

TURKEY'S TURQUOISE COAST

Featuring a Gulet Cruise & Cappadocia

18 days

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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," marvelled Alphonse de Lamartine, the 19th-century French writer and politician. Today we arrive in this legendary city that has served as the beating heart of three mighty empires. Istanbul straddles two continents at the confluence of the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus, making it the only city in the world to span Europe and Asia. New Rome, Byzantium, Constantinople, Istanbul---each name tells a chapter in humanity's greatest urban story. The Romans built their eastern capital here, the Byzantines created a Christian empire that lasted a thousand years, and the Ottomans forged their Islamic dynasty from these same ancient stones.

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Istanbul: Hippodrome & Agia Sophia

Dawn breaks over a city divided by waterways into three distinct parts---two in Europe, one in Asia---creating Istanbul's unique character as the world's only transcontinental metropolis. We begin with a panoramic drive around the Golden Horn, following the massive walls that protected Constantinople for over a thousand years.

The first bridge here was built during Justinian's reign in the 6th century, and today we pass the famous Galata Bridge where fishermen still cast their lines as they have for centuries. The towering minarets of Süleyman's Mosque and the medieval Galata Tower guide us towards Sultanahmet Square, where the heart of old Constantinople awaits.

Our walking exploration begins at the legendary Blue Mosque, built between 1609 and 1616 by Mehmet Aa. Inside, over 20,000 hand-painted znik tiles create a symphony of blue that gives the mosque its popular name. At the adjacent Hippodrome, we stand where 100,000 Romans once cheered chariot races. Here stands an Egyptian obelisk carved for Pharaoh Thutmose III around 1500 BC---older than Christ, yet brought here by Byzantine Emperor Theodosius in 390 AD.

We continue to Hagia Sophia, built by Emperor Justinian in 548 AD as the largest church in Christendom for nearly a millennium. When Ottoman forces conquered the city in 1453, they transformed this Christian cathedral into an Islamic mosque. In 1934, it became a museum; in 2020, President Erdoan controversially returned it to mosque status, though visitors are still welcome.

Beneath Hagia Sophia lies another marvel---the colossal Basilica Cistern. Using columns plundered from ruined temples, Emperor Justinian created this underground cathedral to store water for his Great Palace. Walking through this subterranean wonder, we understand why the Byzantine Empire was history's greatest engineering civilization.

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

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Day 3 Istanbul - Antalya

A morning flight (75 min) takes us south to Antalya, located in the region called Pamphylia and founded by Attalus II, King of Pergamum in the 2nd century BC.

On arrival we will visit the excellent Antalya Archaeology Museum, then continue to Perge. Built around 1000 BC, Perge boasts a beautiful theater and the largest stadium in all Asia Minor. Alexander spent time here, as did the mathematician Appolonius. The city was by turns Pamphilian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Selcuk. We then visit Aspendos and the best-preserved theater in Asia Minor which is still used for performances.

Overnight in Antalya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Antalya - Myra - Demre: Gulet Cruise

Today we drive southwest toward Finike via the ruins of Myra and the Church of St. Nicholas (3rd century). Myra boasts one of the most colossal and well-preserved Roman amphitheaters in the world, complete with stone masks of the performers lying about. We explore 4th century BC Lycian house-tombs with richly-decorated facades carved out of the rock.

At nearby Demre we board our gulet and head west skirting the indented coast. As a point of interest, Demre is where the legend of Father Christmas ("Noel Baba" in Turkish) is said to have originated with a Christian bishop who gave dowries to penniless girls. The bishop became known as St. Nicholas.

OUR BOAT: Gulets are wooden boats, traditionally hand made by master craftsmen from the Bodrum area of Turkey. This classic gulet was once used by fisherman and sponge divers to transport their catch. Today they are purpose-built for the charter market with fittings and equipment designed for guests' comfort. A gulet is typically built of pine wood and styled with a pointed fore and round aft. The major difference between the Turkish and Western boats is that the Turkish boats are designed to allow passengers more space on the deck. The Bodrum built boats take as much advantage as they can of the pleasant climate of the south. An aft deck for dining and lounging in the shade of a sun awning and a forward deck with numerous sunbeds. Large living areas, air-conditioned twin-berth cabins (with WC, shower) and a sun deck furnished lounge area are typical. On deck there are sun lounges for sunbathing and relaxing as well as dining areas under sun awnings. Our gulet will range in size, depending on number of group participants.

