Tour Code
**TK1**

ADVENTURESABROAD

# TURKIYE: WEST & EAST

## The Complete Anatolian Journey

**27 days**

Created on: 5 Nov, 2026

### 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

### 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.

The remainder of the afternoon is yours to explore before our evening meal. Your Tour Leader can point out the nearby 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.

Your Tour Leader can also 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.

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 3 Istanbul Touring Continued

The aromatic Spice Bazaar awakens our senses this morning, where cinnamon, clove, and thyme spill from hundreds of colourful muslin bags. Merchants have traded exotic spices here since the 17th century, when Ottoman ships brought treasures from across their vast empire stretching from Vienna to Yemen.

Nearby stands the Mosque of Süleyman the Magnificent, the masterpiece of Sinan, history's greatest architect. Built in the 16th century during the Ottoman Empire's golden age, this mosque achieves perfect harmony between monumentality and grace. Süleyman's complex included libraries, soup kitchens for the poor, hammams, fountains, and schools---a complete community surrounding the sacred space.

We board a ferry for a leisurely cruise along the legendary Bosphorus, sipping traditional tea from small curved glasses as summer palaces and palatial mansions drift past on both shores. This narrow strait has been humanity's gateway between Europe and Asia for millennia. Alexander the Great crossed here pursuing Persian dreams, Crusaders passed these waters seeking Jerusalem, and today massive tankers carry the world's energy through this 30-kilometre channel.

Disembarking at the strait's northern end, we visit the Kariye (Chora) Museum. Here, Byzantine artists in the 14th century created some of history's most beautiful mosaics---intricate golden scenes telling the story of Christ with an artistry that rivals Michelangelo.

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 4 Istanbul - Gallipoli - Troy - Canakkale

This morning we bid farewell to Europe, driving along the Sea of Marmara through Thrace---the small European corner of a nation that is 97% Asian. Turkiye's fascinating character springs from the countless peoples who have claimed this bridge between continents as home.

Before leaving Europe, we visit Gallipoli---Gelibolu in Turkish. This narrow, mountainous peninsula has witnessed over 3,000 years of battles for control of the Dardanelles. Here, during World War I, a young officer named Mustafa Kemal first showed the brilliance that would transform him into Atatürk, father of the Turkish Republic. Winston Churchill's ambitious plan to capture these straits, open the way to Russia, and seize Constantinople failed catastrophically. Today, over 30 memorials mark this hallowed ground where Australian, New Zealand, British, French, and Turkish soldiers fought with extraordinary courage.

Crossing the Dardanelles by ferry, we leave Europe for Asia and journey to Troy, where legend claims Greek and Trojan heroes fought for beautiful Helen. For centuries, scholars dismissed Homer's Iliad as pure myth until German businessman Heinrich Schliemann excavated here at his own expense in the 1870s. His discoveries proved that a sophisticated city had indeed flourished on this strategic hilltop for millennia.

Standing on Troy's ancient ramparts, we gaze across the windswept plain where archaeology and epic poetry merge into one timeless story. The famous north wind still blows from the Dardanelles, just as Homer described 3,000 years ago. We arrive in Canakkale in time for dinner.

Overnight in Canakkale.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 5 Canakkale - Pergamon - Kusadasi

An early start carries us down Turkiye's rugged Aegean coast to the authentically Turkish town of Bergama, ancient Pergamon. Here we explore one of antiquity's greatest medical centres---the Asklepion, considered among the world's first hospitals. Ancient patients came here seeking healing through a combination of medicine, psychology, and faith.

We discover the carved symbol of two serpents wrapped around a cup---the caduceus that still represents medicine today. In Pergamon's theatre, mentally disturbed patients allegedly acted out their emotions as a form of therapy, foreshadowing modern psychoanalysis by 2,000 years. The innovation of ancient physicians who understood the connection between mind and body feels remarkably contemporary.

Our route continues through Izmir, Turkiye's most vital port city, birthplace of the legendary blind poet Homer. Here in 1922, during Turkiye's War of Independence, Atatürk's forces expelled Greek invading armies, securing the new Turkish Republic's sovereignty. The dramatic events of that war transformed the ancient city of Smyrna into modern zmir.

We arrive in Kusadasi as evening approaches---the "Island of Birds"---named for the small fortress island connected to the mainland. This

beautiful port has welcomed traders, pilgrims, and travellers for centuries. Tonight we rest beside the Aegean Sea, preparing for tomorrow's encounter with one of antiquity's greatest cities.

