

24 hours in Beyoglu

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Leisa Tyler is charmed by an Istanbul borough filled with Ottoman mansions, edgy art and an air of transformation.

Istanbul is in the midst of a cultural and architectural revival. This rich and storied city, peppered with Byzantine churches, Ottoman palaces, chaotic bazaars and steamy hammams, has long been the crossroads of East and West, Europe and Asia.

Now, after years of staunch traditionalism and economic depression, Istanbul is reinventing itself as the Mediterranean's new city of cool. At the heart of this renaissance is Beyoglu. Across the Golden Horn from the old city, the former ramshackle borough of 19th-century apartment blocks and grand Ottoman mansions is rapidly being transformed into a lifestyle hub.

"Ten years ago you wouldn't walk these streets at night," says the owner and chef of Mikla, Mehmet Gurs, who led Beyoglu's transformation when he opened the rooftop club NuTeras in 2001.

The streets surrounding NuTeras are now a hive of construction. The legendary Pera Palace Hotel will reopen next month after a \$33 million makeover (it is rumoured Agatha Christie wrote *Murder on the Orient Express* in room 411). Next door, W Hotels is converting a mansion into a boutique hotel, the group's second in Istanbul. Around the corner, the "starchitect", Frank Gehry, is drawing up plans for a new cultural centre.

8.30am Emerge from the ruffle of feathers that is your bed at Witt Suites, the latest designer digs in the up-and-coming neighbourhood of Cihangir, a grid of steep streets peering over the Bosphorus. The first hotel for the brother-sister team of Secil and Tuncel Erdogan, this 17-room establishment has been fitted by the Turkish design group, Autoban, and is as glamorous as it is functional. Get your heart started with breakfast in the lobby: goodies from Turkey's plump pantry, including smoked cheese, goat's feta, sweet vine-ripened tomatoes and pastrami ham with sesame-seed simits.

Witt Suites, 26 Defterdar Yokusu, phone +90 212 293 1500, see www.wittistanbul.com. Double rooms from €159 (\$220), including breakfast.

10am Trundle up the hill to Taksim Square, the heart of Beyoglu and the main bus and metro stop for the area. From here, turn left into Istiklal Caddesi, the main drag, filled not with cars but people.

Ideally, visitors to Beyoglu should experience Istiklal Caddesi twice: once in the morning so you can spot the sites at leisure and once in the evening when the boulevard turns into a sea of people. Look out for notable buildings such as Ortaoyuncular Sahnesi, a theatre built in 1885, and the Cicek Pasaji, a late-19th-century shopping mall where bourgeois Russian women, fleeing their country's 1917 revolution, came and opened flower shops.

10.30am Spend the morning taking in one or both of Beyoglu's privately owned museums, both of which gave the area a big cultural injection when they opened in 2004. A few metres off Istiklal Caddesi, the Pera Museum has two floors of permanent exhibition space showing Ottoman-era orientalist paintings and Anatolian weights and ceramics. But it's the visiting exhibitions that create the most buzz, with works by Fernando Botero, a Colombian figurative artist, exhibiting until mid-July.

Part of an old shipping warehouse on the shores of the Bosphorus, Istanbul Modern is an airy space dedicated to Turkey's avant-garde artists. The first floor traces Turkish art through the past century, with pieces such as Adnan Coker's abstract work, *Retrospective*, and a self-portrait by Sultan Abdul-Mejid II, the last ruler of the Ottoman empire. The bottom floor hosts rotating exhibitions covering a range of disciplines - cinema, photography, sculpture - and the cryptic images of Murat Germen until mid-September.

Pera Museum, 65 Mesrutiyet Caddesi, see www.en.peramuzesi.org.tr. Entry 7 lira (\$5) a person. Istanbul Modern, Meclis-i Mebusan Caddesi, see www.istanbulmodern.org. Entry 7 lira, closed Mondays.

