

VISIT GUIDE 2026

Basilica Cistern

Istanbul · From 57.50€

https://yerebatan.visit-tickets.com/en/ · Skip-the-line tickets & rates



History & experience

ORIGIN & HISTORY

The buried secrets of Justinian

GOOGLE	4.6 ★★★★★	98 521 reviews	
TIQETS	4.3 ★★★★☆	322 reviews	

Beneath the cobblestones of Sultanahmet Square, a stone giant has slept since the 6th century. Built during the reign of **Justinian I**, the Basilica Cistern was erected to supply water to the Imperial Great Palace. This monumental reservoir, capable of storing 80,000 cubic meters of water, is the largest of several hundred underground cisterns scattered throughout Istanbul. Its name derives from the Stoa Basilica, a vast Roman public square located directly above it, and not from a church, contrary to a persistent misconception.

The logistical effort mobilized was colossal: ancient texts report that **7,000 slaves** worked on its construction. The floor is supported by a forest of 336 marble columns, each nine meters high, arranged in twelve rows. Most of these columns are spolia, recovered from the ruins of earlier buildings or brought from various provinces of the Byzantine Empire. Some capitals feature Ionic or Corinthian styles, while others, rarer ones, are of the Doric order without carvings.

For centuries, the existence of this cistern was forgotten by the general public, even though local residents continued to draw its water. It was not until **1565** and the French traveler Petrus Gyllius that the structure was officially documented. In his writings, he describes being taken by boat between the columns, observing fish swimming in the dark waters, thus providing the first precise visual testimony of this mysterious place buried beneath Constantinople.

The modern rebirth of the cistern began with the major restorations of 1985–1987, during which 50,000 tons of silt were removed, notably revealing the sculpted bases of Medusa heads. More recently, between 2020 and 2022, the İBB Miras team modernized the structure by replacing the old iron rods with stainless steel to enhance its earthquake resistance, while preserving its historical authenticity.

THE EXPERIENCE

As soon as you cross the threshold, the air changes. The cool moisture envelops your skin, sharply contrasting with the summer heat of the surface above. You descend fifty-two stone steps leading to a suspended world, where silence is punctuated only by the gentle lapping of shallow water. The darkness is soft, illuminated by dim lamps that make reflections shimmer on the liquid surface, creating a unique cinematic atmosphere.

In the midst of this twilight, the forest of columns rises like a hypnotic maze. Each step on the metal walkways resonates faintly, reminding you of the fragility of the present moment against the millennial permanence of the stone. It is a total sensory experience, where one feels small before the vastness of the underground, cradled by the echo of Byzantine history that permeates every block of marble.



PREPARE YOUR VISIT

Practical information

ADDRESS
Sultanahmet District · Metro: Taksim (M2) then T1 tram towards Sultanahmet, direct exit.

OPENING HOURS
Open every day. Hours may vary slightly depending on the season and special events.

FARES
Indicative price: €57.50. Check for child and senior discounts at the time of purchase.

VISIT DURATION
Allow 45 minutes to 1 hour for a complete immersion. The space is confined, so it is better to take your time to appreciate the acoustics and humidity rather th

PHOTOS
Photography allowed without flash. The dim lighting creates unique cinematic atmospheres. Be careful with reflections on the low water level, which can hinder s

AUDIENCE
Ideal for adults and teenagers. Less suitable for very young children due to the narrow space, slippery floor, and lack of natural light. Avoid if you are claus

HOW TO GET THERE

Access & transport

Metro
: Sultanahmet — 2 min à pied
Bisser Station (7 min) · Haydarpaşa Station (15 min)

Bus
: Sultanahmet — 1 min à pied
Bisser Station (9 min) · Haydarpaşa Station (23 min)

Car

Bisser Station (4 min) · Haydarpaşa Station (15 min)

Bike

Bisser Station (4 min) · Haydarpaşa Station (19 min)

