The city that is discovered as you experience it, and loved as discovered...
Istanbul

‘If the world were a single state, Istanbul would have been its capital.’
Napoleon Bonaparte

The capital of empires… The city that dominated continents… The cradle of civilisation… The meeting point of cultures and civilisations… These are some of the thousands of phrases that describe Istanbul. Yet neither words nor any amount of reading or listening are sufficient to truly describe and become familiar with the city. Only when you walk along its historic streets, when you see with your own eyes the architectural masterpieces of Byzantine and Ottoman Empires in their original setting, when you enjoy the panoramic vistas of its unique location, and when you start to explore its mystical beauties – only then will you begin to discover, and to fall in love with Istanbul…
Istanbul is the most developed and largest city of Turkey, and the latest discoveries indicate that the history of human habitation goes back 400,000 years ago. The Megarians settled and founded the city of Byzantium that later lent its name to the Byzantine Empire. However, the first settlers in the region established their city Chalcedon (Kadıköy), on ‘the land of blind people’ which was strategically less important. And the Megarians, led by an Oracle, became aware of the beauty of Seraglio Point (Sarayburnu), and they established their city there on the opposite side of the Chalcedon.
Today the historical peninsula is the most beautiful part of Istanbul, and is strategically well placed. The city is surrounded by a seascape peppered with distant islands, and this, together with the Golden Horn (Haliç), the estuary that thrusts into the land along the peninsula, make Istanbul a unique place – and, throughout its long history, a city that many desired to conquer. But the desire to possess the city cannot be explained only by its strategic position or unsurpassed beauty; it has a different attraction, a mystical magnetism that drew states, empires and great conquerors towards it. This attraction led to a long history of conflict, conquest and
occupation between those determined to maintain their hold on the city and those who strove to capture it.

For more than 1,500 years Istanbul was the capital of two empires, first the Byzantine and later the Ottoman. It was beautified accordingly with magnificent monuments and became a metropolis where diverse cultures, nations and religions mingle. Those cultures, nations and religions are the small pieces that form the mosaic of Istanbul. Perhaps some of those little pieces do not mean much to you, but as an ensemble they make up the unique majesty of Istanbul.
The Royal Purple Years of İstanbul: The Period of the Byzantine Empire

Royal purple is the colour of the Byzantine imperial family. The Byzantine emperors called themselves ‘the Royal Purple Blooded’; they were born in purple-decorated rooms, they wore purple mantles when they were enthroned, and they were buried in purple sarcophagi; so their whole lives were identified with purple.

The purple years of İstanbul may be considered to have started in 330 when Emperor Constantine declared the city the capital of his empire. Until 1453, when it was conquered by the Ottomans, the city had served as the capital of the Byzantine Empire. During the sovereignty of Byzantine Empire it was adorned with several works of art to become the most magnificent city of the world, even in those years when the Byzantines themselves were enfeebled.

When the Roman Empire needed a base to stage its campaigns towards the East, there was not much need to explore further afield: İstanbul’s unique location and strategic position made it the best choice. The capital was first called ‘New Rome’, and indeed the city is quite similar to Rome. Both cities were based on seven
hills; the original settlement area of Istanbul was surrounded on three sides by the Sea of Marmara and the Golden Horn, while Rome was surrounded by the River Tiber; the layout of both cities looks like a scalene triangle. Perhaps those features were influential in choosing the location of 'New Rome'. However, physical similarities were not deemed enough, and so every resource of the empire was drawn up to enhance the magnificence of the new city.

Byzantium was in fact a continuation of Rome, and the Byzantines called themselves 'Romans' even until the day their empire came to an end. Yet there was a significant difference between the Byzantines and their ancestors: Christianity. In Byzantium, Roman temples were replaced with churches. Displaying unique examples of Byzantine painting and architecture, these buildings were scattered across the historical peninsula as well as in other parts of Istanbul. Some of the most important Byzantine masterpieces in Istanbul are public buildings such as the hippodrome, water cisterns, palaces, thoroughfares and public squares and the city walls.

The identity of Istanbul that began to be formed by the Byzantines was further shaped during the period of Ottoman Empire.
The Most Valuable Heritage of the Ottoman Empire

Istanbul

The reason why Istanbul is one of the most beautiful cities of the world stems from the fact that its natural beauty has been enhanced by human endeavour. The most important building activities started in the Byzantine Period, and the city was then embellished further during the Ottoman Period.

Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror declared Istanbul the capital of Ottoman Empire after he conquered the city in 1453. Over the next 450 years the city was adorned with superb Ottoman works of art. Building activities after the conquest gained apace during the reign of Sultan Bayezid II, with the finest works built by Mimar Sinan, the Chief Royal Architect. This world famous architect put his signature on the silhouette of Istanbul with several masterpieces. Of course, he was fortunate to live through the most glorious period of Ottoman history, a coincidence that played a major role in his work. Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent generously put the riches of the empire at the disposal of Sinan in order to enable him to beautify Istanbul. Sinan responded to his generosity by adorning Istanbul with buildings that still evoke admiration in visitors thanks to his superlative talent and skill. Sinan’s apprentices and disciples continued this work after him, so that Istanbul,
from being the most prominent city of the Byzantine Empire, gained a new identity with mosques, caravanserais, public bathhouses and tombs and became a city to admire.

