ISTANBUL

Visas: you will need visas for your trip. There are three options to take care of this: (i) you can stand in line at the Turkish Embassy in DC to get them; (ii) you can use a service, which is less hassle but, obviously, more money. (We use G3 Visas and Passports ([www.g3visas.com](http://www.g3visas.com)), which has the forms and the requirements for the visas. You just FedEx the completed forms and the passports to them, and they FedEx back to you your passports with visas. It’s a beautiful system.); or (iii) you can wait until you land at the Istanbul airport, get in line to get a tourist visa (before you go through customs and immigration) and buy a visa for US$20/person. It is much less expensive to wait until you arrive at Istanbul, as it’s clear that the purpose of the visa requirement is revenue generation.

Hotels: We stayed at the Four Seasons at Bosphorus. There are two Four Seasons in Istanbul. The one in central Istanbul is more conveniently situated to get to different tourist sites. It was once a Turkish prison, and it is smaller than the other one with fewer amenities. The Four Seasons at Bosphorus is located right on the Bosphorus with beautiful views of the river and the old city. It also can provide you with a hammam (Turkish bath) experience that gives meaning to the word “sybaritic” (more about that later).

Note: our favorite hotel chain is the Shangri-la, and there is a Shangri-la hotel located on the Bosphorus that is scheduled to open in June 2013. It is worth checking out as a hotel option, although we cannot give any first-hand opinions about it.

Transportation: we hired a guide who had a car and driver for us. Given that the Turkish language bears no resemblance to any language I’ve seen (it’s supposed to belong in the same family as Finnish and Japanese, but then, I wouldn’t have thought you’d put Finnish and Japanese together in a family of languages), having a guide makes sense.

Must-see sites:

Topkapi Palace: the residence of the Ottoman Sultans. There are multiple buildings that make up the palace, and the rooms are beautifully decorated with colorful mosaic tiles. There are interesting exhibits on jewelry (including a “spare” basket of emeralds, none of which were smaller than my thumb) and different types of weaponry. There was also an amazing collection of religious relics, including John the Baptist’s skull, Mohammed’s arm, David’s sword, and Moses’ staff (which did not turn into a snake on an hourly basis). They were part of the Byzantine Empire collection, so whatever your thoughts on the authenticity of the items, they were, at the very least, really old. This will take you the bulk of the day. The cafeteria there serves a very nice lunch.

Dolmabahçe Palace: a modern palace by Turkish standards, as it was built in the 1800s. The palace contains beautiful artwork, and the interior of the building has intricately inlaid wood floors and stair rails. It’s a beautiful building. This will take you 1-2 hours.

Hagia Sophia: one of our favorites. This building started out as an Orthodox church and was later converted into a mosque. The Christian frescoes and mosaics were whitewashed over during the conversion, but many of them have been restored. Make sure you go upstairs and find the graffiti etched by some bored Viking bodyguards on a marble handrail. This will take you 1-2 hours.

Grand Bazaar: this is a surprisingly orderly and clean marketplace that holds over 4,000 shops. It’s crowded but very accessible. The breadth of goods they sell (from gold to clothing to cashmere to tiles to knick-knacks) is fascinating. Remember, bargaining is expected here, so the price you are quoted for anything is merely an opening bid. This will take you as long as you want to spend there.

Spice Bazaar: we loved the Spice Bazaar. They sell everything from pepper to olives to paprika to chili paste to tea to coffee. They also sell birds (as pets, not food) and many other things you would not necessarily have lumped under spices. It is well worth a visit. This will take you as long as you want to spend there.

Summer Palace: an Ottoman palace that the sultans used during the summer as it was cooler than their palaces in Istanbul proper. The palace is beautiful (other than for the harem, which is much smaller and plainer than the rest of the palace). There’s an interesting story of how the Empress Eugenie of France is the only female to have ever been allowed in the non-harem portion of the palace. (The sultan at the time had a special set of apartments built for her in the main part of the palace.) This will take you 1-2 hours.