NOTE: single cabins are limited in number. Late single supplement requests may need to double up on the gulet portion of the tour. The actual order of places visited may vary due to variables such as weather and other considerations.

The pace is, of course, relaxed with plenty of time for swimming, snorkelling and sunbathing on deck. During the day our gulet navigates for about 4 hours at most, stopping in the bays and isolated islands for swimming breaks or short visits to the shore. In some places where the gulet can dock close to the shore, you will be able to travel by smaller boat (dinghy) to the shore for a walk or to visit a place. Most of the places you visit are of historical and natural importance.

Overnight on Gulet.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Kekova - Kas - Kalkan

The Gulf of Kekova is one of the most picturesque stretches of the coast and has several bays. On Kekova, there is no trace of the city which once dominated the island -- its ruins and foundations can now only be seen under the surface of the clear water on the northern side of the island. The name "Kekova" is Turkish for "plain of thyme" and describes the region encompassing the island of Kekova, the villages of Kalekoy and Ucagiz and the three ancient town of Simena. We will have a chance to hike to Kalekoy, a pastoral village crowned by a Crusader castle with dozens of impressive Roman sarcophagi strewn around its base.

Kas is just a little further on, and is slightly larger and more developed than its neighbours but still very charming, with streets and shops leading down to the sea. Kas was one of the earliest settlements of the Lycian era, when it was called Antiphellos. A large sarcophagus dominates the centre of town, and the sheer rock face overlooking Kas is dotted with Lycian rock tombs. After touring the village on foot (1

hr) we reach our anchorage at Kalkan for the night.

Overnight on Gulet.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 6 Oludeniz & Gemiler Island

Today we stop at Oludeniz, the "Dead Sea," below the resorts of Ovacik and Hisaronu. This azure lagoon, now part of a nature park, features on countless Turkish travel posters and is one of Turkey's iconic sights. The area southeast of the lagoon, fronting onto an attractive sandy beach, has developed into the popular resort village of Belcegiz -- though it is far more commonly referred to, even by locals, as Oludeniz.

After a chance to swim and lunch and enjoy this pretty spot, we sail to Gemiler Island where we can hike to the 6th C. ruins of a Byzantine monastic society. This tiny islet is sprinkled with ruined monastic buildings, Byzantine dwellings and churches -- one believed to have been the original burial place of St. Nicholas, the inspiration behind Father Christmas.

Overnight on Gulet.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 7 Aga Bay - Lydea - Hamam Cove

This morning we can hike from Aga Bay to Lydea (3 hrs, optional), an ancient Lycian Oracle reached only by foot. This is one of the most spectacular hikes in the region -- high, rocky ridge tops with pine forests, shepherds' homesteads, and the aroma of natural herb gardens of oregano, thyme and sage lingering in the air.

We then continue to Hamam Cove, a wonderful stop with unbelievably beautiful sea and coastal scenery. In a typical Mediterranean fashion, local people are convinced that Cleopatra once swam here and so the site is often called Cleopatra Cove. We can swim and snorkel, searching for sponges, octopus and fish. An easy walk takes us along the cove. Then we sail towards our anchoring point for the evening.

Overnight on Gulet.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 8 Arrival in Fethiye: Disembark

Today we sail into Fethiye where we bid our gulet crew farewell and retire to a hotel.

Fethiye is a sizeable-yet-relaxed town with a friendly vibe and international atmosphere. It has grown from a modest trading port/fishing village and fertile tomato growing area to a rapidly expanding vibrant town and tourist holiday destination which offers many things to many people, from those with an interest in history and nature to those looking for sun, sea and great food.

While in Fethiye we will visit the cave tombs, located in the cliff on the south side of town. We will also see the Lycian sarcophagus -- there are a number of stone sarcophagii carved in typical Lycian style scattered around the town, with one of the most preserved ones lying in the yard of town governor's office. The Fethiye Amphitheatre, a coastal amphitheatre dating back to Hellenistic times (as far back as Alexander the Great), is also worth a look.

Overnight in Fethiye.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Fethiye - Bodrum: Crusader Castle of St Peter

After breakfast we drive to Bodrum, 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 houses scattered on the hillside overlook the perfect natural harbour. It's delightful to wander along the palm-lined marina in the evening and marvel at the yachts from all over the world.

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's A&M University.

Overnight in Bodrum.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Bodrum - Didyma - Kusadasi

After a free morning in Bodrum, we travel northward along the Aegean coast, on winding roads through fields and olive groves, toward Kusadasi, a beautiful port city with a small island fortress. 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.

Kusadasi has rapidly developed into one of the most popular seaside resorts of the coast and was most probably founded on the ancient site of Neopolis. Because of its beautiful location and its excellent hotels, it is an ideal base for Ephesus.

Overnight in Kusadasi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Kusadasi: Ephesus Site Tour

Today we step into one of the ancient world's greatest cities---Ephesus, crown jewel of Roman Asia Minor. During its golden age, over 250,000 people lived here, making it the empire's third-largest city after Rome and Alexandria. The patron goddess Artemis watched over this cosmopolitan metropolis from her temple, considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Walking down the marble-paved Arcadian Way, we follow the same path where St. Paul preached, Mark Antony paraded, and wealthy merchants displayed their prosperity. The Library of Celsus rises before us in restored magnificence---once holding 12,000 scrolls, it served as both library and elaborate tomb for the Roman consul whose son built it in his honour.

The Great Theatre, carved into the hillside, could hold 24,000 spectators for gladiator contests and dramatic performances. From its upper tiers, we gaze across the former harbour where Mediterranean ships once docked. Centuries of river silt have moved the coastline 8 kilometres away, leaving this great port city stranded inland---nature's reminder that even mighty Rome couldn't control everything.

Our special visit to the Terrace Houses reveals how Ephesus's elite lived. These Roman villas, protected under modern roofs, preserve incredible frescoes, mosaics, and marble decorations. Walking through their rooms, we glimpse the sophisticated lifestyle that made Ephesus famous throughout the ancient world.

The superb Ephesus Museum houses treasures that bring the ancient city to life, while nearby Selcuk shows us Turkey's medieval Islamic heritage with the beautiful sa Bey Mosque, built in 1375, and the imposing Ayasoluk Fortress crowning the hill.

Overnight in Kusadasi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Kusadasi - Aphrodisias - Pamukkale

After breakfast we leave the Aegean coast and drive along the winding Menderes River Valley, which gives its name to the geographical term referring to a winding, or meandering river.

We visit the impressive Roman site of Aphrodisias, named after Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. Much of the site's excavation has been funded by the National Geographic Society. Aphrodisias is the location of one of the greatest schools of sculpture in antiquity; the museum here contains some magnificent pieces.

We continue to Pamukkale where mineral-rich water breaks through the earth's surface and cascades down the hillsides creating terraces of white chalk-like stone. We visit the ruins of Hierapolis before checking in to our hotel.

Overnight in Pamukkale.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Pamukkale - Konya

We have a morning departure for the mystical city of Konya, birthplace of the Whirling Dervishes and capital of the Seljuk Empire. En route we pass by Lake Egirdir. Two islands, connected by a causeway to the mainland, extend the town of Egirdir far out into the lake's fish-filled waters.

During the sightseeing tour of Konya we will visit the Mausoleum and Museum of Mevlana, home of the famous Whirling Dervishes; as well as the ceramics museum of Karatay, once an Islamic school, built in 1251.

Overnight in Konya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Konya - Cappadocia

Traversing the vast Anatolian Plateau, we encounter Sultanhani Caravanserai, a magnificent testament to medieval Turkey's position as the bridge between East and West. These fortified inns sheltered merchant caravans traveling the Silk Road, providing security, supplies, and hospitality in a dangerous world.

Sultanhani's imposing stone architecture and well-preserved courtyard offer vivid insights into medieval trade networks that connected China with Europe. Caravanserais like this enabled cultural and commercial exchange that enriched civilizations from Venice to Beijing. Standing in its shadowed archways, we imagine merchants from dozens of nations gathering around evening fires, sharing stories and goods that would travel thousands of kilometres to distant markets.

As afternoon progresses, we enter the heart of Cappadocia, where geology creates landscapes that seem to belong on another planet. Millions of years ago, volcanic eruptions from nearby Mount Erciyes covered this region with layers of ash and lava. Over millennia, wind and water carved this volcanic debris into fantastic formations---towering cones, mushroom-shaped rocks, and intricate valleys that housed entire civilizations.

