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Orhan Pamuk's Istanbul

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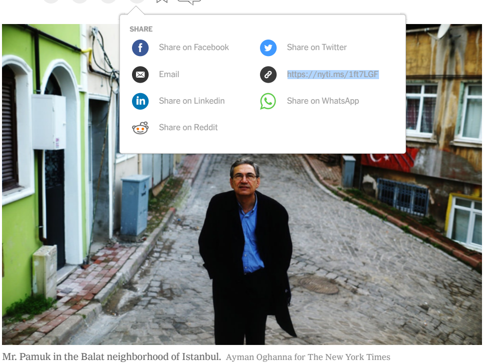


Mr. Pamuk in the Balat neighborhood of Istanbul. Ayman Oghanna for The New York Times

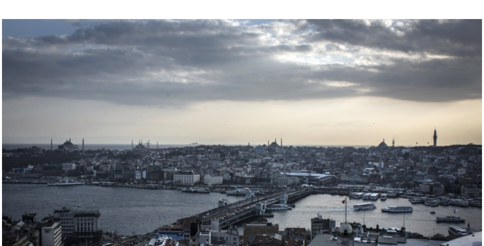
By Joshua Hammer

Jan. 31, 2014

On a windswept afternoon in mid-December, the writer Orhan Pamuk stood in a leafy square around the corner from Istanbul University, absorbed in a 40-year-old memory. He walked past parked motorcycles, sturdy oaks and a stone fountain, browsing through secondhand books in front of cluttered shops occupying the bottom floors of a quadrangle of pale yellow buildings. Sahaflar Carsisi, Istanbul's used-book bazaar, has been a magnet for literary types since the Byzantine era.

In the early 1970s, Mr. Pamuk, then an architecture student and aspiring painter with a love for Western literature, would drive from his home across the Golden Horn to shop for Turkish translations of Thomas Mann, André Gide and other European authors. "My father was nice in giving me money, and I would come here on Saturday mornings in his car and fill the trunk with books," the Nobel Laureate remembered, standing beside a bust of Ybrahim Muteferrika, who printed one of the first books in Turkey — an Arabic-Turkish language dictionary — in 1732.

"Nobody else would be here on Saturdays. I'd be haggling, talking, chatting. I would know every clerk, but it's all changed now," he said, referring to the somewhat touristy atmosphere and the disappearance of characters he'd come to know, such as a manuscript seller who doubled as a Sufi preacher. These days, he said, "I come only once a year."



Mr. Pamuk was born in Istanbul in 1952 and has lived in the city for most of his life. Monique Jaques for The New York Times

Mr. Pamuk was born about three and a half miles from the market, in the prosperous Nisantasi neighborhood in 1952, the son of a businessman who frittered away much of his fortune through a series of bad investments. Mr. Pamuk grew up surrounded by relatives and servants, but quarrels between his mother and father, and the ever-present sense of a family unraveling, cast his youth into uncertainty and periodic sadness.

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For most of the six decades since, Mr. Pamuk has lived in Istanbul, both in Nisantasi and nearby Cihangir, alongside the Bosporus. His work is as grounded in the city as Dickens's was in London and Naguib Mahfouz's was in Cairo. Novels such as "The Museum of Innocence" and "The Black Book" and the autobiographical "Istanbul: Memories and the City" evoke both a magical city and a melancholy one, reeling from the loss of empire, torn by the clash between secularism and political Islam and seduced by the West. Most of Mr. Pamuk's characters are members of the secular elite, whose love affairs, feuds and obsessions play out in the cafes and bedrooms of a few neighborhoods.

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"I did my first foreign travel in 1959, when I went to Geneva for the summer with my father, and I didn't leave Istanbul again until 1982," Mr. Pamuk told me. "I belong to this city."

Leafing through a book at Sahaflar Carsisi, a used-book bazaar in Istanbul. In the early 1970s, Mr. Pamuk would fill the trunk of his father's car with books from the bazaar. Ayman Oghanna for The New York Times

Last fall, I emailed Mr. Pamuk and asked him if he would take me on a tour of the neighborhoods that shaped his upbringing and his development as a writer. After many visits, I wanted to get beyond the tourist sights and observe the city as he sees it — a place of epic history and deep personal associations. Mr. Pamuk readily agreed, and two months later I met him at his apartment in the affluent Cihangir quarter, overlooking the Cihangir Mosque, a 19th-century monolith flanked by minarets, and, beyond it, the Bosporus, the strait that forms the boundary between Europe and Asia.

