

Istanbul: THE ORNAMENT OF TURKISH HERITAGE

— By Cassidy Hazelbaker —

Continually vibrant and magical, Istanbul mesmerizes through its rich history and avant-garde contemporary society.

Cassidy Hazelbaker writes about the city’s past and present, and its unique position as a gateway between the East and West.

The Blue Mosque in Istanbul.
Image courtesy Magnus Manske.

The French writer Alphonse de Lamartine once stated, “If one had but a single glance to give the world, one should gaze on Istanbul.” De Lamartine, who wrote the book History of Turkey in 1854, was referencing Istanbul’s beauty and heritage. Without a doubt, Istanbul is one of the most inspiring and invigorating cities in the world. The city is host to a plethora of architectural gemstones, such as the Hagia Sofia and the Blue Mosque. From Topkapi Palace, one can delight in the view of both the Bosphorus and Marmara Sea. It is easy to get lost in the bazaars, which offer fabulous sweets, spices, art objects and textiles from all over Asia, or to take in a summer breeze while strolling in one of the city’s many flower-strewn parks. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Istanbul is one of the top five most- visited cities in the world. Today’s Istanbul is set for a vibrant and dynamic future, anchored by an equally rich and magnificent past.

BRIDGE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Istanbul straddles the Bosphorus, literally encompassing the border between Europe and Asia and occupying the gateway between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara. Such a strategic location in terms of land and water access has made Istanbul, formerly known as Constantinople, one of the most coveted cities in history. It has been the capital of four empires - Roman, Latin, Byzantine, Ottoman - and the subject of fierce battles between warring kings who sought to rule the city.

For centuries, Istanbul was a bastion of Christianity. Its location at the Easternmost point of Europe played a large role in the expansion of the religion, as the Byzantine Empire passed along beliefs and knowledge farther East. Numerous saints and venerated figures resided in Turkey, including Saint Peter and the Virgin Mary, who spent her final days in Western Turkey. For a thousand years, Hagia Sofia was the largest church in the world. However, in 1453 Mehmed II led the invasion of Constantinople and declared the city the capital of the Ottoman Empire. The control of such an important city cemented Ottoman power and marked the transition of the Ottoman state into an empire. Istanbul was quickly converted into a jewel of an Islamic city, with many awe-inspiring churches undergoing quick makeovers to relaunch as equally awe-inspiring mosques. Under the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul continued to flourish and thrive as a mix of cultures and religions.

Having changed hands so many times, Istanbul

retains influences and traces from each segment of its history and blends them into something uniquely Istanbulian. Though in many ways its position as head of the Ottoman Empire drew it closer to the East, it is impossible to deny the influx of European influences, from the design of its lush green parks to the architecture of its governmental buildings. Furthermore, elements of Istanbul’s distinct style spread throughout the Ottoman Empire during its 600-year existence and many artistic and architectural styles seen today while walking down the streets of Cairo or Beirut can be traced back to Istanbul.

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two worlds, the ornament of
Turkish homeland, the treasure
of Turkish history, the city
cherished by the Turkish nation,
Istanbul has its place in the
hearts of all citizens.”*
Nearly a century later,
these words are still true.



CROSSROADS

Istanbul was a key location along the Silk Road, which has rendered it a crossroads for social, cultural, religious and ethnic exchange. Its bazaars flourished as merchants came from both East and West to exchange goods. With material objects came the transmission of knowledge and information.

Even after the arrival of silkworms to the Mediterranean and the subsequent demise of silk importation, Istanbul remained an important trade route. While for many Istanbul was a stopping point in a great journey, some travelers chose to settle permanently within the great city, which created a diverse melting pot full of the languages, customs, and beliefs of people both from the East and West of the city.

Artists from all over Turkey, Europe and the Middle East flocked to Istanbul, which became a cultural hub for the region. Poetry from the Ottoman Empire was some of the finest, partly due to Persian influence on the Empire’s predecessors, the Seljuk Turks. Calligraphy was also a highly celebrated art form, as was carpet weaving, which is still prevalent today. Another tradition left over from the old trade routes was that of the meddah, or coffeehouse storytellers, who would travel and perform fictional and nonfictional stories.

In 1896, a film screening took place in Istanbul, only one year after the first public debut of film technology in Paris. Though the film industry was slow to take off in Turkey, today’s Turkish soap operas are very popular in many regions of the Middle East and serve to diffuse Turkish culture and traditions.

MODERATE MODERNITY

1923 was a pivotal year for Turkey, as the Republic of Turkey emerged from the post-First World War disintegrated Ottoman Empire. The Republic’s first leader, Mustafa Kemal, abolished the sultanate and introduced many reforms in order to transition the country from the former Muslim empire to a secular state. Basing Turkey on the European secular model, he introduced a new constitution, reformed the judicial and legislative branches of government, and devised new economic policies. He reduced taxes upon peasants and built thousands of new schools to promote education, which was made compulsory for children. The Turkish Parliament later bestowed the honorary surname Ataturk (Father of the Turks) upon the President, by which he is now commonly known. Ataturk is widely praised by historians and contemporary politicians, who credit him with designing the modern Turkish state and rendering it a regional powerhouse and political leader. Though some criticize his approach to religion, many proclaim Turkey’s balance of secularism with Islam that is practiced widely by its citizens is an ideal model for its surrounding Muslim neighbors.

Though the administrative capital of Turkey was moved from Istanbul to Ankara with the founding of the Republic of Turkey, Istanbul has retained the position of a capital for culture, tourism and history. As Ataturk once stated, “On the meeting point of two worlds, the ornament of Turkish homeland, the treasure of Turkish history, the city cherished by the Turkish nation, Istanbul has its place in the hearts of all citizens.” Nearly a century later, these words are still true. ♦