

Introduction

by Barrie Kerper

Though Nişantaşı (pronounced nish-AHN-tuh-shuh) has been a distinguished neighborhood since its inception, it has never been as hot as it is right now. It's rarely mentioned in guidebooks as there are not many sites of historic interest, although I think the target stones, for which the neighborhood is named, are alone a good reason to check out this part of town. Additionally, it's very modern and hip, with great places to eat and shop, and it offers a nice contrast to Old Istanbul—there's nothing wrong with combining historic sightseeing with retail therapy. I think first-time visitors to Istanbul especially will be surprised to find this very Western-oriented neighborhood in the middle of the city.

I was introduced to Zeynep Kunt by Berrin Torolsan, publisher of the excellent magazine, *Cornucopia: The Magazine for Connoisseurs of Turkey*, published in Istanbul. Zeynep's appreciation for her city, and for the Nişantaşı neighborhood (where the *Cornucopia* offices are located), impressed me and I asked her if she would create a walking tour for my readers.

Nişantaşı: The Symbol of New Istanbul

by Zeynep Kunt

To understand Istanbul one has to make sense of its layers upon layers of history. Recent excavations have shown that the track of civilization on the site goes back 8000 years. Old Istanbul offers magnificent architecture and cultural artifacts that date back a few thousand years. But there is another face of Istanbul: the new city. And one enclave that is emblematic of the new city is Nişantaşı, a neighborhood that perfectly symbolizes the transformations of modern life in Istanbul.

At first sight, Nişantaşı seems to be almost a miniature Champs-Elysees, filled with cafes, restaurants, and chic boutiques. Visitors come here to see beautiful people, to enjoy haute couture stores of fashion designers, and to dine at some of the best cafes and restaurants of Istanbul (and Europe). In the January 2002 issue of *Istanbul Life*, Nişantaşı was described as “the most western face of Istanbul.” For me it is certainly the most chic. The lifestyle of the people here seems to be shaped mainly by high-quality consumption. But like all old towns, Nişantaşı keeps its secrets for the curious, those who are willing to make the effort to discover its own many layers. Residents view living in Nişantaşı as a very particular kind of status symbol. For them, to be a true resident, you have to have etiquette in your genes, you have to have a certain elegance about you, a certain style. People who have been living in Nişantaşı for many years are proud to call themselves “natives” of the neighborhood and some trace their ancestors back to the Ottoman elites.

Nişantaşı's Past

Nişantaşı became a settlement at the time of the construction of Dolmabahçe Palace. The Palace was built towards the end of the Ottoman Empire (1850's), when the Ottomans were losing wars and as a consequence, losing land. Though the 600-year-old Empire was going through hard times, the Ottomans couldn't easily let go of their golden days, and to prove to other nations that the Empire was still a force with which to be reckoned, they embarked on building extravagant, showcase palaces. One of these was Dolmabahçe, built at a time when the Ottomans were weakest (so don't be swayed too much by the riot of ornamentation in the interior, including the Baccarat crystal staircase!). Dolmabahçe was built by the famous Armenian architects Garabet and Nikoğos Balyan (four generations of architects from the Balyan family served six Ottoman sultans over the course of a century), and was designed in the European style, with 285 rooms, 43 saloons, and six balconies. Sultan Abdulmecid moved into the Palace by 1856 and ordered the creation of a new neighbourhood behind it. This he allocated for his ministers, who built mansions with high ceilings and many rooms, with big, beautiful gardens. This is how the quarter of Nişantaşı was established and developed.

Previously, this part of the city was covered with cemeteries and parks with almost no activity. The Ottoman Sultans had used the open fields for shooting and archery activities, and when they were successful marksmen, they built target stones to mark their success and engraved the details on the stones. As you walk the streets of Nişantaşı, you will see some of these target stones that have given Nişantaşı its name (nisan means target; taş means stone). Four of these target stones survive today.

There was a hierarchy among the Palace officials when they moved from Old Istanbul: the ministers and the Sultan's children settled in Nişantaşı, while the second ranking officials lived in Machka, right next to Nişantaşı. The popularity of Nişantaşı increased until the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, but with the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the capital of Turkey moved from Istanbul to Ankara and the government officials were obliged to move as well. They sold their houses for next to nothing and left the region.

The foundation of the Turkish Republic was a joyful time for those who wanted independence, secularism and democracy. However, the transition period was difficult, as there were so many changes, from a new alphabet to codes of dressing, and modernization of all institutions including law. Palaces were turned into museums, and the population of the neighborhoods around these Palaces would go through changes, just as Nişantaşı did.

During the transition period from Empire to Republic, Nişantaşı adopted a strong modernist vision. Old mansions and the old life style were abandoned for the high apartments of modern life. Some of these mansions were burned down. It's possible to see traces of this period in literature: Orhan Pamuk, in his book *İstanbul: Memories and the City*, talks about the melancholy of this period. He writes, "Great as the desire to westernize and modernize may have been, the more desperate wish was probably to be rid of all the bitter memories of the fallen empire...the great desire to westernize amounted mostly to the erasure of the past; the effect on culture was reductive and stunning."

The mansions that were burned down or demolished for the new apartment blocks became the symbol of a new life. Pamuk recalls the old mansions "where Ottoman officials had once entertained foreign emissaries and those that belonged to the nineteenth century Sultan Abdulhamit's daughter" as dilapidated brick shells with gaping windows and broken staircases darkened by bracken and untended fig trees.

When you are walking in the streets of Nişantaşı today, the feeling you get is completely different, with all the ultra modern stores, cafes and restaurants. As the population of Istanbul increased with amazing speed, the profile of many of its neighborhoods changed drastically, and the remaining aristocracy of Nişantaşı from the 1950's merged with the newly rich, whose culture can be described as that of extravagant consumption. But perhaps, when you look closely at some of the old apartments, you will see they reflect the modest yet elegant soul of Nişantaşı.

The Walking Tour

The main arteries of Nişantaşı are Valikonagi, Rumeli and Tesvikiye. Note that, compared to other places in Istanbul, Nişantaşı was built rather late, so it's rare to see a building here dating from before the beginning of 19th century.

There are two good ways to start a great day in Nişantaşı, one cultural and one what I refer to as natural.

For a quiet, relaxed start of the day I would suggest beginning in Machka Park, which is at the west part of Nisantasi. There are two entrances of the park. If you're coming from the direction of

Dolmabahçe, you enter from the south, that is next to the stadium. If you're coming from Taksim, you'll be entering from the north.

Machka Park is the escape for people living on this side of the city. The cafes in the park are more or less the same, but my choice would be Fua Cafe (meaning 'nice taste' in Ottoman). Here you have the option to be seated on the giant cushions in the garden or on the civilized terrace with regular tables. Everywhere you will have the beautiful view of the Bosphorous.

You should opt for the Turkish breakfast with all kinds of cheeses, jam, olives, tomatoes, and many kinds of bread. Traditional Turkish tea is a must at breakfast. Eating is an activity in itself in Turkey, too precious to be hurried. So take this opportunity to enjoy thoroughly enjoy this delicious and varied cuisine. I believe that people who really pay attention to what they're eating are more aware of many more things in life!

After a healthy Aegean-Turkish breakfast and a little relaxation under the trees, you're ready for the tour ahead. Take the west exit out of Machka Park, which is across from the Istanbul Technical University Machka Maden Fakültesi (Machka Street). The University was built as a military barracks towards the end of the 19th century by Sultan Abdulaziz. Behind the University you will find an imitation of an old wooden mansion that is said to date from the Ottoman era. It is the home of Antik Palas, the antique auction house of Rafi Portakal, a distinguished and famous Turkish dealer. You might want to check the website to see if there are any art exhibitions or auctions during the time of your visit (www.antikpalace.com.tr).

Another way to start the day would be to take a tour of Dolmabahçe in Beşiktaş, right on the Bosphorous. For a tour of the Palace it is best to go early in the morning to avoid the tourist hordes later in the day.

