

The Perfect Trip

Turkey

In this ancient country where Europe meets Asia, the sun shines down on a unique fusion of history and scenery, combining classical ruins, curious rock formations, golden beaches and tumbledown towns with memorable views

WORDS JAMES BAINBRIDGE | PHOTOGRAPHS MARK READ

The ruined Library of Celsus stands as a reminder of Rome's imperial rule over Turkey, with Ephesus declared capital of the Roman province of Asia in 133 BC

Your trip mapped out

Delve into Turkey's past, from Ottoman splendour in Istanbul to cave dwellings in Cappadocia

2 AYVALIK
Best for coastal life

Drop the pace down a notch with a visit to the relaxed coastline of Ayvalik, with time to savour the fresh cuisine and local spirits.

1 ISTANBUL
Best for Ottoman splendour

The imperial architecture of a formidable history still wows the crowds against a backdrop of skyscrapers and modern prosperity.

3 EPHESUS
Best for classical ruins

The river may have stopped flowing here but you can still relive history among the old city's remarkable Roman buildings and streets.

4 LYCIAN WAY
Best for walking

Considered one of the best walks in the world, this epic journey will take you along ancient trails and closer to the people of the region.

5 KEKOVA
Best for a boat trip

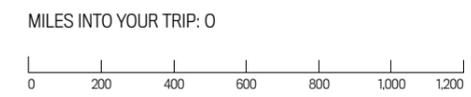
Take a traditional sailing boat out to the island of the Sunken City and step into the submerged Lycian streets, lost nearly 2,000 years ago.

6 CAPPADOCIA
Best for horse riding

Mount an Anatolian steed and ride through the distinctive valleys of Cappadocia, where generations of people have carved homes from the rocks.

MAP ILLUSTRATION: STUART KOLAKOVIC

1 ISTANBUL Best for Ottoman splendour



Istanbul displays all the signs of bullish development you'd expect in one of the world's fastest-growing economies, with shiny skyscrapers growing ever upward, shops as far as the eye can see and tankers queueing in the Bosphorus river. And yet, among the organised chaos of this great modern city, ancient mosques and palaces rise sphinx-like from the jumble of roofs.

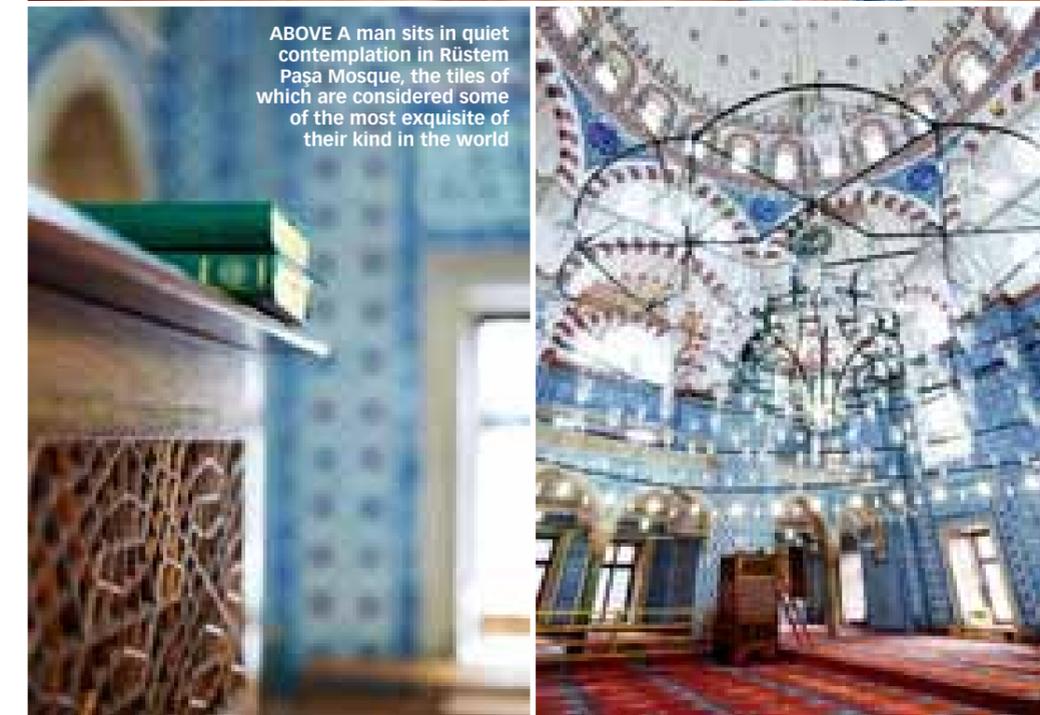
For nearly 500 years, Istanbul – or Constantinople, as it was previously known – was the capital of the Ottoman Empire, a powerful regime that, at its height, stretched from Hungary to Iraq. In the city's imperial days, traders sold spices from distant dominions in the bazaars, dignitaries hunted in parks lining the Bosphorus, and buildings rose to immortalise the sultans. People came here from across the empire. 'It was global before there was "global",' says Ottoman historian Caroline Finkel, who has lived in the city for 25 years.