Overnight in Kusadasi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 6 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 Turkiye'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 7 Kusadasi - Didyma - Bodrum: Crusader Castle of St Peter

Winding roads carry us southward along the Aegean coast through landscapes of olive groves and pine forests. En route, we pause at Didyma, one of antiquity's most powerful oracles. For over a thousand years, pilgrims journeyed here seeking Apollo's wisdom through prophecies delivered by the sacred priestess.

The Temple of Apollo at Didyma was the fourth-largest temple in the Greek world, its massive columns reaching towards the heavens in tribute to the sun god. Standing among these ancient stones, we understand why Greeks believed this was a place where mortals could communicate with the divine.

Our destination, Bodrum, occupies one of the Mediterranean's most perfect natural harbours. This was ancient Halicarnassus, birthplace of Herodotus, the world's first historian, and site of another Wonder of the Ancient World---the Mausoleum. This elaborate tomb was so magnificent that all grand tombs since have been called mausoleums in its honour.

Modern Bodrum charms visitors with its whitewashed cube houses draped in brilliant bougainvillea, cascading down hillsides to the sparkling sea. The reputation of Bodrum's shipbuilders stretches back to ancient times. Today's craftsmen still construct traditional wooden yachts: the sharp-prowed Tirhandil and the broad-beamed Gulets used for pleasure cruising.

This afternoon we explore the magnificent Crusader Castle of St. Peter, built by the Knights Hospitaller in the early 15th century using stones from the ancient Mausoleum. The castle now houses an extraordinary underwater archaeology museum, displaying treasures from ancient shipwrecks discovered off Turkiye's coast by teams from Texas A&M University.

Overnight in Bodrum.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 8 Bodrum: Day at Leisure

Today belongs to you in this enchanting seaside town where ancient history meets modern pleasure. The morning might find you exploring the remains of the Bodrum Mausoleum, where enough foundations survive to imagine King Mausolus's magnificent tomb rising 50 metres above the surrounding city. Though earthquakes and medieval builders have claimed most of the structure, the site's gardens and remaining sculptures still evoke the wonder that made this one of antiquity's seven marvels.

The hillside Bodrum Amphitheatre offers another glimpse of ancient Halicarnassus. Built during King Mausolus's reign in the 4th century BC and later expanded by the Romans, this well-preserved theatre commands stunning views across the modern city to the azure sea beyond. Sitting on its stone seats, you can imagine audiences 2,400 years ago watching Greek tragedies and Roman spectacles.

Bodrum's narrow streets invite wandering, with traditional Turkish houses, boutique shops, and waterfront cafés creating a perfect atmosphere for relaxation. The harbour bustles with wooden gulets preparing for sunset cruises, their varnished hulls gleaming in the Mediterranean sun.
Perhaps you'll choose to stroll the castle ramparts again, watching fishing boats return with their daily catch, or simply find a seaside taverna to sample fresh seafood while contemplating how this beautiful bay has sheltered sailors and dreamers for thousands of years.

Overnight in Bodrum.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 9 Bodrum - Kas

Leaving Bodrum's azure embrace, we journey over the coastal fringes of the mighty Taurus Mountains towards the warm Mediterranean shore, famously called the "Turquoise Coast" for its extraordinarily blue waters. This dramatic landscape transition takes us from Aegean sophistication to Mediterranean wildness.

The picturesque fishing village of Kas welcomes us with its intimate harbour surrounded by mountains that plunge directly into crystal-clear seas. Lycian tombs carved into cliffsides 2,000 years ago watch over the town, while an ancient theatre carved from living rock speaks of Kas's importance during classical times. The Greek island of Kastellorizo floats just offshore, so close you feel you could swim to it.

Known throughout Turkiye for its stunning natural beauty and relaxed atmosphere, Kas has evolved from a quiet fishing village into a haven for those seeking authentic Mediterranean life. The town maintains its traditional character despite its popularity, with narrow streets climbing hillsides adorned with brilliant bougainvillea and traditional Turkish houses painted in white and blue.

Local fishermen still bring their catch to the small harbour each morning, just as their ancestors did when this was the Lycian city of Antiphellos. The ancient name means "opposite Phellos," referring to the Lycian city across the bay whose ruins still crown a nearby hilltop.

Tonight we rest in this magical corner of Turkiye where mountains meet the sea and ancient stones blend seamlessly with modern life.

