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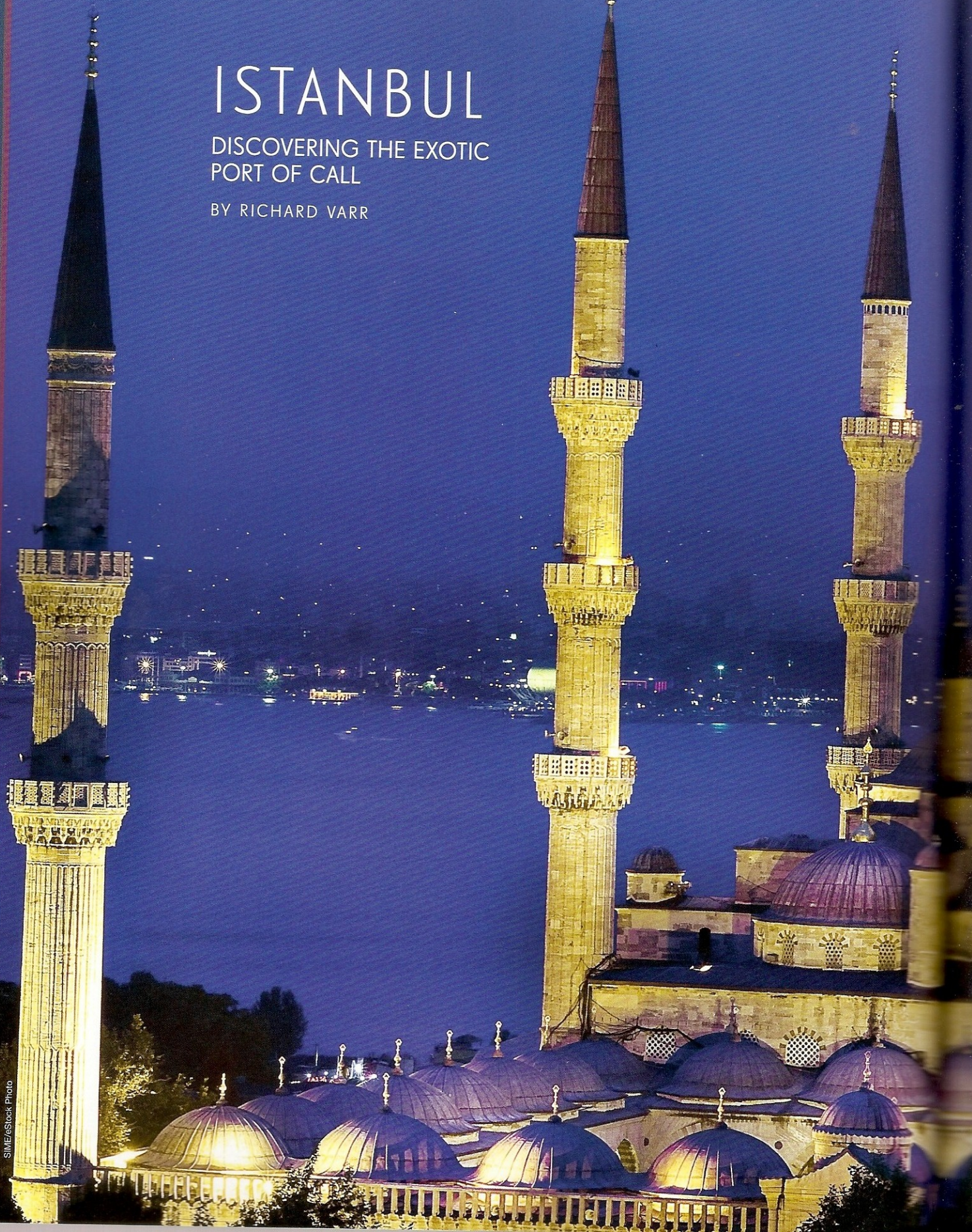


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ISTANBUL

DISCOVERING THE EXOTIC
PORT OF CALL

BY RICHARD VARR





Blue Mosque at night

I'm awestruck by what might be the crossroads of the world.