The region's name comes from the Persian "Katpatuka," meaning "Land of Beautiful Horses," though today Cappadocia is famous for entirely different reasons. Byzantine monks carved hundreds of churches into these soft volcanic rocks, creating hidden sanctuaries where Christianity flourished even under Islamic rule.

Tonight we rest at the edge of this geological wonderland, preparing to explore landscapes and history that exist nowhere else on earth.

Overnight near Cappadocia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Cappadocia Area

Dawn reveals Cappadocia's otherworldly landscape in all its surreal glory---a moonlike terrain where fairy chimneys and conical towers topped with perfectly balanced capstones create one of earth's most extraordinary geological galleries. Here, volcanic ash hardened into soft tuff rock that wind and water sculpted into towering mushrooms reaching 30 metres high.

In Goreme Valley, we discover a monastic complex where Byzantine hermits carved churches directly into the living rock between the 10th and 11th centuries. These rock chapels preserve brilliant frescoes depicting biblical scenes, their colours still vivid after a thousand years of hidden sanctuary. Walking through this open-air museum, we understand how persecuted Christians created an entire civilization inside the earth itself.

Our exploration continues at Kaymaklı underground city, one of dozens of subterranean communities carved into Cappadocia's soft volcanic rock. At least eight levels descend into the earth, four currently open to visitors through an elaborate network of tunnels, stairways, and chambers. These hidden cities served as safe havens during times of invasion, sheltering entire communities complete with churches, stables, kitchens, and ventilation systems.

The engineering sophistication of these underground cities astounds modern visitors. Narrow passages that could be quickly blocked, clever air shafts that prevented suffocation, and communication networks that connected multiple levels demonstrate how medieval communities adapted to survive in a dangerous world.

Weather permitting, adventurous travellers might choose the optional hot-air balloon flight at sunrise. Evening brings optional performances of traditional Turkish folk dances.

Overnight near Cappadocia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

Our journey begins with a visit to the picturesque village of Uçhisar, dominated by the imposing Uçhisar Fortress---a natural rock castle that provided medieval communities with an impregnable refuge and panoramic views across Cappadocia's volcanic landscape. This ancient stronghold, carved from a single massive outcrop, demonstrates how geography shaped human survival strategies in this remarkable region.

Continuing through Ürgüp, we discover a charming village that medieval records show was once home to a Byzantine bishop. The village's cobblestone streets, traditional stone houses, and vibrant atmosphere reflect centuries of cultural continuity, where Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Turkish communities created a unique Anatolian civilization.

En route to Ankara, we pause at Tuz Gölü, Turkey's great salt lake. This shallow inland sea, one of the world's largest hypersaline lakes, creates a landscape that shifts dramatically with seasons and weather---sometimes mirror-flat and reflective, other times crystalline white with evaporated salt deposits that stretch to the horizon.

Ankara, Turkey's modern capital, began as an ancient trading centre famous for the soft angora wool of local goats. When Atatürk established the Turkish Republic after World War I, he deliberately chose Ankara over Istanbul as his new capital, symbolically breaking with the discredited Ottoman Empire to create a modern, forward-looking nation.

We pay our respects at Ataturk's Mausoleum before visiting the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, considered among the world's greatest archaeological museums. This extraordinary collection spans from the Paleolithic settlement at Çatalhöyük (7500 BC) through the mighty Hittite Empire, showcasing artifacts from Phrygian, Urartian, Assyrian, and countless other civilizations that flourished on Anatolian soil.

Overnight in Ankara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Ankara - Istanbul: Topkapi Palace

Today we travel to Istanbul via high-speed train (3.5 hours).

On arrival we will visit the Topkapi Palace, the great palace of the Ottoman sultans from the mid-fifteenth to the early nineteenth century. It was from this vast complex of buildings that the mighty Ottoman Empire was organised. Today it is a huge museum containing ceremonial robes in silk and gold thread, Japanese and Chinese porcelain, European clocks, miniature paintings depicting Ottoman courtly life and one of the largest jewelry collections in the world. You may choose to end your visit with a look at the Topkapi Harem, where the sultans' many "wives" were kept in isolated splendour, before leaving the palace (optional approx +/-9 USD entrance fee).

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Departure

Departure from Istanbul.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast