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An international affair: The IWI Christmas Bazaar

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The Christmas Bazaar is one of two fundraising events, along with an annual Spring Ball, held by the IWI, which assists a variety of charities that benefit women, children, the underprivileged and the infirm. Members and supporters donate food, prizes, books, time and money.

shopping fever, but no one becomes angry. Christmas is in the air and the spirit is infectious.

These shoppers have come for the annual Christmas Bazaar organized by the International Women of Istanbul, or IWI. For nearly 40 years, Turks and expatriates alike have flocked to this event.

"The bazaar has become famous among the Turkish/Istanbul community because of the possibility of buying foreign products," IWI Vice-Chairwoman Esbie Van Heerden explains. "In the early 1970s, it was nearly impossible to buy imported things such as instant coffee. So in those days, people came to buy things that were not available in shops, but which IWI members could get their hands on. I understand that people literally stormed the tables and the ballroom was completely bare at the end of the day."

Certainly at today's bazaar, there is a bit of a scramble. At least a dozen people hover about a table selling French wine, sausage and pâté. At other tables, shoppers vie for Belgian chocolates, Swedish cookies or German *apfelmus* (apple sauce). There's more for sale than just food, however: A table organized by UNICEF sells Christmas cards, while other groups offer stockings, nutcrackers and assorted decorations. Used books and clothing are particularly popular.

"More and more things have become available locally and the IWI bazaar has become more specialized, where national groups sell things pertaining to their communities' specific needs," Van Heerden said.

There are many other attractions in addition to the items for sale. The organizers of the Christmas

With two and a half weeks left to Christmas Eve, the convention center at the Istanbul Hilton in Harbiye was packed in the week following Nov. 24.

Hundreds of shoppers rove about the large room, browsing wares and clutching shopping bags filled with goodies. Speaking a dozen different languages, they communicate across cultural lines in imperfect English. Sometimes they jostle one another in their

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Bazaar sell lottery tickets for items donated by local businesses, including airline tickets and gift certificates for spa days or restaurant dinners – even DVD players and plasma televisions. On the upper floor of the convention center, shoppers stop for lunch at a buffet offering various homemade or catered items from international cuisines.

The multiculturalism of the event – IWI members hail from 56 different nationalities – is particularly evident in the blend of aromas wafting from the booths.

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I asked Van Heerden what she likes most about the bazaar. “The Christmas atmosphere, and the fact that so many people are willing to give up their time and/or donate so generously to charity,” she said. “It takes the IWI board about eight months to organize and an army of more than 100 volunteers from IWI on the day of the event.”

Van Heerden singled out bazaar coordinator Laurina van Dam, who hails from Holland, and the Hilton for special mention for their assistance.

Certainly the bazaar exemplifies many attributes of the Christmas spirit: charity, good will and sociability, as well as shopping and good food. For expats, the bazaar is an opportunity to tap into Christmas excitement that they might be missing back home. At the same time, the event is an effective vehicle for sharing the holiday with Turks.

Certainly, there can be no denying that Christmas is becoming increasingly popular in Turkey – from Christmas decorations at the Cevahir and Kanyon shopping malls to Christmas merchandise sold at major chains such as TepeHome or even by small vendors in the bazaars of Eminönu. And as Christmas becomes more of an Istanbul tradition, the IWI Christmas Bazaar will be there each year to usher in the Turkish Christmas season.

For more information about the International Women of Istanbul, visit their website at <http://www.iwi-tr.org>.

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