

The Heart of the Great Silk Route (22 Days)

**Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan
And including The Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan**

October 1 PM (October 2 early AM) – October 22 (October 23 early AM), 2021

Post Tour: China's Silk Route



TURKMENISTAN

Oct 1: Day 1 Ashgabat via LH, 11:20 pm. **OR Oct 2** via TK 245 am
Met at airport and transfer to hotel.

Oct 2: Day 2 Ashgabat (B,L)

Today we discover the Turkmen capital with your guide. We will have a relaxed start today to assist in recovering from the long flight. We'll depart the hotel at about 10 am.

Horses for centuries have played a vital role in Central Asian life. We will drive 28 miles north-west of the city to visit a stud farm and see the beautiful Akhal-Teke horses. Turkmens began to breed these horses 5000 years ago and to this day they are not cross-breed. Their elegance, lean body and fine bone structure are impressive. The horses are used for racing and are well-known among Eurasian jockeys. We will see the stables and the care and training of the horses. The Akhal-Teke horse is considered to be the national symbol of Turkmenistan.

From here we will visit the nearby Gokdepe Fortress. Gokdepe fortress was attacked in December 1880 by Russians during Tsar expansion to the territories of modern Central Asia. The siege of Gokdepe lasted twenty-three days, after which the city was captured. The astonishing Gokdepe Mosque was built to commemorate the soldiers who defended the fort. It is known for its mint-turquoise blue colored roof and white marble structure.

Afterwards, visit Park of Independence, The Tower of Neutrality and the Arch of Neutrality (originally constructed next to the Central Square in the old city center, it was the landmark of Ashgabat. In late 2011 it re-opened at its new location at the southern edges of the city. The tripod construction in concrete, with its decorative legs and belt, was made by a Turkish company, and dedicated to the fact that Turkmenistan had been recognized as a neutral country by the United Nations Security Council on 12 December 1993. It remains, however, famous for the golden statue of the first president of Turkmenistan that crowns the top, but does not rotate anymore. (city-tour lasts 3-3.5 h)

This afternoon, visit the National Museum of History & Ethnography. The museum has a rich collection of ancient artifacts from Turkmenistan. More than 500,000 exhibits are displayed here. The highlight of the museum is a collection of ivory, discovered during the excavations at the Old Nissa, residence of Parthian kings from the Arshakid Dynasty. Very interesting is collection of Turkmen carpets. (excursion lasts 2h).

Please Note: The Tolkuchka Bazaar, hours 8 am-3 pm (aka Tolkuchka or Altyn Asyr Gundogar market) once described as "amazing," one of the largest markets in Central Asia and the best place to shop for beautiful Turkmen carpets, handmade embroidery and other unique souvenirs, is no longer the attraction it once was. Now most merchants have moved to a modern market in a new location. The new bazaar is called Allyn Asyr Gundogar Bazaar. It is housed in several concrete plated pavilions. We will go to other more traditional markets later in the tour. Notably in Osh and Bishtek.

Oct 3: Day 3 Excursion to Mary/Merv (B,L)

We depart at 7 am this morning and drive to Mary on a good highway. We will make a few stops along the way including the ruins of the Seyit Jemaletdin Mosque, a Timurid-era monument (built 1446-1457) with a mosaic in the form of two dragons looking at each other at the top of the arch of the mosque. And Ambivert Caravanserai. The drive will be about 5 hours including the stops.

Lunch on arrival in Mary. Afterwards drive to ancient Merv (26 km/20 min). In the 4th c BC, Merv was conquered by Alexander the Great. Located at the crossroads of various trade routes and civilizations, Merv came under Persian, Greek, Sassanian and Moslem rule and from the 11th century was the capital of the Seljuk Turks, who controlled an empire stretching from Afghanistan to Egypt. In the 13th century Merv was destroyed by the Mongols leaving only the ruins of these numerous civilizations.

Visit the History Museum, Sultan Sanjar Mausoleum and Kys Kala, an unusual windowless castle, nicknamed "The House of Maidens Tears."

A short (1 h) guided city-tour in Mary, a pleasant town close to Merv (26 km/20 min). Visit the Kurbankuli-Hadzhi mosque, Christ church (1900), History and Ethnographic Museum and the excellent oriental bazaar. There are many restaurants, small shops and a park. Have a snack here if you like (pay direct) as by time you get back to Ashgabat will be a late dinner.

Evening flight to Ashgabat. Flt T5-132 dep 19.20 pm, arr 20.00 pm. Transfer to hotel for overnight in Ashgabat

Oct 4: Day 4 Ashgabat & Nisa (B,L)

Morning visit the ruins of Anau Mosque. The site includes the remains of the Bronze Age settlement Anau - Depe and the fortress of Anau. The name Anau derives from Abi-Nau, meaning "new water." The site was already inhabited in the 4-3 B.C. The culture of this period has been named Anau culture. Excavations began in 1904 when an American archaeologist R. Pempelli launched an expedition. The site includes a great wall and a ditch. Some skeletons of children, the remains of the painted ceramics, decorated with the geometrical ornament and the most ancient remains of the camels were discovered at the time of excavations. According to the scientists camels were domesticated at first just on the territory of the present day Turkmenistan. Anau fortress already existed during the Parthian period /3d c BC- 3d c. AD.

The United States and Turkmenistan have launched a restoration project at the 15th-century Seit Jemmalatdin Mosque. The mosque is located in the southern part of the fortress. Its lofty, powerful outlines were visible from a great distance. One curious feature of the mosque is the mosaic decoration above the entrance, depicting two enormous 8-9 m dragons facing each other. Some experts think that dragons were totems of the Turkmenian tribe which inhabited Anau in the 15th century. Sheikh Jemaled-din probably belonged to this tribe. The mosque was destroyed by the 1948 earthquake. In the mean-time the location is still hallowed as the site of the grave of Sheikh Djemalledin. Childless couples bring children's clothes here as an offering, and baby dolls are swaddled and left in tiny hammocks slung between two sticks.

This afternoon we'll visit cable road at the foot of the Kopetdag Mountains.

We then continue to the archaeological site of Old Nisa (20 min), once the capital of the Parthian state and a flourishing city between the 3rd century BC and the 3rd century AD. the township of New Nissa was the centre of the Parthian City. It was inhabited up to the 16th - 17th centuries. Old Nissa was a royal residence of the Parthian kings with the palace and temple, the depositories and the treasury. During the archaeological excavations about 2700 texts inscribed with black paint on the clay vessels fragments were discovered. The written language used in Nissa was of the Aramaic origin. It dates back to the 2nd century BC. (excursion 1.5 h)

Onward to the Turkmenbashi Mosque, the biggest mosque in Central Asia, located 12 km from Ashgabat. (excursion lasts 1.5 h)

THE AUTONOMOUS REPUBLIC OF KARAKALPAKSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN

Oct 5: Day 5 Ashgabat - Dashoguz-Konye Urgench-Nukus (B,L)

Early morning flight to Dashaguz T5 101 depart 6:10 am, arrive 7 am (flight schedule subject to change). On arrival, drive to Konye Urgench (approx 1.5 hr).

We tour Konye-Urgench for approx. 1.5 hours. Because we aim to reach the border of Uzbekistan before it closes for their lunch break, we must keep the tour to a tight 1.5 hr. **If the flight arrives late, we will tour and lunch in Konye Urgench to reach the border at 1 pm, when they re-open. Timings for border closure and re-opening are approximate.**

The ancient city of Konye-Urgench (Old Urgench) was destroyed and re-built seven times. Urgench (formely Gurgandzh) was the capital of the wealthy Persian Khorezmshakh state in the 10th century and one of Central Asia's grandest cities.

Situated in the Amu Darya delta in northern Turkmenistan and western Uzbekistan, it has a favorable

geographic location - the crossing of two major caravan routes: east to China and from the south to the northwest to the Volga River. Expansion into a true center of civilization came quickly. In the early 11th century, Gurgandzh's fame surpassed Bukhara's splendor. During the 13th century, Gurgandzh was the heart of the Islamic World but its governor rebelled against Genghis Khan. Mongols destroyed the famous city in 1221. Modern Kunya-Urgench never fully recovered.

In Konye-Urgench, many historic buildings remain from the Khoresmshakh dynasty. They are examples of Islamic architecture of Central Asia. Many construction designs, rare dome shapes, and purity of color inspire admiration. Konye-Urgench blossomed during Kutlug Timur and his wife Tyurabek-khanym's rule. The most magnificent architectural monuments were erected at this time. The first is the mausoleum of Tyurabek-khanym and the minaret of Kutlug-Timur. There are also ancient fortified cities including Devkesen, Shasenem, Zmukshir, Kenevas and others. Kunya-Urgench is unique with architectural masterpieces that have been entered into the World's Legacy of UNESCO. Turkmenistan archaeologists recently discovered traces of an ancient settlement in today's Koneurgench. During the excavation of a barrow called Kyrkmolla, contours of a powerful antique fortress and ceramics of 6th-7th century AD were found.

Transfer to checkpoint Hoyjayli (approx. 20 min). We aim to arrive by 11 am as the border crosses at approx. 1130 or 12 noon for a lunch break; reopens approx. 1 pm. Your Turkmen guide will assist you with the formalities. There is a transit zone between the two borders of about 500 meters, which you will walk. The Uzbek guide will meet you on the Uzbek side and assist with the formalities at the Uzbek checkpoint. The timing for border procedures is unpredictable, expect at least one hour.