The Eminönü port bustles as morning commuters charge onto ferries that will whisk them to Asia. Vendors hawk sweet pastries, steaming cups of apple tea and chestnuts grilled on smoky kiosks. Fishermen have already cast their lines from atop the iconic, two-level Galata Bridge stretching over the Golden Horn. And in the distance, across the emerald-tinted Bosphorus Strait illuminated by a hazy sunrise, I see Istanbul's first suspension bridge spanning two continents.

"On your right is Asia and on your left is Europe," tour guide Serdar Dönmez tells me as we gaze upon the vast waterside flanking a contrasting cityscape of pointed minarets, shining skyscrapers and the stone Galata Tower, the skyline's medieval landmark. "Napoleon once said after seeing the beauty of Bosphorus," Serdar continues, "that if the world were one country, Istanbul would be its capital."

I'm on Europe's edge — the "Gateway to the Orient", the very heart of where East meets West. It's where civilisations have merged for millennia and where cultures now meld harmoniously within crowded bazaars and

IT'S WHERE CIVILISATIONS HAVE MERGED FOR MILLENNIA AND WHERE CULTURES NOW MELD HARMONIOUSLY WITHIN CROWDED BAZAARS AND BUSTLING STREET MARKETS



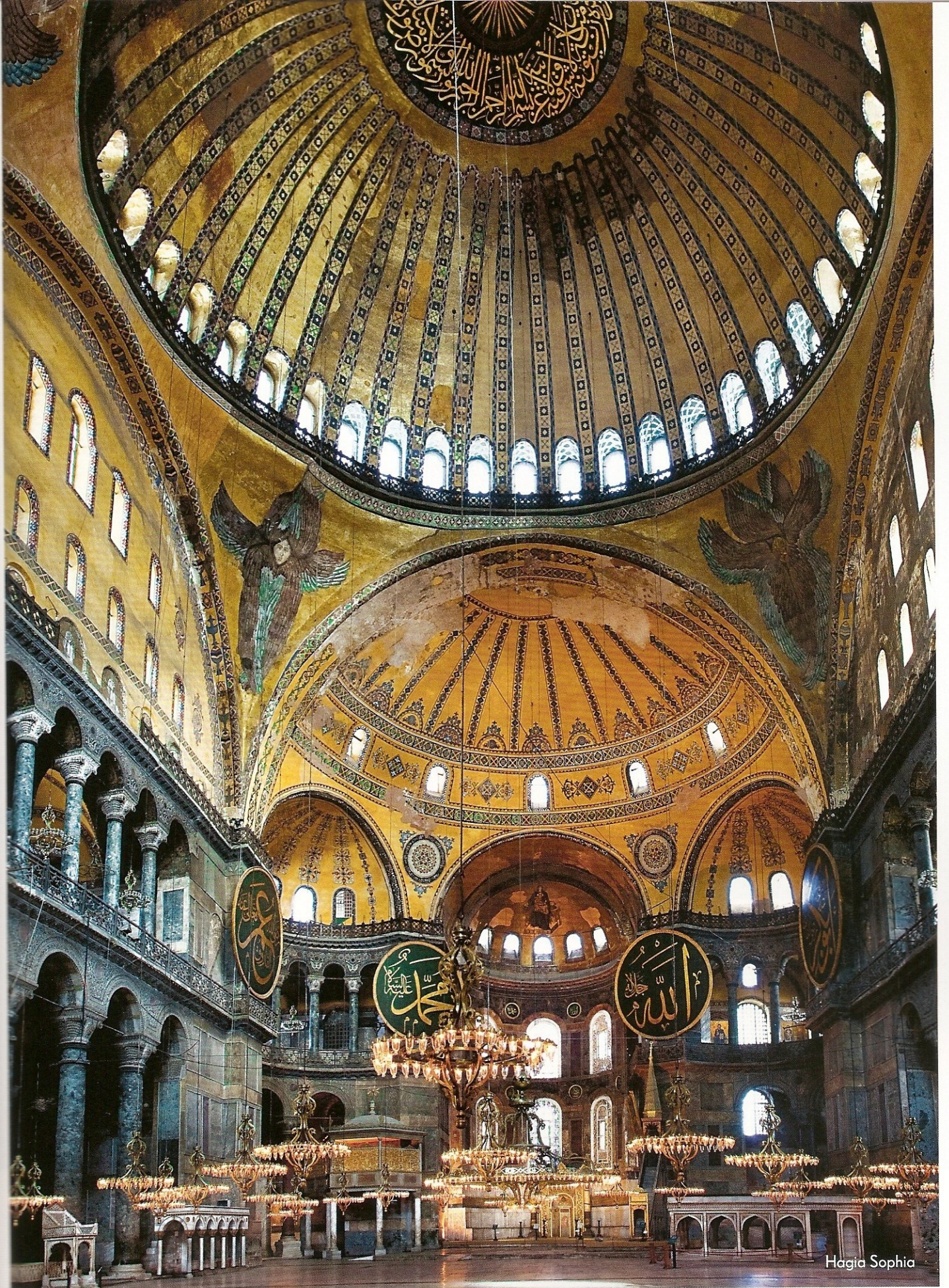
Grand Bazaar entrance

bustling street markets. Turkey's mystical, centuries-old ambiance comes to life within palaces and harems that sultans once called home; through the spiritual rituals of whirling dervishes, with the Hagia Sophia's sparkling Byzantine mosaics, and with calls to prayer simultaneously echoing from Ottoman mosques — all affirming Istanbul's enormous historical legacy.

A 15-minute walk from Eminönü leads to the Sultanahmet district, where the multi-domed and buttressed Hagia Sophia sits across a grassy square from Istanbul's storied Blue Mosque. "There are 21,000 beautiful blue tiles from İznik and that's why it's called the Blue Mosque," says Serdar, referring to the lakeside Turkish town that has produced arabesque-patterned ceramics since the 15th century. "Sunlight comes in through 260 windows. Those pillars that look like elephant legs have borne the weight of this structure for 400 years."

The Byzantine Empire first built Hagia Sophia as a church in the 6th century, but the Ottomans converted it into a mosque after their 15th-century conquest of what was then Constantinople. Now a museum, its domed nave has both Muslim and Christian features — the *minbar* pulpit and *müezzin mahfili* raised platform, for example, and restored golden-toned Byzantine mosaics. "The Ottomans didn't destroy the Christian mosaics, but just whitewashed them with lime to protect them," notes Serdar.

I imagine a typical day in a sultan's life when walking through the Imperial Gates and exploring the four expansive courtyards of the nearby Topkapı Palace,



Hagia Sophia

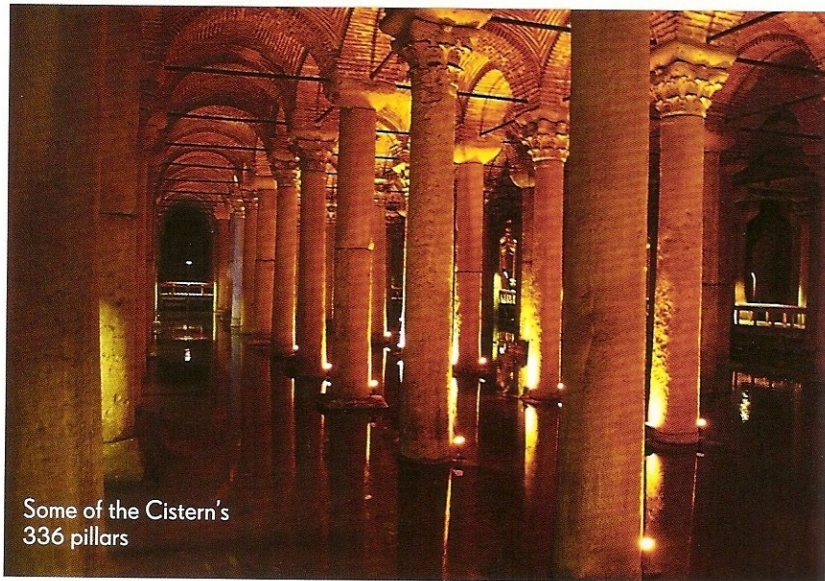
I'M LIKE A FEATHER FLOATING IN THE WIND.



