

The Topkapı Palace Museum

The First Hill

The Signature of Istanbul

by Anna G. Edmonds

The First Hill -- the site of the Blue Mosque and the Pudding Shop, of Topkapı Palace and the lighthouse of the movie **Topkapı** fame, of the Cağaloğlu Turkish bath and the Sublime Porte -- is the oldest and richest area of Old Istanbul. Romances of history, wonders of architecture, fables of wealth and power -- the banal and the sublime -- all these and more crowd into an area a bit less than 2 km long and 1 km wide. They're so close together here that you can almost touch them all at once. How can so much be compressed into so small a plot of land? Each time I walk around the area I find something else to draw me back again, and again, and again. Old Istanbul casts an infectious spell!

The First Hill is treasured ground. Like the diadem of royalty, the narrow crest of this Seraglio Point crowns Old Istanbul. Its jewels are its heroes and its buildings, the gold band that holds them together is its sixteen hundred years of world dominion. What other hill, what other city in the world boasts such substance? Tragedy and comedy, defeat and victory, villainy and courage have repeatedly so colored this promontory that no other place can equal its drama.

The richness continues today to be a source of delight and entertainment. On the western slope of the hill behind St. Sophia an ancient building has just this year been cleaned out and refurbished. The Turkish Touring and Automobile Association has created a delightful **Sarnıç (Sarnich) Taverna-Restau-**

rant in what was built as a cistern over a thousand years ago. A brass gong announces each new customer for the restaurant's specialties of soups, mussels, roast meats and wide-awake service. Six massive stone columns support the very high, arched roof; a large fireplace and candles add a soft glow to the interior. Iron grillwork, special green pottery tableware in keeping with a Roman taverna, wooden tables and, in the background, baroque music, make this one of the most original and successful works of the General Director, Çelik Gülersoy. This man is the one who has done the most in recent years to give the historic sites of Istanbul a dignity and an "Old World" charm.

If you wish to savor more deeply of the Seraglio Point there is the **Ayasofya Pensions**, a row of nine hotel buildings on Soğuk Çeşme Sokak (Cold Fountain Street), just above the Sarnich. These have also been restored by the Turkish Touring and Automobile Association's Gülersoy. The rooms present a 19th century ambience; each is decorated in the color of a fragrant flower: jasmine, honey-suckle, rose, wisteria. From the front windows you can get an intimate view of St. Sophia in the changing moods and lights of the day.

As soon as the **reference library** of works on Istanbul which is located here has been catalogued, it will be available on application to research scholars.

Are you interested in exploring dark old cisterns? in buying batik dresses? in playing



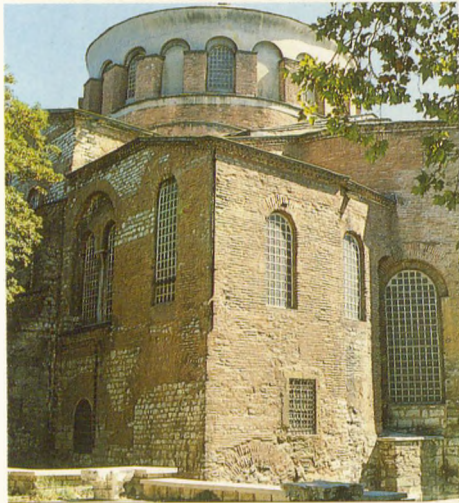
The Green House Hotel, and Sidewalk Café

billiards? Do you want to take a picture of a dancing bear, or of a sultan's robe? Are you thirsty for a drink of pickle juice or do you need a tape of the current pop singers? The First Hill is the place to look. Here the Oriental, the centuries-old and the unpredictable blend with the modern and the convenient. Roasted chickpeas and chestnuts must have been things the ancients enjoyed here as much as we do now. The street peddlers calling their wares surely would have been familiar hundreds of years ago. Do you suppose that Constantine also believed that those long, hot green peppers were a potent aphrodisiac? What would he think of television sets, or a portable walkman carried by the bear's owner, or computers? What presently unpredictable necessity will be for sale here next year?

But many of these items you might see elsewhere. Here the first thing to catch your attention is the silhouette of the First Hill, the signature of Istanbul.

By car, you can drive around the circumference in a few minutes; on foot you can circle its boundaries in a morning. Because of this compactness, the Point lends itself to a quick first look. But be careful: the longer you give to study this narrow hill the more you will be taken by it.

