Eastern European Experience

Valid for trips between 1/1/2020 and 31/12/2020

Travel across romantic Eastern Europe from Hungary to Turkey and experience the diverse range of cultures and landscapes in between. From beautiful Budapest to the haunted castles of Transylvania, through stunning mountain scenery to Bulgaria and beyond - be enchanted by medieval monasteries, Old World towns and the warm hospitality of this little-travelled region.



Detailed Itinerary

Day 1 Budapest

Szia! Welcome to Hungary.

You can arrive at any time as there are no activities planned until this important meeting; please ask the hotel reception where it will take place. If you can't arrange a flight that will arrive in time, you may wish to arrive a day early so you're able to attend. We'll be happy to book additional accommodation for you (subject to availability). If you're going to be late, please inform the hotel reception. We'll be collecting your insurance details and next of kin information at this meeting, so please ensure you have all these details to provide to your leader.

Since the collapse of Communism, Budapest has experienced something of a renaissance. The grand architecture and boulevards evoke a time gone by, while glamorous stores and glitzy restaurants make this one of the truly great cities of Europe.

With so much to see and do, hire a bicycle for a great way to move between the city sights.

For art and history buffs, Budapest has museums to occupy you for days including the Museum of Fine Arts at Hero's Square, which offers free English tours of the permanent collections (Monet, Manet, Dutch Masters, Gauguin, Goya, El Greco) from Tuesday through to Saturday from 11am daily.

Head out to Statue Park to see all the communist monuments that were removed from the city streets after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

One unmissable activity is a soak in the hot thermal baths. There are several around the city centre ranging from the sumptuous and elegant to simple outdoor types. There are pools of varying degrees - some with whirlpools, chess boards and seats where you can enjoy it all while recuperating in the therapeutic waters.

Day 2 Eger

Take a train east to Eger (approx 3 hrs).

The beautifully preserved Baroque town of Eger is surrounded by ranges of hills and is home to some of the most famous vineyards in Eastern Europe, producing such renowned brands of wines as the Egri Bikaver (also known as 'Bull's Blood').

Explore the 13th-century castle, which established Eger's reputation as a patriotic town when 2000 soldiers (including the women) withstood a month-long siege and successfully defended the fortress from 150,000 Turkish troops, hence thwarting the Ottoman Empire's advancement into Western Europe. Also check out the stunning 19th-century cathedral and the Minorite church in Dobo Square.

Visit the wine cellars of the seductively-named Valley of the Beautiful Women to sample some of the town's famous 'Bull's Blood' red wine and perhaps even sing with the local folk musicians.

Days 3-4 Maramures

Travel by bus to visit the pleasant town of Debrecen (approx. 3hrs). While there, you'll have time to explore Deri Square with its fountains and colourful buildings.

Continue on by train and private vehicle to Romania (approx 6 hrs). Time in Romania is an hour ahead of Hungary so don't forget to re-set your watch.

Please note that Romanian visas are not available at the border. Should you require one, please organise this before you commence this tour.

The region of Maramures ('mah-ra-moo-resh') is a land that seems frozen in time. It's often said that Maramures contains Romania's heart and soul. It's a region of tradition, customs, rich folklore and ancient superstitions that have remained unchanged for hundreds of years. One of the last peasant cultures in Europe continues to thrive here with traditional music, costumes and ancient festivals continuing to flourish. Each village has its own colours for outfits and their own style of straw or felt hats. Maramures is particularly famed for its wooden churches, many of which are World Heritage-listed sites.

Set out to explore the region - visiting the Merry Cemetery in Sapanta, the village museum in Sighetu and various other traditional villages.

Day 5 Sighisoara

Travelling through the pastoral fields to Sighisoara (approx 9 hrs) and cross into the magical land of Transylvania - the name alone conjures up images of haunted castles, gothic churches, werewolves and vampires. Its connection with the famous Count Dracula, itself a literary myth, is a small part of what makes Transylvania an enchanting, romantic and exciting destination.

The medieval masterpiece of Sighisoara ('Sig-he-shwara') is likely to seduce visitors' hearts more than any other place in Romania. Another World Heritage site, the town was first settled by the Romans but flourished under the Saxons from the 12th century.

There is the option of enjoying a meal at Casa Dracula, a restaurant in the house where the Wallachian prince, Vlad Tepes, whom many identify as the source of inspiration for the literary Dracula, was born.

The more energetic are free to take a walk around the town which includes a 64m-high clock tower that dominates the citadel and cobblestone side streets.

Day 6 Viscri

Our next stop is less than an hour away, but it seems that we are in a different world.

