

TURKEY 2024

A WEEK IN İSTANBUL AND ANATOLIA



CHARLES GANNON © 2024



TURKEY 2024

A WEEK IN İSTANBUL AND ANATOLIA

This account is about a Travel Department tour in Turkey, which started in İstanbul on 8 October 2024 and finished on 15 October in Kuşadası.

During this period 100 *lira* was equal to about €2.60

Cover photographs: Aya Sofya, İstanbul (top) and the Temple of Hadrian in Ephesus (bottom).

Certain letters used in spelling Turkish words are listed below:

c – like the j in ‘jolly’

ç – like the ch in ‘church’

ğ – is not pronounced; it simply lengthens the preceding vowel

ı – is pronounced like the ‘ee’ in ‘see’

î – (i with no dot) is pronounced like the i in ‘it’

ö – is pronounced as in German

ş – is pronounced like the ‘sh’ in ‘ship’

ü – is pronounced as in German or in the French word *tu*.

My thanks once again to Andrew Robinson, who has kindly proofread this account.

PART ONE

İSTANBUL



*A detail of tiles in the Apartment of the Chief Black Eunuch,
Topkapı Palace, İstanbul*

1: İSTANBUL

Tuesday, 8 October 2024

Damn, damn, damn! Before the bus stopped at Terminal 1 in Dublin Airport I was on my feet, waiting for the door to open; as soon as it did, I made a bolt for it and ran into the Arrivals area and up the stairs to Departures. Where were the check-in desks for Turkish Airlines? I glanced at an information screen; nothing – no doubt the checking in was well over and done with. I asked a lady in uniform and she waved me down to the other end of the long hall. At last I found a row of Turkish Airlines desks, but there was nobody behind them. A few people had formed a short queue – they were waiting for a later flight. An official pointed me in the direction of another desk where, I was told, somebody would be able to help me. However, nobody was there. I shouted to get attention, but to no avail. Eventually a lady appeared and I explained that I was in danger of missing my flight to Turkey at 10.35 a.m. – it was now shortly after ten. She took my passport, found my flight on her computer, but was unable to print me a ticket. Another lady appeared and, after a phone call and some more work on the computer, a boarding pass was eventually produced and handed to me.

Having been given directions, I now ran over to the passport-controlled entry point, then approached the long queue for the security check, which I began to skip. A lady in charge told me that skipping the queue was not allowed but, as soon as her back was turned, I was off again. When I reached the security scanners, I hollered at a man and asked him if I could go next, and he said yes. At the other side of the machine, I gathered my belongings, put them back into my pockets and, having looked for a sign pointing me in the direction of Gate 211, ran for it as fast as I could. As I approached a familiar-looking circular area I heard my name being called over the loudspeaker system and I waved to the young lady who was making the announcement. My boarding pass was checked, a door was opened and I ran out of the airport and over the tarmac to the waiting plane. Although I was last on, people were still organizing their luggage and standing in the aisle. When I finally found my seat at the very back of the plane, I stowed away my small amount of hand luggage, flopped down into my seat, and heaved a sigh of relief.

My lateness had been caused by the non-appearance of the Aircoach at the Cornelscourt stop in the south of Dublin at 7.31 a.m. that morning. I had been at the stop some six or seven minutes beforehand, but the bus had either passed by earlier or had not come at all. I therefore had to take the next bus, which appeared on time, at 8.01. By then the rush-hour traffic was at its heaviest, and our progress was slowed even more by the circuitous route that the bus took; at one point it doubled back to pick up a couple of passengers from a hotel, where we stopped for about five minutes. At last we were back on the main road to Dublin's city centre. Shortly afterwards I was joined by a lady who sat down beside me. Conversation with her helped to calm my nerves as we drove slowly towards the airport. I was fearful of missing my flight as I was very much looking forward to visiting Turkey, especially as the week-long tour, organized by the Travel Department, wasn't exactly cheap. I had not planned to go to Turkey at all, for I had already booked for a trip to Egypt, which would begin on

the last day of November. I had stumbled upon the ‘Istanbul and Ancient Turkey’ trip quite by accident in a brochure that had been posted to me, and had decided to join it as a treat for myself – and also a way of helping my friend Colm. Colm and I had booked a trip to Greece at the beginning of 2020, but it had been cancelled at the last minute because of the Covid virus. Colm had paid a €200 deposit, which was returned to him by way of a voucher but, as he had reached the age of 80 by 2024, he decided that he did not want to do any more travelling. By using his voucher for the Turkish trip, I was able to reduce the cost by €200, which I then returned to him in cash. He was therefore happy to retrieve his money at long last, and I was happy to go on the trip. As soon as I had done all this, I borrowed the *Lonely Planet* guide to Turkey from my local library, and began to read about the country, taking copious notes as I studied the relevant sections.

