This week’s dream: A thriving, reinvented Istanbul

“Istanbul is no longer just the spot where Europe meets Asia,” said Suzy Hansen in Condé Nast Traveler. Over the past decade, this ancient city has thrived while many Western capitals have struggled, and the streets have come alive with “the thrum of creative ferment.” Some of this is due to new leadership. Turkey’s “charismatic” prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has unleashed long-suppressed capitalist energies, but he is also an Islamic conservative who’s encouraged all of his constituents to stop ignoring their cultural history and start celebrating it. Suddenly, “everyone wants to be here,” from rural Turks seeking jobs to artists seeking simply to breathe in Istanbul’s special atmosphere. The city these days is so diverse and vibrant, it’s “as if someone had dribbled bits of Berlin and New York and Barcelona onto a seaside Islamic wonderland.”

Nowhere is the change more apparent than in Karakoy, a neighborhood in the Beyoglu district. Five years ago, I was afraid of Karakoy’s “weird little streets.” Friends claimed that the area teemed with prostitutes and drug dealers, and Karakoy felt like “the rotting underbelly of a faded Constantinople, home to everything creepy and half-dead.” Not anymore. One evening last spring, I attended an art opening that spilled out the gallery doors, with DJs set up in the street and surrounded by foreigners and Turks drinking wine. To get there, I’d navigated “an architectural jungle” that included a 16th-century mosque, Greek churches, traditional teahouses, a few hoo-kah hangouts, and bars where blond socialites rubbed elbows with hipsters.

I now live in Beyoğlu and have watched the area transform “at lightning speed.” If I leave for a week, “I return to discover that my deli has become a secondhand-glasses shop, that the old-school one-oven bakery is now a high-end burger joint.” Whenever I enter one of the area’s beautiful art nouveau buildings, I now know to expect that it will be newly renovated, with “high-quality tile beneath my feet and recently uncovered 100-year-old paintings on the wall.” Everywhere one feels “the excitement of an ancient place that seems somehow fresh and new.”

At Beyoğlu’s Witt Istanbul Hotel (wittistanbul.com), doubles start at $208.

Hotel of the week

Villa Orsula
Dubrovnik, Croatia

We’ve found “the perfect place to sit and watch Dubrovnik’s Old Town come to life each morning,” said Adam McCulloch in Departures. Built in 1939 as a private mansion, this 11-room, two-suite hotel was thoroughly refurbished last year yet still has the look of a Venetian estate—“with cascading gardens leading down a cliff to the Adriatic Sea.” There’s “something utterly romantic” about waking up to such views in a contemporary room, then taking your coffee on the breakfast terrace. As you look down on Old Town, gnarled grapevines provide a soothing canopy.

Getting the flavor of...

New Mexico’s artists haven
Taos, N.M., is a town of “remarkable women,” said Jay Jones in the Chicago Tribune. To mark New Mexico’s centennial, this still-modest alpine settlement is celebrating several women who helped shape its history. A few arrived well ahead of indoor plumbing: Former New Yorker Mabel Dodge Luhan, who founded an artists retreat that still takes guests, came to town in 1916, before “doing the unthinkable”—marrying a Native American. Lucy Harwood, whose home is now a contemporary art museum, arrived the same year. Oil heiress and model Millicent Rogers, a 1947 arrival, also has a namesake museum, where her turquoise jewelry collection shares space with other examples of Southwestern art. Among the other free thinkers drawn to Taos were “some of the biggest names” of the 20th-century avant-garde, including painter Georgia O’Keeffe. The town’s busy gallery calendar suggests that her legacy in Taos also lives on.

Indie-minded Ithaca
Ithaca, N.Y., is so free-spirited that it even has an alternative currency, said Melanie D.G. Kaplan in The Washington Post. On a recent stopover in this upstate college town, I made it a mission to celebrate the place’s spirit by finding businesses that accept the colorful-looking bills, called Ithaca Hours. Created in 1991 to encourage local purchasing, the currency isn’t accepted by as many business owners as it once was. But I was able to use it at the Ithaca Bakery, GreenStar Natural Foods Market, Collegetown Bagels, and even at La Tourelle Resort & Spa, where I stayed. As home to Cornell University and Ithaca College, Ithaca is “as dense with brainpower as it is with composting bins,” so I grew confident that a few locals could resuscitate Ithaca’s currency by creating a debit card version. They could think it through while exploring the many trails, gorges, and waterfalls that make their lifestyle seem so worth preserving.

Last-minute travel deals

Haunted Milwaukee
Until month’s end, Milwaukee’s grand, century-old Pfister Hotel is offering couples a “Room with a Boo” for just $226, to honor a ghost guests claim to have spotted. The offer includes a “boo” berry pancake breakfast.

For art-loving leaf peepers
As leaf colors peak in Massachusetts’s Berkshire Hills, the Porches Inn at Mass MoCA is offering doubles starting at $159 per weeknight. Created from a row of Victorian houses, the inn is decorated in a style it calls “industrial granny chic.”

National ‘Cruise Week’
Bargains abound on various cruise lines during National Cruise Vacation Week, Oct. 21-27. For example, AMA Waterways is offering discounts of up to $1,000 on staterooms, plus $250 in shipboard credit.