Mosques and statues, churches, baths, palaces, and cisterns are the visible remains from the history of the city. In the **Hippodrome** -- the Byzantine sports arena -- is the truncated **Serpentine Column** cast by the victors of a battle for freedom in 479 BC; across the park from it is a modest **bust of Halide Edip**



St. Irene Museum

Adivar, herself a heroine in the Turkish War of Independence in 1919-1923. Within these centuries the rulers of this city have created and held the fascination and the power of the Eastern Mediterranean.

It's hard for me not to want to photograph all the buildings, all the people, all the scenic views of this hilltop. Can I get the play of arch and angle of the mosque roof? Will all the six minarets be visible? Is the water in the pool quiet enough that St. Sophia will be reflected? What flowers are blooming in the garden today to add color to the austere stones? Will there be a group of people wearing bright clothes to make a point of reference? Or an eager face of a child who could have lived and laughed in any century?

The earliest city here was reportedly founded in 660 BC by Byzas, the man who gave his name to it. Probably the only remains that he would recognize today are in the twistings and turnings of some of the oldest streets -- ways that for him would have been goat trails. Is it possible that the Quarter of the White Beard and the Street of the Sweating Whiskers refer to Byzantine notables who lived on this eastern slope of the hill?

There are postcards here -- traditional "wish-you-were-here" tourists scenes, stylized roses for non-committal congratulations, beauty queens for "having-a-good-time" messages. Here you can stand up for a quick toasted **kaşar** cheese sandwich and a drink of a sweet carbonated drink, or you can sit in a small restaurant (**lokanta**) to savor split egg-plant bellies (**karniyarik**) and watered yogurt (**ayran**).

You can find hundreds of lokantas that are good; the **Gar Restaurant** in the Sirkeci train station; the **Borsa** (Yalı Köşkü Cad, Yalı Köşk Hanı 60-62, Sirkeci); the **Sultan** (Divanyolu Cad. 2, Sultanahmet) looking towards St. Sophia; **Pascha** (Prof. Kâzım İsmail Gürkan Cad. 21, Cağaloğlu); **Konyalı** (in Topkapı Palace); **Pandeli** (in the Spice Bazaar) to name only six.

Besides the bronze snakes in the Hippodrome there's another column I always look for -- the **granite obelisk** from Egypt (c 1500 BC). Lady Mary Wortly Montague thought that its hieroglyphics were "mere antient puns" when she saw it in the 17th century. Perhaps the last one to laugh in its shadow will have the best laugh. It is mounted on a marble base that's carved with scenes that were familiar to the Hippodrome sixteen hundred years ago. Among those, one shows the Emperor Theodosius listening to musicians; in another he is receiving homage from some conquered soldiers.

The fast fading figures on the lower base explain how the stone was raised. A story -- perhaps only a story -- goes that the crane to lift it was just a fraction too short to move the obelisk onto its base. The engineer was about to be condemned when he begged for a 24-hour respite. During that day he poured water continuously on the structure. In the morning the swollen wooden hoist was high enough for the engineer to set the monument triumphantly into place.

Like many another sports arena, the Hippodrome was the heart of Constantinople. Rather than the stone structure of the Colosseum in Rome, this one was probably a tall wooden stadium above its solid stone foundation. Part of the circular southern outer face can still be seen as one comes up the hill from the Sea of Marmara. Some of its marble is still here in the buildings of the Mosque of Sultan Ahmet and the Ibrahim Pasha Palace.



The Topkapı Palace entrance

The tiers of seats could have held a hundred thousand spectators. Around the top tier an arcade was decorated with famous sculptures brought to embellish Constantine's New Rome. This had been done at the expense and to the disgust of the residents of the earlier Rome. People could promenade here between the sports events, visiting with their friends and showing off the newest fashions. There were statues of a monstrous, enraged elephant, a beautiful Helen, a wounded hero struggling to overcome a lion, and eight sphinxes offering solutions to the world's problems. Most of these disappeared with the problems that the Fourth Crusade created.

The imperial box was in the center about opposite the obelisk. Sitting here, the Emperor could watch in comfort all the excitement of the games. Sitting around him, the spectators could watch in mounting anger any unpopular emperor. For him there was a direct, covered corridor between that box and the palace through which he could escape from the sticks and stones of his unruly subjects.