Whirling Dervishes



Medusa sculpture in the Basilica Cistern



Some of the Cistern's 336 pillars

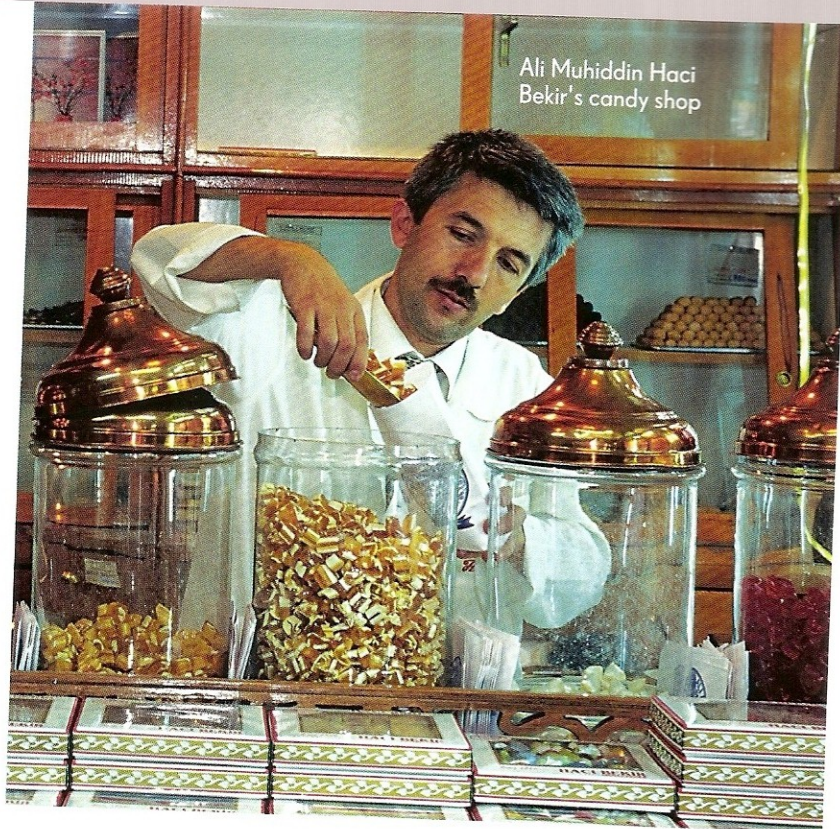
home of the sultans for 400 years. Today, its tiled pavilions house museums with sultans' portraits, royal silk wardrobes, ruby and emerald-studded daggers and Chinese porcelain traded along the Silk Route. The Pavilion of the Holy Mantle, a Muslim pilgrimage site, has a cloak and sword once worn by the Prophet Muhammad.

Despite its often libertine reputation, the Imperial Harem with its decorative tiled rooms was home to the sultan's family, children, concubines and eunuchs. But it was the *valide sultana*, the sultan's mother, who was in charge. "If a concubine was so beautiful and so talented to grab the attention of mother sultan, then she would pick her for her son," says Serdar. "Some concubines had never seen the sultan's face — not once."

There's a similar harem at the baroque and rococo Dolmabahçe Palace along the Bosphorus, where the Ottoman Empire's last sultans resided from 1856 until 1923. Their reign ended when military hero Mustafa Kemal Paşa, known as Atatürk, founded modern Turkey. I pass by the red-carpeted Baccarat crystal staircase, but what I find most impressive is the Ceremonial Hall with possibly the world's heaviest chandelier. "It's four-and-a-half tons and could hold 768 candles," explains Serdar. Another important highlight is Atatürk's deathbed, with palace clocks stopped at 9:05 a.m. to mark his time of death on 10 November, 1938.

Perhaps the city's most unusual sight is the 6th-century Basilica Cistern. The enormous subterranean chasm — like an underground Roman temple — could hold 100,000 tons of water and is supported by 336 towering 26-foot-high pillars. Yet conquering Ottomans didn't know about the river-fed cistern for 100 years until residents started pulling water — and fish — from below their basements. Today, walkways stretch between the pillars and above shallow water still filled with fish.

In the evening, I watch whirling dervishes in a trance-like state, their robes smoothly flailing as they twirl with arms extended and heads tilted. "Your right hand is on top as it takes the light from the Divine and through your left hand you share it with the people on the Earth," says dervish Ahmet Milli of the ritual he practices with his fellow Sufis. "I think I'm surrounded by enlightened souls — millions of them — and they're holding me. I'm like a feather floating in the wind."