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It seemed appropriate that I was visiting Mr. Pamuk during the off-season, given his focus in books like "Snow" and "Istanbul" on winter, grayness and melancholy. The air was crisp, the light was muted, and although the sun occasionally burst through the clouds, the city seemed largely drained of color. "I have always preferred the winter to the summer in Istanbul," Mr. Pamuk wrote in "Istanbul." "I love the early evenings when autumn is slipping into winter, when the leafless trees are trembling in the north wind, and people in black coats and jackets are rushing home through the darkening streets." From the balcony of his apartment, he looked approvingly at the sun shining weakly through the cloud cover and pronounced it an optimal day for a walk. "If this was a hugely sunny day I would be upset," he said. "I like the black and white city as I wrote in 'Istanbul.' "

I had caught up with him during the last stages of polishing his new novel, "A Strangeness in My Mind," to be published in English in 2015, chronicling the life of an Istanbul street vendor from the 1970s to the present. He told me that he was grateful for a break. "I am an obsessive about my work, but I love it," he said. He put on a trench coat and pulled a black baseball cap over his brow, a halfhearted effort to render himself a little less recognizable.

A cafe in the affluent Cihangir quarter, where Mr. Pamuk has an apartment. Ayman Oghanna for The New York Times

In 2005, Mr. Pamuk responded to an interviewer's question about a crackdown on freedom of expression in Turkey by asserting that "a million Armenians and 30,000 Kurds were killed in this country and I'm the only one who dares to talk about it." The offhand remark, published in a Swiss newspaper, resulted in death threats, vilification in the Turkish press and charges by an Istanbul public prosecutor of the "public denigration of Turkish identity." Mr. Pamuk was forced to flee the country for nearly a year — his longest time out of Turkey. The charges were abandoned in January 2006 amid an international outcry, and the threats have subsided. Though Mr. Pamuk sometimes travels with bodyguards, especially during his nocturnal rambles, he now feels relatively safe.

On this cloudy afternoon we followed a zigzag route that roughly paralleled the Bosporus and took us through the heart of Cihangir, once a predominantly Greek neighborhood. In the 1960s, when Mr. Pamuk was a student at the elite Robert College prep school farther up the Bosporus, rising nationalistic fervor over a looming conflict in Cyprus came to a climax in the government's eviction of the neighborhood's Greek population. Deprived of its commercial class, Cihangir became the city's red-light district.

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"I wrote an early novel here in the 1970s, in my grandfather's apartment," Mr. Pamuk said. "Every night, I used to wake up to women and their bodyguards — their macho protectors — and their clients, bargaining, throwing belts out the window."

A woman and young girl pass a hamam, or bath house, in Cihangir. Ayman Oghanna for The New York Times

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Cihangir is now a trendy neighborhood of artists and writers, elegant cafes, antiquarian shops and sky-high rents.

One engine of Cihangir's revitalization is Mr. Pamuk's own creation: the Museum of Innocence, which opened in 2012 in a burgundy building on a steep road leading down to the curving Golden Horn, which connects the Bosporus to the Sea of Marmara. The museum is a meticulously rendered time capsule of 1970s Istanbul, and a tribute to the power of obsession. It was inspired by Mr. Pamuk's 2008 novel "The Museum of Innocence," about an affluent Istanbul businessman, Kemal Basmaci, who falls in love with a poor shopgirl, Fusun, and becomes so consumed that he assembles a collection of every trace of contact with her.

Mr. Pamuk found the building himself, designed the exhibits and assembled his character's fictional collection from flea markets and his own family heirlooms. Glass cases on the walls in darkened rooms are arranged chapter by chapter, filled with these supposed tokens of his character's mostly unrequited love: crystal bottles of cologne, porcelain dogs, Istanbul postcards and 4,213 of Fusun's cigarette butts, each one encased behind its own tiny window. "I didn't publish a novel for years, but I have excuses," Mr. Pamuk told me. "I did a museum in between."