The history of Turkey, and especially of Anatolia (the main part of the country, which is in Western Asia) is quite unique, for human habitation here dates back to the Palaeolithic period (also known as the Old Stone Age). There are several Neolithic archaeological sites in the southeast region, including Göbekli Tepe, which is believed to have been founded in about 9500 BCE. Çatalhöyük (7000 BCE) is regarded as being the most advanced of these. The most ancient period in the history of Anatolia spans from the emergence of the first period of Hattians up to the conquest of Anatolia by the Achaemenid Empire in the 6th century BCE. The Hittites arrived in about 2000 BCE and conquered Hattusa, the centre of Hittian and Hurrian culture. The empire reached its height in the 13th century BCE, controlling much of Asia Minor, north-western Syria and northwest upper Mesopotamia. The destruction of the famous city of Troy by the Mycenaeans took place in about 1200 BCE.

Cyrus of Persia overran Anatolia in 547 BCE, setting the scene for a long Greco-Persian rivalry. During the fourth century BCE, Alexander the Great advanced on the Persians and conquered most of Anatolia. During this period, Celtic people settled in Galatia, the region in which the city of Ankara is now situated. A series of Hellenistic kingdoms followed and, in 133 BCE, the final one was bequeathed to the Roman Republic, even though Hellenistic culture remained predominant.

Saint Paul, who was originally from Antioch (now Antakya), made his long proselytizing treks across Anatolia between CE 45 and 60. It is believed that Saint John and Mary, the mother of Jesus, ended up in Ephesus. In 330, the emperor Constantine declared his ‘New Rome’, later renamed Constantinople, as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium). A convert to Christianity, he had hosted the First Council of Nicaea in 325. Under the emperor Theodosius, the whole Roman Empire became officially Christian and paganism was forbidden. On his death, the empire was split into east and west. His successor, Theodosius II, built the walls of Constantinople to protect the riches of the capital. Byzantium enjoyed a golden age during the reign of Justinian; there were military conquests in North Africa and Spain, there were reforms within the empire, and building projects abounded.

During the seventh century, Muslim Arabs captured Ankara and besieged Constantinople. Although Arab incursions in the west were temporary, the eastern and southern fringes of the Byzantine empire (notably Syria and Egypt) were lost forever. Nevertheless, in 867 Basil I helped to restore Byzantium’s fortunes; there was a resurgence in military power and a flourishing of the arts. Under Basil II, Byzantium reached its high-tide mark; the frontiers were pushed to Armenia, Italy was retaken, and the Bulgarians were defeated.

In 1071 there were new arrivals: the Seljuk Turks, whose empire had been founded in 1037 near the Aral Sea in Central Asia. Having conquered Persia and the

surrounding region, they then moved westward to Anatolia and defeated a large Byzantine force at Manzikert. However, they did not immediately follow up on their success.

The rabble of the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople in 1204, and some forty years later the Mongols rumbled out of Central Asia, taking Erzurum in eastern Anatolia and defeating the Seljuks at Köse Dağ. However, the Mongols departed, leaving only some minor states. In 1300, the leader of the Ottoman Turks, Osman I, came to prominence during the marches between the Byzantines and the Seljuks. He died in 1324 while campaigning against the Byzantines at Bursa in north-western Anatolia, the first Ottoman capital. The Ottomans and the Byzantines made their first foray into Europe in 1349; the Crusade of Nicopolis in 1396 aimed to forestall the march into Europe, and was defeated by the Islamic Ottoman forces. In 1402, Beyazıt, the victor of the crusade, besieged Constantinople, but diverted his army in order to take on the Tatar warlord Tamerlane. However, his army was crushed and he was enslaved.

In 1453, Mehmet II laid siege to Constantinople, and the Turks were victorious after the city walls had been breached. He then tried to invade Italy; although he succeeded in capturing Otranto in Puglia, he died before marching on Rome.

The reign of Süleyman the Magnificent between 1520 and 1566 was the zenith in the Ottoman Empire; he captured Budapest, Belgrade and Rhodes, doubling the size of his nation. However, the Ottoman navy was destroyed at Lepanto in 1571 by the resurgent European powers who, at that time, were in control of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean trade routes, and were experiencing the advances of the Renaissance.

