

Topkapı means “cannon gate” in Turkish, so make sure you append “*Sarayı*” (palace) when giving directions to your taxi driver in Istanbul, otherwise you might be taken to a neighbourhood altogether unrelated to the object of your visit.

The first stone of Topkapı Palace was laid by Mehmed II, known as Mehmed the Conqueror, in the mid-15th century. (Around the same time, he also built the core market of what would become the Grand Bazaar.) His basic layout—pavilions, wide courtyards, reception rooms, administrative buildings under the control of the grand vizier (the effective head of government), vast kitchens, military quarters, a treasury—was largely preserved over subsequent centuries, albeit periodically expanded. For example, a wing dedicated to housing the Imperial Harem was added in the late 16th century. There, amid ornate Iznik tiles, some 300 concubines lived in tiny, occasionally chilly cubicles. Elsewhere on the wing favorite concubines, wives, princes and the sultan’s mother occupied more sumptuous quarters.

Virtually a city unto itself, the palace was the seat of Ottoman power during an era of conquest and expansion. In watchful silence, the Janissaries (an army of elite soldiers entrusted with guarding the sultan) used to camp on the site itself, day and night—about 30,000 of them, fully armed. However, the threat implied by their eerie presence, combined with intrigues between competing concubines championing their respective royal offspring, must have done little to reassure prospective or incumbent sultans of their tenure. Mehmed III, one of the more paranoid denizens of the harem, had 19 brothers and half-brothers strangled in one night to guarantee his succession to the throne.

The practice of primogeniture would certainly have avoided much tension and bloodshed at court, but the Ottomans preferred instead a more or less permanent, more often than not lethal, open competition for power. Suleiman the Magnificent, perhaps the greatest sultan of all, had his brilliant

elder son, Mustafa, strangled in order to defeat whom he thought to be a potential and enormously popular usurper. Similarly rare was the grand vizier who died a natural death; for example, Pargalı Ibrahim Pasha, a supporter of Mustafa, was likewise executed on Suleiman’s orders. Some say Suleiman did all of this to satisfy his favourite, Roxelane, and indeed it was one of her sons who ended up reigning ingloriously as Selim II (“Selim the Drunk”).

But there is much to remember in Topkapı Palace beyond intrigue and intermittent violence. It also offers a splendid insight into the everyday lives of the privileged who lived there, and of those who aspired to be part of that privilege. Many a royal birth there was not destined for tragedy; girls, in particular, tended to be married off safely, for political ends. And for the little princelings, the *şehzades*—at least so long as their succession was not at issue—no luxury seemed superfluous. To make the long summers bearable for them, large blocks of ice hewn off Caucasian glaciers were wrapped in felt and transported to the palace, for over a thousand miles on sleds, and then buried in deep wells and used to make sorbets and sherbets.

Furthermore, Topkapı Palace remains an architectural marvel. Even from afar down the Bosphorus, the curves of its pavilions and cupolas delight the eye. There is no single monolithic structure here, attempting to impose itself over others; this is no Oriental Schönbrunn or Versailles, but instead a collection of delightful architectural objects whose elegance and understatement belie the ruthlessness they have witnessed. The textile collection has no rivals outside of China and Japan. The treasury makes hearts leap. The kitchens house the greatest known Ming porcelain collection. But perhaps the main attraction is to be able to stand at the centre of what was, until only a little over four centuries ago, the greatest power on Earth—a great empire lingering on the cusp, ready to wane and yield to Western civilisation. Here is splendor of a different kind, consigned to history yet still beguiling to the foreigner who beholds it.

The Beauty of Power

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