Rioting sports fans haven't lived only in the 20th century. The city was divided between two teams known for their colors, the Blues (who were orthodox in religion and were largely members of the upper class) and the Greens (who were heretics and were mostly of the lower class). At times it was difficult to say whether the racing event or the religious debate was the more emotionally charged.

The most famous disturbance came to a head during the reign of Justinian. It got started

over a minor issue of drivers in a race. The mob in the arena got out of hand, so Justinian tried personally to quiet it. Justinian's voice was thin and squeaky (according to his chronicler who didn't have many kind words about him in private), not imperiously commanding. Each time he called for quiet the crowd laughed harder. Shortly the fans turned into a stamping, chanting mob, crying, "Nika, Nika, Victory!" As their mood turned stormy he fled for his life down the escape route into his palace.

Frustrated in the absence of that target, the rioters surged out into the streets, burning large areas of the city. The churches of St. Irene and St. Sophia were razed along with hundreds of shops and houses. Then while the storm center of the mob was still concentrated in the Hippodrome, Justinian's General Belisarius rushed in with his army, trapped the rebels, and massacred them all.

This riot took place in January of 532. Justinian spent the next five years reshaping his image and rebuilding the city. To the enrichment of future generations, his energies and his wealth were expended on the churches of St. Sophia and St. Irene. Architecturally, **St. Irene** is an interesting transition between a basilica and a cruciform church. In church history it has the honor of having held the Second Ecumenical Council when the Nicene Creed was completed.

In shape and in history, **St. Sophia** has been the inspiration for great architecture ever since. From people and places around the Mediterranean Justinian solicited contributions for its erection -- columns from Baalbek,

from Ephesus, from Delphi, from the widow's mite and the sycophant's millions. The sweat of 10,000 workmen and the daily inspection of the Emperor were inseparable in its construction. As church, mosque and museum, this building more than any one other place in Istanbul continues to attract the admiration of people all over the world.

A story that links St. Sophia and the Hippodrome concerns a cobbler who owned some of the land that Justinian wanted for his church. Rather than gold, the cobbler demanded that his payment be in the form of a place of honor equal to the Emperor's in the Hippodrome. He got his seat. How he must have bragged about his coup to his family and his friends! The imperial guard saluted him appropriately when he approached it the first time. But his glory was short-lived: the crowd realized to their glee that his seat was turned to the wall, not to the games.

There are so many stories about Justinian! Surely not all of them are fictional. While St. Sophia is most identified with him, a smaller church built a few years earlier is also famous for events that happened there during his reign. Justinian wanted the help of the Western church for some of his religious policies. So he called Pope Vigilius to come from Rome and support him. The Pope arrived and promptly disagreed with the Emperor. Defiance of an emperor carries its own price, the Pope realized as he ran for his life to sanctuary in the **Church of SS Sergius and Bacchus (Küçükayasofya)**. When the Emperor's soldiers burst into the church, Vigilius grabbed



Aerial View, the Blue Mosque and St. Sophia Museum

hold of the altar for dear life. The police seized his hair and his beard to pull him off, but he held on so hard that they pulled the altar down instead. Although some bystanders chased the police off, the next day the Pope gave in to Justinian. During his seven-year stay in the capital, SS Sergius and Bacchus was set aside for his use.

Not far from Küçükayasofya is the stately **Mosque of Sokollu Mehmet Pasha**. It was built by the Ottoman architect, Sinan, in 1571. (Its place was formerly occupied by the Church of St. Anastasia which had been sacked during the Fourth Crusade; in the 4th century it was the Church of St. Gregory of Nazienzen.) Sokollu Mehmet Pasha was the son-in-law of Sultan Selim II. He followed Hayreddin Barbarosa as the Grand Admiral, and then he became Grand Vizier. The interior of his mosque is particularly noted for the beautiful İznik tiles on the walls and the pendentives. There are three small pieces of the black stone from the Kaaba that have been embedded above the door, the mihrap, and the mimber.

The **Mosque of Sultan Ahmet** (known affectionately as the **Blue Mosque**) shares the crest of the hill with St. Sophia and the Topkapı Palace. It was built above the place of the Byzantine palace; as with St. Sophia, many lesser buildings were cleared out to make room for the mosque. Like Justinian, its builder, Sultan Ahmet I, labored on his building with the workmen and paid them himself every Friday.

