

WESTERN TURKEY

featuring Istanbul, the Coast & 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," 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 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."

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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 this 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 Askleion 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 Gulets 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 and Dinner

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.

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 -- the original Father Christmas -- on the way to Antalya. 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.

Overnight in Antalya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Antalya: Perge & Aspendos

We visit the vast Roman site of Perge where St Paul is said to have preached his first sermon. Here are the ruins of a huge theatre with impressive marble relief work, fountains, a colonnaded steam bath and basilica. Nearby is the well preserved amphitheatre at Aspendos, which the Romans designed so brilliantly that natural acoustics allow someone sitting in the furthest seats to hear a person speaking in a normal voice down in the orchestra area. We will also see the aqueduct that brought water from the mountains to the city.

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 we drive across the flat Anatolian Plateau to Cappadocia. Along the way we visit the caravanserai of Sultanhanı. Caravanserais were fortified, medieval inns located one day's journey apart, for the protection of travelling merchants. This encouraged merchants and their caravans of silks and spices travelling the "Silk Route" to trade in Turkish lands, thus promoting commerce.

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 Kaymaklı one of the many cities dug into the soft rock of Cappadocia. At Kaymaklı 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

Our drive today takes us to a salt lake called Tuz Golu. We travel through the village of Uchisar, clustered around the Uchisar Fortress, and the village of Urgup which was, according to documents found in the Middle Ages, a bishop's residence.

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.

Please note: The inclusion of Ankara on our tour is currently under review and may be adjusted due to inconvenient train/flight connections back to Istanbul. We will continue to assess ever-changing conditions and travellers' feedback and will make a change if logistics warrant.

Overnight in Ankara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Ankara - Train to Istanbul

Today we travel to Istanbul via high-speed train (+/-5 hours).

You should have some free time in the city before our evening meal.

PLEASE NOTE from 2025 onward, this tour will not return to Istanbul on this day. Tour TK1 will travel to Trabzon overland via Samsun; tour TW4 will end in Ankara and become one day shorter. Once our 2024 tours depart, this program will be adjusted.

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Departure

Departure from Istanbul.

IYI YOLCULUKLAR/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast