

Balkan Explorer on the Danube Express: Venice to Istanbul

<https://www.irtsociety.com/journey/danube-express-balkan-explorer/>



Overview

The Highlights

- Travel through an astounding nine European countries, with seven nights on board the *Golden Eagle Danube Express*
- Special visit to the Tunnel Museum under Sarajevo Airport with a guide's personal account of the 1992-96 conflict
- See the renowned arch bridge of Mostar and learn about the city's Ottoman history
- Explore the narrow streets of Skopje's Old Town, with tiny shops and mosques with ceramic-tiled interiors
- Sightseeing tour of Pula & Rijeka, Croatia
- Tour Istanbul's Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia
- Accommodation in five-star hotels in Venice and Istanbul.

The Tour

Discover the fascinating history, vibrant culture, and medieval relics of this enchanting region as we venture through the lush landscapes of the Balkan states and their neighboring countries on this journey aboard the [Golden Eagle Danube Express](#). Meandering through verdant landscapes and along turquoise coastlines, this exclusive rail cruise delivers a captivating exploration of the Balkan nations. Travel through an incredible nine countries in just 12 days, aboard your comfortable hotel-on-wheels.

Add the '[Castles of Transylvania](#)' tour, a 7-day Istanbul-Budapest extension to your Balkan Explorer journey!

Itinerary

Day 1: Venice (Italy)

Arrive in Venice, where you will be met and transferred to a centrally-located hotel for a two-night stay.

Today is at leisure 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 (Italy)

Venice is a truly captivating city of romance; its unrivaled beauty is breathtaking for first-time

visitors and local residents alike. Today we will have the opportunity to choose a tailored experience of Venice.

You may choose to join a guided walking tour beginning at the iconic Rialto Bridge. Stroll through Venice's winding streets and across its many bridges, uncovering the city's hidden corners and everyday life. The walk is followed by a short gondola ride, before enjoying lunch at an authentic Venetian restaurant. After lunch, the tour continues to the magnificent St Mark's Square, the historic and cultural heart of the city.

Alternatively, embark on an excursion to the famous Venetian islands. Visit Murano for a traditional glassblowing demonstration and time to browse local workshops, before continuing to Burano, a charming group of small islands renowned for their brightly colored houses and centuries-old lacemaking tradition. Enjoy a guided walk through the island and a visit to a celebrated lacemaker, before rejoining the group back in Venice for lunch.

This evening, there is an optional private visit to St Mark's Basilica, offering a rare and unforgettable opportunity to experience one of Venice's most extraordinary landmarks in a more intimate setting.

Day 3: Trieste (Italy) & Postojna (Slovenia)

This morning we transfer from the hotel, by boat, directly to Santa Lucia station on the Grand Canal. Here, we board the *Golden Eagle Danube Express*.

After lunch onboard the train, we make a brief stop in the Italian port city of Trieste for a short guided tour. Explore the expansive Piazza Unità d'Italia, one of Europe's largest sea-facing squares, and enjoy time at leisure to perhaps savor an espresso in one of the city's celebrated historic coffee houses.

This evening, we experience the truly jaw-dropping Postojna Caves. Travel deep underground aboard a cave train before exploring a remarkable network of vast chambers, dramatic stalactite and stalagmite formations, and the mysterious subterranean wildlife that inhabits this extraordinary natural wonder.

Day 4: Pula & Rijeka (Croatia)

Begin the morning with a guided tour of Pula, exploring its historic center and the impressive Roman Arena, where a spectacular gladiator performance brings the city's ancient past vividly to life.

Continue inland to the Kumparicka Estate for a visit and leisurely lunch, enjoying a tasting of authentic Istrian flavors in a beautiful rural setting.

In the afternoon, travel to Rijeka for a guided walk through the city center, including time along the lively Korzo promenade, before rejoining the train to continue your journey.

Day 5: Sarajevo (Bosnia & Herzegovina)

An 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.

Following lunch at a local restaurant, the afternoon offers two carefully selection options. You may ascend by cable car to Mount Trebevic, once a 1984 Olympic venue, where breathtaking panoramic views unfold across the city and surrounding mountains.

Alternatively, visit the Tunnel of Hope, a profoundly moving site that tells the story of Sarajevo's endurance and spirit during the siege of the 1990s, offering a powerful and reflective counterpoint to the city's beauty above ground.

Day 6: Mostar (Bosnia & Herzegovina)

We continue to the historic city of Mostar, a true crossroads of civilizations, cultures, and faiths.

Enjoy a guided walking tour through the old town, including a visit to a traditional Turkish House and a local mosque, offering insight into Ottoman life and architecture. Wander through the narrow bazaar streets, rich with character and color, where you may browse for traditional handicrafts and local souvenirs.

Lunch is enjoyed at a restaurant overlooking the iconic bridge, before following the emerald waters of the Neretva River to the ancient Ottoman fortified town of Pocitelj, dramatically set against the hillside and steeped in history.

Day 7: Belgrade (Serbia)

Today, we arrive in Belgrade where we disembark the train for an overnight stay at the historic Hotel Bristol, an elegant landmark reflecting the city's grand past. Begin with a guided tour of the Old Town and the commanding Kalemegdan Fortress, where sweeping panoramic views unfold at the dramatic confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers.

Following the tour, enjoy a curated wine tasting featuring local Serbian wines, accompanied by regional snacks that showcase the country's emerging wine culture.

In the afternoon, visit the magnificent Church of Saint Sava, one of the largest Orthodox churches in the world, renowned for its vast scale, luminous interiors, and spiritual significance.

Day 8: Belgrade (Serbia)

Today we explore Tito's Belgrade, gaining insight into the life and legacy of one of the most influential figures in Yugoslav history. Visit Tito's museum complex, including his former residence and the museum itself, where you will be welcomed with the traditional Serbian offering of bread and salt.

The visit is complemented by a lively Serbian folk dance performance, bringing local culture and tradition vividly to life and offering a memorable perspective on Belgrade's 20th-century

heritage.

Following the visit, we rejoin the train and continue our journey southeast towards Sofia, crossing the scenic landscapes of Serbia as we make our way into Bulgaria.

Day 9: Sofia & Plovdiv (Bulgaria)

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

Following the morning tour, you may choose to rejoin the train for lunch as we continue our journey to Plovdiv, or take a short drive to a local winery for a light lunch accompanied by wine tasting and a lively Bulgarian folk performance, before travelling onwards by bus to Plovdiv.

Arriving in Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second-largest city, known as 'The City of Seven Hills,' we discover one of Europe's oldest continuously inhabited settlements, home to over 200 known archaeological sites.

In the early evening, enjoy a guided tour of the Roman Forum and Amphitheatre, then wander through the charming Old Town with its cobbled streets, medieval walls, and Ottoman-era baths, soaking in the city's layered history and timeless charm.

Day 10: Istanbul (Turkey)

This morning we arrive into Istanbul, where we stay two nights at a five-star hotel.

This fabled city that spans Asia and Europe is the final stop on our tour. Begin with a gentle walk through the historic streets, absorbing the sounds, colors, and rhythm of the city, before entering the atmospheric Spice Market. Enjoy a guided visit through this centuries-old bazaar, taking in the rich aromas and vivid displays of spices and delicacies, whetting the appetite for a traditional Turkish lunch in a historic building dating back to 1772.

After lunch, embark on a scenic cruise along the legendary Bosphorus, where Istanbul's dramatic skyline unfolds in a sweeping panorama of domes, minarets, and waterfront palaces, offering a unique perspective on the meeting point of Europe and Asia.

Later, check in at the hotel and enjoy time at leisure to explore the ancient heart of the city, perhaps visiting the nearby Blue Mosque or strolling through the surrounding historic streets.

This evening, descend into the atmospheric depths of Istanbul's ancient cisterns. Visit one of these remarkable underground structures—the Basilica Cistern being the most famous—before enjoying dinner, concluding the day with a truly memorable and evocative experience.

Day 11: Istanbul (Turkey)

This morning begins with Freedom of Choice options, allowing you to tailor your final explorations

of Istanbul.

You may choose to visit the opulent Topkapi Palace, former residence of the Ottoman sultans, exploring its magnificent courtyards, harem, and treasury, each revealing centuries of imperial history.

Alternatively, enjoy a guided tour of the Grand Bazaar, including the exhilarating opportunity to follow in James Bond's footsteps with a walk along the rooftop of this vast and historic marketplace.

After lunch, we visit one of the city's most iconic landmarks, the awe-inspiring Hagia Sophia. Built in the 6th century under Emperor Justinian, it was once among the grandest basilicas of the Christian world. Following the Ottoman conquest, it was transformed into a mosque, and today it stands as one of the most magnificent Grand Mosques in the world—a powerful and enduring symbol of Istanbul's layered history and architectural brilliance.

This evening, conclude your journey with a Farewell Dinner at the hotel, an elegant and intimate celebration of the remarkable experiences shared across Europe and the Balkans.

Day 12: Istanbul (Turkey)

Following breakfast in the hotel, you will be transferred to the airport for your flight home. Alternately, choose to extend your stay in Istanbul for additional nights to explore more of this fascinating city.

Want to lengthen your journey? Add the 7-day "Castles of Transylvania" Istanbul-Budapest extension. [Click here for details.](#)

Dates & Prices

2026 Dates

May 8 - May 19

October 2 - October 13

Accommodation	Double	Single	Deposit
Deluxe Class	\$24,700	\$36,750	25%
Superior Deluxe Class	\$31,750	\$53,150	25%

Prices are shown in USD and are based on a quarterly exchange rate. Prices are subject to change to quarterly. All prices are per person.

2027 Dates

May 7 - May 18

September 10 - September 21

October 19 - October 30

Accommodation	Double	Single	Deposit
Deluxe Class	\$27,600	\$41,400	25%
Superior Deluxe Class	\$35,900	\$59,900	25%

Prices are shown in USD and are based on a quarterly exchange rate. Prices are subject to change to quarterly. All prices are per person.

More

For a first-hand report of Angela Walker's journey on the *Golden Eagle Danube Express*, [click here](#).

Included in the tour price:

- Arrival and departure transfers
- A generous drink allowance, including wine, with lunch and dinner
- All gratuities
- All off-train touring, with personal headsets to make it easy to hear your guide
- Complimentary tea, coffee, and bottled drinking water are available in your cabin 24 hours a day
- An on-board doctor, with medical facilities, is available, should the need arise
- 24-hour service attendant
- Porterage of bags; your bags will be stowed for you on the train and transported to your hotel at the end of your trip