

Its hallowed ground housed an ancient pagan temple, succeeded by a church (Megale Ekklesia, 360 A.D.) and two basilicas (415, 537), before being turned into a mosque (1453), then a museum (1934), and ultimately a mosque again (2020).

SACRED SOPHIA

IN THE LAND WHERE EAST MEETS WEST, NO STRUCTURE SYMBOLISES TURKEY'S SACROSANCT SYMBIOSIS OF HERITAGE LIKE THE HAGIA SOPHIA. ITS TUMULTUOUS HISTORY—MARKED BY WAR AND WORSHIP—PAIRED WITH THE CAPTIVATING CONTOURS OF ITS COLOSSAL BYZANTINE BODY HAVE MADE THIS TREASURE AN ATTRACTION SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL. BUT IT IS SO MUCH MORE THAN A MUST-SEE. FROM TRAM COMMUTERS AT SULTANAHMET STATION TO FISHERMAN ATOP GALATA BRIDGE, THE HAGIA SOPHIA'S ROSE-HUED VISTA IS INTEGRAL TO ISTANBUL'S CITYSCAPE: A CULTURAL COMFORT AS PLEASING AS THE SCENT OF SUMAC COILING THROUGH THE CITY'S MANY SPICE BAZAARS.

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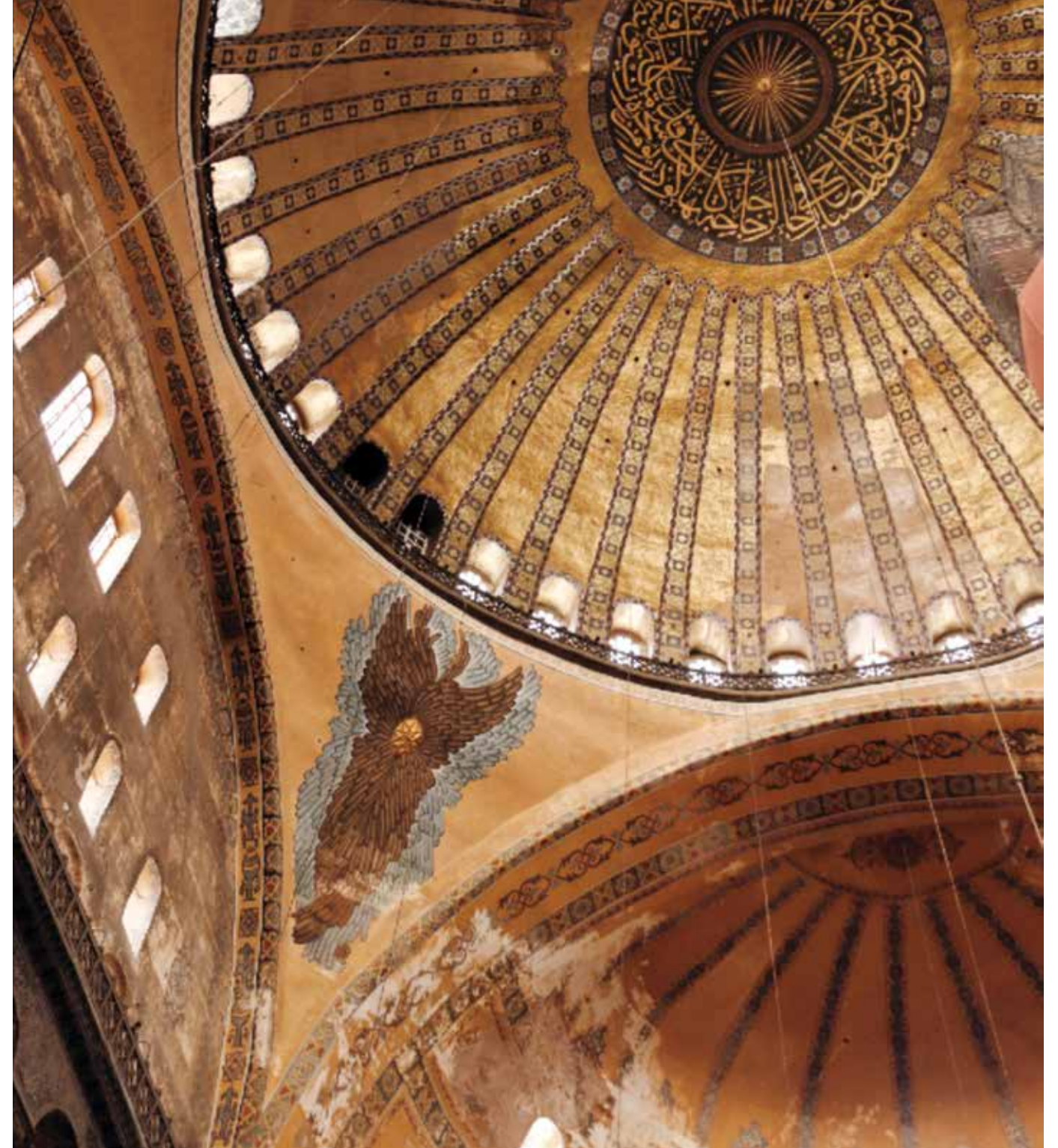


In the heart of the city, every few doors yield a store dedicated to beautifully detailed carpets and kilims (left). These crafts of ancient nomadic tribes traced to modern Turkey have long served as a comfortable and portable flooring for roving communities. They also feature decorative and atavistic motifs of Anatolia and Central Asia. While Turkish carpet-weaving is a centuries-old tradition, the flat-weaving technique behind the kilim has been around for millennia. These works represent more than the livelihood of hawkers, they hold thousands of years of cultural heritage.



Istanbul adopted trams back in 1871, when it was still known as Constantinople. The service grew and ran regularly until 1966. After a long hiatus, the tram was reintroduced (middle) to Istanbul as a line to tour heritage sites in 1990, and soon grew into a robust tram system across the city. It now operates several local transport lines and useful tourist transportation to local attractions. The Galata Bridge (right) spans the Golden Horn to connect the busy Eminönü and Beyoğlu districts, but the bridge itself feels like its own distinct neighbourhood. Below the bridge an array of local seafood dishes sizzle for hungry tourists. The upper level sees swarms of seagulls eyeing bait, basking in the tackle boxes of rows of fisherman propped up against the rail.





The confluence of distinct traditions sees a 6th-century basilica dome framed by 16th-century minarets, and the interiors are no different. A 9th-century mosaic of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus between the Roman emperors Justinian I and Constantine is neighbored by century-old Ottoman chandeliers (facing page) and golden Koranic calligraphy.



Mısır Çarşısı, also known as the Spice Bazaar, is the city's most colourful and fragrant market. Shop after shop display magnificent mountains of cumin, sumac, red pepper flakes, and whole-dired chillies: every alley is a rainbow of its own. But nothing catches the eye-like the glistening Turkish Delight waiting to greet customers at nearly every stall. One's eyes flit from the fine sugar-dusted tones of pistachio and honey lokum to the mahogany hues of hazelnut and chocolate creations, while stacked Turkish teapots steam for worthy customers.



This enchanting maze of colour and lights spans 30,000 square metres and 60 streets and alleys, consisting of over 4,000 shops and stalls. It is a shopper's paradise within a city, offering everything from leather bags to lanterns, carpets to antiques, jewellery to art. Yet the most sought after items are tea sets, a nod to Turkey's time-honoured caffeine culture.