In 1683 Sultan Mehmet IV besieged Vienna; this ended with the rout of his army. By the end of the century the Ottomans sued for peace at last and lost the Peloponnese, Hungary, and Transylvania.

Despite attempts to modernize their nation and get military training from France during the late 1700s, the Ottomans lost ground to the Russians under Catherine the Great, who appointed herself as protector of the Ottomans' Orthodox subjects. Major attempts were made at reform under Mahmud II in the early 1800s; he centralized the administration and modernized the army, resulting in an 'Auspicious Event' during which the Janissaries (the established military caste who violently resisted reform) were put to the sword.

In 1876 Abdülhamid II took the throne. The National Assembly met for the first time and a constitution was created, but Serbia and Montenegro, emboldened by the pan-Slavic movement, fought for independence. In 1908, the Young Turks of the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) demanded the reintroduction of the constitution; in the ensuing elections, the CUP won a convincing majority.

The First and Second Balkan wars took place between 1912 and 1913. An alliance of Serbian, Greek and Bulgarian forces took Edirne and Salonika, previously the second city of the Ottoman Empire. The alliance later turned on itself. During 1915 and 1918 the Turks fought in World War I on the side of the Central Powers. Defending four fronts, they repelled invaders only at Gallipoli and, at the end of the war, a British fleet was positioned off the coast of İstanbul. The Turkish War of Independence began in 1919. The Treaty of Sèvres (1920) reduced Turkey to a strip of Anatolian territory but the Turks, led by Mustafa Kemal (later named Atatürk), rose to defend their homeland. In 1922 the Turks pushed back the Greek expeditionary force, then in Anatolia, and ejected them from Smyrna (İzmir); Turkey reasserted independence and the European forces acceded. During the following year, 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne, signed by the general and statesman İsmet İnönü, undid

the wrongs of the Treaty of Sèvres, and the Republic of Turkey was unanimously supported by the members of the National Assembly.

Atatürk died in 1938 at the age of 57, and all the clocks in his palace were stopped at the time of his death: 9.05 a.m.

After World War II, which the Turks avoided, the Truman Doctrine brought aid to Turkey on the condition of democratisation. Elections were held in 1950 and the Democratic Party emerged victorious. However, during the 1970s and 80s there was political strife, which was quelled by military coups. In 1983, Turgut Özal was elected leader, and Turkey was opened to the West, bringing in tourism. Between 1985 and 1999 the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an armed political group calling for a Kurdish state, was established. A long, low-intensity war in south-east Anatolia began until the PKK founder, Abdullah Öcalan, was captured in 1999.

In 2002 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's new Justice and Development Party (AKP) won a landslide election victory, which was a reflection of the public's disgruntlement with the established parties. The economy recovered, though criticism of the AKP mounted during the Gezi Park protests in 2013. However, the party recovered in 2015.

During 2016, millions of refugees arrived in Turkey because of the Syrian war, and ISIS suicide bombers targeted İstanbul. In July, military factions launched a failed coup attempt; the government reprisals were both swift and draconian. At the time of writing, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is still in power, much to the delight of his followers, but to the disgust of his many opponents because of widespread corruption.

It is interesting to note that Anatolian languages, the earliest attested branch of Indo-European, have been spoken in Anatolia since at least 1800 BCE. The Turkic languages had originated in Mongolia and East Turkestan (now Xinjiang province in north-western China), and had spread westwards through Central Asia, finally arriving in Turkey when the Seljuk and Ottoman Turks settled there. I can remember reading the numbers from one to ten in Turkish to a young man in Xinjiang province when I was there in 1989; although the young man had never heard of Turkey, he was astonished by the fact that he was able to understand what I was saying. Originally the Turkish language was written using a modified version of the Arabic script, but now the Roman alphabet is used.

After we watched a video of what to do in case of an emergency, first in Turkish and then in American English, the plane began to taxi down the runway and finally rose up into the clouds. By now I had removed my shoes and changed into a pair of sandals. The lady and gentleman sitting beside me turned out to be members of our Travel Department group, and so I had a few words with them. As I was not in the mood for watching films or listening to music, I took a copy of Homer's *Iliad* out of my bag and began to read some of it, for Troy was one of the archaeological sites that we would be visiting.

The four-hour flight was comfortable but uneventful, and tedium was broken by the arrival of an excellent lunch provided free of charge by the airline. As I had not expected this, I had brought a couple of chicken and salad wraps with me in my bag, one of which I ate afterwards rather than bin it. After the meal I dozed for a short time and felt all the better for the rest.