A vendor sells roasted chestnuts in the Karakoy area. Mr. Pamuk's memories of the area include getting his first bike there. Ayman Oghanna for The New York Times

Karakoy Square, farther down the hill, is a waterfront plaza radiating outward into avenues lined with modern and Ottoman-era office buildings, food bazaars and appliance shops. Street vendors sell pomegranate juice and simit, the wheel-like bread otherwise known as a Turkish bagel.

Tucked off one steep avenue is an alley of government-sanctioned brothels guarded by the police. The Karakoy area conjures vivid memories for Mr. Pamuk of his childhood. He pointed out a row of bicycle shops, where his father bought him his first two-wheeler. A bit farther on is a passageway leading to the Tunel, one of the world's oldest subterranean transit lines. The two-stop subway, built by French engineers, began in 1875 and still links Karakoy Square with the embassy district in the central Beyoglu district. In its early incarnation the train consisted of a steam engine that pulled two wooden cars, with separate compartments for men and women. "The empire fell apart, and there was no other subway line in Turkey for 120 more years," said Mr. Pamuk, who loved riding the trains with his parents as a child.

We stopped for lunch in the shadow of the Galata Bridge, a double-decker concrete-and-steel span, opened in 1994, with walkways, three lanes of traffic in each direction and tram tracks. Plastic tables and chairs stood haphazardly on a muddy patch near the water, flanked by portable grills selling fish fillets on baguettes, garnished with paprika, chile powder and chopped vegetables. A stray dog, his ear tagged as proof of his government-issued rabies shot, lay in the dirt. "He's a local monument," said Mr. Pamuk, who was bitten by a street dog during an evening walk 13 years ago and had to undergo a painful series of rabies shots.

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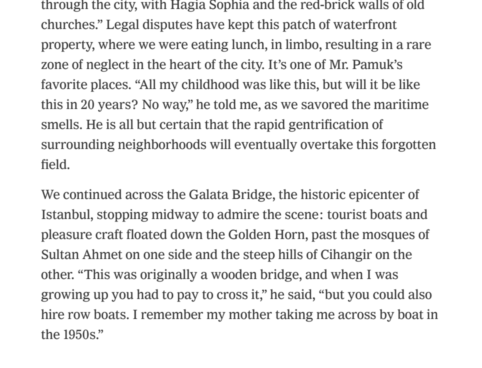
A casual lunch area, one of Mr. Pamuk's favorite places, in Karakoy. Ayman Oghanna for The New York Times

Across the inlet, in stunning contrast to the scruffy surroundings, rose the silver dome of Hagia Sophia, wreathed in limestone and sandstone minarets. Built as a Greek Orthodox basilica and opened in A.D. 537 and converted into a mosque after the 1453 Islamic conquest of Constantinople, it was secularized by Kemal Ataturk, modern Turkey's founder, and turned into a museum in 1935.

"I had little interest in Byzantium as a child," Mr. Pamuk wrote in "Istanbul." "I associated the word with spooky, bearded, black-robed Greek Orthodox priests, with the aqueducts that still ran through the city, with Hagia Sophia and the red-brick walls of old churches." Legal disputes have kept this patch of waterfront property, where we were eating lunch, in limbo, resulting in a rare zone of neglect in the heart of the city. It's one of Mr. Pamuk's favorite places. "All my childhood was like this, but will it be like this in 20 years? No way," he told me, as we savored the maritime smells. He is all but certain that the rapid gentrification of surrounding neighborhoods will eventually overtake this forgotten field.

We continued across the Galata Bridge, the historic epicenter of Istanbul, stopping midway to admire the scene: tourist boats and pleasure craft floated down the Golden Horn, past the mosques of Sultan Ahmet on one side and the steep hills of Cihangir on the other. "This was originally a wooden bridge, and when I was growing up you had to pay to cross it," he said, "but you could also hire row boats. I remember my mother taking me across by boat in the 1950s."



A vendor selling simit, the wheel-like bread otherwise known as a Turkish bagel. Ayman Oghanna for The New York Times

Half a mile down the Golden Horn a new bridge has just opened, a sleek white span that partly blocks views of some of Istanbul's grandest mosques. Like Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's aborted plan to raze Gezi Park in Taksim Square and put up a shopping mall in the style of an Ottoman military barracks, the bridge project has divided the city largely along socioeconomic lines: The city's liberal elite has strongly backed the preservation of its Ottoman-era core, while the mostly poorer Islamists have tended to welcome this sweeping away of the past.