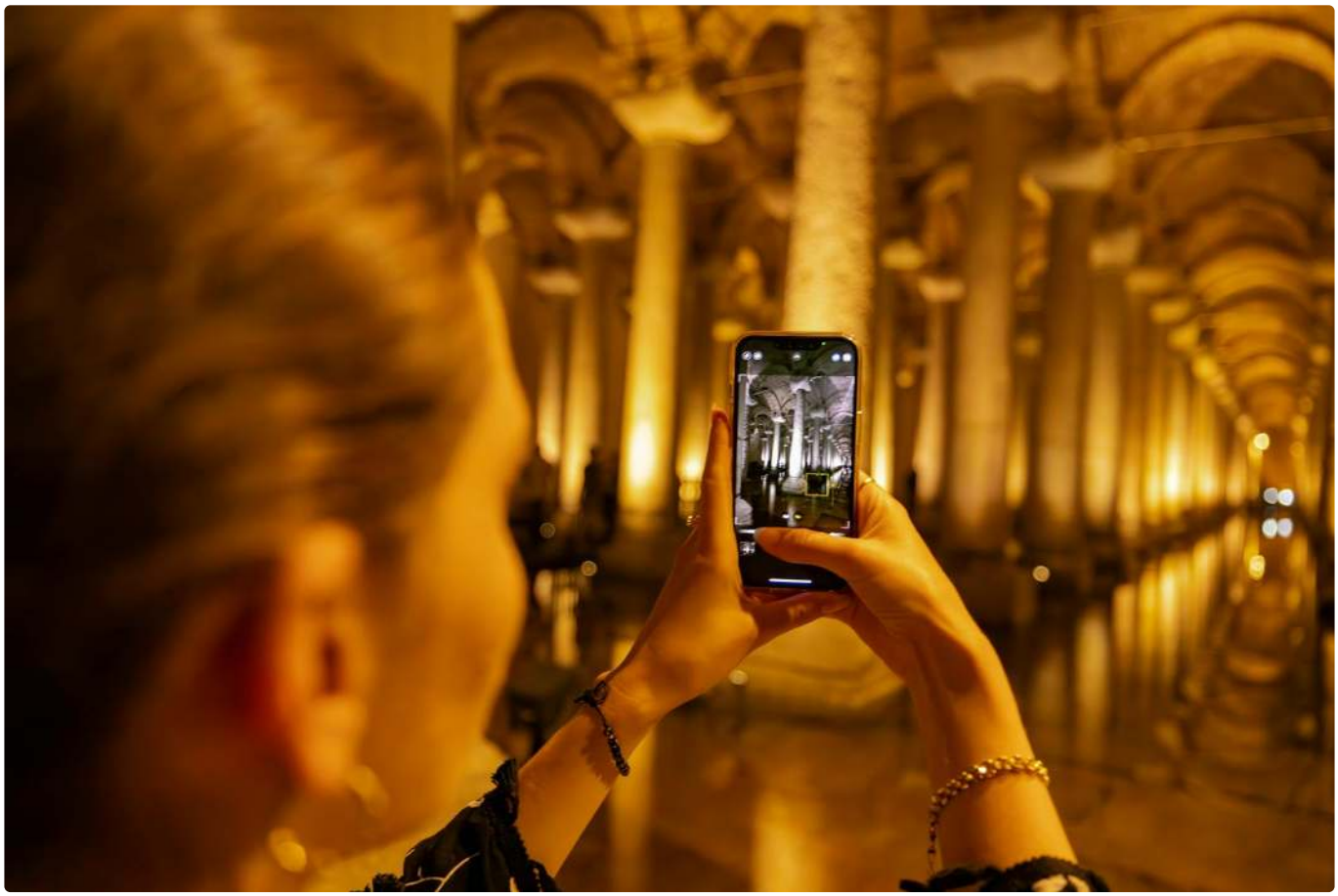
LOCALISATION

Où se trouve Basilica Cistern ?



📍 Alemdar Mh., Yerebatan Cd. 1/3 — 34410 Istanbul

🌐 41°0.503′ N, 28°58.673′ E



ORGANIZATION

Understanding the site's structure

Level -1 (Reception area and descent)

This is where the experience begins, with the descent of 52 stone steps. Visitors pass through a reception area where contextual information is provided before entering the core of the cistern. The acoustics begin to change here, isolating the noise from the outside city.

Level 0 (Forest of Columns)

The core of the visit takes place on the modern walkways installed above the water. Here, you can admire the 336 marble columns and their varied capitals. This is also where the famous Medusa heads are located, two of which are placed upside down on the bases of the pillars.

Specific Zones (Temporary Exhibitions)

Depending on the season, areas dedicated to digital exhibitions such as 'Daha Derine' may be accessible. These spaces use projection mapping on walls and columns to create contemporary interactive installations, enriching the historical perception of the site.

ACCESSIBILITY

♿ **Disabled Access**

Access is possible via elevator but the interior space is narrow; check specific accessibility avail

👨‍👩‍👧 **Families**

Less suitable for very young children due to darkness, humidity, and confined spaces that may cause

🎧 **Audio guide**

French, English, Turkish, German



Must-sees

SELECTION

Must-see wonders

01 Bases of the south-east columns

The Heads of Medusa

Two heads of Medusa carved in white marble are integrated into the bases of two columns. They are oriented differently: one is placed upside down, the other on its side. This arrangement has given rise to numerous theories, ranging from neutralizing the power of the Gorgon's gaze to purely practical considerations during construction.

> 💡 A local legend claims that the heads were placed this way to prevent Medusa from looking towards the sky and turning passersby to stone, an interpretation far removed from the technical reality of **spoliation**.

02 Cistern as a whole

The Forest of Columns

The 336 marble columns, nine meters high, form a striking architectural landscape. Their arrangement in twelve rows creates infinite perspectives in the dim light. The diversity of materials, including granite and different types of marble, testifies to the extent of the Byzantine Empire at the time of their collection.

> 💡 Some columns come directly from neighboring construction sites, such as Hagia Sophia, illustrating the common practice of reusing noble materials in late antiquity.

03 Central row

The Column of the Chicken Eye

A specific column is adorned with reliefs depicting a chicken eye, inclined branches, and tears. This iconographic motif is rare and resembles the decorations of the Arch of Theodosius I in the 4th century. It serves as a focal point for art historians studying the stylistic influences of the Justinian era.

> 💡 This unique sculpture reminds us that the cistern was not merely utilitarian, but also a space where **ornamentation** retained strong symbolic importance.

04 JENNIFER STEINKAMP ET AL. Modular Spaces

The 'Daha Derine' Installation

The digital exhibition 'Daha Derine' (Going Deeper) uses light and projection to explore themes of memory and water. Contemporary works dialogue with ancient architecture, transforming walls into immersive cinema canvases. It is an innovative way to make the site's complex history accessible to a modern audience.

> 💡 The artists worked with sensors to adapt the projections to visitors' presence, creating a dynamic interaction between humans and the **underground** space.

05 All the columns

Ionic and Corinthian Capitals

Careful observation of the capitals reveals the site's stylistic richness. The majority are of the Ionic or Corinthian order, characterized by their delicate volutes and acanthus leaves. A few more restrained, uncarved Doric capitals offer an interesting contrast. This variety reflects the different geographical origins of the stones used.

> 💡 Byzantine craftsmen sometimes modified existing capitals to better adapt them to new structures, leaving visible traces of these architectural adaptations.

06 Under the walkways

The Byzantine Brick Floor

Thanks to recent restorations, the original 6th-century Byzantine brick floor has been partially uncovered. Before that, it was covered by concrete added in the mid-20th century. Seeing this raw, damp, and ancient texture anchors the visitor in the physical reality of the old structure, far from modern finishes.

> 💡 The extraction of 1,440 m^3 of concrete revealed brick-laying details that help engineers understand the **hydraulic construction** techniques of the time.

07 Outer Perimeter

The Firebrick Walls

The four-meter-thick walls, built of firebrick and coated with a watertight mortar, protect the cistern from infiltration. Their thermal mass helps maintain a constant and cool temperature inside, even in midsummer. It is an engineering feat that has allowed the structure to survive for 1500 years.

> 💡 The exact composition of the watertight mortar, often based on lime and pozzolana, remains a subject of study for building chemists seeking to reproduce these modern **properties**.

08 Water Surface

Reflections on the Water

Although the water level is kept low for visitor safety, the reflections on the surface remain a central element of the visual experience. They double the image of the columns and light, creating a dizzying symmetry. This is the element that gives the place its dreamlike and photographic quality.

