

ENTERTAINMENT

OPINION

Everything is new-old in Istanbul, where history, art and culture combine in fascinating layers

The hum of a place made up of 3,000 mosques and 40,000 bars. Frescoes and domes; bridges, bazaars and minarets; thick coffee, rooftop raves, alley cats and calls to prayer.

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Walking past the famous Pera Palace Hotel, well after dusk, in the Beyoglu quarter of [Istanbul](#) — the place where [Agatha Christie](#) is said to have written her legendary “Murder on the Orient Express” in Room 411 — I spotted a man shrouded in white head bandages scurry out of the hotel. Then, another, across the street — in the same bandages. Finally, a third. Likewise.

A mystery made for Agatha?!

“Hair transplant,” my guide murmured, as I took a further sweep. Oh, right. I had read all about it: the thousands of men who pour into Istanbul these days to get their scalps jacked for a fraction of the price it takes to get these procedures in other parts of the world. Part of the booming medical-tourism industry here and what GQ diagnosed last year in a headline that read “How Istanbul Became the Global Capital of the Hair Transplant,” it is literally a part of the panorama of this Turkish megapolis to see dudes walking around with freshly busted heads. The airports, too, such a sea of these men that some people lovingly refer to Turkish Airlines as Turkish Hairlines.

So anyways. “Should we go to Soho House?” I motioned, peering down the same street to what is a massive, 19th-century palazzo that once housed the American consulate in Istanbul and now looms as one chapter of the globe-spanning private club (probably the most fabulous of all the Soho Houses).

And, OK ... end of scene. But certainly not end of story. Hair transplants may be in vogue here, but an emotional transfusion is also very much for the taking, as I found out when taking the temperature recently of the only major city that sits on the shoulders of two continents: Europe and Asia. I had been to Istanbul before, and liked it, but something about seeing it through post-pandemic eyes — which inevitably informs all travel — made me appreciate it even more, especially on the cusp of the 100th anniversary of the founding of Turkey as a modern republic in 1923.

In fact, the word *pentimento* swam to my head more than once during my short visit: the arty term, effectively, for a painting hidden under layers of another painting. That is what Istanbul is, after all: Byzantine and Genoese and Ottoman and so much more, exemplified for instance by the [Hagia Sophia](#), a building that serves three religions (Pagan, Christian Orthodox and Sunni Islam), a central mosaic of baby Jesus and the Virgin Mary flanked by the Arabic names for Allah and Mohammed.

The hum of a place made up of 3,000 mosques *and* 40,000 bars, as I was told about Istanbul. Frescoes and domes and bridges and bazaars and minarets standing out like baubles against the Bosphorus; thick coffee and rooftop raves and alley cats and calls to prayer. And all the teeming people — a city of 15 million-plus people in a country with the youngest population in Europe (half the populace is under 30). So much so that when you walk Istiklal Avenue, as I did many times — the biggest thoroughfare in Istanbul — it can take on the feeling on any given night of a New Year’s Eve in London or New York. And you just have to recalibrate your idea of what a “big city” really is when you come here.

Everything is new is old is new-old in Istanbul, especially culturally.

There is the freshly renovated opera house, for instance, in the Atatürk Cultural Center on Taksim Square. Shaped like a bright red sphere, made up of thousands of tiles, it hits you like a giant pomegranate.

There is the incredible restoration project that is the Rami Library, opened earlier this year on the site of the historic Rami Barracks from the 1800s, in the Eyüp district. A winding, low-hung series of building, it is anchored on acres and acres of hipster parkland and has a capacity of seven million books.

There is the all-new Istanbul Modern, a museum of contemporary art, reimaged in a five-story edifice designed by Renzo Piano. It is set on the water on an esplanade now known as Galataport, a once scruffy port that, incidentally, is also home to the just opened Peninsula Istanbul, a spiffy, buzz-making hotel where every room comes with a view.

Another hotel high: the Ciragan Palace Kempinski, a mouth-dropping grande dame of a hotel first built as a house by the famous Balyan family for members of the Ottoman court. It just entered a new era with a full-scale redo of one building that leans into the esthetic flourishes of that era, as curated by premier Ottoman art expert Serdar Gülgün.

Among my other memorable exploits: dining solo at Yeni Lokanta, a superchic restaurant (and not in an in-your-face way) with its minimally dark interior, bold green lamps, beautiful tile work and a beef dumpling sent out as an amuse-bouche, drowned in Turkish chili oil, that is among the best things I have eaten this year. Also: swapping continents at one point to take the quick ferry over to the Asian side to check out Kadıköy Market (miles and *miles* of fishmongers, meat vendors, olives, cheeses).

For sure, too: the moment I basically had the Rüstem Pasha Mosque to myself. Built between 1561 and 1563 by Mimar Sinan, the Antoni Gaudí of the Ottoman Empire, it actually precedes the more famous Blue Mosque (which he also built), but is said to have inspired it. The best part: no crowds here and you can sally right up to the tiles!

If there was one place I really made the connection between [the layers of history](#) that make Istanbul truly interesting it was the reinvigorated Balat neighbourhood. Ever-changing — think: cafe culture for miles, amazing antique shops, multicoloured buildings, tons of fashionably raffish people — it also offered just the right kinds of ghosts. The kind of place you stumble upon the old Jewish quarter just steps from a mosque dating back to the 1400s; a Greek Orthodox Church with an extraordinary history on one street and a stunning Macedonian Church on another.

It, also, is where I found myself on a cafe on top of a building — one that looked right down on the twists of the closely knit Balat streets and made me feel like Carrie Mathison on a mission — as I eavesdropped on some people talking politics. For all the hand-wringing in places like this about President Erdogan and his nationalist tilt — [he just won re-election](#), extending his power in Turkey into its second decade — it reminded me that Istanbul stubbornly goes on. The psychological makeup of a place that has faced so many different headwinds over so many different eras.

Like the new hair follicles that many men leave the city with — hope springing ever eternal — Istanbul itself, seemingly, is always reinventing itself. Or as globetrotter Jan Morris once wrote: “The muddle of humanity there, seething through the urban labyrinth, makes one feel that nobody has ever left Istanbul, that nothing has ever been discarded, that every century has simply added its shambled quota to the uncountable whole.”

Correction — Aug. 23, 2023: *A previous version of this article mistakenly said that the Hagia Sophia is the only building in the world that has served three religions (Pagan, Christian Orthodox and Sunni Islam).*

Shinan Govani was hosted by Turkish Airlines and its wide-ranging stopover program, which offers a free layover en route to myriad destinations on any ticket fare. Turkish Airlines did not review or approve this article.