



48 HOURS IN

Istanbul

SUN · STONE · SEA

WELCOME

Welcome to Istanbul.

Istanbul is the only city in the world built across two continents, and this is not a geographic curiosity — it is the operating principle of everything here. The Bosphorus strait divides Europe from Asia, Byzantine from Ottoman, the ancient from the contemporary. You can take a ferry from one continent to the other for a dollar and a half and the crossing takes twenty minutes. No city makes the scale of history more physically present or more casually navigable.

The historic peninsula — Sultanahmet, Eminönü, the Grand Bazaar — contains more significant architecture per square kilometer than almost anywhere on earth: the Hagia Sophia (532 CE), the Blue Mosque, the Topkapi Palace, the Byzantine Hippodrome. But Istanbul in the 21st century is also a city of 15 million people with a creative economy, a serious contemporary art scene in Beyoglu and Karaköy, and a food culture — street simit, Bosphorus fish sandwiches, meyhanes, and the world's best baklava — that rivals any city in the world.

Istanbul rewards solo travelers who move between worlds. The historic sites require half a day of serious attention. The neighborhoods of Beyoglu, Cihangir, and Karaköy require evenings in meyhanes with shared tables of meze. The Bosphorus requires a ferry. None of it requires a group.

DAY ONE

Day One

Hagia Sophia • Blue Mosque • Grand Bazaar • Beyoglu

The first day covers the historic peninsula before crossing to Beyoglu for the evening. Start at the Hagia Sophia before the crowds, move through Sultanahmet, navigate the Grand Bazaar, and cross the Galata Bridge for dinner in Istanbul's creative quarter.

MORNING

8:00 AM – 1:00 PM

8:00 AM

Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya)

Sultanahmet: built by Emperor Justinian I in 532 CE as the largest cathedral in the world — a title it held for nearly a thousand years. Converted to a mosque by Mehmed II in 1453, a museum by Atatürk in 1934, and returned to mosque use in 2020. The interior — 56 metres high at the dome, with Byzantine mosaics visible alongside Ottoman calligraphy — is among the most moving architectural experiences in the world. Free entry; remove shoes and women should cover heads. Arrive before 9am.

INSIDER TIP

The upper gallery of the Hagia Sophia is accessed via a ramp on the north side — this is where the finest Byzantine mosaics survive, including the Deësis mosaic (c. 1261), considered one of the greatest works of Byzantine art. The gallery is less crowded than the main floor and has a direct view down into the nave.

10:00 AM

Blue Mosque (Sultan Ahmed Camii)

Directly across the Hippodrome from the Hagia Sophia: the only mosque in Istanbul with six minarets, built 1609–1616. The interior — tiled with 20,000 hand-painted Iznik tiles in blue and white — is extraordinary in morning light. Active mosque: closed to visitors during prayer times (check schedule). Free entry; same dress requirements as Hagia Sophia.

11:30 AM

Topkapi Palace (brief visit or full)

Gülhane Park: the Ottoman imperial palace from 1478 to 1856, housing the treasury (including the Topkapi Dagger and the 86-carat Spoonmaker's Diamond), imperial harem, and relics of the Prophet Muhammad. Allow two to four hours for a full visit; the treasury and harem require separate tickets. Book at muze.gov.tr.

AFTERNOON

1:00 PM – 8:00 PM

1:00 PM**Lunch: Tarihi Sultanahmet Köftecisi**

Divan Yolu Caddesi 12: the most famous köfte restaurant in Istanbul, operating since 1920. One dish — grilled köfte with bread, tomato, and peppers — served to a perpetual queue of locals and visitors. €4 for a full lunch. The canonical Sultanahmet meal.

2:30 PM**Grand Bazaar (Kapalı Çarşı)**

One of the world's oldest and largest covered markets: 61 streets, 4,000 shops, operating since 1461. Enter from the Beyazıt Gate and navigate without a specific destination — the spatial experience of the bazaar is the point. Buy Turkish ceramics, copper, textiles, and spices from the surrounding Spice Bazaar (Mısır Çarşısı). Budget two hours minimum; bargaining is expected.

INSIDER TIP

The Spice Bazaar (Egyptian Bazaar) at the waterfront is smaller, better-lit, and has a more concentrated selection of quality spices, dried fruit, and lokum (Turkish delight) than the Grand Bazaar's food section. The rooftop café of the Grand Bazaar (Havuzlu Restaurant) is excellent for a break.

5:00 PM**Galata Bridge & Karaköy**

Walk from the bazaar district down to the Galata Bridge: fishermen line both railings day and night, selling mackerel sandwiches (balık ekmek) from boats below the bridge. Cross to Karaköy — the neighborhood at the foot of the Galata Tower, now Istanbul's most concentrated design, gallery, and café district.

EVENING

8:00 PM – Late

8:00 PM**Dinner: Beyoglu Meyhane**

Walk up the Galata Tower hill into Beyoglu and Cihangir. Meyhanes are Istanbul's traditional tavern-restaurants — shared tables, continuous plates of cold meze (ezme, haydari, stuffed mussels, fried liver), grilled fish or meat, and rakı. Asmalımescit Street (off Istiklal Avenue) has the best concentration: Refik (1954), Yakup 2, and Cumhuriyet Meyhanesi are all reliable. No reservations needed; arrive by 8pm for a table.

10:30 PM**Istiklal Avenue & Beyoglu Night**

Istanbul's main pedestrian boulevard: 1.4km of 19th-century Levantine architecture connecting Taksim Square to Galata. The side streets — Cihangir, Asmalımescit, Nevizade — are better than the main avenue after dark. The bar culture runs late.

DAY TWO

Day Two

Bosphorus Ferry • Asian Side • Sunset at Pierre Loti

The second day crosses to the Asian side — the most undervisited and most genuinely local Istanbul experience — before returning for the Süleymaniye Mosque, a neighborhood walk through Balat, and an evening at one of the world's great meyhanes.

MORNING

8:00 AM – 1:00 PM

8:00 AM

Bosphorus Ferry to Kadıköy (Asian Side)

Take the vapur (public ferry) from Eminönü or Karaköy to Kadıköy: 20 minutes across the Bosphorus for ₺7. Kadıköy is Istanbul's most liveable neighborhood — a food market (Kadıköy Çarşısı), independent bookshops, café culture, and a morning energy that feels genuinely different from the European side. Buy breakfast at the market.

INSIDER TIP

The Bosphorus ferry at dawn — the Asian shore visible across the water, the minarets of Sultanahmet catching first light — is one of the great urban views in the world. Take the upper deck. The ferry costs less than two dollars and runs continuously from 6am. No booking required.

10:00 AM

Kadıköy Market & Moda

The Kadıköy covered market: cheese, olives, spices, fresh produce, and the best börek (savory pastry) in Istanbul. Walk south toward Moda — the neighborhood's café and residential quarter on the Marmara coast. The Moda tram runs the waterfront; sit in the front car for the water view.

12:00 PM

Return Ferry & Lunch: Karaköy

Return to Karaköy by ferry. Lunch at Karaköy Güllüoğlu (Rıhtım Caddesi): the most famous baklava shop in Istanbul, operating since 1949. The pistachio baklava is the standard against which all others are measured. Eat it here, standing at the counter, with a glass of tea.

AFTERNOON

2:00 PM – 8:00 PM

2:00 PM**Süleymaniye Mosque**

Architect Sinan's masterwork (1558): built for Suleiman the Magnificent on the Third Hill with a view over the Golden Horn. Considered the finest Ottoman mosque in Istanbul — calmer than the Blue Mosque, architecturally purer, almost always less crowded. The courtyard looks directly across the Golden Horn to Beyoglu. Free entry; same dress requirements.

3:30 PM**Balat & Fener Neighborhood Walk**

The neighborhood below the Süleymaniye along the Golden Horn: historically the center of Istanbul's Greek Orthodox, Jewish, and Armenian communities. Painted wooden houses in faded colors, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Byzantine churches converted and reconverted, and a street-level authenticity entirely absent from Sultanahmet. The most photogenic neighborhood in Istanbul.

INSIDER TIP

Balat's café scene has developed rapidly: Forno Balat (Vodina Caddesi) for coffee and excellent sourdough; Sur Balık for a lunch or early dinner of fresh fish with a view of the Golden Horn. The neighborhood is best explored without a map.

5:30 PM**Pierre Loti Hill & Eyüp**

The hilltop café above the Eyüp Sultan Mosque: named for the French novelist who wrote here in the 19th century. Take the cable car from Eyüp. The view over the Golden Horn at sunset — minarets, the old city walls, the Bosphorus in the distance — is one of the most beautiful in Istanbul.

EVENING

8:00 PM – Late

8:00 PM**Dinner: Nevizade or Asmalımescit**

Return to Beyoglu for dinner in a meyhane. Nevizade Sokak (off Balık Pazarı, the fish market) is a single pedestrian street of wall-to-wall meyhanes — shared tables set outside, musicians moving between tables, the city at its most festive. Arrive by 8pm; request the fish plate and the cold meze selection. The street is free to walk even if you eat elsewhere.

10:30 PM**Rakı at Fikret Meyhane**

Cihangir neighborhood: one of Istanbul's most beloved traditional meyhanes. Rakı with water — the Turkish ritual of diluting the anise spirit until it turns milky (lion's milk) — shared at communal tables with strangers who will become temporary friends. The most genuinely Istanbul experience available to a visitor.

WHERE TO EAT

Istanbul's Table

BREAKFAST & STREET FOOD

Simit

€0.50 · everywhere

The sesame-crusted bread ring sold from street carts throughout Istanbul. The canonical Turkish breakfast item — buy one hot from a cart near any ferry dock at dawn.

Balık Ekmek (fish sandwich)

€3 · Galata Bridge

Grilled mackerel sandwich served from boats under the Galata Bridge at Eminönü. One of the great cheap meals of the world. Buy, eat standing at the waterfront.

Karaköy Güllüoğlu

Karaköy · €

The standard-setting baklava shop since 1949. Pistachio baklava, kadayıf, and künefe. Eat here before comparing anywhere else.

Van Kahvaltı Evi

Cihangir · €€

The most famous Turkish breakfast spread in Istanbul: a full table of cheese, olives, eggs, honey, clotted cream, sujuk, and bread for two hours. Kılıçali Paşa Mah., Defterdar Yokuşu 52A.

MEYHANES & DINNER

Refik

Beyoglu · €€

Operating since 1954 on Asmalımescit Street. Cold meze, grilled fish, and rakı. The archetype of the Istanbul meyhane. Reserve for Friday and Saturday.

Cumhuriyet Meyhanesi

Beyoglu · €€

The most welcoming meyhane for solo travelers on Asmalımescit: the servers will guide you through the meze selection and the rakı ritual without any ceremony.

Çiya Sofrası

Kadıköy · €€

The most important restaurant in Turkey for Anatolian regional cooking: dishes from obscure regional traditions unavailable anywhere else. Kadıköy market, Güneşlibahçe Sokak 43.

WHERE TO EAT (CONTINUED)

LUNCH & LOCAL SPECIALTIES

Tarihi Sultanahmet Köftecisi

Sultanahmet · €

Istanbul's most famous köfte counter since 1920. One dish, perpetual queue, worth every minute. Divan Yolu Caddesi 12.

Karaköy Lokantası

Karaköy · €€

A beautifully designed modern meyhanes for lunch — one of the most photogenic rooms in Istanbul for a solo midday meal. Kemankeş Caddesi 37A.

Hafız Mustafa

Multiple locations · €

The most reliable Turkish sweets shop in Istanbul: lokum (Turkish delight), helva, şekerpare, and the best Turkish coffee. The Sirkeci and Beyoğlu locations.

Kadıköy Çarşısı (market)

Asian Side · €

The covered Kadıköy market: best börek, cheese, and olive selection in Istanbul. The butchers and fishmongers are extraordinary. Eat breakfast here from the stall vendors.

NAVIGATING ISTANBUL

Getting Around

Istanbulkart

The city's contactless transit card: works on metro, tram, bus, ferry, and funicular. Buy at any transit booth (₺50 deposit + credit). Essential for the entire trip. Transfers are discounted.

Tram T1

The most useful line: runs from Bağcılar through Sultanahmet, past the Grand Bazaar, across the Galata Bridge to Kabataş. Covers the full historic peninsula itinerary.

Ferry (Vapur)

Istanbul's public ferries cross the Bosphorus continuously from Eminönü and Karaköy to Kadıköy, Üsküdar, and the Princes' Islands. The best transport experience in the city. All covered by Istanbulkart.

Metro M2

Connects Taksim Square north to the airport and south to Yenikapı. Useful for reaching Beyoğlu from the historic peninsula.

Funicular F1

Connects Kabataş at the waterfront to Taksim Square. 90-second ride; essential for the Beyoğlu ↔ Sultanahmet connection.

Taxi / BiTaksi app

Taxis are metered and widely available. Use the BiTaksi app to book and confirm fare before departure — Istanbul taxi scams targeting tourists are real and avoidable.

NEIGHBORHOODS

Know Before You Go

Sultanahmet

The historic peninsula: Hagia Sophia, Blue Mosque, Topkapi, Grand Bazaar. Tourist-dense but irreplaceable. Stay here for maximum site access.

Beyoglu / Istiklal

The 19th-century Levantine quarter across the Golden Horn: Istiklal Avenue, meyhanes, galleries, and the best nightlife in Istanbul.

Karaköy

At the foot of the Galata Tower: design shops, galleries, the best baklava (Güllüoğlu), and the ferry dock for the Asian side.

Cihangir

The hillside neighborhood above Karaköy: expat-heavy, café culture, Van Kahvaltı Evi, and the most comfortable solo travel atmosphere in Istanbul.

Balat & Fener

The Greek and Jewish historic quarter along the Golden Horn: painted wooden houses, Byzantine churches, and the most photogenic streets in the city.

Kadıköy (Asian side)

Istanbul's most liveable neighborhood: the Çarşı market, Çiya Sofrası, independent bookshops, and a 20-minute ferry from Eminönü.

Bebek / Arnavutköy

The Bosphorus villages north of the city: waterfront cafés and the most scenic stretch of the strait. Best as a half-day extension.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Before You Go

Getting There	Istanbul Airport (IST) is 45km from the city center — the main international hub. Havaist bus to Taksim: 45–90 min, ₺130. Metro M11 opening gradually. Sabiha Gökçen (SAW) serves budget airlines; 90 min by bus.
Visa	Most Western nationalities require an e-Visa (evisa.gov.tr) — apply before travel, approximately \$50–60 USD. No longer available on arrival for most nationalities.
Currency	Turkish Lira (₺). Exchange rates favor cash — use ATMs rather than airport exchange bureaus. Most tourist restaurants accept cards; meyhanes often prefer cash.
Getting Around	Istanbulkart covers all public transit. Buy at any metro station. The T1 tram + ferries + F1 funicular cover the full itinerary.
Best Time to Visit	April–June and September–October: mild temperatures, lower crowds. July–August is very hot (34°C+) and extremely crowded. December–February is quiet and mild.
Solo Dining	Istanbul's meyhane culture is genuinely welcoming to solo travelers — shared tables are normal, and servers typically guide solo visitors through the meze ritual.
Useful Apps	Istanbulkart app (transit), BiTaksi (taxis), evisa.gov.tr (visa), muze.gov.tr (museum bookings), Google Maps offline.

Istanbul awaits.

I
s
t
a
n
b
u
l
,

T
u
r
k
e
y

BEFORE YOU LEAVE: FINAL CHECKLIST

- ☐ E-Visa before travel: evisa.gov.tr
- ☐ Topkapi tickets: muze.gov.tr
- ☐ Buy Istanbulkart at airport metro
- ☐ Kadıköy ferry from Eminönü (Istanbulkart)
- ☐ Reserve Refik meyhane (Fri/Sat)
- ☐ Google Maps offline — download Istanbul

Your interactive map is one scan away.

All locations from this guide, colour-coded by day, open on your phone.



goingsolo.life/maps/istanbul

GoingSolo.Life

TRAVEL ALONE. LIVE FULLY.