



TRAVEL THE UNKNOWN

TAKE THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

FIVE STANS ODYSSEY

30 days



Countries visited

Turkmenistan • Uzbekistan • Tajikistan • Kazakhstan • Kyrgyzstan • India

Tour Highlights

- The sparkling white marble eeriness of Ashgabat
- The old fortress of Nisa
- The ruins of the ancient city of Merv
- Historic monuments in Kunya-Urgench
- The UNESCO listed Silk Road city of Bukhara
- The great "Tower of Death" minaret and mosque of Poi Kalan
- The sublime architecture of the UNESCO-listed city of Samarkand
- The bustling capital of Dushanbe
- Discover Kazkhstan's rich history in Almaty's Central State Museum
- Impressive rock formations at Sharyn Canyon
- Intricate wooden carvings on Karakol's Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral

- Sublime beauty of Issy Kul Lake

Places visited

Ashgabat • Nisa • Ancient Merv • Mary • Kipchak • Kunya-Urgench • Nukus • Dashoguz • Khiva • Ayaz Kala • Toprak Kala • Savitsky Museum • Bukhara • Kyzylkum Desert • Samarkand • Shakhrisabz • Konigil Village • Afrosiab • Tashkent • Khujand • Istaravshan • Zerafshan Valley • Penjikent • Sarazm • Dushanbe • Iskanderkul Lake • Hisor Town • Almaty • Karakol • Charyn Canyon • Chon-Kemin valley • Ashu • Cholpan Ata • Bishkek

What's included

- Arrival & departure transfers
- Ground transport with driver
- Domestic flights
- Dushanbe - Almaty flight
- Accommodation
- Meals as per the meal plan
- English-speaking guides (in each country you will have a new guide)
- Entrance fees to sites & parks

What's not included

- Meals not mentioned in itinerary
- Drinks
- Visa fees
- Tipping
- Camera / video camera fees
- Personal items (laundry, telephone, etc.)
- Medical expenses
- Any services not mentioned in itinerary

All accommodation subject to availability. Final accommodation choices will be confirmed after booking.

Your Itinerary Explained

Date	Place visited	Meals
	<p>The first part of the text in each day is the itinerary schedule and will explain what you will normally see/do during this day of your itinerary.</p> <p>---</p> <p><i>The part of the day's text in italics (and comes after the three dashes "---") is background information on the places or sites on that day of your itinerary. It is not part of your itinerary and may mention places that will not be visited on your itinerary. If you have any questions please ask us. Travel times where noted are only meant as a guideline.</i></p>	<p>B: Breakfast</p> <p>L: Lunch</p> <p>D: Dinner</p>

Tour Itinerary

Day 1	Arrival in Ashgabat (Turkmenistan)	Meals
	<p>Arrive into Ashgabat where you will be met by a Travel The Unknown representative and transferred to the hotel. In the afternoon, visit the Old Nisa fortress. Later, enjoy a tour of Ashgabat, visiting sites including the Monument and Independence Park, as well as the impressive Ertoghrul Ghazi mosque. We round off by exploring the National Museum of History and Ethnography (closed on Tuesdays). Overnight in Ashgabat.</p> <p>---</p> <p><i>Ashgabat translates to "the city of love" in Arabic. This city is relatively young, being founded and developed by the Russians at the end of the 19th century. A massive earthquake in 1948 completely destroyed the city and killed two thirds of its population. It was rebuilt by the Soviets in their inimitable style, but the grand white marble palaces, domes and manicured parks seen today have mostly been built in the last 15 years to showcase the country's oil and gas wealth.</i></p> <p><i>The National Museum of History and Ethnography is a great place to get a feel for Turkmenistan's long and complex history. It houses over 500,000 artifacts and relics from the country's main archaeological sites, as well as examples of national dress, traditional household equipment, a couple of enormous carpets and some traditional musical instruments</i></p> <p><i>The UNESCO-listed ruins of Nisa can be found near to Ashgabat. The settlement was originally founded under the rule of the Parthian king Arsaces I in the 3rd century BC. Excavations of the site have uncovered mausoleums, shrines, ornate ivory rhytons (drinking cups) and Hellenistic works of art, indicating that the site was one of the earliest and most important cities of the Parthian empire. It was destroyed by an earthquake in the 1st century BC.</i></p>	<p>N/A</p>
<p>Day 2</p>	<p>Ashgabat – Merv</p>	<p>Meals</p>



Ashgabat

In the early morning, transfer to the airport for your flight to Mary. On arrival, drive to Bayram-Ali, the contemporary re-incarnation of the Ancient Merv. After sightseeing, return to Mary and visit the local History Museum. Overnight in Mary.

B

***Ancient Merv** was once a major oasis city on the Silk Road, where evidence of civilisation dates back to the 3rd millennium BC. The ancient site held significant cultural and political importance and is believed to have been the largest city in the world in the 12th century. The walled ruins of Merv have since been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. It is believed that Genghis Khan slaughtered a million people here when conquering the city.*

*The city of **Mary** is located on the Murghab River in the Kara Kum Desert. Formerly known as "Merv", the oasis city was an important stop on the Silk Road. The modern settlement of Mary was founded in 1884, when it became a Russian military administrative centre. It remains a centre for the production and trading of cotton and gas.*

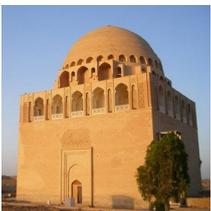
*The **History Museum** in Mary was founded in 1968. It contains over 40,000 exhibits that document the culture, history and heritage of the region. These include traditional clothing, tapestries, manuscripts and historic weapons.*

Overnight in Hotel Mary, Mary

Day 3

Mary – Ashgabat

Meals



Mary

In the morning, transfer to the airport for your return flight to Ashgabat. On arrival, explore the colorful Russian bazaar. Later, visit the Arkadash stud farm near Geok-Depe, the site of the biggest battle for Russian domination in Central Asia in the late 19th century. On the farm, you will have a chance to enjoy an Akhal-Tekke horse ride. Return to Ashgabat, stopping at an impressive complex in Kipchak en route. On arrival in Ashgabat, transfer to the hotel for your overnight stay.

