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Asia travel: How to make the most of 48 hours in Cappadocia, Turkey



By Alisha McDarris

17 Sep, 2022 11:30 PM 7 mins to read

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A sunrise hot air balloon ride offers a bird's eye view over the valleys of Cappadocia. Photo / Getty Images

From ancient cave churches to morning hot air balloon rides, Cappadocia is stunning from every angle, writes Alisha McDarris

As the sun sets in the west, the hills to the east turn from green-gold to red-brown in the last simmering rays of light. The lanterns tucked into alcoves across the carved-out hillsides flicker on. The city below is two-tone in the warm blue of early twilight: all red-tiled roofs and sandstone buildings, looking as if the town of Urgup has sprouted from the earth beneath it. Indeed, it almost has; hotels and storefronts are carved into hillsides, their embellished facades blending perfectly with the colour of the stone that surrounds them.

It is a destination one with the landscape, a volcanic topography hewn by thousands of years of erosion, a city built alongside dwellings carved into the faces of towering cliffs, hundreds of years old, striking hoodoos pointing high into the expansive blue sky above, sweeping valleys twisting into the earth below.

But Turkey's Cappadocia region offers more than just a stunning landscape: history, an adventurous spirit and culture abound here, too.

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Day 1

Start your day with a cup of Turkish coffee, which is on the Unesco World Heritage Intangibles list for its rich and storied history and prominent place in Turkish culture. Fortunately, you can enjoy a cup at just about any cafe or restaurant in the region.

The tiny cups of strong brew are cooked slowly in a special pot known as a cezve, usually over a stove, but occasionally in a pan of heated sand to delight tourists. A frothy foam on top signifies you've been served a quality cup. But don't knock the demitasse back too quickly; super-fine ground coffee settles at the bottom of the cup and, while it may not be pleasing to the palate, what's left at the bottom is often studied in order to divine your fortune.



Breakfast with a view at one of the city's rooftop cafes. Photo / Getty Images

After you're properly caffeinated, head to the Goreme Open Air Museum, a vast mosaic complex carved into the sandstone hillsides that dates back as far as the fourth century. Dozens of chapels and refectories are carved into the high, vertical cliff faces. Some, called salsos, functioned as monasteries or burial caves. Others were homes, allowing for a rich communal life.

In many of the cave churches, post-iconoclastic Byzantine art and frescoes, many expertly preserved, adorn the walls in sharp relief. Saints and holy figures look down upon visitors from every angle as they meander through the hilly grounds, exploring the chapels and dwellings.



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Byzantine art peers down on visitors inside one of Cappadocia's many cave churches. Photo / Getty Images

After you wander the grounds, watch the mesmerising cultural experience that is the whirling dervishes in meditative silence as men in flowing white spin and spin from left to right, one hand pointed to the heavens, one to the earth, in a spiritual and reverential ritual unique to the Mevlevi belief within Sufi Islam. The sacred ritual takes place at a caravanserai, one of many pit stops on the silk road that offered weary travellers a place to rest in safety.

As the sun sets beyond the plateaus, enjoy dinner on the balcony and settle into your room at Yunak Evleri Hotel in Urgup, one of the region's famous cave hotels, which offers the opportunity to sleep in rooms carved directly into the sand-coloured cliffs.



Sand-coloured houses in Urgup, Cappadocia. Photo / Getty Images

With its winding, hidden courtyards, high vantage points, dual pools and restaurant balcony that looks out over all of Urgup, no matter where you repose, you'll be treated to stunning views and structures stacked and carved across the valley, impressive feats of engineering.

Day 2

Plan for an early morning for one experience that shouldn't be missed in Cappadocia: a hot air balloon ride. But don't worry, the pre-dawn wake-up call is more than worth it for the magical views of the valley below as the sun slowly creeps over the mountains in the east, cutting through the blue haze of morning to bathe everything in warm, golden light.

As you soar over the Unesco World Heritage sites of Cappadocia some 1500m in the air, enjoy a bird's eye view of the jagged and flowing landscape below, a landscape of hoodoos and soft curves carved out by hundreds of thousands of years of erosion. Book a ride in advance at any of the dozens of tour operators in the area to secure your spot.

After your balloon ride (or in lieu of it if you're not keen on heights and you'd rather watch the balloons from afar), request a special private breakfast in advance at Wish Cappadocia's tiny house and lavender field, where you'll recline at rustic tables as delicious homemade jams, spreads, breads and more are delivered from the tiny house just up the hill. Among rows of fragrant plants, doves cooing, the rich, almost palpable scent of lavender, the sight of the sun rising and warming the hoodoos and valley floor that stretches for miles before you, this may just be the most magical part of your visit to Cappadocia.

After another cup of Turkish coffee, head to the pottery studio of Chez Galip to watch a master at work. Indeed, if there's one thing Cappadocia is known for other than its magnificent, wind-sculpted valleys and hoodoos, it's pottery; the rich red clay that comprises the dry soil is ideal for crafting sturdy, stunning stoneware.

While there are many potters scattered throughout the region, Chez Galip may be the most renowned, within Turkey and beyond. A fifth-generation potter, his work and that of his many students can be found in his spacious studio in Avanos.





The intricate designs of traditional Turkish ceramics. Photo / Getty Images

There, not only do thousands of bowls, vases, mugs and wall decor line countless shelves, (including in a back room reserved just for the master's work filled with unique phosphorescent works that glow in the dark) but you can also watch Galip on the wheel as he transforms a lump of clay into a striking vessel in mere seconds.

With your new set of intricately painted dishes or coffee cups purchased and packed, take a steep, winding trail to the bottom of Rose Valley for a pleasant hike and an up-close look at the history that remains there. Homes carved into the soft sandstone walls, many of which are scores of feet up the cliff faces, are as old as 5000 years.

This 3300sq km volcanic area features sandstone structures—fairy houses, hoodoos and sanctuaries carved from rock—that tower hundreds of feet above the valley floor, each chiselled into sweeping, soft shapes by centuries of wind and rain.

Along the way, creeks flow, offering a home for lush, riparian environments to bloom green, yellow and purple with grasses and wildflowers. And peppered here and there are rustic, make-shift cafes where hikers can stop for a tea or cold beverage. Just make sure to bring plenty of water with you in case they aren't open.



Ancient rock formations and blush pink hues in the Rose Valley. Photo / Getty Images

Finally, refuel with fine cuisine from the terrace of Elai Restaurant in Uchisar. From fresh seafood to perfectly plated appetizers to delectable desserts, the chefs at Elai serve up a mouthwatering and delightful experience, which is only improved by the view from the restaurant terrace: the minarets of a nearby mosque stand proudly pointing to the sky and from them emanate a soothing, sombre voice calling out across the city in Arabic, reverberating in the stone buildings and the cliffs beyond, daily calls to prayer. It's the perfect place to witness the day sighing into twilight, resigning peacefully into evening.

Top tip: Don't want to venture out on your own? Exodus Travels offers a new Premium Tour of Cappadocia perfect for adventurous travellers.



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