

# The Heart of the Ottoman Empire

## Visiting the Topkapi Palace

By Ela Erozan Gursel

Every time I visit my native Istanbul, I stroll through the old town, Sultanahmet, where the landmarks of Hagia Sophia Church, the Blue Mosque, Basilica Cistern and Topkapi Palace, the traditional merchants and their colourful shophouses, restaurants and tea gardens represent the mosaic of Turkish diversity. I enjoy wandering through Topkapi Palace or reading a book in its extensive gardens, imagining life in the palace many centuries ago.

Construction of Topkapi Palace commenced in 1459 by order of Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror after the conquest of Constantinople. It remained home to Ottoman sultans for 400 years until Abdulmecid I moved to the Dolmabahce Palace, the first European-influenced palace along the Bosphorus. Topkapi Palace opened to the public as a museum after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. In 1985 UNESCO granted it World Heritage status as part of the 'Historic Areas of Istanbul'.

The palace complex consists of four main courtyards and many smaller buildings. At its height, it housed as many as 4,000 people and contained mosques, a hospital, library, bakeries and a treasury.

The main exterior gate, the Imperial Gate, opens to the first court, where service buildings and servants' housing were located. Here one finds Hagia Irene, one of the oldest Byzantine churches, with its intact atrium from the 4th century. Down the hill, a narrow lane gives way to Gulhane Park, which was once part of the palace gardens. About halfway down is the Tiled Pavilion, now a ceramics museum with superlative examples of Turkish ceramics from the 12th century to the present day. The Archaeological Museum, also possessing an outstanding collection of artefacts, and the Museum of Near Eastern History with its pre-Islamic Arab works and finds from Assyria, Babylon and Egypt, stand nearby.

Inside the palace, the harem (derived from the Arabic word *haram*, which means taboo or forbidden), consisted of approximately 400 rooms scattered around small inner courtyards. These were the private quarters where the sultan lived with his mother, brothers and sisters, wives, children and eunuchs. *Cariyes*, servant girls who did housework for the imperial family, and the concubines who were educated in the courtly arts of dancing, poetry, music and the erotic arts also lived here. With only one man allowed access to the wives and concubines, the harem was certainly the most exotic, secret and private place in the palace! Under the strict rules of protocol, no guest could enter the harem unless specifically invited and no woman could leave unless permanently dismissed. Today, the harem still has its own rules: to visit, one must get a separate ticket and join a guided tour.

Topkapi Palace is home to a legendary 86-carat pear-shaped diamond known as the Spoonmaker's Diamond or Kasicki Diamond. One story says that a very poor man found a very shiny stone in a garbage heap in Istanbul. He bartered



Topkapi Palace

the stone to a spoonmaker for three wooden spoons. The spoonmaker sold it to a jeweller who eventually sold it to the palace. Another tale says that a French officer named Pikot bought the diamond from the Maharajah of Madras and took it to France. Thieves got wind of the gem and robbed Pikot. Soon a large diamond about the size of the stolen stone appeared at auction, where it was purchased by Napoleon's mother, who later sold it to finance her son's escape from Elba in 1815.



The Spoonmaker's Diamond

Topkapi Palace is open daily except on Tuesdays. One should spend at least a half-day to get a good understanding of its history and architecture and to view the imperial treasury. Konyali Restaurant, located in the palace, offers excellent traditional Turkish food and a panoramic view of the Bosphorus.

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