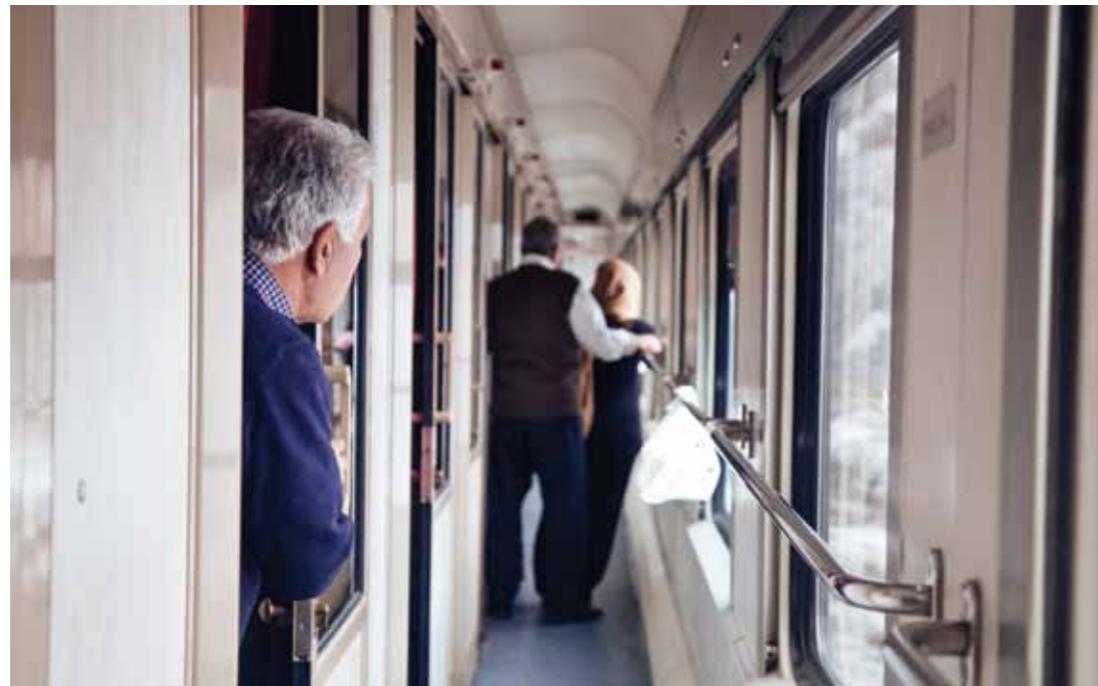




TRAVEL
Ankara - Tehran

The Trans Asia Express

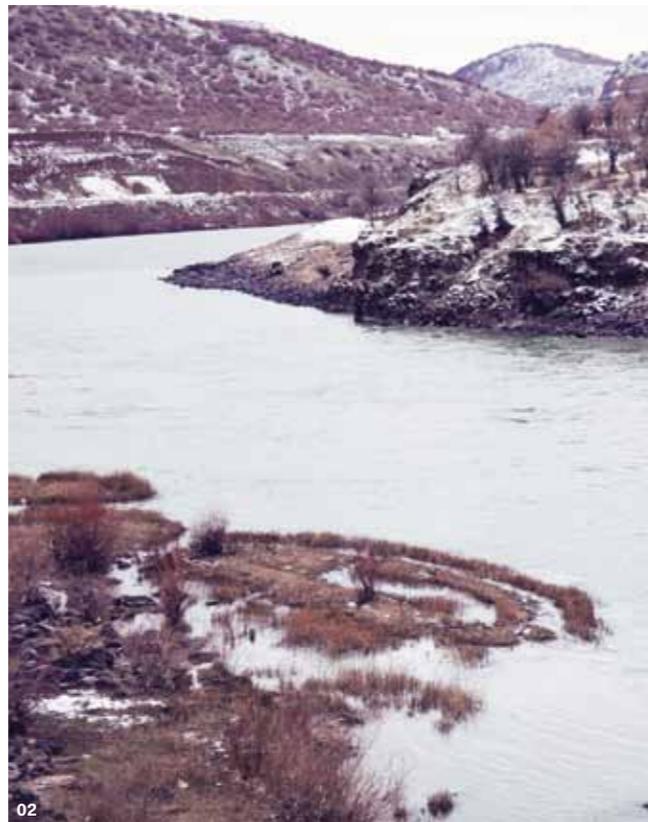
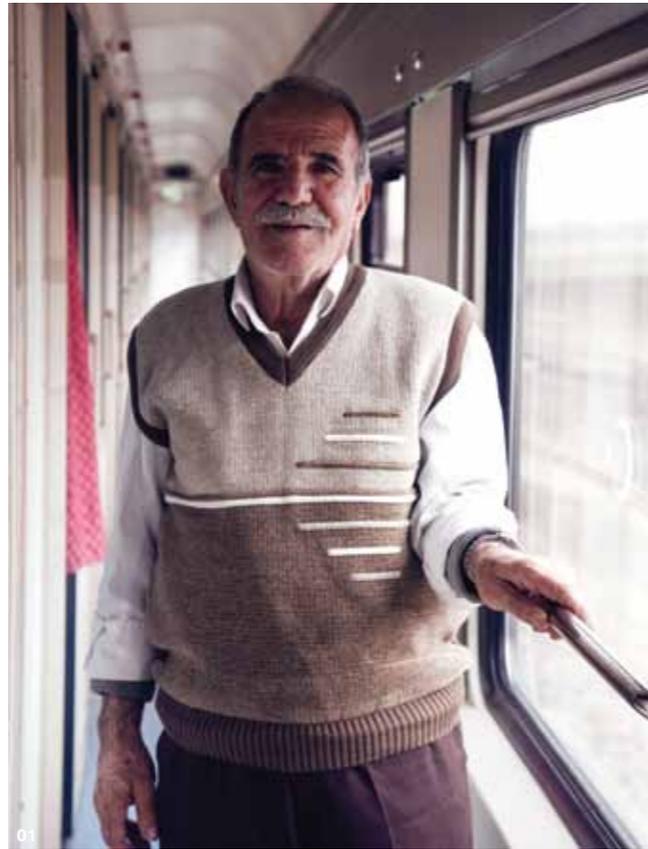