B

***Kipchak** was the home village of the first President of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, and the site of the impressive white marble Kipchak Mosque. Also known as the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque, it is the largest mosque in Central Asia, with an overall capacity of 10,000 people. It was built between 2002 and 2004 for Niyazov, who is buried in the mausoleum alongside his family. It cost Turkmenistan \$100,000,000 to construct and its image is featured on the national 500 TMT banknotes.*

Overnight in Grand Turkmen Hotel, Ashgabat

Day 4

Ashgabat – Kunya-Urgench – "Hojeili" border (Uzbekistan) – Nukus

Meals



Kunya-Urgench

Transfer to the airport for your flight to Dashoguz. On arrival, drive to Kunya-Urgench and visit its historic sights, including the 14th century mausoleum of Turabek Hanum, the minaret of Kutlug Timur, and the fabled al-Mamun's Academy of Sciences. Continue to the "Hojeili border" and cross into Uzbekistan on foot, where you will meet your Uzbek guide / driver on the other side and transfer to Nukus for your overnight stay.

B

Kunya-Urgench is a UNESCO-listed town in northern Turkmenistan, located on the banks of the Amu Darya (Oxus) river. Once the heart of the Islamic world under the Khorezmshah dynasty, it was extensively destroyed by Genghis Khan, who even diverted the Oxus to flood the city. It was later ruled by the Golden Horde and became the capital of Khorezm until Timur saw it as a rival to Samarkand and destroyed it again, though he may have taken some ideas first. Today there are buildings from 12th to 19th century, some very beautiful. Though banned, locals continue to bury their dead here.

The city of **Nukus** is surrounded by the Kara Kum, Kizil Kum and Ustyurt deserts. The former village of Nukus became the site of a large military fort during Soviet rule in the 19th century. The village began to expand in size around this fortress and later became the economic, administrative, political and cultural centre of the autonomous province of Karakalpakstan.

Overnight in Hotel Jipek Joly, Nukus

Day 5

Nukus - Khiva

Meals



Nukus

Spend the day exploring the highlights of Nukus, including the Igor Savitskiy Museum. In the afternoon, drive to Khiva, visiting the ruins of Toprak Kala and Ayaz Kala fortresses en route. Overnight in Khiva.

B

Ayaz Kala is one of the largest castles of ancient Khorezm, consisting of a lower, middle and upper fortress. These clay frontiers are believed to have been constructed between the 4th century BC and 7th century AD to protect against nomadic raids. It is estimated to have remained in use until the Mongol invasions of the 13th century.

Toprak Kala was the capital of Khorezm in the 3rd century AD. The fortress was originally home to the governors of the country, although many wars led the rulers to flee. Today, these ruins provide an insight into ancient Khorezm culture. Excavations have led to the discovery of relics including coins, ceramics, silk fabrics and jewellery.

The **Savitskiy Museum** is one of the key sights in Nukus. This art museum was opened in 1966 - and houses a collection of over 82,000 items. These include folk and fine art, along with the second largest collection of Russian avant garde in the world. The museum is named after its founder, Igor Savitskiy, who was a Russian painter, archaeologist and collector.

Day 6

Khiva

Meals



Kalta Minar

Enjoy a walking tour of Khiva, visiting the major sights of the Ichan Kala citadel, including the Kalta Minor minaret, the Rakhimkhon Madrasah and the Mausoleum of Pakhlavan Makhmud. In the afternoon, visit the Friday Mosque and Tashauli Palace. Overnight in Khiva.

B

Khiva is a city located in the Khorezm region of Uzbekistan. Its history stretches back to at least the 6th century BC, though possibly much longer. Khiva is made up of an outer town (Dishan Kala) and inner town (Ichin Kala), which are surrounded by fortified brick walls that date back to the 10th century. Ichin Kala was the first site in Uzbekistan to be inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Tashauli Palace was built within the walls of Ichin Kala during the 1830s to house the Khivan ruler, Allah Kuli Khan. Tashauli means 'stone house' and seems to accurately conjure up images of the labyrinth of stone passageways within and surrounding the palace complex. The outer walls of the palace are decorated with colourful murals, whilst inside there are ornate pendant ceilings, stone carvings and delicate inscriptions.

The **Friday (or Juma) mosque** of Khiva is typical of Arabian mosques built during the 18th century, consisting of moonlight holes in the ceiling and carved wooden columns. The mosque has over 200 such columns, many of which were carved from the trunks of trees. Some columns sport Arabian inscriptions, which are believed to date back to between the 10th and 12th centuries and reused when building this mosque.

Kalta Minar, meaning "short minaret", has become a symbol for the city of Khiva. Construction started in 1853 by the Khiva ruler, Muhammad Amin Khan. It was intended to be over 70 metres tall, but in 1855 he was killed and the construction halted at a mere 26 metres. The wide foundation of the minaret indicates the intention to build an imposing tower, supposedly so he could see all the way to Bukhara. It is covered with original glazed tiles and majolica.

Islam Khodja Minaret is the tallest building in Khiva's Ichin Kala. Built in 1908, it is almost 60 metres tall and was designed to be seen from a great distance so travellers could find their way to the city. There is an observation level within the minaret at a height of 45 metres, where visitors can enjoy a view out across the many monuments of Khiva.

Day 7

Khiva – Bukhara

Meals



Khiva

After breakfast, drive to Bukhara via the famous Kizil Kum Desert. Observe the desert flora and fauna, including the unique "saksaul" trees, and stop at the Amudarya river bank. Later, continue to Bukhara for your overnight stay.

