

EASTERN TURKEY

'The Land Beyond the Seas'

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Ankara

Arrival in Ankara, Turkey's modern capital.

Ankara offers a unique blend of ancient history and modern urban life. It's a city that's often overlooked by tourists, but it's well worth a visit. For those arriving early enough (or if you have booked an extra hotel night), a highlight is the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, which showcases artifacts from ancient Anatolia.

Later today, you may be joining other travellers coming from our tour of Western Turkey, accompanied by your Tour Leader.

Overnight in Ankara.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Ankara - Hattusas - Amasya - Samsun

This morning we travel by road to Samsun.

From Ankara we'll embark on a scenic drive, stopping at Çorum where we'll visit the ancient Hittite site of Hattusas. This UNESCO World Heritage site offers a glimpse into the Hittite civilization, one of the most powerful empires of the ancient world. Explore the city gates, temples, and royal palace, imagining the bustling life that once existed here.

After our visit we continue your journey to Amasya, a picturesque city situated along the Yesilirmak River. This city played a significant role during the Ottoman period. We'll take a leisurely stroll through the historic district, admiring the traditional Ottoman houses perched on the hillside. Here we'll visit the tomb of the Ottoman prince, Prince Danismend Gazi.

As the day draws to a close, we'll arrive in Samsun, a coastal city on the Black Sea. Samsun holds historical significance as the starting point of Turkey's War of Independence. Before/after dinner, you might like to enjoy a stroll along the beach.

Overnight in Samsun.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Samsun - Trabzon

This morning our journey continues by road to Trabzon, where we'll have a tour of this interesting Black Sea port city.

Our first visit is the 13th century Church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), built by Manuel I on the site of an earlier pagan temple. Having suffered extensive damage over the years, many of the frescoes -- some of the finest examples of Byzantine painting in the world -- were painstakingly restored to their former glory during the 1960's. Inside we will see scenes from the Old Testament and the life of Christ.

We then embark on a walking tour of old Trabzon. The city of Trabzon, the capital of "Byzantium in Exile" has inspired travellers and writers from Marco Polo to Rose Macaulay. Milesian colonists from Sinope settled here in the 7th century BCE who are thought to have been engaged in the metal trade, exporting such things as Urartian bronze to the Western Mediterranean. The name of Trapezos is thought to derive from the table-like headland on which the citadel was established, upon which are the remnants of the Byzantine city.

From here we continue into the old quarters to see the Tabakhane Bridge, the citadel and city walls, the Middle City, and the Ortahisar Mosque, formerly the main Cathedral of Byzantine Trabzon where weddings, funerals and coronations took place. We see the Upper Citadel where the Imperial Palace once stood overlooking the ravine. We leave the citadel via the Zagnos bridge to our final visit, the Ottoman Mosque of Gulbahar Hatun.

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Overnight in Trabzon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Trabzon - Sumela Monastery - Erzurum

This morning we head to the Monastery of Sumela, built in the place where the venerated icon of the Virgin -- believed to have been painted by St. Luke -- was discovered by the Athenian monk Barnabas in 385 CE. The monastery developed in the 6th century, though what remains dates to the 13th and 14th centuries when the Byzantine Emperors of the Komnenos dynasty celebrated their coronations here. The miraculous powers of the icon were so famous that even Turkish sultans came here to make offerings.

We will ascend the monastery via a footpath through a lush forest; the entire walk is about 250 m and takes about 30 minutes. The first glimpse of the monastery clinging to the face of a sheer cliff is unforgettable. Although in a state of decay, many brilliant frescoes are still visible inside the main chapel. Sumela gives us a fascinating insight into monastic life, from the medieval to modern era.

We'll break for lunch en route to Erzurum; while in the eastern Black Sea area, you may choose to sample some typical dishes of the region: lahana corbasi (cabbage soup), lahana sarmasi (stuffed cabbage rolls), hamsi (anchovies), and muhlama and kaymak -- two types of melted hot cheese served with bread.

We continue onwards to Erzurum. Erzurum has some of Turkey's earliest Islamic buildings. If time permits this afternoon, we will see Erzurum's most famous building, the Cifte Minare Madrasa. It was founded in 1253 by the Seljuk Sultan Aleddin Keykubad II in honour of his daughter whose mausoleum is part of the madrasa. We will also see the Lala Pasha Mosque and the Ulu Cami.

Overnight in Erzurum.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Erzurum - Kars & Ani

This morning we make our way to the frontier town of Kars and the haunting ruins of the old Armenian capital, Ani. Once a city of a hundred gates and a thousand churches, the ruins of Ani still capture the imagination. By the middle of the 10th century CE, no city in Europe could compare in size and magnificence to Ani and in the east only Constantinople, Cairo and Baghdad were its rivals. The Mongol raids, a severe earthquake in 1319, and the coup de grace of Tamerlane's conquering armies combined to destroy the city. Today the abandoned walls and dozens of churches in red and black sandstone stand at the edge of a deep gorge right on Turkey's eastern border. Several of the churches have beautiful frescoes in the Armenian style.