A three day train ride across Turkey and Iran is a journey of small pleasures and big views



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Waking up aboard the Trans Asia Express is disconcerting. A peek out of the train window elicits a ‘where am I?’ moment seldom witnessed in the jet age. There are no signposts on this iron road across Anatolia. No ‘Ankara 500 kilometres’, no ‘Tehran 1,800 kilometres’. There are no road markings below, and few vapour trails above.

Conversely, travel within the wider Middle East is typically an everyday tale of homogenisation. The iPhone boarding pass, the double macchiato, the Time magazine. But this 60-hour voyage between two of the region’s least visited capitals is a journey off the map, and a visual history lesson to boot.

Passengers aboard the weekly 10.35am Ankara to Tehran Trans Asia Express begin that lesson as they board. Now Turkey’s diplomatic capital, Ankara was a dusty rail town before the country’s inception in 1923. The German train pioneers, who had laid their tracks across Anatolia a decade before, decided to centre the rail junction here. The city’s art deco train station and surrounding European streets simply grew up on top.

It’s jokingly claimed that those German engineers were paid by the mile. The track twists and turns through Turkey’s heartland all the way to Tehran. Thirty minutes from Ankara the ripening sun casts a burning shadow

over an endless agricultural plain: sunflowers, orchards, tobacco, grain.

This part of Anatolia is more about ancient history than modern. The now barely populated region is where the Persians first pushed west, to be met by Alexander the Great, who pushed back east. The train gallops through the spot where occidental and oriental cultures first clashed, a discord that still rattles on to this day.

Yet the train is a toast to modernity itself. Its contemporary luxuries are a stark juxtaposition to the century-old tracks. Four-person couchette sleeping cars boast giant picture windows and crisp linen sheets. Each nine-room carriage shares bathroom facilities down the hall.

The best way to meet fellow guests is aboard the dining car at lunch. This is the train’s entertainment epicentre – and the most hopping spot in Anatolia, so it would seem. As air travel between Ankara and Tehran is just three hours, the Trans Asia Express passenger list is a rare mix. Expect Iranian families laden with shopping bags from Istanbul’s ancient bazaars and modern malls. Add small groups of Turkish students riding this discount form of public transport home. Offbeat European travellers are often present. Sometimes it’s a young family on a cultural voyage