Viscri is a small Saxon/Roma town which was originally inhabited by the Saxons from the Luxemburg area.

Visit the fortified church and museum, and learn about the Sock Project which supports the Roma community.

Stay in a very special place in this Transylvanian village. The rooms are in different houses and have shared facilities with our host families. We have dinner with the families to sample the fresh produce, home-made wines and schnapps. This is a fantastic and unique opportunity for local interaction and indulgence.

Days 7-8 Brasov

Take a short train trip to the 13th-century Saxon city of Brasov (approx 2 hrs).

Also known by its German name of Kronstadt, the city of Brasov was a major medieval trading centre with ornate churches and townhouses, protected on three sides by mountains and the massive walls that still remain.

Explore the city's main attraction - the gothic Black Church. This Protestant church was completed in 1477 and took its name from its fire-blackened the walls in 1689. The original statues from the exterior of the apse are now inside and some 120 Turkish rugs hang from the churches balconies (gifts from merchants who went on shopping sprees in Ottoman lands).

For those looking for a little nightlife action, the city has plenty of funky bars and restaurants to enjoy.

Day 9 Bucharest

Head south to Bucharest (approx 3 hrs), stopping en route at the famous Bran Castle.

No trip to Romania would be complete without a visit to the famous Bran Castle, most commonly known as Dracula's Castle. The castle was built by the Saxons in 1382 to defend the Bran pass against the invading Turks. With its fairytale turrets and Mediterranean whitewashed walls, it's far from menacing.

Take a guided tour of Romania's beautiful capital city. Bucharest likes big things and we'll stop by the huge Piata Unirii, one of Europe's largest squares. Also see the 'Ceausima', the enormous 12-storey Palace of Parliament, the second largest building in the world (behind the Pentagon).

Days 10-11 Veliko Tarnovo

Travel by train across the friendship bridge into Bulgaria and the picturesque town of Veliko Tarnovo (approx 6 hrs).

Veliko Tarnovo's history is incredible. Founded in 4500 BC by the Neolithic people, the Romans later built the first fortress walls and in the 6th century, a Byzantine capital was established on Tsarevets Hill by Emperor Justinian. After the foundation of the second Bulgarian empire in 1185, it became the second most important and beautiful city in the region (after Constantinople) and trade and culture flourished for the next 200 years. In 1393 the town fell to the Turks who held the city until the Russians liberated it in 1877. Because of its importance during the second Bulgarian empire, the city was chosen as the place where the Bulgarian constitution was written in 1879 and where the official proclamation of Bulgaria as an independent state was made in 1908.

Explore the City of Tsars and the imposing Tsarevets Fortress which overlooks the city. This once-magnificent fortress was first built in the 7th century and the ruined citadel is a delight to wander through.

Wander through the Old Quarter with its preserved Renaissance houses and handicraft workshops before relaxing in one of the town's cafes or 'vinarnas' (wine bars).

Day 12 Sofia

Travel by bus to Sofia (approx 3 hrs).

Bulgaria's capital, Sofia, is an ever-growing and cosmopolitan city with wide tree-lined boulevards and pleasant parks.

Enjoy a walk through the city and pass some of its most striking buildings, perhaps none more impressive than the gold-domed Alexander Nevski Church which dates back to 1912 and was built as a memorial to the 200,000 Russian soldiers who died fighting for Bulgarian independence during the Russo-Turkey war (1877-1878).

Other impressive buildings include St Nikolai Russian Church, Sveta Nedelya Cathedral and Banya Bashi Mosque, a reminder of years of Turkish rule. At night, the city comes alive with interesting bars and nightclubs.

Day 13 Gorno Draglishte

Take a short bus ride to Rila.

Explore the most important of the orthodox monasteries in Bulgaria. This World Heritage-listed site is the largest, holiest and most impressive of Bulgaria's monasteries, hidden away in a narrow and forested valley. Founded in 927 by Ivan Rilski, a leader of a monastic colony of hermits, the monastery helped keep Bulgarian spiritual and social life alive during centuries of Turkish rule. The monastery's most treasured historic and artistic monuments include the 14th-century Hrelyo Tower, the five-domed Birth of the Blessed Virgin church and the original monastery kitchen from the 19th century.

Transfer to the small mountain village of Gorno Draglishte.

Stay at our local friend's guesthouse. Here we have the chance to learn all about traditional weaving and some of the regional Bulgarian cuisine. Our guesthouse accommodation is simple and not all rooms have en suite, but the atmosphere is welcoming and warm.

Days 14-15 Bansko

Travel to the small town of Bansko.

Set at the bottom of the majestic Pirin Mountains, Bansko is mome to more than 150 cultural monuments and many of its stone houses have been transformed into charming 'mehanes' (taverns).

In the evening, we have an opportunity to indulge in some local cuisine. Try some filet elena (spicy cured meat) or kapama (simmered meat, rice and sauerkraut), and wash it down with some delicious melnik (dark red wine).

And if you have the time, you could stretch your legs with a hike up the mountains, home to some crystal-clear lakes, jagged peaks and pine-forested alpine scenery.

Days 16-17 Plovdiv

Travel by train to Plovdiv (approx 5 hrs).

Situated on the Maritsa River, Plovdiv was once the meeting point of two ancient transportation routes. A picturesque town with many parks, gardens, museums and archaeological monuments, its Old Town features many 18th and 19th-century baroque houses dating from the national revival period. These charming homes sit alongside museums, mosques, galleries and Byzantine ruins.

Join a local guide for a tour of the main sights and some insight into the history of this fascinating town. The most remarkable sight is the magnificent ancient Roman amphitheatre. Built during the 2nd century BC during the reign of Trajanus, the theatre seats about 6000 people. From here, wander up the cobblestone street to the site of Nebet Tepe, a former hilltop fortress, for excellent views of the city before heading downhill to the 15th-century Dzhumaya Mosque, still in use today.

Be sure to take the time to wander about the workshops of the traditional masters of old Bulgarian arts and crafts on Strumna Street - coppersmiths, farriers and potters are all represented.

Another alternative is to travel 30 km south to the foot of the Rhodope Mountains to one of the oldest and richest Bulgarian monasteries - Bachkovo Monastery. It was established in 1083 by the brothers Bakouriani who were military commanders in the army of the Byzantine emperor Alexis Comnenus. The church in the yard of the monastery was built in 1604 while the icon of the holy virgin dates back to 1310. The icons, frescoes and the monastery crypt are especially interesting

You could also visit the many mineral hot springs surrounding the Plovdiv region. Thirteen bath-treatment resorts offering 2000 beds function all year round. One of the most well-known spa towns is Hissarya, famous for its 22 mineral springs.

Take an overnight train to Istanbul (approx 14 hrs). Please note that for our overnight train journey we use very small 3 berth cabins. We choose to travel overnight so you can make the most of your time in Plovdiv and Istanbul rather than spend all day on a train limiting your time to see the wonderful sights of these cities. This train can be fully booked which means there's no room to spread out as we are assigned specific berths. Please take note of the luggage suggestions in the 'What to Take' section of these notes since there's limited room for large suitcases. Please also note that when we arrive at the Turkish border early in the morning, we'll be required to get off the train for a short while to get our passports stamped and to purchase visas for those passengers who need one.

Day 18 Istanbul

Istanbul is the only city in the world to straddle two continents, so it will come as no surprise that this vast metropolis is home to a beguiling mix of different cultures and traditions, blending the influences of both east and west. Originally founded by Greek settlers over 2000 years ago, Istanbul originally went by the name of Byzantium, then Constantinople when the Romans made it the capital of their eastern empire. Today, intriguing Istanbul is a bustling mega-city with a population of over 12 million people and a rich history waiting to be explored.

There's so much to explore in this sprawling city of 16 million people you might consider staying on; admire the marvellous Blue Mosque and Topkapi Palace; stand in wonder of the awesome Aya Sofya and shop till you drop in the world’s biggest undercover market, the Grand Bazaar. This is a land of Turkish baths, whirling dervishes and superb cuisine.

This is a departure day and there are no activities planned. For your comfort and convenience a day room is provided on this day until 12 noon, for luggage storage and an opportunity to have a shower and freshen up. Once settled consider joining the rest of the group in a farewell breakfast. Otherwise you are free to depart any time after our arrival.

We recommend not booking flights any earlier than 3pm to allow for any train arrival delays, time to transfer to the airport and check-in time required at the airport.

Itinerary Disclaimer

Occasionally our itineraries are updated during the year to incorporate improvements stemming from past travellers' comments and our own research. Our brochure is usually released in November each year. The information given in this itinerary may be slightly different to that in the brochure. It's very important that you print and review a final copy of your Trip Notes a couple of days prior to travel, in case there have been changes that affect your plans.

Please note that while we operate successful trips in this region throughout the year, some changes may occur in our itineraries due to inclement weather and common seasonal changes to timetables and transport routes. This can happen with little notice so please be prepared for modifications to the route.