A Caspian Odyssey Along the Ancient Silk Road

Overview

The Highlights

- Traveling aboard the luxurious, fully en-suite *Golden Eagle* luxury train
- Caspian Sea ferry crossing from Baku to Turkmenbashi
- Samarkand’s Registan Square, beautifully lit at night
- Visit Gori, birthplace of Stalin, including a museum of the infamous Soviet dictator
- See the amazing Darvaza burning crater in the Kara Kum Desert
- Tbilisi’s old town, with winding streets and alleyways
- Emir’s Palace of the Moon and Stars, located outside Bukhara
- Cave city of Uplistsikhe, dating from the 6th century BC

The Tour

Begin the captivating Caspian Odyssey journey in Yerevan, Armenia, where the skyline is dominated by snow-capped Mount Ararat towering in the distance. Then, board the luxurious all-ensuite *Golden Eagle* train and begin your adventure through the South Caucasus region.

Visit the Georgian cities of Tbilisi, Telavi, and Gori, all steeped in history both modern and ancient. Then make your way to Baku, Azerbaijan on the western shore of the Caspian Sea.

After an adventurous crossing of the Caspian Sea, you'll join the ancient Silk Road trading route and visit Ashgabat, the gleaming capital of Turkmenistan. Then, visit Uzbekistan, with tours of Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent, before arriving at your final destination of Almaty, Kazakhstan.

This once-a-year tour takes you to places few western travelers have ever seen - and on one of the most luxurious trains in the world, the *Golden Eagle*. There's no better way to see these historic and otherworldly places!

Read about IRT Vice President of Operations Angela Walker's Caspian Odyssey.

Itinerary

Day 1: Yerevan, Armenia

On arrival in Yerevan, you are met and transferred to the five-star Alexander Hotel (or similar) for a one-night stay. Relax in this comfortable hotel before meeting your fellow travelers at a welcome dinner this evening.

Day 2: Yerevan, Armenia

Tour Yerevan, whose skyline is dominated by Mount Ararat. The day’s tour will first take you out of the city to the ancient Geghard Monastery that contains a number of tombs and churches, some even built into the rock face itself. You will also see the pagan temple of Gami from the 1st century, built to worship the Sun God Mitra. Return to Yerevan city to visit the Cascade stairway
and the Casfejian Museum of Modern Art inside. In the evening, we board our Golden Eagle private train to start our rail adventure.

Day 3: Lake Sevan & Dilijan, Armenia

Our train takes a scenic route around the stunning Lake Sevan, and we make a short stop to walk to the beach for a photo opportunity. Along with Lake Van and Lake Urmia, Sevan was considered one of the three great lakes of the historical Armenian Kingdom, collectively referred to as the Seas of Armenia; it is the only one within the boundaries of today’s Republic of Armenia.

Continue to Dilijan to visit the Monastery of Haghpat, built between the 10th and 14th centuries. Its beautiful location in dense woods make an atmospheric backdrop for St. Astvatsatsin Church, its most important building.

Day 4: Tbilisi, Georgia

Heading into Georgia, we visit Tbilisi. Hemmed in by the Surami Range, the city extends for 17 miles along the banks of the River Kura. The old part of the city still retains much of its original layout, a spider’s web of narrow winding streets and alleyways. Historical sites we visit include the 13th-century Metekhi church, a cross cupola church which forms part of the Royal Residential complex, and the 5th century Sioni Cathedral, the main church of Tbilisi. We’ll also visit the recently built Holy Trinity Cathedral, one of the largest Orthodox churches in the world, and take a walking tour of the old town and Rustaveli Avenue. Here we will see the Great Hall of the Georgian Philharmonia, built in 1969-71, which has been acknowledged as one of the finest public buildings since the Second World War. We’ll see the treasures of the city housed in the Janashia Museum of Georgia.

Day 5: Telavi, Georgia

Travel into the birthplace of Georgian viticulture and wine-making as we explore the beautiful Kakheti region, which borders the Great Caucasus Mountain range. We tour the Tsinandali country estate of the Alexandre Chavchavadze family with a marvelous garden, house-museum, park and winery dating back to the 19th century, located near Telavi, a couple of hours’ drive from Tbilisi.

Day 6: Gori, Uplistsikhe Cave City & Mtskheta

Gori is one of the oldest cities in Georgia, founded in the 7th century AD. Joseph Stalin, the Soviet leader, was born here in 1879. Visit the Stalin Museum, which includes the small house in which he was born and his private railway carriage. We then go to Uplistsikhe for a barbecue lunch on the banks of the Mtkvari River with traditional music. This famous cave city dates from the 6th century BC. Carved into the rocky plateau we find huge echoing halls, meandering corridor-streets, chambers for pagan worship and even the remains of Georgia’s oldest theater. Late afternoon we visit the city of Mtskheta, Georgia’a Old Capital. Due to its historical significance and numerous ancient monuments, Mtskheta became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994.
Day 7: Baku, Azerbaijan

Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, lies on the western shore of the Caspian Sea and derives its international importance from its huge oil industry. The core of present-day Baku is the Old Town, or fortress, of Icheri-Shekher. Most of the walls, strengthened after the Russian conquest in 1806, survive, as does the 90-foot tower of Kyz-Kalasy (Maiden Tower, 12th century). Around the walls of the fortress, the busy streets and imposing buildings of modern Baku rise up the slopes of hills surrounding the bay. For two nights, we stay at the five-star Four Seasons Baku (or similar) while our train is loaded on the ferry.

Our train is loaded onto a cargo ferry for a 12-14 hour crossing of the Caspian Sea from Baku to the town of Turkmenbashi. Formerly known as Krasnovodsk, it is the western terminus of oil and natural gas pipelines and of the Trans-Caspian Railway, which links the Caspian region with central Asia. The cargo ferry has limited passenger facilities with basic cabins and catering, and the adventurous among the group can choose to travel on the ferry with our train. Upon arrival at the port at Turkmenbashi our train will be offloaded and you will travel overnight to Ashgabat (this option should be requested at the time of booking).

Day 8: Baku/Turkmenbashi

This morning we offer a Freedom of Choice tour to Gobustan Rock Art Cultural Landscape. Located 40 miles (64 km) from Baku on the west bank of the Caspian Sea, Gobustan is an outstanding archaeological site of more than 6,000 pre-historic rock engravings. The area also features the remains of inhabited caves, settlements and burials. This is followed by lunch overlooking the Caspian Sea. Returning to the city in the afternoon, you can choose to enjoy free time in the city or visit a local theatre. Dinner will be held in a traditional local restaurant this evening.

Day 9: Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

Today after breakfast, we take a morning flight to Ashgabat, capital of Turkmenistan. Situated between the Kara Kum Desert and the Kopet Dag mountain range, its fountains, golden domes, marble sidewalks and modern buildings appear strangely incongruous in this desert setting. Known as the “Las Vegas of the Kara Kum,” Ashgabat is a relatively modern city built upon the ruins of the Silk Road route and a Society city. Highlights on our visit include a trip to the National Museum and Kipchak Mosque. Stay overnight in Yyldyz hotel (or similar).

Day 10: Darvaza, Turkmenistan

The Golden Eagle makes a brief scheduled stop at Ichoguz, where you have the option to leave the train and make a short journey to Darvaza’s famous burning gas crater, a spectacular sight best seen at night. Located in the middle of the Kara Kum desert where the area is rich in natural gas, the 70 meter-wide crater is known by the locals as the ‘Door to Hell’ and has been burning for over 40 years. This is a unique experience that is not to be missed.
Day 11: Khiva, Uzbekistan

Our train travels towards Urgench, from where we transfer to the ancient city of Khiva, founded 2,500 years ago. As one of the Silk Road’s most important trading posts and now a World Heritage Site, it lies at the crossroads of the routes between Mongolia, Russia, China and Persia. A truly magnificent sight to behold, it rises out of the desert to reveal a wealth of impressive architecture. Stepping back in time, we discover its impressive mosques, bazaars and minarets within Khiva’s ancient walls.

Day 12, Bukhara, Uzbekistan

Bukhara is simply outstanding. The main highlight is The Ark, a fortified residence of the Emirs of Bukhara, the despotic and ruthless leaders who ruled until Soviet times. We then travel out of the city to experience the Emir’s enchantingly named “Palace of the Moon and Stars.”

Day 13: Samarkand, Uzbekistan

Founded in the 6th century BC, Samarkand’s stunning architecture hints at its former status as one of the most important cities in Asia and is particularly noted for its architectural remains from the 14th to the 17th century, when it flourished as the fabled capital of the Mongol empire of Timur and his successors. Visit some of its most significant sites including Registan Square, Bibi Khanum Mosque and the Ulag Beg observatory (one of the earliest Islamic astronomical observatories built in 1428). Before dinner we return to see Registan Square beautifully illuminated.

Day 14: Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Today we explore Tashkent, capital city of Uzbekistan. Spend the afternoon touring this modern Soviet-style city which was rebuilt following the devastating earthquake of 1966. Our tour of the city includes the Old Town, where traditional homes and religious buildings line the narrow streets and here in a small library we’ll be privileged to see one of Islam’s most sacred relics – the world’s oldest Koran. This is followed by a visit to the Railway Museum and the Museum of Applied Arts.

This evening we enjoy our Farewell Dinner onboard the Golden Eagle as we head overnight to our final destination of Almaty.

Day 15: Almaty, Kazakhstan

This morning we arrive into Almaty, our final destination and bid farewell to the Golden Eagle. We will take a tour of Almaty including a visit to Panfilov Park, located in the heart of the city, and home to the Zenkov Cathedral, a 19th century Russian Orthodox Church made entirely of wood.

Overnight we stay for one night at the luxurious Intercontinental Almaty hotel (or similar).

Day 16: Almaty, Kazakhstan
Transfer to Almaty Airport to begin your journey home.

## Dates & Prices

### 2022 Dates
September 23 - October 8

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2023 dates are tentative and subject to change

2023 tours can be booked at 2022 pricing—for a limited time!

## More

Travel visas may be required for Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, depending on your nationality.