Overnight in Kars.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Kars - Ishak Pasa Sarayi - Dogubeyazit

Today we drive to Dogubeyazit, via the region of Mt. Ararat, the highest mountain in Turkey (5165m/17,045 ft), steeped in religious tradition throughout the Near East since antiquity. According to Genesis 8:4, Mt. Ararat was the final resting place of Noah's Ark once the waters of the Great Flood had receded. The Armenians believed that their race descended from its slopes, the Arabs considered it the "roof of the world" from which the life-giving Tigris and Euphrates rivers originated.

En route we'll visit Ishak Pasa Sarayi, an incredible palace built in the 17th century by a Cildiroglu chieftain and finished by Ishak Pasa in the 1784. The palace is located some distance from the remote frontier town of Dogubeyazit on the border between Turkey, Armenia, and Iran. The palace built circa 1800 is a mixture of architectural styles with Seljuk, Persian, Georgian, Armenian, and Ottoman elements. At one time the palace had a door plated in gold and studded with precious stones.

We descend from the palace to Dogubeyazit, a frontier town only 35km from the Iranian border, where we will spend the night. Your best chance to see Mt. Ararat in all its glory is first thing in the morning before the clouds move in.

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Overnight in Dogubeyazit.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Dogubeyazit - Lake Van

Today we have a beautiful drive through the Bitlis Canyon to the shores of Lake Van, the heart of the ancient Armenian, Turcoman, and Kurdish cultures. Lake Van is the largest lake in Turkey and the largest soda lake in the world -- a phenomena created by the high alkalinity of its waters. Located 1750m above sea level, with a maximum depth of 450m (1,485 ft), the lake was created millions of years ago when lava flows from nearby Mt. Nemrut blocked the basin's outlet.

Upon arrival, we will pay a visit to the Van Museum with its outstanding collection of Urartian gold jewellery. We will also drive out of the town centre for a view of the Van Castle overlooking Lake Van.

Overnight in Van.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Lake Van & Akdamar Island

This morning we'll take a 20-minute boat ride out to Akhtamar Island, where stands the 10th century Armenian Church of the Holy Cross. Its beautiful location, 2 km off shore, has infused it with a tranquil and sacred aura. A monastic settlement since the 6th century, it was also at one time the seat of the Armenian Patriarch and the sacred burial ground of saints. Akhtamar church is also considered one of the masterpieces of Armenian art and architecture. We will see the remnants of its medieval frescoes inside and on the exterior, the wonderful frieze carved in relief of human and animal figures and biblical scenes.

Returning to Tatvan by boat, we continue our journey to Van, enjoying magnificent views of the lake, and, if it's a clear day, the snowcapped peaks of Mt. Nemrut (3050m) and Mt. Suphan (4058m).

Back in Van, we'll explore Van, the capital of the ancient Urartian Empire, whose realm once stretched into modern Iran, Iraq and Syria. We will climb up to Van Castle, the Urartian citadel, perched like an eagle's nest on a high rocky outcrop, where we will see the remains of stone battlements, a temple, royal tombs and inscriptions. From this vantage point, there are splendid views of Old Van.

Overnight in Van.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Lake Van - Kahta

This morning we leave Van for a drive west to Kahta, the base for our visit to Mt Nemrut.

This is a full day's travel (the longest of the trip) through the rugged, spectacular scenery of this corner of the country. Kahta, our destination, is a small town in attractive countryside at the foot of Mount Nemrut. The population of Kahta is mostly of Kurdish origin from Reshwan tribe.

Overnight in Kahta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Mt. Nemrut Touring

This morning we visit the world famous Mt. Nemrut.

Mt. Nemrut rises to a height of 2150m (7,095 ft) above sea level, the highest mountain in this area of the anti-Taurus range. The summit of the mountain was adorned with colossal statues circling a massive 50m high tumulus in the 1st century BCE by the vain and megalomaniac king, Antiochus I. The ruler of a relatively unimportant but wealthy kingdom, the Commagene Kingdom served as a buffer state between the Roman and Parthian Empires. Antiochus I "Theos," a self-styled god, had two desires: to leave visible proof of his (self-proclaimed) royal descent from Alexander the Great and King Darius of Persia, and to be "buried close to the celestial throne." The result is the massive self-aggrandizing funerary monument impossibly built on the mountain summit.

On our way to the summit we will stop at Arsameia, the capital of the Commagene Kingdom. A 5m stele has a well-preserved relief depicting Mithridates I (father of Antiochus) shaking hands with Hercules. A nearby inscription mentions the founding of Arsameia and the sacred tomb of Mithridates. We continue to the summit of the mountain. From the car park, we will walk about 600m (20+ minutes) up the slope to visit the Western and Eastern Terrace. Although the latter is better preserved, both terraces have a similar layout. Lining the base of the tumulus, are colossal statues (of which the heads alone are 2m tall!) of the Graeco-Parthian gods of Helios-Mithra, Fortuna, Zeus-Ahurmazda, Antiochus and Hercules. On the western terrace are a series of reliefs, showing Antiochus shaking hands with Apollo, Zeus and Hercules, as well as one with a lion and the planets -- perhaps the astrological symbols of Antiochus's birth date. According the inscriptions found here, Antiochus left elaborate instructions on how he wished his birth and coronation date to be celebrated, including details of offerings and sacrifices to be made. The artificial mound of crushed rock in the center covers the royal tomb of Antiochus himself, which is yet unexcavated. We descend the mountain in the same manner; the route back to Kahta provides panoramic views of the reservoir of the Ataturk Dam below and hillside villages.

Overnight in Kahta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Kahta - Adiyaman - Fly to Istanbul

Today we drive the short distance to Adiyaman from where we fly back to Istanbul.

Fight time-permitting, we may accomplish some of our Istanbul city touring today upon arrival.

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Istanbul: Hippodrome & Agia Sophia

Istanbul straddles the confluence of two waterways, the Golden Horn and the Bosphorous. The city is divided by these waterways into three parts -- two parts are in Europe and one part is in Asia, making Istanbul the only city in the world spread over two continents! The city is crowded with beautiful mosques, churches and palaces.

We start our day with a panoramic drive around the Golden Horn and the great walls of Constantinople. The first recorded bridge over the Golden Horn was built during the reign of Justinian the Great in the 6th century at the western end of the city, and today we will pass the famous Galata Bridge and the Ataturk Bridge. As we drive along the Byzantine city gates and walls we will view the towering minarets of Suleyman's Mosque and the Galata Tower before arriving in Sultanahmet Square.

We'll begin the walking component of today's tour at the legendary Blue Mosque, built between 1609 and 1616 by Mehmet Aga. We will see the interior, where the walls and ceiling are covered by more than 20,000 Iznik tiles. At the adjacent Hippodrome we will see the remains of the great sports stadium where chariot races were held in Roman and Byzantine times. We will also see an Egyptian obelisk, a giant needle of stone carved for the Pharaoh Tutmoses III around 1500 BC and brought to Constantinople by the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius in AD 390.

We continue to the church of Agia Sophia (St Sophia), built by the Emperor Justinian in 548 BC. It was the largest church in the Christian world for nearly 1,000 years. When the Ottoman Turks conquered the city in 1435 one of the first things they did was to convert St Sophia into a mosque. In 1934 the building was deconsecrated and converted to a museum; however, in 2020, Pres. Recep Tayyip Erdogan made the

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controversial decision to convert the building back into a mosque, though it remains opens to visitors (please note that the ongoing conversion/renovations may limit our visit to certain areas or result in some features being covered, rendering them unviewable).

Outside Agia Sophia we descend underground to the gigantic Basilica Cisterns.* These are the largest of several hundred ancient cisterns that lie beneath the city of Istanbul. Like most sites in Istanbul, the cistern has a colourful history. Constructed using columns, capitals and plinths from ruined buildings, the cistern's symmetry and sheer grandeur of conception are quite extraordinary. This immense underground water container was built during the reign of Emperor Justinian I in 532 to meet the water needs of the Great Palace. This marvelous piece of engineering only confirms yet again that those were the heydays of the Byzantine Empire.

The remainder of the afternoon is yours to explore before our evening meal. Your Tour Leader can show you to Istanbul's famous Grand Bazaar -- even if you're not a keen shopper, the atmosphere and goods on offer offer interesting local insights into life in the city, the old and the new.

Note: You may wonder why we choose not to include Topkapi Palace in our program. While it's an important site with a long storied history, the nature of the facility and the rules pertaining to visitation, ie limits on groups and guiding to reduce crowding and noise, make it better-suited to a self-guided, rather than a group touring, experience. Should you want to visit on your own, please consult your Tour Leader in advance.

* Due to periodic closures for restorations, we may substitute the nearby Cistern of Philoxenos, also known as the Binbirdirek Sarnici or "Cistern of 1,001 Columns."

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Istanbul Touring Continued

Our morning starts with a visit to the aromatic Spice Bazaar, where the smells of cinnamon, clove, and thyme rise from hundreds of colourful muslin bags at every store front. Nearby we'll visit the Mosque of Suleyman the Magnificent, built by the great architect Sinan in the 16th century. The design of the mosque achieves a perfection of harmony and monumentality at once, set in the centre of a huge complex which included a library, soup kitchen for the poor, a hammam (bath), fountains, gardens, caravansary, and schools.

We then board a ferry for a relaxing cruise along the shores of the legendary Bosphorus, the natural gateway that divides Asia and Europe. As you sit back and enjoy some tea from traditional small cups, numerous summer palaces and palatial homes will pass by on either side.

Disembarking at the northern end of the strait, we have a break for lunch (a local fish restaurant is recommended) before we proceed to the Kariye (Chora) Museum to see the marvelous mosaics of the late Byzantine period. We then make our way back to our hotel with some free time before our evening meal.

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Istanbul.

IYI YOLCULUKLAR/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast