

TRAIN : The Danube Express

JOURNEY : The Balkan Explorer

Eastbound Journey Duration : Upto 11 Days

Day 1 VENICE

Arrivals day in Venice where you will be met and transferred to the luxurious five-star Danieli hotel for a two-night stay. The legendary hotel enjoys a spectacular location and is only a short stroll from St Mark's Square, the Doge's Palace and the Bridge of Sighs. Today is at leisure for all guests to explore this wonderful city. This evening we will enjoy a welcome reception and dinner, giving you the opportunity to meet your fellow travelers.

DAY 2 VENICE

Venice is a truly captivating city of romance; its unrivalled beauty takes away the breath of first time visitors and regulars alike. Today we will have the opportunity to take a walking tour around the highlights of this spectacular city. Walk through the winding lanes beside the Grand Canal to St Mark's Square, which for 1,000 years was the heart of Venetian life. We also see St Mark's Basilica and stroll through the Rialto Market.

Spend the rest of the day exploring this magnificent city. For a truly iconic experience, take a gondola ride in the Basin of St. Mark's and along the Grand Canal followed by a short stroll through the artists' district of Dorsoduro, where we will stop to take in the city's most breath-taking views from the Academia Bridge, before returning to your hotel.

DAY 3 TRIESTE

This morning we transfer from the hotel, by boat, directly to Santa Lucia station on the Grand Canal. Here our private train, the Golden Eagle Danube Express, is ready to receive us. Mid-morning the train will thread its way out Santa Lucia station onto the 3-mile causeway over the Venice Lagoon and on to our first stop at the Italian port city of Trieste, for an afternoon tour. We stop at the vast Piazza Unita d'Italia, the main town square, and can climb the hill to the famous Church of San Giusto built around a medieval complex that dates backs to the 13th century.

We will go inside the church for a close-up view of the splendid Byzantine-style architecture enriched with precious mosaics.

DAY 4 POSTOJNA & LJUBLJANA

Today we visit Postojna caves as we ride an underground train deep into the cave and tour the network of magnificent halls, a myriad of cave formations and mysterious animals.

After the visit to the caves we return to Ljubljana which is the delightful capital city of Slovenia offering a combination of ancient architecture and youthful culture. Our afternoon walking tour of Ljubljana's Old Town includes a visit to Preseren Square, the Three Bridges, Dragon Bridge and Plecnik Market.

DAY 5 SARAJEVO & MOSTAR

Early morning arrival into the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo which is an intriguing blend of Eastern and Western culture; it has mosques and minarets, an ancient bazaar and an atmospheric old Turkish quarter. Discover the city's poignant history through a truly absorbing tour detailing the horrors of the Balkan War. Sarajevo suffered from the longest siege of a capital city in the history of modern warfare. The scars of war are still evident as we travel past war-torn buildings and we make a special visit to the Tunnel Museum under Sarajevo Airport. Your guide, who lived through the 1992-1996 conflict, brings to life in touching fashion the struggles the citizens of Sarajevo faced during the siege of the city.

Following a light lunch in Sarajevo, this afternoon we travel along a very scenic line to the historic city of Mostar, the crossroads of many civilizations, cultures and three religions. Mostar was one of the most important cities of the Ottoman Empire. The town's renowned stone arch bridge linking the Christian and Muslim areas was re-built in the summer of 2004. We also visit Turkish House and the mosque before walking through the narrow, bazaar streets, where you can shop for traditional souvenirs and handicrafts. From here, we travel onto Dubrovnik by coach where we stay for one night.

DAY 6 BELGRADE

Arrive this morning in the Serbian capital, Belgrade, the former Yugoslavian capital. Located at the strategic meeting point of the Danube and Sava Rivers, this truly cosmopolitan city has fortifications from Celtic times, medieval tombs and Turkish baths. We spend a full day here and our city tour includes the 'House of Flowers' – the mausoleum of Josip Tito, the Town Hall, Republic Square and Knez Mihajlova Street, as well as 'Varos' Gate and a visit to the mighty Kalemegdan Fortress.

DAY 7 BAR & PODGORICA

This morning we cross the border into Montenegro, still one of Europe's largely undiscovered locations. Blessed with glorious beaches and spectacular landscapes of rugged mountains, gentle lakes and medieval towns, Montenegro has a combination of incredible natural beauty and captivating history that makes it a fascinating place to visit. This morning we arrive into Bar where we enjoy a short sightseeing tour of the coastal town.

During lunch onboard the *Golden Eagle* Danube Express we travel onto the capital city of Podgorica. The city has passed through the empires of the Romans, Ottomans and the Austro-Hungarians. Its streets are an interesting hotchpotch of Ottoman oddments, Austrian shopfronts, communist tower blocks and modern shopping malls.

DAY 8 SKOPJE

Today we arrive in the little-visited Skopje and discover a city where the Ottoman influences are still strong. Explore the narrow streets of the Old Town with tiny shops and mosques with ceramic-tiled interiors. Meander through the Old Bazaar area, brimming with things to buy, and cross the 15th-century Stone Bridge which links the bazaar to the modern town.

DAY 9 SOFIA & PLOVDIV

The site of Bulgaria's modern capital, at the foot of Mt Vitosha, Sofia was first occupied by the Thracian tribe of Serdi. On our morning tour we will visit sections of the Roman wall, admire the ancient church of St George, the golden domed Alexander Nevsky Cathedral and the Turkish Bashi Mosque.

We enjoy lunch on the train as we travel to Plovdiv. The second largest city in Bulgaria after Sofia, 'The City of Seven Hills' is one of the oldest cities in Europe with more than 200 known archaeological sites. We spend the afternoon here exploring the Roman Forum and Amphitheatre. We'll visit the charming Old Town including its medieval walls and Ottoman baths.

DAY 10 & 11 ISTANBUL

On Day 10 we arrive in Istanbul where we stay for two nights at a five-star hotel. This fabled city that spans Asia and Europe is our final stop on our tour so there is time to see how old meets new, east meets west when we visit Istanbul's must-see historic sites.

Included in our two night stay is a visit to the crown jewel of the Ottoman Empire, Topkapi Palace. This stunning palace is the largest and oldest in the world and was the primary residence of the Ottoman Sultans from 1465 to 1853. With its treasury and exotic buildings overlooking the Golden Horn, your visit to Topkapi promises to be a truly fascinating experience.

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 Grand Mosques in the world. 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. We will have time to marvel at the exterior of the building which features six towering minarets and 260 windows illuminating its vast main chamber.

Also included in the Istanbul touring programme will be an afternoon's cruise on the legendary Bosphorus and a visit to the Grand Bazaar.

DAY 12 ISTANBUL

Following breakfast you will be transferred to the airport for onward departures. There is also an option to extend your stay in Istanbul for additional nights to explore more of this fascinating city.

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