At about four o'clock (two hours ahead of Irish time) we discovered that we were approaching İstanbul. Through the windows we could see the sun shining brightly from a cloudless sky. At last we landed and, once off the plane, entered a huge modern airport in which we had to walk very long distances. We eventually reached the baggage reclaim area, which I did not need to use, but where I availed of the

opportunity to change some money at a currency exchange desk. I changed €50 into the local currency at a rate of 29 *lira* to the euro, which yielded 1,468.31 *lira*. I then emerged from the baggage reclaim area through an incorrect door and so was unable to find our guide and the members of our group in the arrivals area. An official directed me down to the correct place and I found the person who was in charge of us: a lively and good-humoured lady named Meltem Karamete. While we waited for some more members of our group who had got lost or were delayed, I sat down and chatted to some of my fellow travellers, all of whom were pleasant. When eventually everyone was together, we clambered aboard a coach, which was driven by a very friendly man, and I sat right behind the driver and beside our guide.

At last we left the airport and drove through the busy streets, all chock-a-block with heavy rush-hour traffic, towards our accommodation: The Arts Hotel, near Taksim Square. The hotel was very modern and plush, and my double room was large and impressive. Once I had sorted out my things and had prepared what I needed for the evening and the following day, I joined our group and a fellow traveller named Frank, whom I had seen on the plane and had spoken to when we were in the arrivals area earlier. Meltem then brought us outside to show us where the best – and safest – restaurants were in the area. When we reached the end of our street, we turned a corner and, having noted a restaurant named Faro, which Meltem recommended, emerged into the large Taksim Square, where we found many more restaurants. By now it was quite dark. We went as far as an ugly modern mosque, looked down a street where there were more restaurants and food stalls, then decided where we were going to have our evening meal. Meltem left us at this point and Frank, along with a couple who had tacked themselves on to us, decided to walk back to the Faro restaurant, where the prices looked fairly reasonable.

Although the establishment was rather basic – the paper tablecloths were rather grubby – the waiters were friendly and it looked as though it was a place where the locals ate. We ordered drinks (I asked for a glass of beer) and chose our dishes, three of which were delivered to our table. Mine contained chicken and was quite tasty. Frank waited for his dish while sipping his beer, but nothing appeared. He eventually called over a waiter and demanded that his dish be served to him, along with an extra glass of beer supplied free of charge. The extra beer arrived quickly enough, though Frank had to wait for his meal to be cooked as the waiter had forgotten all about it. The young man finally brought him his beef burger and apologized for his mistake.

The meal finally finished, we walked back to our hotel and returned to our rooms. Because of the unaccustomed heat, I left the window slightly open, had a shower, wrote my diary and finally went to bed.

Wednesday, 9th

I woke at seven o'clock this morning after a good night's sleep, got myself ready, and at 8 o'clock went down to the dining room for breakfast, where I joined people who were choosing food from the huge selection on offer. I picked what I wanted and sat down beside an American couple who were members of our group. Unfortunately the lady had little or nothing to eat as the gluten-free bread that she had requested was not available. After our meal we returned to our rooms in order to get ready for today's sightseeing: a visit to the famous church – and later mosque – of Hagia Sophia (now known by its Turkish name Aya Sofya), then the Blue Mosque, the Egyptian obelisks and the Roman Hippodrome, followed by an optional lunch by the Golden Horn, and then a boat trip in the afternoon.

As requested, I was down in the lobby by nine o'clock, and shortly afterwards we all piled into the coach. Once again I sat in the front, opposite Meltem and behind the driver. On our way to our destination, Meltem pointed out certain places in the city to us. As the streets were once again full of traffic, progress was slow. Our route brought us along the Golden Horn, a wide and long stretch of sea, which we later crossed by a long bridge.



Aya Sofya, İstanbul

At last we reached our destination. Before the coach stopped, Meltem donned a red and rather bizarre-looking striped conical hat so that we would be able to see her. We then stepped out of the coach and, joining the crowds of tourists and worshippers, followed her and approached the famous and familiar-looking building with its fantastic domes and minarets: Aya Sofya, the history of which is as long as it is fascinating. It had been constructed on the site of Byzantium's acropolis, which was also the site of two earlier churches of the same name – one destroyed by fire and the other during riots in AD 532. The present building was commissioned by the Roman emperor Justinian, consecrated as a church in 537, converted into a mosque by Mehmet the Conqueror in 1453, turned into a museum by Atatürk in 1935, and then converted back into a mosque in 2020. Designed and built in the Byzantine style, Aya Sofya became the paradigmatic Orthodox church form, and its architectural style was emulated by Ottoman mosques a thousand years later. It surpasses other churches and mosques in its innovative architectural form, rich history, religious importance, and extraordinary beauty. It is worth noting that it had briefly served as a Catholic cathedral during the Fourth Crusade, in 1204.

