

ISTANBUL – A BORROWED CITY

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I used to live in Istanbul. And this summer I went back for the first time. Eighteen years ago I had followed my heart and a Frenchman to live in this extraordinary and unique city. I fell in love with it immediately – it was more exotic than any place I had ever been to in my life. I knew Europe well. I was brought up in London and had travelled extensively all over Britain. I skied in Austria, went to Spain Holland and Germany with my parents, and lived several months in Madrid when I was seventeen. I studied in Florence and then journeyed through Italy for a year. My honeymoon was spent in Portugal and Madeira. I worked in Luxembourg before coming to live in France as a young mother with two small children, where I stayed for six years and learned all about that delightful cultivated country.

But Istanbul! Now this was something different entirely.

Lygos – Byzantium – Constantinople – and now Istanbul. The stuff of legends, of romance, at the heart of the known world, straddling Europe and Asia, gateway between West and East.

The iconic skyline over Sultanhamet, Aia Sofia and Topkapı is probably what most people think of when talking about Istanbul and I well remember the impression it made on me when I first saw it, as the taxi flew along the *Sahilyolu*, the road from Atatürk airport bordering the

Marmara Sea following the centuries old city walls built by Theodosius, the last Emperor to rule over both Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire.

At first when I went over to Istanbul we used to stay in the glamorous Pera Palas Hotel, last stop of the Orient Express before crossing over to the East. Then for a few months we lived in Beyoğlu just up from *Galata Kulesi* (the Galata Tower). Sometimes I would go north from Beyoğlu up onto Istiklal Caddesi to look at the shops and wander down to Taksim Square, scene of so many demonstrations and unrest (though not when I was there), and go into the Marmara Hotel for a drink and to watch the brilliantly coloured exotic fish swimming in the giant Aquarium in the lobby.

But most mornings I would run down the hill and over Galata Bridge and Haliç, the Golden Horn, to the accompanying aroma of grilled fish which would be cooking under the bridge at Karaköy any time of night or day, served up fresh in a bread roll and butter – one of the most delicious street-foods in a city of wonderful street-food.

Avoiding the myriad fishermen on the bridge all playing their lines out over into Haliç, and dodging the *simit* sellers who ran through the streets holding aloft their wooden trays of these fresh-baked bready rings sprinkled with sesame or poppy seeds and the lemon sellers who came in from the country carrying hods of the bright yellow fruit on their backs, I would plunge into the markets where spices of every sort were sold in sacks and bootblacks lined the street trying to persuade passers-by to get their shoes polished. The hubbub of sounds mingling with the various enticing scents was exciting and unfamiliar.

From there I often escaped into the Rıstem Pa_a Cami, my favourite mosque in Istanbul. A tranquil haven

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from the crazy chaos outside, I went there for refuge and solace, to think and to dream, often with my notebook and pen. The atmosphere was calm and full of peace and yet it had a strange story. Mimar Sinan, the renowned Ottoman architect who built most of the famous mosques around that time (mid 1500's) was apparently madly in love with Roxelana, one of the daughters of the great Sultan, Süleyman the Magnificent. The Sultan however refused to let him marry her and instead betrothed her to Rqstem Pasa, his old Grand Vizier, at the same time commanding him to build a mosque for his arch rival in love. It is said that Mimar Sinan poured out all his passion and sadness into the beauty of the design and there is indeed a deep poignancy within those walls. The mosque is thought to be one of Mimar Sinan's finest works although paradoxically Rqstem Pa_a died before it was completed.

I loved the deep rich blue and white tiles dotted with the famous tomato red from Iznik that covered the walls from floor to ceiling and the wall-to-wall scarlet "seccade" or prayer carpets and the great circles of hanging lamps that hung so low I could touch them. Emerging into the heat and bustle of the surrounding markets was always a shock and a delight at the same time. I used to go to the "Kapali Çarsi" the great covered market of Istanbul so huge it has a mosque, several restaurants and cafes and a police station inside it. This Grand Bazaar has existed for over a thousand years and I remember reading how the Crusaders coming through on their way to fight the Saracens would marvel at the prodigious goods on display – silks, velvets, jewels, spices and sweets, silver and gold, things of a fineness and quality they had never seen or imagined in the barbaric north. Today hundreds of sellers of carpets, jewellery, gold and silver objects, leather goods, and all manner of spices and foodstuffs, throng every broad alleyway, all demanding that you come in, "haggle away" and buy. It is all too easy to get lost – the Kapali Çarsi is a whole city unto itself.