Chora Museum: this was once an Orthodox church, converted into a mosque, and is now a museum. There is some stunning artwork (the Christian artwork was boarded up, rather than whitewashed over, so it is much better restored than the Hagia Sophia) and well worth your time to see. This will take you 45-60 minutes.

Archaeological Museum: this is not a well-curated museum (it’s a bit of a jumble organizationally), but the antiquities here are impressive in their breadth and beauty. This will take you 2-3 hours.

Grand Cistern: a working cistern that was built during medieval times. It’s a fascinating and impressive feat of engineering. This will take you 30-45 minutes.

Hippodrome: located near the Blue Mosque, it is a place where they used to hold chariot races. There are still a few Egyptian obelisks, brought to Istanbul back when it was Constantinople and the capital of the Byzantine Empire. We were quite amused to hear how many treasures were “brought” to Constantinople and then “plundered” by the Crusaders and taken to Europe. This will take you about half an hour.

Blue Mosque: if you’re female, you need to cover your heads with scarves before entering, as it’s a working mosque. The Blue Mosque is lovely but not that interesting. Still, it’s a must see in Istanbul, if only because all of your friends will ask you if you saw it. This will take you about half an hour.

Other points of interest

Hammam (Turkish bath): everything you have heard about the opulent and sybaritic nature of a Turkish bath is true (especially if you do it at the Four Seasons or similar hotel). You lie on a heated marble table/bench, and the masseuse pours basins of warm water on you. They then scrub you with a sea salt scrub, sponge that off of you, and then cover you with olive oil bubbles, so that you look like a giant ice cream sundae. They rinse that off of you, give you a massage, and complete the process with a shampoo. (The men’s version is slightly different—no shampoo, for example—but the basic concept is the same.)

Boat cruise down the Bosphorus: this is a lovely experience, especially if the weather is nice. There is a twin set of forts the Ottomans built to cut off Istanbul from the rest of Turkey. The fort on the Europe side is well preserved. The cruise is an easy way to visit the Summer Palace and Maiden’s Tower.

Maiden’s Tower: a tower in the middle of the Bosphorus with a legend of Byzantine princesses imprisoned there (the legends vary depending on the speaker). You can take a ferry from the shore to the Tower, but there’s not much to see other than the view.

Old Muslim Quarter: there are only a few blocks left in Istanbul where you can see original Muslim architecture. The streets are narrow, but the buildings are beautifully maintained.

Eyup Mosque: dedicated to a close friend of Mohammed’s, who is buried there. It’s in the Old Muslim Quarter and is worth swinging by for a quick look.

Restaurants: Turkish cuisine is generally very accessible, especially if you like lamb and/or fish. These are some of our favorite restaurants

Tugra: located in the Kempinski Hotel, down the street from the Four Seasons Bosphorus. The cuisine is nouvelle Ottoman Empire. The food is excellent, and the service was unobtrusive and attentive.

Hamdi Restaurant: located near the Spice Market, the kebabs are excellent here, but the restaurant is famed for its baklava. Some Turkish baklava is not well-suited to Western taste buds, but all of it is worth trying.

Labiderya: this is a Turkish/European fusion restaurant. The food here is very good, and the service is also good. It’s a difficult restaurant to find, so make sure you get good directions or a guide that knows where it is.

Travel Tips:

Electricity: most of your electronics will be able to cope with the 220 volts of Turkish outlets. Check your power units, which will state whether they are compatible or not. Our laptops, iPads, iPods and cell phones worked fine with 220 volts. You will need to get an outlet converter since the Turkish outlets do not work with American plugs.

Cell phones: your cell phones will work in Turkey (at an astronomical price, but they will work). You can get an international calling plan (or an international data plan, for you texting addicts) from your US carrier. It’s billed by the month, so you can cancel it after you return.

Food: Turkish food is generally lamb and fish oriented. Their mezze—appetizer plates—are delicious and worth sampling. Fish is very fresh but prepared simply—either grilled or fried. Kebabs are standard fare and are generally available with chicken or lamb. It’s not fancy food, but it’s generally accessible, even for picky eaters.