

Istanbul will take your breath away

BY LISA JOHNSON

ISTANBUL IS ENJOYING A charmed moment. While western countries struggle to recover from debt, the Turkish economy is flourishing, with investment flooding into coastal developments, city hotels, restaurants and bars – the Four Seasons, W Hotels and Park Hyatt all opened new properties in Istanbul last year. It's outside the dreaded eurozone (although those who favour hip, new places over local, authentic ones probably won't see much benefit). It's gearing up for its stint as European Capital of Culture in 2010, which gives it a particular momentum. And its youthful, dynamic population, while keen to embrace new trends from the West, seems equally mindful of its eastern heritage. The result is a heady mix of contemporary cool and ancient riches that makes it one of the world's most exciting cities.

There is no bad time to visit. A sprinkling of snow is a gorgeous backdrop to the treasures of the Old Town: the 1,500-year-old monument to Byzantine and Ottoman history that is the Hagia Sophia; the Blue Mosque; Topkapi Palace; and sixth-century Basilica Cistern, with its 336 marble columns up-lit in red and amber.

But spring has the edge because it is then that the Bosphorus – the strait of water that links the Sea of Marmara to the Black Sea, Asia to



Delight in Turkey

Europe, and Istanbul's Byzantine, Roman and Ottoman past to its effervescent European present – comes into its own. As do the ferries that cruise along it, the launches that take the well-heeled to nightclubs on it, and the hotels, restaurants and cafés that look over it. From the glass-walled terrace of Mikla, a much-fêted bar and restaurant on the 18th floor of the

The Hagia Sophia and the historic Istanbul peninsula, main; a room at the Witt Istanbul Suites hotel, below

Marmara Pera hotel, the minarets and domes of Sultanahmet glow gold as cargo ships move silently through the water, and the evening call to prayer reverberates across the rosy sky. It is one of the most magical skylines in the world, especially when the air is balmy, and there's a promise of long, hot nights to come.

We eat a tasty eggs Benedict breakfast on the terrace of the House Café in Ortaköy, with the sun streaming down on the Bosphorus Bridge and Ortaköy Camii mosque in front of it. We buy rings we don't need at Ortaköy's Camden-style silver market, and drink in more romantic views on the terrace of Müzedechanga, a cool, retro-styled restaurant-café at the Sakıp Sabancı Müzesi further north. And we amble back to posh Bebek for a late lunch at Mangerie, a scrubbed-white hideaway with a covered veranda, serving simple but delicious salads and cakes. The sun on the water and the sparkling-white boats, the modish urbanites and the steep cliffs carpeted in green all bring to mind the Côte d'Azur, but with an exotic twist. **SM**

It's a heady mix of ancient and modern



FACTFILE ISTANBUL

HOW TO GET THERE

■ Flights from Scotland to Istanbul start from £173 from Edinburgh or Glasgow, both with British Airways (0844 493 0787, www.britishairways.com).

WHERE TO STAY

■ Witt Istanbul Suites, Cihangir (00 90 212 393 7900, www.wittistanbul.com). Hip new hotel with 15 retro-modern suites by Autoban and a rooftop gym. Doubles from £135, B&B.

WHERE TO EAT

■ Mikla, Beyoğlu (00 90 212 293 5656; www.istanbulji.com).
 ■ NuTeras (00 90 212 245 6070), in the NuPera building.
 ■ Vogue, Besiktas (00 90 212 227 4404, www.istanbuldoors.com).

AND THERE'S MORE

■ www.gototurkey.co.uk
 ■ Visit www.holidays.scotsman.com for cruises to Istanbul.

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