Ali Muhiddin Haci Bekir's candy shop

Queen Victoria visits Istanbul on several occasions during summer and early autumn 2016. Contact the Voyage Sales Specialists on board for more information.

The next morning's sunny skies make it ideal for a Bosphorus cruise. Seagulls flutter as we depart from Eminönü and chug past the single-domed Dolmabahçe Mosque and adjacent Palace. Beyond the 1973 Bosphorus Bridge, the turreted Fortress of Europe and Fortress of Asia sit on opposing shores. "The Fortress of Europe took four months, 20 days to build," explains Serdar. "The sultan built it to prevent help from reaching the Byzantine Empire by sailing down from the Black Sea."

We also pass colourful *yalis* or shore houses, once Ottoman summer homes. For a full day excursion, tourists can disembark at Anadolu Kavagr, the last stop, stay for lunch and return on a later boat to Eminönü.

Back in Istanbul, I walk the Grand Bazaar's labyrinth of indoor streets where vendors pitch everything from genie-shaped vases and porcelain to cashmere and flashy gold bracelets. "You from US? Where are you from?" yells an excited salesman. "You want to see some carpets?" It's easy to get lost here, but walking the confusing grid is all part of the experience.

The L-shaped Spice Bazaar overflows with mounds of curry, Turkish saffron, red pepper and orange tea along with tubs of nuts and dried fruit. Scented rosemary and lavender soaps add to the wafting aromas. Boxes of sticky baklava

and Turkish delight candy squares are stacked high. Nearby is Beyazıt Square's packed flea market at Istanbul University. Opposite that, the unique Book Bazaar occupies a courtyard that was once a Byzantine market.

Come lunchtime, I nibble on starters known as *mezes* — olives and white cheese, green beans and tomato sauce, artichokes cooked in olive oil and others, all served with pita bread or *pide*. Main entrees might include lamb or chicken kebabs, fish stews or steamed mussels. Serdar recommends trying the "Ottoman soft drink" sherbet, made with fruit juices, pomegranate, ginger and other spices. A popular lunch option is a tasty grilled fish sandwich served from bobbing boats along Eminönü's waterside.

The Galata Bridge connects the city's European neighbourhoods across the Golden Horn, the horn-shaped inlet named for its golden sheen at sunset. Atop the bridge, fishermen wait patiently for a bite while waiters lure customers into restaurants on the lower level. Once across, I trek uphill along narrow backstreets with small shops and cozy cafes to the rounded Galata Tower for splendid 360-degree city views.



Time allowing, other must-sees include the Church of St. Saviour in Chora, a bus ride from the city centre, where the 14th-century Byzantine mosaics are some of the best anywhere. The colossal Süleymaniye Mosque is a tribute to Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, and the Istanbul Archaeological Museums' antiquities span five millennia.

Before leaving the city, I stop again at Eminönü, to catch glimpses of dolphins frolicking in the Golden Horn — perhaps the perfect way to end my visit to this age-old port of call.

Photo top: SIMA/istock Photo; Photo bottom: Richard Vorr

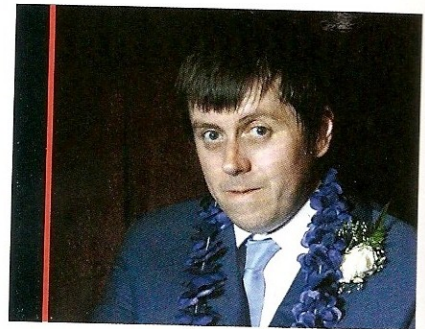
CONTRIBUTORS



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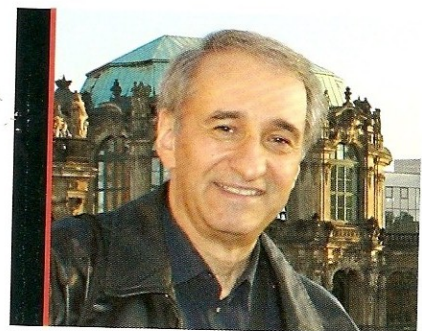
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