

The Stans of Central Asia

Departs 3rd April 2025

Blue Dot Travel





\$15,440 pp

Twin-share

Excludes international flights to/from Australia

Single supp \$1,800

THE 5 STANS OF CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia, or "The Stans", is a vast landlocked region of Asia, popular amongst travellers who want to experience one of the world's last great frontier lands. In Stalin's time, the area was known as Turkestan. Soon after its independence, the five former Soviet Central Asian Republics, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, were defined as Central Asia. This is the common modern definition, and our tour covers all five.

The Silk Road was a network of Eurasian trade routes spanning 6,400 km, which played a central role in facilitating economic, cultural, political, and religious interactions between the East and the West. Its unique place in human history resulted from the interchange of ideas, innovations and philosophies among the people that travelled it. Our journey will encompass many historic places and "story-book" destinations. Beautiful monuments, some restored, some not, museums full of ancient artefacts and colourful bazaars, combined with stunning landscapes, will make this a memorable experience.

The history of Central Asia is defined as much by its climate as by its geography. The region's aridness made agriculture difficult, and its distance from the sea restricted the growth of industry. As a result, few large cities developed. Instead, the region was dominated by the nomadic horse people of the Steppe. These Steppe horse riders became some of the most militarily successful people in the world.

Periodically, great leaders would organise several tribes into one force of almost unstoppable power. These included the Hun invasion of Europe, the Wu Hu attacks on China, and most notably, the Mongol conquest of much of Eurasia. The fracturing of the Mongol Empire led to the Turkic people's resurgence. The tyrant Timur, was a Turco-Mongol conqueror who founded the Timurid Empire in and around Central Asia, becoming the first ruler of the Timurid dynasty. An undefeated commander, he is widely regarded as one of the greatest military leaders and tacticians in history. His descendants ruled separately in small kingdoms and duchies for almost a century. The dominance of the nomads ended in the 16th century, as firearms allowed settlers to gain control of their surroundings. Russia, China and other powers expanded into the region and captured the bulk of Central Asia by the end of the 19th Century.

Central Asia's geography is varied, with high plateaus, mountains, vast deserts, and treeless, grassy steppes. Much of the land is too dry and rugged for farming, so the majority of the population earn a living by herding livestock. Central Asia's water is a precious resource, leading to occasional border disputes.

Some parts of Central Asia have hardly seen a traveller, making it all the more fascinating. Bring your camera and curiosity, with many wild and beautiful landscapes to explore.



**Departure, Thursday 3rd April
FROM AUSTRALIA**

Depart Australia for Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Our recommended flight is via Seoul, and we will provide you with an individual flight plan for your journey.

**Day 1, Friday 4th April
TASHKENT, UZBEKISTAN**

On arrival to Tashkent, we'll meet for a welcome dinner and a good night's rest before exploring the city tomorrow. *D*

**Day 2, Saturday 5th April
TASHKENT**

A full day of sightseeing awaits in Tashkent, the capital city of Uzbekistan. We'll visit the key sites of the Old City, including stunning mosques, madrasas and mausoleums, the Applied Arts Museum and the city's main square and streets. A true highlight is the Chorsu Bazaar for total sensory overload! *B/D*

**Day 3, Sunday 6th April
TASHKENT TO SAMARKAND**

We'll start early today, taking the Afrosiyob fast train to Samarkand (approx 2.5 hours.) Situated at the crossroads of world cultures for over two and a half millennia, Samarkand is one of the most important and beautiful sites on the Silk Road. We'll have an orientation walk on arrival and visit the enormous and

impressive Registan Square. Check in to our hotel in Samarkand for a three-night stay. *B/D*

**Day 4, Monday 7th April
SAMARKAND**

Today, we'll visit some of this historic city's most famous and beautiful landmarks. What we don't visit today will be seen on our tour tomorrow. Highlights include the fascinating Ulegbek Observatory and the surprisingly beautiful Shakhi Zinda necropolis. We'll visit the famous Siyob bazaar, the Tomb of the Living King, the Afrosiyob museum, the Gure-Amir and Iman Al Bukhariy mausoleums. Tonight, there's a traditional Uzbek dinner at a local restaurant. *B/D*