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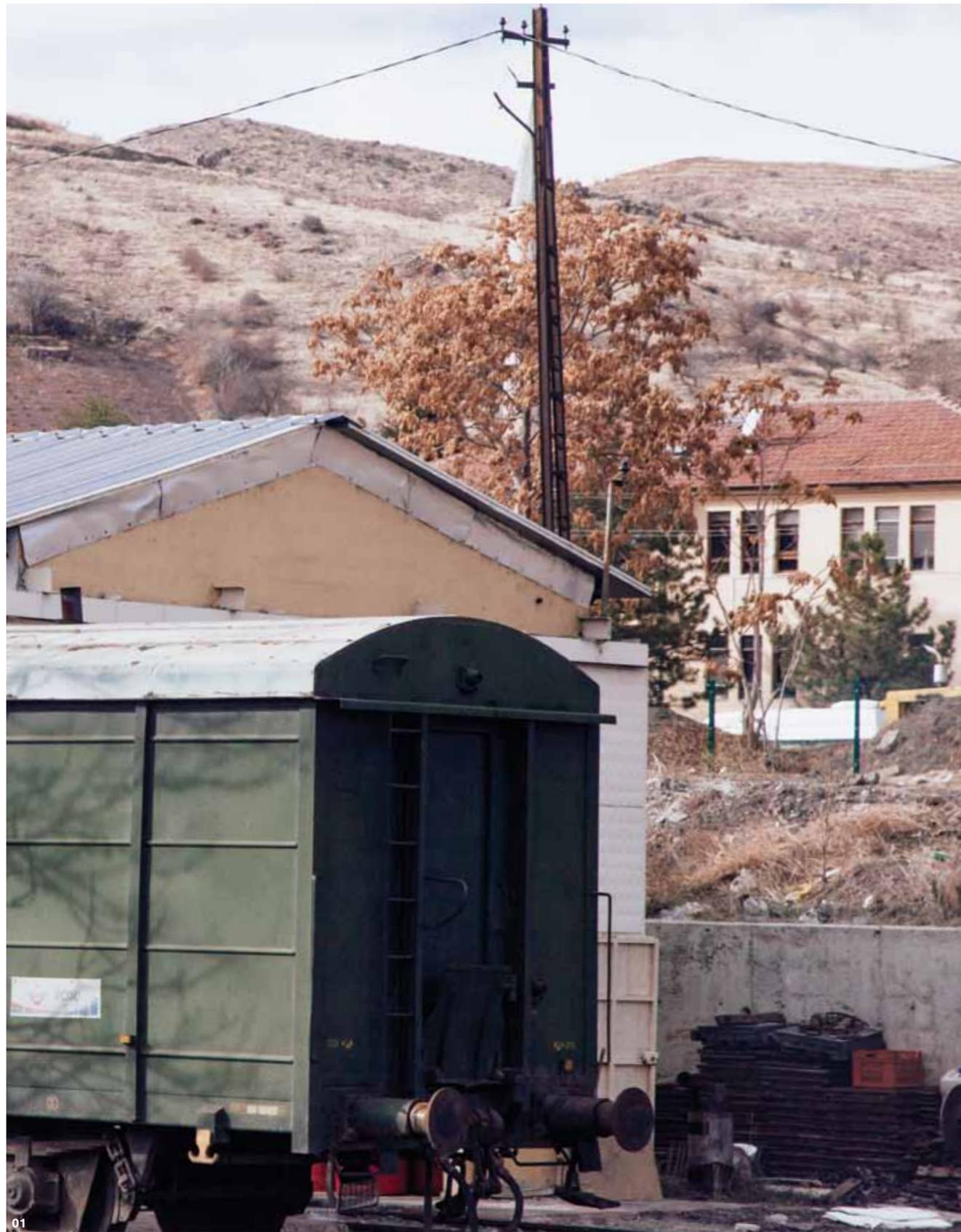


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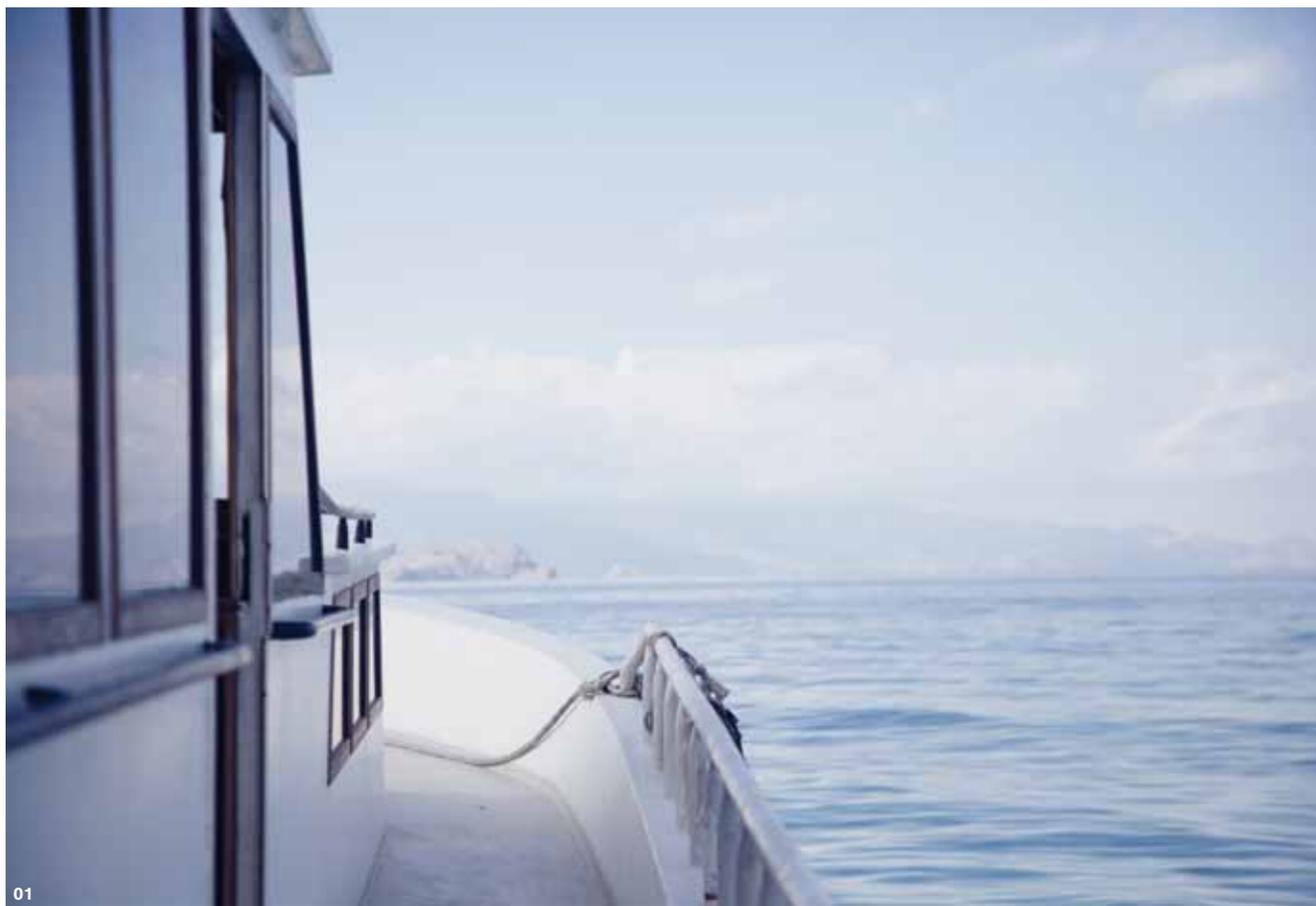
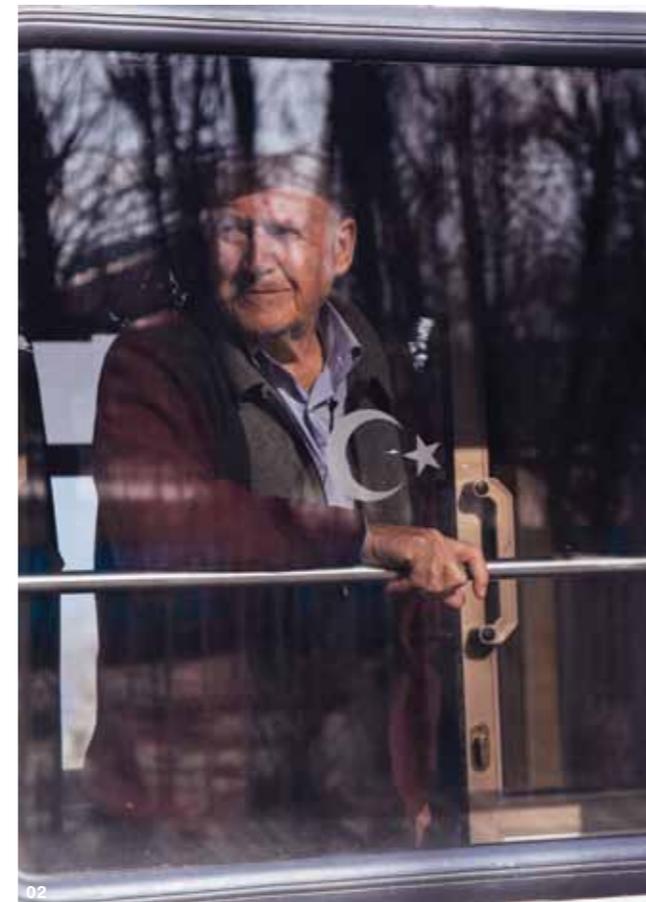


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they'll never forget. Or an old couple retracing a rail route to India they took when the Shah sat on the Persian throne.

As darkness falls at dinnertime, the dining car lights up. Groups begin to mingle. Smartphones stream Turkish pop. The entire carriage sings along. The food matches the singing quality: varied, and occasionally excellent. There are Turkish köfte meatballs, çorbası lentil soup and sizzling şiş kebab.

Sleep comes easily on the first night of the Trans Asia Express. Rest assured, no one who books this slow train to Tehran is in any hurry to reach their final destination. The driver eases through the night at a steady 60 kilometres per hour, occasionally calling at what must be the loneliest stations in all of Turkey. Indeed, the Trans Asia Express might be the only passenger train they see all week.

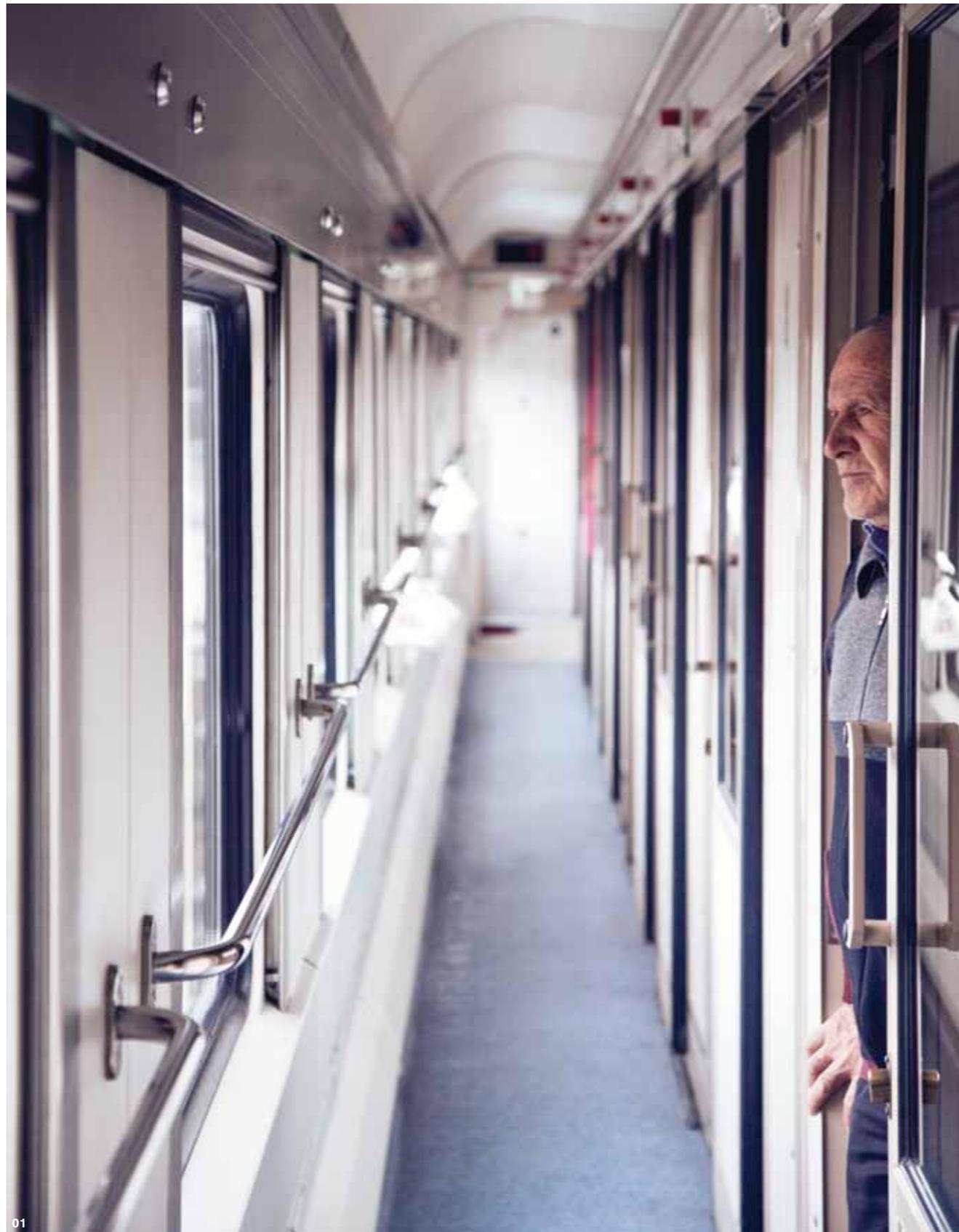
Travellers are keyed into the rhythm of the train by breakfast time on day two. Black tea, fried eggs and green olives are slowly consumed as a wilder, craggier Anatolia passes by. On summer mornings, lone shepherds and their wolf-sized kangal dogs can be spotted on the plain. In deep winter, snow frequently bleaches the scene entirely white. But all thoughts are on the train's afternoon metamorphosis.

