



Silk Road Backroads & Byways 2020



Silk Road Backroads & Byways

Deserts & Diversions in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan & Turkmenistan

One departure in 2020 – Cultural Series – 19 Days

August 20–September 7, 2020

The fascinating countries of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan encompass some of the most spectacular and absorbing hidden corners of Central Asia. Explore the distinct cultural identities of these extraordinary lands, discovering ancient desert citadels, dramatic Silk Road fortresses, and surprising Soviet-era sights on a journey that dives deep into the region's unique and multi-layered history. Begin in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, and from there drive west to survey the ancient archaeological sites of Penjikent, famous for its medieval trading center and connection with the Persian poet Rudaki, and Sarazm, where some of the first humans settled in Central Asia. Cross into Uzbekistan, via a border reopened in 2018, to visit the remnants of its fabled UNESCO-listed caravan cities — Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva — as well as those of the vanishing Aral Sea, starved of its water to produce cotton for the Soviet Union. Cross into Turkmenistan, and drive overland across the Kara Kum Desert to overnight in a camp beside the burning Darvaza Gas Crater, known locally as the “Door to Hell.” Head into the mountains to visit a family of weavers in their remote village home, then descend back down to cruise aboard a yacht in the country's only seaport, Turkmenbashi, where abundant oil reserves are refined and shipped across the Caspian Sea. Throughout the journey, connect with artists and villagers who still cling to traditional ways of life.



Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Thursday, August 20	Arrive Dushanbe, Tajikistan
Day 2, Friday, August 21	Dushanbe
Day 3, Saturday, August 22	Dushanbe • Penjikent
Day 4, Sunday, August 23	Penjikent • Samarkand, Uzbekistan
Day 5, Monday, August 24	Samarkand
Day 6, Tuesday, August 25	Samarkand • Bukhara
Day 7, Wednesday, August 26	Bukhara
Day 8, Thursday, August 27	Bukhara • Khiva
Day 9, Friday, August 28	Khiva
Day 10, Saturday, August 29	Khiva • Nukus (desert citadels)
Day 11, Sunday, August 30	Nukus (ships in the desert)
Day 12, Monday, August 31	Nukus • Kunya-Urgench, Turkmenistan • Dashoguz • Darvaza
Day 13, Tuesday, September 1	Darvaza • Ashgabat
Day 14, Wednesday, September 2	Ashgabat • Nohur • Serdar
Day 15, Thursday, September 3	Serdar • Yangykala
Day 16, Friday, September 4	Yangykala • Turkmenbashi
Day 17, Saturday, September 5	Turkmenbashi (yacht cruise on Caspian Sea)
Day 18, Sunday, September 6	Turkmenbashi • Ashgabat
Day 19, Monday, September 7	Depart Ashgabat



MIR Signature Features

- Visit the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, named for the Persian word for Monday.
- Explore the newly renovated Rudaki Museum in Penjikent, filled with Sogdian artifacts and natural exhibits from the area.
- Explore Sarazm ancient archaeological site, Tajikistan's first UNESCO World Heritage site.
- Applaud the unsurpassed majesty of the Registan and learn about the architectural marvels of fabled UNESCO-listed Samarkand.
- Experience the timeless character of UNESCO-listed Bukhara's Old Town with its winding streets, colorful markets, and *chaikhanas* (tea houses).
- Dine at the homes of local Uzbek families and sample traditional Central Asian dishes.
- Wander Khiva's Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and walk along the ramparts.
- Drive into the desert surrounding Khiva to visit ancient citadels dating from 2,000 years ago.
- Learn about the environmental impact of the shrinking Aral Sea from a local expert, and see the "ships of the desert" near the town of Muynak.
- Adventure by jeep across the Kara Kum "black sands" desert to the mouth of the burning Darvaza Gas Crater in Turkmenistan.
- Venture outside Ashgabat to explore the striped and striated limestone cliffs of Yangykala, which create a bizarre yet beautiful desert moonscape.

Tour Highlights

Dushanbe	Ismail Samani monument, Rudaki Park, Flagpole Park, Gurminj Museum of Musical Instruments, Shohmansur Bazaar, Victory Park, Hissar Fortress, National Museum of Tajikistan, American Corner
Penjikent Samarkand	Old Penjikent, Sarazm (Tajikistan's first UNESCO site), Rudaki Museum, Registan Square, Gur-Emir Mausoleum, Valentina Romanenko's studio, Bibi Khanum Mosque, Shah-i-Zinda, Afghan-Uzbek Silk Carpet Factory, Ulug Bek Observatory, paper factory, Afrosiab History Museum, Janona Dance Troupe, dinner in the private home of a local Uzbek family
Bukhara	"Historic Center of Bukhara" (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Bahauddin Naqshband Mausoleum, Summer Palace of the last Emir of Bukhara, Chor Minor Madrassah, Ismail Samani Mausoleum, Chashma Ayub Mausoleum (Job's Well), Zindan Prison, Poi Kalon, Mir-i-Arab Madrassah, Ulug Bek Madrassah, Abdul Aziz Madrassah, Magoki Attori Mosque, Lyabi-Hauz Plaza, Nadir Divan-Begi Madrassah, Ark Citadel, Bolo Hauz Mosque
Khiva	Ichon Qala (Inner City), Khiva's Old Town, (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Kunya Ark, Muhammad Amin-Khan, Madrassah, Muhammad Rahim-Khan Madrassah, Pakhlavan Makhmud Mausoleum, Sayid Alauddin Mausoleum, Juma Mosque, Allakulli-Khan Madrassah, Tash-Hauli Palace
Nukus	Capital of the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan, Savitsky Art Museum, with the world's second-largest collection of Russian avant-garde art, Dashoguz
Darvaza Ashgabat	Flaming natural gas crater Altyn Asyr Bazaar, Carpet Museum with weaving workshop, Turkmenbashi Mosque & Mausoleum, Geok Depe Mosque, private Akhal-Teke horse farm
Nohur Serdar	Tribal cemetery, pilgrim site Kiz-Bibi, silk-weaving home workshop Scenic Balkan Mountains
Yangykala	Pre-historic canyons, Gozli Ata pilgrimage site, volcanic rock formations at Kaytarmysh
Turkmenbashi	Scenic Caspian Sea location, local bazaar, Russian Orthodox church, Turkmenbashi Mosque & Mausoleum



Daily Itinerary

Day One, Thursday, August 20

Arrive Dushanbe, Tajikistan

Arrive in the early hours of this morning in Dushanbe and take some time to rest before an afternoon city tour. Named for the Persian word for Monday, **Dushanbe** was at one point a small market village where traders would gather each Monday to sell their goods. During the Soviet era the city grew to be the most important center of production in Tajikistan, and the Shohmansur covered market reflects its historical ties to local trade. As Tajikistan's capital, the city's tree-lined streets are home to many national museums and monuments, but watching the colorfully dressed locals stroll by from a park or café is a highlight in and of itself.



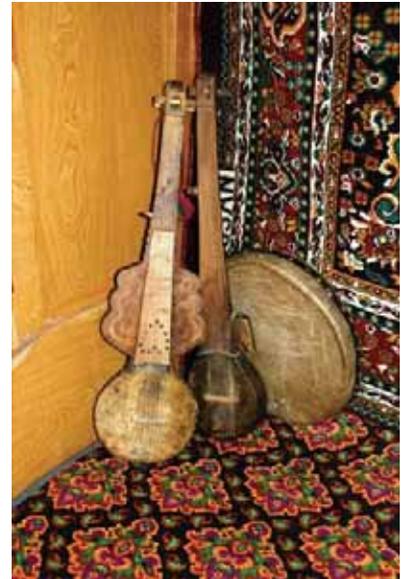
It is hard to miss the golden arch and bubbling fountains of the **Ismail Samani monument** in the center of town. Commemorating the 1,100th anniversary of the Samanid State, the handsome monument honors the Persian Samanis, whose time in power was one of peace and plenty, with a great flourishing of science and the arts.

Located in the very center of Dushanbe, **Rudaki Park** is dedicated to the 9th-century Persian poet Rudaki. Paths wind through the flowers and grass, and a mosaic-covered statue of Rudaki and a fountain lie in its center. Families from all over Dushanbe flock here on warm evenings and holidays.

Dushanbe's **Flagpole Park** is home to the one of the world's tallest flagpoles, which was completed in 2011 and stands at 541 feet (165 meters). Immediately adjacent to the structure is a manmade lake with views over the city and nearby mountains.



