

For your reading pleasure! – an excellent article on Turkey written by Aldona Charlton and featured in *Global Traveler*, March 2009: 47

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## *Continental Convergence – Istanbul*



The only metropolis in the world straddling two continents, Istanbul defies categorization. Sights, smells, sounds — all converge in glorious cacophony in the bridging of Europe and Asia along the Bosphorus. Still called Constantinople by some and Stamboul by others, Istanbul received its official name with the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal.

A *pasha* (general) in the Turkish army, Kemal resisted the Sultan and the allied forces after World War I in their drive to have Turkey accede to an American or British mandate. He retreated from then-occupied Istanbul and launched a three-year War of Independence. Hailed as Ataturk — father of the Turks — the nickname eventually became his surname. Ataturk is responsible for modern Turkey, carrying out drastic reforms that brought medieval Ottoman society into the 20th century. He abolished polygamy, granted women equal status with men before the law (which included the right to vote), separated government and religion and replaced the Arabic alphabet with the Latin alphabet for written Turkish. Fez and veil were outlawed, and European dress took their place. This marked the beginning of Turkey's westernization. Still in pursuit of full membership in the European Union, Turkey aims to adopt the E.U.'s basic system of national law and regulation (the *acquis communautaire*) by 2014.

Chosen by the E.U. as a European Capital of Culture for 2010, Turkey will have the opportunity to showcase its cultural life and development in the next year. For travelers who have experienced Istanbul, that culture is mesmerizing. For those who haven't,

wonders await. Minarets punctuate the memorable skyline of domes, towers and, increasingly, high-rises, as the Bosphorus echoes the insistent call of the *muezzin*, broadcast on loudspeakers throughout the city five times a day. The call to prayer also broadcasts Istanbul's Muslim heritage — if accepted into the E.U., Turkey will be its first Muslim member.

Bordered by eight countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq and Syria), Turkey's location is of strategic importance in bridging the Muslim world with Europe. A member of NATO since 1952, Turkey is the alliance's vital eastern anchor, controlling the straits leading from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean. In the recent Georgia crisis, Turkey found itself playing the role of mediator. It is also currently engaged in active diplomacy with Syria, the Middle East, Armenia and the Caucasus in efforts to advance regional stability.

Traditionally an agrarian economy — agriculture accounts for 10.5 percent of the gross national product and provides about 26 percent of the nation's jobs — Turkey has surged ahead as a textile and ready-to-wear supplier to the European Union in recent years. It currently ranks second only to China in these exports and counts Germany, England and Italy as its biggest trading partners. Fashion is thriving, and many boutiques in Istanbul feature local designers, competing favorably with international names in the chic designer shopping streets of the Nisantasi. Other significant growth sectors include iron and steel, machine production, mining, automotive and electronics. Turkey's economy grew an average of 6 percent per year from 2002 through 2007 — one of the highest sustained rates of growth in the world. Figures for 2008 are expected to show a growth of 5.5 percent, even with the global economic downturn. As an international commercial center, Istanbul contributes 40 percent of Turkey's budget, 40 percent of Turkey's total industry and 45 percent of the total tax base.

Istanbul's population now exceeds 12 million, with 50 percent under 40 years of age — 51 percent male and 49 percent female. It's no wonder clubs, restaurants and boutiques are evolving weekly. From the ancient cobblestone streets of Sultanahmet to an ever-expanding urban push across the Bosphorus into Uskudar and Kadikoy, Istanbul is forging ahead as Europe's — and, increasingly, Asia's — most exciting city.