



I was glued to WeatherBug iPhone app, which updates its forecasts hourly.



The Currency app on my iPhone came in handy on Terkoz Çikmazı, a secret shopping alleyway. I checked to make sure I was getting a deal on neon plaid boxers for my boyfriend (\$3). I was!



My new Turkish Facebook friend Gorkem showed me around old Galata, the neighborhood where she does her daily shopping.



Irazca, a Turkish women's rights worker I met through my college alumni's Yahoo group, pointed me to the city ferry. It's so low-tech there aren't even receipts—you just hand over some coins and get on.



My friend Matt pinged me from New York on Google Talk and said I should check out the fish carts near the Eminönü tram stop. Best fish sandwich ever.



I was able to figure out the tram by using the Google Maps "transit" search.

THE BUDGET TRAVEL CHALLENGE:

The Connected Traveler

With a smartphone in each hand, **Arianne Cohen** tests the limits of online networking in a foreign land. No guidebooks. No language skills. Only social media and mobile apps. **The destination: Istanbul.**



NAME: Arianne Cohen

AGE: 28

MUST-HAVE TRAVEL ITEM: My worldwide outlet adapter (I call her Pluggie). It's one unit—not a million pieces like some—that you can use in 150 countries.

ARGH! WHAT I FORGOT TO PACK: A power strip. I spent the whole trip charging an iPhone, a BlackBerry, a camera, and a laptop on one converter plug.



You can always identify a hardcore Facebooker by whether or not she informs her friends of her dietary intake. Each morning at 6 A.M., I check my Facebook feed over coffee—and tell my 350 friends on the website what blend I’m drinking and how many ounces. My friends on Twitter, MySpace, and Google Talk get similar beverage updates throughout the day (seltzer in the afternoon, green tea at night). For everything from shopping to advice, I am—and I say this with self-love—a social media addict.

Which is why it’s surprising that it took me until now to apply all that online action to one of my other great passions: travel. I resolved to go on a mission to answer a simple question: Could I toss the tour book and take a trip, beginning to end, with social networking as my only guide? And could I do it in a city where I’d really have to put my connections to the test—a place I’d never been, where I didn’t know a soul?

I wasn’t just testing my own network. In the past couple of years, companies have decided social networking is the Answer—and none more than travel companies. A whole new category of social travel sites has emerged, and I decided to try out as many of them as humanly possible. I signed up

for Twaveltalk and TND_TravelDeals (Top Daily Deals), two aggregators of travel deals you’ll find on Twitter, the micro-blogging site where people communicate in “tweets”—short messages of 140 characters max. I soon realized that quantity definitely didn’t mean quality—it meant major frustration. In two weeks of perusing hundreds of offers a day, I couldn’t find a deal that fit

HOT TIP
Contact “hub” people. I got in touch with locals via my hubs—those super-connected people I know who are friends with everyone and their mother.

my parameters. It was peak travel season, exchange rates were brutal, and I was flying from Portland, Ore.—an expensive proposition to begin with. Flights to appropriately far-flung places were all over four figures, so I rejoiced when a realistic option, \$950 on Delta to Istanbul, came through on Twaveltalk. Finally, I could take a breather from the torrent of tweets.

AT THE HUB

Before I left, I had fearful images of sitting alone on a curb in Istanbul with nowhere to go. So I asked the entire Internet for advice: “I’m going to Istanbul. Know anyone there?” Very few people responded. I complained to a computer programmer friend, and he told me about the “hub” theory of social networking: To tap the full power of your social network, you need to contact the hubs, those hyper-social people who know lots of other people. I put together a list of the three dozen hubs I’ve met over the years and got in touch with them—the results were astounding. It turns out that my former college roommate has a Turkish grad-school buddy, a reporter friend knows a woman on a fellowship in Turkey, and my literary agent has a client my age in Istanbul. Two other friends connected me with a women’s rights worker and a travel agent.

A week before landing, I set up one-on-one appointments with my new Turkish network. My goal was to squeeze as many meet-ups as possible into the first 36 hours of my four days on the ground. By the day I left for Turkey, I had six meals on my calendar.

My introduction to Istanbul was flawless. A dinner-time taxi whisked me from the airport to the **Ayasofya Hotel**, a converted 19th-century private home just a cobblestoned block from the Blue Mosque, the Hagia Sophia, and the stunning Topkapi Palace. My new Facebook friend Mesture had recommended the hotel because of its location and the drop-dead gorgeous views of the Princes Islands and the Sea of Marmara from the roof deck. I had cross-referenced the reviews on TripAdvisor—solid all around.

WOMAN ABOUT TOWN

Armed with a BlackBerry and an iPhone, I began my first morning in Istanbul on the **funicular**, a two-minute ride up a steep hill that people pay \$1 to not have to climb. I confirmed my meeting with Meline and Suzy, two new Facebook friends, over e-mail on my BlackBerry. As we drank strong Turkish coffee, with eggs on toast and mint lemonade with apple slices, I learned which tourist sites to bother with: the Blue Mosque (yes, it’s free), Topkapi Palace (yup, despite the pricey ticket), a Bosphorus ferry tour (gorgeous, definitely). And which to skip: Hagia Sophia (under renovations), the Grand Bazaar (eh, hit a local one), seedy

Previous spread: Orhan Durgut. All logos courtesy the companies



☉ The view from the Bosphorus ferry tour, right. Far right: the scene at the party I crashed on the Princes Islands. Opposite: breakfast in the old Galata neighborhood with Suzy and Meline, two of my new Facebook friends



“tour guides” that mob tourists (avoid with my life).

So far, my new “friends” were coming through with tips that easily rivaled a guidebook’s. After breakfast, Suzy walked me down bustling Istiklal Caddesi, the 1.5-mile-long main shopping drag, and deposited me in Taksim Square, Istanbul’s version of Times Square and the site of my next meet-up.

I was still in the typical tourist quandary of being wary of public transportation, the best way to get around a city of 12.5 million with ferry, bus, subway, tram, and rail lines. When my iPhone was able to connect through AT&T roaming, I used the Google Maps app for directions. But I often couldn’t find a connection. (In Turkey, AT&T partners with Turkcell and Vodafone Telekom, and I found the service a bit spotty).

My fear of public transport was quelled by my lunch date, Gorkem, a fashionista who owns her own travel agency, **Hip Travel**. I knew what she looked like from my friend’s Facebook photos of them goofing around together, and I immediately identified her in the middle of the busy square. She pressed me into a **dolmuş**, an unmarked \$1 group taxi, which zipped us up to Beşiktaş, an upscale neighborhood lined with boutiques I’d never have discovered on my own. Over more crack-like Turkish coffee and watermelon and cheese at **Der Die Das Café**, an outdoor bistro hidden behind a block-long building, Gorkem mapped out a handful of must-see places on a smudged napkin that I clung to for the

next two days. From then on, I carried it in my pocket with my BlackBerry and iPhone—and it was just as indispensable (you don’t have to turn on a napkin to access its information).

Dinner that night was the best meal I had in Istanbul, at a hole-in-the-wall called **Ortaklar Iskender Kebap**, in the company of Irazca, a women’s rights nonprofit worker I met through my college alumni’s Yahoo group. We noshed on *corba* (lentil soup), *lahmacun* (Turkish meat pizza), and raki (an intensely foul drink that tastes like licorice vodka), and later she directed me to a city ferry. In one day, I’d conquered the funicular, the tram, the *dolmuş*, and the ferry, seen several neighborhoods, and met four new friends. Jet-lagged? Sure, I was 10 time zones from my own. But my pride outweighed any exhaustion.

THE PARTY

In my e-mails with Turks, I had bluntly asked about sailboats. The waters around Istanbul are teeming with yachts, and I’ve never been on one. So I kept asking, until a friend responded with this: “I don’t know anyone who has a boat, but here’s a suggestion that would put you in the company of people who do: There’s a huge party this

HOT TIP
Don’t be a social snob. It’s the people you connect with that matter, not the programs they’re on. I used Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, and AOL Instant Messenger to contact friends. Some of those tools I like; some I don’t. I went where the action was.

My Social Networking Bookmarks

There are more ways than ever to connect online with people all around the world—almost too many. These four websites did the trick for me.



DOPPLR

A 2-year-old social network that compares your travel plans with those of your friends. I learned that I’d be at JFK at the same time as my childhood best friend, and we met up.



IGUGO

A collection of forums, journals, and tips from recently returned travelers. I found it useful early on in my planning, as I sifted through already-posted material.



INTERNATIONS

A global expat community with 230 local branches. If your own social network falls through, this is the place to track down locals who speak your language.



TWITTER

A micro-blogging site with updates from millions worldwide. I searched “Istanbul” my last night, and people were tweeting about the rain—floods hit hours after my plane left.

HOT TIP

Be blunt. I brazenly invited myself to events and proposed meals with strangers. Success rate: 50 percent. Major failure: No glorious yacht ride for me.

Saturday, at a Gatsby-like estate on the Princes Islands.” It sounded perfect. The picturesque islands are 15 miles off Istanbul in the Sea of Marmara, where everyone recommended I go swim and hang out for a day trip anyway. I e-mailed the hosts, an American expat and his Russian wife, and not so subtly

hurled myself at their party. They said sure.

The formal invitation mentioned one guest’s 80-foot yacht, which would transport people from Istanbul to the island. Since I was already crashing the party, I hopped the **city-run \$2 ferry** and took a horse-drawn buggy, the island’s main form of transportation, to the estate. This was a grave mistake. From the moment I arrived, everyone there was talking about the yacht—how lovely the yacht had been, how purifying it is to feel the salty breeze on your skin, and, wow, the yacht.

The party’s theme was Fruits and Flowers (I had neither fruit nor flowers—just some raki I desperately wanted to get rid of), and so I stood in a corner and surveyed the Chiquita-banana-lady headdresses on many of the guests’ heads. Then I heard someone say, “Arianne Cohen? Is that you?”

This, my friends, is how social networking works. If you get a few degrees away from yourself and then go to a 200-person party on an island somewhere, chances are actually pretty good that you’ll know someone. Even in Turkey. It was Liesl, an acquaintance from New York. She introduced me to the hosts—friends of hers—and as is always the case with an in-person introduction from someone already in the clique, I was in. For the next six hours, I circulated with a mix of European businessmen and journalists and Russian oligarchs,



MORE PHOTOS! To see the rest of Arianne’s Istanbul snapshots, go to mybudgettravel.com, where you can also share your own.



In front of Sultan Mehmet Mosque. Opposite: the Egyptian Spice Bazaar

pausing at one point to walk down a path to the water-side and admire the horizon-wide night view of the lights of Istanbul. I promptly took a photo and posted it to my Facebook page with this note: “I’m. So. Lucky.”

THE AFTER-PARTY

Parties themselves are hubs, and one of the people I met that night was Yigal, the cofounder of a food blog called istanbuleats.com. He offered himself up for a post-hangover lunch date. We started at **Ciftesarmasik Café**, a typical workers’ joint, where you point to what you want (eggplant stew, shepherd’s salad, grilled meatballs) and everything costs about \$6. Yigal then led us to **Karaköy Güllüoğlu**, a baklava wonderland, which made me deeply depressed that I’m allergic to nuts.

I spent the rest of the day and the next doing exactly what my new friends had suggested. I began with a one-hour **Bosporus ferry tour**. Halfway through, I read Gorkem’s napkin note and looked at the “beautiful” newer, European side of the city. I realized that, like many Turks, she prefers the cookie-cutter new condos and monstrous housing projects to the grand old mosques and palaces, which I found spellbinding.

The next morning I started at **Topkapi Palace**. Suzy had wisely told me to arrive before the tourist buses do (at 9 A.M.) and had assured me that the \$10 fee to see

the harem area (on top of the \$13 base ticket price) was worth it. It was. The sultan’s private quarters are surrounded by those of his harem—women who were handpicked by his mother, I was mystified to learn.

You can’t go to Istanbul without seeing the **Blue Mosque**, so of course I made a visit. But my friends had insider advice I’d never have gotten from a guidebook. Right behind the mosque was the **Arasta Bazaar**, a shop that came up when I posted a blog entry on BudgetTravel.com asking for tips. I received two dozen comments—many of them insightful and detailed (thanks!). Jenna, a BudgetTravel.com user who’d lived in Istanbul for a year, wrote that I should seek out her “carpet guy.” I paid a visit but declined to drop \$7,500 on a rug. She also suggested her “ceramics guy,” from whom I bought a folk-art mug and sticky-sweet Turkish delight.

