

# JEWELS OF PERSIA

## ONBOARD THE DANUBE EXPRESS

### Westbound Itinerary

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

### Tour Schedule (Westbound)

April 13 – April 27, 2015

September 17 – October 1, 2015

October 29 – November 12, 2015

November 29 – December 13, 2015

## TOUR ITINERARY (WESTBOUND)

### DAY 1

#### TEHRAN

#### IRAN

Arrivals day in Tehran where you will be met and transferred to the five-star Espinas International Hotel (or similar). We will enjoy a welcome reception dinner, whilst you meet your fellow travellers on this highly anticipated journey.

### DAY 2

#### TEHRAN

#### IRAN

Our first port of call on our city tour of Tehran 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. Late afternoon we transfer to the main railway station in the city and board the Danube Express. Settle in to your cabin and later enjoy dinner as the train heads overnight to Mashhad.

### DAY 3

#### MASHHAD

#### IRAN

An early morning arrival provides us with the whole day to explore the city of Mashhad, which is home to the Imam Reza Holy Shrine, the largest mosque in the world in terms of its dimension, followed by a tour of the Nader Shah Museum. Following lunch in the city, we will visit the Tomb of Ferdowsi, the father of the Persian Language who lived over 1,000 years ago.

### DAY 4

#### MAHAN & KERMAN

#### IRAN

Today we will travel from Kerman to the city of Mahan to visit the famous 19th century Prince Garden as well as the 15th century Mausoleum of the Shah Nematollah Vali, the renowned Iranian mystic, poet and philosopher who died in 1431.

Lunch is taken in the very impressive restaurant situated inside the Prince Garden before we return to Kerman in the afternoon with a visit to the Green Dome and the Sanati Contemporary Museum.

## DAY 5

### 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 6

### 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 7

### ZANJAN

#### IRAN

The UNESCO World Heritage Site of Sultanieh is our first stop upon arrival in Zanjan, 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 8

### LAKE VAN, AKDAMAR ISLAND & VAN

#### TURKEY

In the early hours of the morning we cross the border from Iran into Turkey to Van where we will navigate the old streets of the town and marvel at the beautiful silver and hanging kilims (woven carpets) made from natural dyes. After lunch a six-hour crossing by train ferry takes us from Van to Tatvan, 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.

## DAY 9

### 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 and is the focus of our visit.

## DAYS 10 & 11

### 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 architecture.

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 from Derince for the next stage of the journey. Late afternoon on Day 11 after the conclusion of our city tour, we leave Istanbul and travel by bus to Tetkirdag to re-board the Danube Express and continue our journey towards the Bulgaria.

Engineering work in connection with the Bosphorus Tunnel project (on both sides of the Bosphorus) will involve the train stopping short of Istanbul in both directions. The journey into and out of Istanbul will be by road and the train will be sent across the Bosphorus by ferry.

## DAY 12

### KAZANLAK & VELIKO TARNOVO

#### BULGARIA

We arrive before breakfast in Kazanlak, situated in the Valley of the Roses, which 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.

We take lunch onboard during the climb over the Shipka Pass and travel onwards to 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.

Relax in the Lounge Car before dinner is served as our train continues through the scenic landscape as we head across the Romanian border.

## DAY 13

### BRAȘOV & SIGHIȘOARA

#### ROMANIA

Overnight 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. This morning we arrive into Brașov for a tour of Bran Castle. Popularly known as Dracula's Castle, this beautiful 14th century building is situated amongst stunning mountain scenery. We return to the train for lunch as we continue onto 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. Dinner is served as our train continues onto Hungary and across the Great Hungarian Plain.

## DAY 14

### KECSKEMÉT & BUDAPEST

#### HUNGARY

Our final day onboard is expected to provide a spectacular conclusion to our rail journey as first we get the opportunity to explore Kecskemét, a fascinating city at the geographical centre of Hungary before the train heads, steam-hauled, to Lajosmizse for a spectacular 'Puszta' horse show.

We then arrive late afternoon at our final destination, Budapest, the romantic and historic Hungarian capital located on the banks of the magnificent Danube. This evening we will enjoy a farewell dinner and take the opportunity to reflect on our pioneering journey from Iran to Central Europe. We will stay overnight in the Four Seasons Hotel Gresham Palace.

## DAY 15

### BUDAPEST

#### HUNGARY

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