



## Caspian Odyssey: Yerevan to Almaty

Explore the countries on both the eastern and western shores of the Caspian Sea – Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. With their location at the crossroads of trade, religion, language and the arts, these countries are home to fascinating modern cultures as well as some of the world's most ancient and timeless architecture.



16 days/15 nights

### ITINERARY

#### Day 1: Yerevan, Armenia

Upon arrival at Yerevan International Airport you will be met and transferred to the five-star Alexander Hotel, where you will stay for one night.

Boasting a prestigious central location the Alexander, a Luxury Collection Hotel, is located in the heart of Yerevan's historic quarter and allows guests a relaxing stay in luxurious surroundings. Even the hotel's facade with a history dating back to the 18th century presents a unique glimpse into the country's fascinating past. Tonight you will enjoy a Welcome Dinner at your hotel whilst you meet your fellow travellers and look forward to the journey ahead.

#### Day 2: Yerevan, Armenia

The Yerevan skyline is dominated by Mount Ararat in nearby Turkey, with its snow covered peak towering in the distance. Yerevan has a rich history and was occupied as early as 6,000 BC. The fortress of Erebuni was erected there in the 8th century BC. Seized by a succession of conquerors, the city later passed back and forth between the Turks and the Persians until 1827, when it was taken by Russia. It became the capital of Soviet Armenia in 1920 and following the demise of the Soviet Union, the capital of the new nation of Armenia.

Your day's touring will take us 23 miles (37 km) out of Yerevan to the ancient Geghard Monastery. The beautiful monastery contains a number of churches and tombs, many of them cut into the rock. The complex of medieval architecture is set into a landscape of great natural beauty, surrounded by towering cliffs at the head of the Azat Valley.

You'll also visit the 1st Century pagan temple of Garni, built to worship the Sun God Mitra. You'll explore the remains of an ancient fortress, palace and baths there. Back in Yerevan city you'll visit the Cascade giant stairway and inside it the Casfejian Museum of Modern Art.

In the evening you will board our *Golden Eagle* private train and start your rail adventure to Almaty.

#### Day 3: Lake Sevan & Dilijan, Armenia

The train takes a scenic route today around the stunning Lake Sevan and makes a short stop to allow you 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.

You'll continue to Dilijan to visit the nearby Monastery of Haghpat, built between the 10th and 14th centuries. Its beautiful location in dense wood in the gorges of two small mountain rivers make an atmospheric backdrop for St.



Astvatsatsin Church, its most important building.

You'll have an Armenian cognac reception at Avan Dzoraget Hotel on the Debed River, nestled among the forest-covered hills and rocky slopes of the Caucasus Mountains.

#### **Day 4: Tbilisi, Georgia**

Heading into Georgia, you visit Tbilisi. Hemmed in by the Surami Range, the city extends for 17 miles (27 km) along the banks of the River Kura. Despite the wars and fires which caused innumerable changes in the topography of Tbilisi, 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 you 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. You'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 you 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. You'll see the treasures of the city housed in the Janashia Museum of Georgia.

#### **Day 5: Telavi, Georgia**

Today you will explore the beautiful Kakheti region, which borders the Great Caucasus Mountain range. This region is known as a birthplace of Georgian viticulture and wine-making. You will tour the Tsinandali country estate of the Alexandre Chavchavadze family with a marvellous 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, Georgia**

Gori is one of the oldest cities in Georgia, founded in the 7th century AD as Tontio. Joseph Stalin, the Soviet leader, was born here in 1879 and he spent his childhood years in the city and later (1888-94) studied at its theological seminary. The small house where Stalin was born is preserved under a canopy outside the huge columned palace-like building that houses the Stalin Museum. To the side of the museum is Stalin's private railway carriage. The museum is filled with interesting photographs of the man responsible for more deaths and suffering than any other human being. From the town you will go directly to Uplistsikhe where you will have a private performance of traditional Georgian polyphonic singing.

The famous cave city of Uplistsikhe dates from the 6th century BC and is first mentioned in the chronicles of the 1st century AD. Carved into rocky plateau you will find huge echoing halls, meandering corridor-streets, chambers for pagan worship and even the remains of Georgia's oldest theatre, complete with auditorium, stage and orchestra pit. Like the other cave-towns of Georgia, it is rooted in the prehistoric traditions of the peoples of the Near East. On one side the fortress was protected by the Mtkvari and an almost vertical rock face, on the other, by powerful fortifications. Its strategic position on the approaches to Gori and, in particular, its strong defences made it possible to control the surrounding terrain. There were numerous attempts to destroy Uplistsikhe. Only in the 13th century, however, did the hordes of Genghis Khan's son Khulagu succeed in doing so, after capturing and destroying many fortresses in Transcaucasia with the help of siege machines. The 5,000 inhabitants of Uplistsikhe perished and life ended forever in the fortress.

Late afternoon you visit the city of Mtskheta, Georgia's 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 the southern side of the Apsheron Peninsula, around the wide, curving sweep of the Bay of Baku. The bay, sheltered by the islands of the Baku Archipelago, provides the best harbour of the Caspian Sea, while the Apsheron Peninsula gives protection from violent northerly winds. Baku 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 ft (27 m) tower of Kyz-Kalasy (Maiden Tower, 12th century). The walled old town is highly picturesque, with its maze of narrow alleys and ancient buildings. These include the Palace of the Shirvan-Shahs, now a museum, the oldest part of which dates from the 11th century. Also of the 11th century is the Synyk-Kala Minaret and Mosque (1078-79).

Other notable historic buildings are the Law Court (Divan-Khan), the Dzhuma-Mechet Minaret, and the mausoleum of the astronomer Seida Bakuvi. Around the walls of the fortress, the regular streets and imposing buildings of modern Baku rise up the slopes of the amphitheatre of hills surrounding the bay.

You will stay at the five-star Four Seasons Baku (or similar) for two nights, while the train is loaded on the ferry to cross the Caspian Sea.

*NB: The 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 amongst the group can choose to travel on the ferry with the train. Upon arrival at the port at Turkmenbashi the train will be offloaded and you will travel overnight to Ashgabat (this option needs to be requested at the time of booking the tour).*

#### **Day 8: Baku, Azerbaijan**

This morning a Freedom of Choice tour is offered to explore 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**

Following breakfast you will take a morning flight to Ashgabat. The capital of Turkmenistan is known as the 'Las Vegas of the Kara Kum'. Situated between the Kara Kum desert and the Kopet Dag mountain range, Ashgabat is a relatively modern city built upon the ruins of the Silk Road city of Konjikala and the Soviet city built after the devastating earthquake of 1948.

The city's extravagant fountains, golden domes and towering modern buildings appear strangely incongruous in this desert setting. Highlights on your visit include a trip to the National Museum and Kipchak Mosque. Stay overnight in the luxury five-star 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 metre-wide crater is known by the locals as the 'Door to Hell' and has been burning for over 40 years. A unique experience that is not to be missed.

#### **Day 11: Khiva, Uzbekistan**

Your train travels towards Urgench, from where you will 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, you will discover its impressive mosques, bazaars and minarets within Khiva's ancient walls.

#### **Day 12: Bukhara, Uzbekistan**

Bukhara is quite simply outstanding. Like Khiva, UNESCO sponsored the renovation of much of the city for its 2,500th anniversary in 1999. The most enjoyable aspect of this city is to just immerse oneself in the atmosphere of this unique and ancient city and re-live some of its fascinating history at the crossroads of Asia. The main highlight of this wonderful tour is a visit to The Ark, a fortified residence of the Emirs of Bukhara – the despotic and ruthless leaders who ruled until Soviet times. You then travel out of the city to experience the Emir's enchantingly named, 'Palace of the Moon and Stars'.

#### **Day 13: Samarkand, Uzbekistan**

Just the mention of Samarkand instantly conjures up evocative images of the Silk Road, more so than any other town. 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.

Today you will visit some of its most significant sites including Registan Square, the refined elegance of the beautifully proportioned Bibi Khanum Mosque and the Ulag Beg observatory, one of the earliest Islamic astronomical observatories built in 1428. Before dinner you will return to the now illuminated and awe-inspiring Registan Square.

#### **Day 14: Tashkent, Uzbekistan**

Tashkent is the capital city of Uzbekistan and we spend time 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 you'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 you will enjoy our Farewell Dinner onboard the *Golden Eagle* as you head overnight to our final destination of Almaty.



### Day 15: Almaty, Kazakhstan

This morning you arrive into Almaty, your final destination and bid farewell to the Golden Eagle. Today you 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 you will stay for one night at the InterContinental Almaty hotel, or similar.

### Day 16: Almaty, Kazakhstan

Following breakfast you will be transferred to Almaty Airport for your onward flight, whether you are heading home or to your next destination for continued touring.

### Train information

These special rail cruise itineraries are planned and operated exclusively by Golden Eagle Luxury Trains. They are dedicated to never losing sight of the little things that really matter to you, the valued guest, so that you can experience these Voyages of a Lifetime in a relaxed and informal manner. The Golden Eagle is your luxurious hotel-on-wheels. Unpack just once and settle into your well appointed and comfortable en-suite cabin as you begin this adventure by rail. One of your cabin attendants, available at all times, will be on hand to look after all of your needs.

### Golden Eagle Luxury Train

Aboard your luxurious private train, you can expect well-appointed en-suite cabins, fine dining and elegant surroundings – no matter where you choose to explore. First-class service is included as standard, with a personal cabin attendant service, available at all times, to look after all of your needs. The Golden Eagle has been carefully designed with emphasis on your comfort, relaxation and enjoyment. In addition to our private en-suite sleeping cabins, we offer a beautifully appointed Bar Lounge Car and Restaurant Cars. Unwind in comfortable surroundings and watch the world go by as you get to know fellow passengers in the social heart of the Golden Eagle, the Bar Lounge Car. The perfect location to relax and unwind as you watch the ever changing scenery pass by. Reminisce the day's adventures with fellow passengers over afternoon tea or perhaps challenge your friends to a game of cards before dinner. Throughout your journey the Bar Lounge Car and Restaurant Cars will host a variety of entertaining and enriching activities such as Russian language lessons and engaging lectures on local history and culture from expert guest speakers. It is also here that our Tour Manager will organise a programme of activities for the journey ahead. Daily itineraries detailing train arrival and departure timings and information on the following day's excursions and activities will be provided, plus useful weather forecast and time zone information. As evening falls, enjoy the sounds of the resident pianist playing on the baby grand piano in the Bar Lounge Car. Each night the bar stays open until the last person leaves. Floor plans of each cabin class are available on request.

## Details

### Trip Code:

002297-W20

### INCLUDED

- Arrival and departure transfers
- First-class hotel accommodation & en-suite accommodation on the train
- 24-hour cabin attendant and evening turn-down service
- All gratuities
- Breakfast, lunch and dinner daily including a Gala Caviar Dinner (beginning with dinner on Day 1 and ending with breakfast on Day 16)
- Complimentary tea, coffee and bottled water in cabin 24 hours
- Complimentary bottle of vodka, robes, slippers and luxury toiletries in-cabin
- Option to have breakfast served to your cabin
- Drinks, including international wines, with lunch and dinner
- Afternoon tea and cakes
- Tea, coffee, bottled water, soft drinks and local beer in the Bar Lounge Car
- Resident pianist in the Bar Lounge Car
- Seminars and lectures on-board
- Detailed route map and illustrated tour brochure
- Guided off-train excursions as outlined with experience tour manager
- Personal headsets to hear the guide's commentary
- Porterage from airport on arrival to your departure
- On-board English-speaking doctor
- Embroidered backpack (one per cabin)
- Commemorative USD with photos of your tour



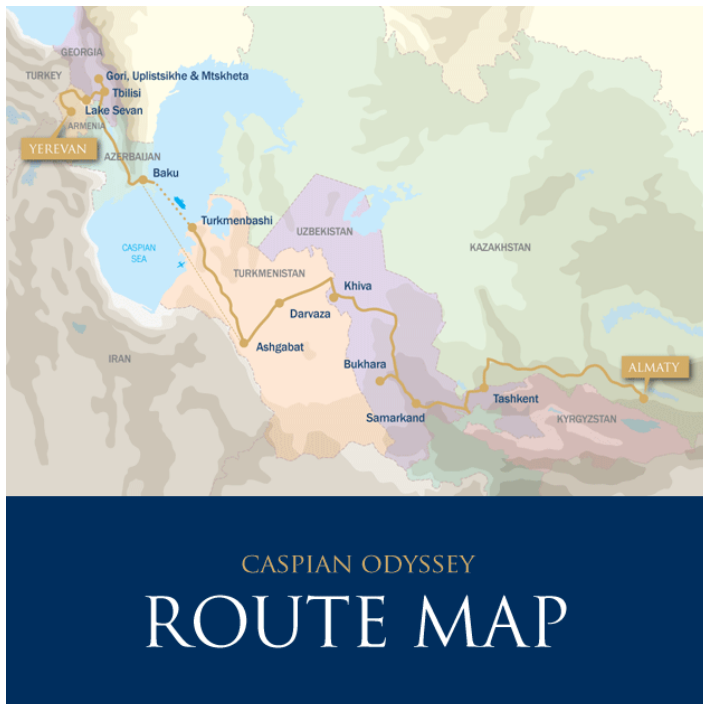
## NOT INCLUDED

- International flights to Yerevan/from Almaty
- Optional tours
- Passport and visa fees
- Travel insurance
- Items of a personal nature

## TOUR NOTES

*Disclaimer: We do our utmost to ensure that information posted on our website is correct at the time of publication, however trip details are subject to change without notice by the suppliers and operators involved. We update the information as soon as possible when changes are advised to us, however, we cannot assume responsibility for such changes made by the suppliers and operators.*

## ROUTE MAP





**Contact**

**Winnipeg**

164 Marion Street  
Winnipeg, MB, Canada  
R2H 0T4  
Phone: 204.949.0199  
Fax: 204.949.0188  
Toll Free: 800.661.3830

**Edmonton**

(formerly Butte Travel Service)  
11733 95th St. NW  
Edmonton, AB, Canada  
T5G 1M1  
Phone: 780.477.3561  
Fax: 780.477.9871  
Toll Free: 800.661.8906



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