

TURKEY: EAST & WEST

Our Full Turkey Program

27 days

Created on: 21 Dec, 2024

Day 1 Arrive in Istanbul

Today we arrive in Istanbul and transfer to our hotel.

"If one had but a single glance to give the world, one should gaze on Constantinople," marveled Alphonse de Lamartine, the 19th century French writer and politician. New Rome, Byzantium, Constantinople, Istanbul; the legendary city has served as the capital of the legendary Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. Though no longer a capital, Istanbul is the largest city and the cosmopolitan heart of Turkey, full of marvels and startling contrasts.

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 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 Atatürk 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. Erdogan made the controversial decision to convert the building back into a mosque, though it remains open 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."

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Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 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 4 Istanbul - Gallipoli - Troy - Canakkale

After breakfast we drive along the Sea of Marmara through the small European part of Turkey known as Thrace. Only 3% of Turkey is in Europe, the other 97% known as Anatolia, is in Asia. One of the fascinations of Turkey is the huge number of peoples and empires that have occupied this land.

Before leaving Europe we visit Gallipoli, Gelibolu in Turkish. This narrow, mountainous peninsula on the northwestern side of the Dardanelles has seen more than its share of history with countless civilizations having battled for control over these straits for over 3,000 years. This is the historic World War I battleground where Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, father of the Turkish Republic, first rose to prominence. Under the direction of Winston Churchill, an unsuccessful naval and land campaign failed in its attempt to capture Gallipoli, open up the Dardanelles, and seize Constantinople. This battleground is now marked with over 30 memorials.

We then cross the Dardanelles waterway by ferry from Europe to Asia where we visit the ruins of Troy where Greek and Trojan heroes fought for the beautiful Helen. Troy had been accepted as a legendary city for ages, but very few people believed in its true existence. Heinrich Schliemann excavated here at his own expense in the 1870s and discovered the spot where a sophisticated settlement had existed for centuries. As you stand on the ancient hilltop you can look out over the plain of Troy and feel the famous cool north wind blowing from the Dardanelles.

We arrive in Canakkale in time for dinner.

Overnight in Canakkale.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Canakkale - Pergamon - Kusadasi

We have an early start today, travelling down the rugged Aegean coast and inland to the typically Turkish rural town of Bergama. Here we visit the Akropolis and Asklepon of the Roman city of Pergamon, said to be one of the first hospitals in the world. We see a carving of two snakes wrapped around a drinking cup (a modern symbol of the medical profession), and a theatre where the mentally disturbed would allegedly act out their emotions (a forerunner of today's psychoanalysis?).

Later we travel through Izmir, Turkey's most important port. Here the blind poet Homer was born when the city was known as Smyrna. Also

here in 1922 the Turks expelled the invading Greeks from Turkish soil during the Turkish War of Independence.

We continue to Kusadasi, a beautiful port city with a small island fortress. The island, attached to the mainland, gives the city its name: Kusadasi, "The Island of Birds."

Overnight in Kusadasi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Kusadasi: Ephesus Site Tour

Today we visit Ephesus, one of the highlights of any visit to Turkey. During its Golden Age, the city was adorned with splendid monuments, theatres, agoras and libraries. The protectress of the city was the goddess Artemis whose temple, dating back to 1300 BC, was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World. As a prosperous trade and banking centre, Ephesus had a cosmopolitan population. It has been recorded that St John brought the Virgin Mary to Ephesus where she spent her last days after the death of Christ. On our tour of Ephesus we see a 24,000 seat amphitheatre, the Library of Celsus, and the marble-paved Arcadian Way. We also include the special Terrace Houses section, which provides fascinating insight into family life during the Roman period.

In addition to the main site of Ephesus we will visit the superb Ephesus Museum. We also visit the traditional town of Selcuk with its many beautiful buildings, including the Isa Bey Mosque (built in 1307), remains of old Turkish baths, and a hill crowned by the Ayasoluk Fortress.

Overnight in Kusadasi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Kusadasi - Didyma - Bodrum: Crusader Castle of St Peter

Today we travel southward along the Aegean coast on winding roads through fields and olive groves to Bodrum. En route we stop at Didyma, an ancient Ionian shrine and the most renowned oracle of the Hellenic world, containing a temple and an oracle of Apollo. The Temple of Apollo at Didyma was the fourth largest temple in the ancient Greek world.

Bodrum is the site of one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: the Mausoleum. This was also the birthplace of the Greek historian Herodotus. Today Bodrum's whitewashed sugar-cube houses, draped in bougainvillea and scattered on the hillside overlook the perfect natural harbour. The reputation of Bodrum's boatyards dates back to ancient times, and today, craftsmen still build the traditional yachts: the Tirhandil with a pointed bow and stern, and the Gullets with a broad beam and rounded stern. The latter, especially, are used on excursions and pleasure trips,

This afternoon we visit the Crusader Castle of St Peter, which dominates Bodrum Bay. The castle was built by the Knights Hospitaller in the early 15th century. Today the castle houses an excellent museum, mainly dedicated to the artifacts retrieved from the many ancient shipwrecks discovered off the Turkish coast. Many of the pieces in the museum have been excavated from below the sea bed by teams of archaeologists from Texas A&M University.

Overnight in Bodrum.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Bodrum: Day at Leisure

Today is free for you to enjoy the ambience of this beautiful seaside town. Some may want to explore the Bodrum Mausoleum, also known as Mausoleum of Halicarnassus -- one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Mausoleum dates back to 350 B.C. and is dedicated to Carian satrap Mausolus. This monument tomb was 50 meters high, and rose over the region. Though there is not much left to see, the site is worth a visit with its beautiful ruins, gardens and landscape.

Situated on a hillside overlooking Bodrum is the Bodrum Amphitheatre, another structure accredited to the reign of King Mausolus. The

theatre is another witness to the great past of Bodrum, and it is one of the best-preserved structures of ancient Halikarnassus. Originally, it was built around 4th C BC during the reign of King Mausolos, during the Roman period it was enlarged and enriched.

Overnight in Bodrum.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

Day 9 Bodrum - Kas

Leaving Bodrum we head over the coastal fringes of the Taurus Mountains to the warm Mediterranean coast, called the 'Turquoise Coast' because of the exquisite blueness of the sea.

The picturesque fishing village of Kas has a quaint harbour, carved tombs in the mountain behind, an ancient Lycian amphitheatre, a Lycian tomb, and the Greek island of Kastellorizo just off shore. Known for its stunning natural beauty, crystal-clear waters, and relaxed atmosphere, Kas is a popular destination for those seeking a peaceful getaway. The town is surrounded by mountains and boasts picturesque harbour views.

Overnight in Kas.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Kas & Gulet Cruise

Today we cruise along the magnificent Turquoise coast aboard a traditional Turkish Gulet -- a handmade vessel crafted from wood by highly skilled master craftsmen. The origin of Gulets can be traced back to the Bodrum area in Turkey.

Kas is an unspoilt location in Turkey, and the bays around Kas are captivating. Our itinerary is open-ended today in order to account for local weather conditions, though our likely itinerary will include Tersane, Kekova submerged ruins, and the fortress at Simena. At some of these sites, foundations of houses and rock hewn staircases with outlines of buildings can be seen almost at the water's surface. There are several excellent places to moor for swimming, sightseeing, and recharging on a relaxing day.

Overnight in Kas.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Kas - Phaselis - Antalya

Today we travel along the Lycian Coast visiting the rock tombs of Myra and the Church of St Nicholas -on the way to Antalya.

The Rock Tombs of Myra are ancient burial sites carved directly into the cliffs overlooking the ancient city of Myra (now Demre). These impressive structures are a testament to the Lycian civilization's skill in architecture and engineering. The tombs were used to house the sarcophagi of wealthy and influential individuals, and many are adorned with intricate carvings and sculptures. The Church of St Nicholas is believed to be the birthplace of the saint, a 4th-century bishop who is the inspiration for the legendary Father Christmas. The church features beautiful Byzantine mosaics and frescoes.

Before reaching Antalya we stop at Phaselis, one of the most spectacular Roman cities on the coast, located on a narrow peninsula between pine forests and three natural harbours. Founded in the 7th century BC, Phaselis was a prosperous port city and a member of the Lycian League. The city boasts well-preserved ruins, including a theater, a gymnasium, and a necropolis.

Overnight in Antalya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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Day 12 Antalya: Perge & Aspendos

Today, we delve into the rich history of the Roman Empire with a visit to the vast archaeological site of Perge. This ancient city, believed to be the birthplace of St. Paul, offers a captivating glimpse into Roman life and culture.

As we explore Perge, we'll see the impressive ruins of a massive theater adorned with intricate marble reliefs. The theater's grand scale and acoustics provide a testament to Roman engineering prowess. Nearby, we'll discover a colonnaded steam bath and a basilica, offering a glimpse into the daily life and religious practices of the ancient Romans.

To further enhance our understanding of Roman architecture, we'll visit the nearby amphitheater at Aspendos. This remarkably well-preserved structure is a masterpiece of Roman engineering, renowned for its exceptional acoustics. Even from the farthest seats, spectators can clearly hear a speaker's voice from the orchestra area, a testament to the Romans' mastery of sound design.

Finally, we'll explore the intricate aqueduct system that once supplied Perge with water. This vital infrastructure, stretching across the landscape, showcases the Romans' ability to harness natural resources and provide essential services to their cities.