The Ottomans wisely tolerated religions other than Islam, and dedicated many places of worship to Christian and Jewish communities so that these peoples could practise their religion in peace of mind.

Because of this tolerant outlook, mosques, churches and synagogues stood and still stand side by side. This is the physical evidence of the fact that Istanbul was the symbol of tolerance and fraternity of religions.
The Tour Guide of Istanbul; an Asian as well as a European City

Asia and Europe are like two lovers who long to embrace but cannot because of the straits. The union of those two lovers is Istanbul. Besides these two continents it has also unified many peoples from different cultures for thousands of years. While in one part you can experience the mystery of the East, in the other you can explore the European aspect. In many areas of the city the minarets of mosques, the symbols of Islam, stand high next to churches and synagogues. Both modern and historical architecture can be seen on the same street, and hidden beauty spots can be found all across the city.

Istanbul cannot be seen or experienced in with all its glorious colours in just a couple of days. The visitor needs a couple of weeks to explore this magnificent city. You have to walk along the
streets to get the feel of the city, and avoid public transport if you are to enjoy the experience of finding hidden gems. The following are the routes that we recommend you try.

**The Historical Peninsula:** 'Within the Royal Walls'; ‘Sultanahmet and Environs’; from ‘Eminönü’ to ‘Süleymaniye’ – From ‘Süleymaniye’ to ‘Eminönü’; ‘Fatih’ along the ‘Golden Horn’. The walk at ‘Fener’ and ‘Balat’ as well as sightseeing along the ‘Divanyolu’ (which follows the Byzantine ‘Mese’ road), where you can see examples of monumental architecture, will help you to familiarise yourself with the historical peninsula.
The European Side of the Istanbul Strait: Galata and its environs have been the centre of commerce since the antiquity. A walk from here to Ortaköy or to Beyoğlu, the heart of Istanbul’s entertainment industry, would be a good start.

The Asian Face of Istanbul: On the Asian side of Istanbul are Kadıköy and Üsküdar which were hunting grounds and pleasure gardens during the Byzantine and Ottoman periods. A walk along the Strait is also highly recommended.

Boat Tour on the Istanbul Strait: A boat tour on the Strait, connecting the Sea of Marmara to the Black Sea, is a delightful way of seeing Istanbul without setting foot either in Asia or in Europe. You can also take a boat trip to the Prince Islands to escape the hustle and bustle of Istanbul.
The Historical Peninsula

The Heart of the Historical Peninsula: Sultanahmet and Its Environs

The most magnificent of Istanbul’s monuments are clustered on the historical peninsula, the triangular piece of land surrounded by the Sea of Marmara to the west and south, by the Golden Horn to the north and by the city walls to the east. The Megarians settled here and Septimus Severus, who was largely responsible for the pre-Byzantine settlement, paid particular attention to this area. The city walls, which were built according to plans that the Emperor Constantine drew up with a spear, form the base of the triangle.

The centre of the land that was the core of Istanbul was the area we know today as Sultanahmet Square. The most prominent examples of Byzantine and Ottoman architecture can be seen in close proximity here.

In the Byzantine Period the centre of the city was the Hippodrome and its environs. The palace which was the centre of power, Ayasofya (Hagia Sophia) the most spectacular of the religious buildings, the Hippodrome which served as the common entertainment centre and the Yerebatan Sarnici (Yerebatan Cistern) which
supplied most of the city’s water, had all been
gathered here at the city centre. The Hippodrome
was the site of many riots as well as chariot races
in Byzantine Period. During the Ottoman times
the square where the Hippodrome used to stand
became the site for the circumcision ceremonies
of the Sultan’s sons. These ceremonies lasted
for forty days and forty nights, during which
jugglers and magicians performed their tricks.
This was also where the principal religious and
state buildings, including Topkapı Palace, were
constructed.
A tram line operates along Hüdavendigar Street, the road that climbs towards Sultanahmet from Sirkiç. The Royal City Walls enclose the gardens of Topkapı Palace to the left. These walls have several portals, and across the road the first thing of interest is the former Bab-ı Ali (Sublime Porte) which houses the Governor’s Office at present. The name of this part means ‘the portal of pashas’, and it is the gate to the palace of the Grand Vizier. The term Bab-ı Ali later applied to all the buildings in the complex. Renovated several times in its history, the area has witnessed some of the most important episodes in Ottoman history.