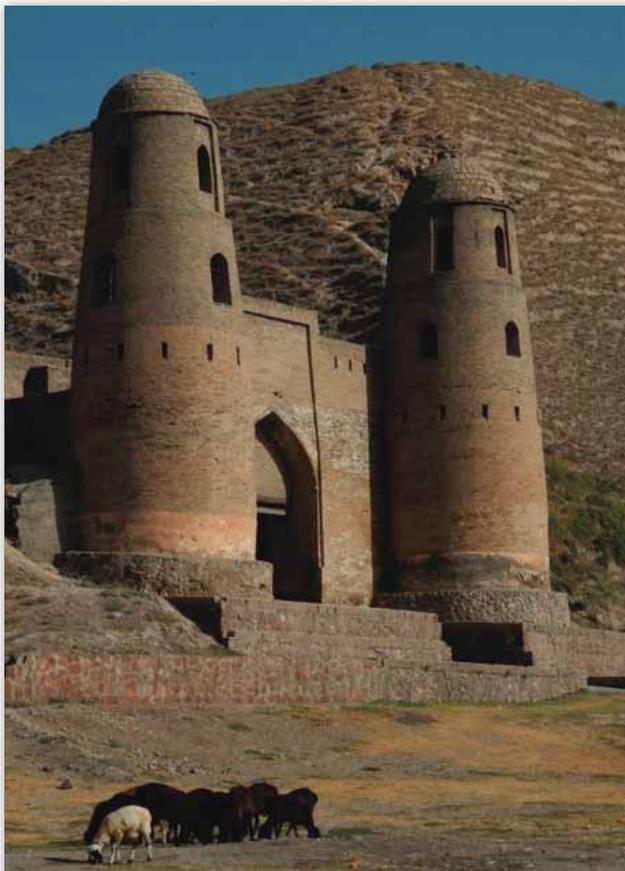
The small but fascinating **Gurminj Museum of Musical Instruments** was founded by Badakhshani actor Gurminj Zavkybekov. Displaying a fine collection of beautifully crafted antique and modern instruments from Afghanistan, the Pamirs, Turkey and China, the museum is often the scene of exuberant performances and demonstrations.



Visit Dushanbe's **Shohmansur Bazaar**, selling local produce, bread, prepared food and clothes, shoes and carpets. Also take in **Victory Park**, a green and tranquil spot to stroll and take in fantastic views of the city. The centerpiece of the park is a memorial dedicated to the Tajik veterans who fought with Nazi Germany in June 1945. Enjoy a cup of tea or a frosty local beer in the park's teahouse as you soak up scenic panoramas over Dushanbe.

Meals: B, L, D – *Serena Hotel or similar*

Day Two, Friday, August 21 Dushanbe



Begin the day by traveling outside the capital to visit a significant historical site. Just 18 miles from Tajikistan's capital in a valley surrounded by snow-capped mountains, the city of Hissar is dominated by the 18th century **Hissar Fortress**. The area has been inhabited since antiquity and features an 8th-century mosque, but it was the emirs who inhabited the fortress and the Silk Route traders that crossed the valley who made Hissar a center of commerce and learning. Several Islamic religious schools – known as *madrassahs* – dating from the period of the Bukhara Emirate are still standing today.

The remains of a palace used by governors of the Bukhara Emirate are also located at the site. Their thick baked brick walls once guarded a pool, garden, and palace, and sat opposite a noisy market and caravanserai. The strategically important fortress guarded the town, which was a staging post on the old Silk Road; it is said that it was overcome and destroyed by the likes of Cyrus the Great and Alexander the Great. What remains today is a portion of the wall and two monumental gate towers from the 18th century.

The new **National Museum of Tajikistan** was opened to the public in 2013. This large, modern building is filled with exhibits on Tajikistan's natural and political history. An airy, light-filled space stretching from the ground floor to the glass ceiling four stories up forms the heart of the museum. The structure is capped by an enormous model of Tajikistan's national seal.



Pay a visit to the **American Corner** on Tolstoy Street, a joint project of the U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan and the Tajik national government which opened in 2011. Guided by its mission to promote cross-cultural interaction through libraries and digital media education, Dushanbe's American Corner offers an extensive collection of English language books, publications, and digital materials free of charge to local students and citizens, and regularly hosts a variety of author readings, workshops, film screenings, and speaker programs.

Meals: B, L – *Serena Hotel or similar*



Day Three, Saturday, August 22

Dushanbe • Penjikent

Depart Dushanbe this morning and begin the drive toward Penjikent. An isolated city of 35,000, modern **Penjikent** is most famous for its past. On a ledge above the new town are the ruins of what was an important Sogdian trade center. Called Bunjikath, meaning “five villages,” the town was built in the 5th century AD and survived for three hundred years until the Arabs burned it during their 8th century invasion.

Discovered in 1933, the early medieval site includes the remains of the *shakhristan*, or town center, along with the frescoed foundations of the houses of wealthy merchants. However, the finest frescoes, sculptures, and pottery were claimed by Tashkent and

St. Petersburg museums. Two Zoroastrian temples demonstrate the importance of the old city.

Arrive early this afternoon and enjoy lunch before beginning an exploration of the city. Visit the site of an archaeological dig at **Old Penjikent**, where excavations began 50 years ago. Tour the remains of Shakhristan, two Zoroastrian temples, the citadel, and houses of wealthy families.



Sarazm means “where the land begins” – aptly named for this ancient archaeological site traced back some 5,000 years, and where humans first settled in Central Asia. Located in northwestern Tajikistan in the Zerafshan River valley and discovered only in 1976, Sarazm is Tajikistan's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, officially known as the "Proto-Urban Site of Sarazm." This thriving metallurgical center reached its apex in 3,000 BC at the beginning of the Bronze Age, when it was rich in metals, minerals and especially turquoise. Archaeologists also discovered evidence of wheat and barley, concluding this fertile valley was an agricultural center as well, with early farmers tilling the soil and nomadic herders tending their animals.



In the new town – a tobacco-growing center – visit the **Rudaki Museum**, filled with Sogdian artifacts and natural exhibits from the area. Frescoes from the Sarazm archaeological site, statues, ossuaries and costumes complete the exhibits. The museum was named after the celebrated founder of Tajik and Persian poetry, Abdullah Mohammed Rudaki, who was born in Penjikent, became a Samanid court poet, and is considered the father of Persian poetry. Meals: B, L, D – *Zarafshonor, Sughd Hotel, Umariyon Hotel or similar*



Day Four, Sunday, August 23

Penjikent • Samarkand, Uzbekistan

Depart Penjikent and continue toward the city of Samarkand. The road from Penjikent to Samarkand follows near the dry foothills of the Pamir Mountains along the Zerafshan River. On arrival in Samarkand embark upon an introductory tour of the city.

Samarkand is perhaps the most well-known of Silk Road towns. This fabled oasis on the fringes of the Kyzyl Kum Desert has been settled since the 6th century BC. Because of its location on the plains where the

Zeravshan River spills out from the Pamir Mountains, Samarkand became a major Silk Road crossroads.

A World Heritage Site, UNESCO calls Samarkand the "Crossroad of Cultures," visited through time by many of the world's conquerors — Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. Alexander said of Samarkand, “Everything I have heard about the beauty of the city is indeed true, except that it is much



more beautiful than I imagined.” Tamerlane made it his capital city and gathered the finest architects, builders and artisans of the time to enhance its beauty.

Registan Square is the centerpiece of Samarkand, and the most recognizable landmark for visitors. The three emblematic madrassahs frame the square, and loom over the empty space in the center. It was this central space that originally gave the place its name, for “*registan*” simply means “place of sand.” This sandy place was at the center of ancient Samarkand, and was a public square and marketplace before the Ulug Bek, Tillya-Kori, and Shir Dor madrassahs existed.



Gur-Emir Mausoleum is the final resting place of Tamerlane, but was originally built for his grandson after the latter’s death at the turn of the 15th century. The interior of the mausoleum has been restored, brilliant in gold leaf and fresh tile. The heavily gilded central dome opens over the set of tomb-markers resembling *sarcophagi* (the bodies are located well below, but are on site). All are marble, with the exception of Tamerlane’s, which is a slab of solid jade reportedly from Mongolia.

This evening visit internationally recognized fashion designer **Valentina Romanenko’s studio**. Moscow-trained

Romanenko has transformed her traditional Uzbek home into a workshop and display area. In this intimate setting, decorated with brilliant Uzbek carpets and wall hangings, she creates and shows her elegant modern fashions made with traditional fabrics and techniques. As exotic music plays, enjoy a short presentation with graceful Uzbek women modeling Romanenko’s sophisticated creations. Meals: B, L, D – *Grand Samarkand Superior, Emir Khan, Sultan or similar*



Touring for First-Time Visitors to Samarkand:

Spend the day exploring Samarkand, beginning with a visit to the **Bibi Khanum Mosque**. Built by Tamerlane to be the largest mosque in the Islamic world, it was dedicated to the memory of his favorite wife. Architects from India and Persia were brought in to build the mosque; it is said that 95 elephants were used to transport marble and other building materials from India to Samarkand.

The row of tombs and mausoleums collectively called **Shah-i-Zinda**, or “place of a living king,” stretches between the present and the past. At its front is living Samarkand, and at its back are the dusty slopes at the edge of ancient Afrosiab. Even on hot summer days the mausoleums remain shady and cool, and seem to lure the traveler to approach the oldest tomb at the far end. Behind the complex set into the hill lies an active cemetery with grave sites dating back as far as the 9th century, and as recently as the present day.



Continue to the **Afghan-Uzbek Silk Carpet Factory**. This joint

venture carpet factory uses natural vegetable dyes to color the thread used in its carpets. Tour the gardens outside the factory where the weavers grow indigo, coleus and dahlias to use for dye. Observe the entire process of dyeing the thread and weaving the carpets, with an opportunity to shop afterward.

Explore the **Ulug Bek Observatory**. Though concerned with conquest, politics and other matters of terrestrial importance, Tamerlane’s grandson, Ulug Bek, found his true interest in the heavens. The astronomer-king was fascinated by the stars and the cosmos and built one of the most advanced observatories of the ancient world. The observations, which he undertook with the naked eye only, predated the telescope by over 150 years. They were aided by the building itself, which housed a large vertical half-circle, only a quarter of which remains today. By using careful methods, rigorous observation, and meticulous recording, Ulug Bek calculated the length of the year to within a minute of the modern accepted value. He also created the most comprehensive (to that date) catalog of the heavens, earning his place in history.



Visit a **workshop where handcrafted paper** is made according to traditions handed down from the 8th century, when papermaking began in Samarkand. Founded in 1997 with the support of UNESCO, the workshop of Abdurakhim Mukhtarov, located in the village of Koni Gil on the outskirts of the city, produces lovely paper crafts and stationery as you watch.

Just outside of modern-day Samarkand lie the dusty hills of the ancient city of Afrosiab, once a potent capital and now an archaeological site guarding treasures of antiquity. Scientific digs began here in the 1800s under Russian rule, and continue to this day. On site is the **Afrosiab History Museum**, which houses artifacts from the area, including pottery and tile found among the excavated walls of the town.

Touring for Repeat Visitors to Samarkand:

For those who have visited Samarkand previously and seen the highlights, there will be an alternate excursion schedule offered.

Depart early this morning and drive approximately 40 minutes to the foot hills of Hissar Mountain. Enjoy a **morning hike through sheep herder trails**, pausing to sip on a cup of campfire tea. Your hike will end in the mountain village of Ohalik, where you will have the opportunity to **meet and talk with locals**, as well as learn about the local political summer camps.

Before noon, depart for Samarkand to rejoin the rest of the group for lunch, then enjoy a free afternoon before the evening's events.

Alternatively, remain in Samarkand and enjoy a leisurely day for rest or independent exploration.

Together this evening, enjoy a performance of traditional Uzbek dances by the young **Janona Dance Troupe**, consisting of schoolchildren ages 7 to 11. The young dancers study, rehearse, and perform at the former Soviet-era Palace of Pioneers, a massive white building which – after the breakup of the U.S.S.R. – was renamed the Palace of Children's and Youth Creativity. At this after-school



venue, children are encouraged to take up sports, join hobby clubs, and learn Uzbek culture – from national songs and dance to poetry and art.

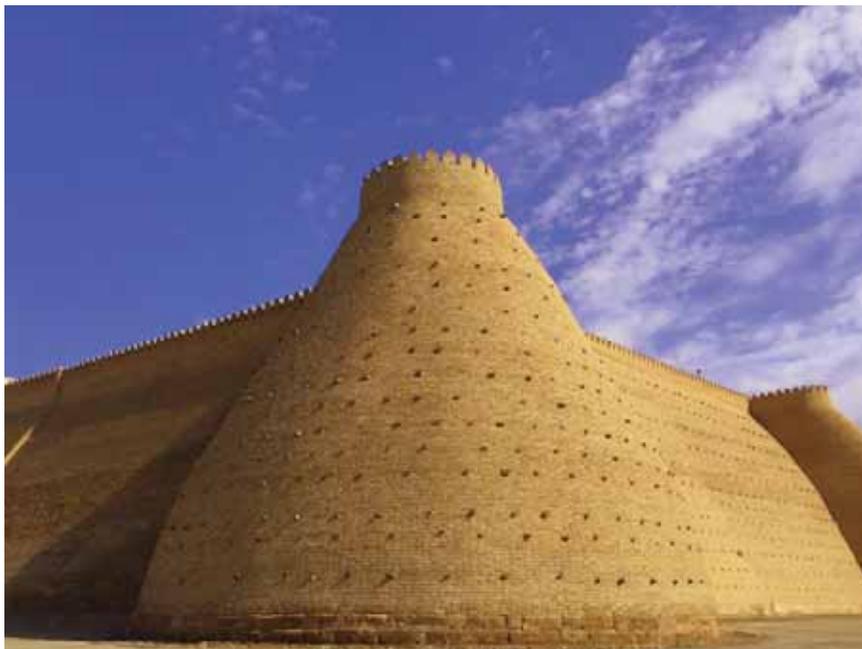
This evening, enjoy dinner in the **private home of a local Uzbek family.**

Meals: B, L, D – *Grand Samarkand Superior, Emir Khan, Sultan or similar*

Day Six, Tuesday, August 25

Samarkand • Bukhara

Following breakfast, board a high-speed modern train for the one-and-a-half hour ride to Bukhara. An oasis in the desert, UNESCO-listed **Bukhara** offers cool shade and rest to the modern traveler as it did to the camel caravans that plied the Silk Road hundreds of years ago. Bukhara is as old as Samarkand, and has preserved its ancient architecture and design to an arguably larger extent than that city. Bukhara's Old Town has a unified feel, drawn together by a central reflecting pool and plaza, by commonality in the structure of the domed bazaars, and by the major monuments ringing the Old Town: Kalon Assembly, Zindan Prison, and Ark Citadel.



Bukhara was the site of one of the best-known episodes (to westerners) in Central Asian history, the 19th century capture and ultimate execution of two British spies posing as explorers. They were involved in what was then known as the Great Game between Russia and England for control over Central Asia, and access to India. The last emir of Bukhara was a notoriously brutal and crafty leader, and kept the men imprisoned at great length before their public execution.

The city was also an important merchant center of Sephardic Jewry. The term “Bukharan Jews” refers to a large community of Jews originally from Persia who lived in the lands formerly ruled by the emir of Bukhara.



Visit the **Artisan Development Center**, located in Saifutdin Caravansarai at Lyabi-Hauz Plaza. This organization's main goal is to revive and develop ancient handicrafts, offering a variety of workshops for puppet makers, coppersmiths, cloth printers, wood carvers, gold and silk embroiderers, and jewelry makers.



Following lunch, venture outside Bukhara approximately 45 minutes to a **village studio specializing in the art of suzani**. See a demonstration of the process from start to finish: silk cocoons, dyeing, design, drawing, and embroidery in this home workshop of a multi-generational family that has been practicing the art for many years.

Return to Bukhara to rest at the hotel before dinner.

Dinner tonight includes a **master class in the art of making plov**, Central Asia's most ubiquitous dish. Learn how the freshest ingredients are combined to create the savory concoction that you will then enjoy.

Meals: B, L, D – *Sofiya Hotel, Sasha & Sons B & B or similar*

Day Seven, Wednesday, August 26 **Bukhara**

Touring for First-Time Visitors to Bukhara:

Spend today exploring Central Asia's most ancient living city.

