EASTERN TURKEY EXPLORER

14 days
Countries visited
Turkey

Tour Highlights
• Former Armenian capital of Ani
• The incredible Ishak Pasa Palace
• Experience a sunset at Ishak Pasha Palace
• Climb the walls of Diyarbakir
• Visit the beautiful honeycombed town of Mardin
• Ancient statues of Göbekli Tepe
• Spiritual Mardin and Urfa
• Sunrise at Mount Nemrut
EASTERN TURKEY EXPLORER

Places visited
Istanbul • Kars • Ani • Doğubayazit • Hosap Castle • Akdamar Island • Mardin • Urfa • Göbekli Tepe • Cendere Bridge • Adıyaman • Gaziantep • Zeugma • Halfeti

What's included
• Internal flights
• Airport pick-up & drop-off
• Ground transport
• Accommodation
• Entrance fees to sites
• Breakfasts and some meals (refer to itinerary for meal plan)
• Drivers and guides

All accommodation subject to availability. Final accommodation choices will be confirmed after booking.
Your Itinerary Explained

The first part of the text in each day is the itinerary schedule and will explain what you will normally see/do during this day of your itinerary.

---

The part of the day’s text in italics (and comes after the three dashes “---”) is background information on the places or sites on that day of your itinerary. It is not part of your itinerary and may mention places that will not be visited on your itinerary. If you have any questions please ask us. Travel times where noted are only meant as a guideline.

Tour Itinerary

Day 1  Arrival in Istanbul

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.

Overnight in Turkoman Hotel, Istanbul

Day 2  Istanbul - Kars

Early flight from Istanbul to Kars. This afternoon you will have sightseeing in Kars, visiting Kars Museum, Kars Forth and the Armenian Church of the Apostles. Overnight in Kars.

---

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 gravyer cheese, butter and honey.

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 | Kars - Ani - Kars

**Kars - Ani - Kars**

After breakfast you will be transferred to Ani for a visit of the site. Overnight in Kars.

---

**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 Apostoles, the mosque of Minuchir, the remains of a Zoroastrian temple and the citadel.

*Total travel time: 1.5 hours*

**Overnight in Kar's Hotel, Kars**

### Day 4 | Kars - Van

**Kars - Van**

Today will be an early start. In the morning you will be transferred to Doğubayazit to visit Ishak Pasha Palace and stop for lunch. This afternoon continue to Van. Overnight in Van.

---

**Ishak Pasha Palace**, a splendid 18th Century Ottoman complex, was started in 1685 by Colak Abdi Pasa, the bey of Beyazit 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.

**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.
EASTERN TURKEY EXPLORER

Total travel time : 7 hours
Overnight in Elite World Van, Van

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 5</th>
<th>Van</th>
<th>Meals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>B L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After breakfast visit the sprawling Van castle with views over the city as the sun sets. Continue to Hoşap castle and the ancient site of Çavuştepe. Lunch by Lake Van. 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.

---

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.

Hosap 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 its intricate lion carvings. A short distance from Hosap is the Urartian centre Cavustepe. Built in the 8th century B.C., Cavustepe 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.

Total travel time : 1.5 hours
Overnight in Elite World Van, Van
Day 6: Diyarbakir

Drive to Diyarbakir. Stop off in Gevaş village to see a Seljuk graveyard as well as Veysel Karani’s tomb. Take a short tour of the marketplace and Diyarbakir’s famous walls. Take in the sunset on city walls, reputed to be the world’s largest wall after China’s Great Wall. Overnight in a comfortable hotel in Diyarbakir.

---

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.

Total travel time: 6.5 hours

Overnight in Novotel Diyarbakir, Diyarbakir

Day 7: Diyarbakir - Hasankeyf - Mardin

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.

---

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.

Total travel time: 4.5 hours

Overnight in Kaya Ninova Hotel, Mardin
### Day 8  
**Dara - Mardin**

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.

---

**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.

**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.

Overnight in Kaya Ninova Hotel, Mardin

### Day 9  
**Göbekli Tepe - Urfa**

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.

---

**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 lead us to civilisation and thus to agriculture.

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. There are striking similarities to sites in Peru, Bolivia and Easter Island that were noted by Robert Schoch in the Megalithomaniacs expedition in November 2012. 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/print/2011/06/gobekli-tepe/mann-text](http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/print/2011/06/gobekli-tepe/mann-text)
The Urfa Museum contains many of the archaeological finds from Göbekli Tepe including steles and sculptures. It also contains Hittite sculptures from Golpinar and pieces from Harran, Nevali Cori and Kabahaydar.

Total travel time: 3 hours
Overnight in Hilton Garden Inn, Urfa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 10</th>
<th>Urfa - Harran - Urfa</th>
<th>Meals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 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 Balikli Gol, the Gumrukhan and the Firfirli and Ulu Mosques. Overnight in Urfa. --- Urfa (a.k.a. Sanliurfa, “the prophet’s city”, or Edessa in ancient times) is the most spiritual city in Eastern Turkey. It is a major centre for pilgrimage and its traditions are very much alive and well. The “Sanli-“ 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 in to the fire by Nimrod, the park of mosques, the market area and the Urfa museum. Visit the ancient city of Harran, once the centre of Egypt’s Hermetic tradition. See its ominous "Astrological Tower", citadel and local village and take in one of the most atmospheric sites anywhere in the world. 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 which enjoy a constant temperature throughout the year, winter or summer. The Great Mosque of Urfa meanwhile, was constructed in 1170 on the site of the old Christian church, which Arabs referred to as ‘the Red Church’. Balikli Gol, or ‘The Legendary Pool of Sacred Fish’, is the site where Nimrod threw Abraham into the fire, located within the grounds of the mosque of Rahil-ur-Rahma and surrounded by ornate gardens. Riddled with a mythical enigma, the fish in the pool are said to thrive and a local legend even terms the pool, ‘the doorway to heaven’. Total travel time: 2 hours
Overnight in Hilton Garden Inn, Urfa |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 11</th>
<th>Kahta - Mount Nemrut</th>
<th>Meals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After breakfast drive to Kahta and see the Karakus Tumulus. Next visit Cendere Bridge and Arsemia and get to Mount Nemrut in time to see the sunset. Overnight near Mount Nemrut. --- Cendere Bridge</td>
<td>B D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cendere Bridge is one of the world’s oldest bridges still in use, constructed during the empire of Septimus Severus (193-211). Composed of 92 stones, each weighing around 10 tons, it is thought to be the second largest Roman bridge still in existence, spanning an impressive 122 metres. The bridge today appears as a simple, unadorned arch, but was originally decorated by four Corinthian columns dedicated to Septimus Severus and his wife.

A mountain of around two thousand metres, Mount Nemrut is home to the tomb of the pre-Roman king, Antiochus I Theos of Commagene. Built by the king himself in about 62 BC as a shrine to his own remains, the site consists of two large statues of Antiochus which dwarf two statue pairs of eagles and lions, and various Iranian, Greek and Armenian Gods. The statues are now damaged and mostly appear beheaded. Scholars have largely attributed this to later attacks on iconoclasm, but the statues have since been returned to their original places. Behind the display of statues are some well-preserved slabs of stone which feature figures in relief carving and are originally thought to have formed a large frieze. Archaeologists interpret the figures as Antiochus’ ancestors, which allegedly included Greeks and Persians. It is the perfect place to experience a sunset or sunrise as the views from the summit are sublime.

NOTE: it is a 20-30 minute walk up uneven steps to reach the summit.

Arsemia was the summer capital of the Commagene Kingdom and burial place of Mithridates. It is home to the largest rock inscription found in Anatolia, which describes the political and religious beliefs of the inhabitants.

Total travel time : 5 hours
Overnight in Hilton Garden Inn, Adiyaman

Day 12 Halfeti - Rumkale - Zeugma Meals

After breakfast 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. Next take in the antique city of Zeugma. Overnight in Gaziantep.

---

Rumkale translates to ‘Roman Castle’ and was once a powerful fortress, overlooking the river Euphrates. In ancient times a site of great strategic importance to Romans and Assyrians alike, the fortress is accessible by boat from the neighbouring Zeugma Region. Today, much of the lower-lying town area has been flooded, but the dramatically situated Rumkale helps you imagine the magnificence of the area in ancient times.

Zeugma, once at the forefront of ancient art and culture, boasts some of the most magnificent artworks and sculptures from ancient Turkey. Founded by one of the generals of Alexander the Great, the name ‘Zeugma’ means ‘bridge passage’ and refers to the city’s location on the river Euphrates and its former strategic importance in the silk trade route. 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.
A small farming district situated on the East bank of the river Euphrates, Halfeti has been a home to the Assyrians (first established by Assyrian King, ShalmaneserII in 885 BC), the Greeks, Romans, the Mameluks and the Ottomans. Despite being sieged by the Mameluks, parts of the old city walls still remain.

Total travel time: 4.5 hours
Overnight in Anadolu Evleri, Gaziantep

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 13</th>
<th>Gaziantep</th>
<th>Meals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After breakfast, visit the Zeugma Mosaic Museum. Take a walking tour of the Old City of Gaziantep with an optional visit to the archaeology museum and a walk through the old covered bazaars of Zinciriye, Gumrukhan and Coppermakers. Afternoon free. Overnight in Gaziantep.</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

The culinary capital of Eastern Turkey, Gaziantep’s famous baklava (pistachio pastries) are shipped all over the country and beyond, and its renowned restaurants serve up mouth-watering dishes. Besides cuisine, Gaziantep boasts a fine Seljuk-era citadel, numerous impressive mosques and restored old buildings. Gaziantep’s chief draw however, is its mosaic museum, believed to be the best in the world. The mosaics were recovered from the ancient Roman town of Zeugma, now underwater. The town’s bustling city markets are also well worth a visit.

The Zeugma Museum houses many impressive artworks and sculptures which testify to the area’s magnificence in Greek and Roman times. Its highlight however is a series of mosaics, the most famous of which is a mosaic known as the “Gypsy Girl”.

Overnight in Anadolu Evleri, Gaziantep

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 14</th>
<th>Gaziantep - Istanbul and departure</th>
<th>Meals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>After breakfast transfer to Gaziantep airport. Fly to Istanbul (and onwards where applicable – we recommend booking an international flight with a departure after 4pm local time).</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---