**Day 5, Tuesday 8th April
SAMARKAND**

We'll continue our sightseeing tour of Samarkand today, visiting any sights we didn't have time for yesterday. We'll visit the carpet factories that produce the silk carpets the region is famous for, and then you can spend your afternoon wandering this fabulous city with a camera in hand. *B/L*

 **Day 6, Wednesday 9th April**
SAMARKAND – BUKHARA

This morning, we'll take another journey on the comfortable, fast train from Samarkand to Bukhara (approx 90 mins). We will leave our luggage at the hotel and head out to explore this lovely city, which has long been a hub for traders and travellers since its foundation over 2000 years ago. Our guided tour will include the Labi Hauz complex, Magoki mosque, the stunning domes of the old city, Bozori Kord Khammam (sauna), Ulugbeg and Abdulazizhkan madrassahs. We'll return to our hotel in the late afternoon to freshen up, and will spend the next 3 nights here. This evening a local family will show us how to prepare Plov, the traditional Central Asian dish. *B/D*



Day 7, Thursday
10th April
BUKHARA

Mosques, madrasas and markets await today as we continue to explore the fascinating ancient city of

Bukhara. Highlights include the Ark Fortress, Bolo Hauz Mosque and the Samani Mausoleum. Your afternoon is free, and our hotel is centrally located near the ancient trading domes, the ideal place to wander, have a coffee, or pick up an antique or local handicraft. Over a wonderful local dinner, we'll enjoy a folk show at Devonbegi Medressah this evening. *B/D*

Day 8, Friday 11th April
BUKHARA

Today we'll explore more of the delights of fascinating Bukhara. This will include visiting the summer palace of the last emir of Bukhara. We'll also visit the local synagogue and experience a cultural puppeteer show before having time to wander the fabulous trading domes again and haggle for a memento or two. Dinner is at a local restaurant. *B/D*



Day 9, Saturday
12th April
BUKHARA – MARY
(TURKMENISTAN)

Today is a long but rewarding travel day, starting with the 2-hour drive to the Farab border, where we say goodbye to

Uzbekistan for a few days and cross into Turkmenistan. The border formalities can be lengthy and often frustrating, but they are also part of a true Central Asian journey. We'll meet our new guide and driver and stop for lunch in Turkmenabat before making the 4-hour drive through the desert to Mary. It's a long, bumpy drive, but the desert scenery is fascinating. We'll have a one-night rest stop in Mary. *B/D*

 **Day 10, Sunday 13th April**
MARY – MERV – ASHGABAT

Today, we'll drive east towards Bayram-Ali, the historical and cultural park of Ancient Merv, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The cities that developed at Merv together form one of the most complex and well-preserved urban centres on the Silk Route of Central Asia. After exploring the site, we'll return to Mary to visit the local History Museum, which presents an array of archaeological finds dating from 3000 BC to the late 19th century. In the early evening, we'll take a short flight to Ashgabat, Turkmenistan's capital, where we'll spend the next three nights. *B/D*

 **Day 11, Monday 14th April**
ASHGABAT

Prepare to be surprised! Ashgabat is one of the quirkiest cities ever, made of white Carrara marble that positively shines in the desert sun. Today, we'll visit the fortress of Old Nisa, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the earliest Parthian Empire capital at the foot of the Kopet-Dag Mountains. We'll return to Ashgabat via Kipchak village to visit the biggest mosque in Turkmenistan and the family mausoleum of the first president. We'll conclude our day with a visit to the National Museum of History, where more than 325,000 objects are displayed, including ancient artefacts from many of Turkmenistan's archaeological sites. *B/D*



Day 12, Tuesday 15th April
ASHGABAT AND SURROUNDS

We'll start our day with a visit to the fascinating National Carpet Museum, home to the world's largest carpet and other exquisite objects, before leaving town to see pure-blood Akhal-Tekke horses at a stud farm. We'll then travel west to Kov-Ata cave and its unique hot-water underground lake. There are many stairs down into the cave, so it may not be for everyone but take swimmers and a towel just in case. After a barbecue lunch, we'll return to Ashgabat (approx 2 hours drive) for dinner. *B/D*

Day 13, Wednesday 16th April
ASHGABAT – KHIVA (UZBEKISTAN)

