

Turkey 's border lands: Adventure, scenery and culture

ITM London

A world away from Turkey's popular resorts, the eastern borderlands offer adventure, scenery and cultural interest on a grand scale.

Ani Walls



A popular tour organised by Wild Frontiers Adventure Travel, begins in the lush, towering and verdant mountains of the Black Sea region, close to Georgia, and concludes

on the arid plains that stretch down towards Syria.

On the way there is a complex mix of cultures both past and

present. Some of the sites are evocative and historically important namely the ancient Armenian capital of Ani, the Byzantine masterpiece that is Sumela Monastery, the Ishak Pasha Palace, the architecture of Mardin and many seldom visited spots such as Lake Çıldır and the remote Georgian churches and fortresses in the northeast.

Ani, the city of 1001 churches, is located on a hilltop near the bank of the Akhuryan River. The territory of the city had been

inhabited from the ancient times. The fortress of Ani was first mentioned by Armenian historians in the 5th century A.D. By the end of the 8th century Ani, with its nearby estates, came under the control of the Bagratid dynasty. Ani began growing since 961 A.D, when the Bagratid King Ashot III transferred his capital from Kars to Ani. During the period of only 40-50 years Ani was transformed from a little fortress town to a big medieval city and became an important crossroads for merchant caravans. The city controlled trade

Grand mosque in Mardin



Ishak Pasha Palace



routes between Byzantium, Persia, Syria, the Caucasus, and central Asia. In 1064 Alp-Arslan Sultan of Seljuk-Turks with his big army attacked Ani. Seljuk-Turks captured and devastated the city.

In 1072 the Turks sold Ani to Abl-Svar who was Dvin's Emir. He in turn gave it to the Manuchyan Emirs. In 1199 the Zaqaryan princes liberated Ani and other Armenian territories and established their principality. Under their rule the city regained much of its former prosperity.

In 1237 the Mongols invaded and

occupied Armenia. Later Ani was occupied by Kara Koyunlu. In 1579 the city became a part of the Ottoman Empire. A small Armenian village still remained within its walls at least until the mid 17th century. Some European travellers in the early 17th century mentioned the existence of 200 churches in Ani and its immediate neighbourhood. By the beginning of the 19th century Ani was empty of human beings - a city of ghosts with the remain of its churches testifying to its former glory.

Another magnificent site is the Sumela Monastery located some

30 miles south of Trebizond in a valley covered by forests. The entrance leads to the top storey of the monastery to a sort of piazzetta in a cavity of the mountain. A group of chapels and other tiny buildings are scattered in an apparently haphazard manner. The monastery was under the protection of the Emperors of Trebizond, but the fall of the empire did not mean the end of the monastery. A large Greek community continued to live in Trebizond, mainly involved in trading activities. In Trebizond the

main churches had been turned into mosques and the Greeks who had maintained their Orthodox faith were obliged to meet in tiny and almost hidden churches. The monastery, miles distant from the nearest village, was not seen by the Ottoman rulers as a defiance to Islam and so the Greek community of Trebizond was allowed to support the monks living in the monastery.

Part of the Wild Frontiers Tour takes in the Silk Route where the



Village near Lake Cildir

Lake Van



Ishak Pasha Palace near the Iranian frontier, is situated on a high and vast platform of strategic importance on an area of 7600 meter square. It is a mixture of Anatolian, Iranian and North Mesopotamian architectural tradition, rather than the Ottoman tradition. The traditional model used in the construction of the Royal Palaces in the capital cities like Bursa, Edirne and Istanbul was taken as an example in the design of Ishak Pasha Palace. The western influence in Ottoman architecture during the post-classical period is also evident.

The palace is composed of two courts and the collection of

structures positioned around them. Some of the buildings of the first court are destroyed. The second court, which is surrounded on four sides with buildings, has a



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rectangular ground plan. To the right, there is the men's quarter and behind it the harem section. At the end of these, there is the mosque and the mausoleum. The mausoleum is built in the style of the Seljuk "kümbet" (cupola) architecture. The palace section has two storeys. All of its 366 rooms are arranged on these two floors. Each room has a stone fireplace. The cavities within the stone walls indicate that the building as a whole possessed a central heating system. The

reception hall is 30mx3m. It has stone walls and floors. Its walls are decorated with couplets and verses from the Koran in the decorative examples of the Turkish calligraphic art. Among these a couplet, which in very free translation states: "Ishak, upon will, made the whole world a place of benevolence and the date to witness this was one thousand one hundred ninety nine" and indicates that the palace was completed in 1784 A.D.



Last judgement painting in Sumela Monastery



Mardin museum
at night

History also comes alive in Mardin. According to hearsay, the city dates as far back as the flood. The town is located on the slope of a hill looking down south to the Mesopotamian plains.

The city lived within the rule of the Hurri-Mitani, Hittites, Surs, Babylonians, Persians, Romans, Arabs and the Seljuk Turks. Later, the Mardin branch of the Artuklu Kingdom called "Tabaka Ilgaziyye" was established and the city

flourished during this time.

The fortress, Kasimiye Medresse, Zinciriye Medresse and Grand Mosque are important historical sites around the city. Other historical assets in the area worth seeing include Dayrul-Zeferan Monastery and Harizm Medresse. Dating from 1385, the Sultan Isa Medresse is an interesting, beautiful Turkish monument with its magnificent carved portal. The Kasim Pasa Medresse, is also

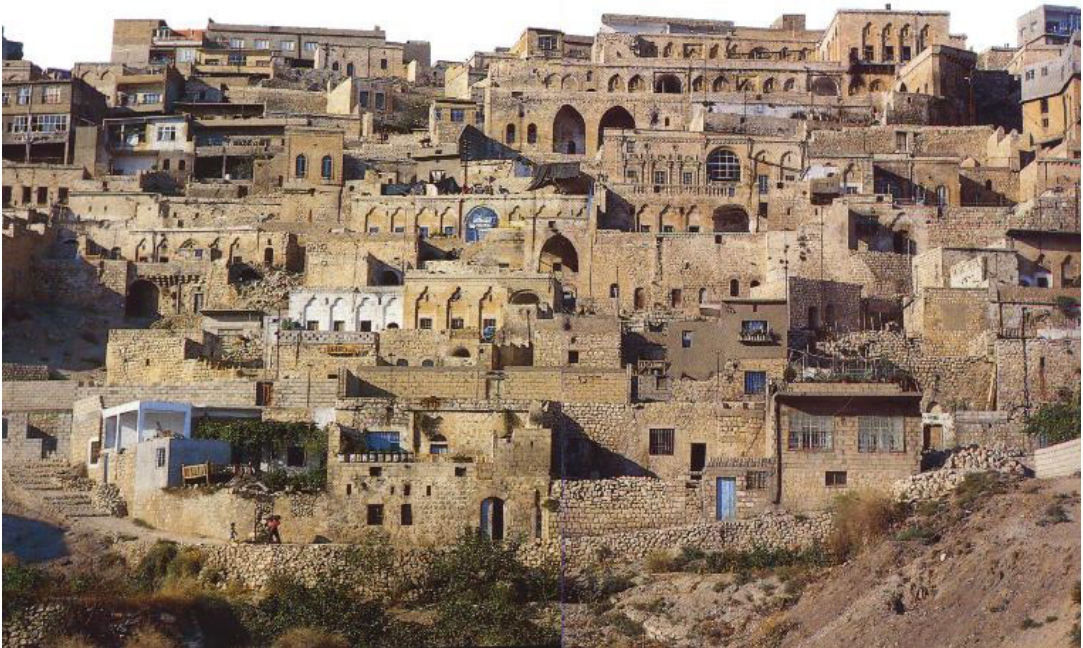
significant for its dome of beautiful stonework and the Ulu (Grand) Mosque with its well-decorated minaret, is another sightseeing spot.

At Hasankeyf which is on the borderline with Batman province, are the ruins of the ancient 12th century capital of the Artutids. The bridge which once connected the two parts of the city over the Tigris (Dicle) river and the palace, are others. Hasankeyf will be completely flooded whenever they the nearby dam is completed. Another attraction is the 15th

century Zeynel Bey Mausoleum nearby, is attractively decorated with blue tiles.

The museum is housed in the former patriarchate constructed in 1895 by the Patriarch of Antakya, Ignatios Benham Banni. Now restored to its original condition, the dwelling houses has collections dating from 4000 BC up to the present day and representing the Assyrian, Urartian, Hellenistic, Persian, Roman, Byzantine, Seljuk, Artuklu and Ottoman periods. Pottery, seals, cylinder seals, coins, lamps, figurines, teardrop bottles, and jewelry are

Mardin



St Grigor church Armenia



among the many and fascinating exhibits.

Mardin has preserved the old-style carving in its houses. Since it is located in a volcanic area, the basic input used in local architecture is easily workable calcareous rock. Houses in Mardin, reflecting all top features of a closed-in life style are surrounded by four meters high walls and isolated from the street. These walls provide protection

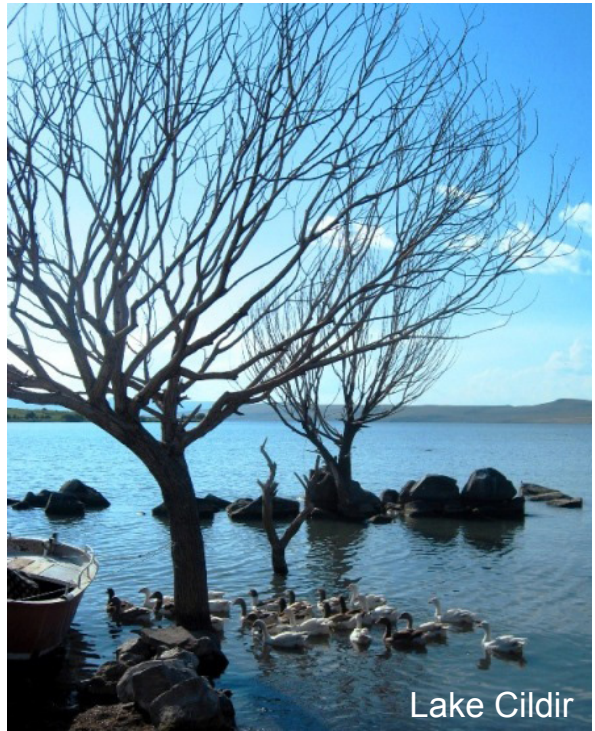
from harsh climatic conditions. Often the lanes run through arched tunnels beneath the upper floors of houses. Relief carvings of animals and fruit lend the city a dream-like character, and the modern world appears to disappear.

A seldom visited wild life spot is Lake Çıldır, a large freshwater lake in the Ardahan Province, in the northeastern part of Turkey. At an elevation of about 1,900 m and

surrounded by mountainous region it is one of the most important bird migration sites in Turkey.

The trip ends near Mount Ararat at 5137m which dominates the Iranian border. Lake Van, vast and mountain encircled, feeds the plains near the Iraqi frontier.

With its broad vistas and dramatic scenery, its ubiquitous borders, fascinating history and culture, this trip gives a truly varied insight into a part of Turkey rarely seen by foreign visitors.



Sumela Monastery

