



Eastern Turkey

Archaeology, architecture, history and landscapes

9–24 June 2025 (ML 713)

16 days • £5,930

Lecturer: Ian Colvin

A journey through Turkey's historic East from Mesopotamia and the Fertile Crescent to the Caucasus and the Black Sea.

Spectacular landscapes featuring mountains, valleys, plains and coast.

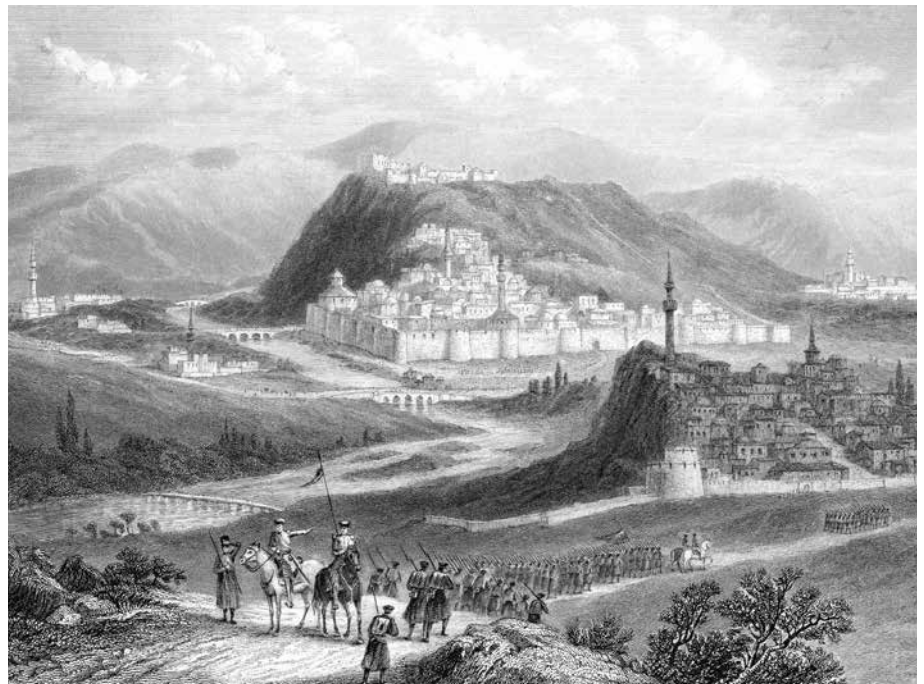
Wide-ranging themes and varied architecture; Byzantine and Georgian churches, Seljuk mosques and Armenian monasteries.

Showcases the many cultural interactions between East and West, the Mediterranean and the Iranian and Islamic worlds.

The majestic scenery of eastern Anatolia is the setting for this ambitious tour, which, while remaining firmly within the borders of modern-day Turkey, encompasses an extraordinary range of historic and contemporary cultures. From the broad plains of Mesopotamia, to the verdant slopes of the Pontic alps, via the Taurus mountains and the East Anatolian plateau, this part of Anatolia has always been a crossroads, whether for Abraham, patriarch of the three Near Eastern faiths, as he followed the Fertile Crescent from Ur to Canaan, or for the Greek mercenaries hired to fight for the Persian king Cyrus, who had to make their way back to their homeland across the Anatolian plateau and the Pontic Mountains.

The tour journeys through the cradle of civilisation between the Euphrates and the Tigris, where human settlement in the towns of Urfa and Harran goes back to the fifth millennium BC. It includes a Neolithic religious sanctuary, Urartian citadels and Roman frontier towns, Byzantine churches and Seljuk mosques and madrasas. It explores cultures and civilisations that have almost disappeared from the historical record – early Christian monasteries of the Tur Abdin, Georgian churches of Tao-Klarjeti and the lost Armenian city of Ani. It even takes in the sites of two medieval coronations – of the Armenian king Gagik Artzruni on the island of Aktamar in 908 and that of the Byzantine emperor of Trebizond, Alexius III Comnenos, at the monastery of Sümela in 1349.

Far from being backward-looking, though, this tour offers a remarkable opportunity to meet people trying to forge their present-day



Kars, steel engraving c. 1840

identities: the Kurds of Diyarbakir, the Syrian Orthodox monks and nuns of the Tur Abdin and, of course, the Muslim population of Turkey itself, whose efforts to work out what it means to live in a secular Islamic country are and will continue to be of huge significance for us all.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly at c. 1.30pm (Turkish Airlines) from London Heathrow to Gaziantep via Istanbul, arriving Gaziantep c. 10.45pm. Overnight in Gaziantep.

Day 2: Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa. After a leisurely start, visit the Gaziantep Museum, home to one of Turkey's most impressive collections of mosaics, relocated from the nearby site of Zeugma before the area was flooded by the construction of the Birecik Dam. The mosaics, dating from the 2nd and 3rd centuries BC, are testament to the wealth of the region and are among the finest examples anywhere to be found. Drive to Şanlıurfa and visit the extraordinary excavations at Göbekli Tepe. Dated to c. 10,000 BC, this is perhaps the earliest known man-made place of worship and challenges current ideas about the early Neolithic. First of two nights in Şanlıurfa.

Day 3: Şanlıurfa. Şanlıurfa, or Ancient Edessa as named by Alexander the Great's successor Seleucus I Nicator, an early Christian centre of learning and now a pilgrimage town for Muslims. In the morning, drive out of Şanlıurfa to Karahan Tepe, another Neolithic site showcasing T-shaped pillars and stone structures dating back over 10,000 years. In the afternoon visit the complex of 12th-century mosques purported to mark Abraham's birthplace.

Day 4: Şanlıurfa to Karadut. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers define the region known as Mesopotamia ('land between the rivers' in Greek), which has been home to many great civilisations including the Akkadians and the Assyrians. Drive north toward the Euphrates and stop to see the Atatürk Dam (the third largest in the world). Atop one of the highest peaks in the Eastern Taurus mountain, Nemrut Dağ, stands the temple-tomb of Antiochus I (86–31 BC). This monumental structure reflects the syncretism of Commagene's culture, blending Greek and Persian influences in its pantheon. Overnight in Karadut.

Day 5: Diyarbakır, Mardin. Located in the upper Tigris basin, Diyarbakır has been a focal point at the crossroads of Mesopotamia.

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Its identity is deeply rooted in this strategic location, and throughout history, it has been influenced by nearly every dynasty that has ruled over Anatolia and Mesopotamia. The Great Mosque dates back to 639 and was rebuilt in the 11th century. St. Giragos Church (1376) is one of the largest Armenian churches in the Middle East. Continue to Mardin where the next two nights are spent.

Day 6: Mardin. Deyrul Zafaran, built in 495 and once the seat of the Syrian Orthodox patriarch, has some beautiful stonework in the chapel housing the patriarchal throne. The Kasimiye Madrasah was built during the Artuklu Period and completed in 1445. This two-storey, domed building features a single courtyard of smooth cut stone. In the afternoon, explore Mor Behnam Church, a historic landmark in Mardin built in 569. The day concludes with a visit to the Grand Mosque, originally built with two minarets; today, only one remains, bearing an inscription from 1176.

Day 7: Mardin, Batman, Van. The 260-mile journey from Mardin to Van offers a fascinating change of scenery. From barren, stony terrain, the landscape transitions to fertile plains before revealing the stunning vistas of Lake Van. Stop en route near the village of Anıtlı to visit the Meryem Ana Manastırı (Monastery of the Virgin Mary). Initially believed to be a 1st-century Roman triumphal arch, it was later converted into a church between the 5th and 6th centuries. After lunch in Batman, continue to Van. First of three nights in Van.

Day 8: Akdamar Island, Van. Take a boat to the 10th-century Church of the Holy Cross, seat of Armenian king Gagik Artzruni, who was crowned here in 908. Built in 921, the church is made of local sandstone with relief carvings of Biblical stories, mythological animals and Gagik himself. Faded frescoes adorn the interior. A verdant enclave surrounded by pea-green waters and snow capped mountains, the setting is idyllic. Enjoy a lakeside lunch before returning to Van.

Day 9: Van, Çavuştepe. Capital of the kingdom of Urartu in the 9th century BC, Van (ancient Tushpa) was rival to Assyria. The Van Museum displays artefacts tracing the history of the region from the Stone Age to the present. Explore the massive, steep-sided Van Castle,

first investigated by Austen Henry Layard in the 1840s, and the trilingual inscription from the time of Xerxes, which contributed to the decipherment of cuneiform. In the afternoon drive to Çavuştepe to see the basalt remains of the fortress-palace of Sarduri-İfinili, including the sacrifice area, open-air temple, cemetery and cisterns. Continue to the magnificent Hosap Castle, built by the Kurds.

Day 10: Mount Ararat, Kars. Drive through the Artüs Mountain range toward the Iranian border, to the İshak Paşa Palace positioned at the base of Mount Ararat. A magnificent example of Ottoman architecture, it is a fascinating mixture of styles: Seljuk, Iranian, Georgian and Armenian. Drive up through pasture land following the Armenian border north to plateaus with spectacular mountain vistas. First of two nights in Kars.

Day 11: Ani, Kars. Once the capital of medieval Armenia, Ani is now a deserted city standing sentinel above the Arpaçay river, the border between Turkey and Armenia. Its walls, towers and minarets retain many of their foundation inscriptions, and its ruined churches and cathedral display the variety and quality of Armenian architecture. Unlike Ani, Kars bears the marks of subsequent Ottoman and Russian occupation. Visit the Armenian Church of the Holy Apostles and the Seljuk castle and Ulu Camii.

