

over the tomb of the evangelist St. John, and the site of the Temple of Artemis, one of the original Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

After Ephesus, we'll visit a local cooperative to learn how world-renowned hand-woven Turkish carpets are produced. We'll also enjoy lunch together here.

Late this afternoon, we transfer to the airport for our short flight to Istanbul. We check into our hotel before dinner on your own at one of this cosmopolitan city's many great restaurants.

Breakfast, Lunch

TITANIC CITY

Sat

Day 15 - May 26, 2012 Istanbul/City tour

Enjoy the day getting to know Istanbul, the great romantic city straddling the Bosphorus Strait. This morning, we'll visit a few of the great landmarks of the city's historic center, which has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. First, we'll explore the sprawling Topkapi Palace, the maze of opulent buildings that served as the seat of the Ottoman Empire between the 15th and 19th centuries. The Topkapi was a city-palace with a population of approximately 4,000 people. It housed all the Ottoman sultans from Sultan Mehmet II to Abdulmecit—nearly 600 years and 25 sultans. Today, it is the world's oldest and largest surviving palace, one of the world's richest museums, and a masterpiece of Turkish architecture—a complex of shady courtyards overlooking the Golden Horn, where the Sea of Marmara meets the Bosphorus. Highlights include the weapons collection, and galleries exhibiting the imperial collection of crystal, silver, fabled jewels, and Chinese porcelain.

We'll also visit the supremely beautiful Sultan Ahmet Mosque. The mosque was built between 1609 and 1616 by the architect Mehmet under the orders of Sultan Ahmet I, who, interestingly, ascended the throne at age 14, was the 14th ruler, and died 14 years later. The mosque is part of a large complex consisting of tombs, *medreses* (theological schools), fountains, a health center, homes, storehouses, and other buildings, but it is best known for its courtyard, elegant domes, and six heavenly minarets. As we remove our shoes to enter

the mosque, you'll see how it earned the name Blue Mosque: Its interior gleams with a magnificent paneling of blue-and-white Iznik tiles.

After lunch on our own, our tour continues at the magnificent Hagia Sophia, one of the most beautiful buildings in the world. Constructed as a Christian church during the sixth century, this Church of the Holy Wisdom served as the mother church of the Orthodox religion for more than 1,000 years. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks seized control of Istanbul and converted the church into a mosque, which it remained until 1935. Today, it is a museum.

Among the wonders of this remarkable structure is its huge dome—the model for Byzantine churches to come. As you enter the Hagia Sophia, note the cannonballs along the outer courtyard, which remain from the Ottomans' siege of the city. Entering the sanctuary, you will be awed by its immense vaulted ceiling that soars above the four arches on which it rests. Admire the marble walls and the juxtaposition of Islamic calligraphic roundels with golden Christian mosaics that are still being uncovered. ***Please note:*** *Hagia Sophia is closed Mondays. If this day falls on a Monday, we will visit Chora Museum instead.*

Just outside, you'll also see the Roman Hippodrome, where thundering chariots once competed in races. Wrestling, boxing, and other athletic events were also held here, as were political rallies. Women will be glad that times have changed, as they were not admitted when the arena was built, in AD 203. Of special note at the Hippodrome are the Obelisk of Theodosius, which dates to around 1500 BC and which was transported to Istanbul (then Constantinople) in AD 390. You'll also see the fourth-century Constantine Column; the Greek Serpentine Column, one of city's oldest monuments, dating to 479 BC; and the German Fountain, a gift to the Ottoman Sultan in 1898.

Your introduction to Istanbul concludes with a stroll through one of the largest (and with its origins in the 15th century, the oldest) covered markets in the world, Istanbul's Grand Bazaar (known as the Covered Bazaar to the Turkish people). As you browse among the 4,000 shops stretched along miles of labyrinthine passageways, you'll find that the street names recall the