

Eastern Turkey and the Kingdom of Urartu Forgotten Kingdoms and Lost Empires

Explore eastern Anatolia with its fertile plateaux, stunning lakes and mountains, and the architectural legacy of the Urartian, Armenian, Selçuk and Ottoman empires. Beginning in Trabzon on the Black Sea, travel through Erzurum, Turkey's highest city to Kars, set amongst stunning scenery scattered with fine churches and monasteries. Travel along the ancient Silk Road to Lake Van at Tatvan, the largest sodium carbonate lake in the world, with breath-taking scenery, to discover the Urartian fortress at Cavustepe and the imposing Kurdish castle in Guzelsu, once a frontier town of the Ottoman Empire.

Day 1: 23 August 2025 London – Istanbul - Trabzon

Fly to Istanbul with connecting flight to Trabzon. Transfer to our hotel in Trabzon to meet the lecturer, local guide and the rest of the group over a drink in the hotel bar, followed by dinner at the hotel restaurant.

Overnight: Usta Park Hotel/Invite Hotel or similar | Meals: D

Day 2: 24 August 2025 Trabzon

Depart for St. Sophia (Ayasofya), a 13th century church with an extraordinary collection of Byzantine frescoes. Visit Gülbahar Hatun Mosque, Ataturk's Mansion, Ortahisar Mosque, a Comnenid cathedral in the old town.

After enjoying lunch at a seaside restaurant in Akçaabat, in the afternoon, we shall explore the cobbled stone streets of Trabzon and drive to Boztepe for a panoramic view of the city. Return to our hotel for dinner and overnight.

Overnight: Usta Park Hotel/Invite Hotel or similar | Meals: B/L/D

Day 3: 25 August 2025 Sümela Monastery - Zigana - Karaca Cave - Erzurum

Morning visit the 4th century Sümela Monastery, the monastery of the Panaghia. Founded in the year 386 AD it clings dramatically to a sheer cliff face in a deep forest of the Altindere Valley National Park. After lunch, we travel along the Silk Road through the Zigana Mountains (Pontic Alps) to Karaca Cave, considered to be the most beautiful in Turkey for its colours and drip-stones. Drive to Erzurum, Turkey's highest city, and one of its most devout; we may see some women wearing carsafs (full length dun coloured robes with hoods and veils) or Iranian chadors. The name is a corruption of Arz-er-Rum or "Domaine of the Byzantine" in Arabic. Check into our hotel for dinner and overnight.

Overnight: Palan Hotel/Hotel Zade or similar | Meals: B/L/D

Day 4: 26 August 2025 Erzurum - Kars

After breakfast, visit the Çifte Minaret Medrese. Built as a theological school in the mid-13th century it takes its name, Twin Minaret Madrasa, from the two fluted minarets that crown the monumental façade. The Medrese has been closed for renovation but may reopen by the time of our visit. We shall also visit the Archaeological museum if open. If not, we shall visit the Ulu Cami, the Kümbets and the Rüstem Pasa Caravanserai and the ethnographic museum instead.

After lunch, drive to Kars, passing on the way Sarıkamis, the coldest spot in Turkey. Founded by the Armenians, Kars became the capital of their Bagratid dynasty early in the tenth century, but lost some of its importance when the capital was transferred to nearby Ani. Captured by the Russians in 1878 it remained in Russian or Armenian hands until 1920, accounting for the incongruous belle époque buildings which lend an attractiveness to the town it otherwise might not have.

On arrival, check into our hotel where we'll be staying for the next two nights. Enjoy dinner together as a group.

Overnight: *Buyuk Kale Hotel/ Hotel Katerina Sarayi or similar* | **Meals:** *B/L/D*

Day 5: 27 August 2025 Kars – Ani – Kars

Drive to the romantic ruins of the Armenian city of Ani, made the capital of the mediaeval Armenian Kingdom after Kars and strategically situated astride a major East-West caravan route. Impressive 10th century fortified walls built by master stoneworkers still encircle the ruins of numerous churches, mosques and caravansaries and can be seen from several miles away.

Visit the Cathedral, Citadel, church of Holy Apostles and the charming monastic church of St Gregory the Illuminator, which is covered inside with Ani's only remaining frescoes. If there is time this afternoon we will visit the Kars museum.

The evening is at leisure for you to enjoy dinner independently at a local restaurant of your choice (dinner not included).

Overnight: *Buyuk Kale Hotel/ Hotel Katerina Sarayi or similar or similar* | **Meals:** *B/L*

Day 6: 28 August 2025 Kars - Dogubeyazit

This morning we will drive for 3 ½ hours along a scenic stretch of the Silk Road to Doğubeyazit, which has a large Kurdish population. We will have the opportunity to see various views of Mount Ararat, over 18,000 feet high.

In the afternoon, stop and visit the Işak Paşa Palace, one of the most beautiful buildings in the whole of Turkey. Constructed in the 17th-century by the Ottomans to control traffic along the Silk Route, the complex is perched on a rocky promontory overlooking the town. A combination of a mosque, a fortress and a palace complete with harem, it originally had a room for every day of the year! The gold plated doors from the

grandiose gateway were removed during the Russian retreat in 1917 and are now on display in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. Below you can also see the foundations of Eski Bayazit, an Urartian City which flourished in 1000 BC.

Check into our hotel in Dogubeyazit for dinner and overnight.

Overnight: *Butik Ertur/Altihan Plus or similar* | **Meals:** *B/L/D*

Day 7: 29 August 2025 Dogubeyazit – Ahlat - Tatvan

Departure for the medieval city of Ahlat on the shores of Lake Van, with beautiful views of Mount Ararat along the way.

First an Urartian, then Armenian settlement, Ahlat fell to the Arabs during the seventh century, was retaken by the Byzantines two hundred years later and passed to the Selçuks in 1071. The area is scattered with Selçuk kumbet tombs, mausoleums for two to four people, two stories high with a distinctive conical design. Visit the Selçuk cemetery, crammed with monumental tombs with elaborate gravestones dating from the 11th to 16th centuries.

Continue to Tatvan and visit the fortress, then check into our hotel for dinner and overnight.

Overnight: *Kardelen Hotel or similar* | **Meals:** *B/L/D*

Day 8 30 August 2025 Tatvan - Van

This morning, travel by small boat to the tiny island of Akdamar, picturesquely set just off Lake Van's southern shore, to visit the exquisite Church of the Holy Cross.

Built between 915-921 by the Armenian King Gagik Artsruni, the church has fabulous relief carvings which run in a series of five bands around the exterior with animal scenes and several depictions of Bible stories such as David and Goliath. The interior frescoes have recently been sensitively restored by the Turkish government.

Continue to the buzzing but conservative city of Van to check in to our final hotel for a three night stay.

Overnight: *Elite World/The Conforium or similar* | **Meals:** *B/L/D*

Day 9: 31 August 2025 Van

Visit the Urartian fortress of Sardurihinilli at Çavustepe which was built by the Urartian King Sarduri as his capital in the 8th century BC. One of around a dozen Urartian citadels found in modern Turkey and Armenia, each one incorporated a palace, workshops, storage depots and temples, and were always located on naturally defensible rocky spurs.

Continue to the imposing medieval castle of Hoşap, high on a rock outcrop on the north bank of the Hoşap River.

Built by a Kurdish ruler in the 17th Century, there is an inner castle with prison and dungeon, and an outer castle, once protected with forty towers, containing thirty dwellings and a mosque. (Please note that this castle is being renovated and is periodically closed without notice. An alternate excursion will be arranged if we are not able to gain access).

The evening is at leisure for you to enjoy dinner independently at a local restaurant of your choice (dinner not included).

Overnight: *Elite World/The Conforium or similar* | **Meals:** *B/L*

Day 10: 01 September 2025 Van

Morning visit the Van Kalesi (Rock of Van), a Urartian fortification situated a few miles from the city, known for the tomb of Argishti 1, set in sheer cliff-face and surrounded by cuneiform inscriptions cut into the rock.

Behind the Rock of Van are the remains of the old city, largely destroyed by the Ottomans during World War I but nonetheless a haunting, atmospheric place, with one or two crumbling or restored buildings rising from the otherwise cleared ground.

If open, we shall also visit the museum which includes material from Toprakkale and other Urartian sites, including cuneiform tablets and the 13 Hakkare Stelae. It was badly damaged in the 2011 earthquake although there are plans to move some collections to Van Kalesi and/or create a Urartian museum.

If it is not possible to view the exhibits there will be free time to shop at the bazaar or take a taxi to walk around the old city.

Meet this evening for a final farewell dinner with the group.

Overnight: *Elite World/The Conforium or similar* | **Meals:** *B/L/D*

Day 11: 02 September 2025 Van - London

Transfer to the airport for flight to Istanbul with connecting flight to London

Private Istanbul stop-over extension

All flights to Trabzon and Van require a change of planes in Istanbul, so we highly recommend a stopover stay to explore Istanbul if you have the time to add this to your itinerary. You can opt to stop for any duration, but in our opinion, 3 nights is ideal to see the main historic highlights. We can arrange either a simple self-guided stay with a booking including a recommended hotel and private airport transfers, right up to a fully inclusive tour with private guiding throughout, or a hybrid of these two travel styles. Ask our team for a quote.