B

 The **Kyzylkum Desert** is located in Central Asia, between the Amu Darya (Oxus) and Syr Darya rivers. "Kyzyl Kum" means "Red Sands" in Uzbek. As you can infer, this desert has many red sand dunes and clay takirs, which are also known as salt flats. Animals found in the desert include the Russian tortoise and the large Transcaspian lizard. The historic Amu Darya river (formerly Oxus river) is one of the longest rivers in Central Asia. Until relatively reaching into the Aral Sea, the Oxus flows a total length of 2,400 kilometres from its source in Afghanistan through to Uzbekistan. Intensive irrigation of the river that began under Soviet Rule to enable extensive cotton farming in the lower basin of the river has taken a devastating effect on those that relied on the river and the Aral Sea.

Overnight in Paradise Plaza, Bukhara

Day 8

Bukhara

Meals



Ark Fortress

Enjoy a full day exploring some of Bukhara's main highlights, including the Lab-i-Khauz Ensemble, the Nadirxon Devanbegi Madrasah and the Mogaki Attari Mosque. Also see the Poi Kalon minaret and mosque before proceeding to the Aziz Khan and Ulug Beg Madrasahs. After lunch, visit Ark Fortress, Balakhauz Mosque, the Mausoleum of Ismail Samani, and Chashma Ayub. Continue to the Hunarmand UNDP Assisted Workshops near Lyabikhauz, and observe block printing, carving and suzani embroidery. Overnight in Bukhara.

B

 UNESCO-listed **Bukhara** was a key staging point on the Silk Road. According to myth the city was founded by a Persian prince who escaped his wicked stepmother across the Oxus river in search of new fortunes. The city today is home to over 140 largely intact architectural monuments. Constructed on an artificial hill in the 5th century BC, the Ark Fortress is Bukhara's oldest building. The former military structure became the winter residence of Bukhara's emirs before it fell under rule of Russia in 1920. Besides an edifying visit to the Ark Museum, the Fortress houses the former Russian Embassy, the former home of a progressive vizier named Kush Begi, and the throne room, where emirs were coronated and coins were minted.

The **Ark Fortress** is Bukhara's oldest building, constructed on an artificial hill in the 5th century BC. The former military structure became the winter residence of Bukhara's emirs, before it fell under rule of Russia in 1920. Today, the Ark is home to a museum that depicts its history and you can visit the former Russian Embassy, the former home of a progressive vizier named Kush Begi, and the throne room, where emirs were coronated and coins were minted.

Chashma Ayub, means "Job's well". To combat drought in the region, Job (of Biblical fame) struck the ground with his staff and made a well. The water of this miraculous well is still believed to possess healing powers. A mausoleum was later constructed to protect the sacred site, and there is a small water museum here too.

The **Mausoleum of Ismail Samani** was built at the end of the 9th century, making it one of Bukhara's oldest buildings. It was constructed by Ismail Samani as a family crypt following the death of his father. Ismail was the founder of the Samanid dynasty, and his reign was seen as Bukhara's first golden age during which education and the arts flourished. The mausoleum's simple architectural design is decorated with geometrically intricate patterns made from fired mud brick and shows influences of Buddhism as well as Islam, making the mausoleum unique.

Balakhauz mosque is the only preserved monument on the Registan square in Bukhara. The building was constructed in 1712 under the rule of Emir Shakhmurad. It was primarily built for public prayers, but was also a dormitory for Dervishes. Its beautiful wooden pillars are made from elm, walnut and poplar.

Poi Kalyan is a religious site that encompasses Kalan Minaret, Kalan Mosque and the Mir-i-Arab Madrassah. **Kalyan Minaret**, which stands at around 46.5m high, was built in 1127. It's often called the "Tower of Death", as during the reign of Emir Nasrullah – the Butcher of Bukhara - many of those sentenced to death were thrown from the top. **Kalyan Mosque** was built during the 1500s, on the site of a former mosque that had been destroyed by Genghis Khan. Modelled on Naqsh-e-Jahan square in Isfahan in Iran and built by Persian craftsmen, it served as a warehouse during Soviet rule. The ornate **Mir-i Arab Madrassa** was built by Ubaidullah-khan in honour of his spiritual mentor, Sheikh Abdullah Yamani of Yemen. A great blue dome stands above the intricate murals that adorn the great entrance.

The **Ulug Beg Madrasah** is part of Kosh Madrasah, which also includes the **Aziz Khan Madrasah**. Each of these structures represent different ruling dynasties in the history of Bukhara. The influence of the Timurid and Ashtarkanid dynasties is reflected in the madrasah's differing architectural design and decor - where the Ulug beg Madrasah is more modest, Aziz Khan is more luxurious.

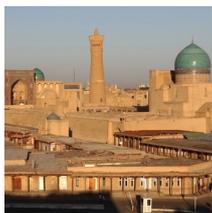
The **Nadirkhon Devanbegi Khana** was built in 1620 as a lodging house for Sufi Muslims. Due to its location, the Khana became a significant cultural and religious site in Bukhara. Following the construction of the Nadirkhon Devanbegi Khana the connecting Madrasah was then built in 1962 - both under the order of Vizier Nadir. Its architecture is typical of Central Asian Muslim monuments, whilst the decor features colourful murals of birds, animals, the sun and human beings - something that was uncharacteristic of Islamic monuments constructed during this era.

The **Lab-i-Khauz Ensemble** means "by the pond" in Persian. It is the name given to the architectural monuments that surround one of the few remaining ponds in the city of Bukhara. Many others were filled during the Soviet era due to fears of spreading disease. This one remains and is the centerpiece of a remarkable architectural ensemble including the Kujeldash Madrassa (built in 1568-1569), the Nadikhon Devanbegi Madrassa (1620) and Khana (1622). There has been a tea house beside the pond since the 16th century and Bukhara's Jewish quarter abuts this area.

