Tour Code
TE2

ADVENTURESABROAD

EASTERN TURKEY

'The Land Beyond the Seas'

17 days

Created on: 28 Mar, 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 - Hatay / Antakya

This morning we fly from Istanbul to Hatay and Antakya, ancient Antioch. On arrival we visit the Hatay Museum, which houses one of the finest collections of Roman mosaics in the world, and Church of St Peter Church. Composed of a cave carved into the mountainside on Mount Starius, this church wasn used by the first Christians in the Antakya region, and is one of Christianity's oldest.

Just outside Antakya, we will pay a visit to the Grotto of St Peter, erected in the 13th century by the Crusaders. It was here that Peter preached his first sermon and founded the first Christian community. Throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Antioch stood out as one of the most influential and enduring cities.

Overnight in Antakya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Antakya: Samandag & Titus Tunnels

Today we visit Samandag, southwest of Antakya, to visit the St. Simeon Monastery, built in honour of the Christian ascetic monk Simeon Stylites. Simeon, seeking ever greater isolation, lived his life atop a pillar and preached his wisdom to his many visitors for 39 years. He started a fad of pillar-sitting, and his imitators were called Stylites (style means pillar in Greek). His remains are buried in Antakya, and a vast church was built on the site of his pillar outside of Aleppo, Syria, but this small monastery in Samandag was built to accommodate the many monks who followed in his footsteps.

We then drive to the Titus Tunnels, a canal built by the Romans to divert flood water from the Musa-Dagh massif to the antique harbour of Selukia. After that drive to Vakifli Village, a story-book Armenian village. In the middle of the village stands a church and other buildings distinctive from other villages in the region.

Overnight in Antakya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Antakya - Mt Nemrut - Adiyaman

This afternoon we will visit an incredible site, the giant heads on top of Mount Nemrut, 2150 m (7,052 feet). This vast funeral monument, built by the dynastic ruler Antiochus, is unlike anything else in the world with a remote and isolated location at the top of the mountain. Virtually unknown until after the Second World War, the site was first excavated by the American school of Oriental Research in Connecticut some

years after the war. Mount Nemrut is often called the "Eighth Wonder of the World".

Overnight in Adiyaman.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Adiyaman - Urfa

Today we drive via the huge southeast Anatolia irrigation scheme to Urfa, also known as Sanliurfa or "Glorious Urfa" for its role in defending the Turkish Republic. Urfa stands at the edge of the great Mesopotamian Plain. Legend says that it was here that God saved Abraham when an angry Nimrod, the Assyrian king, threw him on a funeral pyre for destroying the pagan idols. To save him, God created a lake known today as the Pool of Abraham which attracts many pilgrims, both Muslim and Christian. We also visit the village of Harran with its unusual beehive houses. The ancient city of Harran is famous for its Biblical association. It was here where Abraham stayed for several years on his way to Canaan.

While in the Urfa area, we will also visit the nearby site of Gobekli Tepe, a Neolithic (stone-age) hilltop sanctuary erected at the top of a mountain ridge. This is the oldest known human-made religious structure, most likely erected by hunter-gatherers in the 10th millennium BCE (c. 12,000 years ago).

Overnight in Urfa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Urfa - Diyarbakir - Mardin

We depart for the ancient walled city of Diyarbakir. This great old city is enclosed in and protected by black basalt walls, its back protected by the eastern Taurus mountains dominating both the northern Mesopotamian plains and the river Tigris. The protected city lies at the limit of navigability of this mighty river, and so acts as a convenient crossing point. The city has the confidence of a place that has been important for centuries and still the key city of the southeast.

We will take a guided tour of the markets and narrow streets of Diyarbakir. Together we wander, relax and soak up the atmosphere. The city is more Arabic in style than Turkish; it is special in the same way that Aleppo in Syria and Fez in Morocco are special -- they are all cities that have until recently existed within fortified city walls.

We continue to Mardin, perched at the edge of a plateau overlooking the Mesopotamian plain.

Overnight in Mardin.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Mardin Area

Today we explore the city of Mardin with its labyrinth of narrow streets, historical buildings and stunning scenery over the Mesopotamian plains into Syria. Mardin is the best preserved city in eastern Turkey. Built on steep slopes with a castle atop a hill, it looks like a fantastic medieval stronghold. Its typical stone-carved houses along alleys with long tunnels that stretch underneath houses and old city walls intensify the image even more. As well as being a fascinating setting, Mardin is also famous for the Syriac, i.e. Syrian Orthodox heritage. South and east of Mardin lies the Tur Abdin, the Holy Land in Syriac language. Here, a lot of churches and monasteries, some dating back more than a thousand years ago, are still used by dwindling groups of priests, monks and believers.

We visit the Saffron Monastery --Deyrul Zafaran -- probably named after the building stonework. Fifteen hundred years old, the monastery is still active. On the hilltop, carved in the rocks, is the ruined monastery of St. Mary's, dating to the beginnings of Christianity.