We return to Antalya and visit the excellent museum containing early Christian icons and Roman tombs with some of the best examples of Roman sculpture of Asia Minor.

Overnight in Antalya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Antalya - Side - Konya

We climb inland through dramatic scenery to the Anatolian Plateau.

Agriculturally, Turkey is one of the richest countries in the world. As we drive past villages and farms we see an abundance of wheat fields and orchards. Turkey is a huge exporter of dried fruits such as apricots and figs as well as nuts, lentils and beans.

We take a scenic route to Konya through the Taurus Mountains via Side. Once the trysting place of Anthony and Cleopatra, Side stands on a promontory flanked by two excellent beaches of golden sand. The ruins of the ancient city mingle with the new, and despite its development as a resort, it retains its own very special atmosphere and charm.

Later we arrive in Konya, a very traditional town and a religious centre where Mevlana Rumi founded the Whirling Dervishes in the 13th century. Here he taught a mystical branch of Islam which still has a strong influence around the world today. We visit the museum and tomb of the Mevlana, one of the holiest places in Turkey for Muslim pilgrims. Konya was the centre of Sultanate of Rum from AD 1150 until 1300. Many of the great buildings of Konya are Seljuk in design and date from this 'Golden Age'.

We will see the ruins of the Seljuk Palace, the delicate stone carving of the Slender Minareted Madrasah, and the Karatay Museum (the museum has been intermittently closed for renovations for several years and may not be open during our Konya visit).

Overnight in Konya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Konya - Cappadocia

Today as we traverse the vast Anatolian Plateau, we'll encounter the Sultanhani Caravanserai, a fascinating glimpse into the region's rich trading past.

Caravanserais were fortified inns established along major trade routes, providing a safe haven for traveling merchants and their caravans. These medieval waystations played a crucial role in facilitating commerce and cultural exchange, particularly along the Silk Road. Sultanhani Caravanserai, with its imposing architecture and well-preserved courtyard, offers a vivid picture of life on these ancient trade routes.

Later we venture into the heart of Cappadocia, a region renowned for its otherworldly landscapes, ancient history, and unique geological

formations.

Overnight near Cappadocia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Cappadocia Area

Today we will spend a full day exploring this unique and fascinating lunar landscape with its fairy chimneys and conical towers topped with huge, delicately balanced rocks. Here the elements have weathered layers of volcanic dust into giant cones and mushrooms 9m (30 feet) high! Most of the chapels date from the Byzantine period of the 10th and 11th centuries.

In the Goreme Valley we will see the many churches carved into this landscape with their wonderful paintings and frescoes. This monastic complex of rock chapels covered with frescoes is one of the best known sites in Central Anatolia. We will visit the underground city of Kaymakli one of the many cities dug into the soft rock of Cappadocia. At Kaymakli there are at least eight levels in the underground city, four of which are currently open to the public. The city is an elaborate network of tunnels, stairways and chambers hollowed out of the rock. It served as a safe haven during times of unrest and protected its citizens from marauding armies.

Optional Activities:

Weather-permitting, you might choose to fly over the region by hot-air balloon at sunrise. We do not include this activity as it is not necessarily of interest to all, but this can be booked with Tour Leader assistance upon arrival on tour (more info in your pre-trip package).

This evening, those who wish may attend a performance of Turkish traditional dances from Turkey's many regions (optional).

Overnight near Cappadocia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Cappadocia - Tuz Golu - Ankara & Museum of Anatolian Civilizations

Today's journey takes us to the salt lake known as Tuz Golu. As we make our way there, we'll pass through the picturesque village of Uchisar, nestled beneath the imposing Uchisar Fortress. This ancient stronghold, with its towering rock formation, offers breathtaking panoramic views of the surrounding Cappadocia region.

Continuing our journey, we'll arrive in Urgup, a charming village steeped in history. According to medieval records, Urgup once served as the residence of a bishop, a testament to its religious significance in the past. The village's cobblestone streets, traditional stone houses, and vibrant atmosphere make it a delightful place to explore.

We continue to Ankara, Turkey's modern capital. Ankara was an ancient trading town before the Romans arrived; its name is derived from the angora wool of the goats sold here. Ataturk, founder of the Turkish Republic, made Ankara the capital rather than Istanbul to break with the discredited Ottoman Empire after World War I.

We visit the Mausoleum of Ataturk before our visit to one of the best museums in the world -- the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations. The museum contains a superb collection dating back to the settlement at Catal Huyuk in 7500 BC and includes pieces from the Phrygian, Urartian, Assyrian and mighty Hittite Empires.

Overnight in Ankara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 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 18 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.

Overnight in Trabzon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 19 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 20 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 21 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.

Overnight in Dogubeyazit.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 22 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 23 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 24 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 25 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 26 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 27 Departure

Departure from Istanbul.

IYI YOLCULUKLAR/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast