

EASTERN TURKEY

'The Land Beyond the Seas'

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Ankara

Arrival in Ankara, Turkey's modern capital.

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

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

Overnight in Ankara.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Ankara - Hattusas - Amasya - Samsun

This morning we embark on a scenic drive towards the Black Sea, stopping at Çorum to explore Hattusas, the extraordinary capital of the Hittite Empire and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Between 1650 and 1200 BC, the Hittites ruled an empire that rivalled Egypt and Babylon, controlling trade routes between Europe and Asia from this strategic Anatolian stronghold.

Walking through Hattusa's massive gates, temples, and royal palace foundations, we begin to understand the sophistication of this Bronze Age superpower. The Hittites were master diplomats and warriors, the first civilization to work iron systematically, and pioneers of international law---their peace treaty with Egypt is history's earliest known diplomatic agreement.

Our journey continues to Amasya, one of Turkey's most picturesque cities, stretched along the banks of the Yeilrmak River beneath towering cliffs. This stunning location made Amasya a favourite residence of Ottoman princes, who learned statecraft here before ascending to the throne. Traditional Ottoman houses cascade down hillsides in perfect harmony with the natural landscape.

We visit the tomb of Prince Danis-Mend Gazi, an important figure in early Ottoman expansion into Anatolia. Amasya's history stretches back to the ancient kingdom of Pontus, but its Ottoman architectural heritage creates an atmosphere of particular elegance and refinement.

As evening approaches, we arrive in Samsun, Turkey's most important Black Sea port and a city of profound historical significance. Here on 19 May 1919, Atatürk began the Turkish War of Independence that transformed the defeated Ottoman Empire into the modern Turkish Republic.

Overnight in Samsun.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Samsun - Trabzon

Our journey continues eastward along Turkey's dramatic Black Sea coast to Trabzon, the "Byzantium in Exile" that has captivated travellers from Marco Polo to Rose Macaulay. This ancient port city served as capital of the Trebizond Empire after Constantinople fell to the Fourth Crusade in 1204, maintaining Byzantine culture and Orthodox Christianity for another 250 years.

We begin at the 13th-century Church of Hagia Sophia, built by Emperor Manuel I on the site of an earlier pagan temple. After suffering centuries of damage and neglect, the church's magnificent Byzantine frescoes---among the world's finest examples of late Byzantine art---were painstakingly restored during the 1960s. Inside, vivid scenes from the Old Testament and the life of Christ demonstrate the spiritual intensity and artistic sophistication of medieval Orthodoxy.

Our walking tour of old Trabzon reveals layers of history stretching back 2,700 years. Milesian Greek colonists settled here in the 7th

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century BC, attracted by the metal trade and the natural harbour created by a table-like headland---giving the city its ancient name Trapezous, meaning "table."

We explore the Tabakhane Bridge, ancient city walls, and the Middle City before reaching the Ortahisar Mosque, originally Trabzon's main Byzantine cathedral where emperors celebrated weddings, funerals, and coronations. At the Upper Citadel, we stand where the Imperial Palace once overlooked the dramatic ravine that provides Trabzon's natural defences.

Crossing the medieval Zagnos Bridge, we conclude at the Ottoman Mosque of Gülbahar Hatun, demonstrating how Islamic architecture adapted Byzantine traditions to create uniquely Turkish sacred spaces.

Overnight in Trabzon.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Trabzon - Sumela Monastery - Erzurum

This morning we venture deep into the Pontic Mountains to discover Sumela Monastery, one of Orthodox Christianity's most spectacular and sacred sites. According to tradition, the Athenian monk Barnabas discovered here in 385 AD the miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary believed painted by St. Luke himself.

The monastery developed during the 6th century, though the surviving buildings date mainly to the 13th and 14th centuries when Byzantine emperors of the Komnenos dynasty celebrated their coronations at this remote mountain sanctuary. The icon's miraculous powers became so famous that even Ottoman sultans made offerings here, demonstrating the respect Turkish rulers showed for Christian holy sites.

We ascend through lush forest along a winding path---about 250 metres of gentle climbing that takes approximately 30 minutes. Suddenly, the monastery appears, seemingly impossible, clinging to a sheer cliff face 300 metres above the valley floor. This first glimpse creates an unforgettable moment of wonder and spiritual awe.

Though now partially ruined, brilliant frescoes still adorn the main chapel's interior, depicting religious scenes with the distinctive intensity of late Byzantine art. Exploring Sumela's cells, chapels, and galleries carved into living rock, we understand how generations of monks created a complete spiritual community in this vertical sanctuary.

Breaking for lunch en route to Erzurum where you can sample regional specialities of the eastern Black Sea: lahana corbasi (cabbage soup), hamsi (anchovies), and muhlama---melted cheese served with bread that reflects the area's dairy-farming traditions.

Overnight in Erzurum.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Erzurum - Kars & Ani

The eastern Anatolian morning breaks as we journey toward one of history's most haunting archaeological treasures. Our destination lies at Turkey's Armenian border, where the ghost capital of Ani once rivalled Constantinople itself.

We arrive in Kars, a frontier town weathered by empires, before venturing to Ani---the medieval Armenian city that housed over 100,000 souls beneath a thousand church spires. By the 10th century CE, "no city in Europe could compare in size and magnificence to Ani," recorded chroniclers. Today we understand why as we walk among red and black sandstone ruins crowning this dramatic gorge.

Mongol raids, the devastating 1319 earthquake, and Tamerlane's final assault transformed this glorious metropolis into today's haunting ruin. We explore the Cathedral of Ani, its soaring arches still defiant against time, and trace Armenian frescoes that have survived seven centuries. The Church of St. Gregory reveals intricate stonework that speaks to medieval Armenian artistry at its pinnacle.

From the precipice where city walls plunge into the Arpacay Gorge, we gaze across no-man's land toward modern Armenia---a reminder that borders shift while Ani's stones remain eternal witnesses. The wind carries whispers of merchants who once filled these streets, of pilgrims who worshipped in these sanctuaries, of a civilization that flourished at the crossroads of empires.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Kars - Ishak Pasa Sarayi - Lake Van

Mount Ararat dominates the eastern horizon as we depart Kars, its snow-capped peak at 5,165 metres (16,946 feet) earning the Arabic designation "roof of the world." According to Genesis, this sacred mountain cradled Noah's Ark as floodwaters receded.

We break for lunch in Dogubeyazit, just 35 kilometres (22 miles) from Iran's border, where ancient Silk Road caravans once navigated mountain passes connecting empires across continents.

Our afternoon destination is Ishak Pasa Sarayi, perched impossibly on a mountainside like an architectural marvel suspended between earth and sky. This 18th-century palace represents brilliant synthesis—Ottoman, Persian, Armenian, and Georgian design traditions merged in honey-coloured stone. Built by a Kurdish chieftain and completed by Ishak Pasa in 1784, the palace once boasted doors plated in gold and studded with precious stones.

We explore courtyards and chambers where each room reveals different architectural influences. The palace's strategic position overlooking Turkey, Armenia, and Iran reminds us of Kurdish chieftains' vital role controlling mountain trade routes.

Continuing westward through spectacular mountain landscapes, Lake Van emerges like an inland sea, stretching 119 kilometres (74 miles) across the Anatolian plateau. This extraordinary body—Turkey's largest lake and the world's largest soda lake—was born from volcanic drama when Mount Nemrut's lava flows blocked the basin's natural outlet millions of years ago.

We arrive in Van with time for proper rest after our journey.

Overnight in Van.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Lake Van Comprehensive Touring

Today we explore Lake Van's remarkable treasures. The lake's unique alkaline chemistry—four times saltier than seawater—creates an environment supporting endemic species including the famous Van cat with mismatched eyes and pearl mullet. These turquoise waters reach 450-metre (1,476-foot) depths, reflecting surrounding mountains in shades that change hourly.

At Van Museum, we encounter the remarkable Urartian civilization that dominated this region from the 9th to 6th centuries BCE. The collection's intricate gold jewellery reveals sophisticated culture controlling trade routes linking Mesopotamia with Anatolia.

We ascend Van Castle, the commanding rocky outcrop serving as the Urartian empire's administrative heart. From this dramatic citadel known as Tushpa, Urartian kings commanded territories stretching from the Caucasus to northern Iraq. Stone battlements, temple ruins, and royal tombs bear cuneiform inscriptions revealing Bronze Age civilization's sophisticated administration.

Our afternoon boat ride across Lake Van's azure waters carries us toward Akdamar Island, rising like a jewel just two kilometres (1.2 miles) offshore.

The 10th-century Armenian Church of the Holy Cross stands as medieval architecture's masterpiece, its red tuff stone walls alive with intricate relief carvings. King Gagik I Ardzruni commissioned this marvel between 915-921 CE. Exterior walls flow with carved narratives: Adam and Eve, Jonah and the whale, David facing Goliath.

Inside, medieval fresco fragments whisper stories of Armenian Christianity's golden age, when this island served as the Armenian Patriarch's seat.

Overnight in Van.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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Day 8 Lake Van - Kahta

We embark upon our journey westward through eastern Anatolia's rugged magnificence toward Mount Nemrut's foot. This route traces ancient pathways connecting Armenian highlands with Mesopotamian plains, carrying us through landscapes witnessing countless civilizations' rise and fall.

The road winds through spectacular Bitlis Canyon, where geological forces carved deep gorges over millions of years. Sheer cliffs tower above rushing waters as we navigate this dramatic terrain. We pass Kurdish villages where traditional life continues as it has for centuries, crossing boundaries between ancient kingdoms—Urtian, Commagene, and Roman territories that once contested control over these vital mountain passes.

Changing vegetation and architecture tell our westward progress story: Armenian plateau's harsh beauty gradually giving way to anti-Taurus ranges separating Anatolia from Mesopotamia.

Our destination, Kahta, sits in attractive countryside at Mount Nemrut's foot, serving as gateway to archaeology's most extraordinary discoveries. The population here is predominantly Kurdish, descended from the Reshwan tribe calling these mountains home for generations.

As evening approaches and Mount Nemrut's distinctive 2,150-metre (7,054-foot) profile becomes visible against darkening sky, anticipation builds for tomorrow's pre-dawn ascent. The summit ahead conceals the ancient world's most audacious artistic achievement—a fusion of Greek, Persian, and Armenian religious traditions that defied the gods themselves.

Overnight in Kahta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Mount Nemrut Touring

Before dawn, we begin ascending Mount Nemrut toward archaeology's most spectacular discovery. King Antiochus I of Commagene, ruling this buffer kingdom between Rome and Parthia from 69-34 BCE, conceived a monument so audacious it staggers imagination—a funerary complex where he declared himself equal to gods.

At Arsameia, the Commagene capital, a perfectly preserved relief shows Mithridates I, Antiochus's father, clasping hands with Hercules in divine partnership. The 5-metre (16-foot) stele and inscriptions speak of royal bloodlines tracing to both Alexander the Great and Darius of Persia—genealogical claims justifying Antiochus's ultimate hubris above.

The final 600-metre (1,969-foot) summit climb requires 20 minutes of steady hiking, building anticipation for the revelation awaiting us. Cresting the ridge, the Western Terrace reveals Antiochus's achievement: colossal seated statues in semi-circle, their 2-metre (6.5-foot) heads representing syncretic gods—Helios-Mithra, Fortuna, Zeus-Ahuramazda, Antiochus himself, and Hercules.

The Eastern Terrace, better preserved and more dramatic, displays these divine figures in original majesty. Between them lies the 50-metre (164-foot) artificial tumulus of crushed stone concealing Antiochus's unexcavated tomb. The king left detailed inscriptions explaining his divine status and specifying elaborate rituals celebrating his birth and coronation for eternity.

Relief panels show Antiochus's divine partnerships, while the lion horoscope relief records the precise astrological moment—July 7, 62 BCE—when planets aligned to herald a god-king's arrival.

Overnight in Kahta.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Kahta - Gobeklitepe - Sanliurfa (Urfa)

This morning we journey toward Sanliurfa, known simply as Urfa, one of humanity's most ancient continuously inhabited cities. Our route carries us deeper into the cradle of civilization.

Our first destination is Gobeklitepe, the site that transformed our understanding of human social organization. Discovered in 1995, this

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11,500-year-old temple complex predates Stonehenge by 6,000 years and the Egyptian pyramids by 7,000 years. Walking among the circular stone enclosures with their massive T-shaped pillars carved with animals and abstract symbols, we confront a revolutionary truth: organized religion and monumental architecture emerged before agriculture, not after.

Hunter-gatherer peoples constructed this vast ceremonial complex, suggesting that spiritual and social needs drove civilization's development. The precision of megalithic construction and sophisticated carved reliefs challenge previous assumptions about prehistoric societies.

At the new Sanliurfa Archaeology Museum, one of Turkey's most impressive modern cultural institutions, we explore Gobeklitepe's context through exceptional artifacts and displays. Life-sized reconstructions help us visualize these ancient ceremonies, while the comprehensive collection traces the region's continuous inhabitation from the Stone Age through successive empires.

Arriving in historic Urfa by evening, we enter a city sacred to three Abrahamic faiths. According to tradition, the prophet Abraham was born here.

Overnight in Urfa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Urfa Touring - Fly to Istanbul

Our final morning in southeastern Anatolia offers several exploration options, depending on group interest and flight timing.

We may journey to Harran, the ancient city mentioned in Genesis where Abraham stopped on his journey from Ur to Canaan. Harran's distinctive beehive houses, constructed using architectural techniques unchanged for millennia, create an otherworldly landscape. The ruins of Harran's great mosque and university remind us that this was once a centre of Islamic learning where scholars translated Greek philosophical texts that would later spark Europe's Renaissance.

Alternatively, we might explore the Urfa Mosaic Museum, housed in the beautifully restored old market building, containing the remarkable "Amazons Mosaic" and other Roman and Byzantine treasures discovered in the region.

For those preferring to remain in Urfa itself, the old city offers extraordinary discoveries. The Pool of Abraham (Balikligol) remains a functioning pilgrimage site where sacred carp swim in waters believers hold miraculous. The surrounding complex of mosques, madrasas, and caravanserais creates an atmosphere of timeless devotion.

This afternoon we transfer to Urfa's airport for our flight to Istanbul, carrying us from civilization's ancient birthplace to the city bridging East and West. Landing in Istanbul, minarets and domes punctuating Istanbul's skyline welcome us like old friends after journeying through Anatolia's heartlands.

Tonight offers reflection on extraordinary diversity—landscapes, cultures, and historical periods experienced together.

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Istanbul: Hippodrome & Agia Sophia

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

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

We'll begin the walking component of today's tour at the legendary Blue Mosque, built between 1609 and 1616 by Mehmet Aga. We will see

the interior, where the walls and ceiling are covered by more than 20,000 Iznik tiles. At the adjacent Hippodrome we will see the remains of the great sports stadium where chariot races were held in Roman and Byzantine times. We will also see an Egyptian obelisk, a giant needle of stone carved for the Pharaoh Tutmoses III around 1500 BC and brought to Constantinople by the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius in AD 390.

We continue to the church of Agia Sophia (St Sophia), built by the Emperor Justinian in 548 BC. It was the largest church in the Christian world for nearly 1,000 years. When the Ottoman Turks conquered the city in 1435 one of the first things they did was to convert St Sophia into a mosque. In 1934 the building was deconsecrated and converted to a museum; however, in 2020, Pres. Recep Tayyip Erdogan made the controversial decision to convert the building back into a mosque, though it remains opens to visitors (please note that the ongoing conversion/renovations may limit our visit to certain areas or result in some features being covered, rendering them unviewable).

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

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

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

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

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Istanbul Touring Continued

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

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

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

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Istanbul.

IYI YOLCULUKLAR/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast