than on Galata Bridge on a fine summer morning, lazily watching the world go by. I would have stayed longer chatting to the anglers but my stomach told me it was time for breakfast.



THE SPICE MARKET

Resisting the charms of the pigeon seed seller urging me to feed her flock I found a small cafe selling meat filled pastry boreks and hot, thick Turkish coffee; I took a seat, placed my order and relaxed. It was tempting to have a third cup of coffee but the nearby Spice Market was open for business. Although there are lots of tacky souvenir shops it is still the place to go for saffron, curry powder, Turkish delights, teas and pastirma meats and sausages. You can almost have a meal on the free samples! Walk around the back of the market too, you get a great view of Yeni Mosque.



GALATA TOWER

I strolled back across Galata Bridge this time enjoying the view of Galata Tower which dominates the hillside and caught a clean, modern local train for the 30 minute ride to Yedikule.



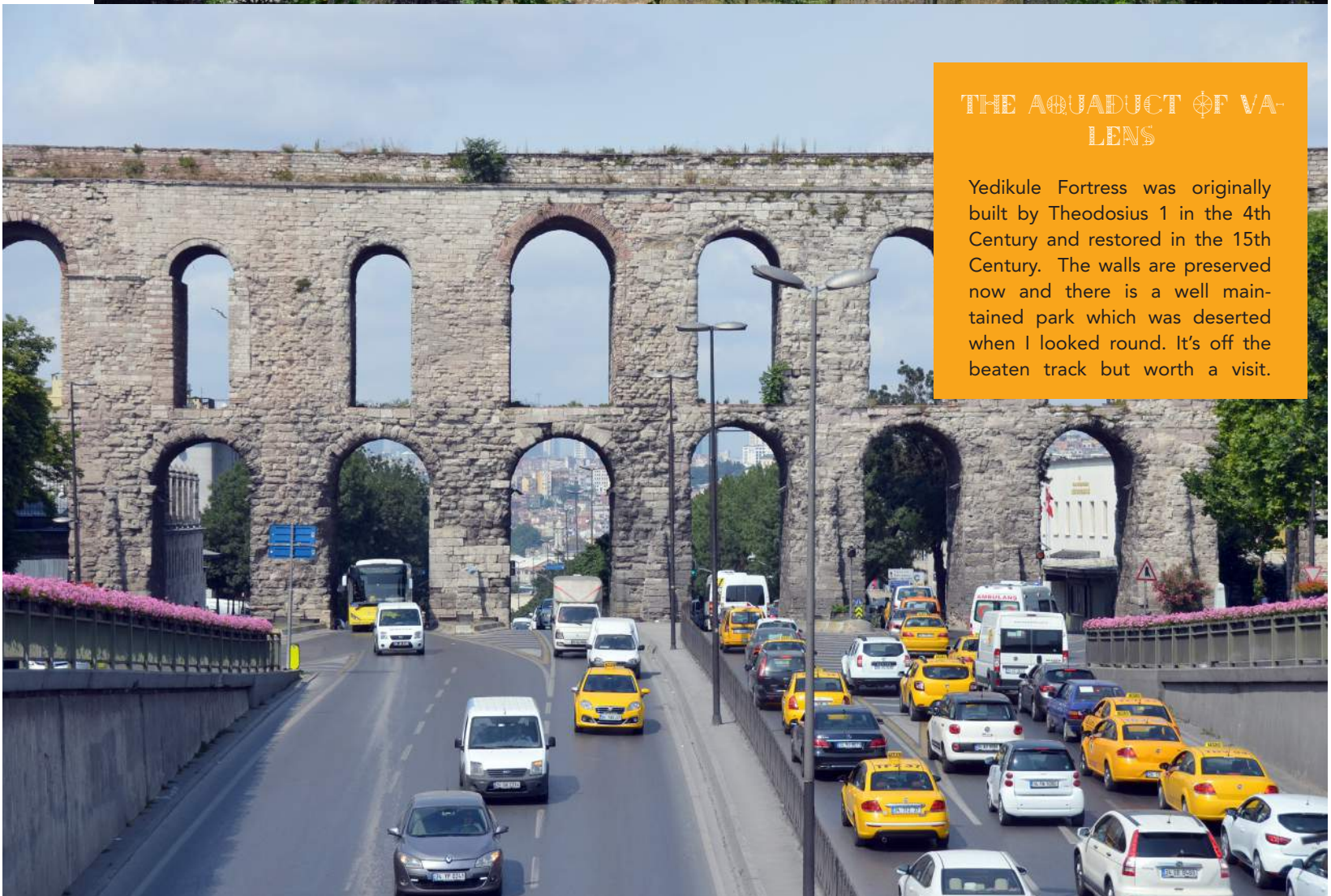
YEDIKULE

Yedikule Fortress was originally built by Theodosius 1 in the 4th Century and restored in the 15th Century. The walls are preserved now and there is a well maintained park which was deserted when I looked round. It's off the beaten track but worth a visit.



