

The Buyuk Kulup Club of Istanbul

by

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This memo is to summarize a visit that my wife and I undertook to the Buyuk Kulup (“Big Club”) in Istanbul in October 2010.

Club History

The history of the club is provided in a brochure enclosed, but briefly it began in 1882 when it was founded by Sir Alfred Sandison and other influential expats, including many diplomats, living in Istanbul. The club originally included many French members, hence the library has extensive holdings in French and the alternate name of the club is the Cercle d’Orient. The club now has about 6800 members, is growing, and is a social, sports and intellectual club with members drawn from the influential ranks of Istanbul and Turkish society.

Club Facilities and Rules

The club is located on twenty acres on the Asian side of Istanbul, in a high density, expensive and attractive neighborhood, on the shore of the Sea of Marmara. It faces one of the Prince’s Islands. The oldest part of the club is the headquarters, built in French colonial style of white clapboards in the early 1900s. The rest of the club is modern, built in the last 20 to 30 years but recently updated, and consists of two wings and various sports facilities.

The two wings house meeting rooms, including an attractive large room with impressive chandeliers, which will hold up to 350, and various smaller rooms. The second wing (or block) houses two dining rooms, a large card room and bar. One large room is often rented out as an art gallery for temporary art exhibits.

Sports facilities are numerous and include an indoor pool (about 60 x 30 feet), outdoor pool (about 120 x 60 feet), kiddie’s pool, Jacuzzis, full gym with treadmills, elliptical machines, and about 25 machines in all, free weights, table tennis room, pool (billiards) room, four tennis courts, steam room, cold room, hamam (Turkish bath), salt room (where you soak in the salt air for about ½ an hour), and massage rooms.

There is also a large hair salon and barber shop, a boat and swimming dock, and a Zodiac for tending visiting yachts moored offshore.

Classes (usually one hour long) offered regularly to members include Pilates, yoga, martial arts, languages (including Russian, German, English, Spanish and French), dance

(Greek, Turkish and ballroom), “wise and happy living,” computer literacy and web development, and “accessorizing” (jewelry for ladies).

Entertainers, including Turkish singers, local bands, a jazz band, and others, are usually offered three to four nights per week.

There is a library with several thousand volumes, mostly in French, with some Turkish and English.

During the summer there are five eating venues at the club, including two in the main block, one at the outdoor pool, one at the tennis courts, and food can be brought in to the card room. There is no hotel wing, but the club is seriously considering building one on the grounds. In the meantime, the GM can arrange reasonable rates at several nearby hotels. The club is also seeking a second location on the European side of the city, in or near downtown.

The club has a limited reciprocal network of only about twelve clubs around the world, including the Oxford and Cambridge Club and the Landsdowne Club in London and the Princeton/Columbia Club in New York. The Buyuk Kulup is seeking to expand this network.

Dinner at the Baron Restaurant in the club requires jacket and tie, otherwise smart casual attire is acceptable.

Food

We had a lovely meal at the club, eating courses as suggested by the General Manager. The appetizer of smoked raw bonito was cured in salt, yet didn't taste salty, and was excellent. The fried calamari was not tough or rubbery, and was also excellent. I had lamb chops and my wife had lamb loin with eggplant puree, and both were memorable. For desserts we had baklava, ice cream and semolina soaked in honey. The latter was unusual and excellent. We are not wine experts, but the local wine was good and the wine cellar is extensive. Service was terrific. Altogether, we found the food to be notably better than at most of the dozen London and New York reciprocal clubs we have visited, and better than on the Western cruise liner we subsequently sailed on around the Black Sea. And we are tough graders!

Club Membership

Membership in the club is by invitation, and is considered by a committee of fifteen voting and five non-voting persons. Nominations may be taken only from members of at least four years standing, and according to the GM, a careful investigation of each nominee is undertaken, the nominee name is posted for some time on a board and comments taken, and then a decision is made. There is no requirement for publications, but the club seeks only members who, according to the GM, are “outstanding in their fields, and exemplify the spirit and qualities of Ataturk” (the founder of modern,

Western-oriented Turkey). Professions that are well represented include government and diplomatic service, military service, business, journalism, academia, arts, humanities and letters. Women are admitted as full members.

Summary

The Buyuk Kulup draws members from the highest strata of Turkish society and professions, has excellent facilities and cuisine, and does not violate any of our guidelines. The only downsides are the lack of a hotel wing, and the location on the Asian side of town several miles and a ferry ride or bridge crossing from the downtown and historic area. I think the first item is addressed by the fact that the GM is happy to arrange accommodation at nearby hotels (and could probably obtain discounts at the Four Seasons or other historic area hotels). The second item is addressed by the fact that the club location is fashionable and good for business meetings, and the club is seeking a second downtown location.



Club salt bath



One of several club swimming pools

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