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RUG, THE WRITER  
HEADS TO ISTANBUL,  
UNRAVELING THE  
ANCIENT CULTURE  
OF CARPETS.

By DONOVAN WEBSTER  
Photographs by PALANI MOHAN

# MAGIC CARPET RIDE

# THE CARPET IS IDEAL.

With a tribal pattern from Kurdish Iran, measuring roughly 14 feet by 10, and about 80 years old, it has a dozen natural-dye shades of rust, pomegranate, lapis, pistachio, and saffron. It sprawls across the floor of one of the oldest carpet stalls in Istanbul's mostly enclosed Grand Bazaar. Outside, the marble hall echoes with the sounds of haggling and clinking tea glasses, as it has for more than 550 years.

"Come on," says shopkeeper Hasan Turkeri. "We've made a good price. Let's finish this." All I need do is shake his hand, write down my address back in Virginia, and--as he

puts it--"the carpet will arrive at your door before you do." But I've gotten ahead of my story. For years I've yearned for the perfect Oriental rug for my third-story home office. I imagined a carpet large and thick enough to muffle the distracting sounds emanating from downstairs, of children, dogs, and a booming grand piano. It would be sumptuous and evocative, curing the woeful plainness of my work space, which is all hardwoods, plaster, and drywall. Long ago I settled on the carpet's dimensions and even had an idea of what the motif would look like. Finally, last spring, I had my rug fund

together, and it was time to buy. Mine would be no mere foray to the outlet mall, mind you. No, I would take this opportunity (or rather, excuse) to return to one of my favorite cities, Istanbul, immersing myself in an ancient cultural tradition. Istanbul has been dubbed "The City of the World's Desire." More populous and exotic than New York, and far older, this city of ten million, variously known in the past as Byzantium, Constantinople, and Stamboul, was the historical meeting point for dozens of Old World cultures. Splitting it is the Bosphorus, a mile-across strait where, in effect, Europe and Asia meet. As an ancient crossroads, Istanbul is, above all, a marketplace. If you need it, you can find it here--or it will find you. Vendors try to engage you in conversation. If they succeed, they invite you to their shop for tea and trade. Don't take offense at this forwardness; it's an ancient custom. My favorite part of the city--where I always base myself during a visit--is Istanbul's oldest quarter, Sultanahmet, dating to about 660 B.C. It is part of Old Town



"I spent days looking for the best place to photograph the Blue Mosque," so called for its blue interior tiles, "and wound up getting this shot from the window of my room in the Hotel Turkoman," says photographer Palani Mohan. The arched hallways of the Grand Bazaar (left), usually a hive of commerce, are "the most colorful place in the city," Mohan says. *Opening pages:* At the bazaar's Kemal Erol carpet shop, Aytunc Kuskoy flings a carpet to entertain customers.





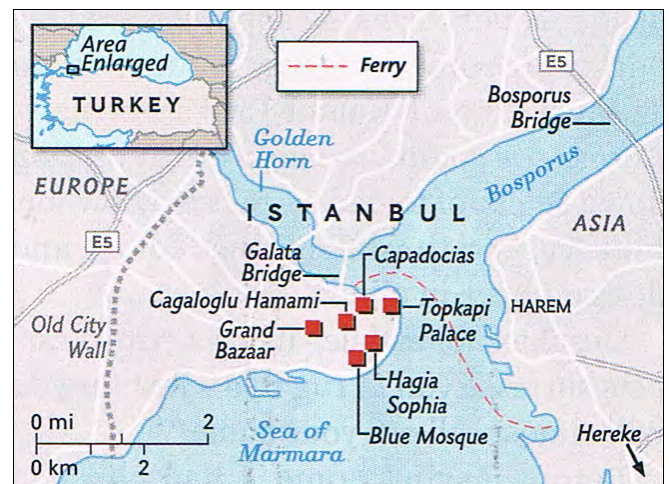
# **BETWEEN STOPS,** I savor a lamb kebab and get a Turkish bath and the world's best shave at a 265-year-old steam room.