Sultanhamet – the Blue Mosque – never impressed me particularly. I much preferred the Süleymaniye or the Fatih Camii, built a hundred years earlier. But for me nothing compares to the magnificence of Aġia Sofia.

This building is unique in the world, in conception, design and history. It was first constructed as a church by Constantine the Great when he became head of the Eastern Roman Empire around 330 AD. It went through various travails of fire and destruction, fell into ruins and was then restored by the Emperor Justinian in 557 AD and that building has remained and is what we see to this day. Constantine had brought the great brass doors from Greece which were made in 300 BC and they are spectacular,

nearly two and a half thousand years old. The overall design is monumental and imposing and the interior has a dark mystical quality, with delicate Byzantine mosaics, gold decorated ceilings, and the great shields covered with beautiful Arabic calligraphy. It has passed from church to mosque to museum without losing any of its grandeur.

Outside there is a long esplanade and one has but to stop and imagine the horse races and chariotteering round the Hippodrome which lies between Aġia Sofia and Sultanhamet. On one side of the Hippodrome is the Islamic Museum which is filled with marvellous examples of ancient silk carpets and textiles, pottery and gold and silverware of the finest quality, as is the fabulous Palace of Topkapi with its amazing collection of gem-studded weaponry. Alongside Topkapi is the Archaeological Museum wherein lies amongst other artefacts what is claimed to be the sarcophagus of Alexander the Great – the mind boggles at such history!

There is so much to see in this city.

The underground palace – the *Yerebatan Sarnici* – or the Basilica Cistern is well worth visiting, again something incomparable with its special White Stone, an ancient version of a modern-day Trig Point, marking the centre of Istanbul from which was measured the distance to all other major cities of the known world. The Turks in the 1400's were able to conquer Constantinople as it was then, by poisoning the water supply to the city further up the Bosphorus and then being aware of this weakness they were careful to build a complex system of waterworks to protect themselves, culminating in this Cistern.

Later we moved into our own apartment in Istinye, about ten kilometres up the coast on the Bosphorus. This time I drove over in my little Peugeot 205 all the way from Toulouse. It took me a week, going gently and having plenty of adventures on the way including taking the ferry from Brindisi into Izmir. The car was not new but still had plenty of spark – a racy little number and I loved it. However it could be temperamental and amazingly it held out until I was driving along the Bosphorus coast only two kilometres from the village of Istinye where the apartment was, when it finally conked out.

I got out, and started to bounce up and down on the door jamb, usually sufficient to encourage the motor to start. As I was doing so a sleek black Mercedes drew up alongside. The window rolled down slowly, as an elegant silver head appeared and a voice called out jovially in French,

"Madame! Quarante-neuf! Est-ce que je peux vous aider?!"



Aḡia Sofia

For a moment I was nonplussed. Quarante-neuf? Forty-nine? but – suddenly it dawned on me. He had seen my French number plate which signalled the department of France I came from, the Maine-et-Loire, and it turned out this gentleman was in the Corps Diplomatique but originally came from the same department. We had a little chat about what my bouncing might achieve and in fact it was not working. So for my last resort I dove back into the car and took out the little silver hammer I kept in the glove-box for such occasions and opened the bonnet. To his astonishment I tapped the starter motor with the hammer then turned the ignition and lo and behold! the engine began to purr beautifully.

So this was my start to two years living in the magical city of Mosques. The apartment was spacious and elegant with marble floors that had underfloor heating and a long balcony with a view we never tired of all the way down the Bosphorus to the bridges. I took my diploma in teaching English and every day walked down the steep hill to catch the ferry which crossed over to Kadiköy on the Asian side where the language school was. Then in the evening I would wander back through the markets buying all sorts of exotic meats and fish and fresh fruit and vegetables before boarding the ferry to return to the West. In winter they served on board a delicious hot drink called *salep*, a thick milky concoction made from the root of orchids, while in summer it was *portakaal suyu*, the fresh squeezed orange juice that one finds on every street corner of Istanbul and as ever the ubiquitous *simit*s.