There is a small summer palace or villa near Dolmabahçe called İhlamur Kasrı (Linden Palace), which was used by the Sultans as a resting place when they were hunting in this area. It was here that, in 1846, Sultan Abdulmecid received French poet Alphonse de Lamartine. Later, Lamartine wrote that he was surprised by how simple the building was—he wrote that the villa was situated between the fruit gardens and had almost no furniture. In the middle of the villa there was a water fountain and a window that framed the Linden tree. Between 1849 and 1855, Sultan Abdulmecid ordered two more villas built and another fountain as well. The architects were again the Balyan brothers. Today these villas are open to visitors. The beautiful garden of İhlamur Kasrı would be a nice option for a coffee break. The two palaces in one day might be too much, and you might prefer to skip this smaller villa for now; but if you have time later in the day you might want to come back to the beautiful garden for a five o'clock tea or coffee.

Nişantaşı is up the hill from Dolmabahçe Palace. So either walk up the hill from Akaratler, or simply take a five minute cab ride to the center of Nişantaşı, the intersection of Machka Street and Valikonagi Street. (If you're walking through Akaretler, which is a small neighbourhood of Nişantaşı, you will note the sudden change of atmosphere—Akaretler didn't have much to offer other than abandoned old buildings until recently. Now, there is a W Hotel, a trendy meeting place.)

When you are at the intersection of Machka Street and Valikonagi street, you are almost 200 meters away from the Istanbul Technical University. There are a number of old schools in Nişantaşı that date from the end of the 19th century. One of these is Nişantaşı Anadolu Highschool (Nişantaşı Anadolu Lisesi) that you will see on your right. Across from the school, there's a surprise waiting for you: Tayga Toys, the wooden world of toys (Ersoy Apt, No.23). Even if there are no children in your life, you'll find it difficult to resist these toys! My favorite is a balance game with lady bugs on a tree. There are grown up games too, like puzzles. But the owner says that sometimes famous businessman come in and buy toys for their offices, like the construction set with all the mechanical details and little workers. The water-filled colored cubes to teach children colors is meditative for me. They can brighten up your day, inspire you to see colors on a dull rainy day.

When you leave the store, continue walking straight ahead, with the toy store on your left. In this part of Nişantaşı, you are surrounded by old buildings with great character. Don't miss the images of sailing boats on the balcony of the Dogan Apartment, the building you see on your left (No. 27), and then you will see İzmir Palas on the left. Inside the building there is a narrow hallway, and there is an antique automobile inside. Next to İzmir Palas, there is Gallery Nev, one of the oldest and the most famous modern art galleries of Istanbul (www.gallerynev.com.tr). If it is exhibition time and you are into art, your visit will be quite memorable.

From this point on you will see the stores of fashion icons like Armani and Gucci, and the haute couture stores of renowned Turkish fashion designers. If you look across the street, you will see one of them: the store of Hussein Chalayan (Zeki Pasa Apartment No. 12). In the middle of summer, there are discounts of up to 50 percent in these stores. Continue walking, and a few blocks later, on the left side of the street, you will see the Milli Reasurans building, which was built as part of the oldest bank of Turkey, Türkiye İş Bank. The two-floor passage has an art gallery, boutiques, cafes, bars and a cozy book store called Patika, where you can find rare books in foreign languages and a vast variety of magazines (they have the most helpful staff, by the way). You are welcome to enjoy a coffee while waiting for them to track down the books you request.

You might not be hungry by now, but you're about to enter the area of restaurants and cafes. So perhaps you should make note of these places and come back later. Cafe Wien at the entrance of this building is famous for its schnitzel, and at the other end of the passage there is Beymen Brasserie, one of the best cafes in Istanbul. It is also a good people watching spot. But you have many other options for lunch: Italian, world cuisine, traditional Turkish, and of course other cafes of Nişantaşı.

If you fancy pastas, you must try manti. At the corner with the Milli Reasurans building, you will see Atiye Street to the left that takes you to a special manti restaurant: Casita. (Abdi İpekci Atiye Sokak No. 3). Manti is a dish that is made of little pieces of dough with mincemeat inside that tastes like ravioli. Right before you eat it, a special, sizzling red pepper sauce is poured on top. The traditional way to eat manti is with garlic yogurt. If you're not a garlic lover, don't forget to ask for plain yogurt.