Istanbul, with its encircling wall from the Roman era, small yet comfy hotels, and seven hills, each topped by an enormous mosque with pointed minarets. This district is pleasingly stately and redolent of the past. To explore this UNESCO World Heritage site, I always start at the magnificently domed sanctuary of Hagia Sophia, a massive cathedral completed by the Roman Emperor Justinian in the year 537. Until 1453, it was the world's most impressive church, and then Mehmed the Conqueror turned it into Islam's greatest mosque. Matching its scale--and exceeding its elegance--is the Blue Mosque, which I reach by crossing a park filled with fountains. I end up at another nearby jewel, Topkapi Palace, historic home to the Ottoman sultans, most of whom added to its spectacle. Topkapi has courts, treasuries, a harem, eunuchs' quarters, a library, terrace gardens, and kitchens. Without a guided tour, you could easily get lost here for days. Between stops, I savor a lamb kebab and get a Turkish bath (and the world's best barber-chair shave) at the Cagaloglu Hamami, a 265-year-old steam room built with white marble. Then I sip a beer and read the International Herald Tribune at an outdoor cafe just across the street from the Hagia Sophia. By mid-afternoon, I'm readjusted to Istanbul's mercantile-mad atmosphere. That means

it's time to go to the Grand Bazaar and get down to business.

Approach it from any street or alley and the Grand Bazaar looks wholly unassuming: an arched marble doorway in the side of a tall, stone wall. Step inside, though, and the bazaar--with its 3,300 shops lining a miles-long grid of stone and marble hallways--assaults your senses. Here, crowds of locals and tourists alike mill about in a world of bright lights, gold jewelry, bronze antiques, hookah pipes,



A couple lingers over breakfast (left) in the private garden of the Hotel Empress Zoe in the historic Sultanahmet neighborhood. fisherman (top) casts his line near the Galata Bridge over The Golden Horn, a storied estuary that divides the city and empties into the Bosphorus Strait.

skullcaps, loose diamonds, soccer jerseys, ATMs, money changers, mosques, antique maps, restaurants, sapphires, rubies, jackets of Turkish leather, old lamps, and souvenir scimitars.

Everyone in the Grand Bazaar is actively selling, buying, or bargaining. The constant babble of commerce--the essence of Istanbul--rises toward the tall, arched ceilings, captured beneath one massive roof.

The secret to enjoying your shopping experience here is to find vendors whose personalities you like. Hagglng is always involved, but, believe it or not, hagglng can create friendships.

I dive into several carpet shops where, over the customary cups of tea, I'm given 15- or 30-minute showings. Some stalls offer pricey carpets of pure silk, handwoven and suitable for hanging, but those are too fine for my office floor. Other shops display affordable carpets made of cotton or wool with floral patterns or medallions or forking geometrics copied from ancient carpets. These are unquestionably nice looking but not unique enough for my purposes.

Soon enough, however, I come upon a knot of guys hanging out in front of Kemal Erol, rumored to be the oldest carpet shop in the bazaar.

"Come in and look around" says a young, black-haired man.

"Nah, it's too late in the day," another says. "We will all be crying soon."

Okay, I'll bite.

"Why will you be crying?" I ask.

"Because either we haven't sold enough carpets," he says, "or we've sold them so cheaply we won't make any money."

Next thing I know, I'm sitting on a leather couch, drinking apple-flavored tea with a 30-something guy named Hasan Turkeri, one of Kemal Erol's partners. Across the room, two men begin pulling down stacks of folded carpets to show me. I tell Turkeri the dimensions, colors, and design I have in mind.

"Just look for awhile," he says. "Good carpets surprise you. A rug that's just for you will almost call out your name."

Before leaving home, I had checked out carpet prices at shops near my home and perused a copy of the book, *Oriental Carpets: From the Tents, Cottages and Workshops of*

the Bosphorus on Istanbul's Asian side. "My parents are Kurds, from the Gilkon clan," he says. "We were apricot growers in Eastern Anatolia and came to Istanbul when I was five."