1.30pm Recharge the batteries at Karakoy Lokantasi, an airy diner around the corner from Istanbul Modern. Also designed by Autoban, the two-storey venue has aqua-blue walls, chequered floors and a wrought-iron staircase running up its belly, with a fabulous array of Turkish treats on the menu, such as spicy white beans cooked in an earthen pot and mash of creamy eggplant with barbecued lamb. For dessert, slip next door to Karakoy Gulluoglu, an old-fashioned baklava shop that locals claim rivals that from Gaziantep, the home of the sticky nut-filled pastry.

Karakoy Lokantasi, Kemankes Caddesi, phone +90 212 292 4455. Lunch for two, 40 lira. Karakoy Gulluoglu, Mumhane Caddesi, phone +90 212 293 0910, see www.karakoygulluoglu.com. Dessert for two, 6 lira.

3pm Continue along the coastline to the Galata Bridge, taking in views of Sultanahmet and the bustling Golden Horn until you reach the funicular railway, the cheat's express to reach the top of Beyoglu's hillside. Safely at the top you can now skip down to the iconic Galata Tower, which was built in 1348 by the Genoese as part of the fortification of their semi-independent city state here. It once served as a jail and fire tower. Take the elevator to the top for 360-degree views of the city and then back down for a cup of Turkish tea and, for those inclined, a narghile (water pipe with fruit-flavoured tobacco) at Ceneviz Cafe.

Galata Tower, see www.galatatower.net. Entry, 10 lira. Ceneviz Cafe, Fircasi Sokak, phone +90 536 580 4300.

4.30pm The neighbourhood of Galata is the hot spot for shopping. Try Laundromat (Galip Dede Caddesi, see www.laundromat-ist.com) for stunning women's threads by bohemian Turkish designers such as Nihan Peker and Gunes Dericioglu, or nearby Adem & Havva (3 Cemekan Sokak, phone +90 212 245 0551) for handmade leather sandals and vintage clothes.

For more home-grown Turkish delights, return to Cihangir. Parisian-style Mariposa (11A Simsirci Sokak, phone +90 212 249 0483) sells lovely tailor-made vintage dresses in flower and chequered patterns (pick a dress from the rack and they will remake it in your size in two to three days).

Or try Zihni Sinir (13 Agahamami Sokak, see www.zihnisinir.com) for handmade toys and clocks.

7.30pm Mikla, on the top floor of the Marmara Pera Hotel, has some of the best views in Istanbul. If you aim to get here about dusk, arm yourself with a glass of punchy Turkish wine and watch the sun sink dramatically over the higgledy-piggledy rooftops of this ancient and chaotic city.

The Finnish-Turkish owner and chef of Mikla, Mehmet Gurs, is in the vanguard of the slow food and organic movements in Istanbul.

Scouring the countryside, Gurs has unearthed a pantry of little-known ingredients such as lavender-infused honey, a centuries-old style of halva and miniature olives to incorporate into his menu. They are best sampled in the extravagant nine-course degustation meal with dishes such as cherry wood-smoked lamb, Black Sea hamsi sardines quickly fried between paper-thin slices of bread, and quince and pear terrine, all paired with superb Turkish wines.

Mikla, phone +90 212 293 5656, see www.istanbuluyi.com. Nine-course degustation menu for two, 110 lira; with matching Turkish wines, 190 lira.

11pm Pera is the heart of Beyoglu's bar scene and you'll find a raft of lively watering holes in the narrow streets around the Marmara Pera Hotel. For cocktails with local celebs and the jet-setter crowd, head to alfresco NuTeras (147 Mesrutiyet Caddesi), which recently reopened after a facelift and change of ownership.

Or for a grungier atmosphere, head for Tunel and bars such as Otto (8 Sehbender Sokak, see www.otto-restaurant.com), to find a prime perch on the street for people-watching.

Leisa Tyler travelled courtesy of Mikla and Witt Suites.

Mehmet Gurs will be appearing at this year's Sydney International Food Festival in October; see www.siff.com.au.

Emirates flies to Istanbul for about \$2250, flying nonstop to Dubai (14hr), then Istanbul (4hr 40min). Fare is low-season return from Melbourne and Sydney, including tax. Australians obtain a visa upon arrival for about \$US20 (\$23) for a stay of up to 90 days.