The road along the walls leads to one of the most important monuments of the ancient world, the magnificent Ayasofya, which bedazzles the visitors.
The most glorious architectural heritage of Byzantine Empire is Ayasofya which has been referred to as the eighth wonder of the world and it is one of the most important surviving works of Byzantine Period. Ayasofya was built under the auspices of Emperor Justinian I, who, along with Emperor Constantine, made great contributions to Istanbul. Massive in size and reputation, the basilica stood for centuries as one of the world’s most significant buildings, and, despite suffering damage from natural disasters such as fire and earthquakes, has survived to this day. Ayasofya is not only renowned for its magnificent architecture but also for its exquisite Byzantine mosaics.

The Emperor Justinian, who ruled during one of the most brilliant periods of Byzantine Empire, wished to construct a basilica surpassing the legendary Solomon’s Temple. The outcome was the Ayasofya. The basilica was designed in a period when Byzantine religious architecture was in search of new ideas, and Ayasofya became famous not only for the magnificence of its construction but also as a superb and unique example of Byzantine religious architecture.
The attempt to merge the basilica plan, which had been employed for churches until that era, with a central plan, and the important influence of local architectural features of Anatolia were apparent in Ayasofya. Its architects were also from Anatolia. Most of the columns, capitals and marbles used in the constructions were collected and recycled from the sites of former buildings of Anatolian antiquity. The columns of the Temple of Artemis of Ephesus, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, were some of the reused material.

When the Ottomans captured Istanbul, Ayasofya was not deliberately damaged; on the contrary, many Turkish architects, including the renowned Sinan, used their best skills to maintain the monument. Mimar Sinan thus played a crucial role in preserving Ayasofya and enabling it to be appreciated even today. The retaining walls he built along the weaker sides of the building checked the damage caused by the lateral outward movement of the walls under the massive weight of the dome.
This sacred place of Christianity was converted to a holy shrine of Islam during the Ottoman Period. The legends about the site that had survived from the ancient times added to its sacred nature. Therefore, many Ottoman Sultans commissioned their tombs to be built within the courtyard of Ayasofya. Şadırvan, the ablution fountain, situated in the courtyard was commissioned by Sultan Mahmut I in 1740. As its construction coincided with the period when Ottoman architectural style was merging with European styles, the elaborate decorations and protruding eaves of the fountain reflect the influence of the Baroque.

The mosaics of Ayasofya, which were uncovered after it became a museum, are the foremost examples of Byzantine art of the ninth to twelfth centuries. Similarly, Ayasofya also boasts fine examples of Ottoman tile and calligraphic arts.
Yerebatan Cistern: One of Istanbul’s major shortcomings was the insufficient supply of drinking water. However, neither the Byzantines nor the Ottomans let their populations suffer because of that shortfall. Even before the city became the capital of Byzantine Empire there were some attempts to bring water into the city, and during the Byzantine Period several public cisterns were built. One of the prime examples of them is Yerebatan Cistern, located right across Ayasofya. It provided water to Istanbul during the Byzantine Period. It is also called Yerebatan Palace since it is the largest of all cisterns in Istanbul. When you climb down to the main holding area of the cistern you realise that the analogy is not baseless. The cistern’s roof was supported by 336 columns. One of them is known as the weeping column since it was decorated with crying eyes and eye drops which are so skilfully carved that in the humid air of the cistern it seems as if the drops are really trickling down. The shallow water level in the cistern,
where small fish swim, and the wooden platforms built just above the water level, lead the visitors to the most attractive feature of the cistern – the head of Medusa, which is rumoured to turn the unwary gazer into stone if directly looked at in the eye. The medusa heads were used as the base of columns, and it was believed that they were brought here to protect the city from evil. That was why they were placed upside down or sideways.

You may be reluctant to leave behind the cool and refreshing air of the cistern; but there is more to see above ground. First is the Haseki Hürrem

Hammam, the public bathhouse commissioned by Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent for his love, Hürrem Sultan (Roxelana). Built by Mimar Sinan, this bathhouse is situated between Ayasofya and Sultan Ahmet Mosque. Hürrem Sultan was brought to the palace to be trained as a concubine in the harem (the sacrosanct female quarters of the royal household). She managed to attract the attention of Sultan Süleyman with her smartness and beauty in quite a short space of time. Hürrem Sultan commissioned many public works bearing her name, and so takes her place of glory in Ottoman history. Her tomb is next to the tomb of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent in the courtyard of Süleymaniye Mosque, considered as one of the city’s most treasured buildings.
Sultan Ahmet Mosque: Sultan Ahmet Mosque, also known as the Blue Mosque, is one of the monuments of Istanbul that has become its symbol. The tiles are superb examples of the tile art of the period, and even the actual number of the tiles used was recorded: exactly 21,043, each of which is priceless, but collectively lent their colour to the name of the mosque. There are a total of 16 şerefler (muezzin's platforms) on the mosque’s minarets. That figure is a reference to the fact that Ahmet was the 16th sultan in the Ottoman succession. The architect of the mosque was one of the apprentices of Mimar Sinan, Sedefkar (master of inlaying mother-of-pearl) Mehmet Aga.

The tomb of Sultan Ahmet I, who commissioned the mosque, was constructed in the gardens of the mosque as a detached building next to the front courtyard. Opposite the tomb stands the German Empire’s Gift to the Ottomans, the Alman Çeşmesi (German
Fountain). The fountain was a gift from Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany to commemorate his visit to Istanbul in 1901, and all of its parts were produced in Germany, hence it bears this name. The internal face of the dome was gilded. It stands in the very place where the gate of the ancient hippodrome stood, which was decorated with numerous statues and monuments.

The Hippodrome; the Site of Entertainment and Rebellion, Victories and Massacres: The Hippodrome, with its final seating capacity of 100,000 people, is located in the square facing the Sultan Ahmet Mosque, and its construction was commenced by Septimus Severus in the beginning of the 3rd century AD. However, it was not completed until the reign of Constantine, who made Istanbul his capital and the most prominent city of his time and who constantly strove to make it greater and more beautiful than Rome. During the Byzantine Period the Hippodrome was the stage for the rivalry between the Blues and Greens, factions who were engaged in passionate struggles to support
their own racers, like our present-day sports fans. Three of the important monuments of the Hippodrome are still standing. They are the ‘Dikilitaş’ (Obelisk), the ‘Yılanı Sütun’ (Serpentine Column), and the ‘Orme Sütun’ (Walled Obelisk). These monuments were erected on the central spine of the race track. Visitors should also be reminded that the monument to Portirius, the legendary champion of those races, can today be seen at Istanbul Archaeological Museum. Let us take a closer look at these monuments.

From the Ayasofya end of the square the first monument is the Dikilitaş (Obelisk), which was brought from Egypt with great difficulty, and erected only after months of effort by an army of workers. Its hieroglyphs were deciphered as late as the 18th century; before that, during the Ottoman and Byzantine periods, the signs carved on the obelisk were believed to quell evil spirits and spells. When the inscriptions were deciphered, it was understood that the obelisk was commissioned by the Pharaoh Thutmosis III of Egypt in the year 1550 BC. The original obelisk was actually far taller than what is seen
at the present time since more than half of it was cut off in order to place in on a cargo vessel available at the time. Erecting the obelisk took such a long time and so much effort that the Emperor Theodosius, who succeeded in the task in 390, had an inscription carved on the huge cubic base of the erected obelisk, saying that despite its having presented a challenge for so many years, it had finally submitted to the will of Emperor Theodosius. The inscription also stated how it had been erected over a period of 32 days, and contained depictions of that heroic feat. Other carvings on the base depict the chariot races and life and wars of Theodosius.

The Orme Sütun (Walled Obelisk) is across the square and between them stands the smaller bronze monument which is known as Yılanlı Sütun (Serpentine Column). Yılanlı Sütun was originally erected in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi in the 5th century BC to commemorate a victory against the Persian army and it was made by melting weapons and armour captured in the war. It was originally a leg that consisted
of serpents coiled over each other and at the top each serpent’s head was separated to form a tripod to hold a vessel where an eternal flame was kept burning for the memory of the war. The vessel had long disappeared and the serpent heads collapsed. The reason why Constantine brought the monument to Istanbul is interesting. The widespread belief of the period was that the monument, consisting of serpents, had a mystical power to keep Istanbul safe from snakes and vermin infestation. While the serpents’ necks and heads have not survived to our day, part of one head was found during excavations and can be seen at the Istanbul Archaeological Museums.

The Örme Sütun (Walled Obelisk) is the last of the extant monuments. It was commissioned by the Emperor Constantine VII in 944, and, as its name suggests, it was made of courses of masonry. When it was completed it supported a bronze sphere, and the marks of fixing studs in the masonry indicate that the obelisk was fully clad with bronze plaques depicting the wars of Emperor Basileus I of Macedon. During the Latin occupation between 1204 and 1261 those plaques were removed and melted down to make weapons, bronze goods and to mint money.
The Hippodrome was not always a place where the people were entertained and where joyous cries could be heard. The bloodiest uprisings of history, the mass punishment of rebels and the massacre of thousands of people also took place there. The infamous Nika Revolt, when many Byzantine monuments including Ayasofya were set alight in 532, was put down in the bloodiest manner there and thousands were killed on the terraces and track of the Hippodrome. The square also played an important role in the Yeniçeri (Janissary) revolts and many were executed there.

The southern tip of the Hippodrome has survived to the present day. Just looking at that part enables us to realise how grandiose it once was. Despite being devastated during the Byzantine Period, the Ottomans gave it a new lease of life by organising the state festivities there, so it continued to serve as the place of public entertainment. Various games and shows were staged there, and the monuments of the Hippodrome were depicted in Ottoman miniature paintings. Entertainments were also shown in
the miniature paintings, for example the high tightropes set between the obelisks for rope walkers, horse riders performing stunts before the Yılanlı Sütun, and tradesmen and artisan guilds displaying their rades on carts in a procession during the festivities. The miniature paintings also show that the Chariot Races of Byzantium was replaced with çirit (the jereed, a horseback team game where the aim was to score hits with a blunt wooden javelin on the other team’s riders).

Environs of the Hippodrome
As the environs of the Hippodrome were the earliest settlement areas of the city, the earliest monuments of Istanbul are situated here. As this area was also at the heart of Ottoman government, many important buildings were constructed here.

In the hierarchy of the Ottoman Empire, the Grand Vizier was the person next to the Sultan, so their mansion houses were built close to Topkapı Palace, where state affairs were
discussed and settled. Ibrahim Pasha was the vizier and son-in-law of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, and his palace was built near the Hippodrome. This building serves as the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, on the edge of the square. The museum exhibits valuable Seljuk and Ottoman carpets and other artefacts covering a long period of history ranging back to the 7th century. We recommend visitors to spare time for the museum since the production of knotted carpets was one of the most important artistic activities of the Islamic countries.

Binbirdirek Sarnıcı (Cistern of Philoxenos) is another monumental building that can be visited on the same site. This was the second largest cistern of Istanbul after Yerebatan. As the Ottomans preferred running instead of still water it fell into disuse and was even forgotten for a long period of time. Its construction started in the 4th century, and it had 264 columns supporting the vaults. At present it hosts occasional artistic exhibitions. One of the most important buildings around the Hippodrome was the Büyük Saray (Great Palace), which was the first imperial
palace of Istanbul and famous for its mosaics; in that sense it resembles the Ottoman Topkapi Palace. Both of them were set upon the land extending to the sea shore, and enlarged with additional buildings over time. The Büyük Saray was first occupied in the 4th century and stayed in service until the 10th century through extensions, though it gradually lost its prominence. From the 11th century the favourite palace of the Byzantine emperors became the Tekfur Sarayı (Palace of the Porphyrogenitus), which is situated in present-day Fatih District near the city walls. It is quite well preserved.

By contrast, the Büyük Saray, which was situated on the land between the Hippodrome and the shores of the Sea of Marmara, did not fare well, and today there are only a few remainders of its past glory. The most important survival is the mosaic floor, which was probably part of a grand hall or a courtyard. The mosaics are believed to date from the period between 450 and 550, and are considered to be one of the finest examples of early Byzantine art. They depict a wide spectrum of scenes including realistic portrayals of daily life including humans and animals in their natural settings as well as mystical creatures, and children’s playing and games. These unique
artefacts can be seen in The Museum of Mosaics of the Great Palace in the Arasta Bazaar situated on the seaward side of the Sultan Ahmet Mosque.

Some surviving parts of Büyük Saray can be seen at the Çatladıkapi (Bull and Lion Gate) where the sea walls end. The area used to be the summer palace of the Byzantine emperors. Built in 842, the palace was also known as Bucoleon or Hormisdas Palace. Today the cellars, gate, and marble jambs can be seen.

The building known today as the Küçük Ayasofya Mosque was formerly the Church of the Saints Sergius and Bacchus. To get here, after leaving the Museum of Mosaics of the Great Palace, follow the Küçük Ayasofya Street; the church is not far from the palace. Emperor Justinian also made great efforts to enrich the beauty of the city. And this building, constructed between 526 and 530, was commissioned by him in memory of these both saints after a dream he had seen. The capitals and entablature with inscriptions surrounding the building are from the original 6th century building and are fine examples of early Byzantine art.

The route can be completed by a visit to the Sokollu Mehmet Pasha Mosque, which was one of the greatest works of Mimar Sinan and famous for its tile decorations. The route returns to Sultanahmet Square, and lets you to take in the mesmerising atmosphere.
Within the Royal Walls: Topkapı Palace

Sur-i Sultani is the place within the royal walls that encompasses Topkapı Palace and its environs. The walls surrounding the gardens of Topkapı Palace were commissioned by Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror. The seaward aspect of the gardens was surrounded by the Byzantine sea walls. The gardens of Topkapı Palace are home to several major Byzantine and Ottoman buildings and museums. The most important of them all is Topkapı Palace, which was the residence of the Ottoman sultans for 400 years: The Topkapı Palace was built on the prime site of the historical peninsula of Istanbul with commanding views of the Sea of Marmara as well as the Istanbul Strait. The architecture of Topkapı Palace was not similar to that of
European palaces. The Ottoman sultans paid great attention to building grandiose religious buildings, while they kept the architecture of their own residences quite plain, just enough to meet their needs. This was probably due to the influence of Islamic thought.

Topkapi Palace was the centre of imperial administration as well as the residence of the sultan and his wives. The spectacular ceremonies in which the sultan and all the high officers of the Ottoman state took part with all their regalia during important festiveties, and the audience ceremonies granted to an ambassador, as well as execution of the death penalty of any high state officer, all took place in this palace. It was therefore a place that witnessed almost all of the most important events in the history of Ottoman Empire.
Topkapi Palace, the first place to visit on arrival in Istanbul, is actually not a single building but a complex of individual buildings set out on a large garden. Its history cannot be restricted to a single period. While its construction was started on the orders of Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror, he died before its completion. The initial building was completed in 1478 during the reign of Sultan Bayezid II, and over the next 400 years the palace was enlarged by adding new buildings according to the needs of the period as a residence and administrative centre. Towards the mid-19th century the sultans preferred the new palaces along the Istanbul Strait such as Dolmabahçe, Beylerbeyi, and Çırağan; however, Topkapı was never abandoned as it also housed the Chamber of Sacred Relics, which was regularly maintained and repaired. Also, many state officials continued to live in the palace.

Topkapı Palace could be reached by walking through the square between Ayasofya and Sultan Ahmet Mosque. Before gaining entry to the
palace grounds, the visitor is welcomed by the Fountain of Sultan Ahmet III. The importance
given to water by the Turks has always been quite special. Satisfying the thirst of a living creature is
considered as one of the best deeds a human being can commit. In accordance with that belief
you will find fountains in unexpected places throughout Anatolia. Fountains have also been
seen as symbols of cleanliness. The Seljuk and Ottoman states therefore built and decorated
monumental fountains wherever they gained control or established a new settlement. As we
have mentioned above, one of the shortcomings of the geographical location of Istanbul was its
inadequate water resources in the vicinity. Unlike the Byzantines, who had built cisterns to collect
water, the Ottomans opted to bring running water to fountains, and they built monumental fountains.
This was the consequence of the belief that running water was cleaner than still water. The
most monumental fountains of the Ottomans – as you may have guessed already – were built in
Istanbul. In the old days there were more than 10,000 fountains in the city, and while many of
them no longer exist, the most spectacular have survived. Built in 1728, the Fountain of Sultan
Ahmet III is probably the finest example in Istanbul and indeed in the whole territory of the empire.
On the walls of the fountain are poems and eulogies inscribed in the Ottoman Turkish.

As you pass this bedazzling fountain you will see in front of you a monumental portal: this is the Bab-i Hümâyûn (The Imperial Gate), which
was the main entrance to the palace during the
Ottoman Period and remains so today. The gate was built during the reign of Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror, and the apartment on the top floor of the gatehouse is the Beytülmal (the property of the Islamic state) offices which take in the belongings of the palace officials who died without an heir for safekeeping before transferring them to the Imperial Treasury.

After entering through the Bab-ı Hümayun, the first courtyard that welcomes you is the Alay Meydanı (Parade Ground) of the Janissary Troops. During the Ottoman Period most parts of the Topkapı Palace was forbidden to ordinary people. However, on certain days the first courtyard was open to the public, when people could gain access to officials to pursue their business and put forward complaints. The tree-lined avenue leading towards the Bab-ı Selam (Gate of Salutation) was the road used when Ottoman sultans left palace for war, when foreign embassies were welcomed and when baksheesh was distributed during a sultan’s enthronement ceremony. So the road was the first witness of many important events in Ottoman history.

In the first courtyard there are other Byzantine and Ottoman buildings. The Aya Irini (Hagia Irene) Church was one of the first Byzantine
churches built during the reign of Constantine, and it was burnt down during the Nika Revolt in 532. The emperor rebuilt the church just like Ayasofya. Because of its architectural perfection the Aya Irini has outstanding acoustic features; not surprisingly, it is a preferred location for concerts. If you visit the city during the Istanbul Music Festival you can enjoy an audio feast in that historical building. It is closed at other times and can only be visited with special permission.

Behind the Aya Irini Church is another important building that has survived to the present day: the Darphane-i Amire (Imperial Mint). Minting Ottoman coins and then the coins of the Turkish Republic continued here until 1967. The building has workshops for casting, rolling, blanking and die-stamping, as well as repairing and mould preparation units. There were also workshops used for the production of precious items and jewellery.
The road leads from Bab-ı Hümayun to another gate which, on both sides, has towers resembling a medieval castle. This is the Bab-ı Selam Kapısı (Gate of Salutation) connecting two courtyards. The gate is opened to the second courtyard where you cannot fail to notice the ticket offices and x-ray security devices mounted on high platforms. These were actually designed to provide vantage points for high state officials and military officers who took part in the Divan (Imperial Council) meetings.

The second courtyard is named the Divan Meydanı (Courtyard of the Imperial Council). Ulufe, the quarterly wages of the soldiers of Ottoman military, was distributed from this square. The audiences of the embassies were also held in this courtyard. As in the first courtyard, here a road (the Vizier’s Road) leads to the Divan-ı Hümayun (Chamber of Imperial Council) and the Bab-ı Saade (Gate of Felicity).