Overnight in Mardin.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Mardin - Hasankeyf - Van

Today we will be travelling to Van, the capital of the ancient Urartian empire and later, of an Armenian Kingdom. En route we stop at the ancient city of Hasankeyf. Hasankeyf and its surrounding limestone cliffs are home to thousands of human-made caves, 300 medieval monuments and a unique canyon ecosystem -- all combining to create a beguiling open-air museum. Despite widespread protests from local authorities, archaeologists, architects, preservationists and environmental groups, the massive hydroelectric Ilisu Dam is expected to be completed in 2013. The reservoir created by the dam will inundate the site's caves and flood most of its structures.

We continue toward Van, located in one of Turkey's most remote regions. Indeed, the whole Van area was inaccessible to visitors until 1960. We will take a ferry out to visit the picturesque Akdamar Island on turquoise Lake Van. It is on this island that the famous Armenian Church of the Holy Cross of Akdamar stands, with its impressive reliefs and carvings on the walls of the church. A favourite picnic spot for the locals, the island is a charming place to relax and take in the stunning scenery. From a shady spot under one of the numerous almond trees you can enjoy the view down over the church, with the blue shimmering Lake Van and the beautifully snow-topped mountains beyond.

Overnight in Van.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Van Area

This morning we will enjoy an excursion to the interesting Urartian hilltop fortress of Van Kalesi. The fortress sits 100m (328 ft) above the lake on a narrow rock outcrop. The Urartians favoured long thin spires for their fortress cities and scattered them all over their empire. Van Kalesi is one of the largest, built with colossal blocks of stone each weighing up to 27000 kg (59,670 lbs). We also visit the museum with its excellent collection of Urartian treasures. During our stay in Van, we hope to see one of the unique Van cats which have one blue and one green eye and are reputed to enjoy swimming!

We also visit the Urartian center of Cavustepe. Built in the 8th century BC, Cavustepe was once home of the kings of Urartu.

This afternoon is at your leisure to wander or to shop. Van is one of the best places in Turkey for hand-crafted Turkish carpets made by nomadic tribes.

Overnight in Van.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Van - Dogubeyazit

This afternoon we explore the pleasure palace of Ishak Pasha, often called the "Taj Mahal of Turkey". The palace is located in the wildly remote frontier town of Dogubeyazit on the border between Turkey, Armenia and Iran. Towering above is the magnificent, 5165 m (16,942 ft), snow-capped Mount Ararat, the legendary last resting place of Noah's Ark. 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.

Overnight in Dogubeyazit.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Dogubeyazit - Mount Ararat - Kars

Before leaving our Dogubeyazit hotel we hope that the clouds will disperse allowing a clear view of the magnificent snow-capped peak of Mount Ararat towering above the plains.

Leaving Mount Ararat, we make our way to the frontier town of Kars. Here we visit the haunting "ghost town" ruins of the old Armenian capital, Ani. Entering Ani, the scene of a destroyed city stretching ahead and to the sides over green grassland is indeed eerie. By the middle of the 10th century, nothing 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 combined to destroy the city. Today the abandoned walls and dozens of churches in red and black sandstone stand eerily 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 12 Kars - Erzurum

Erzurum boasts many of Turkey's earliest Islamic buildings. On our tour of the city this afternoon we will see Ezurum's most famous building, the Cifte Minare Madrasa. It was founded in 1253 by the Seljuk Sultan Aleddin Keykubad II in honor 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 13 Erzurum - Sumela Monastery - Trabzon

Today we descend from the high plateau through an area that was part of old Georgia, dramatically perched above the Coruh River. Our journey takes us through the spectacular scenery of the Pontic Mountains as we make our way to Trabzon, the birth place of Suleyman the Magnificent. In the 13th Century, Trabzon was the centre of a prosperous Christian empire and contains some beautiful churches, including the beautiful church of Hagia Sophia.

On the way we drive inland up a narrow valley to the Sumela Monastery, clinging high on a sheer rock face above steep and heavily wooded slopes. Founded in the 6th century to house the Icon of the Virgin painted by St. Luke, the monastery was inhabited by Greek Orthodox monks until 1923 when the Greeks were expelled from Turkey. The monks lived here in total isolation, perched high on this remote cliff-side. The monastery still contains many frescoes of biblical scenes painted in the Greek Orthodox style.

Overnight in Trabzon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Trabzon: City Tour

We will have a morning tour of Trabzon. We include a visit to the Saint Sophia Cathedral, built in the mid 13th century as a monastery church and later converted to a mosque after the Ottoman conquest of 1461. Later used by the Turks as a military storehouse and a fever hospital, it is now a museum with magnificent frescoes covering its walls. Outside the city we will visit Ataturk's beautiful summer mansion situated high on a hillside overlooking the Black Sea.

This afternoon we visit Rize, a city built in an area where bright green tea bushes cover entire mountainsides. From the city we will have a panoramic view of the area and be able to experience its unique beauty. In antiquity the town was called Rhizion (Rhizous, Rhition, Rhitium) and was a port for the territory of Kissioi. In medieval times it was known as Risso. In 1461 after Mehmet II captured Trebizond it became part of the Ottoman Empire.

This afternoon you will have free time to explore the old walled city.

Overnight in Trabzon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Trabzon - Istanbul

Today we fly from Trabzon to Istanbul with the balance of the day at leisure in this magical city.

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 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. 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."

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Departure

Departure from Istanbul.

IYI YOLCULUKLAR/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast