

A cruise up the Bosphorous is one of the world's great short boat rides.

TRAVEL / TOURISM

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Editor: ANTONIO R. PAÑO

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SEVEN DAYS IN Istanbul

By MANNY GONZALEZ
Plantation Bay Resort & Spa

THE FRIENDLIEST PEOPLE ON TWO CONTINENTS. People in Istanbul are really friendly. Every time I walked out of my hotel, lots of guys would come up, ask me where I was from, and walk alongside just to keep me company. Then, if I so much as said "Good morning," they would offer — assuring me they expected nothing in return — to show me the way to the Blue Mosque.

I made a lot of friends this way. By a strange coincidence, most of them had brothers-in-law who sold carpets. And of course, as befits friends, the brothers-in-law hoped I would buy something from them. But because we were really good friends, they were willing to take a loss on any carpet I bought. Today only, of course.

So if you do go to Istanbul, and do not want to buy FIVE carpets, as I wound up doing, try not to make too many friends. When strange men come up to you in the streets offering to show you the way to the Blue Mosque or wanting to know if you are Japanese, do not pay any attention. Do not say "Hi." Do not say, "Leave me alone." Just keep walking.

What do the Blue Mosque and Seoul Have in Common? If you ever manage to escape the carpet salesman, there is a lot to see in this city of 16 million inhabitants which was, for 1,500 years, the most important city in the world. The tourist area of Istanbul is called Sultanahmet (pronounced sool-TUN-ah-MED) and this is where most of the world-famous attractions are, including aforesaid Blue Mosque.

I must confess, however, that I did not enter the Blue Mosque at all because, this being a place of worship, you must leave your shoes at the front door. Having just read about how thousands of shoes are lost annually in Seoul (at restaurants), I was not about to let my \$1,200 Ermenegildo Zegna suit out of my sight. Well, okay, they were really \$69.95 Nikes. But I was very fond of them. Anyway, the exterior of the Blue Mosque is stunning, especially in the evening, and its six minarets are cool (most mosques have only one or two).

Across the plaza, the Hagia Sophia (pronounced A-ya SOF-ya by the well-informed) represents one of the most remarkable feats of architecture of the ancient world. Emperor Justinian had it built around 350 AD as a basilica. Without benefit of any steel, and with minimal use of internal columns, his engineers were able to create a massive interior space that could hold thousands of people. For over 1,000 years, Hagia Sophia represented the largest roofed

gathering space in the world, and even now I found it a lot more awe-inspiring than St. Peter's or the Notre Dame, which seem cramped by comparison. Inside Hagia Sophia you feel you could fly a kite.

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And with good reason. Turkish food is pretty good. It is related to Greek, though with many differences. (Be careful about confusing Greeks and Turks; ever since the Trojan War, they have not gotten along particularly well.) While many guidebooks will rhapsodize over the "mezze," which are assorted appetizers, mezze taste just about the same as Greek food, and are not the high point of Turkish food. Oops. Neither are kebabs or shawarma, which also taste more or less Greek. Oops.

If you really want to have something to brag about when you get home, order "Testy Kebab." Don't worry, Testy doesn't mean what you think it does. Available in almost every restaurant, it can be made with any meat, but the key point is that it is cooked under pressure in a clay pot which eventually is flamed and cracked open right at your table, attracting lots of attention. The result is a kind of stew that is tender, subtle, and powerful all at once.

And, just because I like you, here's another suggestion. This is a serious recommendation. At the tram stop for the Blue Mosque, walk up the nearest alley half a block to the Adonin Restaurant. If you don't see it, try another alley. They serve a dish called "Adonin Palace." This is not traditional Turkish food, but it tastes Turkish, and is out of sight. I think it's chicken. Trust me.

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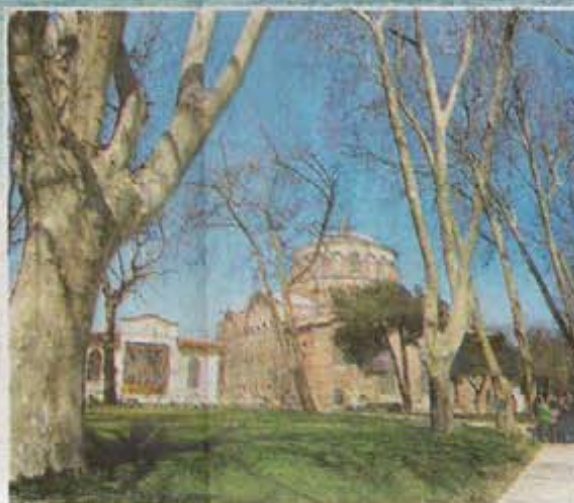
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However, I cannot in conscience tell you the hotel's name because it is in a neighborhood infested with carpet dealers — big dealers, small dealers, Kilim dealers, tribal rug dealers, you name it. If you were to stay at my hotel you would never leave Istanbul without spending a large chunk of your life savings on carpets, and I would never forgive myself. Thanks. I knew you would understand.

But do go. Istanbul is a city unlike any other, with a unique feel. Considering its size and age, it is remarkably clean and efficiently run. Plan on at least five days, and even if you stayed a month you wouldn't run out of interesting places to see. Don't talk to strange men on the street, be respectful of all things Turkish and Islamic, steer clear of the coffee, and you will have a wonderful time.



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The Bosphorous cruise is regarded one of the great romantic short boat-rides in the world. Considering that I was not with Daniela Bianchi, or a distant facsimile, or indeed anybody, I thought it was pretty good. There are picturesque ruins and attractive cityscapes on both sides. And, unlike the Danube, the Thames, and most other bodies of water adjacent to big cities, the Bosphorous is, amazingly, clear and blue. Accordingly, I would put it right up there with New York's Staten Island Ferry, Hong Kong's Star Ferry, Venice's Vaporetto (but



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lost on a side street, 15 minutes later they arrive at the Grand Bazaar. The Grand Bazaar goes back to 1460 AD and is an atmosphere-laden, very large covered mall, now housing some 2,000 shops selling tourist goods, jewelry, leather, antiques, fabrics, lamps, and, of course, carpets. The lanes run in every direction in a Byzantine maze. However, guided only by my unerring sense of direction, I found an exit after only two and a half days.

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[Istanbul 49] The Hagia Sophia was the world's largest roofed building for over 1000 years.

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