Standing proud near the city's spice bazaar is Rüstem Paşa Mosque. Built during the Ottoman Empire, it showcases the best Ottoman architecture and exquisite Iznik tiles, which cover the walls, columns and the façade of its porch. Rüstem Paşa has a stillness, beauty and calm that offers respite from the clamour of the markets outside its walls.

On a much grander scale is the famous Blue Mosque, also decorated with Iznik tiles and stained-glass windows. It lies in the Sultanahmet area, the old town centre that was once the heart of Ottoman life.

This remarkable mosque was built after the Ottomans took the city from the Christian Byzantine Empire, to compete with the Aya Sofya cathedral, which was a conspicuous reminder of the old regime. Now a museum, Aya Sofya was made into a mosque under the Ottomans. 'It was about imperial rivalry,' says Caroline, 'making your own what was there before. Demolishing it by giving new meaning.'

The 1,500-year-old building of Aya Sofya still has a sacred atmosphere. Turkish families crowd the entrance, craning their necks to view the soaring ceiling. They wander through the hushed space and queue up at the weeping column, said to cure ailments with its tears. Ottoman ▶



ABOVE A man sits in quiet contemplation in Rüstem Paşa Mosque, the tiles of which are considered some of the most exquisite of their kind in the world



features such as medallions with gilt Arabic calligraphy draw the eye, but the shadowy corners are rich with original Christian fragments from the Byzantine era – enduring signs of Istanbul’s rich past.

FURTHER INFORMATION

● Entry to the Blue Mosque is free, but it closes for about half an hour at prayer times (listed at namazvakti.com). The Aya Sofya museum (£8; muze.gov.tr/hagiasophia) is open Tue-Sun.

WHERE TO EAT

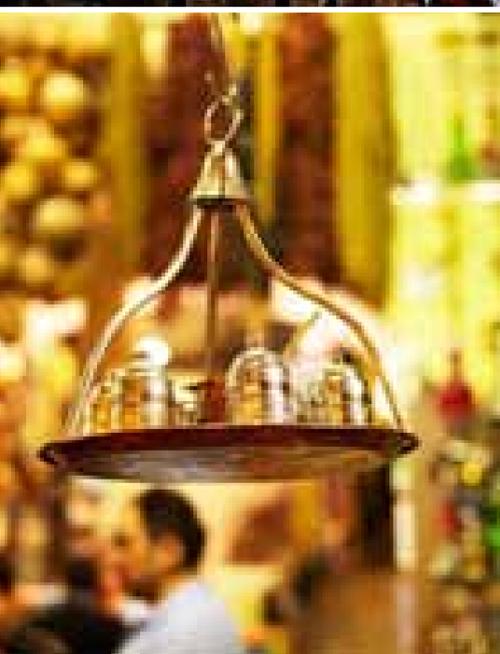
● Istanbul’s premier rooftop bar-restaurant, 360, has views of the old city from its eighth-floor perch. DJs and sporadic performances add to the buzz (dishes from £5; 360istanbul.com).

LEFT Detail shots of the impressive Aya Sofya museum interspersed with images of towers of colourful spices sold in Istanbul’s spice bazaar



WHERE TO STAY
PERA PALACE HOTEL

Opened in 1892, Pera Palace was *the* address in Istanbul for guests arriving on the Orient Express. Agatha Christie’s novel *Murder on the Orient Express* was inspired by her stays in the Ottoman hotel, its neoclassical façade overlooking the Golden Horn estuary. Completed in September 2010, a two-and-a-half-year, £21m renovation has maintained the elegance of the eclectic architecture and the grandeur of the public salons. Rooms and suites reflect their famous past guests. With antique furniture and luxuries such as hamam-like showers, modern comforts mix with vintage style (from £230; perapalace.com). ▶



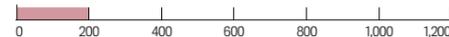
The vast dome of Aya Sofya hints at the museum’s original roles – as a cathedral and later a mosque



2 AYVALIK

Best for coastal life

MILES INTO YOUR TRIP: 200



Fly to Izmir from Istanbul (one hour). Ayvalik is then two-and-a-half hours north by hire car or taxi.

In the restaurants lining Ayvalik's seafront, mellow evenings are spent washing meze and balık (fish) down with the anise spirit raki. There's even an Aegean saying about the time-honoured activity: 'Raki, balık, Ayvalık' – which tells us something about the pace of life in this classic small town.

Boutique renovations are yet to alter the old town, where traditional life continues unimpeded. In a scene that could have taken place 50 years ago, a gang of boys in shorts play a game with bits of string on a doorstep, while in the shade nearby, the slower fingers of men in woolly hats click backgammon pieces.

Staircases clamber between some 2,000 crumbling houses, and sunlight streams into the narrow lanes between peeling pastel-coloured buildings. It's a peaceful

scene, but the presence of Greek houses recalls upheaval – in 1923, most of the town's Greek Orthodox inhabitants were forced to swap places with Muslims from the island of Lesbos across the bay as part of a mandatory population exchange.

In Tarlakusu Gurmeko deli, the proprietor, Ayfer Eroğuz, happily works the coffee machine and enthuses about Aegean cuisine. The area is famous for its tangy olive oil, and juicy local olives figure prominently in what Ayfer describes as 'exchange recipes, which you can still taste in homes. The style is fresh, the cooking period is short and the vegetables do not change their colour or taste.'

Ayfer buys her fruit and vegetables at the Thursday market, where the produce is strictly local, brought from the hills by farmers in old trucks. 'Ayvalık is quieter than the south of Turkey. It's more natural and there are fewer people,' she says.

FURTHER INFORMATION

● turkeytravelplanner.com/go/aegean/ayvalik has useful travel information.

WHERE TO EAT

● Most traffic to Mutlu, just 15 minutes' drive inland, stops at olive farm and gardens Nostalji. Olive oil tastings and a museum of curios are also on the menu (mains from £10; nostalji.com.tr).

ABOVE AND RIGHT The traditional fishing town of Ayvalık, on the Aegean, has an appealing, sleepy pace of life: men chat in roadside cafés and headscarf-wearing women prepare lunches to linger over