Visit **Poi Kalon**, also called the Bukhara Forum. The 12th century Kalon Assembly – including the Kalon Mosque and Minaret and the

Mir-i-Arab Madrassah – surrounds an open plaza teeming with merchants and local vendors. The minaret towers over the dusty square, looking down from a height of more than 150 feet and casting its shadow between the mosque and the madrassah. Fourteen distinct and unique bands of brickwork circle the tower at intervals; at the top of the minaret those bands resolve into a traditional stalactite formation.



The monumental **Mir-i-Arab Madrassah**, with its matching turquoise domes, is part of the Kalon Assembly, located across from the Kalon Mosque in the center of the Old Town. The madrassah was a working Islamic school from the time it was built in the 16th century to its closure in 1920.

Visit the **Ulug Bek Madrassah**. Ulug Bek built three madrassahs during his lifetime; the one in Bukhara was his first. Constructed in 1420 near the Nadir Divan-Beghi Khanaka, the building has two floors of rooms for pupils and the façade is decorated with majolica. The Lyabi-Hauz pool was not dug until around 1620.



The **Abdul Aziz Madrassah** stands across the Lyabi-Hauz pool from the Ulug Bek Madrassah. Completed in 1652, the Abdul Aziz was bigger and more lavishly decorated than its neighbor, and was built on the Persian model with a large courtyard and four *iwans*. Today the Museum of Wood Carving Art is located in the former madrassah.

Not far from the Sarrafon trading dome in Bukhara, the **Magoki Attori Mosque** was originally built in the 12th century and restored in the 16th. In 1991 a carpet museum was established in the former mosque, displaying fine examples of Bukharan, Turkmen, Persian and Caucasian carpets and handwoven decorative objects.

With the feel of a true oasis in an oasis town, **Lyabi-Hauz Plaza** is at the center of Bukhara's Old Town and is – as it has been throughout history – a place to meet friends, eat, drink, and relax in the shade. The atmosphere is cooled by the long rectangular reflecting pool that makes up the center of the plaza, as well as by the shade of the trees that ring the plaza. The mulberry trees here are hundreds of years old, framing the 16th and 17th century madrassahs that make up three of the four edges of the ensemble.

Located on the north side of Lyabi-Hauz Plaza's reflecting pool, the **Kukeldash Madrassah** is the largest Koranic school in Central Asia. Named for the statesman and general, Kulbaba Kukeldash, the madrassah was built in 1568. Today's lunch will be here, with the opportunity to dine with local architect Zoirsho Kilegev.

Two phoenixes spread their wings on each side of a shining sun on the archway that leads into the **Nadir Divan-Begi Madrassah**. Seated on the east side of the Lyabi-Hauz pool, the 1622 madrassah was originally built as a caravanserai. At its opening, Bukhara's leader, Imamkuli-Khan, dedicated it to the "greater glory of Allah," and Nadir Divan-Begi quickly converted it to a madrassah, adding student rooms and the portal with its phoenixes. In the evenings, a performance of Uzbek folk music and dances takes place in the courtyard of the former madrassah.



The **Ark Citadel** is the original fortress of Bukhara and likely dates back two thousand years or more. The current structure has been built and rebuilt on the same site throughout its history, preserving something of the form, purpose, and function of the first Ark. Like the medieval castle complexes of Europe, the Bukhara Ark served the Emirs of Bukhara as a residence and audience hall, as protection from neighboring enemies, and for more mundane purposes such as a trade center and police station.

Admire the serene **Bolo Hauz Mosque** across from the Ark. Called the forty-pillar mosque because of the reflection of its colonnades in the pool, the mosque was founded by 18th century emir, Shah Murad.

Time permitting this evening, visit a **master marionette-maker's private studio** to learn the process of creating traditional Uzbek puppets. It may take seven or eight days to finish one of these expressive puppets, with their unique faces and dressed in traditional Uzbek garments.

Touring for Repeat Visitors to Bukhara:

For those who have visited Bukhara previously and seen the highlights, there will be an alternate excursion schedule.

Venture about 20 miles outside Bukhara to **visit a local village**, meet with the village administrator, and **learn how the village manages education, healthcare, and other social issues**. Meet local villagers and enjoy lunch as a guest in a home.

This afternoon, return to Bukhara and enjoy free time for more shopping at the third trading dome, rest, or independent exploration.



Together again tonight, enjoy dinner and a concert of traditional folk music and costume at the **Gau Kushon Madrassah**.

Meals: B, L, D – *Sofiya Hotel, Sasha & Sons B & B or similar*

Day Eight, Thursday, August 27

Bukhara • Khiva

Following an early breakfast at the bed-and-breakfast, depart Bukhara for the fabled city of **Khiva**. The route today passes across long stretches of the Kyzyl Kum Desert. This is the same route ridden by loaded Silk Road camel caravans, and once plagued by brigands on hand to plunder their riches. Today, travelers can see dunes, saxaul bushes and the distant mountains. Make a stop en route to look at the Amu Darya River, which loosely parallels the Uzbek-Turkmen border. You will also enjoy a packed picnic lunch. Arrive by evening, then enjoy dinner and overnight here, with accommodations in a small hotel located near the historic Old Town.

Meals: B, L, D – *Asia Khiva Hotel or similar*



Day Nine, Friday, August 28

Khiva



Legend says that the ancient Silk Road oasis of **Khiva** was founded at the place where Shem, son of Noah, discovered water in the desert, and that the city got its name from Shem's joyful shout, "Hey va!" at the discovery. Today the living city is part museum town, part re-creation of life hundreds of years ago.

Archaeologists have found traces of human habitation around Khiva dating from the 5th century BC. For hundreds of years it was a fortress town and vital stop on the old Silk Road, but not until the 16th century did Khiva become the capital of the Khorezm Khanate. The khanate ruled the surrounding area for over 300 years.

Touring for First-Time Visitors to Khiva:

Spend today exploring Khiva's Old Town on foot.

Explore Khiva's Old Town, or **Ichon Qala (Inner City)**. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, it has been extensively preserved and restored, existing today much as it did hundreds of years ago. Approaching the Old Town, modern-day travelers face the same sight as Silk Road caravans did eons ago: dun-colored city walls, the main gate opening on a dusty stone thoroughfare, merchants hawking their wares from each side, and the distinctive minarets watching over the whole scene.

The walled Old City was an independent entity and the seat of the Khanate of Khiva. The largest of the existing buildings is the **Tash-Hauli Palace**, home of the Khan and his four legal wives. The intricate blue and white tilework in the open-air throne room offsets the airy space set aside by the carved wooden columns.

The **Kunya Ark** was originally built in the 12th century as the khan's fortress and residence, encompassing numerous small courtyards surrounded by administrative buildings, sleeping quarters, kitchens, guardhouse, stables, parade area, and weapons strongholds. Much of it was lost when Persia invaded the Khivan Khanate in the 18th century, but what remains – including the mosque, harem, and throne room – are beautifully decorated with ceramic tiles and majolica.

Several places offer spectacular views of Khiva's Old Town. From any third- or fourth-floor balcony, viewing the ancient minarets with their blue-green tiles



towering over domes conveys a feeling of quiet and peacefulness in this museum-like town.

Located across from Kunya Ark and adjacent to the squat Kalta Minor Minaret, **Muhammad Amin-Khan** is the largest madrassah in Khiva. Ruler Muhammad Amin-Khan — for whom the two-storied madrassah is named — ordered its construction, which was completed in 1855 with richly detailed majolica, arched niches, carved wooden doors, domes and corner towers, along with living quarters for 260 students. Inscribed in Arabic above its entrance portal is a tiled inscription that reads, "This beautiful building will stand to please its descendants forever."

Muhammad Rahim-Khan was a 19th-century enlightened pioneer and one of Khiva's most educated rulers, carrying out reforms in business, politics, and especially in education. In 1876, he completed construction of a new type of school with his name on it, the Muhammad Rahim-Khan Madrassah. It focused not only on religious subjects but secular ones as well: sciences, mathematics, astronomy, geography and even poetry and debate. Located across from Kunya Ark, the school was the largest madrassah in Central Asia at the time, and today remains a dominating presence in Khiva's Ichon Qala (Old Town). The two-story building boasts a magnificent blue majolica entrance portal flanked by two small towers, four porticos, summer and winter mosques, library, and student living quarters.

The **Pakhlavan Makhmud Mausoleum** was built in 1810 to honor the patron of Khiva, a poet and wrestler who died in the 14th century and believed to be buried here. Its full turquoise dome has become a symbol of Khiva, along with the nearby Islam Khodja Minaret, banded in dark and light blue.

Visit the **Sayid Alauddin Mausoleum**, located east of the Kalta Minor and one of the oldest structures in Khiva. Dedicated to a local Sufi sheikh, this small mausoleum dates back to the early 14th century, when Khiva was still under control of the Golden Horde. While unassuming from the outside, the interior contains a brilliantly decorated sarcophagus covered in blue, black, and white majolica tiles — a specialty of Khorezmian Khiva.

Wood-carving is a traditional specialty of Khiva, with outstanding examples of intricately carved wooden columns at the **Juma Mosque**. The building is partially below ground; the 115 carved columns that support the wooden ceiling create a forest-like effect around two square light wells.

Visit **Allakulli-Khan Madrassah**. Completed in 1835, this madrassah was funded by Khiva's ruler, Allakulli Khan, who ordered the most beautiful school be built in Khiva, made of baked brick instead of plaster. The Allakulli-Khan Madrassah is considered a prime example of Khorezm medieval architecture, with its large scale and harmonious symmetry.





The entrance portal and arched niches of the two-story school are brilliantly decorated in majolica with Khorezm's famous colors of blue, black and white. Along with a city library and two mosques, there is a lecture hall and 99 rooms (*khudjirs*) for students' living quarters. Located between the eastern gate of Ichon Qala and the covered bazaar (Tim), today the madrassah is home to the Abu Ali Ibn Sino Medical History Museum, along with a restaurant featuring Khorezm cuisine.

The largest of the existing buildings in the Ichon Qala is **Tash-Hauli Palace**, the former home of the khan and his four legal wives. Built between 1832 and 1841, the palace was designed as a more sumptuous replacement for Kunya Ark, encompassing more than 150 rooms surrounding nine courtyards. They include a throne room, a ceremonial and banqueting hall with brick bases for yurts, and the khan's own personal harem quarters, beautifully decorated with elaborate blue and white tilework, wooden columns, and intricately carved and painted plaster known as *ganche*.

Touring for Repeat Visitors to Khiva:

For those who are already familiar with the Old Town sites of Khiva and have seen the highlights, there will be an alternate excursion schedule.

Pay a visit to the Artisan Development Center. This non-profit center was created to revive, develop, and hand down ancient handicrafts in Uzbekistan. Enjoy watching master artisans alongside their younger apprentices, teaching them traditional crafts such as Central Asian embroidery or puppet-making, ensuring these skills are passed down from generation to generation. Their trove of Silk Road handicrafts – all for sale – ranges from gold silk-embroidered tapestries and copper works to exquisite jewelry and intricately carved wooden boxes, all made by the Uzbek artisans who work here.

Next, visit a nearby history museum to see its collection of historical photos. For those who are interested, enjoy a walk on the ramparts of Khiva.

Meals: B, L, D – *Asia Khiva Hotel or similar*

Day Ten, Saturday, August 29

Khiva • Nukus (desert citadels)

Enjoy breakfast in Khiva before departing for Nukus. The desert between Khiva in Khorezm Province and Nukus in Karakalpakstan is dotted with ancient citadels. En route to Nukus, visit several desert citadels including Toprak Kala, Ayaz Kala, and Guldursun Kala, with a stop for lunch along the way."

The Amu Darya River – known as the Oxus by the ancient Greeks – meandered through this area, giving rise to cities that later decayed when it changed its course, or when irrigation systems were destroyed. The largest and best-known of these ruins is **Toprak Kala**, the massive 2,000-year-old royal citadel where the rulers of Khorezm lived. Archaeologists have identified three main halls by their remaining murals.



Ayaz Kala fortress dates from the 4th to the 7th centuries. Archaeologists have found grape presses and golden statues here in the ruins.



Guldursun Kala, "Citadel of the Eagles," was originally constructed in the 1st century BC. Also known as "Big Guldursun," it was one of the largest and most important of the Khorezm citadels. The medieval structure of adobe and mud brick was built over the early foundations, which show through in places. Guldursun was overrun and nearly destroyed during the Mongol invasion of the 13th century.

Upon arrival in Nukus, check in to the hotel and enjoy a free afternoon for rest or independent exploration before a group dinner this evening.

Meals: B, L, D – Jipek Joli New Hotel or similar

Day Eleven, Sunday, August 30

Nukus (ships in the desert)

Depart Nukus this morning and head out to the **Aral Sea** to explore Muynak.

Muynak, formerly the Aral Sea's biggest fishing port, is a ghost town, scattered with the hulks of rusted fishing boats and freighters. Once the fourth-largest inland sea in the world, the Aral Sea barely exists today, and what remains is too salty to support life. From the 1960s on, in an attempt to force the arid land to produce cotton, Soviet planners diverted the flow of the sea's two feeder rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, and it began inexorably to shrink. Alarmed, the people of Muynak dug a canal from the port to the receding shore, but the water disappeared too fast for them to keep up with that gargantuan task. As the body of water shrank, the sea became increasingly salty, its fish began to die, and the surrounding cotton fields became more saline and less productive. Today, there are few jobs left in Muynak, with chemicals from the cotton fields often swept into the clouds of salt that blow across the region.



Return to Nukus and, if open (as today is Independence Day in Uzbekistan), it may be possible to explore the wonderful **Savitsky Art Museum (Karakalpak Museum of Arts)**. This remote desert museum houses the incredible life's work of its founder, Igor Savitsky, who was able to amass a collection of thousands of banned avant-garde Russian art pieces without interference from Moscow and keep it hidden from the watchful eyes of the KGB. The story of this collection has been told in the award-winning documentary, "*Desert of Forbidden Art*." The collection is the second-largest gathering of Russian avant-garde art after the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg.



Dinner tonight will be in the home of a local family, with a **performance by Karakalpak throat singers**.
Meals: B, D – *Jipek Joli New Hotel or similar*



Day Twelve, Monday, August 31

Nukus • Kunya-Urgench, Turkmenistan • Dashoguz • Darvaza

Depart by coach from Nukus to the Turkmen border. Customs formalities can be time consuming, so patience is a virtue this morning. Meet 4WD vehicles here for the onward drive across the Kara Kum Desert to Darvaza. After the crossing, visit the ruins of **Kunya-Urgench**, an agricultural center of about 30,000 near the Uzbek border. It is the site of the ancient capital of Khorezm, which was razed by both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane.

About half a mile south of the town lie the remains of the **UNESCO-listed old city**, including the 11th-century **Kutlug-Timur Minaret**, ringed with 18 bands of decorative mud brick and blue majolica tiles. Also admire the domed hall of the **Turabek Khanum Mausoleum**. Notable for the interlocking design of its remarkably preserved ceiling, the mausoleum was built for the daughter of one of the leaders of the Golden Horde.

Drive to the city of **Dashoguz** and visit a **local market** before continuing on to Darvaza. Dashoguz is a border town in northwestern Turkmenistan known as the gateway to the ruins of Kunya-Urgench, an old Silk Road oasis. Dashoguz' name means Stone Spring; it was a transfer point on the old Silk Road because of its sturdy well.



Darvaza is a tiny town of about 350 semi-nomadic Teke tribal people just outside the “Door to Hell.” Located about 160 miles north of Ashgabat in the Kara Kum Desert, Darvaza was a site of natural gas exploration in the 1970s. The story goes that the drilling equipment was swallowed up by a huge sink hole, which was filled with gas. Engineers decided to burn off the gas to make the cavern safe for more drilling, but instead created the **Darvaza Gas Crater**, one of Turkmenistan's most unusual sights. Visit the crater here, and take stunning photos as the lowering evening light turns to night.



Tent camping is near Darvaza in the Kara Kum desert. Admire the desert landscape while the guide sets up your tent and cooks your meal for you. Enjoy a **barbecue-style dinner** under the stars.
Meals: B, L, D – *Tented Camp*



Day Thirteen, Tuesday, September 1

Darvaza • Ashgabat



Depart overland this morning for Turkmenistan's capital, **Ashgabat**. In spite of its location on a trade route, Ashgabat never achieved the status and influence of other Silk Road cities such as Khiva or Bukhara. Originally known as Konjikala, the city was destroyed by Mongols in the 13th century. In 1881, the Russians built a fortress on the site as a buffer against English-dominated Persia, and by the early 20th century Ashgabat was a prosperous and flourishing city. In 1948 a massive earthquake leveled the city, killing over two-thirds of the population. Recently Ashgabat has seen a boom in new construction, which has had a major impact on the look of the city; modern marble and gold monuments are springing up all over town. In 2013, the

Guinness Book of World Records awarded Ashgabat the record for the world's highest density of white marble buildings.

