

# 10+ Good Reasons to Love Izmir

First published in Bacchus, 2012



*Aquamarine sea, bone white ruins, the smell of tomato sauce in the air and laundry drying in the sun. Antique temples, horse-drawn carriages. A glass tulip, full of tea, in front of an open backgammon board. Breakfast with hard-boiled eggs and fresh tiny cucumbers, salted by the sea breeze. The horns of ships approaching the port. The sun, reflected by the restless water into the faces of the passers by. The charms of Smyrna, even though they have undergone transformations through the centuries, have always proved irresistible.*

In Izmir craftsmen use a special decorative technique. Over a tray of water, they spray pigment. First one colour; then another, and another. The drops of paint, held on the surface by a jelly ingredient in the water, often fall over each other, making colourful rings. Dragging a tiny stick through them, you could shape them into rainbows, leaves, waves, butterflies, before transferring them on paper or stone. If the colours are few, the pattern could imitate marble. If they are more, then they resemble a kaleidoscope – half authored by the chance, half – by a human hand seeking symmetry.

Izmir itself seems to have been created in a similar way. Ethnic groups, religions, languages and empires have settled, one over the other, complementing earlier layers to shape the complex historic pattern of this area, one of the oldest populated in the world. Guided either by human will or by chance.

Contemporary Izmir is surrounded by prehistoric, Lydian, Ionic, Dorian, Hittite, Roman and Byzantine ruins. The hill of its ancient Agora has overgrown with synagogues; the old Jewish

quarter has merged with the Oriental marketplace. The number of mosques has exceeded that of the churches, while the colleges and universities are more numerous than the mosques. The town's symbol – the clock tower, is a trace, left by the Levantines – the Ottoman Empire's Roman Catholic community.

## Alive, alive, alive

On top of all this lays the freshest of Izmir's colours – its modern face, consisting of an endless sea promenade, lush parks and crowded cafes, an expo centre, chic banks, lavish hotels and quiet neighbourhoods. And a network of pedestrian bridges, wide green boulevards, steep narrow streets and plenty of water. Over, under and along this network, there can be seen in motion any and all transportation means apart from spacecrafts: from horse-drawn carriages to metro trains, from ships to elevators between the upper and the lower worlds, from bicycles to airplanes.

The traffic is so intense that if you close your eyes, you see the clock tower in the town's centre as a lighthouse around which, like in one of those slow speed photographs, thousands of lines from the passing lights have intertwined.

Opening your eyes doesn't bring much peace either. To describe what people do at each moment around their town symbol, one needs several dozens of verbs. They sit on benches and watch the clock tower. They take pictures of themselves and use it as a background. They smoke, staring at the sea behind it. They lean their luggage against its stairs. They teach their children to walk. They chase the pigeons. Sell balloons. Wait to meet each other. Point at it to one another. They sunbathe, read chick lit, eat buns and seeds. They cool down at the fountains. They hope that someone will notice their polished shoes. They fix their headscarves, gossip and giggle. They squat, fall and read their palms. They sit in the grass, spreading the circles of their bright skirts. They hug. They complain from their husbands. Show each other their purchases. They wonder why are they still waiting. Lose patience. They write all what they see happening around the clock tower of Izmir.

And this is just a tiny fragment of the town's motions. Upwards, downwards, inwards, outwards, it pulsates, breathes, knocks, lets out steam, blows horns, shouts, stretches and hums. Four million people crawl up and down the hills of Izmir, as many generations and peoples have done for centuries before them. All equally enthusiastic that this town, and this life, belong to them.

## Black&White, Passport

Amongst all the paths, streets and roads of Izmir, Passport is the one that a traveller would remember. Paved in a black and white pattern, the sea promenade in Konak was built in 1877. Leading to a pier, designed by Eiffel at the beginning of the last century, Passport, it seems, was created to become Izmir's public stage. The place where city life evolves and gets displayed. The clock's hands have made many circles since, and life in Izmir is profoundly different now, but here is where its charming antiquity can be seen. It's own, authentic face, which survived the city's modernity.

At eight in the morning the waiters already stand by the neat rows of tables, arranging trolleys with boiled eggs, olives, peeled cucumbers, cherry jam, honey and butter. Moments later their first customers – no-nonsense businessmen, come by, take off their jackets, roll up their sleeves and indulge. By noon women and men of all ages sit across from one another over a glass of tea or beer and play backgammon. Their faces are lit by the sun reflected in the water, their hair flies this way and that in the breezy sea wind. As the night falls, men with trolleys start crawling, their lanterns casting light over heaps of black mussels with lemon, buns and *buzlu badem* – almonds in ice.

Now and then, customers from the tables approach them. They take their snacks, pay quietly, and walk away, as if shyly dissolving in the darkness.

## Izmir, first floor. Izmir, second floor

Izmir might be a town that has more than just two floors. But the elevator ignores this chance. Below, on Dario Moreno street, is the first floor. The second is on the top of the tower, where the lift emerges in the heart of Karataş neighbourhood.

The lift is a bizarre contraption, built in 1907 to give fast access to people from the “upper world” to the seacoast and the town centre. Now the elevator is more than just mere memorabilia. Its brick tower, adorned with an exquisite copper roof, serves as a balcony over the city. A watch-tower from which one can follow the traffic in the port, the movement of the rows and rows of cars along the boulevards and the crowds on the squares, while enjoying a glass of tea.

## With a ball on the street

From afar and from outside, the new Turkish neighbourhoods – vast, ugly mountains of concrete, are hardly attractive. On the streets between the blocks though, still reign the old homeliness and intimacy that many Balkan towns once had and have mostly lost. Here children play with a ball, housewives chat on their balconies. A woman from the terrace on the fifth floor lowers a bucket on a rope – sending her son’s breakfast down “the easy way.” Aromas of home cooking and sounds from the TV are in the air. Life here may not be smart. But it’s quiet, real, and smells of tomato sauce and of linen drying in the sun.

## The ring from the inheritance

At places, it looks as if it’s jewellery that Izmir lives for. Shop after shop after shop, street after street, whole neighbourhoods seem to exist with the sole purpose of crafting and selling rings, bracelets and earrings. And these jewels are to be taken seriously. Opulent, elegant and most of all – original, they are not cheap. But they belong to the type that one would buy just once or twice in one’s life. Their variation and multiplicity is nearly beyond imagination. And even if many of them might be considered too oriental, too golden, too opulent, amongst them one can find the Jewel. The one she wants to be married with, or buried with, or... the one that will be passed to one’s children as inheritance.

## White. Ephesus and Pergamon.

One hundred kilometres to the north and 84 to the south, Pergamon and Ephesus are just two of the numerous antique sites around Izmir. There are another 15 only in the area between them, according to a 1957 map. They are all sizzling under the Anatolian sun and their polished white ruins are reminiscent of scattered bones of dead prehistoric creatures. But they have not always been dead. In fact Ephesus and Pergamon once possessed more spirit than nearly any other place on the planet.

In the last centuries BC, the library of Pergamon came to challenge the Alexandrian one with the grandeur of its collection. In their efforts to retain championship in this literary race, the Ptolemies stopped the export of papyrus. However, this proved to be a crucial mistake – urged by their needs, the locals invented both the parchment (called until nowadays *pergament* in many languages) and the concept of a bound book.

Later, when Marc Antonius decided to give the library of Pergamon to Cleopatra, its rolls and books numbered nearly 200,000. Eventually, moved to the library of Alexandria, they perished together with its collection.

Ephesus, in turn, by the first century BC was the second biggest city in the world, with about 250,000 citizens. Its library, built two centuries after the one in Pergamon, had a modest collection in comparison – only 12,000 rolls. But its Artemis temple attracted through the centuries numerous pilgrims, amongst whom Alexander the Great, Marc Antonius, Saint Paul, and, allegedly, Joan the Baptist and Virgin Mary – the latest, many believe, was buried here and her tomb is now a major pilgrimage site.

The best remembered names from ancient history crossed their ways here.

## Aquamarine, Çeşme and Foça

The sea around Izmir is for any taste or pocket. Foça, 70 kilometres to the north, is a small fishermen’s village at the entrance of the deep bay of Izmir. The evenings there liven both the shore and the sea. The dinners take place both in the simple, pleasant restaurants along the shore and on the boats in the water, where people spread newspapers over small tables and set on them the traditional Turkish still life, composed of fish, mezes and *yeni raki*, their alcoholic anise drink.

The cats constantly cross from one side to the other, apparently more attracted to the smell of fresh fish than worried by the risk of a sudden sailing away to sea.

This idyllic rural picture is in sharp contrast with Çeşme. There the always fresh, aquamarine sea that divides the peninsula from the nearby Greek island of Chios, is accessible mainly via the luxurious beaches of chic hotels of the type, where one is torn between the allure of infinity swimming pools and the charm of the long wooden platforms, ending in the clear, shiny waters of the sea.

## Black, Karaburun

From Çeşme to Fethiye, the Turkish seaside is well known, taken over by different types of tourism, and has some great advantages. But one that it has lost is its authenticity. If one wishes to be not just at the seaside, but feel very much in Turkey, Karaburun is a good choice. From Urla, 30 kilometres south of Izmir, the road leads away from the highway to Çeşme and starts following the coastline of a long peninsula, hardly touched by tourism. Fishermen's villages, rocky mountains ending in pristine beaches, a few villages, and here and there – ignorable signs of Turkey's planned development, clusters of concrete villas above the sea.

The villages consist of a few boats in a bay, a small market where artichokes are sold in gigantic bouquets from water basins, a post office, a teahouse and a dozen of unattractive houses.

Ten kilometres beyond the village of Karaburun is the last settlement, Yeniliman. Here is where the road ends and the GPS goes mad. "Take the first chance to make a u-turn. Take the first chance..." The sequence of beaches continues nearly till the cape of the peninsula. The last hotel, Lipsos, is on one of them, beyond the village and the paved road. It's accommodation comfort could not be compared with a five-stars hotel, but its dinners and breakfasts (included in the price) very well could. Plentiful, freshly prepared and entirely local, they are rejoiced over by people (many of them – Istanbulites) and cats.

## The blue eyes of Turkey

Blue eyes, with a bit of white and with sharp black pupils, they watch you from each and every side. From walls, lamps, jewellery, hung on curtains, on strollers, on dogs' leashes. Imbedded in stairs, facades, also in pens, tooth brushes, fridge magnets, glasses, furniture, even cakes or cans, so that at the end the world starts looking like a creature, on which eyes grow like cherries on a tree.

If they cause some dizziness with their multiplicity, this means they have served their purpose. For their aim is to protect from evil. Turks share this picturesque superstition with the Greeks, and at this point some would point out that both the nations have lived through quite some evil in their history. Including some, which they caused to each other. Anyway, history has hardly discouraged Turks to believe in their blue eyes. And to generously offer their protection to friends and guests – it is enough to hang around a bit, and one soon find himself almost buried under their love and guardianship.

# U.S. gourmet raw food craze hits Belgium

First published by Latitude News, Boston, 2014



They peel, cut and grind. They squeeze, mince and press. They assemble incredible collections of vegetables and fruits and process them into smoothies. They soak seeds, wait until they become slightly sleazy and dehydrate them into "crusts." They grind nuts and turn them into "milk," then age this "milk" into "cheese."

Watching Tom Leenders and Sarah Leisdovich cook at their restaurant Eten vol leven (Food, full of life) in the Belgian city of Antwerp, you realize quickly that raw food requires more cooking than cooked food.

Eating raw vegan food was first promoted as a health protocol at the end of the 19th century in Europe. Swiss physician Maximilian Bircher-Benner, convinced of its healing powers, founded a whole medical movement. His methods, which continue to be applied at the sanatorium he founded an hour from Zurich, influenced the lifestyles of Europeans for decades. So did his famous food invention muesli. His main conviction was that food should not be used to satisfy hunger or to feast upon, but to keep the human body healthy.

It was in the 20th century, while Europe was engulfed in two World Wars and the following years of reconstruction, that Bircher-Benner's ideas were developed further in the United States.

Weston Andrew Valleau Price revisited them in his book *Nutrition and Physical Degeneration*, insisting that the modern Western diet contained many deficiencies. Price was followed in the 1970s by Viktoras Kulvinskis, whose cookbook, *Survival into the 21st Century*, is considered to be the first Western raw food book, or at least the one to bring the diet into mainstream consciousness.

The American "second wave" inspires an eager Belgian raw food community.

Vegan raw foodists define themselves by excluding all meat, fish, poultry, eggs and dairy products, as well as any food that has been heated to above 104F from their diets. But in the U.S. over the last 15 years, vegan raw foodism has been aspiring to be something more than a set of restrictions. Chefs in California, New York and Oregon have been working on adding a gourmet touch to the diet. These innovators describe what they are doing as making raw food taste cooked. And their ideas have turned Tom and Sarah's lives around.

She is a philosopher, he is an architect. They grew up in the heart of Europe, Belgian Flanders. They could easily have spent their lives immersed, respectively, in obscure intellectual pursuits and at any one of the exquisite design studios of Belgium. Instead, they fell for vegan raw food, stepped off of their prestigious career paths, and opened a miniscule restaurant.

Some of the customers they cater to in the port city of Antwerp are just curiosity seekers, but there is also a burgeoning Belgian raw food community. Their restaurant, *Eten vol leven*, is the first one of its sort in the country, but it is one of a growing number of new enterprises uniting the followers of this trend. Workshops, online stores for specialized products, the website *Belgium Goes Raw*, a restaurant — all of this points to an upsurge of Belgian interest in this lifestyle.

It's not the first time Belgium has responded to American dietary influence. The contemporary raw food movement here makes little reference to its European history. Tom says that perhaps 95 percent of the literature and other sources of information used by raw foodists is American. This includes the work of Ann Wigmore, founder of Hippocrates Health Institute, Victoria Boutenko, inventor of green smoothies, and dozens of other American proponents of raw foodism. Tom claims that in Belgium you can still track down a significant community of raw food eaters from a previous generation known as *De groene dag* (The Green Day). This group was also inspired by an American trend, but one that came from the States in the 1960s.

First wave emphasized ethics and health, new wave is about taste.

Taste is what drew Sarah and Tom into this lifestyle. Their eureka moment was in the *Verdellama* restaurant in Buenos Aires. "We found the menu so delightfully festive," recalls Tom. "And then, we stepped outside so incredibly full of energy — an experience, which is not typical when you step out of a traditional Italian restaurant, for instance."

A post-meal conversation with the chef, Diego Castro, felt to Tom like a revelation. "In the 10 minutes that we spoke he told me more important things than I had found in the numerous books

I had read." Diego Castro was trained in New York, by David Jubb at his Jubb's Longevity. Tom and Sarah got inspiration there as well — a visit to a top New York raw food restaurant (since closed) helped them realize that this food could be haute cuisine.

*Eten vol leven*, which opened a year ago, offers a mix of simple and more complex dishes. There are traditional and unusual smoothies, such as one featuring dandelions mixed with a generous dose of kiwi. This particular smoothie is meant to convey a key piece of raw foodist ideology: the greener and the wilder, the better — it tastes slightly bitter, but it is very refreshing. A staple of the restaurant, buckwheat crusts with cashew and macadamia cheese, tastes surprisingly like ... ham, with a rich, pungent aroma.

"This is the thing about raw food," explains Tom. "People associate it with tasteless, rough food, but it can actually make the best out of the products concerning taste. Look at one popular example: the sun dried tomato. Are they not like little taste bombs, with all the vitamins preserved in them?"

While taking inspiration from the latest wave of gourmet raw foodism, Tom and Sarah are not uncritical of it. "They tend to overuse nuts. We try to deal with this issue in our menu by maintaining the proportion of 80 percent carbohydrates, 10 percent proteins, and 10 percent fat." This rule, authored by Florida-based Dr. Douglas Graham, is often defined as the most ascetic vegan raw diet.

In the end, though perhaps fashionable, this is a diet that people often come to after having health problems. Or as Tom puts it, "I know many people who wouldn't stick to any raw, vegan, or even vegetarian diet on daily basis. But they turn to it once they feel bad."