

History of the Turkish Flag

The Flag of the Republic of Turkey

The Turks have had numerous flags during their long history and the crescent was on almost every one of them. Turks are Muslims, and many Muslim countries display crescents of different shapes and colors on their flags because the flag of the Ottomans displayed three crescents on a green background.

The Ottomans started to use one crescent and a star on their flags, similar to the current Turkish flag, after the 16th century. There's a great story behind the color and symbols on the Turkish flag, which was officially adopted on May 29, 1936. The story goes as one of the great Sultans, Yavuz Sultan Selim (father of Suleiman the Magnificent), went to war with the Mameluks in Egypt in 1517.

He defeated the Mameluks and added Egypt to the Ottoman Territories. The evening after the victory, Sultan Selim wandered around the battlefield and saw a puddle of his men's blood. The moon and a star reflected in the blood in a shape similar to the current Turkish flag. Sultan Selim was so impressed from that combination that he ordered an image of the reflection to be used as the Turkish flag.

Turkish holidays

Official holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day yeni yıl

National holidays

- April 23: National Sovereignty and Children's Day
- May 19: Atatürk, Commemoration and Youth & Sports Day
- August 30: Victory Day, Zafer Bayramı
- October 29: Republic Day, Cumhuriyet Bayramı

Religious holidays

Seker Bayramı: A three-day festival when sweets are eaten to celebrate the end of the fast of Ramadan. Also known as Ramazan Bayramı.

Kurban Bayramı: A four-day festival when sacrificial sheep are slaughtered and their meat is distributed to the poor.

Seker Bayram (Sugar Holiday) in Turkey

Seker Bayram, after the fast of Ramazan, is a time for visiting family and eating sweets.

Seker Bayram, or the "sugar festival," is celebrated by Muslims at the end of Ramazan, the fasting month for Muslims. It lasts three and a half days. It is a national religious holiday in Turkey. Schools and government offices are closed during those days. It is traditional to wear new outfits during Bayram (meaning festival), so

parents get new clothes for their children. Many children are excited about wearing their new clothes on the first day of the festival. The house is completely cleaned a few days before the festival.

The First Day: The first day of Şeker Bayramı is the most important. Everybody wakes up early and the men go to the mosque for the special Bayram prayer. After returning from the mosque, all of the family members dress up nicely, mostly with new clothes. The Bayram visits are another important tradition that is practiced.

Ramazan Visits: Young people visit their elders first. The other relatives, neighbors and friends are also visited. Due to those visits, the traffic is quite busy on the first day of the festival. Bayram visits are kept very short, 10 to 15 minutes. Mostly candy, chocolates, Turkish coffee and cold beverages are offered to visitors. People who cannot visit their friends and family members in other towns make telephone calls or send cards celebrating the festival. Children normally love Bayram visits and would like to visit as many elders as they can because it's traditional for elders to give pocket money to the children. Children can easily collect pocket money for one month. The best part for the children is that there is no restriction on how much they can spend and how they spend it. Therefore, amusement parks are set up in almost every town during the festival.

Ramazan Tipping: Kapıcı (doormen or superintendents of apartment buildings), trash collectors and Ramazan drummers often knock on doors during the Şeker Bayram festival expecting gifts or tips.

Cemetery Visits: Another tradition practiced during the festival is visiting the graves of deceased family members. The visits to graveyards start one day prior to the festival and continue during the festival.

Gifts and Congratulations: If you visit your Turkish friends, a box of candy or chocolate would be the most appropriate gift to take. The phrase for wishing your Turkish friends' a happy holiday is "İyi Bayramlar" (ee-ye-by-rahm-lahr), which means "good festivals" or "I wish you a happy festival."

Ramazan Names: Another tradition in Turkey is to give boys born during Bayram the name "Bayram," just like giving the name "Ramazan," to boys born during Ramazan. Another name for the festival is "Ramazan Bayramı." In Arabic, the holiday is called "İd-ul Fitr." The name "Şeker Bayram" or "sugar festival" probably comes from the tradition of exchanging sweets during the holiday.

Typically, shops are closed on the first day of the festival, but they open up again on the second day. When you visit Turkish friends or encounter children during Şeker Bayram, you'll often see them kiss your hand and place it on their forehead as they bow to you. It's a Turkish tradition for children to show respect for elders in that way. They put the back of your hand against their forehead to show you that you have a position, "at the top of their head." The correct response is to kiss the child on both cheeks as a sign of love and sympathy for them. You'll then often see the children put out their hands afterward, expecting a bit of pocket change. It's traditional to give the child a coin or some coins when they do this.

Kurban Bayramı: The Sacrifice Holiday

Every year, about 3.5 million Muslims travel from all over the world to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage called Hajj, which is the fifth pillar of Islam. Hajj is obligatory at least once in a lifetime for every Muslim, male or female, in fairly good health, for those who are financially capable and secure. In fulfilling this service, Muslims express their devotion to Allah. The pilgrimage is an annual event attended by Muslims from all over the world.

During this time, the Muslim world gets ready to celebrate the Edu-I-Adha, or Festival of Sacrifice, which falls on the 10th day of the last month of the Islamic calendar. Eid, short for Edu-I-Adha, means recurring happiness or festivity, a day of peace and thanksgiving, a day of forgiveness and moral victory, a day of good harvest and remarkable achievements and a day of festive remembrance.

The climax of Hajj is marked by offering a sacrifice, to celebrate the completion of the Hajj and feed the poor. It is done by Muslims whether they went to Mecca or not. According to Muslims, the tradition is based on an event where Abraham was ordered to sacrifice one of his two sons. According to the Muslims, this son was Ishmael, while according to the Old Testament, it was Isaac. As Abraham was about to sacrifice his own son in obedience to God, God provided a ram to offer in substitution. The offering of the sacrifice has become an annual celebration to commemorate the occasion and thank God for his favors.

The first day of the festival, thousands of sheep, goats and calves will be slaughtered by Turks celebrating Kurban Bayram. The animal should be at least one year old and healthy. You can see sheep sacrificed in all kinds of places: the garden, driveway, back yard, streets and even on balconies. This is especially true during the first day of the festival. You can also see animals sacrificed on the second and third day of the festival. All family members wake up early to make their final preparations on the festival's first day. Male members go to the mosque to perform the special Bayram Namazi, sacrifice festival prayer. The actual sacrifice begins after the men return from the mosque. The head of the family is expected to perform the sacrifice, but a butcher can also be used to perform the ritual on their behalf. The animal is given water and salt, its eyes are wrapped with a clean rag and it is turned to face Mecca. Verses are recited from the Koran, and then the animal's throat is cut.

The meat is then divided into three portions. One portion is given to the poor, another portion to neighbors and relatives and the third portion is kept for the household. The skin of the animal is donated and the income obtained from the skins is shared with various social welfare organizations. Another tradition practiced is visiting the graves of deceased family members. That is mostly done one day prior to the festival. Therefore, the cemeteries are very crowded on that day. Friends, neighbors, and relatives visit each other celebrating the festival. Traditionally, people offer cologne, candy and Turkish coffee during those visits. Children might be given pocket money as well. Kapıcıs (door keepers or apartment superintendents) are also tipped during the festival.

"Bayramınız Kutlu Olsun!" (Buy-rahm-ihn-iz Koot-loo-ol-soon) or "İyi Bayramlar!" (ee-yee-by-rahm-lahr" are the phrases you should use to wish your Turkish friends a happy sacrifice festival.

Bargaining with Turkish Shopkeepers

Bargaining with shopkeepers is a common practice in Turkey.

Turkish people are very generous and hospitable. They like to please their guests and customers. All the merchants consider their foreign customers to be guests of Turkey before they consider them as a customer. Customers will be offered Turkish tea, coffee and soda at many shops. People should feel free to accept these gifts. Customers should not think they should buy something from that shop just because they drink a beverage. It is very normal and natural for people here. If you are not thirsty, kindly tell them that you have just had a drink at another shop or that you are not thirsty at all. They will not be offended.

Some shops may offer beer or other alcoholic beverages. Think twice before accepting their offer.

Traditionally, Turkish people do not offer alcoholic beverages to their customers. After the second or third alcoholic beverage you may feel over the clouds and end up buying something you do not need or might be overcharged. Besides, consuming alcohol in shops is against the law, except in restaurants, bars and discos. From time to time there may be some shop agent outside the gate or in the alley trying to convince you to go their shop in Adana. They claim they have higher quality goods, with lower prices in their shops. Do not trust them. Find your own shop for shopping.

Bargaining is part of the shopping experience here and it can be fun. Some shops have fixed prices and they will not lower them. If you ask for a bargain, they will not be offended. Most of the shops bargain with their customers.

When you go window shopping, the shopkeepers or attendants will try to help you and invite you inside the shop. If you do not want to go inside you can easily say "Sadece bakıyorum" (sah-de-jeh-buck-ee-your-umm), which means "I am only looking."

The Nazar, "Evil Eye" and Other Superstitions in Turkey

A Nazar hangs on the entrance of an apartment building to protect its tenants from bad luck or the "Evil Eye."

Throughout Turkey, you'll see a blue, yellow and white ornament, which looks roughly like an eye. They are often displayed in shops, houses and it's believed that some people have power in their looks that can harm other people, domestic animals, goods and properties. To have the "evil eye," is not the person's fault, it can come upon anyone. Once a person has the "evil eye," he or she can unintentionally bring harm to whomever or whatever he or she looks at. It's also believed that this power comes from the eyes, the two exit points of the soul. This ornament is worn or displayed as a protector from that "evil eye."

The history of the "evil eye," goes back before the Muslim religion's emergence in the Middle East, and is seen among the Arabs, Iranians, Greeks, Indians and even in Ancient Egypt. Blue-bead eyes are attached to children, to valuable animals, houses, vehicles and properties. A chain of blue-bead eyes is attached to the forehead of larger animals. Lovers also give each other blue-beads with the hope these beads will protect their loved ones.

In addition to blue beads, some other objects are also used for that purpose. To protect fruit trees and fields from the "evil eye," an animal's skull is placed by the tree or field. Horseshoes, garlic, and children's shoes can also be seen hanging in trucks, buses and houses. Eggshells are also used as protection from the "evil-eye," but they're only used for beautiful flowers.

Some framed inscriptions hanging in houses and painted on large trucks and other vehicles are used to avert "evil eyes," from the houses and vehicles, or to bring the protection of God. Of those inscriptions "Masallah" means "what (wonders) God has willed," "Allah Korusun" means "may God protect from all evil."

Fortune Telling with Coffee

Many Turkish women can read a person's fortune from the coffee grounds at the bottom of the cup. Fortune telling out of coffee cups after drinking Turkish coffee is a common, popular and ancient art in Turkey. Not everybody can read the coffee cups, but it is quite popular especially among women. There is a Turkish proverb that says "the memories of a cup of coffee are good for forty years." In order to prolong their visit, women generally ask each other to read their coffee cups.

The way it works is you put the saucer on top of the coffee cup after you have finished. Then, shake the cup slightly and turn it so the saucer and cup are upside down. Let the cup cool a while and hand it to the fortune teller. The fortune teller predicts the future according to the designs and shapes the coffee sediment creates in the cup. No two fortune tellers ever agree on the meaning they see in the grounds.

A wide variety of subjects may be seen, such as finance, travel, politics, love and matrimony. If the teller knows the subject the individual is interested in, the fortune usually gets a more accurate forecast.

Some people make fortune telling out of coffee cups professionally and make a living out of it. Here are some of the more popular interpretations you might search for if you want to become a fortune teller:

- Large white spaces mean peace of mind
- A vertical white line down the side of the cup is a snake symbol meaning bad luck.
- A white, uninterrupted circle around the top of the cup means travel, but if it is blocked by a patch of black, it means you'll have to turn back before the journey is completed or cancel it at the last minute.
- Some white lines are also interpreted as travel. A long line means a long trip; a short line means a short trip
- A white pigeon-shape is a good sign meaning happiness or you will receive good news soon. Sometimes the fortune tellers give an estimated time of receiving that news as well depending on the black spots they see around the pigeon-like shape.
- A horse-shape is a sign your wishes will come true.
- A big gate and white space after means you will solve your problems.
- Lumps on the side mean money.
- A big lump at the bottom of the cup means problems.

There is another Turkish saying about fortune telling: "don't believe in fortune telling, but don't disregard it, either!"

Black cats get a bad rap in Turkey

Turkey has been inhabited for more than 10,000 years, and more than 30 civilizations have passed through this country. Turkey is considered a mosaic of cultures and beliefs. Therefore, we have hundreds of superstitions in Turkey.

Different regions have different superstitions, and some acts that may be considered good by one region are considered bad in another. For example, if an owl hoots on the roof of a house, some regions believe the family will receive a message, while another region sees it as a signal of bad luck or death. Despite the regional differences, there are many common superstitions. Some of them are very similar to superstitions in European countries or in America. Here are some of the most common superstitions:

- Walking under a ladder will bring bad luck.
- If a person breaks a mirror, he will have bad luck for seven years or somebody in his family will die. To prevent this, pieces of the broken mirror should be buried immediately.
- If a black cat passes in front of you, it will bring bad luck.
- If someone hands a cutting utensil, like a knife or scissors, directly to someone, they will fight. To prevent a fight, the giver should put the utensil on the ground, a table, desk or chair, so the receiver can pick it up.
- You should get out of the bed from the right side so that your day starts well.
- You should enter your house with your right foot so you will have happiness in your house.
- A shop owner enters his establishment with his right foot so he'll get good business.
- You should not cut your nails at night. Turkish people believe that you will shorten your life for shortening your nails at night.
- You shouldn't whistle at night because it brings evil.
- You shouldn't sweep your house at night. Sweeping at night brings poverty to the house.
- Washing clothes on Saturday brings bad luck.
- If a woman with a headache enters a mosque and sweeps it with her scarf, her headache will go away.
- If a dog barks during the call for prayer, someone in the neighborhood will die.
- If you light a cigarette with a candle, a sailor will die at sea.
- If you see a snake on your way somewhere, it's a sign of good luck.

- If you measure a baby's length, the baby will remain short.
- If a person steps over a baby, it's considered bad luck since babies are assumed to be angels.
- If a young girl wears a married man's ring, she will have bad luck in her marriage.
- If a woman eats eggs during her pregnancy, her child will be very naughty.

Here are a few superstitions specific to particular regions:

- In Çorum, people believe one who can eat pomegranate without dropping the pieces will go to heaven.
- In Eceabat and Canakkale, people place a spoon into the Kaşıkçı Baba, a Turkish holy man's tomb, so their wishes will come true.