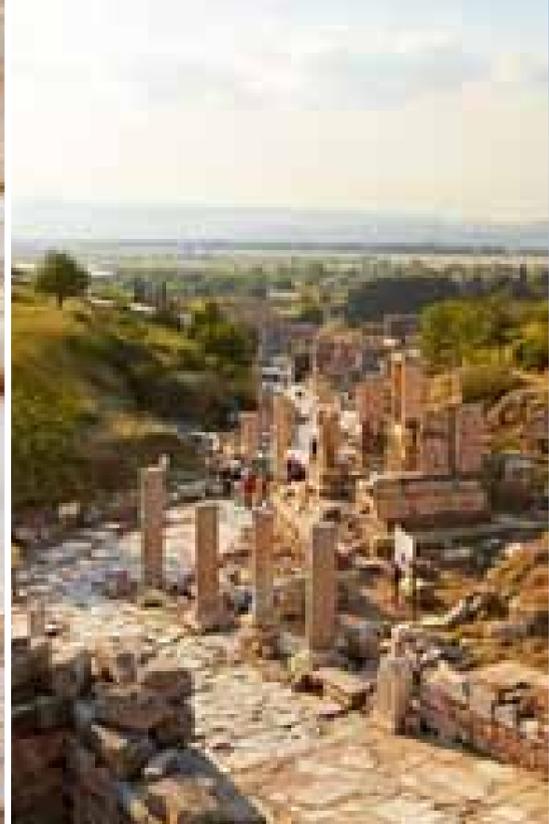
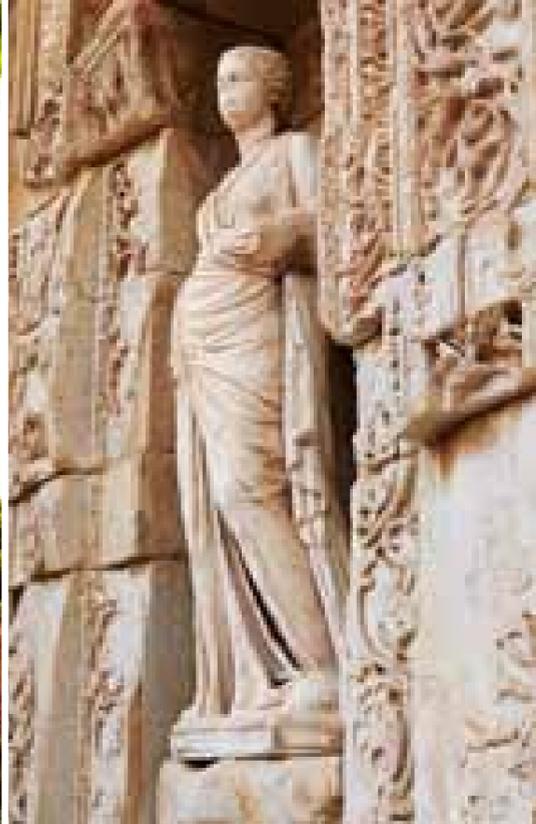
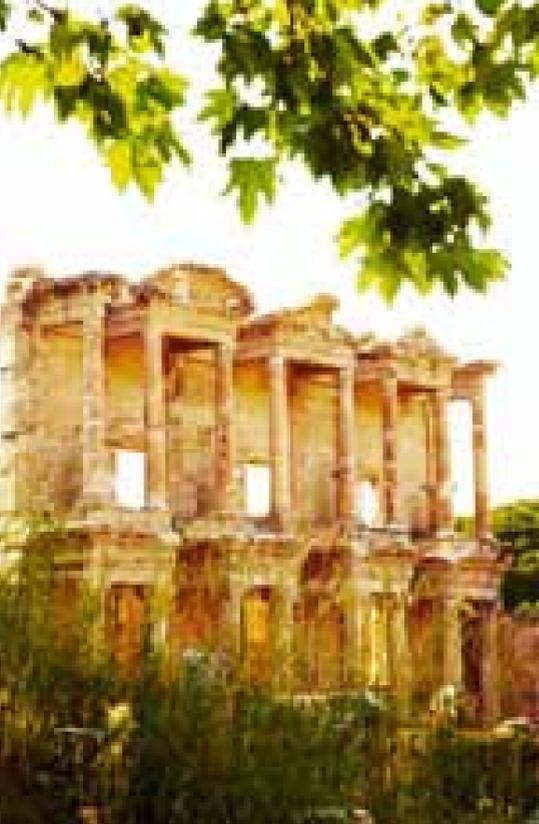
WHERE TO STAY

TAKSIYARHIS PENSION

Sharing a cobble lane with the Greek Orthodox church of the same name, picturesque Taksiyarhis offers the chance to wake up in the quiet old town. Bedrooms are spacious and vine-covered terraces are perfect settings for kahvaltı (breakfast), with views across Ayvalık's terracotta roofs. (from £40; taksiyarhispension.com). ►



A stretch of the picturesque Lycian Way, between Kale and the coastal town of Kaş



4 LYCIAN WAY *Best for walking*

MILES INTO YOUR TRIP: 650



Drive five hours southeast on the D550 and E90 via Muğla and Fethiye.

Of all the ancient civilisations that rose and fell on the Anatolian plateau, the Lycians were the most enigmatic. Aside from being mentioned in Homer's *Iliad* as valiant fighters in the Trojan War, little is known about them – their language baffles scholars, and their culture and customs were unlike any other in the region. Their kingdom was the Tekke Peninsula, where cliff tombs and sarcophagi still litter the hills above the Mediterranean.

Meandering past these ruins is one of the world's most beautiful walks, a 15-mile-long path known as the Lycian Way. It leads along the coast and across the Tekke hinterland, through holiday towns and tiny hill villages, following ancient trails from goat tracks to Roman roads. Above the harbour town of Kalkan, the trail climbs to a yayla (pasture). A line of mountains perfectly encloses the plateau, seemingly protecting the fields ▶

3 EPHESUS *Best for classical ruins*

MILES INTO YOUR TRIP: 400



Drive three hours south on the E87 motorway, past Izmir and through the rolling hills.

At the end of a hot Aegean day, the sun sets on the marble remains of a once-great city. At its peak two millennia ago, Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia and the empire's largest metropolis after Rome. Toga-clad hordes once streamed along these thoroughfares, but today the roads are abandoned, with wildflowers popping up between the flagstones and sprawling headless statues.

Among these remnants are some of the most remarkable Roman structures in the world. There are the remains of temples, marketplaces, bath houses and even public bathrooms (with each toilet set companionably side-by-side for ease of chatting). And there's the towering, columned façade of the Library of Celsus – once home to 12,000 papyrus scrolls – and the vast Great Theatre.

Can Arman, an expert in classics from the Ephesus Museum in nearby Selçuk,

walks along the top level of the Great Theatre's terraced seats, where 25,000 Ephesians would gather to witness gladiatorial battles and ceremonial sacrifices. He points out that this amphitheatre reveals more than just the city's enthusiasm for spectacle. 'A classical city's population was typically about 10 times the capacity of its theatre,' he says, 'so from this we can work out that the population was at least 250,000. Counting slaves and people living outside the city walls, that's up to a million.'

In the sixth century, the city suffered a terminal blow when its harbour became too silted up by the Cayster River and Ephesus lost access to its economic lifeblood, the Aegean. Today, the ancient port town is several miles inland.

Despite its radical changes over time, to walk these ancient streets is to get a genuine glimpse of what it was to live here in Roman times. One of the streets is even home to what is believed to be the world's oldest advertisement – an etched paving stone providing coded directions to the nearest brothel.

FURTHER INFORMATION

● Ephesus is open daily from 8am (£8 admission, plus £6 for the Terraced Houses). The Ephesus Museum is in Selçuk (£2; muze.gov.tr/ephesus).

WHERE TO EAT

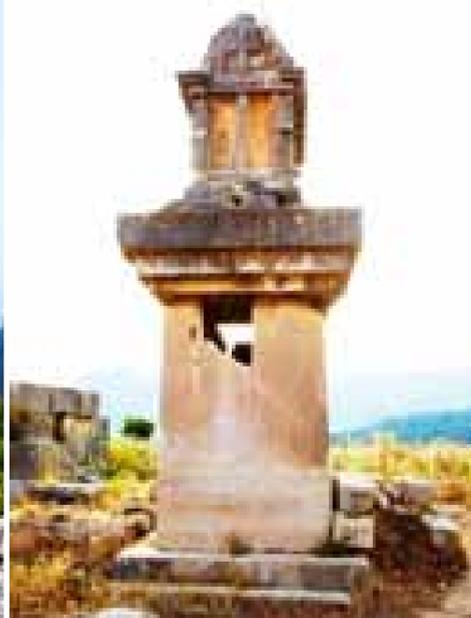
● Facing the Roman Aqueduct, Sisçi Yasarın is a Selçuk institution, selling the finest köfte (meatballs) around (mains from £4; Atatürk Caddesi).

ABOVE, FROM LEFT The façade of the Library of Celsus; niches on the façade hold statues representing the virtues, such as this one of Sophia (wisdom); Curetes Way



WHERE TO STAY NIŞANYAN HOUSE

Having spent 11 years writing guides to Turkey's small hotels, Sevan Nişanyan put his knowledge into practice at this hilltop complex. Overlooking the cascade of fairy-tale Ottoman houses in the town of Şirince, the stone buildings feature marble bathrooms, brightly coloured Iznik tiles, raised sleeping salons and writing bureaus (from £45; nisanyan.com).



A gület passes over the sunken remains of Simena, a city mostly overcome by water in the second Century AD



and the shepherd dozing under a tree with his flock. A mile further on, Bezirgan is a village with stone Ottoman farmhouses overlooking tidy streets and fruit trees. The trail leads past a line of old-timers on a bench and climbs out of the yayla into wilder countryside, following mule tracks along rocky, mottled ridges.

The Lycian Way offers a precious opportunity to genuinely encounter the landscape and people of this region. Small pleasures dot the rural byways: drinking from wells, breaking for çay (tea) and a chat with an old man in a şapka (flat cap) leaning on his stick in the shade of a wooden hut. Often, the only company for hours on end are goats, which scatter into bushes and onto rocks as you pass.

Eventually the path reaches the edge of the plateau and drops dramatically towards the coastal town of Kaş. Far below, terracotta roofs spill down the hillside towards a multicoloured line of masts in the marina, and an anchor-shaped peninsula arcs through the blue. Taking a rest on a rock, Mick Douglas is at the end of a 12-day odyssey along the trail. After camping most nights, the Australian artist says walking the path has brought him a much deeper understanding of this region and its people. 'I just met a guy tending his cows – they were all over the path. We exchanged bits of English and bits of Turkish, established that we both had a sense of humour, and decided to eat lunch together. That's what it's been like throughout the journey. I've loved the whole spirit of it.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

● The Lycian Way runs between Ovacık, three miles north of Ölüdeniz, and Antalya (trekkinginturkey.com). *The Lycian Way* (£15.99; Upcountry), by trail founder Kate Clow, describes the route.

WHERE TO EAT

● Overlooking the beach, Sea Valley Restaurant is popular for a bite. In the kitchen, village ladies roll pastries and bake bread. Seafood dishes and pide (pizza) are also on offer (mains from £5; Kabak).

ABOVE, FROM LEFT Mick Douglas hiking the Lycian Way, paint on rocks indicating the route; a Lycian relic in Xanthos



**WHERE TO STAY
TURAN HILL LOUNGE**

At the bottom of a forested valley, this beatific retreat with yoga platforms is perfect for meditation – even if that just means popping olives and taking in the sea views. The Lycian Way passes through, and jeeps descend the steep track from the main road. The chalets have astrological names and varying degrees of luxury; best are the Special Boutique rooms, with glass doors opening onto balconies. The nearby beach, the terrace bar and restaurant and paths to waterfalls invariably convince guests to extend their stay (from £39; turanhilllounge.com).

5 KEKOVA
Best for a boat trip

MILES INTO YOUR TRIP: 680



Drive 90 minutes southeast to Üçağız via Kaş.

It's sunrise on a still Mediterranean bay, and wooden gülets (traditional Turkish sailing boats) ease silently away from the cove like sheepish morning-after partygoers. From the water, the ramshackle village of Kaleköy appears to cascade downhill from a ruined fortress on the top, all the way to the shore, where Lycian tombs poke up out of the shallows – towering

sarcophagi topped with domed, ridged lids reminiscent of Norman helmets.

While the beautiful scenery is encouragement enough to take a boat trip, the real draw is beneath the waves. A short trip brings the boats to a spot just off the island of Kekova, where lies the Sunken City – formerly Simena, half of which was consigned to a watery grave by earthquakes in the second century AD. For a 500-metre stretch, staircases and the stumpy remains of walls disappear into the sea. Black fish dart over the submerged, ancient district, its foundations picked out pale green by the morning sun.

Boats are not allowed to stop above the ruins, but they do pause at Simena's shipyard, where flagstones lead into the water, and passengers wade to the beach.

While he waits, a chain-smoking captain, Salih Yilmaz, busies himself

with a plastic bottle and a piece of string, fishing for calamari to serve in his restaurant. He is from Kaleköy and, like many of his fellow villagers, he runs these boat trips to supplement his income. 'Before tourists started coming 30 years ago, it was a hard life. Now it's a bit easier,' he says. He peers down into the blue. 'We knew the ruins were there when I was growing up, but they didn't seem very special to us. Now we know how important they are.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

● Boat trips to Kekova, which normally include lunch, depart from Üçağız (£19) and Kaş (£22; xanthostravel.com).

WHERE TO EAT

● Dine in the courtyard at Bahçe Balik, where dishes include grilled octopus and calamari with chestnut mayonnaise (mains £10; Dogruyol Sokak, Kaş).



**WHERE TO STAY
MEHTAP PENSION**

Reached only by a 10-minute boat ride or a 45-minute walk, Kaleköy has 50 houses and three pensions. It's a wonderfully preserved spot, thanks to its isolated position on a peninsula. Mehtap's bougainvillea-covered terraces are perfect for a long breakfast or seafood dinner. The air-conditioned rooms with en-suite bathrooms occupy two stone cottages (from £60; mehtappansiyon.com). ▶

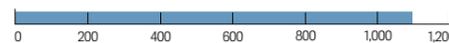


LEFT Frescoes of scenes from the New Testament on the ceiling of Karanlık Kilise (Dark Church) in the Göreme Open-Air Museum. OPPOSITE Ilhan Ekrem rides through the valleys of Cappadocia on a horse he has trained from the wild

6 CAPPADOCIA

Best for horse riding

MILES INTO YOUR TRIP: 1,090



Drive northeast to Antalya (3½ hours), then fly to Kayseri (1¼ hours) and drive a hire car or pick up a transfer west to central Cappadocia (two hours).

A man rides on horseback through a rocky valley, his black hair spilling out of a cowboy hat, in a scene that could almost be from the old American West. This sure-footed steed, however, is an Anatolian horse, and the towering rock formations are unmistakably Cappadocian. Otherworldly columns of rock with mushroom-like overhangs loom above the track against a backdrop of labyrinthine valleys and curvy cliff faces. They were formed by volcanic ash being compressed and eroded into fantastic shapes and chiselled into troglodyte dwellings. Early Christians carved cave monasteries, churches and multilevel hideouts, many of which can be seen in the village of Göreme at the Göreme Open-Air Museum.

The rider is Ilhan Ekrem, a local trainer and 'horse whisperer', who takes visitors on the horse path that winds up steep inclines, along narrow ledges, through slalom-like fissures and across green canyons. Riding on horseback is a time-honoured way to navigate the valleys, so Ilhan is following in the footsteps of cave-dwellers of 2,000 years ago. When Turkey was part of the Persian Empire

(547-333 BC), Cappadocia was famous for its beautiful horses, and they have retained an enviable reputation. Ilhan picks his equine charges from a wild pack on the slopes of Mount Erciyes.

'Anatolian horses are better for negotiating the valleys than their Arabian counterparts,' says Ilhan, 'because it's difficult riding in the mountains, it's rocky, and local horses are accustomed to it.'

Ilhan gathers the reins tightly and with a couple of firm kicks to his horse's girth, the pair canter off, both black mane and hair swishing in the breeze.

FURTHER INFORMATION

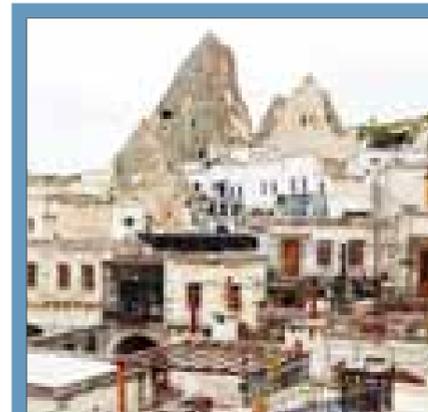
- Ilhan's company The Dalton Brothers, based at the stables behind Anatolian Balloons in Göreme, offers rides lasting from one hour (£15) to full-day treks.

WHERE TO EAT

- Ziggy's brings Istanbul sophistication and unusual meze to rural Cappadocia, with a mellow atmosphere to savour alongside the cocktails (meze menu from £13; ziggycafe.com).



James Bainbridge is the coordinating author of Lonely Planet's *Turkey* guide. His work has also been published in *The Times* and the *Guardian*.



WHERE TO STAY

SULTAN CAVE SUITES

Sultan Cave Suites gives a stylish impression of the troglodyte lifestyle. The stone-cut, honey-coloured rooms were once stables, wineries and storerooms. Wavy walls and volcanic colour-banding mix with chiselled features such as arches and ceiling roses (from £70; sultancavesuites.com).