Designer Gonul Paksoy's store is also on this tiny street at No. 6, where you will find beautiful hand-made jewelry and fabulous clothing. There is a yoga school right next door which is free on Thursdays at 19:00 hours (7:00 p.m.). If you want to take an exercise break, this might be a good time to do it before dinner. There is another famous Turkish designer's store across the street: Arzu Kaprol, if you fancy buying something haute couture or just want to peek in the window.

From Atiye Street, walk back to the main street, which is Teşvikiye Caddesi. Continue walking north. You will see Bahar Patisserie on the left (No. 59), which opened in the 1950s. In the winter Bahar has extremely delicious marrons glacés, and the pistachio chocolate is also delicious, worth taking home.

If you are looking for something light to eat at a cozy place, continue walking until you see the sign Cerkezo on your left (No. 101 Teşvikiye Caddesi). Founded in 1920, Cerkezo is a salad and sandwich place. It has an exquisite choice of sandwiches, breads and fresh salads. They also offer hot meals such as tortillas and meatballs. Whatever you eat will reflect the quality that has been passed down by generations. They also offer fresh fruit juice. (In the summer they are closed on Sundays.)

If you are looking for a fancier meal but in a café setting, House Café—right across the street—is the right address for you. If it's summertime, you must try the lemonade with mint leaves and pieces of apple. The décor is all white and there is a big chandelier in the center of the ceiling, creating an atmosphere that's at once fancy and casual. There are also tables on the street that offer a chance to be a flâneur, which is a must, if you want to feel like a Nişantaşı local. Except for Sunday, when Nişantaşı streets are less crowded, you can see a lot of people who make it onto the high society pages of local tabloids. In Nişantaşı, if the main activity is shopping, the second favorite activity is people-watching at the cafes.

In Istanbul, you never know what surprise is waiting for you around the corner. Right next to the House Cafe is the Teşvikiye Mosque, built by Sultan Selim III in 1794. It is said that the mosque was one of the hunting stopovers for the sultans, and this is where two of the precious target stones lie, from the years 1791 and 1811. You can see the signature of the sultans on the stones, and a few lines written by the famous poets of the time, Feyzi and Ulvi, describing the occasions.

Another target stone is at the corner with the police station, about 200 meters from the Teşvikiye Mosque, on the other side of the street. At the next corner you will see a newspaper store called Alaaddin. It does not look authentic at all. But for the Nişantaşı locals, it's part of history as the store is being run by the third generation. Like the genie of Alaaddin's lamp, this store has everything you can ask for, everything from toys and medicines to newspapers from around the world. The owner holds a degree in English literature and he's proud to be running the eighty-three-year-old store. He's always happy to tell you the story of his grandfather, who opened the store originally as a tiny newsstand.

You shouldn't be exhausted from shopping or walking by this time, but if you feel that you need some relaxation, you are at the right spot. Diagonally to the left of Alaaddin, you will see the fancy Sofa Hotel, which is only a few years old. The hotel has one of the finest spas in Istanbul (treatments are about \$100). You can meet the European Bartender Champion, Onur Tavlan, in the Sofa's bar. Tavlan won this award for his chestnut cocktail. I would have liked to share the recipe with you, but unfortunately he keeps it as a secret. Also in the Sofa is a branch of the very good Patika bookstore, as well as Gallery Art 8, specializing in modern art.

Right across the street from Sofa Hotel you'll see City's, the fancy and new shopping mall of Nişantaşı. Although the variety of stores are your average American or European stores—La Senza, Nike, Nine West, etc.—the big discounts might be worth your visit. And the cafe It's a Joke is a popular place with its extraordinary decoration. When you enter the cafe it feels like you're passing through a storage area. You go through the kitchen and you can watch the chefs preparing the food. Each sitting area is unique, and Argentine steak is a favorite menu item.

If you go out the back door of City's shopping mall, you will happen onto a little park across the street, full of people selling handmade artistic wares, like clay jewelry or hand-knit sweaters. From there you can walk towards Rumeli Caddesi, make a left, and you will be at the intersection of Valikonagi and Rumeli Streets. At this corner is another target stone. If you cross the street towards Rumeli, and continue walking about 100 meters, you'll see McDonald's (yes, even in Istanbul) but look past it to see a beautiful, Ottoman mansion. This is one of the few left here, and now it belongs to the government.

When you come back to Valikonagi Street, on the corner is Yargici, the shop of fashion designer Neslihan Yargici. She is known for wearing black all the time, but her store features pastel colors, and usually whites and beiges. Prices are reasonable—this isn't haute couture—and her clothes reflect her sophisticated taste, with natural fabrics like cotton or linen. At the next corner of Valikonagi Street on the left is Abdi İpekci Street. You will see global brands like Marks and Spencer's and Banana Republic as well as well known Turkish brands like Vakko and Beymen. There is also Banyan restaurant on this street (No. 40) where you can find Asian dishes from ginger and pumpkin soup to beef on volcanic stone and nut sauced beef.

The next street is Mim Kemal Oke, and about 300 meters down on the left is Hunkar restaurant at No. 21, which is a good place to have dinner. Hunkar has a cozy terrace, very sweet owners, and specializes in traditional Ottoman cuisine. It's been in the same family for three generations and its name is Turkish for Sultan. The most famous dish here is hunkarbegendi, which means "the Sultan liked it." It's made with aubergine and meat and it is the most delicious food in the world (for me!). You should also try dolma (stuffed pepper) and Saray koftesi (Palace meatballs). The desserts are fantastic, especially a pumpkin confection served in winter. Cherry sherbet, a traditional drink, is also served here.

You can continue the tour at this point with a coffee at a cafe (Beymen Brasserie, House Cafe, or Armani Cafe) and more shopping, or you can end the tour with a museum visit. For the museum, go back to Valikonagi Street and continue walking towards Taksim, the city center. You will pass a small park, and across from it there is a famous old restaurant called Yekta serving international cuisine. This three-story building (at No. 39) is quite interesting, with all the windows of differing styles. It was once the home of a famous architect named Vedat Tek, the leading figure in nationalist architecture. Across the park you'll see another old Ottoman mansion, a wooden one that now belongs to a governor. And about 400 meters later, you will see Harbiye Askeri Muzesi (Military Museum) on your left, which is the last stop of the Nişantaşı tour.

This museum has artifacts dating back to the fifteenth century, and due to the huge variety and richness of its collections, it's one of the leading military museums in the world. There are a number of particular collections—guns, the library, uniforms, historical documents, etc.—so it might be wise to decide ahead of time what you most want to see. Don't skip this museum even if you think it sounds dull! Among its most fascinating treasures are a length of the chain the Byzantines stretched across the Golden Horn in 1453 and—my favorite—the Sultan's pavilion-like tent, encrusted with jewels, in which he received important visitors. The museum is open daily except Monday and Tuesday (but double check before setting out; (212) 23.327.20) Everyday at 3:00 and 4:00 (check on winter hours) the Mehter Band performs twenty-minute concerts. The concert alone is worth the visit: Band members are bedecked in Ottoman uniforms and they parade around, playing the instruments of old Ottoman military bands. An interesting historical note is that when Mahmut II eliminated the Janissaries in 1826, he hired Giuseppe Donizetti (brother of the famous Italian composer Gaetano), to organize military bands in a more European style. Since there were no tunes for the band to march to, Donizetti had to compose some himself, and these are still played today. The Mehter Band is the world's oldest military band, and the Ottomans were the first to bring musicians along on campaigns. After a town or region had been conquered, the Mehter Band would lead a procession through the town, in advance of the conquering Ottoman commander. The Museum's location in Harbiye is not accidental: Harbiye was the site of the Ottoman imperial military academy—the equivalent of West Point—and it's still an important military reserve.

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ZEYNEP KUNT was born in Istanbul and studied social anthropology and sociology at the University of Kent at Canterbury (UKC) in the United Kingdom and received her MA in Media Studies at The New School University in New York. While in New York, she worked on documentaries for ABC News Productions, and later worked for CNNTurk television and was a project manager for 'Istanbul 2010.' Currently she is a freelance writer and producer and works for Grup 7 Communications Consultancy. She is very passionate about her hometown, especially Nişantaşı, and is happy to share more of her favorite things about this great neighborhood with visitors as well as answer any questions, especially for first time visitors. Send queries to her via e-mail at zeynepkunt@hotmail.com.

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