

Balkan Explorer on the Danube Express: Venice to Istanbul

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



Overview

The Highlights

- Travel through an astounding nine European countries, with six 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
- Explore picture-perfect Dubrovnik, essentially unchanged over 700 years
- 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
- Tour Istanbul's Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia
- Accommodation in five-star hotels in Venice, Dubrovnik, and Istanbul.
- *Please note: For 2025 Travelers, Dubrovnik will be removed this itinerary, and Bar & Podgorica, Montenegro will be added.*

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 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 at your leisure. For a truly iconic experience, take a gondola ride (additional charge) in the Basin of St. Mark's and along the Grand Canal.

Day 3: Trieste (Italy)

Transfer by boat this morning from the hotel to Santa Lucia station on the Grand Canal. Here our private train, the *Golden Eagle Danube Express*, is waiting for us.

The train departs Venice mid-morning and weaves its way onto the three-mile causeway over the Venice Lagoon before it arrives at our first stop, the Italian port city of Trieste, for an afternoon tour. We stop at the vast Piazza Unita d'Italia, the main town square, and climb the hill to the famous Church of San Giusto, built around a medieval complex that dates back to the 13th century. We will go inside the church for a closer view of the splendid Byzantine-style architecture, enriched with precious mosaics.

Day 4: Postojna & Ljubljana (Slovenia)

Today, visit Postojna Cave. Ride an underground train deep into the cave, and tour the network of magnificent halls and myriad of cave formations.

After the visit to the caves, return to Ljubljana, the delightful capital city of Slovenia. Your 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 (Bosnia & Herzegovina)

Early this morning we arrive in 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 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 make a special visit to the Tunnel Museum under the Sarajevo Airport. Your guide, who gives a personal account of 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, we travel on to the historic city of Mostar, the crossroads of many civilizations, cultures, and 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 in the Royal Palm Hotel for one night.

Day 6: Dubrovnik (Croatia)

Since its foundation in the 13th century, Dubrovnik has been attacked many times, but it is now restored as one of the great cities of the Mediterranean, essentially unchanged for 700 years. We will tour the city traveling through Ploce Gate to visit the Franciscan Monastery with one of the world's oldest pharmacies, the Old Harbour, St. Laurence Fortress, and the Rector's Palace. We have lunch overlooking the Adriatic and have free time to wander the narrow streets.

We'll travel by coach back to the train in Čapljina for dinner as we depart towards Serbia.

Day 7: Belgrade (Serbia)

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. Our full-day 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 8: Skopje, Macedonia

This morning 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, filled 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 (Bulgaria)

Sofia, Bulgaria's modern capital at the foot of Mt. Vitosha, 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.

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

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. 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 classic 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 mosaics.

Note: Continued construction associated with the new Bosphorus tunnel could mean that the train stops on the outskirts of Istanbul and our buses will transport us to the city center.

Day 11: Istanbul (Turkey)

Today, continuing your tour of Istanbul with a visit to the crown jewel of the Ottoman Empire, Topkapi. 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, Topkapi promises to be a truly fascinating experience.

Visit the Grand Bazaar, 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 jewelry, leather, pottery, spices and carpets.

Also included in the Istanbul touring program: an afternoon cruise on the legendary Bosphorus.

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

2024 Dates

September 12 - September 23

October 11 - October 22

2024 Pricing

Accommodation	Double	Single	Deposit
Deluxe Class	\$18,495	\$27,595	\$2,000
Superior Deluxe Class	\$23,195	\$38,695	\$2,500

All prices are per person.

2025 Dates

May 9 - May 20

August 27 - September 7

October 10 - October 21

Accommodation	Double	Single	Deposit
Deluxe Class	\$19,395	\$28,795	\$2,000
Superior Deluxe Class	\$24,895	\$41,595	\$2,500

All prices are per person.

2026 Dates

May 8 - May 19

August 28 - September 8

October 5 - October 16

Accommodation	Double	Single	Deposit
Deluxe Class	\$19,395	\$28,795	\$2,000
Superior Deluxe Class	\$24,895	\$41,595	\$2,500

All prices are per person.

2026 dates and prices are preliminary and are subject to change.

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