

# Mosques, carpets, cats, dancers, and crossings

## ► ISTANBUL

*Continued from Page M1*

hypnotic calls to prayer.

One of the most famous houses of worship is the Hagia Sophia, the massive Byzantine complex built between 532 and 537 as an Eastern Orthodox church and converted to a mosque after the city was conquered by the Ottomans in 1453. It was one of the largest buildings in the world when it was constructed, and the overused word “awesome” might best be reserved for this soaring space filled with striking tile mosaics and layers of ornate decoration. It swallows up visitors and puts their eyes on overload. We began to slowly take it in after we spotted doves flying across the dome and discovered a street cat relaxing near the mihrab, the niche that points toward Mecca. Those interlopers brought everything down to size.

The Hagia Sophia isn't even Istanbul's largest mosque. That would be the 1557 Suleymaniye Mosque, built for Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent when the Ottoman empire was at its apex. As in all mosque visits, we removed our shoes before entering and walking on the carpeted floor. But it took a lone worker to make us appreciate the softness of the carpet beneath our feet and to imagine how it might feel if we knelt to pray beneath the striped arches and the soaring domes. On that quiet morning, he pushed a vacuum back and forth, a task meditative and seemingly unending.

## MAKE THREE WISHES

We were captivated by the whimsy of the Magic Lamp Factory Outlet (Aladdin-style lamps in every size), but saved our shopping spree for Istanbul's Grand Bazaar. Dating from the mid-15th century and enlarged during Suleyman's reign, the bazaar is one of the largest covered markets in the world. It claims to have about 4,500 shops on 61 streets, which makes it sound much more orderly than it seemed as we wandered the maze-like interior.

We've always found shopkeepers to be an affable lot, and the merchants of the Grand Bazaar did not disappoint. “Good jewelry shopping always comes by coincidence,” Adnan Talalini told us when we stopped to look at his Bedouin

filigree-style rings. When we hesitated at the prices, he was quick to let us know that he was open to offers. “Flexibility in business,” he opined, “may kill the hesitation.” When we sealed the deal, he gave us a checkered “alpaca” scarf as a parting gift.

Textiles are woven into the Turkish design DNA, and since we weren't in the market for a rug, we gravitated to scarves. “This is made from an antelope's whiskers,” one vendor admonished us when we expressed shock at the price of a soft, embroidered shawl. Emrah Adlig of the shop Istanbul Sal went out of his way to make a sale. He cheerfully demonstrated and modeled a half dozen fancy scarf-tying techniques. The guy could be a sensation on YouTube or FashionTV.

## CATS AND DERVISHES

Cats, however, are the born showmen of Istanbul. At the entrance to the Museum of the Ancient Orient (part of the Archaeological Museums complex), a black cat lazed atop an eighth-century BC carved lion, oblivious to its photo-snapping admirers. Inside, gallery walls are covered with ceramic mosaics of parading dragons, bulls, and lions from the Ishtar Gate created for King Nebuchadnezzar II in 575 BC. It's a bit of ancient Babylon in modern Turkey.

We were constantly, well, delighted by Istanbul's easy blend of cultures and eras. When we went to check out the historic Sirkeci train station, we discovered that a whirling dervish ceremony was going to be held there that evening. The 1890 station was the end of the line for the fabled Orient Express. Designed by German architect August Jachmund, the building was an influential example of European Orientalist architecture, and today it exudes a faded glory that makes it all the more romantic. The Mevlevi Sufi order performs in a high-ceilinged hall with stained-glass windows and elaborate wood trim. As we waited for the ceremony to begin, an orange cat — a true jokester — entertained the crowd by jumping on a row of chairs reserved for the musicians, rolling on his back, and skidding across the marble floor whenever anyone tried to shoo him away. For his finale, he caught and con-



DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**The Grand Bazaar dates to the 15th century and has about 4,500 shops on 61 covered streets.**

sured a large moth.

The seven-century-old ritual was instantly mesmerizing, a worship ceremony to rival the best performance art. To incantatory music of four endlessly repeated triplets, men in long white robes moved deliberately through the space, and began to spin, slowly, then faster, faster, faster until movement and meditation became one and the audience sat hypnotized by a sea of floating fabric.

## CROSSINGS

Locals say that “Istanbul breathes through the Bosphorus,” the 20-mile-long strait that runs through the city and separates Europe from Asia. More than a watery continental border, the Bosphorus exposes Istanbul to the elements and, especially at night, gives it a glittery glamour. We relished the literally cheap thrill of hopping the Kadikoy ferry at the waterfront below the spice market on the European side and finding ourselves 20 minutes later in Asia — just in time for lunch. Removed from the famous landmarks, the more residential Asian side

of Istanbul boasts a large fresh market. We wandered past vendors selling silvery herring, perfectly trimmed artichokes, and sweet dark mulberries until we arrived at Ciya Sofrasi restaurant. We studied the buffet, pointed out dishes that looked the most delicious (meatballs with stewed onion, pilaf-stuffed artichokes, the ubiquitous red lentil soup) and waited for our food to arrive. Our eyes proved bigger than our stomachs, but every dish was a delight. A Turkish delight.

Narrated Bosphorus cruises depart all the time, but the ferries turned out to be among our fondest delights. As we crossed and recrossed the strait, we sipped tea from delicate little cups delivered by waiters who don't think twice about carrying hot liquids aboard a rocking boat. The return trips were always the best as we watched the city skyline — punctuated by more minarets than we could count — loom larger and larger. The scene became even more magical at night when the sky and water turned the same dark blue, the moon rose over the New Mosque along the waterfront, and the twinkling city seemed suspended between heaven and earth.

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## IF YOU GO . . .

### Where to stay

**Hotel Kupeli**  
Eminisan Mahallesi Gedikpasa  
Hamam Caddesi No. 4  
Sultanahmet  
011-90-212-458-5650  
www.hotelkupeli.com  
Modest 19-room hotel two steep blocks downhill from T1 tram line and close to many attractions. Rooms are very small. Doubles from \$56 include generous breakfast buffet.

### Where to eat

**Ciya Sofrasi**  
Caferaga Mahallesi, Gunesli Bahce Sokak No. 43A, Kadikoy  
011-90-216-330-3190  
www.ciya.com.tr  
Famed lokanta (restaurant) serves some of the city's best mezes. Dishes from \$5.

### What to do

**Hagia Sophia**  
Ayasofya Meydani, Sultanahmet  
011-90-212-522-1750  
www.ayasofyamuzezi.gov.tr/en/  
To skip long tickets queue, purchase them in advance at website and print at home or in hotel. Admission \$12.50.  
**Suleymaniye mosque**  
Suleymaniye Caddesi, Eminonu  
www.english.istanbul.gov.tr  
**Grand Bazaar**  
Off Yeniceriler Caddesi (Tram 1) Sultanahmet  
**Archaeological Museums of Istanbul**  
Alemdar Osman Hamdi, Bey Yukusu Sokak, Sultanahmet  
011-90-212-520-7740  
www.istanbularkeoloji.gov.tr \$5.

**Whirling Dervishes**  
Sirkeci Train Station  
Sirkeci Istasyonu Caddesi  
Eminonu  
011-90-0541-271-3084  
Adults \$20, students \$15.  
**Kadikoy ferry**  
Eminonu docks in front of New Mosque  
www.sehirhatlari.com.tr/en \$1.50 each way.