En route to Ashgabat, stop to visit one of the world's most ancient sites. **Anau** has been inhabited since Neolithic times. Archaeologists have recently uncovered evidence of a sophisticated town from around 2300 BC, the time of the early cities of Mesopotamia and ancient Iran. Up until a severe earthquake in 1948, Anau was well known for its beautiful 15th-century mosque, decorated with a tiled mosaic of two dragons. Although the site of the old mosque is today mainly of interest to archeologists, a new mosque has arisen, built of bricks from the rubble of the old one. The old site is still considered holy by locals, who have erected a small shrine among the ruins for use in prayers and special ceremonies.



After lunch, begin touring with a stop at the excellent **National Museum of Carpets**, which displays an abundance of gorgeous carpets, kilims, cushions, and costumes, including one of the largest hand-knotted carpets in the world. The museum is a wonderful place to learn about Central Asian carpets, with displays explaining the nuanced differences in carpet and textile patterns among different Turkmen tribes and regions."

This evening, dinner will be at the hotel restaurant with a panoramic view.
Meals: B, L, D – *Oguzkent Hotel or similar*



Day Fourteen, Wednesday, September 2

Ashgabat • Nohur • Serdar

Continue overland to Serdar with stops en route, beginning with **Turkmenbashi Mosque & Mausoleum**, the largest mosque in Central Asia. Located 11 km west of Ashgabat in his hometown of Kipchak, the complex was built by and in honor of Turkmenistan's President Niyazov, who renamed himself "Turkmenbashi," or "Father of All Turkmen." The massive white-marble mosque and mausoleum complex was completed in 2004 at a cost of \$100M, with impressive statistics: a dome height of 55m, four minarets 91m tall, and a prayer-hall capacity for 10,000 worshipers. The mosque is decorated with arches, fountains, heated floor with handmade carpets, and verses from both the Koran and Niyazov's own writings – which has set off heated debate among Muslims over whether this is a true mosque.

Nearby is a smaller mausoleum containing *sarcophagi* of Turkmenbashi and his family. His mother and brothers died in the devastating 1948 Ashgabat earthquake; a memorial complex to that catastrophe is located across from the mausoleum.



About 40 minutes from Ashgabat lie the ruins of the 19th century **Geok Depe Fortress**, bombarded by forces of the Russian Empire in an 1881 battle. Nearby, the striking aquamarine dome of the 1996 Saparmurat Haji Mosque commemorates the battle.

Venture outside the city to visit a horse-breeding farm devoted to the renowned **Akhal-Teke horse**, arguably the oldest cultured breed of horse in the world. The owner accompanies you on the tour to talk about the workings of the farm and about the breed. These elegant horses have long, slender necks, small heads, long legs and narrow chests. They are said to have lent their genes to both the Arabian horse and the American Quarter Horse. You will have the

opportunity to ride the horses for an additional fee.

The **Kopet Dag Mountain Range** stretches more than 400 miles from the Harirud River almost to the Caspian Sea, forming the natural border between Turkmenistan and Iran. Roughly translated to "piled or heaped mountains," the dry, sandy slopes and plateaus here are the result of an ancient tectonic collision between the Arabian and Eurasian Plates, an event that still continues to shape the range today. With a Mediterranean climate, the slopes of the Kopet Dag provide an ideal environment for growing agricultural crops such as pomegranates, grapes, figs, and wild pears and cherries.



Continue to the village of **Nohur**, located



3,600 feet above the Karakum Desert. A drive up the steep meandering roads along the Sumbar River Valley reveal the cool valleys and hillside villages of the Nohur people. The hills are carpeted with wild flowers in springtime, and two mountain streams provide water for the indigenous mountain goats, porcupines, foxes, and an occasional snow leopard. The tribal Nohur people have long been isolated from the rest of the country and to a great extent have held on to their culture and traditions. The women are renowned for their silk embroidery and special pre-Islamic patterns of their felt, while families grow tomatoes, pomegranates and almonds that are prized in the markets of Ashgabat.

Lunch today will be picnic-style in Nohur before exploring the area. The tiny alleyways of the villages in this region are lined with houses made of stacked stone and ornamented with carved timbers found nowhere else in Turkmenistan. In one of the villages is a derelict old yurt workshop, with a kiln used to steam the wooden ribs of the yurts. Not far away is a sacred cave where women go to pray to **Kiz-Bibi**, the goddess of fertility, for harmony in their families or to conceive a child. The women tie colorful cloths and little cradles to the branches of a nearby tree.

Discover the hillside **tribal cemetery**, whose traditional graves are adorned with the horns of Urial mountain sheep, an animal associated with prosperity and fertility. Only local people may enter the cemetery, as it is a sacred place.

Pay a visit to a **local silk-weaving workshop** that weaves the special tribal patterns of the Nohur people. Observe weavers at their looms and learn about the Zoroastrian ornamentation used in their decoration.

Continue on to site of **Serdar**. A city of some 50,000 at the northern edge of the Kopet Dag Mountains, Serdar was once part of a string of medieval Persian fortresses built to guard the desert frontier of Khorasan from Turkic invaders. In later years, it was the site of one of the first stations along the Trans-Caspian Railway, which today links the oil-rich Caspian region with Central Asia and Russia.



Dinner tonight will be at a local cafe in Serdar.
Meals: B, L, D – *Chinar Guesthouse or similar*



Day Fifteen, Thursday, September 3

Serdar • Yangykala



Continue this morning to **Yangykala Canyon**, with its striped and striated limestone cliffs creating a bizarre, yet beautiful, desert moonscape. Drive to the farthest point of this wildly scenic canyon, admiring a panorama of folded and layered slopes, barren of vegetation but colored with vivid minerals.

En route, you will have time to stop in the **Balkan Mountains** for sightseeing and photo opportunities. Lunch today will be picnic-style in the canyons.

Meals: B, L, D – *Pilgrim Guesthouse or similar*

Day Sixteen, Friday, September 4

Yangykala • Turkmenbashi

After breakfast, depart for Turkmenbashi and explore the **volcanic rock formations at Kaytarmysh** along the way. In a small valley off Yangykala Canyon, a small spring and stream where nomads water their animals have eaten away the sandstone, leaving odd egg-shaped formations. The round stones are similar to huge dinosaur eggs, and some of them stick out of the canyon walls.

Turkmenistan's only seaport, **Turkmenbashi**, was originally named Krasnovodsk and came into being when Peter the Great's emissary, Prince Alexander Bekovich arrived at the Caspian Sea harbor to bring Russian "protection" to the khan of Khiva. Bekovich and most of his men were promptly killed and the empire didn't make real inroads into the area until 1819. After Saparmurat Niyazov became president in 1990, he renamed the port in honor of his title, Turkmenbashi, meaning "Leader of all Turkmen." Turkmenistan's largest oil refinery is located here.

Awaza is Turkmenistan's purpose-built seaside resort town. Awaza sports at least a dozen five star hotels set along the Caspian Sea, as well as a four-mile-long artificial canal. About 11 miles west of Turkmenbashi, the town is very close to the country's largest oil refinery.



Enjoy a free evening for rest or independent exploration before a group dinner at the hotel restaurant.
Meals: B, L, D – *Yelken Yacht Club or similar*



Day Seventeen, Saturday, September 5
Turkmenbashi (yacht cruise on Caspian)

Touring today begins with a **cruise along the Caspian Sea Coast** by Cruiser Yacht. Board the yacht at Turkmenbashi's marina for a sail along the coast and the modern seaport.

Following the cruise, wander through a **vibrant local bazaar**, where you can find the fruits, vegetables, and seafood that flourish in the Caspian area. Caspian caviar is a particularly good buy here.

Set back from the sea, the **Russian Orthodox Church of St. Michael the Archangel** was moved to its current location in 1895 from the Astrakhan diocese after a flood. The well-preserved little church is simple but lovely.

Meals: B, L, D – *Yelken Yacht Club or similar*



Day Eighteen, Sunday, September 6
Turkmenbashi • Ashgabat

Following a one-hour flight, arrive in Ashgabat and continue touring the city, starting with **Altyn Asyr Oriental Market**. It brims with all types of goods for sale, from household items and traditionally patterned carpets to electrical appliances and even animals.

Following the excursion to the market, transfer to the hotel for check-in before heading out for a group lunch, including a folk show performance.

This evening enjoy a **farewell dinner** with the group at the hotel restaurant.
Meals: B, L, D – *Oguzkent Hotel or similar*



Day Nineteen, Monday, September 7
Depart Ashgabat

The trip concludes today with transfer to the airport for departing flights.
Meals: B (flight schedules permitting)



Dates for 2020 – One Departure – Cultural Series

The land itinerary is scheduled to be operated on the following dates. Please note you will need to depart the U.S. at least one day prior to the tour start date, due to airline flight schedules.

August 20-September 7, 2020

Package Prices – 2020 Pricing Information

6-16 passengers (maximum 16), \$7,295 per person, double occupancy

Plus internal air \$125 (economy class, subject to change)

Partial Single supplement \$995

Land Tour Price Includes

- Accommodations as noted in itinerary.
- 19 breakfasts, 17 lunches, and 17 dinners. A few meals are not included so that you may enjoy a chance to experiment on your own.
- Bottled water at group meals.
- Restaurant tips for included meals.
- Services of experienced, English-speaking local guides, drivers and other staff and a MIR Tour Manager throughout the land tour.
- Arrival/departure airport transfers. MIR will arrange for all travelers to be met on arrival and seen off on departure whether we make your airfare arrangements or not, provided you arrive and depart on the tour start/end dates in the tour start/end cities.
- Ground transportation throughout itinerary by private coach or van (size of vehicle depends on group size).
- Guided sightseeing tours and entrance fees as outlined in itinerary.
- Special events, excursions and cultural performances per the itinerary.
- Baggage handling where available.
- Gratuities to local guides, drivers, porters and other service personnel.
- Complete pre-departure information including detailed packing list, reading list, *Touring with MIR* handbook with country-specific information, maps, and travel tips.
- Customized visa application and instruction kit (please note, visa fees are not included in the tour price).
- Final document packet including luggage tags, final updates, and more.

Not Included in Land Tour Price

- Internal airfare (quoted separately and is subject to change by airlines).
- International airfare or taxes/fuel surcharges.
- Meals not specified as included in the itinerary.
- Single supplement charge, if requested or required.
- Items of a personal nature (phone calls, email, laundry, alcohol, excess baggage, etc).
- Gratuities to Tour Manager.
- Visa/passport fees, airport departure fees.
- Expenses incurred as a result of delay, modification or extension of a tour due to causes beyond MIR's control.
- Travel entry pass to Turkmenistan payable on arrival, currently \$12-\$15, subject to change.
- Travel and trip cancellation insurance.

Interested in travel insurance?



To learn more about all the benefits of purchasing a Travel Guard travel insurance plan, please visit www.travelguard.com/mircorp or contact Travel Guard at 1.877.709.5596.

Start Planning Next Year Now

Dates for 2021- One Departure - Cultural Series

At the time of writing, the land itinerary for this program next year is projected to be generally as depicted for this year. Next year's dates and prices are shown below - please call if you're ready to book now.

August 19-September 6, 2021

Package Prices - 2021

6-16 passengers, \$7,395 per person, double occupancy
Plus internal air \$150 (economy class, subject to change)
Single supplement \$995 per person.

Cultural Series

MIR's Cultural Series programs feature some of our most distinctive tour concepts and include uncommon and educational experiences, including visits to small towns and villages outside the major urban areas and capital cities. All trips feature comfortable, well-located hotels.

Important Notes: Is This Trip Right For You?

While the accommodations are as comfortable as possible for the region, they will vary from four and five star properties to relatively basic and simple hotels in the more remote cities we visit, plus a very moderate guesthouse for one night in Turkmenistan and a desert tent camp for an additional night. One night is spent in a homestay/guesthouse where sleeping accommodations are shared with other group members in a large A/C indoor room or an oversize outdoor veranda, sleeping on mattresses placed on the floor; there are rustic outdoor WCs and an outdoor bucket shower. One night is spent tent camping at Darvaza in the desert in a temporary camp. Western style trekking tents with sleeping bags, mats and pillows are provided. Expect rustic outhouse facilities with no running water. There is no electricity to charge phones or camera batteries; though there is a generator which provides lighting for the toilets and shower. It is important to keep in mind that the countries of Central Asia are, in general, not up to the standards North American travelers expect. Services are improving in the region; nevertheless, you may encounter problems with plumbing, bureaucratic service, road conditions, unpaved sidewalks, uneven surfaces and steps, variety of locally available foods, and availability and quality of public restrooms. You are traveling in some areas which, relatively speaking, have seen few travelers, and the infrastructure is not yet fully developed.

While this program is designed to be the most comfortable possible for travel in this region, it is rated as **rigorous touring** due to the daily walking involved, the length of some bus rides and the overall shortcomings of the tourism infrastructure. This itinerary features a significant amount of touring on foot. Many streets are of packed dirt, and some attractions are only accessible via steep staircases with tall uneven steps. In particular, spiral staircases at architectural sites (such as Kalon Tower) can involve



steep steps inside a narrow passageway with limited light. In addition, there are fairly steep staircases with roughly 80 steps at the Shah-i-Zinda site in Samarkand. Some other sites and hotels may not offer elevators. To reap the full rewards of this adventure, travelers must be able to walk at least two miles a day, keeping up with fellow travelers. If you rely on electricity for **CPAP**, or for any other reason, you must have your own battery or other back-up, or please reconsider participation. Border crossings may require crossing a relatively **long distance by foot** while managing your own bags – up to about a half-mile. Bags may need to be carried during these crossings, rather than rolled, as the road/sidewalk surface is not always paved or smooth. Flexibility, a sense of humor and a willingness to accept local standards of amenities and services are essential components to the enjoyment of this trip.

Every effort has been made to make the information in this schedule accurate. However, trip itineraries are always subject to change. We will do our best to inform you in advance of any changes, but due to the nature of travel in Central Asia, this may not always be possible. Only those willing to accept these conditions should consider joining this program. If you are looking for a less adventurous experience, MIR offers other scheduled small group tour options featuring more comfortable accommodation and which do not venture into the remote and undeveloped regions of Central Asia. Please ask for details on these tours (**Journey Through Central Asia**) as well as a custom private journey which may be a better match for your interests and physical capabilities.

Important Notice Regarding Prescription Drugs

Please be advised that some countries in Central Asia, most notably Turkmenistan, but also Uzbekistan, have recently stepped up their border/customs inspection and enforcement activities for arriving and departing travelers concerning pharmaceutical drugs. While baggage search has always been possible, as of late there are reports of much greater frequency for baggage search at border crossings than has been the case based on our experience in the past. If you need to carry prescription medications with you of any kind, you are reminded to **carry an amount suitable for personal use only, in original labeled packing and with a copy of the prescription**. If you are not able to bring a copy of the prescription, please bring an official printed list of your medications that includes the drug name, dosage, doctor's name and all other relevant information. Package labeling should clearly indicate the same information.

Please note that some prescription drugs, including certain pain relievers such as **Tramadol** and **Hydrocodone**, which are somewhat common in the U.S., are completely prohibited from entry into Turkmenistan, even for personal use with a foreign prescription. Anti-anxiety medications such as **Lorazepam** can be problematic, as can sedatives such as **Zolpidem**. Another prohibited medication in Turkmenistan is **pseudoephedrine**. Please be sure to bring alternative medication with you as these drugs (**among others** – call for details) are simply not allowed at the present time.

Are You Prepared?

A Travel Guard travel insurance plan can help cover your vacation investment, offset expenses from travel mishaps and provide you with emergency travel assistance. To learn more about all of the benefits of purchasing a Travel Guard travel insurance plan, please visit www.travelguard.com/mircorp

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Tajikistan here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/tajikistan-travel-advisory.html>

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Uzbekistan here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/uzbekistan-travel-advisory.html>

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Turkmenistan here:



<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/turkmenistan-travel-advisory.html>

If you are not already enrolled in STEP, Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, a free service to enroll your trip with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate.

Weather

Planning your adventure should take all aspects of your destination into account, including the weather that you're likely to experience while on the road. Keep in mind that the weather at all times of the year is highly unpredictable and planning the best time of year should always be coupled with flexible packing, to allow you to make the best of any situation that comes up.

Central Asia experiences hot summers and cold winters. The best times to travel to these countries are in spring and fall, to catch the best temperatures between the hot parts of the summer and the cold winters. Rain is minimal. Late August-September temperatures are typically 80 to 95+.

Our group tours are scheduled to be in Central Asia at the best times for most people. Due to the long distances covered on many of our programs and the amount of time spent on the road, it is fair to say you will experience a range of temperatures and conditions over the course of your trip. We recommend checking temperature ranges online. Research using sites such as Weatherbase, available online at www.weatherbase.com, will help you get a snapshot of daily average temperatures as well as precipitation days and more.

International Airfare

MIR's in-house, full-service air department is available to assist with your air travel needs. Check with MIR before booking air on your own, as we are happy to research and compare the best fares available through multiple channels. Airfare varies depending on a wide variety of factors, such as dates of travel and seasonality, seat availability, special airline promotions, how restrictive ticket changes are, how long the fares can be held without purchase, routing considerations such as stopovers, and more. Tour dates are based on the land tour only. Our preferred carrier for this tour is Turkish Airlines, as they offer convenient itineraries and competitive rates from multiple cities across the U.S. to Central Asia.

Please call us at 800-424-7289 to discuss air options and routings for this program, and to request a quote for your specific plans and dates of travel. We will be happy to put together a no-obligation suggested air itinerary and estimate for you at your request.

Visas

At the time of writing, U.S. passport holders require three visas for this tour: Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen. You may also need a visa for any additional country you fly via to join the tour (such as Russia or Turkey).

Uzbek and Tajik visas are e-visas, while the Turkmen visa is a physical/sticker visas. We recommend processing all visas through our preferred provider, Passport Visas Express. The estimated visa costs for U.S. passport holders, based on standard processing time, is \$346. Your exact visa fees may differ as visa costs can depend on a number of factors, such as state of residence, processing time, and return shipping. Visa fees are always subject to change.

The Turkmen visa can be applied for in the U.S. prior to departure, with a valid authorization letter. Visa processing for the Turkmen physical visa for this tour will generally take 3-4 weeks. Travelers should prepare to be without their passports for that amount of time. Required Turkmenistan visa



pre-authorizations can be very time consuming for MIR to receive on your behalf and may cause delays in processing beyond the expected time spent in the embassies. If you plan to travel in the time leading up to your MIR tour, you may need to obtain a second valid passport or use expedited processing for some of your visas, or plan to obtain your Turkmen visa on the border. Please contact us with any questions you may have regarding the timeline for visa processing.

Extensive pre-tour paperwork is necessary to apply for these visas, which in some cases requires a foreign government approval authorization to be issued prior to submission of your application materials to the Embassies/Consulates. A valid passport with six months validity from the end of the tour is also required.

In the past some travelers have made their own visa arrangements instead of using MIR's preferred provider for their visa processing; either using their own visas service or attempting to process directly with the embassies/consulates. We strongly recommend you discuss it with us before choosing an alternate visa processing method, to help avoid difficulties and visa problems. **In the event that you plan to process visas without going through MIR's preferred provider, please contact us first so we can pass you detailed instructions with critical trip-specific information.**

Also Nearby...

For more tours to Central Asia, you may want to check out:

Flexible Essential Trips – Classic Private Journeys

Essential Central Asia, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, 13 days. Explore the markets, mosques and minarets of oasis towns on the fringes of the Kyzyl Kum and Kara Kum deserts. Here spiritual beliefs were the greatest commodities to flow along trade routes, and civilizations blossomed amidst austere natural beauty.

Essential Kyrgyzstan, 8 days. On this comprehensive journey among the soaring peaks, glacial lakes and steep valleys of the Kyrgyz outback, spend a night with a village family, learning the traditional way to make felt, bake flatbread in a clay oven and milk a mare. Visit with a seasoned eagle hunter and admire dramatic landscapes of ochre and umber sandstone formations.

Essential Tajikistan, 8 days. Rarely-visited Tajikistan is wreathed in spectacular mountains and colored with the influence of Persia, the Islamic world and Russia. Meet local people at Fergana Valley markets, explore the ruins of ancient Penjikent and share a meal in a warm Tajik home. Visit the country's capital, Dushanbe, where an airy, light-filled space is home to the modern National Museum of Tajikistan.

Essential Turkmenistan, 12 days. From the golden monuments of Ashgabat and the ruins of Parthian Nisa, head into the mountains to visit a silk weaver in his tribal village home. Visit the Caspian seaport, Turkmenbashi, explore UNESCO-listed Merv and learn about traditional crafts. Camp at the "Door to Hell" and survey Kunya-Urgench, ancient capital of Khorezm.

Essential Kazakhstan, 7 days. Begin in the new city of Astana, capital of Kazakhstan only since 1997. Fly to Chimkent and discover the historic city of Turkistan with its UNESCO-listed mausoleum of a revered Sufi sheikh. Fly to Almaty and explore spectacular Charyn Canyon, with its strange rock formations and colorful strata.



Essential Uzbekistan, 10 days. Beginning in the modern capital, Tashkent, roam the great Silk Road oases of Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva, all of them UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Admire their mosques, *madrassahs*, and minarets clad in ceramic tiles the color of the desert sky.

Small Group Tours

The Pamir Highway: From the Heavenly Tien Shan to the High Pamirs, 18 days. Join a fascinating and adventurous journey through two of the most remote and rarely explored countries in Central Asia – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Life in these isolated nations has remained unchanged for centuries. Experience the proud traditions and hospitality of Kyrgyz nomads in the highlands, enjoy visits with local Tajiks in their timeless mountain villages, and take in majestic and hauntingly beautiful landscapes along one of the world’s most scenic drives, the Pamir Highway.

Return to the North Caucasus, 14 days. Discover the ravishing mountain landscapes, medley of cultures, and overflowing hospitality of North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan in the North Caucasus region, where ancient mountain tribes have guarded their way of life for thousand of years.

Silk Route Odyssey: Caravan Across Uzbekistan, 15 days. The center of Central Asia, Uzbekistan, is home to three of the most renowned of the Silk Road oases — Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. Journey through these UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the incredible Savitsky Museum in Nukus, and the lush Fergana Valley where Central Asia’s silk production began with two cocoons hidden in the headdress of a royal Chinese bride.

Conditions of Participation

Your participation on a MIR Corporation trip is subject to the conditions contained in the 2020 Tour Reservation Form and Release of Liability and Assumption of Risk Agreement. Please read this document carefully and contact us with any questions.

Cancellation and Refund Policy

Payment Terms: Non-refundable deposits are accepted by check, Visa, MasterCard or American Express. Final land payments may be made by check or credit card for reservations made directly with MIR. If booking through a travel agent, please contact your agent to find out what form of payment they accept. (MIR can accept final payment from travel agents by agency check only.) Air fares are subject to change until ticketed; payment policies vary by carrier.

If you cancel your trip please notify MIR in writing. Upon MIR’s receipt of notice the following charges apply to land tours (policies for air tickets, custom group trips vary):

Scheduled MIR Small Group Tours

Cost of cancellation, if received:

61 or more days prior to departure, deposit due or paid in full of \$750;

31-60 days prior to departure, 50% of land tour cost

30 days prior to or after trip departure, no refund

References

We encourage you to speak directly with satisfied past travelers. Please request a list of references.



Why MIR?

Regional knowledge is crucial to the success of any trip to our corner of the world. MIR combines detailed information about geography and infrastructure, history and art, language and culture, with the depth of knowledge that comes only from decades of regional experience. You may wonder how we differ from other tour operators...

Destination Specialization

MIR focuses exclusively on the exceptional region at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. This area has been our overriding passion since 1986; we don't do the rest of the world. Our hard-earned expertise gained over the last three decades can take you from end to end of the largest country in the world – Russia – and to all of its neighbors. We specialize in travel to Siberia, the Silk Route, St. Petersburg & Beyond. Our destinations include: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), Turkey, Mongolia, China, Tibet, and Central/East Europe (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia).



30 Years of Experience

A travel company doesn't last more than 30 years in the business without a solid track record. MIR has helped thousands of individuals achieve their travel goals. Our dedication and experience have earned us their trust and the trust of many well-respected institutions. Today MIR is the preferred tour operator for museum, alumni and special interest organizations across the country.



Recommended & Respected

MIR has twice been rated one of the “Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth” by *National Geographic Adventure*. Several of our tours have won awards in top travel publications, such as *Outside* magazine and *National Geographic Traveler*. Our trips have been featured in books such as *Riding the Hula Hula to the Arctic Ocean* and *1,000 Places to See Before You Die*.

More Questions?

Please feel free to call us with questions at 1-800-424-7289, 8:30am-5:30pm Pacific Time.

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