

Istanbul walking tour

Despite being a massive, sprawling city, home to 20 odd million people, it's possible to see most of Istanbul's most famous attractions in a day.

Starting at [Taksim Square](#) join the throngs of people strolling down Istanbul's elegant [Istiklal Avenue](#). At the end of the street you'll come to [Galata Tower](#) which you can climb for fantastic views of the Golden Horn. Continuing on you'll cross [Galata Bridge](#), stopping to sample a famous fish sandwich, before arriving at [Eminönü](#). From there follow your nose to the bustling [Egyptian Spice Bazaar](#). When you're done with the Spice Market battle the boisterous shoppers and head up the hill towards Istanbul's [Grand Bazaar](#) – one of the oldest, and largest covered markets in the world. Emerging into the daylight you'll find yourself in Sultanahmet – Istanbul's old town – and just a stone's throw away from [The Hippodrome](#), [Basilica Cistern](#), [Blue Mosque](#), [Aya sofya](#) and [Topkapi Palace](#). Rest your feet and cap off your day with a drink on one of the old town's [famous roof-top terraces](#).

Taksim Square

A good place to start is in Taksim Square – the massive square in the heart of modern Istanbul and the centre of secular Turkey.

The square sits upon the city's main transport hub -with hundreds of buses, trains and even a funiculaire converging. Above the ground, the square is crowded day and night with hawkers, simit sellers and thousands of tourists and locals alike.



In the southwest corner of the square is the Republic Monument – a statue designed by Italian sculptor Pietro Canonic and – unveiled in 1923 to commemorate the formation of the Turkish Republic. The Republic monument sits in the centre of a roundabout which acts as a turning circle for one of Istanbul's two nostalgic tramways.

Istiklal Cadessi – Independence Avenue

The heritage trams rattle up and down the spine of Istiklal Cadessi – probably Istanbul’s most famous avenue and on par with Champs-Élysées in Paris or London’s Regent and Oxford Streets.

The avenue is rammed day and night, with the more than 3 million people strolling up and down it each day. The 1.4 kilometre street runs from Taksim Square to Şişhane with its late Ottoman era buildings housing hundreds of boutiques, music stores, bookstores, art galleries, cinemas, theatres, libraries, cafés, pubs, night clubs with live music, historical patisseries, chocolateries and restaurants.



Half way down Istiklal you’ll come across Galatasaray Square – home to the oldest high school in Turkey. To the west you’ll come across Çiçek Pasajı a small passageway leading to the network of little streets bustling with busy bars and restaurants.



Tünel

Further down Istiklal you'll come tünel – a short underground railway in Istanbul – and the second-oldest subterranean urban rail line in the world (after the London Underground). The line links Karaköy and Beyoğlu and proves pretty helpful when avoiding one of Istanbul's killer hills.



Galata

Continuing down the hill Istiklal turns into Galip Dede Cadessi – a steep cobbled street packed with shops selling musical instruments, kebabs and souvenirs.

To your right you'll come across Galata Tower – one of Istanbul's most striking landmarks. The nine-story tower stands at 67 metres high and dominates the city's skyline. If it's not too busy it's worth climbing to the top for fantastic 360 degree views of Istanbul and its historic peninsula. The tower was built way back in 1348 during an expansion of the Genoese colony in Constantinople. At the time, it was the tallest building in the city and was built to replace an old Byzantine tower. [More info.](#)



Karaköy

Once you get to the bottom of the hill you'll find yourself in Karaköy a bustling little quarter packed with small bars, cafes and restaurants.



Galata Bridge

You'll also find yourself on the edge of the Bosphorus – the busy strait connecting the Black Sea with the Marmara. You'll also find yourself at the foot of Galata Bridge – a link spanning the Golden Horn. There's been bridges in the same location since the 6th century but the current one was completed 30-odd-years ago in 1992.

If you're feeling peckish – the Turks and guide books all rave about the fish shops peppering Galata Bridge. They're cheap and cheerful, but don't really do it for me.



Egyptian Spice Market

Across the bridge you'll find yourself in front of Rustem Pasa Mosque and the Eminönü Yeni Cami – an Ottoman imperial mosque completed in 1665. Take the underpass to avoid getting killed in the crazy Turkish traffic and you'll pop up in Eminönü.

Follow your nose to the southeast corner of the square and you'll find yourself and the heaving Egyptian Spice Bazaar – one of the most famous covered markets in Istanbul.

The Bazaar is home to dozens of spice stalls – selling all sorts of spices, Turkish delight and other sweets, jewellery, souvenirs, and dried fruits and nuts. Once you're done in the Spice Market continue up the hill.

Sabuncu Hanı Sokak will turn into Fincancılar Sokak and you'll find yourself in a heaving scrum of people ducking in and out of shops selling everything under the sun. [More info.](#)



Grand Bazaar

Take a right on Çakmakçılar Yokuşu and continue straight on. Eventually you want to take a left onto Tiğçılar Sk or Örucüler Kapısı. Both streets will lead you to the Grand Bazaar – one of the oldest and largest covered bazaars in the world.

With 61 covered streets and more than 4,000 shops, the Grand Bazaar attracts between 250,000 and 400,000 visitors a day. It regularly listed among the world's most-visited tourist attraction and see more than 91 million visitors a year.

Muster up your best bargaining skills and prepare to wander through the bazaar's maze of little streets and passages packed with shops selling carpets, lanterns, Aladdin lamps and other trinkets. Lots of people say offering a third of the asking price of an item is a good place to begin when haggling. When you've had enough of the Bazaar make your way out into the world and make a b-line for Sultanahmet. [More info.](#)



Sultanahmet

This part of Istanbul sits on a peninsula bounded by bodies of water to north, east and south (the Golden Horn, Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmara, respectively) and by the old city walls to west and is essentially what used to be called Constantinople. You'll find yourself spoiled for choice for things to do and see, with your only restriction being how tired you are.

Spread across Sultanahmet Square and all within a couple of minutes of each other you'll find:

° The hippodrome – a circus that was the sporting and social centre of Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire.



° [The Basilica Cistern](#) – the largest of several hundred ancient cisterns that lie beneath the city. The cistern is propped up by 336 marble columns and is capable of holding 80,000 cubic metres of water. [More info.](#)



° [Blue Mosque](#) – The 16th Century Sultan Ahmet Mosque with its blue tile clad walls. It's free to go inside so stick your head in. [More info.](#)



° Aya Sofya – Greek Orthodox Basilica, imperial mosque and now a museum – the Aya sofia or Hagia Sophia is famous in particular for its massive dome. It was considered the epitome of Byzantine architecture and is said to have changed the history of architecture.

From the date of its construction in 537AD it served as an Orthodox cathedral and seat of the Patriarch of Constantinople.

From 1453 until 1931 it served as a Mosque before being secularised and opened as a museum in 1935. [More info.](#)



° Topkapi Palace – The major residences of the Ottoman sultans for almost 400 years of their 634-year reign. At its peak, the palace was home to as many as 4,000 people. It contained mosques, a hospital, bakeries and a mint.

Construction began in 1459 at the order of Sultan Mehmed II – the conqueror of Byzantine Constantinople.

The palace lost its importance in the 17th century and finally in 1856 the royal court was moved to Dolmabahce Palace – the first European style palace in Istanbul.

It's now a museum and contains important relics of the Muslim world, including Muhammed's cloak and sword. [*More info.*](#)



You'll probably be exhausted before you even step foot inside any of the monuments and if I were you, I'd probably find a roof-top restaurant or bar and while away the rest of the afternoon and come back (by metro) and do some more sightseeing when you're fresh in the morning.

In any case make sure you check out the cute cobbled streets of the old town sandwiched between the Blue Mosque, Aya Sofya and the Bosphorus beyond.

Seven Hills Restaurant isn't a bad pick – it's touristy and probably overpriced, but the views from the terrace are unrivaled, so even if you just go up for a beer (or a look). [More info.](#)



When you've had enough, hop on the tram and continue towards Kabatas from where you can take the funicular back up to Taksim Square.

If you have more than one day in Istanbul, my top picks would be

Take a boat trip to Kadikoy

Take a Bosphorus Cruise up to the Black Sea

Visit Dolmabace Palace

Check out Ortakoy