The queue that had formed outside was long, and it doubled backwards and forwards in an effort to contain the crowds of people who were continually joining it. By now it was roasting hot under the bright sunshine; fortunately I had dressed appropriately. The Muslim women who wore traditional costumes and yashmaks, and who had their hair completely covered, must have been boiled with the heat. Other women, both Turkish and European, wore more conventional clothing. The women in our group who had forgotten to bring headscarves were either supplied with one by

Meltem or else bought cheap ones that were on sale nearby. Although the men in our group had been advised not to wear shorts or tee shirts, we did see some young men casually dressed in such attire. Indeed, I noticed a teenage girl who was very skimpily dressed in summer gear. It became very obvious that the dress code was not so important as it once had been.

When we eventually reached the entrance, Meltem produced tickets that she had purchased, and let us through the electronic gates. Once inside, we joined the tourists and walked up a ramp (like the one in the Giralda in Seville) to the gallery – the only part of the mosque where we tourists were allowed to go. Although our view of the fine building was rather restricted up here, it was thrilling to be in it at long last. Anxious to take some good photographs of the place, I left Meltem and the group and started taking shots of its various points of interest both on my camera and on my phone. Of particular interest was the fine dome that we could see from the gallery; 30 metres in diameter and 56 metres in height, it was supported by 40 massive ribs made of special hollow bricks. I had read that these ribs rested on four huge pillars that are concealed in the interior walls.



Aya Sofya, İstanbul

Starting at the east end of the mosque, where we could look down at some of the eight gigantic circular discs or medallions hanging from the cornice, on which were inscriptions in the Arabic script, we now moved to the west end, from where we had a

wonderful view of the entire mosque and the *mihrab*, where the altar of the Orthodox church had once been. (The *mihrab* is a niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction of the Kaaba in Mecca, towards which Muslims must face when praying. Here, it was positioned slightly off centre in the alcove.) To the left of the alcove was the elaborate *maqsura* or caliphal loge, where the caliph (the chief civil and religious ruler) and his entourage would sit and pray out of sight from the general populace. Immediately to the right of the alcove was the *minbar* or pulpit where the imam stands when delivering sermons. Around the central dome four large *hexapterygons* (six-winged angels) were depicted. Ancient mosaics behind and above us on the balcony depicted Jesus, Mary and some of the Byzantine emperors, including Justinian the Great; during the period when the building had been turned into a mosque, these mosaics had been covered in whitewash and plaster. There was also a Deësis mosaic, which also included Jesus and Mary, though much of it was missing.



Byzantine mosaic, Aya Sofya, Istanbul

When at last we had finished our visit to this wonderful building, we left, pausing briefly to admire another Byzantine mosaic on the way out, then mingled with the crowds outside. Following Meltem, we took a right turn down a street and stopped in an old building which had been converted into a restaurant. Here we were able to sit at tables outdoors, though in the shade, and order some complimentary drinks. I chose a glass of Turkish tea. As somebody had noticed that the back of my cotton jacket was wet, I took off my little backpack and discovered that the lid of a bottle of water, which I had got on the bus and had put into my bag during the morning, had worked loose. Not only had my jacket been affected, but also other things in the bag, such as my diary and the notes that I had written, so I took off my jacket and placed it on a chair in the hot sunshine, along with the bag, so that they could dry out.

Having relaxed for a while and chatted, we eventually got to our feet and made our way to the Blue Mosque nearby. This was another important building in the city. However, as we approached it, a voice bellowed out of the loudspeakers and the call to prayer, delivered in Arabic, began. After a pause, the same announcement could be heard coming from Aya Sofya. The various segments of the call continued as we made our way to the fine mosque, which Meltem thought we still might be able to

enter, but we were out of luck for, when we approached the main entrance, the doors were being closed. We were advised to use the door in the main square, but when we got to it, it too was firmly closed. All we could do now was peer through a window, which afforded us a view of a pillar and a tiny fraction of the interior. We then sat down in the shade of an elegant colonnade, with a view of the packed square and one of the six tall minarets before us, listening to what Meltem had to say about the place.



