

# Is Istanbul Safe for Tourists Right Now?

YAHOO!  
TRAVEL

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Tourists walk backdropped by the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, better known as the Blue Mosque, in the historic Sultanahmet district of Istanbul, following an explosion nearby, Tuesday, Jan. 12, 2016. (AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis)

A suicide bomber killed 10 people and wounded 15 others on Tuesday morning, when he detonated a device in a popular tourist area of the Turkish capital, Istanbul.

All ten of the people killed by the explosion, that occurred just steps from the historic Blue Mosque, were foreign nationals - many of them German.

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu revealed that the Syrian-born bomber was a member of IS, and he pledged to battle the militant group until it no longer "remains a threat" to Turkey or the world.

But in the wake of the attack, many are left wondering, is Istanbul safe?

Istanbul is the sixth most visited city in the world, straddling both Europe and Asia across the Bosphorus Strait, and one of the richest historic and cultural centers on the planet. Over 12.5 million people traveled to the city last year alone.

And while this is the first time that ISIS has targeted Turkey's tourism industry, worth \$30 billion, the country's proximity to Syria makes it a prime target for attack by terrorist groups operating in the region.

The U.S Consulate General in Istanbul released a statement advising U.S citizens to avoid the area and strongly urged people to "maintain a high level of vigilance, be aware of local events, and take the appropriate steps to bolster your personal security."

Although authorities briefly closed a train station that was closest to the attack, by Tuesday afternoon it had reopened. And all shops and restaurants in the area were business as usual, according to reports.

Tuesday's blast follows three other bombings by ISIS in Turkey last year that killed a total of 136 people and injured over 550 others. Following these attacks, both Germany and Russia issued more stringent travel restrictions on their citizens visiting the country.

**"Future attacks are probably likely in the country, and it is possible that groups like IS will target tourists (while Kurdish and Marxist militant groups typically have targeted military and government facilities, it seems). Many tourists still visit Turkey without incident, though it is important for travelers to understand that Turkey has seen an uptick in attacks in the past year or so,"** says Joseph Mroszczyk, Manager of Intelligence Products and Services for Global Rescue, a travel risk and crisis management firm.

**"Prior to the most recent attacks, I believe the largest threat to tourists in Istanbul came from being caught up in violence surrounding a demonstration. However, the events on January 12th highlight a new level in the threat to Istanbul."**

Meanwhile, the country has also been dealing with escalating violence occurring between Turkish authorities and PKK Kurdish Militants.

Turkey's southern border with Syria has been an increasingly worrisome area, with authorities struggling to control the flow of people between the two countries. This has increased the potential for members of Islamic State and other extremist groups to travel from Syria and Iraq, into Europe.

However the Turkish government has gone to great lengths to protect their citizens and visitors alike from potential attacks. Metal detectors and security checks are in operation in many museums, attractions and shopping malls, while police patrol the popular tourist attractions.

Sadly, religious buildings such as mosques or churches, do not have such measures in place and open public spaces, such as the square in the Sultanahmet district where the bombing took place, are inherently hard to police.

The U.S State Department warns that future attacks are likely, specifically those targeting Westerners.

"Due to a record of past terrorist attacks in Turkey and a continuing threat from both transnational and indigenous groups, the threat level for the possibility of further terrorist attacks against U.S citizens and interests remains critical," they wrote on their website.

"As security is increased at official U.S facilities, terrorists may seek alternative targets, including facilities where U.S citizens and Westerners are known to live, congregate, shop or visit."

If you are currently in Istanbul, or planning to travel to the city, there are several things you can do to maximize your safety. The U.S State Department suggests to:

- Keep a low profile, remain vigilant with regards to your personal security and excursive good judgement.
- Follow local and international news to keep up to date on current events.
- Avoid protests and political gatherings.
- Enroll in the Smart Traveller Enrollment Program (STEP) to receive up to date information and make it easier to reach you in the case of an emergency.

In the event of an emergency, contact the State Department at 1-888-407-4747 toll-free within the United States and Canada, or via a regular toll line, 1-202-501-4444, from other countries. Alternatively, call the U.S Embassy in Ankara on +90 312 455 555.