



1. IST Palace; 2. Bosphorus Grill
Cirağan Palace Kempinski;
3. One Bedroom Bosphorus View
Palace Suite



Turkey

A Palatial Stay

There are luxury hotels and then there is Çırağan Palace Kempinski in Istanbul, Turkey, that takes the concept many notches higher. After all, when you combine history with intriguing shades of royalty and opulence with modernity, it's an enticing mix.

Pallavi Pasricha

Staying at this opulent hotel is like stepping back in time – the Çırağan Palace Kempinski was a sprawling palace on the banks of the Bosphorus that served as the residence of the Ottoman sultans. Even though I arrived way after the check-in time, they had not forgotten about me – the concierge and the porter who took my bag, knew my name and greeted me personally. This is what differentiates a good hotel from an excellent one was my immediate thought. The personal

touch adds a different level of warmth and makes you feel at home in a new place. A smooth check-in and a quick welcome drink later I was whisked through a sleek corridor to my room called the Grand Deluxe Bosphorus View, which overlooked the blue ribbon of water that defines this city. I could not have received a better introduction to Istanbul.

Celebrity touch

Before heading to my room I glanced on the wall in the lobby that gave me a

glimpse of the celebrities, royalty and dignitaries who had stayed here. Framed on the wall, there were at least 100 photos of famous actors, musicians, and political figures from across the world, who had made this extravagant hotel their home for a while. Among them were John F Kennedy Jr, Robert De Niro, Sophia Loren, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and Kofi Annan.

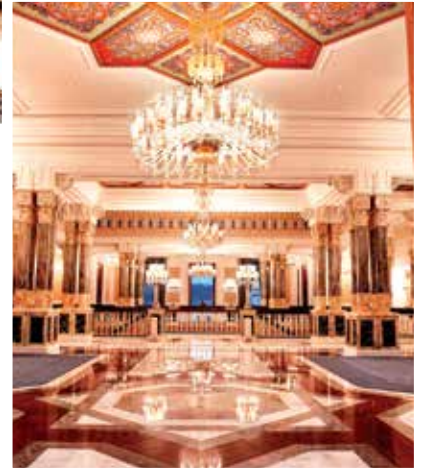
Grand views and the room

The moment I stepped into my sprawling room, I knew that my stay in the Turkish capital city was going to be memorable. Located on the European side, the hotel overlooks the Bosphorus Bridge and has sweeping views of the Asian side. It is an experience one cannot get anywhere else in the world except Istanbul, a city spanning two continents.

The room had all the trappings of a lavish and luxurious space – think sink in beds with soft mattress, a pillow menu, flat screen TV, a writing desk and table full of goodies as the signature welcome. The goodies included *baklava*, Turkish delight, fruits, chocolates, dry fruit and a bottle of red wine. I relaxed with a glass of wine for some time before heading out of my room to see what this place, or rather palace, was all about.

The palace & Sultan Suite

My eye quickly took in the regal Ottoman and Baroque-style interiors and lavish trappings in the palace wing of the hotel. In a magnificent lobby, an



The Sultan's Suite is one of the largest suites in the globe with a living room, two bedrooms, a private Turkish hammam and views of the Bosphorus

ornately-crafted, grand chandelier took my breath away.

I walked through the imperial palace wing and admired the regal palace rooms with ornately decorated walls, vaulted ceilings and elegant antiques. There are 11 suites in the historical palace, but the crown jewel of this property is the Sultan Suite, which is one of the most expensive hotel suites not just in Turkey, but in the world, costing a whopping EUR 34,000 for a night's stay. And what you get for this price is luxury to spoil you silly. It is one of the largest suites in the globe – a living room, two bedrooms, a private Turkish *hammam* with gold plated and crystal faucets, and views of the Bosphorus from every corner. The fittings, furniture and paintings whisper just one word: royal grandeur. Among the famous people who've made this suite their home are Oprah Winfrey and Madonna.

History of the palace wing

A sleek corridor, which doubled up as a gallery with original marble columns, gave detailed information on this place and its chequered history.

Originally constructed in the 17th century as a summer mansion for Ibrahim Pasha of Nevşehir and his wife Fatma Sultan, it is one of the oldest buildings on this side of the Bosphorus. A century later Sultan Mahmut II built a palace to replace the mansion, but this too was demolished by Sultan Abdülmecid who spent a mind boggling

2.5 million gold coins to build an even more lavish, new palace. Nothing was spared to take opulence to another level, whether it was rare marble, mother of pearl or ornamented doors. It was here that the Turkish Parliament was held in 1909. But a year later a fire destroyed quite a bit of the palace. The wars that swept Europe further ravaged it and the building finally opened its doors to the public in 1991 after extensive renovation to restore it to its original heritage. Today it has 313 rooms.

Dining options

No luxury experience is complete without tasting the finest food and the hotel does not disappoint on this count, because food is something it takes very seriously. Whether it is the breakfast with its lavish spread of Turkish cheese or the Turkish cuisine that is reputed to be the best in the city, all the restaurants here will leave you happily satiated. The hotel has five dining options – Gazebo Lounge, Laledan, Bosphorus Grill, Le Fumoir Bar and the award winning restaurant Tugra, which is one of the best fine dining Turkish restaurants in the city.

Dine like royalty

If you want to eat and drink like royalty, go for the Sultans' Dinner, which is a sit-down formal meal. From the ornate silver coffee set with the monogram of one of the sultans of Ottoman Empire to the suite where one dines, the royal touch here is taken

to new heights and the dishes are so delicious that you wonder if they are made with recipes handed down by the Ottomans themselves.

The banquet is rich: you start with a dish called *manzana* which is grilled eggplant, red pepper, and spring onion served with garlic oil. This is followed by a soup, charcoal grilled swordfish, chicken topkapi and the finale is *zerde*, with of course much more in between – a legacy. Each dish has a story to it, ask the server and he will gladly explain it to you.

Turkish hammam

Even as you revel in the luxury, don't forget to go for an authentic Turkish *hammam* bath at the spa. What I particularly loved about this hotel was the cleverly designed infinity pool. I swam thinking I was in the Bosphorus and this view is imprinted in my mind forever.

Sitting on the balcony of my room, enjoying spectacular views of the Bosphorus at sunset, I wondered if anything during my tryst with Turkey could top this experience. ■

Hotel details

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