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## Talking Turkey: What to Do Now in Istanbul

Turkish Airlines is flying US travelers to IST now. Here are some of the best places to stay and things to do

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by Gretchen Kelly



*Ed Note: As international travel begins to recover, Business Traveler USA is exploring opportunities in Turkey, the Middle East and Africa with Kenn Laya, CEO of **Vuitton Travel**, (<https://vuittontravel.com>) a bespoke travel concierge service.*

In Part One of this four-part series, Kenn shared insights into the **Kingdom of Morocco**. Now we turn our attention to hotel, restaurant and attractions open in the City on the Bosphorus, Istanbul.

**BT: Turkish Airlines** (<https://www.turkishairlines.com/>) is flying American travelers to Istanbul now. What are the restrictions and how do you fly there from the US?

**Laya:** You take a non-stop direct Turkish Airlines flight between JFK or LAX to Istanbul Airport. You must wear a mask in flight except while eating but the experience on Turkish is still one of the best airlines flying, especially in Business Class. Note that the

lounges, though, are closed for now. Istanbul's brand new airport is located on the European side of the city.

You need to present a PCR negative test within 48 hours on arrival. The airport is taking strong measures about how they are controlling the virus. Passengers must wear a mask both on board and at all times while in the terminal building. The only people allowed access into the airport are traveling passengers or persons who need accompaniment. Temperature checks are mandatory and all luggage is sanitized with an ultraviolet light.

The terminal has fresh air circulating constantly and also a 24/7 hygiene team on duty.

My clients are met by private transfer as they come out of customs and immigrations for the short drive to their selected hotel.

**BT:** Where are the best hotels that are currently open for US travelers seeking a four-to-five-star experience in the city now?

**Laya:** You are spoiled for choice in Istanbul. All the hotels in Istanbul can only take 50 percent occupancy at the moment and as such can be considered in a soft opening stage. All the hotels open in Istanbul have to adhere to the same standards.

These hotels are not only taking care of their guests, they are taking care of their staff too: temperature checks, PPE, constant cleaning. You see someone cleaning and polishing a handrail for instance, hundreds of times a day. Everyone is being taken care of effectively to minimize any chance of anything going wrong.

**BT:** What would you recommend in terms of time for a stay in Istanbul?

Laya: I would recommend nothing short of a six-night stay. That could be questioned but I'd say: You're in the only city in the world that straddles two continents, Europe and Asia. You're easily enticed by all the sights and sounds. Six nights only gives you five days for the amount of the amazing sights and sounds you'll experience so don't sell yourself short.

**BT:** Let's talk hotels. How do you find the right place that is currently open and taking guests in Istanbul for your clients?

**Laya:** I get a feel for someone by talking with them, understanding what their priorities are: views, walkability, classic or trend-forward design. Then I offer a selection of hotels currently open in Istanbul in a variety of places around the city.

Take Sultanahmet for instance. It is a coveted place to be because of its close proximity to Hagia Sofia, the Blue Mosque, the Hippodrome with its Obelisk, the Grand Bazaar, the Topkapi Palace, the Bosphorus shore and the Basilica Cistern.

In Sultanahmet, I usually recommend The Four Seasons Istanbul at Sultanahmet. However, they have taken this time to close the hotel completely until the spring of 2021 and give it a huge renovation. If you want to go earlier and stay in Sultanahmet. I would stay in the **Pierre Loti Hotel.** (<https://www.pierrelotihotel.com/>) This property, while lovely, is not part of a particular brand. What I like about the hotel is that it is located exactly on the main street of the old city that leads to Topkapi Palace and Hagia Sofia. It is a four-star property, currently open.

The Pierre Loti is well-located for cafes and restaurants and shops. It is in a significant part of town, perfect for strolling. The property features well-appointed rooms and an astonishingly beautiful view from the roof.

**BT:** What other areas do you recommend?

**Laya:** For someone who wants to experience a lot of social life including restaurants, pubs, local culture, I recommend Taksim. Taksim is a very bustling area, which I love. The main street which one automatically needs to go to is Istiklal Caddesi, the street where you'll see the red Tunel trams going back and forth. In non COVID-19 times there would be millions of people on weekends there.

Tunel is a historic subway funicular line that opened in 1875. It takes you from the end of Istiklal Avenue to close to the Galata Tower. This excites me because when you come off the Tunel you just need to wander around. You make your way to the Galata Tower and go up. Here you'll find one of the most awesome views of old Constantinople that you will see – a beautiful panoramic view.



I have four favorite hotels in the Taksim area. I like **The Grand Hyatt in Istanbul** (<https://www.hyatt.com/en-US/hotel/turkey/grand-hyatt-istanbul/istan>) because it is very close to Taksim. You can walk there in a few minutes. There is so much to see and do on that street. You'll see people making baklava, selling pretzels and fresh pomegranate juice.

