

A BRIDGE BETWEEN CONTINENTS

JOURNEYING THROUGH TÜRKİYE'S LARGEST CITY, **RYAN ENSLIN** IS
CAPITIVATED BY ITS DEEP SENSE OF WONDER

The Blue Mosque, resplendent here against a dramatic sky, remains a place of worship and offers intrepid travellers an insight into Istanbul's very soul.

RIGHT Taking in the Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque is a rite of passage for any visitor to Istanbul.

BOTTOM RIGHT The Büyük Mecidiye Mosque, pictured here with the Bosphorus Bridge and reflections of the Bosphorus Strait.

It's just gone 5 am on a Tuesday in Istanbul. Wrapped in my favourite yellow K-Way jacket, a grey knitted beanie and an extra-length scarf that keeps snagging on my unkempt beard, I run through a mental checklist of gear I'll need for a sunrise shoot I'm about to brave the chilly spring morning for.

I pause, and that's when I hear it: The call of a muezzin intones the morning prayer. As the sound weaves between the Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque and The Blue Mosque, I stop to reflect, imagining where this morning's photographic adventure will take me across this vast city. The call now echoing beyond Sultanahmet, I linger a self-indulgent moment longer, my mind alight with the adventures that await.

And then I'm off. I'm in Istanbul with my friend and photography mentor, Martin Dudley, who is leading our group of eight photographers on a week-long photographic discovery across this ancient city. 'There will be a lot of walking,' Martin shares on our first day, 'and some early mornings.'

Listening to Martin reminds me of the 17th-century Ottoman explorer Evliya Çelebi, whom many consider the first travel writer, and who, legend has it, wandered through Istanbul's seven hills with a journal and a thirst for rose-water sherbet. He was sure that the best way to understand a city was on foot. And we're about to put his theory and Martin's planning to the test.

As the current recipient of the Photographic Society of South Africa's Impala Trophy, his second to date, Martin is a respected tog in photographic circles. His list of local and international awards is as long as the Bosphorus Strait. He has meticulously planned this tour, which I know because we have been discussing it since mid-2024. In his planning, Martin has identified iconic locations, mapped out the best vantage points for photographing each and determined which mornings require very early starts. His objective is to ensure we capture the essence of Istanbul on his tour.

Let me share some of the highlights of this trip around Istanbul and insights into how to photograph a city that has wooed travellers for centuries, should you find yourself walking in the footsteps of the Ottomans.



THE BLUE MOSQUE

Rising gracefully above Istanbul's skyline, The Blue Mosque, officially the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, is one of the city's most iconic landmarks. Completed in 1616, it remains a functioning place of worship and a window into Istanbul's living history.

'The Blue Mosque, bathed in golden light and set against a dramatic sky, is visually irresistible,' Martin tells me as we stand on a nearby rooftop. 'I love how the scene plays with contrasts – between past and present, architectural order and natural chaos in the clouds.'

'The magic happens at sunset and into the blue hour, as the last light of the day paints the sky with soft pastels and the architectural splendour of the mosque comes to life.' A sturdy tripod is essential for low-light conditions, and Martin suggests using exposure bracketing to retain detail in both shadows and highlights.

INSIDE THE HAGIA SOPHIA GRAND MOSQUE

Few landmarks define Istanbul quite like the Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque, reflecting over 1 500 years of the city's shifting soul. It was built in 537 AD as a Byzantine cathedral, later an Ottoman mosque, then a museum, and is now once again a mosque. The layered stories of empires are in its domes and shadows. Inside, Christian mosaics and Islamic calligraphy coexist beneath a flood of golden light.

Photographing this space presents a quiet challenge – its sheer scale. Wandering through the upper gallery, where the floor dips in places due to centuries of footsteps, it becomes clear that no single lens could capture the magnitude of the scene.

'To capture that awe,' Martin explains, 'shoot a vertical panorama to reveal the dome's grandeur

and symmetry.' Overlapping each shot by 30–40% is key, he adds, while exposure bracketing helps balance the contrast between bright windows and deep interior shadows. A well-composed image here, he reminds us, isn't just technical. Done right, it lets the viewer step into this historic masterpiece with you.

SUNRISE AT THE BÜYÜK MECIDIYE MOSQUE

'If you want to capture the timeless grace of Istanbul in a single frame, the Büyük Mecidiye Mosque should be on your shot list,' Martin shares with me as we venture across Istanbul on one of those early morning shoots.

Perched at the edge of the Bosphorus Strait in the lively neighbourhood of Ortaköy, the Büyük



BELOW A young lady basks in the warmth of the late afternoon light, reading her Qur'an.

BOTTOM RIGHT A shopkeeper enjoys a Turkish cigarette and the warmth of the early morning sun.



Mecidiye Mosque is a jewel of 19th-century Ottoman Baroque architecture. Completed in 1856, it offers one of the most picturesque scenes in Istanbul, framed by the water and the Bosphorus Bridge rising just behind it.

‘The mosque’s warm golden glow contrasts beautifully against the cool blue of the morning sky during the blue hour,’ Martin shares with the group, ‘while the reflections in the water add symmetry and tranquillity, enhancing the overall visual balance of your frame.’

I ask him more about capturing this scene during the blue hour. Martin’s creative genius comes to the fore as he shares one further insight: ‘The sky retains a deep, rich blue at this time, offering a cleaner contrast between architectural lighting and the natural sky. Including foreground interests like chains and bollards add depth and texture to your frame.’ The results are astonishing.

THE LEGEND OF MAIDEN’S TOWER

Further down the Bosphorus, just off the coast of Üsküdar, is one of Istanbul’s most celebrated silhouettes, the Maiden’s Tower. With roots dating back to antiquity, this structure has served as everything from a lighthouse to a watchtower, a customs station and a café.

Steeped in legends of doomed princesses, secret lovers and serpents, at sunset, it becomes a photographer’s dream, seemingly floating between continents and centuries.

‘Photographing the tower at sunset is pure storytelling,’ says Martin as we set up along the shore. He guides us through using a slow shutter technique to achieve a silky water effect, adding mood and depth to the frame.

‘Tripods are essential,’ he adds, ‘along with a remote shutter or your camera’s timer.’ As we compose our shots, Martin offers a post-processing tip for later: Preserve the warmth in the highlights while boosting cool tones in the shadows to enhance the tower’s mystical allure.

THE PEOPLE OF ISTANBUL

While exploring Istanbul with Martin and my new photographer friends, I quickly realise that this trip is about more than refining my technical skills. It’s about learning to see deeper. I find myself captivated by the people we encounter along the way: the aged woman who emerges from an old house to feed the city’s cats, the young woman reading her Qur’an in the late afternoon light, and the elderly man smoking a Turkish cigarette outside his shop, who asks – in broken English – to see what I have captured. The city pulses with stories, and I feel something shift in how I approach photography. Slower, more curious, more open.



Capturing Maiden’s Tower at sunset is pure storytelling, a tale that seemingly floats between continents and centuries.



RIGHT An elderly lady leaves her home adjacent to the Crimean Memorial Church in Istanbul's Galata District.

BELOW The author, who is wrapped warmly in his yellow jacket, is on the streets of Istanbul.

Martin takes time to help us hone our street photography skills, encouraging us to slow down, observe and connect – reminding us that the real story of Istanbul lives not only in its landmarks but also in the quiet gestures and fleeting glances of those who call it home.

This week in Istanbul has taught me many things, but two lessons linger. The long walks have been my way into the city's soul – each step deepening my understanding and, in turn, my photographs. And despite the struggle of pre-dawn starts, the soft light of these early hours has gifted me photographs that still speak to something deep within me.

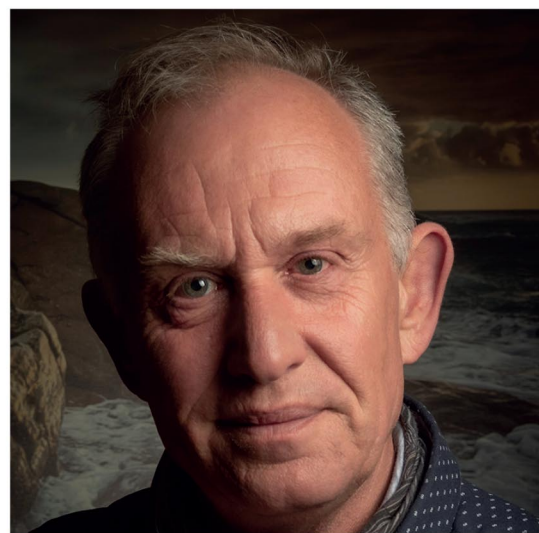
Perhaps Evliya Çelebi was right after all: the best way to understand Istanbul is to walk through it, compelled by wonder. And at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, wonder abounds. **G**



Trip Planner

If you're curious about walking a photographic path of your own through Istanbul, Martin's next tour is scheduled for 21–28 September 2025, with further tours planned for April 2026. Groups are limited to eight photographers to ensure personalised attention. The seven-day tour, which covers more than 20 unique locations, is priced at R45 000 pps and excludes flights and dinners.

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