

Turkey: Country and Culture

Introduction

Turkey is one of only six countries in the world with land on multiple continents. Most of the country is part of the Anatolian Peninsula in Asia, also called Asia Minor. A small region, called Eastern Thrace, lies within Europe. Turkey's land area (300,948 square miles) is greater than any European country, and it borders eight countries and six seas. Situated as a gateway between Asia and Europe, Turkey's history and culture tell a story of diverse influences.

Geography and Climate

Turkey is a mountainous peninsula with most of its land above 1,500 feet in elevation. Many of Turkey's mountain crests exceed 7,500 feet. Most of the lower area is coastal lowland. Turkey is bordered by water on three sides: the Mediterranean Sea to the south, the Aegean Sea to the west, and the Black Sea to the north. The country's two main regions, Anatolia in Asia and Eastern Thrace in Europe, are separated by narrow stretches of water known as the Turkish Straits.

The climate of Turkey is varied and influenced by the mountains and coasts. In general, its higher elevation makes it much colder than other Mediterranean climates. The large region of Anatolia has a range of climates—its central areas have hot summers and cold, snowy winters, while its southern regions are more typically Mediterranean with mild winters and warm, dry summers. The coasts along the Black Sea and Turkish Straits have a temperate, oceanic climate, with rain throughout the year and cool, foggy summers.

History

Anatolia has been settled since the Stone Age, or Neolithic Period, making it one of the oldest permanently settled regions in the world. The people living in Anatolia during the Neolithic Period, more than 4,000 years ago, spoke languages believed to be the origin of more than 400 languages spoken around the world today, including English, Spanish, French, Hindi, and Urdu.

Turkey was colonized by the Greeks beginning in 1200 BC. Greek settlers founded many important cities, including Byzantium, which was later re-named Constantinople by the emperor Constantine when he made it the capital of the Roman Empire in 324 BC. Today, Constantinople is called Istanbul, and it is the most populous and influential city in Turkey.

Turkish land changed hands many times: Persians, Greeks, Romans, and Turks all fought for control of the region, leaving influences in the language, customs, and culture among the people today. Until the 11th century, Turks were concentrated mostly in Siberia, and protection from them was one of the reasons for the construction of Great Wall of China.

In the 11th century, a group of Turks migrated to the Anatolian region, and the Turkish language and Muslim religion became dominant. Once in control of Constantinople, Turks established the Ottoman Empire, which grew in power and size from the 14th century through the 16th century. At the height of its growth, the Ottoman Empire extended into Eastern Europe and across North Africa. Ultimately so expansive that it lacked stability, the Ottoman Empire began to lose control of its territory by the 17th century. After nearly two centuries of war, the Ottoman Empire was formally dissolved in 1908, and the modern Republic of Turkey was established in 1923.



Flag of Turkey



The Celsus Library at Ephesus by [TravelingOtter](#) (CC BY 2.0)

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People and Culture

The term “Turk” refers to both the citizens of the Republic of Turkey and the ethnic group that makes up 70–75% of the country’s population. Kurds are another ethnic group that makes up a significant minority (18%). Some eastern Anatolian provinces are predominantly Kurdish, while Istanbul is home to most other minority ethnic groups, including Greeks, Armenians, and Jews.

Turkey has been a secular country since 1928, when religious conflict prompted a constitutional amendment to remove Islam as the official state religion. Even today some elements of Islam, including wearing traditional headscarves for women or fez hats and turbans for men, are outlawed in public places. However, the country’s population is 90% Muslim, with smaller populations of Jews and Christians.

Turkey’s major cities, including Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, have all the modern amenities of other large cities in Europe and Asia, including universities and cultural institutions like museums and theaters. At the same time, the Byzantine monuments, Ottoman mosques, and Roman aqueducts in these cities are constant reminders of Turkey’s rich history. City dwellers now mostly wear Western, rather than traditional Turkish, clothing, but other Turkish traditions remain alive, including the open-air markets that date back thousands of years.

Turkey’s 50,000 rural villages offer a glimpse of traditional culture that is relatively unchanged. Turkish village houses are typically brick or stone. In some villages, multiple families join houses to form compounds, with multiple living areas, stables, and barns for livestock. Some Turkish village houses are only one room for a single family and their livestock. In the typical house, the main room serves as kitchen, living room, and bedroom for the heads of household. During the daytime, bedding is stacked away, and rugs or mats provide seating areas.

Food

Turkish cuisine reflects the varied influences from Greece, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Even within Turkey, there are many regional differences. A typical meal begins with a soup, then a bean or legume dish, sometimes including meat and rice or bulgur pilaf. This would be accompanied by a salad of cucumber and yogurt. Lamb is a common meat in Turkish cuisine, and other common ingredients are bulgur, pomegranate, eggplant, and nuts.

One staple of the Turkish diet is yogurt, which accompanies nearly every kind of meat or vegetable dish. Ayran, a popular drink, is made from yogurt. In fact, the English word for yogurt comes from the Turkish word *yoğurt*.

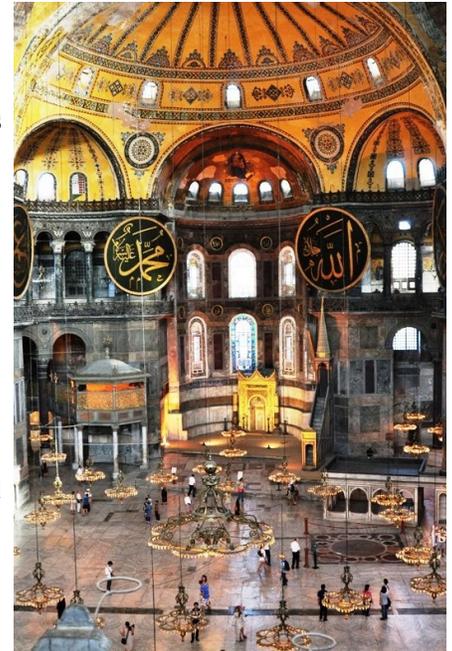
Fun Facts

- Turkey’s flag is rich with symbolism and resembles the banner of the Ottoman Empire. The star and crescent are traditional symbols of Islam but were also used throughout the history of ancient Turkey.
- Two of the “Seven Wonders of the Ancient World” are located in Turkey: the Temple of Artemis and the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus.
- The Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was first a church, then a mosque, and now a museum. Built in 537 AD, it remained the world’s largest cathedral for nearly a thousand years, with a unique dome that changed the history of architecture.

Resources

National Geographic Country Guide for Turkey

<http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/countries/turkey-guide/>



Inside the Hagia Sophia
by Stephen Manuszak (CC BY 3.0)