After passing thru the border into Uzbekistan, we drive approx 30 minutes to Nukus, capital of Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan. Lunch at local restaurant on arrival.

Uzbekistan is considered the cream of Central Asian architecture. The Republic of Karakalpakstan occupies the whole northwestern end of Uzbekistan. It is mostly desert and located near the Aral Sea. Karakalpakstan was ceded to the Russian Empire by the Khanate of Khiva in 1873. Under Soviet rule, it was originally an autonomous area within Kazakhstan before becoming part of Uzbekistan in 1936.

On arrival, we will check-in to hotel. We hope to arrive at least by 3 pm.

This afternoon, time permitting (closes at 5 pm), we visit the State Art Museum also known as Savitskiy Museum, after its' founder Igor Saviysky, a Russian painter, archaeologist and collector. The museum contains a collection of over 95,000 pieces including fine arts, applied Karakalpak folk art, and ancient art from the region of Khorezm. We want two hours for the visit here. If the flight arrival is delayed or we are delayed at the border checkpoint, we may arrive too late to visit this museum, then will visit in the morning. Museum opens at 9 am.

Oct 6: Day 6 Nukus-Khiva (205 km) (B,LD)

This morning we drive approx. 3.5 hours total to Khiva (not counting stops for sightseeing and lunch), one of the oldest towns in the world, a major trading town on the Silk Road and a most unique Uzbek city. Once a ruined desert town, Khiva has been magnificently restored through Soviet and UNESCO funded projects. Most of the city of Khiva is similar to the open-air museum and the nucleus is Itchan Kala Castle.

We will stop en-route, after 2 hour drive, to visit the ruins of Toprak Kala from the Kushan period, built in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE. And also stop to visit Kizil Kala, a frontier fortress from the Kang Kuyi period.

After this visit we have a lunch stop nearby at fish bistro by Akhchakol Lake.

Continue approx. 1.5 hours to Khiva, check-in to hotel.

Culminate the day with a visit to Friday mosque and Tashauli Palace/harem. Dinner at Zainab's National House.

Oct 7: Day 7 Khiva (B,L)

For this morning's tour in the inner city no transport will be used, we enjoy a pleasant easy walking tour.

Sites included: Ichan-Kala Medrese of Muchammad Aminchan, Minaret Kalta Minor, Kunya Ark Fortress, Mausoleum of Pakhlavan Makhmud and Said Alauddin and enjoy view of whole ancient Khiva.

Lunch in a local restaurant.

Continue touring with visits to Juma Mosque, Tash Hauli Palace and Harem, Ensemble Islam Chodja (Khodja) minaret, Madrasah Alla Kuichan.

Oct 8: Day 8 Khiva-Bukhara (B,L)

To its south and across the desert, lies Bukhara with a wealth of architectural heritage dating from its days as one of the principal Silk Road cities.

Transfer to the airport for the flight to Bukhara dep 9:35 am, arrives 10:35 am.

On arrival transfer to hotel for check-in. We'll depart at about 12 noon for lunch and an afternoon tour.

Bukhara was one of the great trading centers on the Silk Road, an independent Emirate and scene of Anglo Russian rivalry in the 19th century. Surrounded by vast expanses of the Kyzyl Kum desert, Bukhara retains the atmosphere of an ancient Silk Road city.

We visit the mausoleum of Ismail Samanid (9-10c)-vault of Bukhara rulers' dynasty, Chashma Ayub (14c), Ark Fortress 16c), Poi Kalon ensemble including Minaret (12c), Mosque (15c).

Return to the hotel. Dinner on your own.

Oct 9: Day 9 Bukhara (B,L,D)

Full day sightseeing tour.

Start with a visit to Makhallya Khuma," the ancient Jewish block of houses and synagogue. Then traditional covered bazaars including Toki Zargaron Trading Dome (1569-70); Toki Telpak Furushon Trading Dome, Toki Sarrafon Trading Dome (16th c.).

We stop for lunch at local restaurant.

The Kosh Madrassah Ensemble (sponsored by Abdullah-khan II (1561-1598), the most successful khan of Shaibanid dynasty (1566-67), Ulugbek Madrassah (1417+); Magak-i Attari Mosque (16c) - one of the earliest religious buildings of Islamic era in Bukhara, Chor Minor Madrassah and Lyabi Khauz Ensemble (17c).

Dinner at local restaurant. Folk Show at Nadir-Divanbegi Madrassah (17c).

Oct 10: Day 10 Bukhara -Samarkand (290 km) (B,L)

This morning an excursion to Sitara-i-Mokhikhosa, the summer palace of the last Emir of Bukhara (1911). The style is an eclectic mix of European, Russian and Oriental design and there is a good exhibition of traditional Suzane embroidery as well as Chinese porcelain brought along the Silk Road from China. The white hall decorated with carved alabaster resembles halls in Peterhof Palace in the suburb of St Petersburg.

Continue to historic Samarkand, a melting [ppot of the world's cultures and a World Heritage Site. We plan to arrive at about 2 pm. Lunch will be en-route or on arrival. Transfer to hotel.

This afternoon we visit "Stars above Samarkand" – Ulugbek observatory (15c), the "Ruins of Afrosiab" - the excavation and museum of the ancient town (6 BC-13 AD) and the Gur Emir Mausoleum (15c).

Optional (pay directly): Enjoy wine tasting at Samarkand Wine factory if you like (pay directly) before heading to dinner at a local restaurant on the Old City. If you choose not to attend the wine tasting you can go for a walk in the park nearby or go downtown.

Oct 11: Day 11 Full Day Touring Samarkand (B,L,D)

With a history dating back 2700 years, Samarkand became famous as the capital of the vast state created by Tamerlane and later ruled by his grandson Ulugbek in the 14th-15th centuries. The historic town is a melting pot of the world's cultures and recently declared a World Heritage Site. Founded in the 7th century B.C. as ancient Afrasiab, Samarkand had its most significant development in the Timurid period from the 14th to the 15th centuries.

We start our day with an excursion to Shahi Zinda Necropolis (14-15c) and St. Daniel Mausoleum (St. Daniel from the bible)-a popular place for local pilgrims whom we shall see doing their sacred rituals.

This afternoon visit to the Registan Ensemble (a main highlight of Samarkand) including Ulugbek (15c), Shir Dor (17c), the Tillya Kari (three beautiful Madrassahs ,17c.).

Next we go to Bibi Khanum Mosque and the Silk Bazaar.

This evening, attend a show at "El Merosi," Theater of Historical Costumes. This 40-50 min show begins at 6 pm. Afterwards, dinner at a local restaurant.

Oct 12: Day 12 Samarkand-Shakhrisabz (160 km)-Termez (288 km) (B,L)

Shakhrisabz is one of the most ancient cities in Central Asia and the birthplace and home town of Central Asia's foremost conqueror - the Great Amir Temur. In certain periods through its long history, it has appeared as the center of some of the most important events in world history - sometimes glorious, sometimes tragic.

Upon arrival in Shakhrisabz, we visit Ak Saroy Palace (14c) – the greatest palace built by Tamerlan, similar in structure to Samarkand's Bibi Khanum Mosque, but unparalleled in size and decoration. It took 20 years to build and was destroyed by Abdulla Khan of Bukhara in the XVII century.

Next, we visit Kok Gumbaz Mosque; see the remains of a once grandiose complex - the Dorus-Syadot (House of the prophet's decrees) mausoleum where Jahangir, the most beloved son of Amir Temur, was buried. This monument became the family burial-vault of the Temurids. Ancient plane trees still grow in this place - the sacred symbol of Shakhrisabz.

Visit another fabulous complex - Dorut-Tilavete (The House of Contemplation) consisting of two mausoleums - Khazreti Sheikh (Shamseddin Kulial) and Ghumbezi Seyeedon with the Kok-Ghumbaz (Blue Dome) mosque.

Lunch at the local restaurant.

We then shall go to see the domed bath house (has been under renovation-should be open by our dates).

Shakhrisabz, is also a traditional center of folk arts, especially embroidery. We visit the trading aisle at the market to see the embroiders of Tubiteykas (traditional hats), suzane, carpets and belts.

Continue drive to Termez. Arrival will depend on how much time is spent at each site, and frequency and duration of photo stops. Dinner at the local Restaurant

Oct 13: Day 13 Termez (B,L)

Termez is in the south of Uzbekistan, near the Afghan border. Once an important trading post at the crossroads of the Silk Routes, Termez is the most overlooked corner of Uzbekistan but is well worth a visit. Here you can find the influences of Greek, Buddhist and Islamic civilizations.

We visit Termez Archaeological Museum considered one of the comprehensive museums in Central Asia

with 9 main halls. Then onward to one of the most highly worshipped monuments of the Muslim world - the burial-vault of Khakim at-Termezi, the spiritual patron of the town, a medieval scholar- scientist-theologian, the founder of the dervish order "Khakimi."

Next, the archeological site of Fayoz-Tepa Buddhist Monastery (the site of an ancient settlement of the 2-3rd cc.), located 1 km northwest of modern Termez. Archaeologists found here a number of sculptures of bodhisattvas and buddhas. A group of statuettes made of white stone are especially interesting.

Visit Kampyr Tepe, 35 kilometers northwest of Termez, an ancient citadel whose remains have yielded further evidence of the introduction of Buddhism before Christ. Over 35 kg of gold was excavated from the site, along with some of the oldest chess pieces on earth.

TAJKISTAN

Oct 14: Day 14 Termez-Dusanabe (B,L)

Today we discover the Tadjik capital during a sightseeing tour, a modern city with wide shady avenues.

This morning we depart at 7 am and transfer to Uzbek- Tajik border, Sariasia. The journey is about 3 hours without stops. The transit zone is 400 meters. The process is the same with the guide from each side assisting you with formalities. It is another 70 km to Dushanbe.

Just before crossing the land border into Tajikistan, we see the Jarkurgan Minaret, one of the tallest in Central Asia and #2 on the list of the 7 "must see" minarets in Central Asia.

After 45 km (approx. 40 min drive) we stop for lunch. (it may be about 1 or 130 pm)

Afterwards, visit Hisor Fort, a 19th century Bukharian stronghold in Dushanbe. Afterwards we stop by the National Tea House to taste some fresh baked flat bread and tea if you like (pay direct).

Continue to Dushanbe (approx. 35 min drive).

Some of Central Asia's most beautiful countryside and the world's highest peaks can be found in Tajikistan and the scenery is totally unspoiled. This afternoon's tour will include:

The blue-domed mosque, mausoleum and madrasah complex of Mawlana Yakubi Charki - a popular pilgrimage site that has a nice, lush garden with lots of birds.

Dushanbe's Museum of Archaeology, which holds the largest Buddha now in Central Asia and also has displays on the Zoroastrian and Buddhist Penjikent and Ura Tepe civilizations.

Another highlight is the Sangin-i-Babur, a rock where Babur -- the founder of India's Moghul dynasty, reportedly carved four lines of a poem of Sa'adi when he was on his way to India in 1511.

Time-permitting, we can add a visit to the bazaar and the botanical garden.

Oct 15: Day 15 Dusanabe-Istaravshan (former Ura Tyube)-Khujand (300 km) (B,L)

Depart by 8 am for a beautiful drive today to Khujand via Istarafshan (130 km/2 hrs). We visit the well-preserved old town of Istaravshan, a maze of small alleys that wind through neighborhoods of shady, mud walled Central Asian homesteads. Sights include the fifteenth century Kuk Gumbaz Mosque, the Hafz-i-Sangin Mosque and the eighteenth century Hazrat-i-Shah Mosque and mausoleum complex.

Ura Tyube is also a handicrafts center, known for its woodcutting. Visit an 'ustokhana' or artisans workshop. Transfer to the hotel.

UZBEKISTAN

Oct 16: Day 16 Tashkent (B,L)

This morning we shall visit the remains of Khujand's citadel built in the early Middle Ages and used up to the early 20th century, as well as the largest statue of Lenin in Central Asia.

Transfer to the Uzbekistan border, Aibek. The transit zone is 500 meters. The process is the same with the guide from each side assisting you with formalities.). Border formalities could take 1.5-2 hours.

Continue to Tashkent (165 km/100 miles). Arrival should be approx 1-3 pm, depending on the situation at the border. Upon arrival, check into the hotel and lunch at local restaurant.

This wonderful city is a real embodiment of the modern elegance that is inherent in many world capitals. At the same time, it remains an oriental city. Tashkent has its own unique flavor. It combines medieval buildings as if descended from the pages of old oriental tales, elegant European architecture from the period of the Turkestan governor-generalship, standard concrete "boxes" of the Soviet era and, finally, glittering skyscrapers of glass and concrete (modern business centers and banks). The city is lined with a grid of straight and wide streets and avenues, decorated with emerald green parks, gardens, fountains imbued with crystal strands.

On this afternoon's sightseeing tour, we shall visit the Mustakillik (Independence) Square in the heart of Tashkent and Tashkent Metro decorated with local marble and granite --like an underground palace; we see the central square Amir Timur Maydoni - dominated by a statue of Timur on horseback and the Alisher Navoi Opera and Ballet Theatre. Dinner at local restaurant.

Oct 17: Day 17 Tashkent (B,L)

This morning we begin our tour with a visit to the sprawling, colorful Chor-Su bazaar- a great place to soak up the essence of Uzbekistan. At 2500 years old, it is one of the oldest markets and was once one of the busiest, since it is located on the silk route. The location hasn't changed in all these years, but the old buildings have been replaced by modern ones. The mammoth marble vanity monuments of Tashkent might represent the sanitized modern facade that President Karimov wants foreigners to believe, but Chorsu Market is the vibrant reality, warts and all. It is crowded, lively and noisy, with a slice of all the nation's social strata there to see. The fruit and vegetables are of beautiful quality, and the spices, dried fruits and nuts inside the main blue dome are delicious.

Next, we tour the historic Old Quarter of the city starting with Madrasah Kukeldash close to Su bazaar. Built in 1570, it was part of an ensemble of the city's main square. For many years it was the center of the city's life. In the XVIII century, the madrasah arranged caravansary carriageways for merchants and hosted living quarters for craftsmen. In the XIX century, the madrasah served as a fortress of Kokand Khans. Until 1865, Madrasah Kukeldash served as a place of public execution in order to strengthen people's morality. Today the restored current madrasah fulfills its original function: educating students. Also, the faithful come here for Friday prayers.

We shall also visit the Kaffal Shashi Mausoleum, Barak Khana Seminary, Tila Shaikh Mosque and archives known for the exhibit of a rare copy of Koran written by the third Caliph Othman. Lunch at local restaurant.

This afternoon we visit the excellent Museum of Applied Arts. Time permitting, we also visit the crafts section of the local market.

This evening we attend Friday evening services at Ashkenasy Synagogue, starts at 5 PM. Even if you are not Jewish, it will be an interesting experience to see this orthodox service.

Oct 18: Day 18 Tashkent-Kokand- Ferghana Valley (Fergana and Margilan) (B,L)

This morning we drive to Fergana (350 km/6-7 hrs), visiting interesting sites along the way. We stop for lunch in Kokand, the former capital of the powerful Kokand Khanate that once dominated the whole Fergana Valley.

Our first stop is Rishtan – center of unique ceramic production in Uzbekistan. Rishtan is known today as one of the largest centers in Central Asia of manufacture of unique glazed ceramic. The Rishtan pottery tradition uses a unique turquoise-ultramarine palette that differs entirely from colors in other Central Asian regions. Rishtan-made ceramics differ technically as well, with thin, delicate walls and a translucent, smooth glaze. Rishtan is the only place in Central Asia where the well-known "ishkor" glaze is still used,

and the vibrant blue colors of Rishtan ceramics are the only colors which are fixed using the “ishkor” glaze.

We shall visit the Rishtan pottery workshop of Rustam Usmanov and the Japanese School. Rustam Usmanov - master ceramist and painter has participated in archeological expeditions to research and restore lost ornaments and patterns and his artwork combines deep knowledge of the local traditions. His masterpieces are displayed in the State Museum of Art of Uzbekistan, the State Hermitage and Museum of Ethnography of St. Petersburg, Russia and the Museum of Arts of Peoples of the Orient in Moscow, Russia.

Next, we go to Margilan to see the process of handmade production of Han-Atlas silk fabric at the Yodgorlik Factory. Located in the southeast of Fergana Valley, Margilan is considered to be one of the ancient cities in Uzbekistan and Central Asia, as well as a big centre of international trade. The caravan routes connected Europe with East Asia via Margilan. From time immemorial, the people of Margilan have been busy manufacturing beautiful silk fabrics, making Margilan city well-known all over the world.

Continue to Fergana (90 km/56 miles). Transfer to hotel for check-in. Dinner at local restaurant.

KYRGYZSTAN

Oct 19: Day 19 Fergana-Osh (130 km/80 miles) Fly to Bishtek (B,L)

This morning we shall have a short tour visiting Al Fargoniy Monument and Square and the modern city before our drive to Dostlick, the checkpoint on the Uzbek- Kyrgyz border. There is a 200 meter transit zone.

Afterwards we drive to Osh, one of the oldest towns in Central Asia, located on the southeast edge of the Fergana Valley at the northern foot of the Pamir -Alai mountain range. Nestled in green slopes, Osh lies on both sides of the Ak-Bura River, at an altitude of 940-1070 m above sea level. The age of the city can be judged from the rock drawings and inscriptions found on the northern slope of the four-headed Suleiman Mountain. This mountain is located in the center of Osh and is a unique historical and architectural monument. The mountain was defense from enemies and its presence governed the unusual layout of the ancient city of Osh. A small mazar was built on the southeastern slope of the mountain, and was named Kichik Mekka ("Small Mecca") where the Muslims of the Fergana Valley would come to pray. Osh became their second Mecca.

Visitors are attracted to the bazaar in Osh with its distinct oriental colors and the aromatic smells of spices and fruits. Lunch at local restaurant.

Afternoon tour: visit Suleiman Mount, the mosque of Babur and browse the national bazaar. Transfer to the airport for flight to Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyz Republic, departing 6 pm, arriving 7 pm.

Oct 20: Day 20 Bishkek (B,L,D)

Bishkek is located where the Kazakh steppe meets the foothills of the majestic snow-capped Tien-Shan mountains. Bishkek was founded in 19th c. after the Kokand conquerors erected a fortress that guarded the caravan routes extending from Tashkent through Chuvalley to Issyk-Kul Lake and Kashgar (China). In 1991 the city Frunze was given the name Bishkek. The city is beautiful any time of the year, though it is at its best in spring, when the central squares (Ala-too, Victory and others) are covered with red tulips and daffodils. The city contains about 20 parks, one of the largest being the Dubovyi (Oak) Park.