The Blue Mosque, Aya Sofya, İstanbul

We learned from her that the Blue Mosque, officially the Sultan Ahmet Mosque, is an Ottoman-era imperial mosque that had been built between 1609 and 1617 during the rule of Ahmed I. Inside was a large central dome, surrounded by four semi-domes, high above the prayer hall. The large hall was decorated with thousands of İznik tiles and painted floral motifs, most of which are blue in colour, and which gave the mosque its popular name. After the Peace of Zsitvatorok, which ended the thirteen-year Long Turkish War between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg monarchy in

1606, and was regarded as a blow to Ottoman prestige, Sultan Ahmet decided to build this large mosque in the hope of soliciting God's favour. I was interested to discover that Pope Benedict XVI had visited the mosque in 2006 during his visit to Turkey. When in the mosque, he had removed his shoes and then, with his eyes closed, had paused for a full two minutes in silent meditation. Afterwards he had said, 'May all believers identify themselves with the one God and bear witness to true brotherhood.'



The Theodosius Obelisk and the Serpent Column, Sultanahmet Square, Istanbul

After relaxing here for a while and watching the people come and go, we left and made our way out to the large Sultanahmet Square, where we stopped to look at the Theodosius Obelisk, situated in what had once been the ancient Roman Hippodrome. This elegant Ancient Egyptian obelisk of Pharaoh Thutmose II (1479–1425 BCE) was erected here by the Roman Emperor Theodosius in the fourth century CE. The marble pedestal was decorated with bas-reliefs, one of them showing Theodosius offering the crown of victory to a winner in the chariot races, along with happy spectators, musicians, and dancers. After admiring this, Meltem told us about the Hippodrome,

where horse and chariot races were held. She then drew our attention to the remains of the nearby Serpent Column (originally known as the sacrificial tripod of Plataea), which had been removed from the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, Greece, by the Roman emperor Constantine. The top had been adorned with a golden bowl supported by three serpent heads, though it appears that this was never brought to Constantinople. All that remains of the Delphi Tripod now is the base, which is called the Serpent Column.

We then were brought to a spot from where we could take the best photos of Aya Sofya. After we had taken our shots of it, we were formed into an organized group and photographed by a professional photographer known to Meltem, who undoubtedly would want to sell us prints. However, I stayed out of the group and photographed them using my own camera. When the group began to move away in order to have lunch and go on a boat trip along the Golden Horn, I spoke to Meltem, who told me how to get to the nearby Topkapı Palace Museum. Earlier she had told me how to return to Taksim Square using public transport, by travelling first by tram and then by the funicular rail line.

I now said goodbye to her and the others, and made my way up a narrow street back towards Aya Sofya. As I was feeling a little peckish by now, I stopped to eat the remaining wrap, which was still in my bag and, hopefully, still eatable. I found a seat in a nearby alleyway, sat down, and gingerly removed the wrap from its plastic container. I concentrated on eating just the pastry and the chicken inside, avoiding the lettuce, which had deteriorated in the heat. I washed this down with the remaining water in my bottle and, when ready to go, continued walking.

Passing Aya Sofya, where I noticed that much fewer people were now queuing near the entrance, I made my way to the large imperial palace, which I had read about and was determined to see. I looked for the ticket office and, after a little bit of confusion, found it. I was shocked by how much I would have to pay in order to get in: 1,700 *lira* (about €58). However, as this included everything, including an audio guide, I bought a ticket using my debit card as I did not have enough cash. Not wishing to use an audio guide, I walked past the collection point and entered the first of the four courtyards.



Church of Hagia Eirene, Topkapı Palace, İstanbul

Although this first courtyard was quite large, it contained little of interest save for the elegant Byzantine church of Hagia Eirene, built in the sixth century to serve as the church for the Patriarch. However, following the construction of the palace, the church was used as an armoury. It was later converted into an archaeology museum, then a military museum. As nobody was heading towards it and it looked closed, I followed the crowd to the entrance of the next courtyard, where the admission tickets were needed to gain access through the electronic gates.



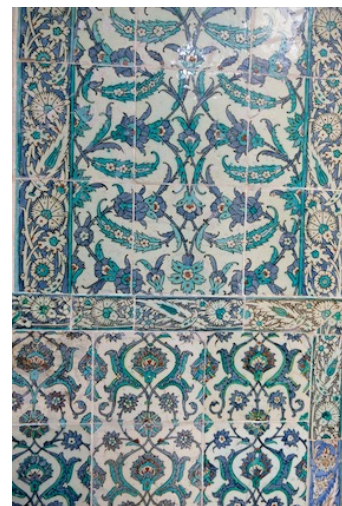
The Tower of Justice and the Imperial Council, Topkapı Palace, İstanbul

This second courtyard, also known as the Council Square, had a large garden in the centre and various fine buildings around the edges. This courtyard had been laid out in the 1460s, when Sultan Mehmet II had conquered the city. I was drawn to the handsome Tower of Justice and the beautiful exterior of the building that housed the Domed Chamber (or Imperial Council). Having taken some photographs of the tower and the building's exterior, I went indoors to admire the fine chamber, which I discovered was adorned with coloured tiles and fabulous gold-plated laticework.