Day 12: Kars to Erzurum. Follow the Aras river west through the Aladağlar mountains; magical scenery with fields of gorse and fern, pristine river beds and deep ravines. Pass the beautiful six-arched Çobandede bridge over the Aras. In Erzurum, the principal city of eastern Anatolia, visit the splendid Seljuk Ulu Camii, with its wooden dome, and also the twin-minareted Çifte Minare Medrese, its entrance adorned with stalactite porches. First of two nights in Erzurum.

Day 13: Ösk Vank, Khakhuli, Erzurum. All day excursion to the 10th-century Georgian monasteries of Ösk Vank and Khakhuli north of Erzurum. Known as Tao-Klarjeti, this area was an important part of medieval Georgia, ruled by the Bagratid kings. Both monasteries were founded by the Georgian noble David the Great Kuropalates in the second half of the 10th century: Khakhuli, an important literary centre, retains its cross-dome triple-apsed church, with fine relief carvings and

frescoes still surviving. Ösk Vank is even more impressive, with scallop-shell arches, high relief mouldings and sculpted column capitals. Overnight Erzurum.

Day 14: From Erzurum to Trabzon. Drive north through the Pontic Alps, in the steps of Xenophon's Ten Thousand. The Sümela Monastery, founded in the fourth century, clings to the sheer rock face above the Altindere Valley. A recent restoration programme has secured the future of the many surviving monastic buildings, with extensive frescoes of the 14th- and 18th-centuries. Descend through temperate forests to Trabzon, the historic port town on the Black Sea. First of two nights in Trabzon.

Day 15: Trabzon. In the morning, visit the Pavilion where Atatürk stayed in 1924. Continue to the late-Byzantine church of Aya Sophia, with 13th-century frescoes and frieze. The Kızlar Monastery, or Panaghia Theoskepastos, built during the reign of Alexios III of Trebizond, is a historic female monastery overlooking Trabzon. Featuring inscriptions and portraits of Alexios III, it has undergone repairs over the years. The day concludes with a city tour of Trabzon.

Day 16: Fly from Trabzon to London Heathrow, via Istanbul, arriving at c. 4.50pm.

Lecturer

Ian Colvin. Historian and Byzantinist specialising in Late Antiquity and the South Caucasus, with interests in the wider history of the region. Trained at Oxford, he moved to the University of Cambridge, where he was a researcher for 18 years. He directs an ongoing archaeological expedition to ancient Archaeopolis in the South Caucasus since 2001, and leads a number of tours in the region.

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Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £5,930 or £5,580 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £6,560 or £6,210 without flights.

Included: international air travel (economy class) with Turkish Airlines: London to Gaziantep (via Istanbul) and Trabzon to London (via Istanbul); travel by private air-conditioned coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 14 lunches and 12 dinners with wine, water and coffee; all admissions to museums and sites; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and national guide.

Visas: British, New Zealand, and American ordinary passport holders can travel to Turkey without a visa for visits of up to 90 days. Most other nationals require individual electronic visas, which are not included in the tour price. You will need to apply online in advance.

Accommodation. Sirehan Boutique Hotel, Gaziantep (www.gaziantepsirehanhotel.com.tr): traditional boutique hotel centrally located. **DoubleTree by Hilton, Şanlıurfa** (www.hilton.com/en/hotels/gnytdi-doubletree-sanliurfa): a modern 5-star hotel in south Sanliurfa. **Euphrat Hotel, Mount Nemrut** (www.nemruteuphrathotel.com): conveniently located within Mount Nemrut National Park, it also features an outdoor pool. **Gazi Konağı Hotel, Mardin** (www.gazikonagi.com): a comfortable boutique hotel housed within a traditional stone-built mansion. **DoubleTree by Hilton, Van** (www.hilton.com/en/hotels/vandidi-doubletree-van): a 5-star hotel near Lake Van, offering captivating views of the lake and the surrounding countryside. **Beylerbeyi Palace, Kars** (vehotelsbeylerbeyisarayi.com.tr): a charming boutique hotel in a reconverted old palace. **Hilton Garden Inn, Erzurum** (www.hilton.com/en/hotels/erzykgi-hilton-garden-inn-erzurum/): a stylish and modern 5-star hotel. **Zorlu Grand Hotel, Trabzon** (www.zorulgrand.com/en): located in the centre of Trabzon, this 5-star hotel blends traditional architecture with modern design elements. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? A long and demanding tour with some early starts and days with a lot of coach travel (but roads are good and the coach carries refreshments). Participants should be able to manage everyday walking and stair-climbing without difficulty. Archaeological sites involve scrambling over rough terrain and sure-footedness is essential. The average distance by coach per day is c. 80 miles.

Group size: 10 to 22 participants.