The story is told that the building of the six minarets of the mosque became a threat to relations between the Sultan and the Sherif of Mecca. But when Sultan Ahmet built the seventh minaret on the Kaaba, the Sherif sent him a piece of the black stone as a peace offering. That stone is now mounted in the mihrap of the mosque.

The gifts which the Sultans sent to Mecca for the Festival of Sacrifice each year started out from Sultan Ahmet by camel caravan. It was also in this mosque that Sultan Mahmut II



Cold Fountain Street

proclaimed the abolition of the Janissaries in 1826.

Attached to the Mosque of Sultan Ahmet on the east side are the rooms of the **Sultan's loge** where he rested before entering his private area of the mosque. These now are used for the **Pious Foundations' Carpet and Rug Museum**. Here you can see treasures that were hidden for centuries under layers of newer carpets in the mosques of Anatolia.

A part of the same Museum display is underneath the Mosque on the south side of the building. This includes historic flat weaves, some dating from the 16th century, some resembling brocades that were floor coverings in the tents when the Sultan went off to war.

Just outside the mosque walls, in an area that was a **marketplace** in Byzantine times, a series of tourist shops has opened recently

offering jewelry, clothing, art objects, welcome refreshments and the ever-witty merchants' banter. Many stores have treasures or souvenirs that can call back memories: ikons that might have graced a once-famous church tempt me to remember Byzantium. Amber prayer beads might have belonged to a Sultan or to his favorite concubine. Onyx cups, meerschau pipes, leather coats and skirts and pants, ceramic bowls and plates from Kütahya, backgammon and chess sets may be just what you were looking for. And is that rug which looks so dull and commonplace the lost, magic carpet?

Close by down the hill is **Istanbul Batik** (Küçükayasofya Cad. No. 35, Sultanahmet) where you can find an attractive variety of dresses, skirts, scarves, tablecloths and other items with Turkish designs produced by the batik technique.

The **Green House Hotel (Yeşil Ev Otel)** (between St. Sophia and the Blue Mosque on the street behind the Baths of Roxelana) is a large Ottoman **konak** -- mansion -- that has been turned by the Turkish Touring and Automobile Association into a modern establishment with its own unique atmosphere of comfort and romance. The decor -- furniture, pictures, rugs -- surround you with the graciousness of Old Istanbul. In its garden on sunny days you can enjoy a leisurely meal next to the marble water fountain.

Next door to it is the **Istanbul Artists' Center (Istanbul Sanatları Çarşısı)**, a restored 18th century school building. Here now a number of crafts that were dying out are being brought back to life both for young people who want to learn them and for others who want to buy them and to enjoy them more permanently in their homes. Book-binding, marbled paper, lacework and miniature painting are only a few of the several shops open here.

Across the Hippodrome from Sultan Ahmet is the **Palace of Ibrahim Pasha**. Newly restored for the Anatolian Civilizations Exhibition in 1983, this was the most sumptuous of any building, public or private, that the Sultan had at his command. While it had existed before, Sultan Süleyman had it refurbished and gave it as a wedding present to his childhood friend and brother-in-law, the Grand Vizier Ibrahim Pasha. It was in its great hall that the circumcision ceremonies of four of Süleyman's sons were held. It was from its balcony and windows in 1583 that Sultan Mehmet III and his court watched the display of circus entertainments and procession of the guilds celebrating the circumcision of Prince Mehmet. The color and variety of this occasion were captured in the Book of Festivities, the miniatures of which were painted by a number of artists.

Today this Palace houses the **Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts**. Besides the exhibits which are expertly displayed (rugs, ceramics, calligraphy, metalwork), the museum has a running series of special exhibits emphasizing particular areas of interest. Its curator, Nazan Ölçer, points out that the work of both Turkish and foreign artists are displayed here. For the footsore sightseer, the elevated, inside courtyard is a delightful place to enjoy a soft drink, a cup of coffee, and a snack, to read the guide book and to digest the riches which the area has offered.

The area is full of parks. Between St. Sophia and the Blue Mosque is a formal garden. At dark the buildings of the square are lighted for the **Sound and Light Show**. Then the story of the city rolls and flashes around you and you feel that you are a part of its drama.



Shopping Center, the Green House Hotel



Covered Bazaar

The **Palace grounds of Topkapı** are another series of parks -- the now rather informal First Courtyard (famed for Janissary uprisings), the Second Courtyard (where during the annual Istanbul Festival Mozart's **Abduction from the Seraglio** pokes gentle fun at the pride of past centuries) and the Third Courtyard (with the buildings housing the Sultan's jewels). Here also are the sacred relics of the Prophet Mohammed.

Across from the **Archeological Museum** (with the Alexander sarcophagus) in the area below the Topkapı Palace are two other museums, those of the **Ancient Orient** and the **Tiled Pavilion (Çinili Köşk)**. A little farther down is the **Gülhane Park** and the sad little Istanbul **Zoo**. In one corner of the wall is a **Review Pavilion (Alay Köşk)** from which the Sultan could watch parades and pedestrians. The mad Sultan İbrahim is supposed to have been allowed to shoot only one subject a day from its windows. Opposite it is the ornate doorway to what was the government offices --the Grand Vizier's place of business. Because of this imposing entrance the name of the Sublime Port came to stand for the Ottoman government.

The **Fountain of Ahmet III**, the **Baths of Roxelana**, the **Cisterns**, the **water balance tower** (an example of clever engineering in which the pressure of the water in the main city lines was regulated and the occasional air-pockets were released), the **Fountain of Kaiser Wilhelm**, the **Mausoleum of Sultan Ahmet I**, the former **Sultanahmet Prison** (which was wryly known by its hippy inmates in the 1960s as the Sultanahmet Hilton) -- the list of places with a history on the First Hill seems endless.

In the park beside the **Law Courts** are the ruins of the **Palace of Antiochus**, a 5th century noble whose residence later became the

martyrium for a 4th century virgin. The virgin, St. Euphemia, was called on to be the judge in a religious quarrel a hundred years after her death. The litigants placed their separate statements in her casket and sealed it up. A week later, when they opened it, she had decided that the Monophysite claims were worthy only of her feet while the Orthodox Christian claims were found on her heart.

The **Cağaloğlu Turkish bath (hamam)** is in the tradition of the Roman public baths. It is a double bath, one section for women, one for men. You enter a reception area (**soyunma yeri**), a large square hall where you undress. (In Roman times there were often caged birds warbling here.) The next area is the "cool" room (**soğukluk**) which contains the lavatories. The most decorated area is the steamy calidarium (**hararet**) with a central marble plat-

form (**göbek taşı**) where you are massaged before you bathe at one of the marble basins in the side chambers.

Back out in the street, you can find a gypsy thumping his drum while his dutiful bear caricatures the nightclub dancers. On the street corner you can best your weight on bathroom scales against your wit in bargaining. Here you can enjoy a cooling drink of ayran while across the park a modern minstrel plays an "antient pun" from the Black Sea on his small **kemençe** held upright on his knee.

During Byzantine times, a gold-encased milestone -- the **Million** -- stood in the square near the Palace of Antiochus; from it all roads were measured off; from it all roads of New Rome went out into the vast Empire. A nearby unassuming restaurant, **The Pudding Shop**, has been the starting place for many people's travels more recently. Twenty years ago this was the point of reference for those looking for a good, cheap meal, a missing friend, or a ride to the Farther Fabled East.

For many of us, probably the most lasting souvenirs of the Point are the memories of the people and the places we see here. There is the street where the parking attendant helped me unlock the car when I forgot the only key inside. Beyond is the shopkeeper who left his business to guide a stranger to one of his rivals' addresses. In the park one day a small shoe-shine boy responded with genuine pleasure to the words of Turkish I struggled to pronounce. On another corner I saw a flock of sheep one year waiting to be singled out for slaughter during the Festival of Sacrifice. Even now occasionally I see a man walking along with a long, bowllike instrument with which he will fluff up a lumpy cotton mattress. In the distance I hear the echo of another man ringing his bell as he moves from house to house selling fresh yoghurt.

What do you hope to find in a visit to the First Hill? Drama? Relics of the Byzantine city? Good food and good shopping? Anecdotes to regale your distant friends? Comfortable hotels? Sights and tastes and smells and sounds? From wherever I look at this small hilltop I marvel at the abundance and variety; I'm overwhelmed with the intensity of the artistic expression present here. I'm staggered by the diversity of the history that has been played out, by the sophisticated imagination of rulers and architects and engineers in the 17th century, in the 6th century -- in the 7th century BC! -- who chose this narrow part of Old Istanbul from which to command the world and to cast their spells even on us.



Detail from the Museum of Ancient Orient arts

