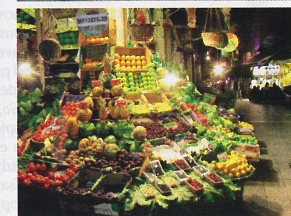


# Istanbullish

A day – and night – in the life of one of Europe's largest cities. BY JEFF KAVANAGH



View of Istanbul from the Galata Tower in Beyoğlu; right, Beyoğlu street scenes.



Our taxi driver at Istanbul's Atatürk Airport was built like a bear. Silently relieving us of both bags like they were full of fresh air and plunked them in the back of a little yellow cab that seemed barely big enough to contain him, let alone me and my girlfriend.

Once squeezed into the back seat, I remembered reading online about the dubious reputation of some of the city's taxi drivers and advice to check that the meter is switched on at the beginning of the journey. But as the meter was obscured by one of the driver's tree-trunk legs, I decided I'd deal with any discrepancy at the other end.

We gave him the name of our hotel in Beyoğlu on the European side of the city, and he simply nodded, engaged gear and roared away from the stand. Within seconds, we were swallowed by one of Istanbul's notorious traffic jams. As we crept forward, our driver sighed loudly and shifted sideways to face us both. "Welcome to Istanbul!" he boomed.

The traffic soon thinned, and as the taxi sped towards our destination, the driver described points of interest, often in single words: "left, Europe"; "right, Asia"; "castle"; "Byzantine"; "very old"; "dictator"; "war"; "ruins"; "yes". We also learnt he worked from 6.00am to 1.00am to support his family. The fare came to just over 30 lira (\$25) – less than I expected – and he offered to round it down.

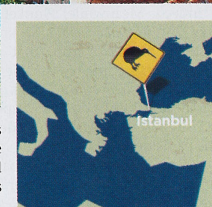
After we'd paid him closer to the \$35 we'd expected to pay, we decided the water was the best place to be on a balmy July afternoon. In this case, the water was a small pool on top of our hotel. The Marmara Pera is perched on a hill overlooking the mighty Bosphorus and the Golden Horn – the inlet that divides Istanbul – and is one of the highest points

in Beyoğlu. Eighteen storeys up, its roof terrace affords the type of view that many would happily queue for: the dramatic domes and minarets of the Blue Mosque, the Byzantine splendour of the Hagia Sofia and, across the Bosphorus, the Asian side of the city. Fortunately, you don't need to be staying at the hotel to enjoy the stunning vista. We had a couple of generously poured gin and tonics and looked out, awestruck, over a city of 11 million people, one of three European Capitals of Culture last year.

Back on earth, we navigated the narrow lanes that slither between Beyoğlu's lovely and occasionally decaying neoclassical and art nouveau architecture. Home over the years to Genoese and Venetian merchants, embassies and foreign schools, this area is still perhaps the most cosmopolitan in Istanbul, despite the brutal demise of the Ottoman Empire and the flight of many of its foreign inhabitants.

Warm evenings in Beyoğlu see long-haired students, with T-shirts bearing legends like "Sex, drugs and sausage rolls" and "I'm a Muslim, don't panic", lounging outside stylishly simple bars, drinking large glasses of popular Turkish beer Efes and smoking Marlboros. Trendy places such as the House Café, which we decided to visit the next day for a breakfast, happily co-exist with *meyhanes* (traditional bar-restaurants) like Yakup 2. A favourite haunt of left-wing intellectuals and famous for its mezze – small dishes of starters such as grilled aubergine in yoghurt, and slices of melon with white Turkish cheese – the tavern attracts an older gen-

eration of patrons who sit beneath its vines stacking up empty plates, chatting and draining cloudy glasses of the anise-flavoured spirit raki and water. We joined them. Out on the street, there's plenty to contemplate should conversation falter. Stray dogs and street hawkers wander past diners' tables, the latter selling everything from pencils to mussels cooked in their shells. Scrap-metal merchants struggle behind large carts, calling out for cast-offs, while men offer the services of fortune-telling bunnies that nervously snuffle pieces of paper prophesying the future. Later, we joined groups of young men and women dressed up for a night on



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the town and heading towards the area's famous shopping boulevard, İstiklâl Caddesi. Running along the crest of Beyoğlu like a spine, the mile-long avenue attracts an almost unfathomable mass of humanity to its enticing mix of traditional galleries and brand-name stores, Turkish teahouses and chain coffee shops, particularly on weekends. As we ambled among so many shoppers, the street's Tünel tram ding-dinged its way through the crowds, seemingly without collecting pedestrians beneath its wheels.

Once the bustle of İstiklâl Caddesi got too much, we were happy to slip back down a side street to explore some of the many boutiques and quiet little second-hand stores. A couple of fresh pineapple juices from a fruit stall were also welcome relief.

Later in the evening, while sitting on the balcony of a bar on Nevizade Sokak, a street packed with nightspots, we considered how to fill the following days in Istanbul – taking the ferry to Asian side of the city; visiting Sultanahmet's magnificent mosques and museums; shopping in the Grand Bazaar; and feasting on some of the city's best lamb kebabs at Hamdi et Lokantasi, a restaurant on the other side of the Golden Horn. As we made our plans, we noticed people dancing on a roof terrace further down the street. Seeing the fun they were having reminded us that while much lay ahead in the following days, we weren't yet ready to call it a night on Beyoğlu. ■