Carpets have been good to Turkeri. He began working in the shops as a teenager, fetching tea for customers, pulling down carpets to display. At night, he attended language school and now speaks English, Italian, and Spanish, as well as Turkish and Kurdish. "But mostly I kept working," he

says. "I sold a lot of carpets and was eventually asked to become a partner at Kemal Erol, which is said to be a prestigious thing."

Now Turkeri drives a Range Rover, has business interests in the States, and has helped build his parents a retirement house.

"It's taken a lot of work," he says. "But really, it's something like a dream."

Over some dessert, Turkeri fleshes out my knowledge of the carpet trade.

"Originally, carpets were simply made as insulation against the cold, since most herdsmen lived in tents. The tribes developed their own designs, and, over centuries, carpet-making became first an art and then a business."

Carpets began finding their way to the West in the 16th and 17th centuries, Turkeri continues, with Turkey being the main conduit. England's Henry VIII was an ardent fan of "Turkey carpets."

Several portraits depict him standing amid his collection. By the Victorian era, the rugs of Central Asia--now being called Oriental or Persian carpets--became wildly popular among the middle

class. By the 20th century, old carpets became even more valued, and unscrupulous businessmen began traveling the outlands of Asia, trading new, manufactured carpets to herdsmen in return for their cultural artifacts.



A salesman at the Kemal Erol shop in Istanbul's Grand Bazaar presents a carpet.

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"They'd say to the herdsmen: 'Your carpets look so old. I'll trade you my new carpets for your old ones,'" Turkeri tells me. "Those merchants walked away with fortunes. That's how carpets created a global industry now worth billions. All because poor shepherds in central Asia were cold."

After eating, I say goodbye to Turkeri and take my thoughts for a walk, strolling from the Grand Bazaar to the shore of the Golden Horn. I catch a 15-minute ferry across the strait to Harem, a bustling seaport on the Asian side, and then return. Traffic on the Bosphorus amazes with its variety, from oil tankers to one-man dories.

Back in Sultanahmet, I climb a hill along the western wall of the Topkapi Palace and, happily exhausted, make for my hotel. As the sun sets, a muezzin begins his adhan, or call to prayer. From speakers positioned high in the minarets of the Blue Mosque, the Arabic phrase for "God is Great"

rings out: "Allllaaaahhhh hu Akkbarrrr ... Allllaaaahhh hu Akkbarrrr."

Beautiful as that sounds, I barely notice. I have a carpet on my mind, that 80-year-old Heriz I liked so much. As we ate, Turkeri regularly came back to price, with me changing the subject each time to avoid the haggle. His price is now down to \$11,000.

Next afternoon, I visit Capadocias, a carpet store in Sultanahmet. The store is run by Ali Eroglu, whose family is from Cappadocia, a gorgeously eroded district in central Turkey where they own a carpet factory. Some of Eroglu's rugs are new, factory-made imitations of traditional rugs. He's

proud of his inventory, and, as it happens, one of his rugs soon begins calling my name. It's the most unique rug I've seen yet, a new version of an antique dowry carpet, from Ushak in eastern Turkey.

Probably not Islamic in origin, it depicts a primitive village, complete with people, houses, cattle, sheep, birds, camels, ponds, and farming tools woven into its vegetable-dyed pile.

Eroglu says he loves dowry carpets above all others. "The young woman who makes it puts her heart and soul and dreams into her carpet," he says. "Will I live on a farm? she wonders. 'In the city? Will I have children?' Then, when she is of an age to marry, the family hangs the carpet in front of the house like an advertisement. The village boys look at it to see if their dreams match up. They can tell if she's lively or dull. It's all right there in the carpet."

He pauses, sips tea, and pulls deeply on a cigarette before continuing his tale.

"If, after seeing the carpet, a boy wants to marry," Eroglu goes on, "he and his parents go to the girl's house to talk to her parents, while the girl stays in the kitchen making coffee and listening at the door. If the parents get along, the father shouts: 'Bring in the coffee!' The girl comes out but cannot speak. If she likes the boy, she will have put sugar in his coffee. If not, his coffee will be heavily salted.

"Everyone watches the boy's face as he takes the first sip. He is nervous. The cup is shaking in his hands against the saucer. If he wants to marry her badly enough, even if he gets the salt, he smiles like he's gotten the sugar."

Eroglu picks up my notebook.

"I can tell you like this carpet," he says. "So I'm writing my best price in your book."

He's right. I like the carpet, but not as much as I like Turkeri's.

Two days later, after a pair of stops at Kemal Erol to reconsider my purchase (Turkeri's price is now \$9,000), I find myself in his Range Rover, hurtling out of Europe over



The Bosphorus Bridge. "Welcome to Asia," a billboard reads. "We're going to Hereke, where the finest silk carpets are made," Turkeri says. "Until democracy was instituted in 1923, the women of Hereke made carpets only for royalty and foreign dignitaries. But now, money is all that matters. If you have enough money, you can buy one."

An hour later, we roll up a narrow, cobbled side street, where houses damaged in a 1999 earthquake have been patched with boulders and cinder blocks. Turkeri stops the car. "We're here".

As if on cue, a squat 65-year-old man wanders toward the car, then gestures for us to join him. We walk over and shake hands. He is Hasan Ibis, production manager for Sirinoglu, a local silk carpet company. We follow him inside a building and up a narrow flight of stairs.

In his office, where patterns for rugs adorn the walls, Ibis pulls out three hairy, grape-shaped white balls and hands them to me. "These are silkworm cocoons" he says. "From each cocoon, you can get about a mile of silk fiber. Each cocoon is a single strand of silk. We wind 40 of these strands together to make silk thread, then dye it in natural dyes. We have more than 150 looms working in Hereke, producing about 30 carpets a month."

"What does a really good Hereke silk carpet cost?" I ask.

"Well, it depends on the size, the number of knots per centimeter, the quality of the silk".

"But where do prices start?"

"In U.S. money? About \$5,000. But that is for a small one".

Ibis leads us up the street to a half-repaired residence with cracked walls. We remove our shoes and go inside, where we're met by a woman named Sudamin. We follow her through the kitchen to the main

room of the house with a potbellied stove in one corner and a TV in the other. In between, a loom four feet wide and six feet tall leans against the wall, holding a half-made carpet, its surface luminous in blue, white, red, and yellow.

"Here you are" she says. "This is my work. I watch TV as I do it. The work is too focused to endure long times at a sitting. So I take breaks to cook and clean the house, then I go back to the carpet. It is part of my day."

Sudamin, who says it takes five months to finish a carpet, turns to the loom to demonstrate, deftly lifting a piece of pile, double-knotting it, and cutting the pile to the proper height. Each square centimeter on this carpet, she says,



In a home in the town of Hereke, about 40 miles (64 kilometers) southeast of Istanbul, Havva Gumustas labors over a silk carpet as her mother looks on. The two of them have been working on the same carpet for over two years. "They still have six months to go," Mohan says, but when completed, the fine carpet may fetch a price of \$40,000 (U.S.).

contains 20 small, tight knots, which makes for some of the world's most durable carpets. She finishes an entire warp line in minutes. Had I been able to do it at all, I would've needed better than a day.

For her work, Sudamin earns \$800 a month--good money around here. She's been at it for 20 years, since age 15. "My carpets are my babies" she says. "Each time I finish one, I take a photo of it to remember it. Then I send my baby out to be adopted by the world".

As we drive back to Istanbul, Turkeri and I talk more about carpets and history and the intersection of the two. Finally, he says: "So, about the carpet back in the showroom.

Are you ready to make a deal?"

There's a long silence.

"You're making me crazy!" Turkeri says, his words clipped. "Okay, then! Eight thousand dollars.

That's my best price!"

No, as it turns out, that isn't his best price. But in the end, Turkeri is right. By the time I get back home to Virginia, the carpet has already arrived. It now almost covers the floor of my far quieter--and better appointed--office. Oh, and my new friend, Hasan Turkeri, rug merchant, is coming to the States for a visit sometime later this year.

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Writer Donovan Webster traced the migratory route of his own DNA in "Footsteps of My Ancestors" in our October 2005 issue. Palani Mohan's pictures of Sri Lanka appeared in "Deep Beauty" last October.