

BEYOND THE BLACK SEA

3 JUNE 2025 - 28 JUNE 2025

Tour Cost (\$AUD):\$23,850
Single Supplement (\$AUD):\$4,150

Tour Duration:26 days



OVERVIEW

Beyond the Black Sea is a wonderful tour to a corner of Europe that is little-visited but no less fascinating or beautiful than other parts of the continent. Our 26-day itinerary takes us to Romania and Bulgaria, then skirting the Black Sea across northern Turkey, and on to Georgia.

The journey begins in Romania's capital Bucharest, a city of wide tree-lined boulevards and glorious Belle Epoque buildings, before moving north to Brasov, deep in the Transylvanian Alps. And it is here that we visit Dracula's Castle, one of the most famous landmarks in Transylvania. Next stop is the delightful medieval citadel of Sighisoara, where Vlad Dracul – the inspiration for Bram Stoker's Dracula – lived in the 15th century. Everything in this pocket of Romania is interwoven with truth and legend and the perpetuation of mystery. Moving on to Bulgaria we discover some of the most remarkable fairy tale towns in the world – without the tourist hordes found in more mainstream European cities. The exotic Turkish city of Istanbul is our next stop, and we have three nights here to fully appreciate its historic treasures, including the imposing Blue Mosque and Topkapi Palace. Our journey then skirts the Black Sea across Northern Turkey with visits to Samsun and Trabzon, which was once an important stop on the Silk Road. Finally we cross the border into Georgia, and after a two-night stay at the amazing former Soviet spa town of Tskaltubo, we head to the capital Tbilisi, a remarkable city that is straight from the pages of a Gothic fairytale. This is a journey that is a heady mix of contemporary and ancient history, rustic medieval settlements, myths and legends, set against the backdrop of the Black Sea. This is undiscovered Europe with a capital U!

Tour Fitness Level: Moderate

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TOUR MAP



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ITINERARY

03/06/2025 Australia – Doha

Check-in at your chosen Australian airport for your flight to Doha.

04/06/2025 Doha – Bucharest (D)
Depart Doha Qatar Airways QR 221, 09.10
Arrive Bucharest 14.00

On arrival in Bucharest we transfer to our hotel

Athena Palace Hotel

Bucharest

05/06/2025 Bucharest (BLD)

Bucharest, Romania's largest city and capital, is today a bustling metropolis, known for its glorious Belle Époque buildings and a reputation for the high life. We visit the most important sights of the capital including the Triumph Arch and the gigantic Palace of the Parliament. We also visit Revolution Square, which gained worldwide notoriety when TV stations around the globe broadcast Nicolae Ceausescu's final moments in power on December 21, 1989. It was here, at the balcony of the former Communist Party headquarters, that Ceausescu stared in disbelief as the people who had gathered in the square below turned on him. In the afternoon we walk through the fascinating Old District of the city.

06/06/2025 Bucharest – Peles – Brasov (BLD)

After breakfast this morning we board our coach for the journey north to Brasov visiting the magnificent Peles Castle en route. With its fairytale turrets and pointed towers nestling in the Carpathians, Peles is considered by many to be one of the most beautiful castles in Europe and has played host to many famous guests, including Kaiser Franz Joseph of Austria-Hungary, Richard Nixon and Yasser Arafat. After lunch we continue on to Brasov.

Hotel Bella Muzica

Brasov

07/06/2025 Brasov – Bran – Brasov (BLD)

Just 30 km from Brasov lies the small village of Bran, which is home to perhaps the most talked-about structure in the world, Bran Castle. Much older than Peles, this spectacular fortress was made famous by Bram Stoker's gothic novel, Dracula. The fortification, popularly known as 'Dracula's Castle', was built on top of a steep rock in the Carpathian Mountains in 1377. Today we delve into myths and legends as we explore this iconic castle.

08/06/2025 Brasov – Sighisoara (BLD)

After breakfast we take a cable car ride to Mount Tampa which has spectacular views overlooking Brasov. We then start our drive to Sighisoara, turning off the main road to visit the wonderfully restored medieval village of Viscri. Totally unspoilt, with horses and carts trudging its streets, this is Romania as it was 200 years ago. We have lunch in Viscri as we soak up the atmosphere of years gone by. We then continue to the oldest-inhabited citadel in Europe, Sighisoara, the best preserved of all the medieval towns in Romania. This is the birthplace of Vlad the Impaler (Dracula) and we visit the house where he was born in 1431. We also walk across town to the famous Clock Tower Museum with its torture and weapons rooms.

Hotel Casa Wagner

Sighisoara

09/06/2025 Sighisoara – Sibiu (BLD)

Leaving Sighisoara we head to the walled town of Sibiu. Just outside the town we visit the Astra Village Museum. Here, in this 96-hectare park, we see replicas of the Romanian traditional villages, with mills, churches and houses as they used to be in

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different parts of the country. The museum, which is set around a beautiful lake, is an invaluable piece of Romanian culture and identity.

Hotel Forum Continental

Sibiu

10/06/2025 Sibiu (BLD)

Sibiu attracts visitors due to its beautiful surrounding landscapes and a rich medieval and Baroque heritage. It was designated a European Capital of Culture for the year 2007. Formerly the centre of the Transylvanian Saxons, the old city of Sibiu is ranked as Europe's 8th most idyllic place to live. Today we walk around some of the beautiful landmarks of the town including the 13th-century Stairway Tower, and across Liar's Bridge to Haller Bastion and the Town Hall. We also visit the Cathedral where the son of Vlad the Impaler was assassinated. Sibiu is a true Eastern European gem that has yet to be discovered by the tourist hordes.

11/06/2025 Sibiu – Bucharest (BLD)

This morning we start our drive on the magnificent Transfagarasan road, stopping at the beautiful glacial lake of Balea. Our journey crosses the mighty Fagaras Mountains, passing Moldoveanu peak (2544m). We then drive along the Vidraru Dam and lake before entering the longest tunnel in Romania, which is nearly a kilometre in length. The Transfagarasan, which is open only from June to October, is a breathtaking engineering feat that literally takes the road straight over and into the mountains. Jeremy Clarkson from 'Top Gear' once called it 'the greatest road in the world'. The road was constructed between 1970 and 1974 during the rule of Ceausescu, to provide quick military access across the mountains in the event of a Soviet invasion.

Athena Palace Hotel

Bucharest

12/06/2025 Bucharest – Veliko Tarnovo (Bulgaria) (BLD)

Heading south towards the border of Romania and Bulgaria, we cross the Danube by the impressive Friendship Bridge that divides the two countries. By lunchtime we reach the former capital of the Bulgarian Empire, Veliko Tarnovo, one of the most ancient towns in Bulgaria. Strolling through the Samovodska marketplace we see pastry cooks, master goldsmiths, potters and carvers pursuing their crafts as they have in centuries past. In the afternoon we visit the nearby village of Arbanassi, a mass of stone houses and red tile roofs.

Yantra Grand Hotel

Veliko Tarnovo

13/06/2025 Veliko Tarnovo – Etara – Plovdiv (BLD)

Soon after leaving Veliko Tarnovo we arrive at Etara village, an open-air museum, where master-craftsmen fashion beautiful gold, silver, copper, leather and wooden articles right before our eyes. The aroma of freshly baked bread drifts across from an old bakery and a tiny coffee shop serves sweet Turkish coffee cooked in a copper pot. This open-air exhibition contains nearly 50 shops and workshops and the village has been designed in a style typical of the Bulgarian National Revival period (18th and 19th centuries). Leaving Etara, we climb through the mountains and into the magnificent Valley of the Roses, arriving in Plovdiv by late afternoon.

Tromontium Princess Hotel

14/06/2025 Plovdiv (BLD)

One of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, Old Plovdiv is quite simply, a living museum. It is an architectural phenomenon and many of the houses of prominent Bulgarians of former times have been turned into museums that stand beside

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the houses of active residents of the old quarter. A contemporary of Troy, Plovdiv today is a modern city with an ancient spirit and charm emanating from its illustrious past. We explore the fascinating sights of the Old Town, including the ancient Roman amphitheatre which dates back to the 2nd century AD.

15/06/2025 Plovdiv – Istanbul (BLD)

This morning we cross the Bulgarian/Turkish border to arrive in Istanbul at lunch time. Bridging the continents of Europe and Asia, the amazing city of Istanbul rises above the bustling waterways of the Bosphorus, the Sea of Marmara and the Golden Horn and retains the glories of three great empires, Byzantine, Roman and Ottoman. This afternoon we explore the colourful Grand Bazaar, the biggest oriental covered market in the world with more than 4,000 shops

Kalyon Hotel

Istanbul

16/06/2025 Istanbul (BLD)

Today we explore the historic heart of the old city including the Hippodrome, built during the Byzantine era for public activities and chariot races. Nearby is the imposing Blue Mosque, with its exquisitely decorated interior and hand-painted tiles. We also visit one of the most remarkable buildings ever constructed, the Basilica of Hagia Sophia, originally used for Christian worship, later converted to a mosque, and now a museum. After lunch we explore the wonders of Topkapi Palace, former residence of the Sultans and political centre of the Ottoman Empire.

17/06/2025 Istanbul (BLD)

After breakfast we board a boat for a fantastic trip along the Bosphorus to Yoros Castle. Here we go ashore at the fishing village of Anadolu Kavagi on the

mouth of the Black Sea. A short walk takes us to the Anatolian Fortress where there are sweeping vistas of the Bosphorus.

18/06/2025 Istanbul – Safranbolu (BLD)

This morning we drive east to the seldom visited Ottoman gem of Safranbolu in the Black Sea region. As its name suggests the town is derived from the precious purple saffron flower that is native to this evergreen province. Harvesting of saffron commences in October and a kilo of these flowers can cost up to USD \$9,500.

Gulevi Hotel

Safranbolu

19/06/2025 Safranbolu (BLD)

Safranbolu was a thriving caravanserai in the 17th century as travelling traders and merchants passed through on their journeys from east to west along this busy trade route. Little has changed since that time and today the town boasts the best preserved Ottoman architecture in the world. As we wander through the labyrinthine cobbled alleyways, lined with timber-framed mansion of the UNESCO Old Town, we can feel the incredible ambiance of this ancient trading city. The many bazaars are packed with leather, lacework, textiles, wooden craftwork and lokum (Turkish Delight made from saffron). The residents of Safranbolu are unspoilt by tourism and their unreserved hospitality is typical of Turkey's remote interior.

20/06/2025 Safranbolu – Samsun (BLD)

Today we head north to the Black Sea coast where we turn east to skirt the southern shores to the port city of Samsun. With one million inhabitants, Samsun is the capital of the middle Black Sea region, This is where the fire of Turkish independence was ignited after WWI and the city of Ataturk is therefore where the very first roots of Turkey lie, with several

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museums and statues regaling this story. Among the most well-known figures of the city are the Amazons, the women warriors of ancient times who lived in a women-only state.

Sheraton Grand

Samsun

21/06/2025 Samsun – Trabzon (BLD)

Commonly known as the city of Sultans, Trabzon is located on the Silk Road and is the gateway into Iran and the Caucasus. Founded in the 8th century by Greek merchants, this is the busiest port on the Black Sea. This afternoon we visit the astonishing Sumela Monastery that was carved into the mountains in the 4th century and the atmospheric Old Town,

Hilton Hotel

Trabzon

22/06/2025 Trabzon – Batumi – Tskaltubo (BLD)

This morning we head towards the Turkish/Georgian border and soon after crossing we reach Georgia's second largest city, Batumi. Located in a lovely bay on the Black Sea coast, this laid back city seamlessly blends ancient monuments and architecture of the third millennium with all the trappings of a sophisticated promenade city. After a lunch stop here we continue to Tskaltubo, stopping en route at the remarkable Dendrological Park at Shekvetili. On arrival into Tskaltubo we transfer to our hotel.

Tskaltubo Plaza

Tskaltubo

23/06/2025 Tskaltubo (BLD)

The fascinating town of Tskaltubo was once an elegant Soviet destination that attracted the elites of the Communist Party, including Joseph Stalin

himself, who visited for rest and relaxation amongst its natural springs. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 the town fell off the map, and today Tskaltubo is an array of crumbling hotels, bath houses, and sanitoriums—ornamental health resorts designed for both rest and medical treatments. But 30 years after the resort town's closure, photographs of these abandoned buildings are attracting new travellers, to explore this extraordinary 'time capsule'.

24/06/2025 Tskaltubo – Tbilisi (BLD)

Leaving Tskaltubo we head east to Tbilisi. En route we visit the town of Gori, which is synonymous with Stalin as this is where he was born and went to school. Visiting this town is like stepping into a giant history book which brings Stalin back to life. We visit the museum of Stalin and the house where he spent the first four years of his life. A short distance from Gori lies the amazing cave city of Uplistsikhe. Inhabited since the 6th century BC, Uplistsikhe was home to some 20,000 people, and has an area of 40,000 square metres, with wonderful views of the Mtkvari Valley. After our visit here we continue our journey to the Georgian capital, Tbilisi.

Tbilisi Marriott

Tbilisi

25/06/2025 Tbilisi (BLD)

Today we take a cable car from Rike Park – opposite the Old Town – to Narikala Fortress where the statue of Mother Georgia looks down over the city below. The views from here are superb, with striking examples of modern architecture sitting side by side with centuries old buildings. Later we visit the Godirdi Baths, which for hundreds of years were one of Tbilisi's main attractions. We also visit the National Museum and take a walking tour of the delightful Old Town. A labyrinth of winding streets and twisting alleys, Tbilisi Old Town is a fusion of Asian and European influences, with doorways leading to

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hidden courtyards and buildings adorned with picturesque sagging balconies and carved pillars.

26/06/2025 Tbilisi - Kakheti - Tbilisi (BLD)

After breakfast we board our coach and head to the Kakheti wine-growing district. Our first stop is the town of Telavi and the palace of Tsinandali. This was the home of Tsar Alexander the 3rd and is surrounded by a beautiful park. We also do a little wine-tasting in this famed wine growing country, before returning to Tbilisi.

27/06/2025 Tbilisi - Doha (BL)

This morning is at leisure to continue exploring Tbilisi. After lunch we transfer to the airport for our flight to Australia via Doha.

Depart Tbilisi Qatar Airways QR 254, 21.40

Arrive Doha 23.45

On arrival in Doha connect with your flight back to Australia.

28/06/2025 Doha - Australia

We arrive back in Australia today.