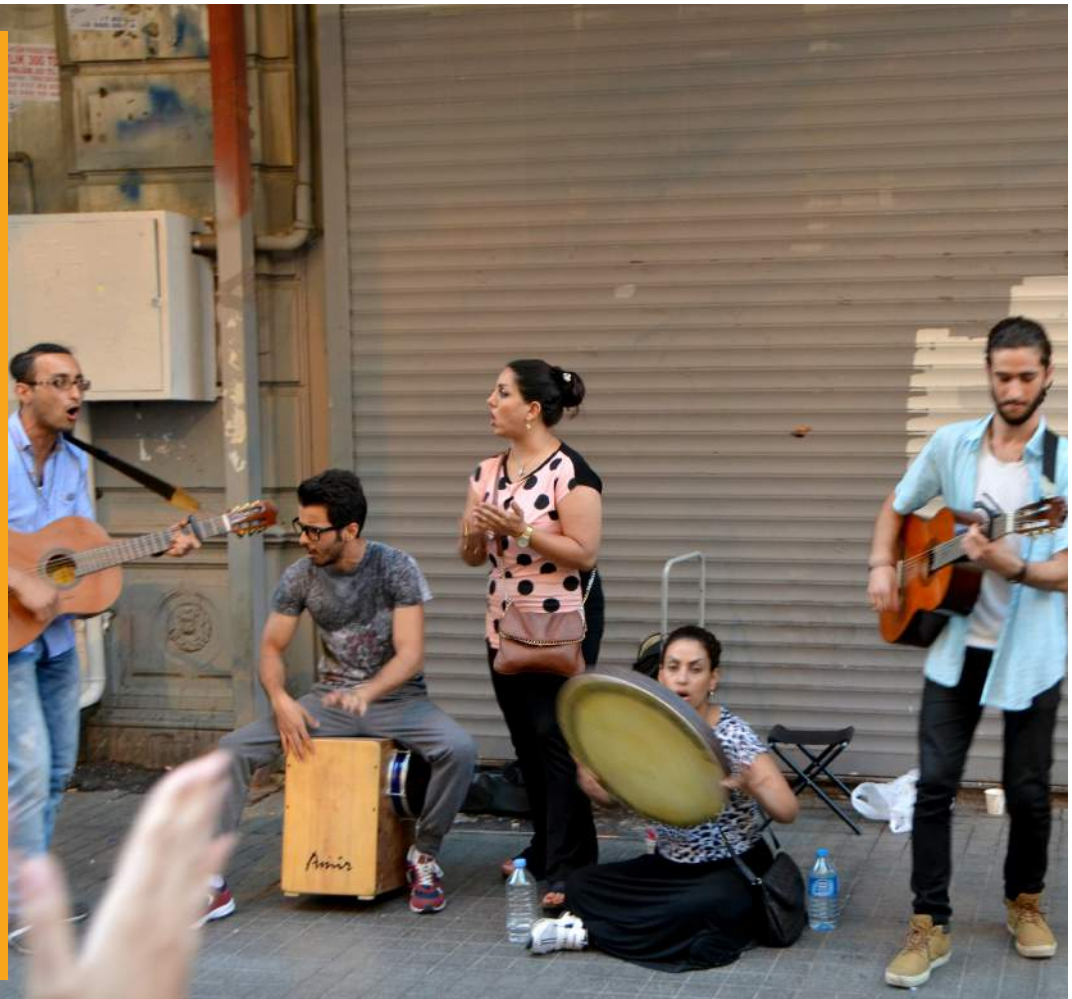
THE AQUADUCT OF VALENS

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A NIGHT OUT IN TOWN

When it comes to evening head to Taksim Square and Istiklal Caddesi, perhaps the busiest pedestrianised street in the world with up to 3 million visitors on a weekend. The 1.5 km road has fast food, fancy restaurants, and sweet shops, international brands selling designer clothes, coffee shops and perfumeries. Add in loads of buskers, hawkers selling delicious mussels and an old tram and you'll understand why I went there. I ended up at a couple of al fresco bars and restaurants down a side streets off the main drag. The food and drinks were extremely affordable, the atmosphere magic and staff very friendly. I didn't try the shisha pipes but they were very popular with the locals. Taksim Square itself was less appealing but the Monument of the Republic and stalls selling flowers were attractive.



DOLMABAHÇE PALACE

After a late night I stayed relatively near the hotel and next morning and took the "Tunnel" the second oldest subway (after London's) to Dolmabahçe Palace. The grounds and gardens and exterior of the palace are lovely and well worth the entrance fee. To enter the palace which has some beautiful rooms you must go on a guided tour which was overcrowded, slow and boring; my recommendation is to skip it! Istanbul has culture, history and charm. East meets west, old meets modern. It's a fun place to visit! Take your walking shoes; there are lots of hills!

