

ISTANBUL al fresco

Business Traveller

JULY/AUGUST 2007

Wining and dining in Turkey's seaside city takes to the rooftops in summer. **Nick Redman** enjoys some spectacular views

Blame it on the Pyramid imagery gracing those Turkish-blend Camel cigarette packets. Until you've been to Istanbul, your mental image is, let me guess, of somewhere aridly Islamic: a desiccated metropolis of kiln-fired earth tones, like Cairo, Damascus or pancake-flat Tehran.

Well, the refreshing reality is that mosque-littered, minaret-spiked Istanbul – Byzantium to ancient Greek mariners, Constantinople as rechristened by the Romans – is a spectacular city by the sea. A city where gulls freeze on the breeze as white commuter ferries trail scarves of black smoke between the European and Asian shores; where flippingly fresh fish spits on quayside grills, to be doused in lemon and forked into a baguette for lunch on the hood.

Istanbul is not merely a city by the sea. It is a city defined by the sea, slashed east and west by the wide cobalt Bosphorus waterway: the "cow ford" strait of Greek mythology. Subdued once by sixth-century BC Persians – then again, almost 2,000 years later, by Mehmet the Conqueror and his merry band of Ottomans – it kinks and glints like a glittering necklace of great lakes. Heading south from the Black Sea with a cargo of dolphins, oil tankers and tiny skiffs, after 30km it debouches into the Sea of Marmara. It makes the Thames seem tame.

As a city garlanded by great waters, Istanbul is also one of diverse seasons. Come autumn the fishermen are out in force, bobbing in small blue-and-white boats to net the schools of bonito that migrate down from the Black Sea. In winter, heavy snow from Russia may blow in – flurries scurrying suddenly south-by-south-west, coating the mosques and russet rooftops in icing-white while millions of citizens sleep. And, hopefully, spring will bring rashes of pink flowers as the Judas trees bloom along the steep evergreen shores, presaging summer...



Dining room at Mikla



Mikla, in the Marmara Pera Hotel

Which is when you'll find Istanbul at its scantily clad sexiest, emerging after dark to party on city rooftop and shoreline. Few metropolises in the world metamorphose quite like it – unless you count Athens, which relocates hip bars and restaurants to premises on the island of Mykonos when the big city gets too hot to handle. Istanbul, by contrast, revels in the heat of the moment. And so, when you're here, should you.

MIKLA

167/185 Mesrutiyet Caddesi;
tel +90 212 293 5656

For vertiginous value, nowhere tops Mikla. It's the best restaurant by Mehmet Gürs – Istanbul's principal designer-diner-monger. You'll find it lodged teeteringly at the summit

of the high-rise modern Marmara Pera Hotel: a plate-glass cyrie looking down on the mosque-blistered old town. Two breeze-cooled terraces (one bar, one restaurant) are eyed up by wheeling gulls. Latino sounds drift, lighting is low and warm and the generous martinis simply won't be upstaged at any other gin joint in the city. For dinner, you've got food as funky as the Italo-Scandic furniture: perhaps a starter of arugula, mint, apricots and cumin; possibly a hefty shared main of whole roasted beef tenderloin with bouquet garni and part-glazed onion. Just make sure you're light enough to ascend the steps for the ultimate high: the white-furnished roof bar, a one-in-a-million outcrop surveying the scattered mosques and minarets below.

NU TERAS

Mesrutiyet Caddesi 145-147;
tel +90 212 245 6070

Gürs's other al fresco nightspot is as slick a trick as you'll find in any world city, with splendid fondant-centred tuna, pepper-crusted, among its fashion-fish dishes. It unfurls on the flat roof of a skinny block in the louchely hip district of Asmalimescit, some several stories above Agatha Christie's beloved Pera Palas hotel (which stands dolefully boarded up, casting a haunted look). Nu Teras draws the faithful nightly to its intimate, open-to-the-skies arena, where the tea-lit decor of pale-leather banquettes and dark wood underfoot is outshone only by the sunsets. These burn themselves out slowly across that immortal waterway of