



Photos by Jamie McLeod

# Istanbul: The Stylish Spice Express

MARCO SOARES explores the delights of Turkey's capital, Istanbul!

I'M a four-holidays-in-the-Mediterranean-a-year kind of guy. At least four as I just can't bear the idea of having just one. It reminds me of something I struggle to say and am unable to spell: monoga... nah, nah. Many! That sounds much more like me. Apart from my polygamy I also confess to being a convicted cheater – I cross the lines and regularly venture to the North Atlantic. From Mykonos to Gran Can, I used to quite happily rotate between the famous four gay holiday spots until my appetite for more got the best of me.

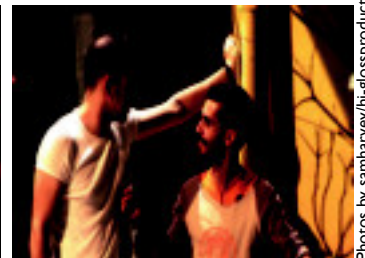
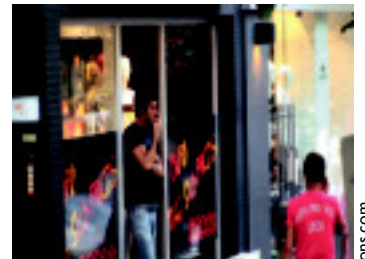
My soul was seeking different seas and estuaries. I fancied fresh new fluids - don't we all? I looked for it and I found it. With its rivers, straits and several seas, Istanbul is, if anything, an eccentric heavenly orgy of bodies of water.

Where was my head at when I booked my flight? In some steamy action at the Turkish baths, of course. What else? Traditional Islamic values. Well, yes indeed. That said, Turkey is an exceptionally secular country and it has been since the end of the First World War when a proud, modern republic was founded. Besides, like many Muslim countries, the attitude towards sex and sexuality is deliciously ambivalent. "And you will have boys too, very many and very beautiful and of noble families," said Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror to his troops during their siege of Constantinople in 1453. The city fell the next day.

It so happened that my host was of a noble and famous breed. On Thursday night we went to the shores of the Bosphoros Sea, where Istanbul's five superclubs are located. But never mind how many, what matters here is the size and flavour. Our first port of call was **Sortie** (Muallim Naci Cad. No141-142, Kuruçesme, Tel: +90 212 327 85 85), the metropolis's dragon of bold clubbing. Outside stand Ferraris, Maseratis and a fierce army of paparazzi. Be Prada-clad (Harvey Nichols Istanbul is now open) or not even having your name on the guest-list will get you pass the door bitches. Unless, of course, you're stepping off your yacht straight into the plethora of dance arenas, bars and restaurants - for the club does have its own private piers. The cute gay PR's are very easily spotted and indeed very welcoming.

After the capitalist experience of the previous night I demanded downmarket. A timely decision! It's on Friday and Saturday that the gay scene really kicks in, with flocks of working class boys coming in from the suburbs. My overprotective companion took me to **Taksim Square** (near the bus terminal, just opposite the Marmara Hotel) the point of reference for the gay scene as well as the transgender, though the latter - with an estimated 3,000-strong - has a life of its own. Within careful walking distance you'll find Istanbul's 20 or so gay businesses including several bars, nightclubs, restaurants and hotels.

We went to **Club Privé** (Tarlabaşı Boulevard, 28/A, Taksim. Tel: +90 212 235 7999) for a taste of trashy Turkish pop, where the bar is somewhat overlarge for the size of the venue, leaving no obvious dance area. The result is an unashamed shake and dance all over the place, not least the jolly doorman. You can step out of this one and head to a number of such bars to find the same amazingly unpretentious atmosphere which has been labelled "a la turca". Eurovision Paradise is an also suitable label. ▷



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▷ We finished off at **Tek Yon** (Mesrutiyet Cad. No:54/1 Tepebasi,

Beyoglu) a reliable spot to cop off with the moustached macho man of your dreams or hobnob with international designers scouting for much the same as you. It was decidedly popular and understandably so. Catering for diversity, it stands in the alluring grey area for partying in Istanbul.

On Saturday night we reversed scenario, back to western upscale. This real megalopolis was dubbed the Paris of the East in the 19th century, and we found that Istanbul surely haven't lost the knack for style. In between clubbing and visiting tourist attractions - which don't come much better than here anywhere in the world - make sure you look your best. Don't feel too shy to go and have a nice shave or even a manicure or facial. **Foiri** (Turgut Ozal Caddesi No 95, Capa. Tel: +90 202 586 67 37) is gay-owned. I thought I went in for shave but I came back with memories of multiple orgasms.

**G-Launch** (Soho Teras, Is Markesi Bldg, Istiklal Caddesi 361-5, Beyoglu. Tel: +90 212 245 0152) is a good bet to get the juices going, as is **Neo Bar** (Lamartin Caddesi 40 - Taksim/Beyoglu. Tel: +90 212 254 4526) but be warned, it's the Mediterranean, meaning that venues are virtually empty before midnight. You know

the score. The **212 Club** (Muallim Naci Cad. N: 39 Ortakoy. Tel: +90 212 327 41 39) and restaurant is a stylish converted hamam and the **Sugar Club Café** (Istiklal Caddesi. Sakasalim Cikmazi No. 7 Beyoglu. Tel: +90 212 245 00 96) is a great meeting place to start or end your night. Though by 2am you must be coming on to a random

good night out. Everyone goes to **Love Point** (Cumhuriyet Caddesi 349/1, Harbiye/Sisli. Tel: +90 212 232 2590) Istanbul's leading gay club night. Like many successful gay concepts it attracts a rather mixed crowd to its modern and chic interiors. Finding a friendly hunk is easy and you definitely shouldn't feel intimidated to come on to him. However, you won't get away with wearing the wrong colours or grooving to the wrong tunes!

There are quite a few afterhours and final pick-up points, not to mention the invitations to carry on at someone's house. Alternatively you could end your night with a relaxing massage at a Hamam - the Turkish word for bath. The curvaceous architecture of these historic buildings and the not-so-forbidden underwater goings should provide for many comings. This is why I booked my next visit for September.

On my return flight I met a friend doing PR for twelve UK Travel agents and I also heard of a group of gay magazine editors being in town at the same time. Further rumours have it that heavy lobbying is underway to make two islands just off Istanbul a primarily gay destination. I know two doesn't seem like much and for some this is not enough but, looking back into fact, being a city where 98 emperors and 27 sultans lived, it's time for queens to move in.

## GAY FRIENDLY TOUR OPERATORS

**KD Tourism & Travel** are specialists in gay travel and offer a range of tours and excursions featuring private yacht cruises, mosque visits to Topkapi, Soliman mosque, spice markets and bizarre. Go to [www.masterandapprentice.com](http://www.masterandapprentice.com) for info or try call +90 212 291 71 00 or email [info@kdtours.com](mailto:info@kdtours.com).

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## HOTELS

**Sofa Hotel**, Tesvikiye Cad. No: 123, Nisantasi, Istanbul is a stunning, modern hotel with individually designed suites. Tel: +90 212 368 18 18 or go to [www.thesofahotel.com](http://www.thesofahotel.com)

Similarly, the decadence of the **Marmara Pera Hotel** is highly recommended and located at Mesrutiyet Cad. Tepebasi, Istanbul with stand out features such as a roof top pool. Tel: +90 212 251 46 46 or go to [www.themarmarahotels.com](http://www.themarmarahotels.com)

## USEFUL WEBSITES

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[www.absolutesultans.com](http://www.absolutesultans.com)  
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