At around 3pm it crosses Turkey's largest lake, then putters off bearing Iranian colours on the other side.

You read that correctly. At the scheduled time of 2.50pm – although in practice often an hour or two later – the train glides along Tatvan pier. It then halts before a sturdy looking ferry. Several of the carriages are then shunted onto a rail track inside the belly of the boat for a five-hour 90 kilometre-long cruise across Lake Van. You don't experience that on your average Airbus.

Nor is Lake Van your average lake. Since 1971 the ferry has sailed through waters inhabited by – it is claimed – the Van Gölü Canavarı, or Lake Van Monster. Like its more famous cousin in Loch Ness, the Lake Van incarnation has been 'seen' by over 1,000 locals. Grainy cell phone footage 'proves' its existence on YouTube. It's enough to make passengers leap into the waiting Iranian carriages at the city of Van with open arms.

It's nighttime, often midnight, before the train shunts off again. Say hello to flowery four-person couchettes, signs in Farsi and another truly eccentric dining car. But say goodbye to your passport, which is held by customs officials until the border with Iran.



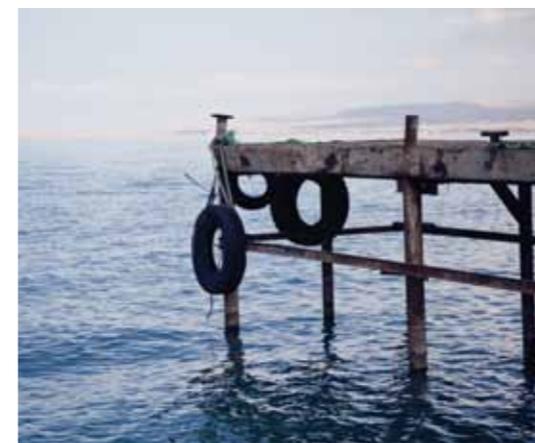
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'We passed through four seasons,' reflects photographer Ayla Hibri, 'sun, rain, snow. Sometimes it looked like Mars, sometimes like a scene from "The Sound of Music". The train to Tatvan took 23 hours. Naturally, it became our home, and the people on the train were like our family. What started as polite nodding when passing cabins ended with hugs and kisses'

As dawn breaks, the scenery changes a final time. The snowy peaks and green plains of Turkey give way to the rocky deserts and distant dunes of Iran. Friendships are cemented with tea and sweets. Cell phone numbers are swapped as the train finally brakes. The arrival at Tehran Central Station is frequently five or six hours late. But after 2,500 kilometres of transcontinental travel, we have time to wait.

NEW ROUTES THROUGH TURKEY

It's a high time for the Turkish rail industry. Three engineering feats make trans-Anatolian train travel easier – and more exciting – than ever before.

Firstly, the Marmaray undersea tunnel connected both banks of the Bosphorus in late October 2013. Passengers may now shuttle from Scotland to Singapore – via Istanbul – without stepping off a rail platform. Secondly, the Istanbul-Ankara high-speed rail line is set to open in late 2014. It will slash travel time between Turkey's two largest cities to around three hours. Long-distance sleeper services from Istanbul, curtailed during engineering work, should also be reintroduced. And finally, the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railway is also scheduled for completion in 2014. This 100km-long route will link Azerbaijan to the Turkish (and thus Iranian and European) rail network.