There are umpteen excellent restaurants in Istanbul, on both sides of the Bosphorus, serving the freshest produce and one can have wine with dinner. In the *locantas* however, which are like *routiers* in France or *dhabas* in India, food is usually washed down with a glass of *Ayran*, a thin yogurt drink with a hint of salt and onion as alcohol is not generally served. Good Turkish cuisine remains one of my favourites, especially *Iskender Kebab* (a delicious yogurt and meat dish), *patlican salatasi* (smoked aubergine) and *pide* (a sort of Turkish pizza). On summer weekends it was wonderfully refreshing to escape the heat and bustle of the city by taking the ferry over to the Princes Islands, Büyük Ada, Heybeliada, to walk and picnic with

friends among the pine trees and swim off the beaches. A good life.

I am not proposing in this article to go into the complexities of Turkish politics either then or now. Suffice to say that the dream of Atatürk in the 1920's to turn the face of Turkey to the west has slowly been eroded by the strength of the Islamists who grow ever more virulent. Mustapha Kemal Pasha (Atatürk) is still as revered as ever and regarded as the Father of the Nation but his vision of a westernised Turkey is fast losing ground. Back in the nineties there was a strong movement to join the European Union and although Turkey had a long way to go to fulfil the criteria necessary for entry I was a supporter of this and still am, on the grounds that we in the west are better off with the Turks as allies than as enemies, and if Europe does not accept them then turn their faces to the Arab world they will. Sadly the present incumbent has done little to further the friendship of Europe, and Turkey remains in a limbo of its own, forever undecided between East and West.

Then for one reason and another and with a lot of sadness on both sides, my Frenchman and I decided to part company. We drove down to Izmir together so that I could catch the liner back to Venice. It was January. Cold but brilliant and blue. The little car just managed to drive on to the huge ship and then died but that's another story. However being woken early one morning to find the ship drifting through the massive chalky-red limestone walls of the Corinth Canal and then a day later sailing into Venice

down the Grand Canal as dawn was breaking on a freezing but rose-gold January morning, with the entire skyline of that fabled city laid out before us, were experiences I shall never forget.

Till this summer those were my last images of Istanbul. Then I was persuaded to go back by a Georgian friend so I went, with some small but eventually unfounded misgivings. It was as wondrous as ever and everything about the city, its layout, the monuments, the language, all came flooding back to me. Of course there have been changes, mostly political which are not in particular evidence on the streets. The people appear more prosperous, they have money, on the whole they seem to live well. The streets are clean and well maintained, the roads fast, the Hammams of Çemberlitas and Galatasaray still offer the sensuous pleasures of massage and steam baths on marble slabs. Restaurants cafes and bars are packed. Karaköy has changed beyond recognition, now it is the hip part of town for the young, and Galata too. The little narrow side streets off Istiklal where one can spend long hours smoking a *nargile* – the water pipe – and drinking thick Turkish coffee heated in hot sand are well patronised late into the night.

There is a sense of timelessness about this city. I have the feeling that it has been inhabited forever. Even before its earliest known beginnings around 1500 BC when the tribes of Thrace settled and called their city Lygos, geographically it has always been of prime importance and therefore historically. From the occupation by the Greeks

in 700 BC to the conquest by the Romans in 190 AD, and through to the present day, it seems to me that the people who lived there then and those who live there now are only borrowing it for a while.

It is easy to forget the proximity of Ukraine and the Crimea, a stone's throw over the *Kara Deniz*, the Black Sea, which meant an influx of Russians in the 1100's and the advent of Russian Orthodox Christians. Then it fell in numbers and importance until the conquest in its weakened state by the Moghuls from the north in 1453 AD, the beginning of the opulent Sultanate which ended with Attatürk's secularisation of the country.

Byzantium, Constantinople, Istanbul, the name has changed over the centuries, the latter becoming accepted since Attatürk's decree of 1930, yet whatever the name the City remains itself, impervious, unassailable. So many different peoples, Thracians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Christians, Jews, Russians, Moghuls, so many religions from Hellenic times to Christianity to Judaism to Orthodoxy to Islam have settled on this site. So many empires have used it as their capital, Byzantine, Roman, Ottoman. The city has always been on loan to whoever occupies it as it passes from generation to generation.

However the lasting and most iconic image that I used to marvel at back in the 1990's, is of two young girls walking arm in arm down the street engrossed in talk, one dressed in a skimpy tank top and hot pants, the other fully covered in niqab and chador, and this image still remains and can be seen today. Istanbul will survive us all. □