To the right of the courtyard is the first building opened to visitors, the Saray Mutfakları (Palace Kitchens), which has high chimneys. The kitchens were originally built in the 15th century.
and repaired and renovated by Mimar Sinan according to the needs of the period. The kitchens were used to prepare regular daily meals for the household, and foods for occasional feasts were prepared by a large group of servants. The sultan's dishes were prepared in a special department known as sultan's kitchen by the chief cook. Today the kitchens function as a museum exhibiting rare Chinese and Japanese porcelain given as gifts to the Ottomans, as well as the copperware, porcelain and ceramic kitchenware of the Ottoman palace kitchens.

As we have already noted, the Topkapı Palace complex was not completed in a single period but was extended by adding individual buildings as the need arose. On the left of the courtyard across the kitchens stands Divan-ı Hümâyûn (Chamber of the Imperial Council), built during the reign of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent. The term Divan (Council) referred to the meetings where the most important state affairs were discussed. Such meetings would deal with a wide range of problems, from individuals' requests to state appointments. The two buildings at either end of this part are the Divan-ı Hümâyûn Kalemi (Secretariat of the Imperial Council) and Defterhanef (The Office Keeping the Records of Imperial Edicts).

Imperial Council meetings were chaired by the sultans until the reign of Sultan Mehmet the
Conqueror; henceforth the Grand Vizier took up that duty. The reason cited for this change was that the matters which could not be discussed openly and plainly in the presence of sultan could be more easily handled in the new manner. On one of the walls of Kubbealtı (Under the Dome, that is, another name of the Chamber of Imperial Council) there is a gilded iron grill called the Kafes-i Müsebbek. It is the window of a private chamber from where the sultan could discretely listen to the proceedings of the Council. Council meetings were held there until the 18th century when the Grand Vizier’s Office moved to the Bab-i Ali (Sublime Porte). The tower with a spire next to the Chambers is the Adalet Kasrı (Tower of Justice). The reason why it is higher than the rest of the buildings can be explained by the fact that the Ottomans valued justice as a virtue higher than any other; and it was also a symbolic expression of the sultan’s vigilance against injustice.

The next building attached to the Divan-i Hümayun is the Hazine Bölümü (Imperial Treasury) where the state’s treasures were kept. Naturally it was the most closely guarded section of the palace and it was used to store the taxes collected, and it could only be opened by the Grand Vizier who kept the imperial seal. At present it is used as the armoury, where the arms of Ottoman sultans are displayed.

While the exterior of the various Topkapı Palace buildings are quite plain, the internal decoration is elaborate. The most beautiful can be found in the Harem Daairesi (Private Apartments of the Sultan), one of the most interesting part of Topkapı Palace (to visit the Harem one must purchase a ticket). This was the most secret and forbidden area of the palace where only the sultan, his family members, and servants of the Harem department could enter. It gave rise to many legends as there was very little information available about it. Most
of the prominent painters of Europe depicted the Harem as they imagined it. The secrecy and forbidding entry to any strangers lasted until the reign of Sultan Selim III, when for the first time foreign visitors' wives were allowed in. In line with the piecemeal development of Ottoman palace architecture, several rooms were added to the Harem, where Harem officials performed their duties and concubines provided their services. Some of the chambers are named after the sultan who commissioned them. For example, the Chamber of Sultan Murat III was built by Mimar Sinan on the sultan's command. There are about 300 rooms in the Harem. There are also nine bathhouses, two mosques and a hospital. Some of the rooms were assigned to the sultan's male children, concubines, Harem Agas, that is, the eunuchs, and other servants. The most beautiful rooms were devoted to the mothers of the sultans, namely 'Valide Sultan' who was the highest ranking person in the Harem. The tile decorations of the chambers of the sultans were also exquisite.

One of the most important sections of Topkapı Palace is the Bab-ı ʻüs Saâde (Gate of Felicity) that serves as the passage from the second courtyard to the third courtyard, and because of this it was the most important gate of the palace. During holy day festivities the sultan seated in front of this gate and the ceremonies and processions marking the event took place on the courtyard in front of this gate.
Passing through the gate the first building across the courtyard is the Arz Odası (Audience Chamber), where Ottoman Sultans met foreign embassies. Behind that building stood the Enderun Kütüphanesi (Library of Imperial College) and the Ağalar Camii (Aghas’ Mosque). This courtyard is the most visited part of the Topkapi Palace complex, largely because of the permanent exhibitions in the rooms around the courtyard. Artefacts from the Treasury of Topkapi Palace can be seen here. The artefacts displayed in Topkapi Palace Museum are invaluable owing to their both material and sentimental values; moreover, they were deemed important enough to become the topic of Hollywood movies. All the riches of the Ottoman Empire, which was one of the most important and richest empires of the world for 600 years, were kept at the Topkapi Palace. Among the grandeur of those years what has come down to us in the present day are the gifts of rulers of other states, objects d’art decorated with priceless gemstones, the personal weapons and armour of the sultans, and their ceremonial garments.