Outside again, I approached the Old or Outer Treasury building, which now served as a small museum. In a series of rooms I glanced at collections of Ottoman and European arms and armour, and also some fine clocks. I could have spent more time examining the clocks, which interested me, but as I knew that there was so much to see in the palace, I left in search of the Harem, which I was determined to visit because of its famed beauty.

I entered this area through a doorway beneath the Tower of Justice and slowly made my way through the exquisite rooms and courtyards, many of which were adorned with beautiful tiles, domes, and ceramic panels displaying Arabic script. Passing through the Domed Cabinets, I made my way to the Fountain Hall and to the Paved Courtyard of the Black Eunuchs, whose function was to guard the women's section of the palace. The practice of assigning this job to eunuchs was an ancient Mesopotamian tradition that went back to the Assyrians; it was later adopted in other places such as China and Rome. From here I entered the Harem proper through the ornamental Main Gate. Next came the small Paved Courtyard of the Wives and Concubines; the concubines who became the favourites of the Sultans, or who gave

birth to a child, were usually raised to the status of wife (Kadın Efendi) or favourite wife (Haseki Sultan).



Outside the Dormitory of the Black Eunuchs; detail of the Paved Courtyard of the Black Eunuchs; Apartment of the Chief Black Eunuch, and a detail of the Apartment tiles, Topkapı Palace, İstanbul

Next came the the Apartment of the Queen Mother, which was lavishly decorated with porcelain tiles and paintings of rustic scenes. From here I walked to the Hammams (bathhouses) of the Sovereign and Queen Mother which, although functional and quite plain, were still very beautiful. I then made my way to the domed and elaborate Hall of the Sovereign, which had been used for various purposes such as ceremonies for exchanging compliments on festival days, spiritual lessons, weddings, ceremonies, and the reception of guests. The fabulous Privy Room of Sultan Murad III was next; built in 1579 on the order of the sultan and used as the sultans' private and official apartment, its walls were covered with sixteenth-century İznik tiles. In it was a tall fireplace and a fountain. Nearby was the Privy Chamber of Ahmed I, built in 1608, the style of which was quite different, and then the Privy

Room of Sultan Ahmed III, constructed during the ‘Tulip Period’ of 1718–30, named after the period’s great interest in flowers, particularly tulips.



Top: Hall of the Sovereign; bottom: Privy Room of Sultan Murad III, Topkapı Palace, İstanbul

Among other fabulous things to see in the complex were the Double Pavilions, one of which was known as the Princes’ Flat, and the other, the Crown Princes’ Flat. Both of these were very ornately decorated inside. Nearby were the Chamberlain’s Courtyard and the Apartment of the Favourites, where the architecture was quite different. In one suite of rooms could be heard the voice of a mullah chanting texts, presumably from the Koran, in Arabic. I found the young man seated in the corner of the following room, with a microphone and a sacred book placed on a desk. The scales of the melodies that he sang were definitely not European.



The Third Courtyard and Audience Chamber, Topkapı Palace, İstanbul

When I eventually emerged from the Harem, I found myself in the Third Courtyard, where I made my way over to the Audience Chamber and had a look inside it. This was where the grand vizier would come to present the sultan with the decrees adopted by the Imperial Council. I then walked to the nearby Library of Sultan Ahmed III, which had been built in the eighteenth century. I was not surprised to discover that it is considered a masterpiece of the architecture of the Tulip Period (1718–30). From here I crossed to the eastern side of the square, where I popped into the Dormitory of the Campaigners and had a quick look at an exhibition of fine clothing worn by the sultans. Seeing a very long queue waiting to gain access to the Imperial Treasury, I decided to skip it for the time being, and walked to the Fourth Courtyard, also known as the Tulip Garden.

Although this final courtyard was small and contained buildings of lesser importance, it was very pleasant and intimate. Here I admired the elegant Marble Hall, looked inside several small but beautiful pavilions, including the fine Baghdad Pavilion, and stopped to take some photographs of the famous stretch of blue sea

before me, known as the Golden Horn. Several local people were photographing each other with the panoramic view behind them.



The Marble Hall and a view of the Golden Horn from the Fourth Courtyard, Topkapı Palace, İstanbul

I then returned to the Third Courtyard and made my way to the Imperial Treasury, on the same side but, instead of joining the long queue immediately, I sat down and rested for a while. I was now able to take in my surroundings, seated in the shade. It was clear that people from all corners of the world were here, visiting this magical place; many of the Turkish girls wore fine clothes and looked very pretty indeed. Children ran around, laughing and squealing with joy. When the queue for the Treasury slackened a little, I finally joined it, and soon found myself indoors again, admiring the many fine objects on view. Some of them were beautifully displayed in a

very imaginative manner. At one point I emerged at a balcony where there was another wonderful view overlooking the Golden Horn.

Exhausted by the time I emerged from the Treasury, I relaxed for a while and slowly made my way back to the First Courtyard, heading towards the Byzantine church of Hagia Eirene. As I was here, I thought that I might as well take a look inside it. At the entrance, my ticket was checked, and I was invited to step inside. As all the decoration had been removed and absolutely nothing of interest was to be seen except for the brickwork, I did not stay long.



The Blue Mosque, İstanbul

I finally left the palace, bought a bottle of water, drank some of it, and tramped back towards the Blue Mosque in the vague hope of seeing inside it. As I had heard the call to prayer bellowing from the loudspeakers a short while previously, I

presumed that the mosque would still be open. I was in luck – it was. I removed my sandals, put them in a plastic bag, entered by the main door, and left the sandals on a shelf inside. I then did what everyone else was doing: wandering around, looking at everything, and relaxing. Even though it was still bright outside, all the lights inside had been lit; arranged in wide circles above the people, they hung low within the huge building. Above them could be seen beautiful domes, and around the walls were stout pillars and many beautiful windows.

I took some photos of the place on my phone and then, following the example of many of the people, sat down on the carpet and rested. Shortly afterwards I was aware of English being spoken behind me; when I turned around to look, I saw three ladies talking together. I said hello to them and they greeted me. When I asked them if they were English, they said yes and, when I told them that I was half English, they invited me to sit down and chat with them. I noticed that two of the ladies had scarves covering their hair, and that one had a scarf around her neck. After a while, somebody who was passing by told the lady to cover her hair, whereupon she apologized and complied with the request. We had quite an animated conversation until one of them noticed that the call to prayer had started, which meant that they would have to move to the women's area at the back of the mosque. At this point I bid them adieu, collected my sandals, which I put on outside, and left. By now it was starting to get dark.

Delighted that I had managed to see the inside of the Blue Mosque, I now crossed the square and went over to where the tramlines were. I saw a tram leaving for the destination that I had been told about (Kabataş) and eventually found a ticket-dispensing machine. Producing a travel card that our bus driver had lent me, I asked a man who spoke English how to operate the machine. Once he had established that I needed to put 100 *lira* on to the card, he started pressing buttons and finally asked me to put my debit card into the machine. However, something went wrong and he had to start all over again. When the money had been finally transferred to the card, he took it out, handed it to me, and then asked me for money, declaring that he was out of work at the moment. I refused, thanked him, and walked away quickly.

I joined a small queue at the tram stop and eventually a tram with the correct destination appeared. As it was full of people, I had to stand and hold a strap hanging from a rail over me. As Meltem had instructed, I stayed on the tram until it reached its final destination, Kabataş. Having checked with two English girls, I crossed to the left side of the road and walked back a short distance to the funicular rail line, hopped aboard a train that arrived shortly afterwards and got off at the next stop: the familiar Taksim Square. By now it was quite dark. I crossed over to where all the various restaurants were, and this evening decided to have my evening meal in the Café Italiano, which Meltem had drawn our attention to during the previous evening. As it looked clean and impressive, I went inside, sat down at a table, and was very quickly joined by the couple with whom we had eaten during the previous evening, and then another couple from our group. I ordered a good meal beginning with a bread and cheese starter, a main course consisting of traditional beef meatballs with chips and vegetables, and washed all this down with a glass of red wine. Later I finished my meal with a generous helping of tiramisu and a cup of Turkish tea. As soon as I had finished eating and had paid the bill of 1,180 *lira* (€39), I excused myself and returned to the hotel.

Back in my room I had a very welcome shower, sent some photos and messages to friends at home, then wrote my diary before going to bed shortly after midnight. It had been a really wonderful day.