> 💡 Historically, the quality of the water was closely monitored because it supplied the imperial palace; today, it is mainly its **aesthetic appearance** that is valued.

TIPS

Our tips for a perfect visit

TIMING

Arrive before 9:30 AM or after 4 PM to avoid large crowds. Between 10 AM and 3 PM, the high footfall makes the experience less contemplative and photos harder to take.

TICKET

Definitely opt for a 'skip-the-line' ticket. The queues in front of the main entrance can be endless, especially during peak season. Check whether the audio guide is included.

TOUR

Follow the linear route proposed by the walkways. Do not attempt to cut through the columns, as the floor is slippery and the space is confined. Take time to stop at the major points of interest.

PHOTO

Use a lightweight tripod or stabilize your phone against a column to take long exposures. The lighting is low, and reflections on the shallow water require some stability to get sharp images.

BREAK

There is no café inside. Plan a break at one of the many restaurants in Sultanahmet, located less than 5 minutes' walk away, ideally after the visit to digest the emotion of the place.

CHILDREN

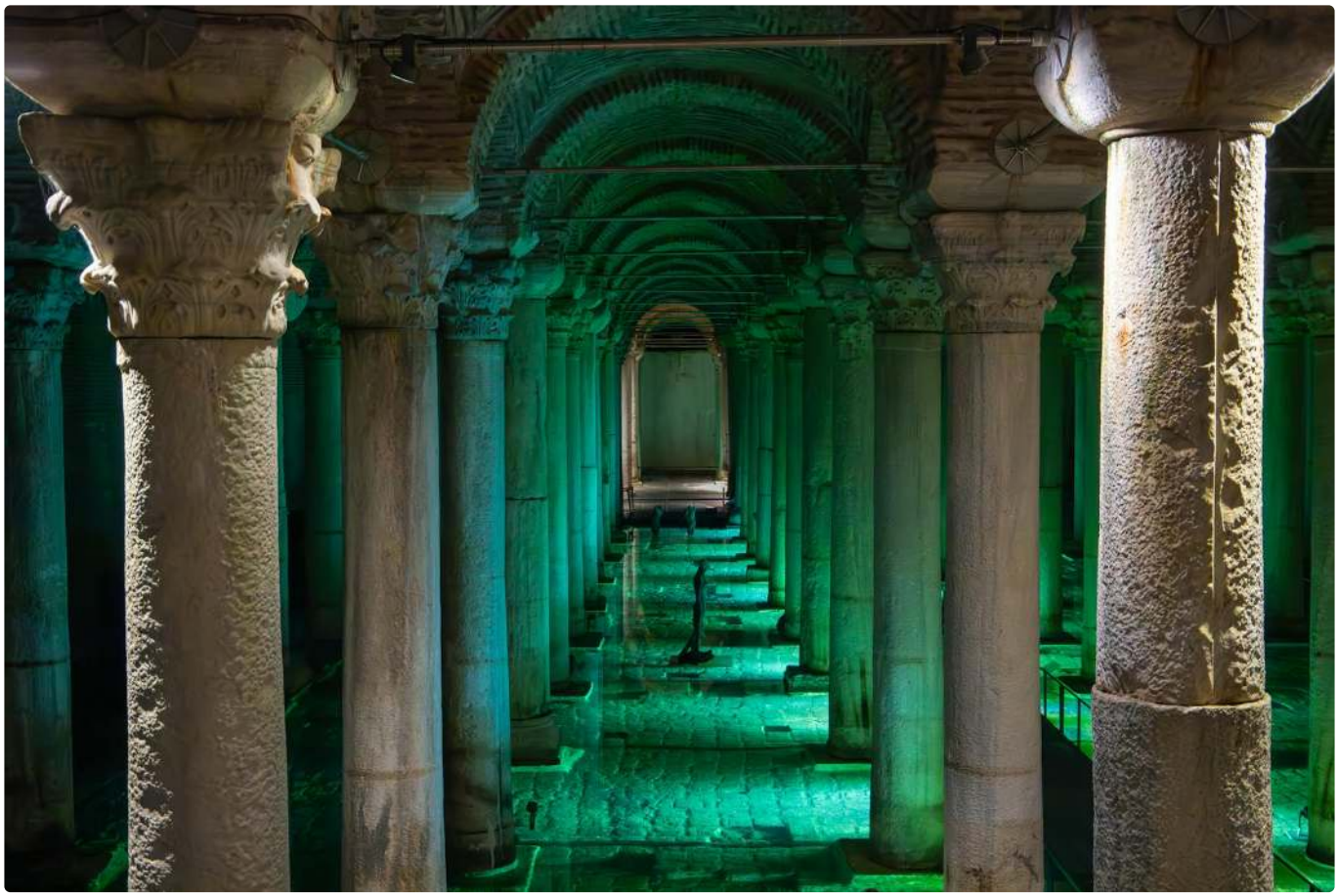
Less suitable for very young children due to the darkness, humidity, and narrow space. Make sure they wear closed-toe shoes and hold your hands firmly on slippery sections.

AUDIOGUIDE

The audioguide is highly recommended and available in French, English, Turkish, and German. It provides the essential historical context to understand the function of the cistern and the origin of the columns, greatly enriching your visit.

COMFORT

Wear closed and comfortable shoes, as the floor is often slippery. Bring a light layer of clothing, as the temperature underground is significantly cooler than outside, even in summer.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

FAQ

Do I really need to book in advance?

Yes, online booking is highly recommended, especially for skip-the-line tickets. Between 10am and 3pm, crowds are at their peak and physical queues can exceed an hour. Buying online guarantees your priority access.

How long before can I cancel?

The cancellation policy depends on the option chosen at purchase. Most flexible tickets allow cancellation up to 24 hours before the visit. Consult the specific conditions of your ticket for more details.

Is there a current promotion?

Promotional offers are regularly available on our platform. We recommend checking the 'Tickets' section just before purchase to take advantage of the best current discounts on skip-the-line or guided options.

Can I combine my ticket with Hagia Sophia?

There are combined passes that include the Basilica Cistern and Hagia Sophia, located only 150 meters from each other. This option is ideal for optimizing your day in the Sultanahmet district and saving on the total cost

How long does the visit last?

Allow approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour to tour the entire cistern. The route is linear, but the immersive atmosphere encourages lingering over the architectural details and the unique acoustics of the place.

DID YOU KNOW?

Anecdotes & curiosities

The misleading name of the Basilica

Contrary to a common misconception, the name 'Basilica' does not come from an underground church. It refers to the **Stoa Basilica**, a vast Roman public square located just above the cistern. This historical detail corrects a frequent confusion among tourists.

The rediscovery by Petrus Gyllius

Forgotten for centuries, the cistern was documented in 1565 by the French traveler Petrus Gyllius. He describes being taken by boat between the columns, seeing fish swimming. This account is the first written evidence of the site's continuous existence for the European public.

