

EASTERN TURKEY EXPLORER



TOUR DETAILS		Duration
		13 days
HIGHLIGHTS		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visit the world's first temple, Göbekli Tepe• Experience a sunrise at Mount Nemrut• Spiritual Urfa and dramatic Mardin• Discover mud beehive homes in ancient Harran	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Climb the walls of Diyarbakir• Former Armenian capital of Ani• The incredible Ishak Pasa Palace• Visit the Armenian church on Akdamar island in Lake Van	
Off The Beaten Track Rating	● ● ● ● ●	Activity Rating ★ ★ ★

ITINERARY

DAY 1 Fly into Istanbul airport where a Travel The Unknown representative will meet you and take you to your hotel. The rest of the day is free to relax or explore. Overnight in Istanbul. Meal plan: n/a

DAY 2 Fly from Istanbul to Kars. Lunch. Afternoon tour of the ethnically mixed town of Kars including the citadel, Kars museum, the Armenian Church of the Apostles and Fethiye mosque. Overnight in a comfortable hotel in Kars. Meal plan: B

*Made famous as the setting of the novel "Snow" written by the Nobel-prize winning author Ohran Pamuk, **Kars** is a quintessentially diverse city. Originally Armenian, then Georgian, later Ottoman, the city fell under Russian occupation for much of the 19th Century and its recapture remained a Soviet aspiration up to and beyond the end of World War II. During its freezing winters the city is often cut off by snow (as happened in the novel "Snow"). The city is also famous in Turkey for its gravy cheese, butter and honey.*

***Kars Citadel** is the main building of note in Kars, and its walls date back to the Bagratuni Armenian period though most of what can be seen today dates from the 13th Century. The **10th Century Armenian Church of the Apostles** with bas relief depictions on its exterior of twelve figures believed to be the apostles has been both a mosque and Russian Orthodox church before lying derelict for a couple of decades until it was converted to a mosque again in 1998.*

DAY 3 After an early breakfast visit the spectacular ruins of the former stately Armenian capital of Ani - set on a wind-swept plain with stunning views. Drive to Doğubayazit, visit the incredible Ishak Paşa Palace, one of the world's most stunning buildings perched on a mountain overlooking Mt. Ararat. Overnight in a comfortable hotel in Doğubayazit. Meal plan: B, L

***Ani**, the former Armenian capital, once rivalled Constantinople in beauty and status. Named for the ancient Urartian fertility goddess Anahid, a city had stood here for centuries before King Ashot III chose it for the site of his capital in 961. Successive kings built a citadel, great churches and monasteries within mighty city walls at the edge of a deep river gorge. Since then it has been home to the Byzantines, the Seljuks, the Kingdom of Georgia, the Persians, various Kurdish Emirs and even the Mongols! An earthquake in 1319 destroyed much of the city and led to its abandonment by the Mongols. It has lain abandoned ever since. Nonetheless many of the buildings in Ani were built to the highest engineering and construction standards of their era and much still remains intact, in some instances far better than just intact.*

***The site of Ani today** is hugely atmospheric and set in a stunning location surrounded by snowy peaks and across a green river valley, you can see into neighbouring Armenia though it is no longer possible to cross from Turkey into Armenia since April 1993 when the Armenians captured the Kelbajar district of Azerbaijan, an ally of Turkey's. The site requires at least two to three hours to visit and the main buildings of note include Ani Cathedral (a.k.a. the Church of the Holy Mother of God), Surp Stephanos Georgian church, the Church of St Gregory of Tigran Honents, the Church of the Holy Redeemer, King Gagik's church of St Gregory, the church of the Holy Apostles, the mosque of Minuchir, the remains of a Zoroastrian temple and the citadel.*

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The construction of **Ishak Paşa Palace**, a splendid 18th Century Ottoman complex, was started in 1685 by Colak Abdi Paşa, the bey of Beyazıt province. A hundred years later, in 1784, his grandson Ishak Paşa completed the gargantuan task of its construction. The results are spectacular. It is one of the most distinguished and magnificent examples of 18th century Ottoman architecture and is very valuable in terms of art history. The beautiful stone complex contains a mosque, a library, a bath house, dining quarters and a harem, where the women used to live. Many of the stone carvings are simply exquisite, and the location, looking out over Mount Ararat (Turkey's highest peak, standing at 5,137m) and the Armenian plateau, is simply breathtaking.

DAY 4 Drive from Doğubayazıt to Van. Stop at the site of 2nd largest meteor crater in the world as well as what is believed by some to be the site of the original Noah's Ark with breathtaking views of Mount Ararat, Turkey's highest mountain. Take a break at the beautiful Muradiye waterfall. On arrival in Van visit the sprawling Van castle with views over the city as the sun sets. We recommend Halay Bar for the evening's entertainment. Live music is on most nights. Overnight in a comfortable hotel in Van. Meal plan: B, L

Van today is a young vibrant university town but the history of the region goes back more than 7 millennia, and the town itself was the Urartian capital as early as the 9th Century BC. **Van Castle**, outside of the modern town, is a vast sprawling Urartian structure dating from the 9th to 7th Centuries BC that affords excellent views of the beautiful surrounding countryside. Don't miss the perfectly-preserved 5th Century trilingual (Old Persian, Babylonian, and Elamite) inscription from Xerxes the Great, the only Achaemenid royal inscription located outside of Iran. The town of Van is also famous throughout Turkey for its kebabs.

The frothy twenty metre **Muradiye Waterfall** is situated amongst cool poplar woods. The surrounding valley channels birds migrating north from Lake Van and hundreds of species, some rare, can be observed during a short period in May. In May/June, the fields around also contain two stunning examples of the region's flora – a huge chocolate-and-white coloured iris and a brilliant red phelepya.

DAY 5 Visit Hoşap castle and the ancient site of Çavuştepe. Lunch in Akdamar. Take a boat across Lake Van to Akdamar Kilisesi. Return to Van to visit a traditional Kurdish weaving "village" where the famous *Van cats* can usually be found. Overnight in comfortable hotel in Van. Meal plan: B, L

Hoşap Castle is a large medieval castle in the village of Hoşap (meaning "Good/Sweet Water" in Kurdish) near the border with Iran. It was built by a local Kurdish lord, Mahmudi Suleyman, in 1643. Legend has it that the hands of the architect who built this formidable stronghold were cut off so that he could not build another. Be sure to find it's intricate lion carvings. A short distance from Hoşap is the Urartian centre **Çavuştepe**. Built in the 8th century B.C., Çavuştepe was once home of the kings of Urartu.

Lake Van, Turkey's largest lake, is flanked by the snowy peaks of the volcanoes of Mount Suphan and Mount Nemrut. The beautiful azure waters of the lake are highly alkaline and drilling at the bottom of the lake by German palaeontologists has revealed climate data covering almost 15,000 years despite only penetrating the first few metres of sediment. It is believed the sediment may hold climate data from the last 800,000 years!

Akdamar island is a small island 3km from the Shore of Lake Van, most famous for the **Armenian Cathedral of the Holy Cross (a.k.a. Akdamar Kilisesi)**. The unique importance of the building comes from the extensive array of bas-relief carvings, of biblical scenes predominantly, that adorn its external walls. Due to the contentious history between Turkey and Armenia the site has been the site of vandalism in the past and its restoration was never short on controversy. But the outcome is spectacular. Besides the marvellous views of the church, the island, the lake and the mountains beyond, there are ruins of an Armenian monastery which once served the church.

DAY 6 Drive to Diyarbakir. Take a short tour of the marketplace and Diyarbakir's famous walls. Take in the sunset on city walls, the world's largest wall after China's Great Wall. Overnight in a comfortable hotel in Diyarbakir. Meal plan: B, L

Diyarbakir (known as "Amed" to the Kurdish majority there) is the largest city in south eastern Turkey and was often the flashpoint for anti-Turkish rebellion in days gone by. Indeed most Turkish Kurds consider it the capital of their would-be nation. Under a less repressive government in Ankara the city today is experiencing a renaissance and is full of soul and character. Its city walls stretch almost 6 kilometres unbroken and inside those walls are a fascinating array of mosques, churches townhouses and an impressive architectural spectrum.

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DAY 7 After breakfast visit Diyarbakir's historic centre including an Orthodox Syriac church, an Armenian Church and the Ulu Jamii mosque. Next, drive to Hasankeyf, a stunning historical site whose fate hangs in the balance. Continue to the Midyat to visit the beautiful Mor Gabriel monastery. Drive to Mardin. Overnight in a comfortable hotel in Mardin. Meal plan: B, L

*With a history stretching back almost four millennia, and beautiful honey-coloured buildings clinging to a cliffside overlooking the river Tigris, **Hasankeyf** is a beautiful and historic place. It boasts a castle, palaces, mosques and a lovely if crumbling bridge. Its future is precarious however due to the proposed Ilisu dam project which intends to flood the whole valley, displacing its inhabitants and losing forever the treasures and beauty of Hasankeyf. Foreign financial backers have pulled out after the World Monuments Fund listed the village but the Turkish government seem keen to push ahead nonetheless. See it while you can.*

***Mor Gabriel monastery** is the oldest surviving Syriac Orthodox monastery in the world. Today it is a working community set amongst gardens and orchards, and is inhabited by around fifteen nuns and two monks, occupying separate wings. The monastery's primary purpose is to keep Syriac Orthodox Christianity alive in the land of its birth by providing schooling and ordination of native-born monks. On occasions in the past it has provided physical protection to the region's Christian population.*

DAY 8 Visit Mardin's historical and religious sites as well as its markets and the nearby historical site of Dara, and the monasteries of Deyrul Zafaran and Kasimiye. After lunch visit the Sakib Sabanci ethnographic museum. Rest of the afternoon free to relax in the beautiful castle town of Mardin. Overnight in a comfortable hotel in Mardin. Meal plan: B, L

***Dara** was an important East Roman fortress city in northern Mesopotamia on the border with the Sassanid Empire. Because of its great strategic importance, it featured prominently in the Roman-Persian conflicts of the 6th century, with the famous Battle of Dara taking place before its walls in 530. Today the Turkish village of Oğuz occupies its location and there are many cave dwellings and other interesting archaeological and geographical features.*

***Mardin** is a remarkable town full of beautiful mosques and churches and a setting that will take your breath away. With baked-brown alleyways, honey-coloured buildings, a maze of a market and stunning ancient buildings, you will quickly see why Mardin has become a favourite with Turkish travellers. The nearby **Deyrul Zafaran monastery** is an important Syriac Orthodox monastery also known as the "Saffron monastery" due to the colour of its stone. Founded in 493 AD, the monastery was formerly the seat of the patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church from 1160 until 1932, when it relocated to Homs in Syria. The monastery has 365 rooms - one for each day of the year.*

***Cercis Restaurant** in Mardin is one of the best in the whole of Turkey. If you are interested in eating here speak to your guide early in your trip and we will try to arrange it.*

DAY 9 After breakfast drive to the unique archaeological site of Göbekli Tepe. Take time to visit the site and learn about its incredible history. Continue to the museum in Urfa which houses many artefacts found at Göbekli Tepe including the oldest life-size human statue in the world. Optional evening event with local music often performed with Ottoman era instruments, and local culinary specialities (at additional cost, approx. €30, payable locally). Overnight in a comfortable hotel in Urfa. Meal plan: B, L

***Göbekli Tepe, the oldest place of worship in the world**, is an archaeological site without equal. Prior to its discovery in 1994 and its subsequent excavation it was widely believed by anthropologists that religion evolved as a result of living in larger communities which was itself the result of the change from foraging to agriculture. However Göbekli Tepe has **turned our theories of our own evolution on their head**. The vast religious site dates from the hunter gatherer period and there is no evidence of any agriculture or even human habitation suggesting that it may have been the emergence of religion that led us to civilisation and thus to agriculture. It is hard to overestimate the significance of this finding. The site contains a vast array of circular structures and huge pillars, some with beautiful limestone carvings of lions, foxes, snakes and birds, believed to be gatekeepers of the entrance to the next world. To date less than ten percent of the site has been excavated. You can read an article about this fascinating site in National Geographic magazine published in June 2011 here:*

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/06/gobekli-tepe/mann-text/1>



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DAY 10 Drive to Harran and discover its ancient Islamic university, its fortress and its charming beehive houses. Stop for tea in a beehive mud hut. Return to Urfa for lunch. After lunch visit the historical sites of Urfa including its stunning mosque complex and parks, its citadel, the *Gumrukhan*, and the Pool of the Sacred Trout. In the late afternoon drive to Kahta. Overnight in a comfortable hotel in Kahta. Meal plan: B, L

Urfa (a.k.a. Şanlıurfa, “the prophet’s city”, or Edessa in ancient times) is the most spiritual city in East Turkey. It is a major centre for pilgrimage and its traditions are very much alive and well. The “Şanlı-” part of its name (meaning “great” or “dignified”) was awarded by the Turkish legislature in 1984 in recognition of the city’s pivotal role in the Turkish war of Independence. Of particular note for visitors are Urfa castle (the current walls were constructed by the Abbasids in 814AD), the Pool of Sacred Fish where Abraham was thrown into the fire by Nimrod, the park of mosques, the market area and Urfa museum.

*Mentioned in the book of Genesis, **Harran** is believed to have once been home to the Prophet Abraham. The site of the first Islamic university in Anatolia, Harran also boasts the remains of an 8th century mosque, a citadel and some 300 year old beehive mud homes.*

DAY 11 Very early start to visit the incredible statues of animals and giant heads at the summit of Mount Nemrut for sunrise. Visit the historical Roman Cendere Bridge on the way back to the hotel. Breakfast and a rest before a midday checkout. Drive to the old town of Halfeti. Have lunch here before changing wheels for a small boat and approach Rumkale by boat through a stunning gorge. This gorgeous boat ride will take you past the enormous fort of Rumkale and some beautiful villages. Take a short detour to the historical site of Zeugma. Continue to Gaziantep for overnight. Meal plan: B, L

Mount Nemrut (a.k.a. Nemrut Dağı) is the perfect place to experience a sunrise or sunset. One of East Turkey’s most spell-binding attractions at the peak of this mountain (at over 2000m) sit enigmatic statues of a pre-Roman king, Antiochus I Theos of Commagene, and the various gods he believed to be his ancestors. The views from the summit are sublime. (NOTE it is a 20-30 minute walk up steps to reach the summit).

Rumkale means “Roman Fortress” in Turkish. The present structure is largely Hellenistic and Roman in origin, though its strategic location had been recognised by the Assyrians. The site was occupied by various Byzantine and Armenian warlords during the Middle Ages, and by the Mamluks in 1293. Today the site is only accessible by boat.

Zeugma was an important trading centre in the Hellenistic Era, whose importance grew steadily under Roman rule. Artistic and cultural development progressed in parallel to that of its trade and commerce. When the site was excavated it turned up a number of beautiful mosaics, including the famous Gypsy girl mosaic now on display in the mosaics museum in Gaziantep alongside many others from Zeugma.

DAY 12 Take a walking tour of Gaziantep including its Kale (fortress), colourful markets and its famous Zeugma mosaic museum. Afternoon free. Overnight in Gaziantep. Meal plan: B

*The culinary capital of East Turkey, **Gaziantep’s** famous baklava (pistachio pastries), are shipped all over the country and beyond. Its renowned restaurants serve up mouth-watering dishes that will satisfy any palate. Besides cuisine, Gaziantep boasts a fine fortress with a World War I museum inside, one of the best mosaics museums in the world and some fascinating markets.*

DAY 13 After breakfast transfer to Gaziantep airport. Fly to Istanbul (and onwards where applicable). Meal plan: B

PRICE INCLUDES

Internal flights from Istanbul
Airport pick-up & drop-off
Ground transport

Accommodation
Breakfasts and some meals (refer to itinerary for meal plan)

Entrance fees to sites
Drivers and guides
Climate Care contribution

ABOUT OUR TRIPS

In addition to our scheduled group departures, **private and tailor-made trips** can be arranged that include some or all of the places on this itinerary. Please contact us with your requirements (e: info@traveltheunknown.com, t: 020 7183 6371) and we will happily put together an itinerary for you and your group. No trip is too long or too short.