

Life in COLOUR

Spice up a Turkey break with a foodie focus

@Katie_McGonagle

“Slice it through the middle and whack each half with a wooden spoon,” says one local woman, as we tuck into lunch.

“Too messy. It’ll look like you’ve murdered someone in your kitchen,” says another, when I tell her this advice. “Just dip each segment in water and pluck out the seeds one by one.”

I had no idea pomegranates could be such a hot topic for debate, but being in Turkey at the height of the season, when these ruby-red fruits reach optimum ripeness and find their way into just about every dish, it seems everyone has an opinion. Just as the British weather occupies more than its fair share of conversation for us, Turks love talking about food – how to grow it, how to cook it and, best of all, how to eat it.

That’s probably because food is a cornerstone of Turkish culture and a talking point at every turn. Dining on endless streams of mezze is as much a social activity

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Head to the Asian side of Istanbul to find tradesmen’s restaurants serving hearty portions

as a meal, and with snacks sold on every street corner and markets teeming with fresh fruit and veg, any holiday to Turkey could be said to have a foodie focus.

There are, however, some trips that take it further, sampling unusual local dishes or getting would-be cooks hands-on with the raw ingredients, so steer your gourmet-loving clients toward the tastiest holidays.

► DINE LIKE A LOCAL

It’s a perennial question asked by just about every tourist at some point: where do the locals

eat? So keen are we to escape overpriced, tasteless tourist fare and follow the advice of those in the know that there are entire guidebooks and websites devoted to getting local tips on where to eat.

According to Anatolian Sky Holidays managing director Akin Koc, one of the best ways to get a proper, authentic meal in Istanbul is to skip the tourist traps and hop on a ferry across the Bosphorus to the Asian side. That’s where to find ‘lokanta’, or tradesmen’s restaurants, which serve hearty portions at a fraction of the price in Sultanahmet.

But if clients want that kind of insider advice at every meal, consider recommending an escorted tour, where they’ll have a local tour leader who can take them straight to all the best spots. Intrepid Travel has a 10-day Real Food Adventure to Turkey (from £985), which is all about getting to the heart



ABOVE: A meal in Cappadocia



Enjoy lunch in local homes, sampling rustic dishes such as tarhana soup, potato borek, aubergines and olives

on an unmistakably authentic meal of pancake-like gozleme and yoghurt drink ayran in Selcuk.

DINE WITH THE LOCALS

Sharing a meal is always a sociable activity, but especially so in Turkey, where small, mix-and-match mezze are designed to encourage interaction with fellow diners. So what could offer more insight into Turkish cuisine than sharing a meal with a local family?

Istanbul has an abundance of tours offering just that, mostly following

the formula of enjoying dinner at a home with a family - usually with a guide to translate - followed by a short sightseeing stroll past the sights of Sultanahmet, stopping for Turkish tea, a game of backgammon or to try a shisha pipe. Attraction World has one such tour priced at £32.

There are alternatives outside Istanbul, often including a market visit instead of sightseeing, as in the case of Viator's private Cappadocia food and culture tour. This four-hour tour combines a trip to buy ingredients at the market in Ayvali village and a stop at a Turkish coffee house, followed by a hands-on lesson under the watchful eye of a local cook, learning to make bulgur soup, filled 'borek' (pastries) and vine-leaf rolls, and ending at a local winery to sample a few Cappadocian wines (from £66.41).

It might seem hard to imagine how this home dining concept could be translated on a group tour, since its success depends on creating an intimate setting and a chance to chat

one-on-one with a family. Yet Trafalgar has managed to roll it into its Secrets of Turkey including the Turquoise Coast tour, as one of the signature Be My Guest dining experiences. Passengers arrive at the tiny village of Demircidere - home to a population of less than 200 - for a stroll through the streets accompanied by women in traditional dress, before splitting off into smaller groups to enjoy lunch in local homes, sampling rustic dishes such as tarhana soup, potato borek, stuffed aubergines and olives.

DINE WITH A DIFFERENCE

Where you eat is as important as what you eat, and Turkey has no shortage of creative dining experiences which set the tone for a truly memorable meal.

Anatolian Sky managing director Akin Koc ranks the riverside restaurant of Halil'in Yeri (which means Halil's Place) in Akyaka as one of his favourites in the whole of Turkey, which is high praise indeed.

Set right on the banks of the Azmak

RIGHT: Akyaka



River in the sleepy, slow-paced resort of Akyaka - a favourite holiday spot for Turks but only just emerging on Brits' radar - this fish and seafood restaurant serves simple yet elegant fare, perfectly complemented by its leafy, secluded setting.

That gentle pace is hard to

recreate in the midst of a city break, but a relaxing dinner cruise along the Bosphorus might be just what clients need to offset a day of busy sightseeing. Availability can be limited so it's best to pre-book; TravelCube has four-hour cruises with dinner, unlimited local drinks, and a chance to see



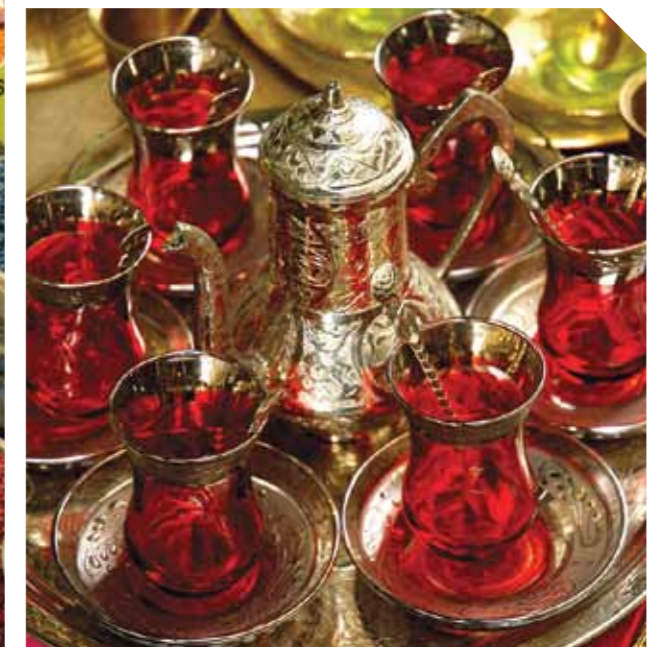
ASK AN EXPERT



Jane Baxter
Gerçeksoz, Turkey product manager, Ilios Travel:

"Turkish people love breakfast. On high days and holidays the family come together not for lunch or dinner but for a rich breakfast that can last many hours. A simple breakfast would be crusty bread, sesame or sunflower seed-covered bread rings ('simit'), creamy white cheeses, salty hard cheeses and crumbly cheeses with walnuts, plus eggs served with spicy beef sausage 'sucuk', olives, tomatoes and cucumber, jams and honeys, and rich, buttery 'acma' and 'pogaça', all enjoyed with Turkish tea. Each region has its own specialities served alongside the staples. In the northern Black Sea area, a favourite is 'mihlama' - a fondue-like blend of local cheeses, with fresh, crusty corn bread to scoop up the mixture. In the Aegean area, the 'village breakfast' includes 'menemen', a dish of scrambled egg with onion, tomato, peppers and spices."

LEFT: Spice market
BELOW: Turkish tea



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ABOVE: Whirling Dervishes

removed from the action for those who like to soak up the city vibe, suggest getting out on foot for a Night Tasting Trail around Istanbul. Not only will a local guide take them straight to the best street-food stalls, but they'll also get a unique window on Istanbul's late-night culture, all while chowing down on flaky borek, deep-fried meatballs and mussels stuffed with rice. Do Something Different has a three-and-a-half-hour night tour starting at £59.

Insight Vacations' Wonders of Turkey tour also includes plenty of sightseeing around Istanbul and a cruise along the Bosphorus, but saves its most unusual dining experience for Cappadocia. The itinerary includes a cultural night at a 13th-century Seljuk caravanserai, with dinner at the Alfina Cave Hotel and a performance by Turkey's iconic Whirling Dervishes. **TW**

→ the Bosphorus Bridge, Ciragan Palace and Beylerbeyi Palace by moonlight (from £52 with hotel pick-up).

If that sounds a bit too

News from Turkey

Red Sea Holidays has released its first Greece & Turkey brochure, expanding into eight Turkish resorts, including Marmaris, Icmeler, Gocek, Belek, Side and Lara Beach, all via Dalaman or Antalya. redseaholidays.co.uk

Independent hotel group Cloud.7 is set to unveil its first property in Istanbul on February 1, with a further 15 hotels planned across eastern Europe and the Middle East. The tech-focused brand will offer free Wi-Fi, online check-in and out, and 24-hour room service via social media. cloud7hotels.com



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