A century ago, "all the boats that came from the Sea of Marmara, from the Mediterranean, ended up here," Mr. Pamuk told me. As he relates in "Istanbul," Gustave Flaubert arrived here in October 1850 for a six-month stay, stricken with a case of syphilis picked up in Beirut. He still managed to frequent the city's brothels and wrote about the "cemetery whores" who serviced soldiers by night. Another celebrated visitor of that era, the French writer and politician Alphonse de Lamartine, "described boys on the bridge shouting to the tourists, 'Sir, give me a penny,' " Mr. Pamuk went on. "Tourists would throw the money into the sea, and they would jump from the bridge and dive in and the money would be theirs."

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On the south side of the Golden Horn, we pushed past crowds in the Baharat spice bazaar, and emerged on a busy street in the Eminonu neighborhood. In his childhood, Mr. Pamuk was fascinated by stories about the Ottoman sultans and pashas who ruled from this quarter of Istanbul, the site of rebellions, coups and secret jails where fearsome punishments were meted out. "One place in Eminonu was especially constructed for what was known as the Hook," Mr. Pamuk wrote in "Istanbul." "Wearing nothing but the suit in which he emerged from his mother's womb, the condemned was winched up with pulleys, skewered with a sharp hook, and, as the cord was released, left to drop."

Vefa Bozacisi, one of Mr. Pamuk's favorite places. Founded in 1876, the shop specializes in boza, a fermented wheat drink. Ayman Oghanna for The New York Times

Within these few square blocks, the Ottoman rulers commissioned grandiose palaces and other buildings that proclaimed the durability of their empire. "The whole bureaucracy was here," he said, pointing out the Sirkeci train station, a classic example of European Orientalist architecture, with colored tiles, Moorish-style archways and twin clock towers, which opened in 1890 and served as the final destination of the fabled Orient Express. The age of grandiosity didn't last long. When Vladimir Nabokov alighted here in 1919, he found "a city in ruins," Mr. Pamuk said. "There was no physical destruction, but this place used to get the riches of all the Middle East and the Balkans, and then it all vanished, and it was reduced to poverty."

In "Istanbul," Mr. Pamuk captured the melancholy, or huzun, that infused the metropolis during his boyhood, when it was still suffering a long decline after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. He described "the old Bosporus ferries moored to deserted stations in the middle of winter ... the old booksellers who lurch from one financial crisis to the next and then wait shivering all day for a customer to return."

The autobiography, published in 2001, brought Mr. Pamuk's life story up to his decision to become a writer in 1973 and captured a very different time in the city's history. "The city was poor, it wasn't Europe, and I wanted to be a writer, and I wondered, 'Can I be happy and live in this city and realize my ambition?' These were the dilemmas I was facing," he said. "When I published the younger generation told me, 'Our Istanbul is not that black and white, we are happier here.' They didn't want to know about the melancholy, my kind of dirty history of the city."

Not far away was another symbol of Ottoman hubris: the monumental central post office, opened in 1909, shortly after a military cabal of Young Turks seized power. "Now it's just a local branch," he said with an ironic laugh, sizing up the arched entryway and the cavernous, nearly empty atrium. It has deep associations for Mr. Pamuk. In 1973, at 21, he had just dropped out of architecture school to devote himself to writing. Afflicted by self-doubt and parental skepticism, he decided to test his abilities by entering a short story in a local magazine competition. The tale was a historical romance set in 15th-century Anatolia, the vast hinterland east of Istanbul. His friends frantically typed sections of the story, and Mr. Pamuk raced to this post office and handed the manuscript to a woman behind the counter just hours before the deadline. "The next day I received a note from her, telling me, 'You paid me too little,' " he said, gazing at the main, gazebo-like kiosk beneath the atrium's soaring central dome, where the moment played out. "But she'd understood that I was ambitious, submitting a literary work, and she paid the postage on her own." One month later he learned that he had won the contest. "So I love this place just because of that," he said.

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Beyazit Square, a windswept plaza behind the book bazaar, abuts Istanbul University, formerly the Ottoman Ministry of Defense compound: a sprawling campus of brick-and-stone buildings and newer, slapdash structures behind a monumental entrance gate. The plaza seethed with protests, riots and army killings during the 1960s and 1970s. Mr. Pamuk was enrolled at the journalism school during one of the most turbulent periods, but while his friends were risking their lives facing down soldiers, he spent most days reading at home in Nisantasi. "I was an ambitious, brainy guy, and university seemed like a waste of time to me."

