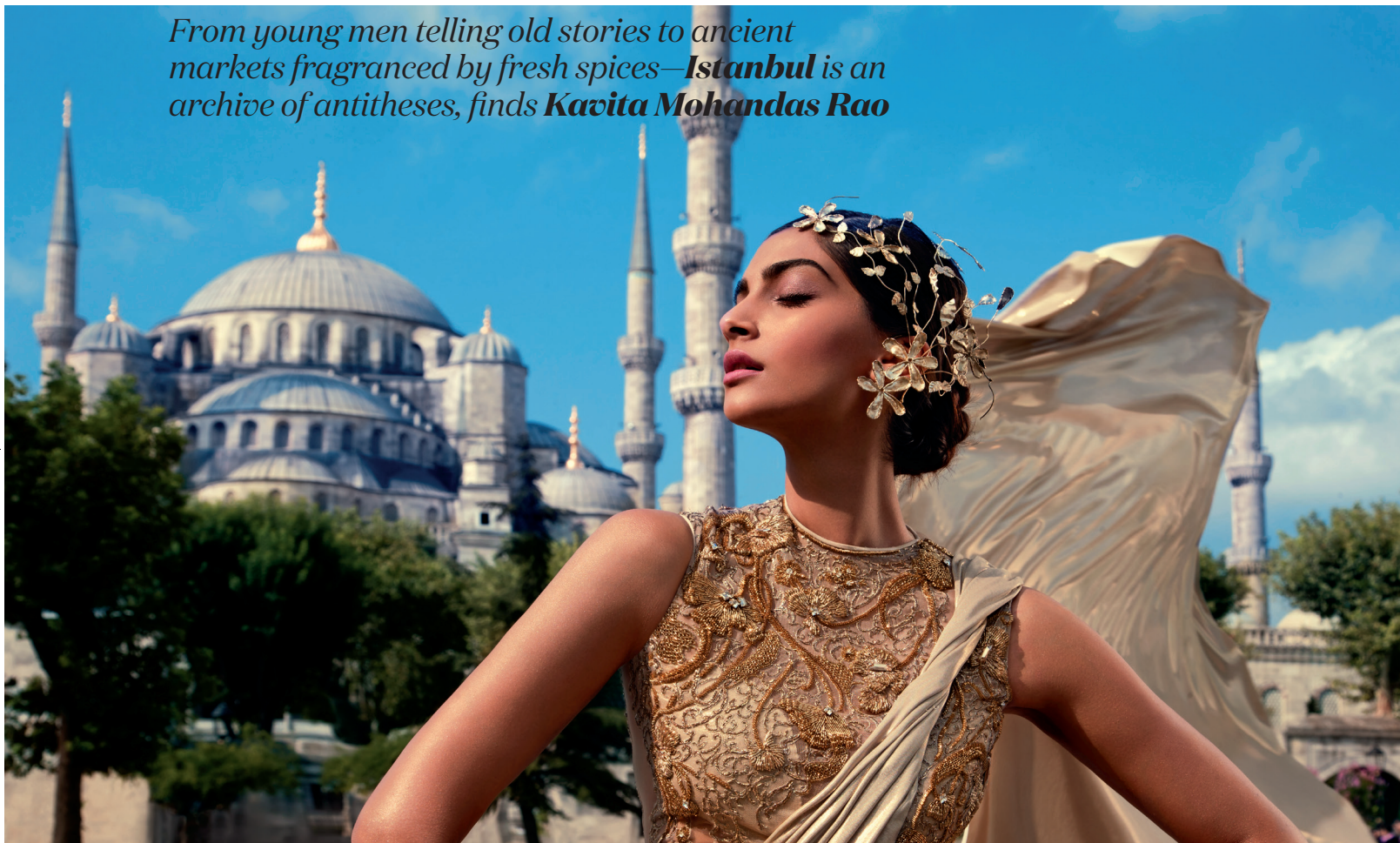


SLOW MOTION

neighbourhoods like **Karaköy**, the exquisite Ottoman-period fountains that have been converted into coffee houses, and the hoodie-sporting teens skateboarding in **Beşiktaş**, which gets its name from a Biblical legend about the stable in which Jesus was born.

Perhaps because they've seen so much of it, one thing that Istanbulites have in abundance, is time. I strolled down to the popular neighbourhood of **Ortaköy**, from my

*From young men telling old stories to ancient markets fragrant by fresh spices—Istanbul is an archive of antitheses, finds **Kavita Mohandas Rao***



When writer Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar said, “I’m neither inside nor totally outside time,” he could well have been speaking for Istanbul, the city of his birth.

It’s a city that’s in a constant state of becoming. On one side of the road from the airport, lies an ancient fort now guarded by regiments of red tulips—and on the other, glass skyscrapers edge eagerly towards completion. You see it in emerging commercial

hotel, Çırağan Palace Kempinski (The Leading Hotels of The World; *Kempinski.com*), and was offered tea just as I stepped into the square that leads to the **Ortaköy Mosque**. The young man who made the offer worked at the Ibrahim Nargile Café (Tel: 05535961450) and was on a smoke break, but somehow had all the time in the world to tell me his story and enquire into mine. Never mind that we met two minutes ago.

This is a good place for storytelling. Framed by cafés selling

Tejal Patni



RED TRAMS IN KADIKÖY



GRAND BAZAAR

EN ROUTE

Given Istanbul's vast line-up of culinary delights, there will be dishes you inevitably miss. Make amends at the Turkish Airlines Lounge in Atatürk airport, where privileged travellers catch a breath at the spa or the movie screen. Exploring the Lounge is like slurping out the final grains of sugar from a coffee cup—it's a last-ditch attempt to savour a city that will never give up its secrets.



the sesame-coated bread rings called simit, potent Turkish coffee, and the more palatable tea served in delicate glassware, it's a place where newly-married couples laugh as they pose awkwardly for photos, cats who have assumed the throne in lieu of the Ottomans purr indulgently, grandparents nudge children into feeding pigeons, and people stare at the Bosphorus as languidly as the jellyfish bobbing on its surface.

In the daytime, the streets are lined with vendors selling everything from Turkish scarves and lamps to scented soaps in handpainted boxes. If you, for some unfathomable reason, miss an excursion to the **Grand Bazaar**, the wares here should provide solace. At night, the clubs along its shore light up like a constellation. *Reina* (Reina.com.tr) and *Sortie* (Sortie.com.tr) are popular choices, but if it's fine dining you're after, drive further into the snazzy **Ulus** area to the *Sunset Grill & Bar* (Tel: 090212 2870357).

For a taste of homey Turkish cuisine, head to *Pandeli* (Tel: 0902125273909) in the **Spice Market**. The dolma (grape leaves stuffed with veggies) is creamy and subtle; the sea bass is light with a hint of lime; the apple tea's worth repeating recklessly. It dovetails nicely into a day spent at **Eminönü**, one of Istanbul's oldest neighbourhoods, gazing in awe at the **Hagia Sophia** (Hagiasophia.com) and the **Blue Mosque** (Bluemosque.co) in between queuing up by the street food vendors selling roasted corn and chestnuts.

Wind down in the high-brow **Nişantaşı** district, where coiffured women stroll past designer boutiques with their pedigree dogs and the country's TV stars casually



BOSPHORUS BRIDGE

drop by for a cuppa and a smoke. It's fantastic for people watching, and dessert at the *Cook Shop* (try the *Pollyanna*; Tel: 02122320566) is ample reason to linger longer.

For all its wonders, the European side of Istanbul does seem a tad contrived, like a well-rehearsed marionette show between the tourists and locals. If you've got the dough, hop on to *Çırağan Palace's* private yacht for a luxurious cruise to the Asian side. Or take one of the ferries, buy a cup of *çay* (tea) from the vendors pacing the boat, and watch the timeless horizon sweep into view.

I chose **Kadıköy** as my port of call, and headed straight for the market. Even at 10 in the morning, the fishmongers were sulkily stocking their shops, the grocers were placing name cards to identify the dozen varieties of olives, and florists were separating sunflowers from tulips. The only places that were open for business were the umpteen coffee shops. The smell of roasted coffee beans wafted past shuttered stores, while old men pulled chairs onto

the footpath to continue a game of chess that they seemed to have been playing for generations.

For more quaintness, there is the adjacent **Moda** area. Though lined with high-street shops, if you amble through its alleys you'll find shops selling second-hand books and second-rate paintings, Rastafarian-themed boutiques and vintage stores stocked with pieces that will stretch your baggage limit.

On the morning of my departure, I stepped into the balcony for an eyeful of the glittering coast at dawn. The stunning *Çırağan Palace*—that luxurious home to the last of the Ottoman kings—gleamed against the blue Bosphorus, assured of its place in history. The muezzins gently sounded the call to prayer, their chants echoing, as seagulls drowsily skimmed the water. It was like any other day, and yet, it wasn't. Istanbul renews itself each day, discovering a new facet, and swapping one legend for another. I was nostalgic for a place I hadn't yet left. Because here, you never meet the same city twice. ●