

JEWELS OF PERSIA

ONBOARD THE DANUBE EXPRESS

As rail tours go, Jewels of Persia is truly amazing. Travelling from the banks of the Danube to the shores of the Bosphorus and onto the ancient land of Persia, this unique journey takes in destinations that are rarely experienced by the Western visitor, which makes it all the more special.



Eastbound Itinerary

- Budapest • Kecskemét • Sighişoara • Braşov • Veliko Tarnovo • Kazanlak • Istanbul • Cappadocia • Lake Van • Akdamar Island • Van • Zanjan • Yazd • Isfahan • Shiraz • Persepolis • Tehran

Tour Schedule (Eastbound)

March 31 – April 14, 2015

September 4 – September 18, 2015

October 6 – October 20, 2015

November 16 – November 30, 2015

TOUR ITINERARY (EASTBOUND)

DAY 1

BUDAPEST

HUNGARY

Arrivals day in Budapest where you will be met and transferred to the Four Season Hotel Gresham Palace. We will enjoy a welcome reception dinner, whilst you meet your fellow travellers on this highly anticipated journey.

DAY 2

BUDAPEST & KECSKEMÉT

HUNGARY

We enjoy a morning drinks reception in the impressive Royal Waiting Room at Budapest Nyugati station before boarding the Danube Express and we begin our spectacular rail journey to Tehran. Settle in to your cabin and later enjoy lunch as the train heads, steam-hauled for the first 100km, to Lajosmizse for a spectacular 'Puszta' horse show. Afterwards there is free time to explore Kecskemét, a fascinating city at the geographical centre of Hungary. Back onboard, enjoy a pre-dinner drink in the Lounge Car as the train continues across the Great Hungarian Plain and dine as we head towards Transylvania.

DAY 3

SIGHIȘOARA & BRAȘOV

ROMANIA

Today we arrive in Sighișoara for a walking tour of the town's main highlights. A World Heritage site rumoured to be the birthplace of Dracula, it is one of the best-preserved fortified medieval towns in Europe. Burgher houses and ornate churches line its cobbled streets. We return onboard for lunch as we continue onto Brașov for a tour of Bran Castle. Popularly known as Dracula's Castle, this beautiful 14th century building is situated amongst stunning mountain scenery. Back onboard later this evening, the train twists and turns as it climbs over the Carpathian Mountains and threads its way through the dramatic landscape with crystal clear mountain streams. Dinner is served as our train continues onto Bulgaria.

DAY 4

VELIKO TARNOVO & KAZANLAK

BULGARIA

We arrive after breakfast in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria's ancient capital. Nestled in a magnificent mountain setting, the stone houses seem perched, one above the other, on the steep banks of the Yantra River. A tour includes the superbly preserved medieval Tsarevets Hill and Castle and there is free time to wander through the ancient city. We take lunch onboard during the climb over the Shipka Pass. Kazanlak, in the Valley of the Roses, produces rose oil prized by perfumers worldwide. Here we visit the Shipka Memorial Church and a Thracian tomb with vaulted brickwork dating back to the 4th century BC. Relax in the Lounge Car before dinner is served as our train continues through the scenic landscape, reaching the Turkish border late in the evening.

DAYS 5 & 6

ISTANBUL

TURKEY

This morning we arrive into Istanbul. This fabled city that spans Asia and Europe deserves an extended stay so over the next two days we will see how old meets new; east meets west when you visit Istanbul's must-see historic sites. One of the most famous monuments in both the Turkish and Islamic worlds, the Sultan

Ahmet Mosque (the Blue Mosque) is a superb creation in the classical Ottoman style and features six towering minarets and 260 windows illuminating its vast main chamber, which is decorated with more than 20,000 Iznik tiles.

Now a museum, Hagia Sophia was built in the 6th century by the Emperor Justinian, and was one of the largest basilicas in the Christian world. After the Ottoman conquest, it was converted to a mosque and is today one of the most magnificent museums in the world. Take a moment to linger here to admire the fine Byzantine mosaics.

The largest and oldest palace in the world and primary residence of the Ottoman Sultans from 1465 to 1853, Topkapi is the crown jewel of the Ottoman Empire. With its treasury and exotic buildings overlooking the Golden Horn, your visit to Topkapi promises to be a truly fascinating experience.

We also visit the Grand Bazaar which is one of the world's largest covered markets, with 58 streets and over 4,000 shops. In operation since the 14th century the bazaar is especially known for its jewellery, leather, pottery, spices and carpets.

Guests stay overnight at the five-star Jumeirah Pera Palace hotel as the train re-positions to Derince for the next stage of the journey. Late afternoon on Day 6 after the conclusion of our city tour, we leave Istanbul and travel by bus to Derince to re-board the Danube Express and continue our journey through Asian Turkey.

Engineering work in connection with the Bosphorus Tunnel project (on both sides of the Bosphorus) will involve the train stopping outside Istanbul with the onward journeys by coach when leaving and re-joining the train.

DAYS 7 & 8

CAPPADOCIA

TURKEY

Cappadocia is an area of Central Anatolia best known for its rocky landscape and is honeycombed with networks of ancient underground settlements and outstanding examples of Byzantine art. Erosion shaped the incredible landscape of the Göreme Valley, but thousands of years ago humans took their cue from Mother Nature and began carving an incredible chamber and tunnel complex into the soft rock. Beginning in the 4th century, an urbanised underground cultural landscape was created here.

You can enhance the Cappadocia experience and stay overnight in a unique cave hotel located in the ancient village of Urgup, which features 7 cave houses and 40 rooms dating back to the 5th and 6th centuries before taking a sunrise balloon flight over the region's famous fairy chimneys the following morning.

We return to the train for the day as we journey across central Turkey towards the Turkish border.

DAY 9

VAN, LAKE VAN & AKDAMAR ISLAND

TURKEY

Today a six-hour crossing by train ferry takes us from Tatvan to Van, where we briefly stop on Akdamar Island to walk to the stunning Akdamar Kilisesa or Church of the Holy Cross. The walls are adorned with Old Testament carvings telling familiar tales from the bible. Onward into Van we will navigate the old streets of the town and marvel at the beautiful silver and hanging kilims (woven carpets) made from natural dyes.

DAY 10

ZANJAN

IRAN

We head into Iran by night via the border crossing at Razi. The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Sultanieh is our first stop upon arrival in Zanzan, with its 13th century mausoleum of Oljeitu, the Il Khanid sultan. A visit to the old Rakhkt Shoor Khaneh and the Museum of the Mummified Salt Men concludes the day.

DAY 11

YAZD

IRAN

Yazd is thought to be one of the oldest cities in the world and the tour takes in the Zoroastrian Fire Temple, Amir Chakhmagh Square and the 14th century Friday Mosque, home to one of Persia's finest mosaics.

We re-board the train for lunch and continue to Isfahan where we enjoy a short tour of the famous bridges of Sioseh Pol and Khadjou. A local restaurant is the setting for our evening meal.

DAY 12

ISFAHAN

IRAN

This enchanting city, which served as Persia's capital from 1598 to 1722, is 2,500 years old and one of the oldest in Iran. As a crossroad of international trade and diplomacy, Isfahan has a rich mix of languages, religions and customs.

The city is famous for its silver filigree and metal work, array of great historical monuments, and its Life-Giving River, the Zayandeh-Rood, which has given the city its beauty. Isfahan is packed with some of Iran's best sights and today we spend a whole day in the city, visiting the Chehel Sotoon Palace and the Vank Church in the Armenian Quarter. Following a traditional Iranian lunch we move on to Naghshe Jahan Square, a World Heritage Site and the second largest man-made square in the world, where the Ali Qapou Palace and Shah and Sheikh Lutfullah Mosques can be found. Here, the time is yours to enjoy the huge square and pick up a bargain at the handicraft Bazaar of Qaisarieh.

DAY 13

SHIRAZ & PERSEPOLIS

IRAN

Shiraz has many strings to its bow: poetry, literature, wine, flowers and amazing gardens and fruit trees. A visit to the Qoran Gate, Hafez Tomb and the Vakil Citadel are the highlights of our morning tour.

Following lunch onboard we continue onto Marvdast, for the home of Persepolis, another World Heritage Site. Perhaps Iran's most important archeological site, this ceremonial capital of the Persian Empire dates back to the 6th century. Even now, the ruins are extremely impressive. We also view the Necropolis (Naghshe Rostam) and the Naghshe Rajab.

DAY 14

TEHRAN

IRAN

After breakfast we reach our final destination and disembark the Danube Express. Our first port of call is the Crown Jewels Museum in the Central Bank of Iran Building, with its vast array of crown jewels used by the Qajar and Pahlavid royalty. Following lunch we head to the Gulestan Palace with its renovated Versailles-inspired mirror-encrusted Marble Throne Hall used for the coronation of the last Shah. Most of the remaining brick and tile buildings date back to the 19th century Qajar dynasty. Guests stay overnight in the five-star Espinas International Hotel (or similar).

DAY 15

TEHRAN

IRAN

Following breakfast you will be transferred to the airport for onward departures.