A few steps away we ducked into Vefa Bozacisi, another of his favorite places. Founded in 1876, the shop, a cozy establishment with leather banquettes and antique mirrors, specializes in boza, a fermented wheat drink that originated in southern Russia. Mixed with water and sugar and sprinkled with cinnamon, the creamy, butterscotch-colored concoction is served in glasses that were lined up by the dozens on polished wooden counters. Beside shelves of pomegranate vinegar, a case reverently displayed the shop's most valuable heirloom: a silver boza cup used here in 1927 by Kemal Ataturk.

We entered the grounds of the Fatih Mosque, built on the orders of Fatih Sultan Mehmed, the conqueror of Constantinople, starting in 1463. It was rebuilt in 1771 after an earthquake destroyed it.

In a marble courtyard beside the massive pink sandstone mosque, considered one of the most graceful in the Islamic world, a wall poster caught Mr. Pamuk's eye. It demanded freedom for Salih Mirzabeyoglunu, a radical Islamist and author of incendiary political tracts, who was sentenced to 12 years in prison on a terrorism conviction. Mr. Pamuk — fascinated and disturbed by the rise of political Islam in Turkey and the Middle East — based one of his most memorable characters, the terrorist leader Blue in his novel "Snow," partly upon Mr. Mirzabeyoglunu. Blue is an ambiguous figure: a charismatic intellectual who espouses a violent message, while avoiding direct entanglements in acts of terror. The cases of Mirzabeyoglunu and Blue were similar, Mr. Pamuk said. "Some Islamists kill, but he didn't, but he's been locked up for a very long time."

He seemed to tense up slightly as we left the mosque and wandered into one of Istanbul's hard-core Sunni neighborhoods. "We could be in a different country," he said in a soft voice. Salafist men with long beards and skullcaps sat on benches in tidy plazas; women in black abayas walked with their children down a cobblestone street past a madrassa, an Islamic school.

The sun had begun to set on this wintry afternoon, bathing the Golden Horn in shadow. We stood in the terraced garden of a mosque, gazing over the landmarks of Istanbul — the red roofs of Cihangir, the 11th-century Galata Tower, one of the few surviving traces of Byzantium. We had been walking for more than four hours, across half a dozen neighborhoods, peeling away Istanbul's tourist-friendly facade to expose the complex fabric beneath it.

"That's the beauty of living here," Mr. Pamuk told me. Then we descended along steep cobblestone alleys leading to the Ataturk Bridge, beginning the long journey home.

Correction: Feb. 16, 2014

The cover article on Feb. 2 about Istanbul mistated the century in which the Chankir Mosque was built. It dates from the late 19th century — not from the 16th, which is when the original mosque was built. (It burned down.)

Joshua Hammer is a frequent contributor to Travel. His next book, "Taking Timbuktu," will be published by Simon & Schuster in 2015.

DETAILS

Vefa Bozacisi (Katip Celebi Caddesi 104/1, Sultanahmet; 90-212-519-4922; **vefa.com.tr/english**) is a cafe tucked in the shadow of the Fatih mosque that specializes in boza by the glass. Boza, which is made of millet, semolina, water and sugar, was first brewed in medieval times in Anatolia and southern Russia. The tangy drink contains just a fraction of the alcoholic content of beer. The shop opened in 1876 and was patronized in its heyday by Kemal Ataturk, whose silver chalice is prominently displayed. Available to go are bottles of home-produced lemon sauce, pomegranate sauce and tarkamis vinegar.

The Museum of Innocence (Cukurcuma Caddesi, Dalgic Cikmazi 2, Beyoglu; 90-212-252-9730; **masumiyetmuzesi.org**) occupies a four story, wine-red building in a lively neighborhood of antiques shops and flea markets high above the Bosporus. Featuring 83 display cases crammed with items drawn from Orhan Pamuk's novel "The Museum of Innocence," the museum offers free entry to anyone who brings a copy of the book (the ticket is printed on the last page). For those who come empty-handed, admission is 25 Turkish lira, or about $11.50 at 2.2 lira to the dollar.

A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 2, 2014, Section TR, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Orhan Pamuk's Istanbul. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

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