Overnight in Kas.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 10 Kas & Gulet Cruise

This morning we board a traditional Turkish gulet, a handcrafted wooden vessel created by master shipbuilders whose skills pass from generation to generation. These beautiful boats originated in the Bodrum region, where craftsmen still shape each hull by hand, following designs perfected over centuries of Mediterranean sailing.

Our open-ended itinerary adapts to local weather and sea conditions, but we anticipate cruising to some of the coast's most spectacular

treasures. Tersane Bay offers a perfect swimming stop in waters so clear you can see ancient pottery shards on the seabed 10 metres below. At Kekova, we sail over the submerged ruins of an ancient city destroyed by earthquakes in the 2nd century AD.

The fortress at Simena, accessible only by boat or mountain path, crowns a rocky peninsula where Byzantine walls still guard empty windows looking across the sea. Swimming near these ruins, we glimpse foundations of houses and rock-hewn staircases beneath the crystal-clear surface---an underwater museum preserved by the Mediterranean's warm, salty embrace.

Our captain guides us to hidden coves known only to local sailors, where pine forests cascade to secluded beaches and the only sounds are gentle waves against ancient stones. We anchor for swimming in waters that shift from deep sapphire to brilliant turquoise, understanding perfectly why this coast bears that jewel's name.

Overnight in Kas.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 11 Kas - Phaselis - Antalya

Following the ancient Lycian Coast, we journey to Myra, where extraordinary rock tombs carved directly into towering cliffs reveal the sophisticated artistry of Lycian civilization. These elaborate burial chambers, adorned with intricate facades resembling temple fronts, housed the sarcophagi of wealthy merchants and nobles who controlled this coastline 2,000 years ago.

At the Church of St. Nicholas, we encounter the historical figure behind the Father Christmas legend. The 4th-century bishop who inspired Santa Claus lived and served in this very community, known for his generosity to children and the poor. Beautiful Byzantine mosaics and frescoes within the church create an intimate connection to this beloved saint's actual life and ministry.

Before reaching Antalya, we explore Phaselis, one of the Mediterranean's most spectacular Roman sites. Built on a narrow peninsula between pine-covered mountains and three natural harbours, this ancient city perfectly demonstrates Roman mastery of coastal geography. Founded in the 7th century BC, Phaselis prospered as a member of the Lycian League, its merchants trading with civilizations across the Mediterranean.

Walking through Phaselis's well-preserved ruins, we discover a theatre overlooking the sea, a gymnasium where Roman citizens maintained their fitness, and a necropolis where elaborate tombs reflect the city's cosmopolitan wealth. The three harbours that made Phaselis famous still shelter modern yachts, their protected waters as valuable today as they were 2,000 years ago.

Overnight in Antalya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 12 Antalya: Perge & Aspendos

Today we delve into Roman imperial grandeur at Perge, believed to be the birthplace of St. Paul and one of Asia Minor's most impressive archaeological sites. This ancient city offers an extraordinary window into Roman life at its most sophisticated, when the empire's eastern provinces rivalled Rome itself for wealth and culture.

Perge's massive theatre, adorned with intricate marble reliefs, demonstrates Roman engineering prowess and artistic refinement. The theatre's 15,000-seat capacity reflects the city's importance, while its superb acoustics prove that Roman architects understood sound as well as structure. Nearby, we explore a luxurious colonnaded steam bath complex and an imposing basilica that served both commercial and judicial functions.

Our visit to nearby Aspendos reveals perhaps the world's best-preserved Roman theatre, a masterpiece of engineering that still hosts performances 1,800 years after its construction. Standing in this magnificent structure, we experience acoustic perfection---even whispers from the stage reach the highest seats with crystal clarity. The Romans' mastery of mathematical principles and architectural innovation created a building that remains functionally superior to many modern venues.

The intricate aqueduct system that supplied Perge with fresh mountain water demonstrates Roman mastery of hydraulic engineering. These stone channels carried water across valleys and through mountains, providing essential services that supported urban populations larger than many modern cities.

We conclude our day at Antalya's excellent archaeological museum, which houses early Christian icons and Roman sculptures representing some of Asia Minor's finest artistic achievements.

Overnight in Antalya.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 13 Antalya - Side - Konya

We climb from the Mediterranean coast through dramatic Taurus Mountain scenery towards the vast Anatolian Plateau, one of Turkiye's most spectacular geographical transitions. As altitude increases, the landscape transforms from subtropical coastline to high mountain passes, then opens onto the rolling plains that form Turkiye's agricultural heartland.

Agriculturally, Turkiye ranks among the world's richest nations. Driving past traditional villages and carefully tended farms, we see endless wheat fields and flourishing orchards that make Turkiye a major exporter of dried fruits, nuts, lentils, and beans. This fertile plateau has fed empires for millennia.

Our scenic route takes us through Side, the legendary trysting place of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. This romantic coastal town stands on a promontory flanked by golden beaches, where ruins of the ancient city mingle seamlessly with modern resort development. Despite tourism's growth, Side retains its enchanting atmosphere and unique character.

By evening, we reach Konya, a profoundly traditional town and Turkiye's spiritual heart. Here in the 13th century, Mevlâna Rumi founded the mystical Sufi order known as the Whirling Dervishes. His teachings about divine love and spiritual unity continue influencing Islamic thought worldwide, making Konya one of Turkiye's most important pilgrimage destinations for Muslims.

We visit the museum and tomb of Mevlâna, beautifully decorated with Turkish carpets, calligraphy, and architectural details that create an atmosphere of profound reverence. Konya served as capital of the Sultanate of Rum from 1150 to 1300, and many magnificent Seljuk buildings date from this golden age.

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 Turkiye'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 Kaymakl 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, Turkiye'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, Turkiye'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 Çatalhoyuk (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 - Hattusas - Samsun

This morning we embark on a scenic drive north toward the Black Sea, pausing at Corum to explore Hattusa, 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 the trade routes between Europe and Asia from this strategic Anatolian stronghold. They were master diplomats and formidable warriors — the first civilisation to work iron systematically, and pioneers of international law. The peace treaty they signed with Egypt after the Battle of Kadesh remains history's earliest known diplomatic agreement between great powers.

Walking through Hattusa's massive lion gates, royal palace foundations, and temple complexes, the scale of this Bronze Age superpower becomes tangible. These were not primitive people on the edge of history — they were contemporaries of Ramesses II, conducting correspondence in cuneiform across half the known world.

The drive continues north as the landscape shifts dramatically — the dry Anatolian plateau giving way to forested hills and then the first green glimpse of the Black Sea coast. By evening we reach Samsun, Turkiye's most important Black Sea port. It was here on 19 May 1919 that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk stepped ashore to begin the Turkish War of Independence — transforming a defeated, partitioned Ottoman Empire into the modern Turkish Republic within four years. A city that witnessed an empire's end and a nation's beginning.

Overnight in Samsun.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 18 Samsun - Black Sea Coast - Trabzon

Our journey continues eastward along Turkiye'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 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 19 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 20 Erzurum - Kars & Ani

Before departing Erzurum we visit the Cifte Minareli Medrese & Ulu Camii. The Twin Minaret Seminary dates to 1253, built under the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum at the height of their power in Anatolia. The facade is the thing — that elaborately carved stone portal flanked by two brick minarets tiled in deep blue, each capped with a muqarnas balcony. The stonework on the entrance rivals anything in the Islamic world for geometric intricacy. Inside, the twin iwans and open courtyard follow the classic Central Asian madressa plan — the Seljuks carried this architectural vocabulary west from Persia and Central Asia all the way to Anatolia.

The Ulu Camii (Grand Mosque) next door is older — 12th century, also Seljuk, one of the earliest mosques in Anatolia. Seven naves running parallel to the qibla wall, a forest of columns, austere and powerful. No Ottoman ornamentation — this is Islam as the Seljuks understood it, severe and geometric. Together they represent Erzurum at its medieval peak — a major Silk Road city, prosperous, cosmopolitan, and thoroughly Seljuk before the Mongols arrived and changed everything.

Our journey then continues toward Kars and one of history's most haunting archaeological treasures. Our destination lies at Turkiye's Armenian border, where the ghost capital of Ani once rivalled Constantinople itself. This medieval Armenian city 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. This afternoon 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.

Overnight in Kars.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 21 Kars - Ishak Pasa Sarayi - Lake Van

Mount Ararat dominates the eastern horizon as we depart Kars, its snow-capped peak at 5165 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.

Our destination, located near Dogubeyazit, 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 Turkiye, Armenia, and Iran reminds us of Kurdish chieftains' vital role controlling mountain trade routes.

After a break for lunch nearby, we continue westward through spectacular mountain landscapes. Lake Van emerges like an inland sea, stretching 119 kilometres (74 miles) across the Anatolian plateau. This extraordinary body—Turkiye'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 22 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.

Our morning 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.

We break for lunch near the lakeshore before continuing to 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.

Time permitting, we visit Van Museum, where the remarkable Urartian civilization comes to life through intricate gold jewellery revealing a sophisticated culture that controlled trade routes linking Mesopotamia with Anatolia. Please note that the museum may be undergoing renovations and a visit may not be possible.

Overnight in Van.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 23 Lake Van - Adiyaman

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—Urartian, 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, Adiyaman, 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 2150-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 Adiyaman.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 24 Adiyaman: Mount Nemrut - Yeni Kale - Cendere Bridge & Karakus Tumulus

This morning we make our way up 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.

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.

Descending from Nemrut, we follow the Commagene trail further into this remarkable kingdom. At Yeni Kale, a medieval castle commands the ridge above the Kahta valley — a dramatic exterior stop that speaks to the strategic importance of these mountain approaches across every era of history.

We continue to the Cendere Bridge, one of the finest surviving Roman bridges in the world, built around 200 CE during the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus. Four commemorative columns once flanked its approaches — dedicated to Severus, his wife Julia Domna, and his two sons. One column is conspicuously absent: the column honouring his son Geta was torn down after his brother Caracalla had him murdered and ordered his memory erased from history. The bridge itself has carried traffic across the Kahta river for nearly two thousand years.

Our final stop is Karakus Tumulus — a Commagene royal burial mound rising from a hilltop and marked by columns topped with carved eagles and animals. Its name means Black Bird, after the eagle that crowns it. A quieter, less visited monument than Nemrut but part of the same dynastic story — the Commagene kings who dared to claim kinship with both Zeus and the gods of Persia, and built their monuments accordingly.

Overnight in Adiyaman.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 25 Adiyaman - Sanliurfa (Urfa) & Gobeklitepe

This morning we arrive in Sanliurfa, known simply as Urfa, one of humanity's most ancient continuously inhabited cities — a place sacred to three Abrahamic faiths and, according to tradition, the birthplace of the prophet Abraham himself.

We begin in the heart of the old city, where the Pool of Abraham (Balklgol) and its surrounding complex of mosques and madrasas create an atmosphere of timeless devotion. Sacred carp glide through waters that believers hold miraculous, and locals come for morning prayers as they have for centuries. We wander the adjacent bazaar streets of Golbasi — narrow lanes of spice merchants, coppersmiths and textile sellers — before breaking for lunch at a local restaurant, sampling the distinctive cuisine of this ancient crossroads city.

Our afternoon carries us fifteen kilometres north to Göbeklitepe, the site that transformed our understanding of human social organization. Discovered in 1995, this 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.

As evening approaches we travel south to Harran, the ancient city mentioned in Genesis where Abraham paused on his journey from Ur to Canaan. Harran's distinctive beehive houses -- constructed using techniques unchanged for millennia -- create an otherworldly landscape unlike anywhere else on earth. We take dinner here near these extraordinary mud-brick domes before returning along the road to Urfa and our hotel.

Overnight in Urfa.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 26 Urfa Touring - Fly to Istanbul

Our final morning in southeastern Anatolia begins at the Sanliurfa Archaeology Museum, one of Turkiye's most impressive modern cultural institutions. Here we explore Göbeklitepe's broader context through exceptional artifacts and displays — life-sized reconstructions help us visualize ancient ceremonies, while the comprehensive collection traces the region's continuous inhabitation from the Stone Age through successive empires. The museum alone justifies the journey to Urfa.

We continue to the Urfa Mosaic Museum, housed in a beautifully restored old market building in the heart of the city. The remarkable Amazons Mosaic and an exceptional collection of Roman and Byzantine treasures discovered throughout the region offer a final reminder of the extraordinary civilisational depth of this corner of Anatolia — Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Islamic layers compressed into one city, one morning.

This afternoon we transfer to Urfa's airport for our flight to Istanbul, carrying us from civilization's ancient birthplace to the city that has bridged East and West for two millennia. Landing in Istanbul, minarets and domes punctuating the skyline welcome us like old friends after our journey through Anatolia's heartlands — from Hittite plateau to Black Sea coast, from Armenian highlands to Mesopotamian plain.

Overnight in Istanbul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 27 Departure

Departure from Istanbul.

IYI YOLCULUKLAR/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast