

Across Turkey by train: riding the Mesopotamia Express

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Choose the correct answers to the questions.

- Where was the first passenger railway in the world?
a. the USA b. the UK
- Where is the highest railway in the world?
a. China b. Bolivia
- Where is the longest train route in the world?
a. Canada b. Russia
- Where is the fastest high-speed train in the world?
a. Germany b. China
- Which country has the world's largest rail network?
a. India b. the USA
- Where is the world's largest railway station?
a. the USA b. France

2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

berth bunting crooked derelict hotspot mercifully
perk pressed primarily rendition seemingly shrill trundle

- _____ is a line of small flags on a string, used for decorating buildings and streets for special occasions.
- A _____ sound is very loud, high and unpleasant.
- A _____ is a bed on a train or ship.
- A _____ is a place that is fashionable, popular and lively.
- A _____ is a benefit or advantage you get from a situation.
- A _____ is a particular way of performing a song, poem, piece of music etc.
- If a building is _____, it is empty, not used, and in bad condition.

Across Turkey by train: riding the Mesopotamia Express

Level 3: Advanced

8. A _____ tower on a building is not straight.
9. _____ has the same meaning as *apparently*.
10. _____ has the same meaning as *thankfully*.
11. _____ has the same meaning as *mainly*.
12. If you are _____ for time, you are in a difficult situation because you do not have enough of it.
13. If vehicles _____, they move very slowly.

b. Use some of the key words to complete these sentences.

1. The ship finally found a _____ at the harbour after waiting for hours.
2. The _____ sound of the alarm clock made him jump out of bed.
3. The old man's cane is _____ after having used it for many years.
4. One _____ of working at this company is the free coffee and snacks.
5. The _____ building was covered in graffiti and overgrown with weeds.
6. The task was _____ impossible, but they managed to complete it on time.
7. The café became a popular _____ for young artists and musicians.
8. The storm _____ ended before causing more damage.

Across Turkey by train: riding the Mesopotamia Express

Level 3: Advanced

With lengthy stops for side trips, this long-distance journey is a joyful, social experience accompanied by great food and music

Jamie Fullerton

3 July, 2024

- 1 It's 11.30 am in Diyarbakır's railway station. Women are posing for pictures underneath clocks bearing the logo of TCDD, Turkey's state rail network. Red bunting hangs from the platform ceiling. Shriill whistles cut through piped music as the Mesopotamia Express pulls up.
- 2 Running 653 miles (1,051km) between Turkey's capital, Ankara, and Diyarbakır, the Kurdish-majority city not far from the Syrian and Iraqi borders, the Mesopotamia Express was launched in April 2024, running once a month in each direction for three months. I'm taking its final service of 2024, with the TCDD saying it should return in 2025.
- 3 Making long stops at a few cities and only offering private two-berth cabins, the Mesopotamia Express is a more comfortable, sightseeing-friendly version of the existing Güney Kurtalan Express, which travels the same route but makes 52 short stops between Ankara and Diyarbakır. I paid 8,000 lira (£194) for my Mesopotamia Express cabin; a seat on the Güney Kurtalan Express costs £8.50.
- 4 This two-tier model was also rolled out in April for the Van Gölü Express between Ankara and Tatvan, a city by Lake Van, Turkey's largest lake. The "touristic" service is also reportedly part of the Turkish authorities' drive to get more tourists thinking beyond its hotspots, such as Istanbul and Antalya.
- 5 The Doğu Express, running between Ankara and Kars, near the Armenian and Georgian borders, was responsible for this Turkish night train perception shift from functional towards fun. After vloggers showcased the Doğu Express's mountainously beautiful route, tourists began booking tickets alongside rurally based locals on the train, before the "official" touristic version was launched in 2019.
- 6 To see if one of these new services is worth the spend, I booked the Mesopotamia Express, beginning in Diyarbakır. The air-con in my train cabin is a welcome perk of the premium ticket price. I also get my own sink, door key, a fridge that doesn't work, plus juice and chocolate to put in it. I go to the dining carriage. Here I meet Hayriye and Seher, two women from Ankara with a violin and guitar. At midday, as the train departs, they tune up while train staff place doner meat plates around us. The passengers show their appreciation for a rendition of a classical Turkish song.
- 7 At 4 pm, we pull into the tiny Yolçatı station for the first of two long stops. A coach drives us through the nearby city of Elâzığ and up winding roads to a dusty peak. This is the ancient town of Harput. A man in a red baseball cap, some kind of guide I assume, leads us past the semi-derelict Harput Castle and into Harput Great Mosque. This building, violinist Hayriye explains, was built around 1157 and is famed for its crooked stone tower.
- 8 A fellow passenger invites me to eat adana kebab in a nearby restaurant. A train crew member, in his wine-red waistcoat and TCDD pin badge, starts calling me "Tolstoy" after hearing that I'm a journalist. The coach takes us back to the train, and I join in with passengers singing Turkish pop. Well, I clap and sing "la la la", seemingly being the only non-Turk on the trip.
- 9 After a mercifully snore-free night, we arrive in the city of Kayseri at 9 am. We're supposed to have three hours here but, because the train is late, we get two. This stop was promoted as a chance to visit Kayseri's Grand Mosque and Seljuk Civilisation Museum, but there isn't time. The musicians and I pick a restaurant near the station and eat a beef speciality.
- 10 So, is the Mesopotamia Express worth the expense? I loved it, primarily when enjoying the music in the dining carriage. With long stops allowing you to visit four cities over two days (on the east-bound route, it's three cities: Ankara, Malatya and Diyarbakır), it's a good option if you're pressed for time – and if the train isn't too late. Despite the train officially being a "touristic" service, I felt a sense of purpose and drive as we trundled towards the capital.

Across Turkey by train: riding the Mesopotamia Express

Level 3: Advanced

- 11 However, if you don't mind stretches in uncomfortable open-plan seating, you could take the "standard" Güney Kurtalan Express on the same route as the Mesopotamia Express, spend a few days in the same city stops, and pay much of your hotel expense with the money saved. While the Mesopotamia Express is finished for 2024, the Güney Kurtalan Express runs all year, five times a week in each direction.
- 12 Still, whether officially "touristic" or not, a bad East Turkey night train option probably doesn't exist. Now I'm eyeing up Van Gölü Express tickets to complete the set.

First published in *The Guardian*, 03/07/2024

Across Turkey by train: riding the Mesopotamia Express

Level 3: Advanced

3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. What are the main differences between the Mesopotamia Express and the Güney Kurtalan Express?
2. Why did the Turkish authorities introduce the two-tier model of train travel?
3. Which train service started the trend towards 'fun' trains?
4. Where in Turkey is the city of Kars?
5. Why did the author of the article book a ticket on the Mesopotamia Express?
6. What does the author describe as a 'welcome perk'?
7. Why did the train stop at Yolçatı?
8. Why did the train crew member start calling the author "Tolstoy"?
9. Why did they only stay for two hours in Kayseri?
10. What did the author most enjoy about the journey?

4 Key language

a. Match the phrasal verbs from the text with their definitions.

- | | |
|--------------|--|
| 1. pull up | a. prepare musical instruments before they are played |
| 2. roll out | b. take part in an activity with people who are already doing it |
| 3. tune up | c. stop |
| 4. pull into | d. arrive at a station |
| 5. join in | e. find the possibility of doing something attractive |
| 6. eye up | f. introduce a new product or service |

Across Turkey by train: riding the Mesopotamia Express

Level 3: Advanced

b. Complete the sentences using the correct form of two of the verbs above.

1. After a seven-hour journey, we finally _____ Grand Central station.
2. This product will probably be _____ early next year.
3. She decided to _____ a chair and join the conversation.
4. He couldn't help but _____ the delicious desserts in the bakery window.
5. The band needed to _____ their instruments before the concert started.
6. Everyone was encouraged to _____ in the community clean-up event.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- "The journey is often more interesting than the destination."
- "Train travel is the most ecologically friendly form of travel."
- "Train travel should either be free or very cheap."

6 In your own words

- a. Use an internet search engine to find as much information as possible about the Trans-Siberian railway.
- b. Report your findings to the class.