Modern seismic restoration

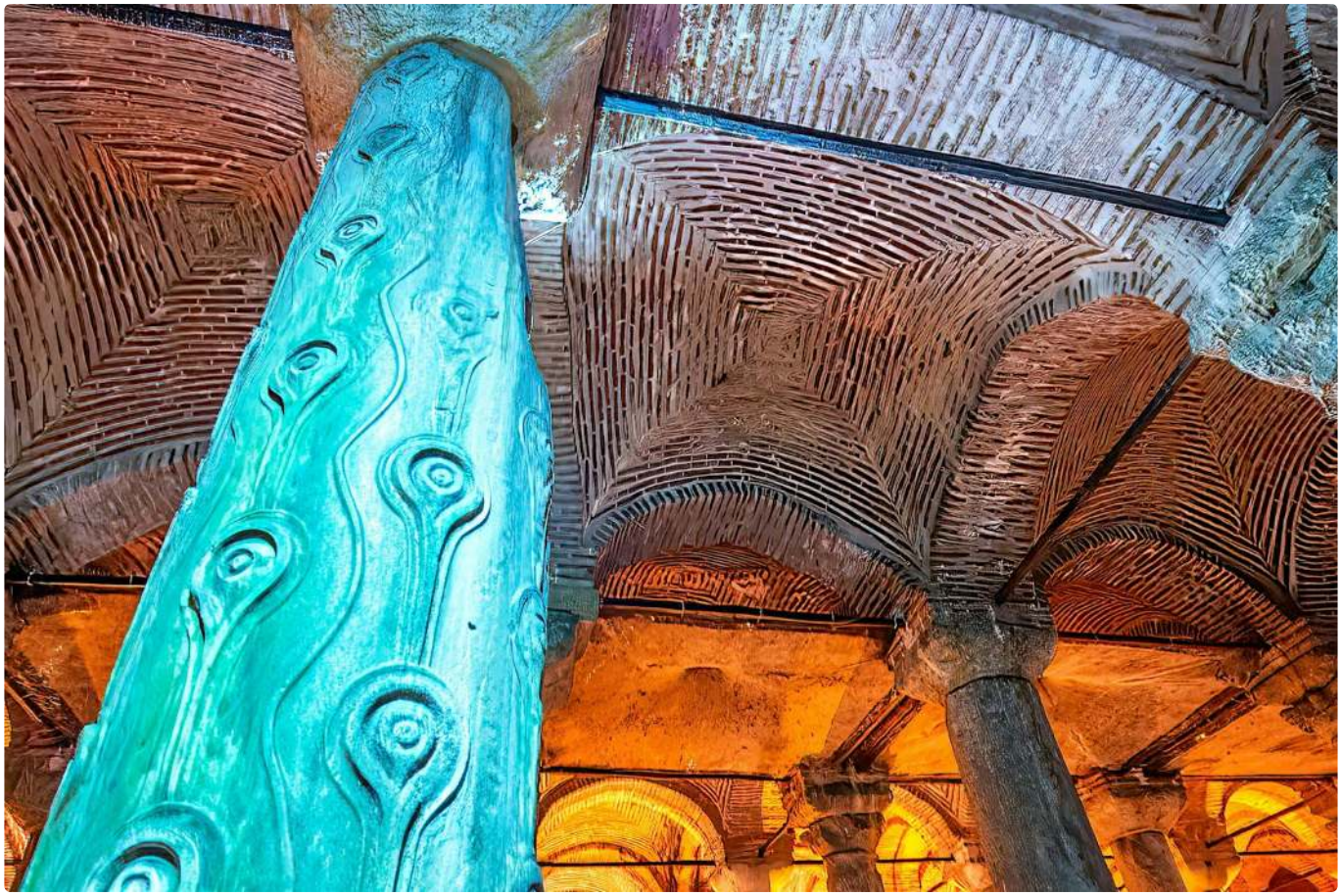
Between 2020 and 2022, the İBB Miras team replaced the old iron rods with stainless steel to enhance earthquake resistance. This technical intervention allowed the original structure to be preserved while ensuring its safety for centuries to come.

50,000 tonnes of silt extracted

The massive restoration carried out in 1985–1987 made it possible to extract 50,000 tonnes of silt that had accumulated over centuries. It was this colossal operation that revealed the bases of columns sculpted with Medusa heads, which had until then been buried under the mud.

AROUND THE MUSEUM

The Basilica Cistern is ideally located in the historic Sultanahmet district, at the heart of the UNESCO World Heritage site. Just 150 meters away stands **Hagia Sophia**, whose airy vastness contrasts magnificently with the cistern's underground confinement. A little further on, the Blue Mosque offers a contemplative break bathed in bluish light, while the Topkapi Palace allows you to extend your immersion into Ottoman imperial history. To refuel, numerous traditional restaurants offer authentic Turkish specialties, such as kebab, allowing you to regain energy after the physical effort of descending. The Grand Bazaar, nearby, is also an excellent option for strolling and buying artisanal souvenirs before returning to your accommodation.



Leaving the Basilica Cistern is like leaving behind a fragment of frozen time. This immersion into Byzantine darkness leaves an indelible mark, far deeper than that of any ordinary tourist site. Whether you are fascinated by ancient architecture or drawn to urban legends, this place offers **absolute contemplation**. Do not forget to return before closing time to capture the last glimmers on the water; it is there that the magic truly works, transforming stone into poetry.