Afternoon tour including Ala-Too Square, The National Museum of History (1 hour), Frunze House, The Art Museum; see the Opera House and the Concert Hall (near which there is a statue of National Hero Manas). Dinner in Kyrgyz national restaurant “Tubeteika.”

KAZAKHSTAN

Oct 21: Day 21 Tamgaly Petroglyphs - Almaty (B,L)

We depart at 8 am and drive 30 minutes to Kazakhstan border, Kordai. The distance between borders is 200 m with a 300 m transit zone all traveled inside the car. The time at the border is unpredictable (can be 30 minutes – 2 hours). I think with the early start our wait will be on the shorter side.

After driving one hour we take a slight detour off the highway and drive another hour to visit the Tamgaly Petroglyph site in the Zhetysay of Kazakhstan (UNESCO World Heritage Site 2004). The road is paved but in poor condition. The territory is huge but we can see the main objects within 1.5 hours.

The majority of the 5000 petroglyphs are in the main canyon which are mostly from the Bronze Age, but some have been overlaid with medieval or later etchings. There are some petroglyphs from the Iron Age.

Continue the drive to Almaty stopping for lunch at a local restaurant en-route. We predict arrival will be about 4:30-5 PM. Transfer to Otrar hotel, located in center of the city, near Panfilov Park - the green heart of the city. Green bazaar nearby- 5 walking minutes.

Oct 22: Day 22 Almaty (B,L)

Tour of Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan, including: The National Museum of History of Kazakhstan, Zenkov Cathedral (one of the tallest wooden-made buildings, the recently restored Museum of Musical Instruments, Panfilov Park and browse the bazaar independently (closes at 5:30 pm). Rooms available till late night transfer to airport.

Oct 23: Depart Almaty early am (just past midnight)

PRICE: \$5565 based on min 4 people. Single Room: \$1285.

\$200 discount when booked with The Caucasus tour.

All Airfares within the tour are included (4 flights).

Extra night in Ashgabat: \$105 per person twin share; \$185 single room

Extra night in Almaty: \$60 per person twin share; \$70 single room

Arrival or departure transfer when not on the tour dates: \$38 per car.

Includes:

accommodation as listed or similar
airport transfers and land transport
Four air tickets within the tour
daily breakfast, 21 lunches, 4 dinners
bottled water on the bus (1 litre per day per person)
accompanying professional guide, (different one for each country)*
local guide services during sightseeing tours where required
entrance fees, folklore show in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan
Visa approval letter for Turkmenistan
Entry travel pass/registration in Turkmenistan.

Does Not Include: international air, airport departure taxes, visa fees, migration tax paid upon arrival at the Turkmen border \$12, camera fees if any, tips to guides, drivers, hotel porters, travel insurance.

Hotels: (Based on availability)

Ashgabat: Nusay Hotel 5* city center, adjacent to Monument of Independence, Presidential Residence, Palace of Congress and the Arts <http://www.ashgabathotels.ru/eng/hotel/nissa.htm>

Nukus: Hotel Jipek Joli 3* (no 4* available here; this is best available & great location)
<http://jipekjoli.com/>

Khiva: Asia Khiva Hotel 4* or similar <http://asiahotels.uz/en/Asia-Khiva.html>

Bukhara, Kavsar Boutique Hotel <http://kavsar-boutique-hotel-bukhara.booked.net/>

OR Minzifa Boutique Hotel <https://www.booking.com/hotel/uz/boutique-hotel-minzifa-bukhara.html>

OR Komil Boutique Inn 4* <http://komiltravel.com/>

Samarkand, Hotel Registan (formerly President Palace) 4* <http://www.registan-plaza.com/>

OR Malika Prime Hotel <http://www.malika-samarkand.com/prime.htm>

Termez, Meridian Hotel 4* <http://uzbek-travel.com/hotels/meridian-hotel/>
Dushanbe, Hilton Dushanabe (formerly Sheraton) <https://www3.hilton.com/en/hotels/tajikistan/hilton-dushanbe-DYUHHI/index.html>
Khujand, Khujand Grand Hotel 4* <http://grand-hotel.tj/>
Tashkent, City Palace 4/5* (formerly The Sheraton) <https://citypalace.uz/>
OR Ramada Tashkent (also known as Park Turon) <http://ramadatashkent.com/>
Ferghana, Hotel Asia Ferghana 3* <http://asiahotels.uz/en/Asia-Fergana.html>
Bishkek, Plaza Hotel 5* <http://www.plazahotel.kg/ru/>
Almaty, Hotel Otrar 4* old Russian style, great location <http://otrarhotel.com/>

NOTES:

Sequence of daily activities may vary depending on timing and various local conditions as well as in-tour flight schedule changes. Flights within the tour are subject to change. We will adjust as needed to attempt to visit all sites. Please be assured all activities and sightseeing will be covered.

Weather: <https://www.weather2travel.com/may/central-asia/>

Average temperatures May: 65-85 F & 12-15 hours of daylight; Oct: 48-72 F & 9-11 hours of daylight.

Hotels

We have mainly 4 star hotels and two five star. A few hotels are wonderful heritage style. In Ferghana the highest level is 3* (which may seem more like a 2 star). If new/better hotels open, we will switch. Please have an accepting attitude. It hasn't happened in several years, however-- even though we received confirmation for our rooms, if a large group suddenly needs more rooms, our reservation gets cancelled. This can happen even after you have let the US and without our advanced knowledge. Such are the business practices in this part, and many parts, of the less developed world. It is quite frustrating to us all!

Road Conditions:

Turkmenistan - all roads are paved and good.

Uzbekistan - transfer from Khiva to Bukhara (290 miles). Reconstruction is going on most of the road (estimated finish in 2014-2015). About 80 miles of unpaved road.

Tajikistan - usually bumpy and have pot holes.

Kyrgyzstan - Half of the road is European highway, the other half is paved but a little bit bumpy road.

Kazakhstan - All roads are great.

Vehicles:

All vehicles have seat belts and ac. There are no quality/comfortable vehicles in Tajikistan. Cars are imported from Europe. The newest models are 2003. Roads are poor (gravel). AC may not work very well. We have requested the best vehicles available.

Guides and drivers

There will be an accompanying guide throughout your journey (different one for each country) who is highly educated and speaks very good English. In some places you may also have local guides in addition to the escort. The guide in Ashgabat will fly with the group to Mary and return. This guide will not fly to Dashoguz because this flight is simply to transport across the Uzbek border, therefore the Uzbekistan guide will meet the group on arrival in Dashoguz and take you across the Uzbek border. The guide in Osh will fly with the group to Bishtek. In all cases the guides do not cross borders. You will be assisted with border formalities on one side and proceed to the check point where you are met by the guide on the other side.

Guides and drivers in Kyrgyzstan & Kazakhstan are ethnic Russian (there are no Kyrgyz or Kazakh drivers at all and 90% of guides are Russians). Their ancestors moved here in the former Soviet Central Asia a century ago. All our guides have a degree tourism and English language. The drivers all smoke, though they will not smoke in the vehicle or in your presence, their clothing will smell of smoke in the car while driving. Suggest carry lavender or another favorite essential oil and dab your nostrils from time to time or dab a handkerchief, if you are sensitive.

Border Crossings

The time it takes to pass through a border is unpredictable. Expect there may be long delays, especially crossing into Kazakhstan. Some crossings require a walk between exit and entry. Have luggage on wheels and keep weight of carry-on (day bag) to minimum. We suggest back pack style for day bag as easiest to manage without assistance.

Distances between border checkpoints:

Turkmenistan/Uzbekistan – 500 meters (Hojayli)

Uzbekistan/Tajikistan – 400 meters (Sariasia)

Tajikistan/Uzbekistan – 500 meters (Aibek)

Uzbekistan/Kyrgyzstan – 200 meters (Dustlick)

Kyrgyzstan/Kazakhstan – 250 meters (Kordai). Here a guide stays with the group.

Amount of time in Kazakhstan

We have created a fascinating and diverse experience of the “Five Stans,” though people often ask why we are only in Kazakhstan one day. Kazakhstan has several interesting historical areas but I think you see enough minarets and other architecture in Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan is a huge steppe country; it has almost no beautiful nature. Also distances between places are considerable. If you would like to stay an extra day in Almaty we can certainly arrange it for you. Several people have enjoyed having a free day here.

Our tour travels across a huge region fit in 3 weeks with different level of hotels, different roads, 5 border crossings, different guides, drivers and vehicles. Situations not under our control change without much notice such as – borders, road work, government conferences, hotel owners. We do our best to anticipate in advance and the guides do their best on the spot to adapt the itinerary when these changes occur. Unfortunately, it is a reality of travel within Central Asia.

VISA information: subject to change

Visa is available on arrival in Ashgabat (we provide the approval letter to you in advance); Kyrgyzstan does not require visa for US & Canadian citizens; Kazakhstan no longer requires a visa. Visas for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan must be obtained in advance. Tajikistan available online. A double entry visa is required for Uzbekistan. No visa is required for Canadians.

Post tour extension tour to China's Silk Route: visits Urumqi, Turpan, Kashgar, Tashkurgan. Request details.