Others are the **InterContinental Istanbul** (<http://istanbul.intercontinental.com/>)(re-opening in October) and the **Ritz Carlton Istanbul.** (<https://www.ritzcarlton.com/en/hotels/europe/istanbul>) They all have the international brands and they are all on a 50 percent occupancy rule.

I also like a property called **Tomtom Suites** (<http://www.tomtomsuites.com/>) an authentic Istanbul building which reflects social history from as far back as the 1850s when it was a home for French nuns. It only has 20 suites, which is lovely as well as a fabulous rooftop terrace and magnificent panoramic views of the old town.

**BT:** What about hotels on the shore of the Bosphorus.

**Laya:** One of my favorite properties is the **Çırağan Palace Kempinski,** (<https://www.kempinski.com/en/istanbul/ciragan-palace/>) an old Sultan's palace on the shores of the Bosphorus. Imagine just having arrived after your long flight, pulling up a chair in the hotel garden and watching the boats along the Bosphorus. It doesn't get better than that. The hotel has a stunning old hamman but that is currently closed although the outdoor pool is still open.



I also love the Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at **The Bosphorus,** (<https://www.fourseasons.com/bosphorus/>) in a stunning old Ottoman building. You feel like

Further on is The Shangri-La Istanbul, Bosphorus, another beautiful property. **The Shangri-La Bosphorus** (<https://www.shangri-la.com/en/istanbul/shangrila/>) is now doing an exclusive Baklava Butler upon arrival experience with a special ornate key, which they will receive upon check in. Dressed in traditional and stylish Turkish uniform, the Baklava Butler meets guests in the Lobby Lounge or IST TOO restaurant, where the butler serves tableside the decadent dessert with Maraş ice cream, a traditional Turkish ice cream that is made of clotted cream. Dating back to the Ottoman Empire, the dessert was served to royalty and is now a milestone in culinary history as a registered Turkish dessert with a patent in 2005.

Further in, away from the water, going up one of the hills is the **Conrad Bosphorus,** (<https://www.hilton.com/en/hotels/isthcci-conrad-istanbul-bosphorus/>) also a lovely

property and near here, too is the modern and beautifully designed **Raffles Istanbul**. (<https://www.raffles.com/istanbul/>)

**BT:** Are there other areas of the city with open hotels that you recommend now?

**Laya:** There is the Ortaköy area on the Bosphorus just before the first bridge. Here, I'd recommend the **Radisson Blu Bosphorus** (<https://www.radissonhotels.com/en-us/hotels/radisson-blu-istanbul-bosphorus>), a stylish property that puts you in one of the most charming places in all Istanbul. It is a mind-blowing little neighborhood, very chic and almost Parisian.



Also, in the direction of the Black Sea in the Sariyer District, there is the **Six Senses Kocatas Mansions**, (<https://www.sixsenses.com/en/resorts/kocatas-mansions-istanbul>) a 2, 3-level, sensitively restored heritage mansion with 43 rooms. It is the height of luxury, private and very boutique-like in feel with manicured gardens on the Bosphorus. There is nothing more beautiful than sunset on the Bosphorus when the long shadows fall across the water. You hear the muezzin call to prayer and just revel in it in your own private haven. It is a remarkable place.

**BT:** What is open in Istanbul currently to see and do?

**Laya:** All the major attractions: Topkapi Palace, the Blue Mosque, Hagia Sofia are all open with social distancing and mask requirements. Note that now, Hagia Sofia is a working mosque again and so rules apply ∩. removing shoes and wearing head

coverings for women. Men must not wear shorts.

For me, personally, there is nothing like getting lost in Istanbul's winding streets.

You need to go to the Galata Bridge at sunset when it is laden with people fishing at the bridge. This area, The Golden Horn, is also famous for its restaurants which are open but with masks and social distancing. The city is still featuring a lot of al fresco dining.

**BT:** What about Istanbul's famous bathhouses?

**Laya:** Bathhouses are limiting certain treatments and requiring masks. The hamman I would recommend is the **Cemberlitas Hamami**, (<https://www.cemberlitashamami.com/cemberlitas-bath-historical-turkish-bath/>) designed by Sinan, the famed Turkish architect. You'll have the most intensely relaxing experience you'll ever have in your life – when you're done, you'll just sparkle.  
BT: Anything else you should not miss?

**Laya:** Go to Üsküdar on the Asian side Istanbul for its leafy, historic streets and for its connection with a fabulous story.

A young American woman once heard a song called Uska Dara named for this area in a bar in the area. A Turkish naval officer's wife taught her the lyrics and she began performing the song in a local bar. A local radio station gave it a lot of play and soon the song went global. She recorded it for RCA records. It sold 120,000 and topped the American charts. That singer's name was Eartha Kitt. Call me an old-fashioned fool but I always get shivers when I hear that song. For me, it is just redolent of everything I love about Istanbul.

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