Hunarmand Assisted Workshops were established under the supervision of the United Nations Development Programme with the intention to support the development of local handicrafts. Visitors to the workshops can watch the skilled process of suzani embroidery (traditional Uzbek tapestries). Other crafts practiced here include block printing, metal chasing, carving and miniature painting

Overnight in Paradise Plaza, Bukhara

Day 9	Bukhara	Meals
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Bukhara

Today is free to explore Bukhara at your leisure. Overnight in Bukhara.

B

Overnight in Paradise Plaza, Bukhara

Day 10	Bukhara – Shakhrisabz – Samarkand	Meals
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Samarkand

In the morning, drive to Samarkand, stopping at Shakhrisabz en route. Visit Ak Saray Palace, the Dorut Tilovat Ensemble, Kok Gumbaz Mosque, and the Friday Mosque. Continue to Samarkand for your overnight stay,

B

Amir Timur, better known as "Tamerlane" in the West, was born in Shakhrisabz in the 14th century. He was the founder of the Timurid dynasty and, under his leadership, Samarkand became the capital of a vast empire. He longed to rebuild the empire of Genghis Khan and his armies are thought to have killed about 5% of the world's population. He referred to himself as the "Sword of Islam", though some scholars suggest his piety may have been political posturing.

Shakhrisabz translates to "Green City". Founded over 2,700 years ago when it was known as "Kesh" or "Kish", it is one of Central Asia's most ancient cities. Throughout history, the city has fallen under the rule of various dynasties, including Alexander the Great in 329 BC. Today, Shakhrisabz is renowned for its handicrafts including carpet weaving, embroidery and tubeteikas (a traditional Uzbek hat).

Ak Saray Palace was built under the rule of Amir Timur. Its construction began in 1380 and took over 25 years to complete. The palace towers once reached a striking 80 metres tall. The luxurious palace was left in ruins following the siege of Abdullah Khan, where, according to legend, Abdullah had the city destroyed after his horse died from exhaustion on the steep approach to Shakhrisabz.

The **Dorut Tilovat Ensemble** was constructed after the death of Shamisiddin Kulal, the famous religious leader and founder of Sufism, in 1370. This memorial complex holds the tomb of Shamisiddin, along with a burial vault (makbarat) of the Timurid family and their descendants. It has become an important pilgrimage stop for the many disciples of Shamisiddin.

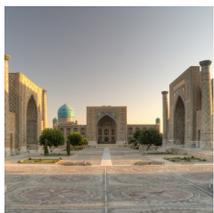
The **Kok Gumbaz Mosque** was constructed in 1435 on the site of the Dorut Tilovat Ensemble. Also known as the Friday Mosque of Shahrissabz, the structure can be found opposite the tomb of Shamsiddin Kulal. "Kok Gumbaz" translates to "blue dome", after its crowning dome which is covered with blue ceramic tiles.

Overnight in Grand Samarkand, Samarkand

Day 11

Samarkand

Meals



Registan Square

Enjoy a full day tour of Samarkand. Explore the famous Registan Square and the three beautiful madrasahs of Ulug Beg, Tillya-Kori and Sher-Dor. Visit Gur Emir and later see the grand Bibi Khanum Mosque. Finally, wander through the Silk Road bazaar and Shah i Zinda mausoleum. Overnight in Samarkand.

B

Samarkand is one of the oldest inhabited cities in Central Asia, with evidence of human activity stretching back over 40,000 years to the late Paleolithic era. The city itself is 2,700 years old. Falling variously under Greek, Persian, Arab, Turkic and Mongol rule throughout its history, it prospered greatly as a key junction on the Silk Road and reached its golden age under the rule of Timur. The city's backdrop of madrassas, mosques and mausoleums highlights its rich medieval history. Today it is Uzbekistan's second largest city and was granted UNESCO World Heritage status in 2001.

Registan Square lies at the heart of the city of Samarkand. Three of the square's four sides are framed by grand madrasa buildings that were built between the 14th and 16th centuries, each with a unique design that displays traditional oriental architecture. All were active until the 1920s, when the Soviets shut them down. Registan translates to "sandy place", as the central square was covered by sand and functioned largely as a trading market before the three madrassas were built.

Gur-e-Amir is the mausoleum of Timur (a.k.a. Tamarlane) and his male ancestors. The tomb was built in 1403 for Timur's favorite grandson, Mohammad Sultan, but also became his own, after he died suddenly of pneumonia on his way to conquer China at the age of 69. The grand entrance to the mausoleum features ornately carved bricks and mosaics, whilst the interior displays a high-domed chamber decorated with hand-painted niches and archways. Stalin dug up Timur's bones in 1941 to prove it was indeed him, despite Timur's warnings to those who would disturb him. The next day Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union!

Built in 1399 by Timur to commemorate his conquest of India and named after his favourite wife, the **Bibi Khanum mosque** was the largest mosque in the world until the Blue Mosque in Constantinople eclipsed it in the early 15th century. Earthquakes and weathering caused it to fall to ruins, but it has undergone extensive reconstruction efforts, which are still ongoing. The restored main chamber and minarets feature beautifully ornate details and decorative mosaics, whilst just outside visitors can see the symbolic statue of a Koran stand.

The **Shah i Zinda mausoleum** contains some of the most spectacular tilework in the world. Here you can find the tombs of several female relatives of Timur. It is also believed that Qusam ibn-Abbas, a cousin of the Prophet Mohammed who brought Islam to the area, was also buried here. For this reason the site draws many pilgrims. The site has been heavily, and controversially, restored. The Shodi Mulk Oko Mausoleum, a niece of Timur, is a sublime exception.

Overnight in Grand Samarkand, Samarkand

Day 12

Samarkand

Meals



Samarkand

Continue exploring Samarkand, visiting Ulug Beg's Observatory and the ancient settlement of Afrosiab. Head to Konigil village to visit the paper mill and take part in the process of turning the rind of the mulberry tree into paper. Overnight in Samarkand.