While it was a treat to have my new friends lead me to their favorite spots, there’s something innately satisfying about making discoveries of your own. On my last night in town, I took a meandering walk around my hotel, which led me to an outdoor couch at a hookah bar down a steep, quiet alley. The place was called **Gulhane Sur Café**, and the owner, Murat Coskun, was possibly the most fun guy in Turkey. His next-door

shop, **Coskun Bazaar**, won my business with the lowest prices on scarves that I’d seen all week (\$7). Murat also treated me to a mint-flavored hookah.

While I practiced blowing smoke rings, I pulled out my Lonely Planet and Frommer’s guidebooks on Istanbul to see what I’d missed. The culture pages answered questions that I’d wondered about, such as whether I should have been tipping taxi drivers (no, it

turns out, and I had been) and why shaking my head for no had seemed to confuse people (a gentle uptick of the face is a Turkish no). The real hitch to traveling via networking is that you only learn what you ask about directly—and naturally, there are nuances you won’t know to ask about. That aside, I’d had a much wider experience than the books could offer, seeing places only locals could show me, and learning up close

how people actually live their lives. After exchanging e-mail addresses with my new best friend, Murat, I decided social networking would always play a part in my travels from now on.

I reached for my iPhone to inform my Facebook friends—old and new—that I was slurping down chai tea on a warm Istanbul night, with two sugar cubes, as they do in Turkey. ☐

HOT TIP

Print out contacts. Make a master list of phone numbers and e-mail addresses of everyone you plan to meet with, and call them when you have questions or can’t find stuff. This was particularly pivotal when I couldn’t connect to my hotel’s Wi-Fi.

TRANSPORT
Funicular
istanbul-ulasim.com.tr, \$1

City-run ferry
ferries criss-cross the waters around Istanbul from nearly every port; 65-minute ferries leave the Kabataş port and dock at four of the Princes Islands. 011-90/212-444-4436, ido.com.tr, \$2

LODGING
Ayasofya Hotel
Kucuk Aya-sofya Caddesi, Demirci Resit Sokak No. 28, 011-90/212-516-9446, ayasofyahotel.com, from \$86

FOOD
Der Die Das Café
Süleyman Seba Caddesi No. 34, Akaretler, Beşiktaş, 011-90/212-227-9700, Turkish coffee \$4

Ortaklar Iskender Kebap
Peykhane Caddesi No. 41, Eminönü Belediyesi Yani, Çemberlitas, 011-90/212-517-6198, lahmacun \$6.75

Ciftesarmasik Café
Mumhane Caddesi No. 41, Karaköy, 011-90/212-243-5654, eggplant stew \$6

Karaköy Güllüoğlu
Katli Otopark Altı, 011-90/212-293-0910, karakoy gulluoglu baklava.com, baklava 75¢

Gulhane Sur Café
Sogükçeşme Sokak No. 40, 011-90/212-528-0986, hookah \$8

ACTIVITIES
Bosporus ferry tour
011-90/212-444-4436, ido.com.tr, \$9 one way, \$13 round trip

Topkapi Palace
011-90/212-512-0480, www.topkapi.sarayi.gov.tr, \$13, harem ticket \$10

Blue Mosque
Sultanahmet Square, 011-90/212-518-1319, free

SHOPPING
Arasta Bazaar
Arasta Çarşisi No. 107, Sultanahmet, 011-90/212-516-0733, arasta bazaar.com

Coskun Bazaar
Sogükçeşme Sokak No. 40, 011-90/212-528-0986

RESOURCES
Hip Travel
Meclisi Mebusan Caddesi No. 31, Murat Han Kat, 011-90/212-293-8356, hip.com.tr

BlackBerry vs. Apple iPhone



GOOD FOR E-mailing. The keyboard makes quick, accurate typing a breeze.

LET ME DOWN The apps. The BlackBerry simply doesn’t compare when it comes to volume and ease of downloads.

THE VERDICT A brilliant e-mail machine—anywhere, anytime.

GOOD FOR Almost everything. The apps help you navigate any scenario—at the tap of a finger.

LET ME DOWN Connections. Turkcell and Vodafone Telekom (AT&T’s Turkish roaming partners) didn’t always come through.

CHARGES From \$25 per month for an unlimited data global add-on package.

THE VERDICT A must-have travel machine.



Phones courtesy: the companies