

Although Istanbul is criss-crossed by water, no one, to the best of my knowledge, has attempted to describe it as the Venice of the Near East. Unlike Bangkok with its waterways, or Manchester with its drizzle, Istanbul is too intimate a contemporary and, in Byzantine times, suffered too much at Venetian hands to bear that comparison.

The historic city of Istanbul is built on seven hills, but further comparisons with Rome are wide of the point. No one either, as far as I know, has likened Istanbul to New York, but they have many clichés in common. Just as New York is not America, Istanbul is not Turkey. Even more than New York, Istanbul has claim to be the cultural and commercial capital of its country, even if political power is housed elsewhere.

Istanbul is also a wonderful place to visit. At this point the similes break down. It is not, by international standards, an expensive city to have a good meal, and the danger in walking the streets late at night comes largely from uneven paving stones.

Although it shares with other Turkish cities, and cities throughout the world, the seizing pains of rapid and unplanned expansion, at its best it can be compared only to its own past and its own future.

Istanbul is not, then, the heart of Turkey. Geographically, it sits to one side of the country and in other ways, too, it remains aloof. This essential element of style is better observed on the return journey. Travelling to the political capital, Ankara, from other Anatolian cities is to arrive at a much larger version of the genre. To climb off the night train from Ankara at Haydarpaşa, the station on Istanbul's Asian side, is to arrive at the portal of a contained universe.

The station itself provides the first clue. It was designed by the architect Cuno in the German Renaissance style and was originally intended as the terminus of a line which extended as far as Baghdad. Out of scale with the limited number of passengers it handles even now, it possesses a cathedral-like grandeur.

Haydarpaşa was nearly destroyed by fire in 1917 and the

windows were again blown out 10 years ago when a Romanian oil tanker caught fire and exploded. Rumour has it that the German firm Holzmann, which built the station in 1909, envisaged such events by thoughtfully providing spare window panes.

The ferry crosses to Europe at the wide neck of the Bosphorus. It leaves behind the military barracks of Selim III, where to this day Florence Nightingale can be seen ministering to the wounded of the Crimean War on the back of any English £10 note. Ahead, on the left, is the historic city, with its Ottoman skyline of mosque domes and minarets.

Straight ahead is the old pontoon bridge, at the mouth of the inlet known as the Golden Horn. This bridge, with its famous seaside restaurants, is soon to be retired, floated away to nearby moorings as a sort of pleasure raft.

To the right is Pera. Once dominated by the fire tower of Galata, Pera's skyline is now dominated by modern hotels. To stay at one of these hotels is to join in a common Istanbul hypocrisy: to enjoy a wonderful view while destroying that of others. One of the tallish buildings contravened building regulations, so it could only find a

tenant for its upper floors by applying political pressure.

In this way, it attracted a branch of the Ministry of Interior which once charted the future plans for the metropolitan area of Istanbul. From its poorly ventilated offices it has a wonderful view of the abuses it was dedicated to curtail.

Views are an obsession: Asian Istanbul looks at European Istanbul across the Bosphorus; the commercial city looks at the historic quarters across the Golden Horn. It is a city mesmerised by itself. Apartment blocks jostle with each other along hilltops to get a postage stamp view of the water, a view that adds value to the price of the property.

Time was when foreign tourists might seem a novel attraction, but now the only strangers to draw attention are the ships. Freighters and tankers, sophisticated warships and Russian pleasure cruisers drift along the horizon. As

Views are an obsession in  
Istanbul but Andrew Finkel  
finds that nothing is quite  
what it appears in this city  
which can both charm  
and irritate

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# THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS

*The Galata Tower,  
which once dominated  
the Pera skyline*



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*The Yeni Camii from the Galata bridge in the Sixties*

*The Fatih Camii from the Galata Tower overlooking the Golden Horn*





they steer slowly through the deep straits of the Bosphorus, they are as tall as buildings and seem near enough to touch.

Istanbul, a city divided by water, is a city of dramatic views. This aspect of division and drama is pervasive; it is the constant contrast between land and sea, past and present, cosmopolitan and traditional. The overwhelming visual stimulation is one source of the city's greatness and is the immediate reward of the casual visitor. This is the sight of Europe becoming Asia, Byzantine Constantinople becoming Ottoman Istanbul, empire becoming modern Turkey.

The city's personality is split by its many divisions: physically it is divided into Asia and Europe; historically it is divided by the conquest into Christian and Islamic orthodoxies; and socially it is divided between the centres of commercial affluence and the culture of those recent migrants in search of a wage.

Istanbul's contrasts are a lure to closer examination, snares to intellectual puzzles. Every stark contradiction is reinforced, then undermined; every generalisation merely a plateau to rest on before the discovery of a thousand exceptions. Istanbul's ability to span two continents is too easy a metaphor, its cultural variegations not necessarily marked by historic monuments, the divide between rich and poor, decline and regeneration not nearly as obvious as the skyline suggests.

Views are important, but not only because they are statuesque or monumental. They also convey important pieces of information. People peer through the night at the tower of Istanbul University to find out tomorrow's weather (green for rain, blue for sun, red for snow).

Drivers stranded along the dramatic span of the Bosphorus Bridge by the slow-moving traffic look down at the ferry boats darting across the water and feel nostalgia for an age, just over 15 years ago, when the geography of the city imposed stricter limitations on the ability to commute. And tourists, puffing up cobbled alleys, stop when the vista suddenly broadens to take in the classic lines of the huge 16th-century complex surrounding the Süleymaniye Mosque. Hopelessly lost a minute ago, they suddenly find their bearings.

Most foreign visitors arrive not by train from Asia, but by air. A city once easily contained within Byzantine land

walls now makes its way in the form of concrete apartment blocks all the way to the airport.

As you finally reach Topkapı Palace, you realise that it is not in this century alone that the arteries of progress were regarded with suspicion. In the mid-19th century, after Sultan Abdülmecit moved to the rococo Dolmabahçe Palace, the lower grounds of Topkapı were given over to become the terminus of the European railway. The sight of the foot of the city's most famous promontory being wrapped in railway sidings was considered by many as an unwelcome innovation.

Even so, the excitement of being able to board a train which would take you all the way to Vienna was enough to silence these aesthetic judgements. And, of course, Sirkeci Station, finally completed in 1890, is a fine building. It was also designed by a German, but unlike Haydarpaşa, Sirkeci — like many 19th-century public buildings in this old commercial district — is in a deliberately cultivated Ottomanesque style.

Change is the great ravager of sentimentality. The city's capacity for transformation is particularly frustrating to those whose interest is in romanticising about its past. Behind every guidebook and memoir describing the city's marvels is the penumbra of resentments that aspects of the city which gave most pleasure are under threat or have gone forever. There is a struggle for a place to look out from and for something wonderful to see.

There is no room for neutrality in Istanbul — one either succumbs or resists. To succumb means to join the crusade to control change or at least to have your sympathies enlisted in the fight to conserve the beauty of nature and the accomplishment of men. To resist is perhaps no disgrace. It may indicate a sensible reluctance to become engaged in the gooey layers of nostalgia — the Turkish Delight which the travel posters offer.

Istanbul — and perhaps Turkey in general — is not a place just to have a good time, although that good time is certainly on offer. My prejudice is that the country sets out to trap and engage, although its methods are capricious. It is as well to be prepared by arriving in the right state of mind. □

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*Haydarpaşa station on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus*