B

*The **Ulug Beg Observatory** was built by Ulug Beg, Timur's grandson, in 1420. Often referred to as the "Astronomer king" Ulug Beg was often more interested in science than ruling. A progressive and advocate for education for all, he built this observatory to observe and measure time, distances and more, with astonishing accuracy. His measurement of the calendar year was out by less a minute. Assassinated by order of his son, religious fanatics destroyed much of the observatory which was only found again in 1908 by a determined Russian general and amateur archaeologist, V. L. Vyatkin.*

***Konigil Village** is home to the 'Meros' paper mill, where traditional Samarkand technologies have been revived. Visitors can watch the paper making process from its raw state as Mulberry bark, to the characteristic yellow Samarkand paper.*

*The ancient settlement of **Afrosiab** lies in northern Samarkand on the spurs of the Cupan-Ata hills. According to legend, the Turanian king Adrosiab founded the town here and it later became the capital of Sogdiana.*

Overnight in Grand Samarkand, Samarkand

Day 13

Samarkand

Meals



Samarkand

Today is free to explore Samarkand at your leisure. Overnight in Samarkand.

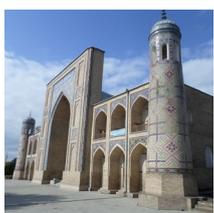
B

Overnight in Grand Samarkand, Samarkand

Day 14

Samarkand – Tashkent

Meals



Tashkent

The morning is free to explore at your leisure before transferring to the railway station for your train to Tashkent. Overnight in Tashkent.

B

Day 15

Tashkent

Meals



Chorsu bazaar

Spend the morning exploring the old town of Tashkent, visiting Barak Khana Seminary and Tila Shaikh Mosque. Later, continue to Chorsu Bazaar and Kukeldash Madrasah. In the afternoon, visit the Museum of Applied Arts, the Mustakillik Square in the heart of Tashkent and the famous Tashkent Metro. Finally, wander through Amir Temur square. Overnight in Tashkent.

B

Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, has had a long and turbulent history. Early on, it fell under first Sogdian, then Turkic, and then Islamic rule before being destroyed by Genghis Khan in 1219. Tashkent rose again as it profited from its position on the Silk Road, but was destroyed by a devastating earthquake in 1966, after which it was largely rebuilt again by the Soviets.

The historic **Kukeldash Madrasah** in Tashkent was built in 1570 by rulers of the Shaybanid Dynasty. The historic madrasah was built in a traditional style around an inner courtyard and garden. Many earthquakes in the region left the building in ruins. It has since undergone significant restoration efforts and was converted into a caravanserai during the 18th century. It was used as a barracks in Soviet times and even once served as a venue for public executions of unfaithful women.

The traditional **Chorsu bazaar** can be found at the heart of Tashkent's old town, near the famous Kukeldash Madrasah. Dating back over one hundred years, the bazaar sits beneath a large, blue-domed roof that is designed to keep out heat and dust. The bazaar serves up an abundance of fruits, nuts, meat, spices, fresh bread, as well as various handicrafts.

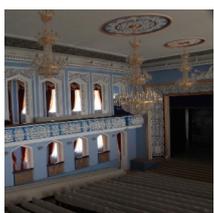
Mustakillik Square ("Independence Square"), located in central Tashkent, was known as "Red Square" under Soviet rule. It was later renamed to "Lenin Square", and Lenin's statue adorned its centre. It is during this era that its many fountains were constructed. Following the 1991 declaration of independence, Lenin was replaced with an independence monument showing an outsized Uzbekistan on a globe. The square is also home to the Senate and a World War II memorial.

The **Tashkent Metro** was the first underground train line to be built in Central Asia. Each station along the metro line has unique architecture and artistic decorations that reflect the station's name. The theme of each station has been created using metal engravings, ornate structures, ceramics and mosaics.

Day 16

Tashkent – "Oybek" border (Tajikistan) – Khujand

Meals



Arbob Palace

Drive to the "Oybek" border and cross over into Tajikistan, where you will meet your Tajik guide / driver. Continue to Khujand and check in to the hotel. Later, proceed on a city tour of Khujand, visiting the Pushkin and Kamoli Khudjandi Squares, Timur Malik's Fortress and the Sughd Museum. Also see the Mausoleum of Sheikh Muslihiddin memorial complex, Panjshanbe Bazaar and Arbob Palace. Overnight in Khujand.

B

Founded between the 7th and 8th centuries, **Khujand** is one of the oldest cities in Central Asia and the second largest in Tajikistan. Located along the Silk Road, it connects Samarkand with Fergana Valley. It was destroyed by the army of Genghis Khan during the 13th century, but quickly revived due to its strategic location and significant transport links, becoming one of the largest commercial, cultural and scientific centres in Tajikistan.

Set within a reconstructed bastion in Khujand's city wall, **Sughd Museum** holds a variety of regional artifacts showcasing the history of the Sughd region. The basement houses a collection of Graeco-Roman-style stone reliefs and murals of prehistoric life, while a statue of Timur Malik takes centre-stage in the main hall.

Built on the tomb of Khujand's 12th century ruler, Muslihiddin Khudjandi, the **Mausoleum of Sheikh Muslihiddin** lies in the historical centre of Khujand. It has been rebuilt several times throughout the centuries, creating a distortion between the buildings not just in style but in purpose (the 16th century reconstructed mausoleum was no longer used for just burials, but also for prayer and ritual ceremonies). Today, the mausoleum is an architectural complex consisting of a cathedral mosque, a 20-metre-tall 19th century minaret and ancient burials.

Meaning "Thursday" in Persian, **Panjshanbe Bazaar** is Khujand's central market and one of the oldest in Tajikistan. Located in a Silk Road city, the market has always been popular with traders and travellers, selling a variety of goods, from fruit and vegetables to meat and bread.

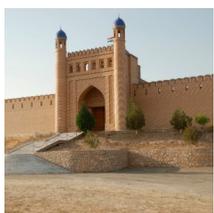
Showcasing beautiful Soviet neo-classical architecture, **Arbob Palace** symbolises the historical bridge between Soviet Tajikistan and independent Tajikistan. Particularly significant in 1992, it was the meeting place of the Tajik Society who officially declared independence from the Soviet Union, as well as the site where the Tajik flag was chosen.

Overnight in Hotel Khudjan Deluxe, Khujand

Day 17

Khujand – Istaravshan – Penjikent

Meals



Istaravshan

In the morning, drive to Penjikent via Istaravshan town. Enjoy a sightseeing tour of Istaravshan, visiting Kok Gumbaz Mosque, Mugtepa fortress and the Sar-i Mazor complex consisting of two mausoleums and a lovely mosque in the gardens. Visit the local bazaar to see famous metalworkers and woodworkers. Continue towards Zerafshan Valley to Penjikent, driving through the Shakhristan Gorge where you will have lunch. On arrival in Penjikent, transfer to the hotel for your overnight stay.

B

The **Kok Gumbaz Mosque** was constructed in 1435 on the site of the Dorut Tilovat Ensemble. Also known as the Friday Mosque of Shahrisabz, the structure can be found opposite the tomb of Shamsiddin Kulal. "Kok Gumbaz" translates to "blue dome", after its crowning dome which is covered with blue ceramic tiles.

Existing for more than 2,500 years and previously known as "Kiropolis", **Istaravshan** is one of the oldest cities in Tajikistan. Located in the northern foothills of the Turkistan mountain range, it was the ancient centre of trade and crafts, famous for its carving, glazed pottery and embroidery. Though some crafts still survive today, its economy is now based on fruit processing and wine making.

*Situated in northern Tajikistan between the western Pamir-Alai mountain ranges, **Zerafshan Valley** is famous for its stunning mountain landscapes and beautiful lakes. The Tajik ancestors, the Sogdians, lived along the valley for over 1,500 years. Primarily entered from Samarkand, it contains little-travelled branches of the ancient Silk Road.*

*Established in the 5th century AD by the Sogdians, the ancient town of **Penjikent** is famous for its millennium archaeological site. Strategically located along the route from Samarkand to Khuhistan, it was an important stop on the Silk Road and the cultural, industrial and trade centre of Soghd. It was destroyed by Arab invaders in the 8th century AD, though archaeological excavations in 1946 revealed the remnants of residential areas, administration buildings, a citadel with a palace and churches. Most impressive are the surviving colourful wall paintings displaying various scenes and stories, from battles and hunting to feasts and dancing.*

Overnight in Hotel Sughd, Penjikent

Day 18

Penjikent - Seven Lakes - Sarazm - Penjikent

Meals



Seven Lakes

Drive to Seven Lakes through the settlement of Sarazm. Enjoy a picnic lunch before returning to Penjikent. Overnight in Penjikent.

Sarazm is an ancient town in Tajikistan dating back to the 4th century BC, that has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site. At around 3000 BC it was the major metallurgical centre in Central Asia. It was later abandoned and then revived again as a base to mine turquoise.

*Located in the west of the Fan Mountains, the **Seven Lakes** of Marguzor each has its own colour, varying from calming turquoise to mesmerising purple. At 2,139 metres lie the lakes of Mijgon, Soya, Hushyor and Nophin, while the lakes of Khurdak, Marguzor and Hazorchashma are found further up at 2,400 metres.*

Overnight in Hotel Sughd, Penjikent

B

Day 19

Penjikent - Dushanbe

Meals



Dushanbe

After breakfast, visit the Rudaki Historic-Ethnographic Museum and Ancient Penjikent settlement. After, explore the local bazaar and mosque. Lunch is served in a traditional Chaikhana, where you can taste "Plov" cooked according to a traditional Penjikent recipe. In the afternoon, continue to Dushanbe, passing the beautiful Iskanderkul lake on the way. Overnight in Dushanbe.

B

*Located in the Hissar mountain range and surrounded by the Fann mountains, **Iskanderkul Lake** sits at 2,255 metres above sea level. It was named after the conqueror Alexander the Great, who allegedly passed the lake on his way to India, with "Iskander" being the Persian equivalent to his name. Due to the high concentration of minerals in the turquoise water, there is almost no aquatic life in the lake.*

Overnight in Hotel Atlas, Dushanbe

Day 20

Dushanbe

Meals



Dushanbe -
National
Museum

Enjoy a morning city tour in Dushanbe, visiting the famous Museum of National Antiquities and the National Museum. Later, observe the traditional Tajik architecture and art at the cultural palace "Kohi Navruz" (subject to permit). Continue to the monument of Ismoil Somoni and Rudaki Park in the centre of city. Finally, walk through the local bazaar. Overnight in Dushanbe.

B

***Dushanbe** means "Monday" in Tajik and was named after the popular Monday market that was once held here. Excavations in the area unearthed artefacts that date back to the 5th century BC. Dushanbe was little more than a village until the early 20th century, but today it is the capital city of Tajikistan.*

*Opened in 2001, **the Museum of National Antiquities** in Dushanbe houses archaeological finds from Tajikistan with an array of artefacts from Islamic and pre-Islamic history. Its most valuable exhibit is the original Buddha from Ajina Teppa.*

*Opened in 2013, Dushanbe's **National Museum** houses a range of exhibits revealing the history of Tajikistan from the stone age to present day. With 22 exhibition halls, the museum showcases both real and recreated archaeological artefacts. Displays include unique frescoes and burned wooden statues from the Penjikent excavation site, as well as a reconstructed Ajina-Tepe Buddhist monastery site.*

***Kohi Navruz** was originally planned as a teahouse, but was instead turned into a palace during construction. It consists of 12 halls, with each room intricately decorated by local artists and craftsmen. There are beautiful examples of wood carvings, Florentine mosaics made from local semi-precious stones and coloured mirrors, and painted ceilings depicting scenes from ancient legends.*

Overnight in Hotel Atlas, Dushanbe

Day 21

Dushanbe – Hisor fortress – Dushanbe

Meals



Hisor Town

In the morning, enjoy an excursion to Hisor town to see ancient fortress of Hisor. Also visit the Kuhna Medrasah, the Museum of Tajik Way of Life and the Mausoleum of Sufi Saint Mahdumi Azam. Later, stop at the picturesque Varzob Gorge and rest by the mountain river side. The main road north out of Dushanbe follows the route of the rushing Varzob river for about 70km, before climbing to Anzob Pass (3,373 m). There are also natural thermal springs at Khoja Obi Garm. After a picnic lunch in the valley, return to Dushanbe and visit the Museum of Musical Instruments to view the private collection of the Tajik artist Gurminj Zavqibekov. Overnight in Dushanbe.

B

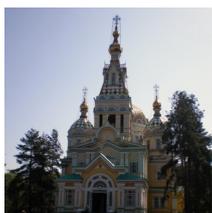
*The city of **Hisor** lies at an altitude of 799 to 824 metres between the Gissar, Babatag and Aktau Mountain Ranges. The old fort of Hisor is said to date back to the time of Cyrus the Great - the founder of the Achaemenid Empire who reigned between 559 and 530 BC.*

Overnight in Hotel Atlas, Dushanbe

Day 22

Dushanbe - Almaty

Meals



Almaty

In the morning, transfer to the airport for your flight to Almaty. Upon arrival transfer to your hotel and spend the rest of the day at your leisure. Overnight in Almaty.

B

***Almaty**, formerly known as 'Alma-Ata', is the largest city in Kazakhstan. It is located in the foothills of the Trans-Ili Alatau mountain and has become the major commercial and cultural hub for the country.*

Overnight in Hotel Kazhol, Almaty

Day 23

Almaty

Meals



Almaty - The Republic Square

Begin your tour today with a visit to the Central State Museum. Later, visit the Republic Square, Abai Opera and Ballet Theatre, the Central Mosque and the Green Market. Continue to the President's Residence, the Independence Monument in Republic Square, and Zenkov Cathedral. In the afternoon, drive to the famous skating rink of Medeu. Overnight in Almaty.

B

***The Central State Museum** in Almaty was originally housed within the former Almaty Cathedral when it opened in 1931. In 1985, a new structure was constructed to properly exhibit the rich history of Kazakhstan. It presents the history of Kazakhstan across four exhibition halls, from the Bronze Age to contemporary times. Exhibits include an archaeological gold collection, ethnographic displays of yurts and exotic costumes, and information on Kazakhstan's many ethnic groups during the 20th and 21st centuries.*

*Almaty's **Republic Square** was constructed in 1980 and was used throughout the rule of the Soviet Union as a place for mass demonstrations, celebrations, festivals and military parades. It was also the site of the infamous 1986 uprising known as Jeltoqsan that occurred in protest over the dismissal of the Kazakh Soviet leader Kunayev.*

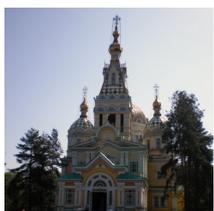
The **Medeu** is an outdoor speed skating rink situated at an elevation of 1,691 metres above sea level in the Medeu mountain valley. It has become known as the highest skating rink in the world.

Overnight in Hotel Kazhol, Almaty

Day 24

Almaty – Big Almaty Lake – Almaty

Meals



Almaty

In the morning, drive to Big Almaty Gorge and the picturesque Big Almaty Lake (2,510m above sea level). Enjoy beautiful views of the surrounding mountain peaks covered with Tian-Shan fir trees, aspen and juniper. On the way back to Almaty, there is an optional visit to a Falcon Farm, where you can enjoy a spectacular show with specially trained hawks. Overnight in Almaty.

One of the most picturesque lakes in the Trans-Ili Alatau, the **Big Almaty Lake** is located in the gorge of the Bolshaya Almatinka River, 2510 metres above sea levels. Surrounded by mountains, it was formed as a result of the movement of an ancient glacier. Three main mountain peaks tower over the lake: Sovetov to the southeast; Ozyorny to the south further up the river valley; and the forested slopes of Turist to the southwest. When the water is calm the views are spectacular, with the mountains and sky reflected on the lake's surface.

Overnight in Hotel Kazhol, Almaty

B

Day 25

Almaty – Sharyn – “Kegen” border (Kazakhstan) - Karakol

Meals



Karakol

In the morning, start driving towards the "Kegen" border, stopping for a short walk to Sharyn River at the magnificent Sharyn Canyon en route. After border formalities, proceed to Karakol, where you will check into your hotel upon arrival. Overnight in Karakol.

Charyn Canyon lies in the open plains of Almaty. The red sandstone was cracked open and enlarged by the Sharyn River. After many years of weathering and erosion, the striking canyon and its impressive rock formations were formed. Visitors can walk, raft and take jeep tours through the distinct landscape. Part of the canyon is known as the Valley of Castles for its unusual rock formations.

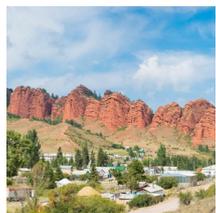
Overnight in Green Yard Hotel, Karakol

B

Day 26

Karakol – Jety Oguz – Karakol

Meals



Jety-Oguz gorge

After breakfast, visit the Chinese Mosque and the striking Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral. In the afternoon, travel to the Valley of the Flowers and Jety-Oguz Gorge for a light hike through the magnificent canyon of red sandstone. Overnight in Karakol.

B

Karakol, the administrative centre for Issyk-Kul province, was established as a Russian military post in the 19th century and was largely populated by Cossacks from western Siberia. Its population swelled in the 1880s, when many Dungans (Chinese Muslims) fled to Karakol to escape persecution in their home country. The town contains many fine examples of 19th-century Russian architecture. Today, Karakol is an important base for travellers who enjoy hiking, trekking and exploring the surrounding mountainous region.

The scenic **Jety-Oguz** gorge is located just outside of the city of Karakol. 'Jety-Oguz' translates to 'seven bulls'. It is named after the seven dramatic cliffs that span a length of 35km and are thought to resemble seven bulls. The surrounding hot springs, mountain lakes, forests and grasslands boast a rich biodiversity. It makes for a beautiful walking area.

Located in the centre of Karakol, the **Holy Trinity Orthodox Cathedral** is a fine example of a Russian Orthodox church. Built on the site of an earlier church in 1895, it served as a dance hall under the Soviet rule before being used as a school during World War Two. It was renovated in the late 1980s and now serves as an active church. Constructed using wooden walls on a stone foundation, the facade is decorated with intricate carvings.

Constructed in 1907 by a Chinese architect and 20 artisans, Karakol's **Chinese Mosque** showcases distinctive decoration and bright colours in the style of a traditional Chinese temple, created for the local Dungans. However, it was actually built in the Kyrgyz wood-feathering style, in which only wood is used for construction without the use of a single nail.

Overnight in Green Yard Hotel, Karakol

Day 27

Karakol – Cholpan Ata – Ashu

Meals



Chon-Kemin valley

After breakfast, drive to Chon Kemin valley. On the way, visit the unique Museum of Nikolai Przhevalskii and the Cholpan Ata petroglyphs. Visit the Semenov Gorge and drive along the northern shore of Issy Kul. The remainder of the day is free to spend at your leisure. Overnight in Ashu.

B D

Chon-Kemin is a beautiful natural valley where the Chon-Kemin River flows between the Kungei Ala-Too and Iliysky Ala-Too mountain ranges. The valley is a combination of both wild and pastoral landscapes, dense conifer forests and sparse mountains. Its Tien Shan fir forests are famed for their medicinal herbs, mushrooms and edible berries. The area offers excellent hiking, rafting, horse riding and fishing opportunities.

The **Nikolai Przhevalskii museum** was opened in 1957 in Karakol to commemorate the Russian explorer-scientist, Nikolai Przhevalskii. During his lifetime, he undertook 4 expeditions to Mongolia, China and Tibet. He researched the geography, flora and fauna of these Central Asian countries, discovering over 200 plant species, as well as doing a little spying for the government, most probably. The museum displays his extensive research alongside a zoological collection that is comprised of various plant, bird, fish and animal samples.

The summer resort town of **Cholpan Ata** lies on the northern shore of the Issy Kul Lake. It boasts a scenic backdrop of the Tian Shan Mountains and is famed for its many preserved petroglyphs. This prehistoric form of art, where shapes and patterns are carved into rocks, dates back to between 800 BC and 1200 AD. Along with its ethnographic museum, the open-air petroglyph site provides a real insight into the rich heritage of Cholpan Ata.

Overnight in Kalmak-Ashu Guesthouse, Ashu

Day 28

Ashu

Meals



Ashu

In the morning, go on a walk in the foothills of the mountains and enjoy village life. There is also the option of horse riding (to be paid locally). Return to the village for lunch at the guest house. Later, proceed on a walk to observe the fascinating views of the valley. Overnight in Ashu.

B L D

Chon-Kemin is a beautiful natural valley where the Chon-Kemin River flows between the Kungei Ala-Too and Iliysky Ala-Too mountain ranges. The valley is a combination of both wild and pastoral landscapes, dense conifer forests and sparse mountains. Its Tien Shan fir forests are famed for their medicinal herbs, mushrooms and edible berries. The area offers excellent hiking, rafting, horse riding and fishing opportunities.

Overnight in Kalmak-Ashu Guesthouse, Ashu

Day 29

Ashu - Bishkek

Meals



Bishkek

In the morning, drive to Bishkek, stopping at the Burana Tower en route. Enjoy a city tour on arrival, visiting Manas Monument, Independence Monument, Old Square, Parliament House and Lenin's Monument. Watch the changing of the Guard of Honor at the main Ala Too Square and finally, stop by the Victory Square. Overnight in Bishkek.

B

Bishkek lies in the shadow of the Kyrgyz Ala-Too range, an extension of the Tian Shan mountains. It is Kyrgyzstan's capital and biggest city with a population just under one million. It was named "Frunze" by the Bolsheviks in 1926 after a military leader born there. Following its independence in 1991 it was renamed "Bishkek", after the fortress of "Pishpek" in the area.

Burana Tower is a minaret in the Chuy Valley that marks the 9th-century Karakhanid town of **Balasagun**. The town is believed to have been once considered the centre of the world, but was lost in the mists of time until quite recently. The minaret was originally 45m tall, though only 25m remains due to earthquakes. Nearby a wide variety of statues known as *bulbuls* dot the landscape. These intriguing statues often hold a cup in one hand and a weapon in their other, to represent their hospitality, and the repercussions for those who might not accept it!

The **Eternal Fire** monument, also known as 'Victory Square' and 'Victory monument', was constructed in 1984. The statue depicts a woman who is standing over the eternal flame, waiting for the return of her son or husband to return home from the Great Patriotic War (as they call their participation in World War II, from 1941 to 1945).

Overnight in Hotel Plaza, Bishkek

Day 30	Departure from Bishkek	Meals
	<p>In the morning, transfer to the airport for your departure flight.</p>	<p>B</p>
<p>Flight</p>		