The most important and holiest of all exhibition halls of the Topkapi Palace is the Mukaddes Emanetler Dairesi (Chamber of Sacred Relics), which were set in the former ‘Has Oda’ (Sultan’s Private Chambers) and audience chamber as well as other ancillary chambers. The Sacred Relics considered holy and highly significant by all Muslims are exhibited here. Among them are the relics of the Prophet Mohammed: silver and gold inlaid keys of the door of the Kaaba; artefacts used by Prophets Moses, Abraham and Joseph, and the arms and armour of the first four caliphs of Islam. It was customary for the Ottoman
sultans to send valuable gifts to Mecca and Medina, the holy cities of Islam, during the hajj period. The caravans bearing those valuable gifts were ceremonially sent off from this spot.

The last place to visit at Topkapı is the area which was the terrace of the palace until the beginning of 17th century when new pavilions were built there. It is known as the Fourth Courtyard or **Sofa-i Hümâyûn** (Imperial Sofa). The most important buildings here are the two pavilions of the Topkapı Palace, the pavilion of Revan (Yerevan) and of Bağdat (Baghdad), built to commemorate Sultan Murat IV’s conquest of Yerevan in 1636, and Baghdad in 1639.

**Note:** The Museum can be visited between 09.00 and 17.00 every day except Tuesdays. Some sections of the museum may be closed temporarily for repairs and maintenance. For up-to-date information about daily tours and closures please visit the website: www.topkapisarayi.gov.tr.
Witnesses to History: Archaeological Museums of Istanbul

The Royal Walls do not only surround Topkapı Palace. Within the Royal Walls are Archaeological Museums of Istanbul, which consist of the Archaeological Museum, Museum of Ancient Orient, and the Çinili Kiosk (Tiled Kiosk) Museum, all of which are among the world’s famous museums.

At the entrance of the Archaeological Museums the first building on the left is the Museum of Ancient Orient. This museum houses rare artefacts collected from the Ottoman territory before the First World War, from lands such as Egypt, Syria and Palestine, as well as Anatolian finds.

The most important item held in the museum is the Kadesh Peace Treaty, which is known to be the oldest recorded treaty in the world. Also there are almost 75,000 cuneiform tablets, making the museum an important resource for this type of artefact.

The Archaeological Museum forms the main body of the Archaeological Museums of Istanbul and exhibits the most well-known items such as
the Sarcophagus of Alexander the Great, and Sarcophagus of Crying Women, as well as numerous artefacts from successive Anatolian civilisations. Recently a new ancillary building has been added to the complex so the exhibition capacity has greatly increased, and two storeys of the old building built at the end of the 19th century were devoted to the exhibition of unique artefacts such as statues, sarcophagi and coins from antiquity to the Byzantine Period. The four storeys of the six-storey ancillary building are open to visitors. The ground floor is designed to introduce children to history and stimulate their interest in the subject. The first floor is dedicated to the history of Istanbul. The second floor is dedicated to the Trojan War, and displays artefacts from excavations at Troy as well as other settlements in Anatolia: this exhibition is called ‘Anatolia through Antiquity and Troy’. The upper floor is dedicated to exhibiting artefacts from lands such as Syria and Palestine, formerly part of the Ottoman Empire.

The museum opposite the Archaeology Museum is the Çinili Köşk Museum. This building is one of the oldest examples of civilian architecture in Istanbul, and was built in 1472. Its name is derived from the tile mosaics on its facade. And as its name suggests, it exhibits tiles and ceramic artefacts from the Seljuk and Ottoman periods.
Gardens of Topkapı Palace: Gülhane Park

The Sur-i Sultani within the Royal Walls includes not only the buildings that have stood witness to important episodes in world history, but also beautiful landscaped gardens. The first of those gardens is Gülhane (Rosehouse) Park. Today, the tulip is a flower mainly associated with other countries. Perhaps in your mind too tulips are identified with other countries. However, you should know that the first tulip bulbs were sent abroad from Istanbul in the Ottoman Period. The tulip has even lent its name to the most controversial era of Ottoman history. If you visit Istanbul in season, you will find tulips in bloom in Gülhane Park – a wonderful haven for those trying to escape from summer heat, a place where you can enjoy sea breezes under the cool shade of centuries-old trees. The park also has a panoramic view of the Sea of Marmara.
the Golden Horn and the Istanbul Strait, as it is situated on the tip of the historical peninsula. The park is also associated with the Tanzimat (reorganisation of the state) reforms since the Rescript of Gülhane was proclaimed here. The Tanzimat Museum, which exhibits documents and photographs relating to that important period of the Ottoman Empire, is situated in Gülhane Park.

The Has Ahırlar (Royal Stables) is a part of Gülhane Park, and at present they house the Islamic Science and Technology Museum. The museum exhibits replicas, built according to written records, of various devices and tools invented and developed by Islamic scientists between the 8th and 16th centuries. Among them are the world map designed by 70 geographers and astronomers in a thirty-year period in 9th century, and the oldest clock of the world that works in accordance with the time system which is still in use. We recommend a visit to the museum for an insight into the contribution of scientists from the Islamic world to the world history of science.