

LILY CHEN '16 VISITS SABANCI UNIVERSITY IN ISTANBUL



Inside the Hagia Sophia

My trip to Istanbul this past spring break was one of the most amazing experiences I've had at MIT. As part of the MIT-Sabanci University Freshman Scholars Program, I was one of eight MIT sophomores, chosen based on freshman year academic performance, who visited Sabanci University in Istanbul over spring break. Our counterparts from Sabanci are currently visiting MIT this week on their spring break. While in Istanbul, we sat in on classes at Sabanci, made new friends, and toured the city, visiting historic mosques and bazaars, and experiencing the rich culture (and cuisine!) of Turkey.

Sabanci University is beautiful, with a sprawling, tree-lined campus an hour outside of Istanbul. Classes there are not unlike MIT classes, with lectures, recitations, and labs. The language of instruction at Sabanci is English, so as to attract world-class faculty who might not speak Turkish. My fellow MIT students and I enjoyed attending classes on such varied topics as computer science, biology, art history, and visual art. It was a welcome break from our normal routines of taking mostly classes in our majors. My favorites were the classes on game theory and typographical design.

Most classes at Sabanci have two- or three-hour-long lectures, much longer than the typical one-hour lecture here at MIT. The instructors would give the class a 10- to 15-minute long break in the middle of class, to allow for students to ask questions, get coffee, or simply socialize. This was surprisingly effective at keeping everyone focused throughout the lecture. In visiting classes at Sabanci, I realized how well MIT has prepared all of us in the STEM fields: my friend Kathryn and I, neither of us physics majors, were able to listen in on a graduate-level laser optics class and understand nearly everything.

The city of Istanbul is truly a marvel to behold. Known variously as Byzantium, Augusta Antonia, Nova Roma, and Constantinopolis over the millennia, its current name comes from *istimbolin*, a Greek phrase meaning “in the city.” And it deserves every bit of that name. As a born-and-bred New Yorker, I was impressed by the sheer magnitude of Istanbul, which seemed to dwarf even New York City. Our host, Sabanci University's President Nihat Berker (an MIT Course 5 alum and Professor Emeritus of Physics), took us to see the historic Hagia Sophia, which had served as a Byzantine basilica, an Ottoman mosque, and now a museum. We saw the Basilica Cistern, a huge underground reservoir for water from the Roman aqueducts, which are still visible around the city today. We visited the Topkapi and Dolmabahçe palaces, which had housed the Ottoman sultans and their harems in splendor and opulence for centuries.



In front of the Dolmabahçe Palace

(L to R): Kathryn Brink, Harun Reza Sugito, Sheela Devadas, Tyler Gray, Felipe Hernandez, me, Songtai Li, Kathleen Xu

We walked through local marketplaces and tried *dondurma*, a Turkish dessert resembling sticky, chewy ice cream, traditionally served by street vendors who serve the ice cream on a long stick and pull it away or toss it around several times before finally handing it to the customer. We sampled delicious Turkish dishes like stuffed apricots, eggplant with yogurt, *baklava*, and lamb kebabs. We took a boat cruise up and down the Bosphorus straight, which separates Europe from Asia, and enjoyed a meal of fish caught in the Black Sea. Several of us fell in love with sour cherry juice, a ubiquitous drink in Turkey, and took up drinking it with every meal for the rest of spring break.

When it came time to return home, I was truly sad to go. My trip to Istanbul and Sabanci University has been a remarkable once-in-a-lifetime experience. I got to know my companions from MIT well, and made friends with the Sabanci students who are now visiting Boston. I'm very excited to someday visit Turkey again and explore even more of its culture and history!