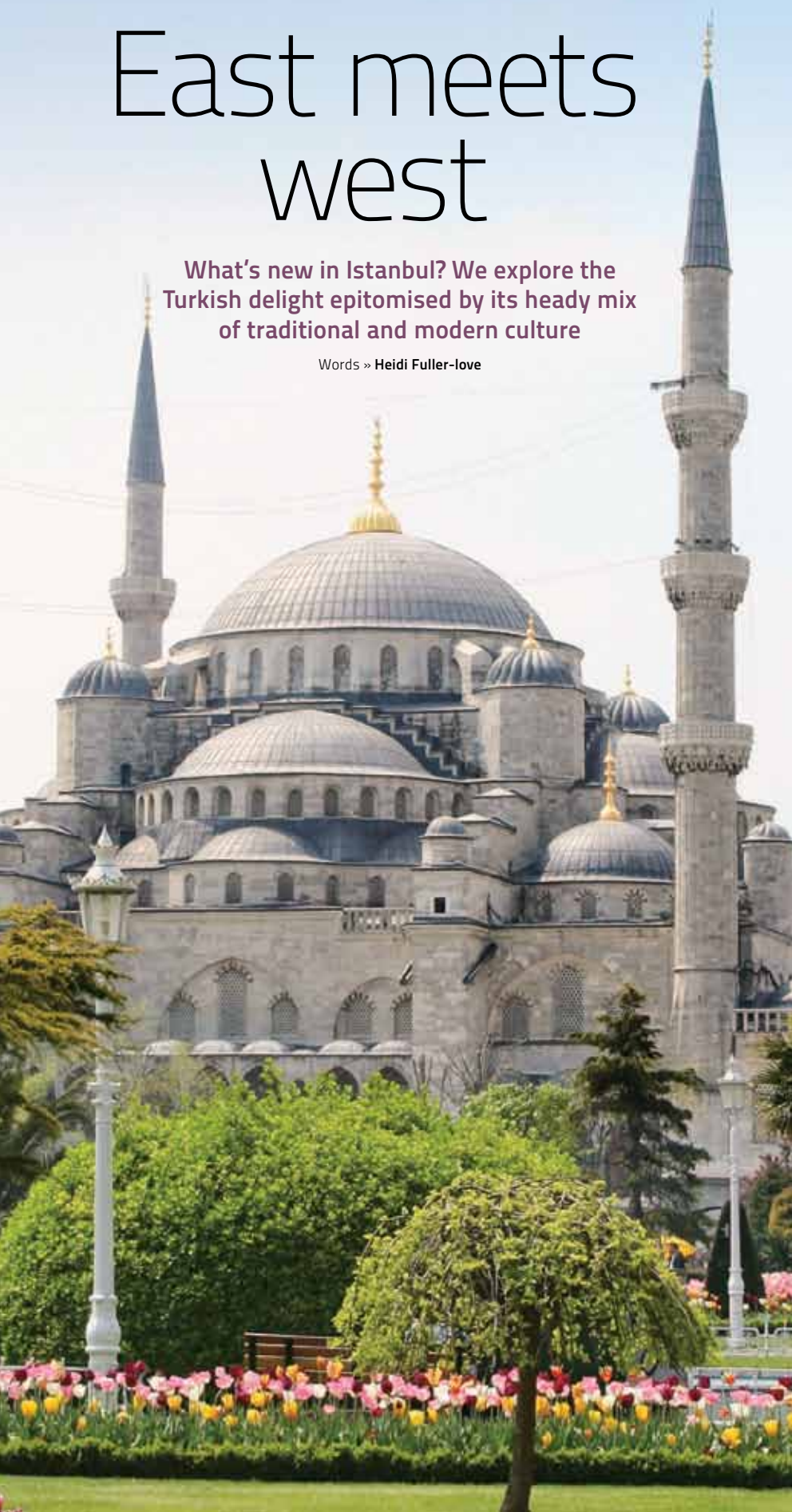


East meets west

What's new in Istanbul? We explore the Turkish delight epitomised by its heady mix of traditional and modern culture

Words » Heidi Fuller-love



Whether its aromas of spice and shoe polish, sights of dazzling ceramics, flavours of Loukoum and Kofte, touch of soft silks, or just the sound of boats chugging along the Bosphorus, Istanbul is a city that keeps your sensory perceptions on red alert. Capital to three of the world's greatest Empires, and inspiration for Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, Istanbul is home to exquisite architecture, vibrant markets and top class restaurants.

Boosted by a burst of foreign investment and a burgeoning youth population, this city is currently experiencing a renaissance. 'Modern Istanbul has as much dynamism as New York,' says Genco Gulan, director of the Istanbul Contemporary Art Museum.

Cultural, economic, and financial centre of Turkey, modern Istanbul is a sprawling metropolis, split into 32 main districts, with most of the best Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman architectural gems contained in the city's compact historical peninsula on the southern shore of the Golden Horn.

This area can easily be explored on foot, but if you want to go further afield take a tram from Taksim Square, hop on the brand new metro line that fans out from Beyoğlu, or flag down a cheap yellow taxi.

From ancient Yali architecture to new museums, like the Istanbul Modern; from bustling bazaars to state-of-the art hotels, such as the Four Seasons, modern Istanbul bridges the gap between cultures, styles and ages. Recently chosen to be European Capital of Culture and with dozens of exciting events planned for 2012, there's never been a better time to visit.

SIGHTS OF SULTANAHMET

Home to three of the city's most stunning sights Sultanahmet, at the heart of the district known as ancient Stamboul, has to be the first stop. Seat of the Ottoman sultans for four centuries, Topkapi Palace, situated in the centre, contains some of the Muslim world's holiest relics. After marvelling at the prophet Muhammed's sandals, join crowds » gathering to see Spoonmaker, one of the



Istanbul is famed for its bazaars, including the Grand Bazaar, and its tasty food from spices to sweets

world's largest diamonds. A stroll through the palace gardens leads to Hagia Sofia. Built by Emperor Justinian, the Church of the Divine Wisdom served as the city's chief mosque for five centuries following the Ottoman conquest in 1453. Staring up at the magnificent domed ceiling decorated with 30 million gold mosaic tiles you understand why Emperor Justinian said, "Solomon, I have surpassed thee!" when he inaugurated the building in 537.

Built in the 17th century by Ottoman architect Mehmet Aga to rival Hagia Sofia, the Blue Mosque's six slim minarets spear the city's sky-scape just opposite. Renowned for handmade blue Iznik tiles, this impressive edifice was ordered by Sultan Ahmet I.

FISH DISTRICT AND GRAND BAZAAR

From Sultanahmet Square, Küçükayasofya Avenue leads to Kumkapi, an atmospheric fishing district, where fishermen sell fresh caught rainbow trout from barrows, while wooden-fronted Konak restaurants serve the city's most tasty fish mezes. One of the best places in town to try the local fish specialties, Yengeç in Çapariz Sok Street, serves flavour-packed midye dolma (rice stuffed mussels) and succulent pazıda levrek (sea bass cooked with chard).

Next, take a stroll along Divanyolu Caddesi to Kapali Carsi. Standing in the shadow of The Suleymaniye Mosque, the Grand Bazaar is the country's largest souk. Sprawling out over the same site for the past four-and-a-half centuries, some 4,000 stalls sell everything from fashion to fine-

woven carpets and designer perfumes.

SPICE BAZAAR AND CAGALOGU HAMAMI

A 10-minute walk from the Grand Bazaar along Uzunçarsi Caddesi Street leads to Misir Carsisi, Istanbul's spice market. Trading since the mid 17th century, this is the best place in town for spices, dried fruits, nuts and loukoums (Turkish delight).

Just round the corner, Cagaloglu Hamami (cagalogluhamami.com.tr) was once the favourite sweat room of celebrities ranging from King Edward VIII to Franz Liszt and the Rockefellers. Recently featured in the book *1,000 Places to Visit Before You Die*, the city's 300-year-old hamman is currently favoured by A-listers including Cameron Diaz and Sean Connery. 



Above: colourful buildings line the shores of the Bosphorus



Istanbul events >>

The Turkish Delight Festival, 28 April-2 May
Istanbul's most exciting bellydancing event features gala evenings, workshops and shows by international dancers. (turkishdelightfestival.com)

International Istanbul Fashion Fair, 9-11 February
A biannual clothing event showcasing Turkish and international designers. (cpi-istanbul.com)

Millionaire Fair, March
A luxury lifestyle fair showcasing everything from sleek yachts and sparkling diamonds to sumptuous villas. (liberatum.org.uk)

Istanbul Shopping Festival, June
Discount shopping events, fashion shows and more held in venues throughout the city. (istanbulshoppingfest.org)