This morning, we'll take an early flight to Dashoguz in the north of Turkmenistan to visit the UNESCO-listed Kunya Urgench, which has wonderful architecture and monuments dating back to the 11th century. Time permitting, we'll visit the local market before driving to the Uzbek Tashauz border to meet our original Uzbek guide. Once again, patience will be needed as we complete border formalities before driving to Khiva (approx 1 hour). Legend has it that the son of Noah founded Khiva, while archaeology suggests it was founded as early as 5000 BC. In its heyday as the last resting place of caravans before crossing the desert to Iran, Khiva was a vital stop on the Silk Road where the sale of camels, carpets, coffee and concubines shaped

capitalism as we know it. We'll spend the next two nights in Khiva, and dinner is at a local restaurant tonight. *B/D*

 **Day 14, Thursday 17th April**
KHIVA

Today, we'll explore the magnificent Khiva, regarded as one of Central Asia's most coherent and well-preserved examples of Muslim architecture. Even though this walled city is small, there are seemingly endless alleyways and sites (to say nothing of craft shops) to discover with the help of our guide. We'll explore the highlights of the old city, including the old city gates, the Allakuli Khan Madrasah, the Kalta minaret, the Kunya Ark fortress, the Juma mosque and the Tosh Hovli Palace. *B/D*

Day 15, Friday 18th April
KHIVA – TASHKENT

We'll continue exploring Khiva this morning, visiting any of the key sites we didn't have time for yesterday. There'll be free time for lunch, and in the afternoon, we'll take a short flight (1.5 hours) to Tashkent, where we'll overnight before flying to Dushanbe in the morning. *B/D*

 **Day 16, Saturday 19th April**
TASHKENT – DUSHANBE (TAJIKISTAN)

After breakfast, we'll take a 1-hour flight to Dushanbe in Tajikistan and meet our new guide and driver. Dushanbe (which means Monday) is a relatively new city named after the traditional bazaar that was historically held on Mondays here. The city's Archeological Museum is a fascinating visit, with exhibits from its many civilisations (Greek, Buddhist, Hindu, Zoroastrian and Islamic). The 14m Buddha statue, the largest of its kind in Central Asia, was transported in 43 pieces by a team of restorers from the Hermitage Museum and painstakingly restored to what we see today. The decadent Navruz Palace was originally intended as a tea house but became something much grander and is now one of the city's main attractions. Dinner is at a local restaurant tonight. *B/D*

 **Day 17, Sunday 20th April**
DUSHANBE

This morning, we'll visit Hissar Fortress, the residence of Bukhara Emirs during the 18th century and the Madrasah Kuhna, a 16th-century Madrasa. Returning to the city, we'll take a walking tour of the delightful capital, visiting the central mosque, markets, and the National Museum of Tajikistan. The impressive Friendship Square is marked by a golden statue of 10th-century Ismoil Somoni, founder of the Samanids Dynasty and a strong state in Central Asia. Extensive Rudaki Park, named after the writer considered the founder of Persian literature, sits under a beautiful canopy of trees and is a wonderful spot to rest and take it all in. *B/D*

 **Day 18, Monday 21st April**
DUSHANBE

This morning, we'll take a scenic drive to Iskanderkul Lake, nestled in the heart of the Fann Mountains (approx 3 hrs). Named after Alexander the Great and sitting at an altitude of 2,200 metres, this glacial lake is simply stunning. We'll have a picnic lunch on the shores of the lake and then spend some time walking in the area. There is an optional hike of approximately 1.5 hours to

the nearby Waterfall and Snake Lake. We'll arrive back to Dushanbe for dinner at a local restaurant. *B/L/D*

Day 19, Tuesday 22nd April
DUSHANBE – BISHKEK

Today is another travel day, beginning with a morning flight to Tashkent (approx 1 hour). Depending on flight schedules, we may have time in Tashkent to visit the famous ceramist Akbar Rahimov's workshop and then head back to the airport for our flight to Bishkek (approx 1.5 hours). On arrival in Bishkek, we'll transfer to our hotel for dinner and a three-night stay. *B/D*

 **Day 20, Wednesday 23rd April**
BISHKEK

Today, we'll enjoy a full day of sightseeing in Bishkek – Kyrgyzstan's capital city. The key sites include impressive

monuments, tree-lined boulevards and gardens, historic city squares and the fantastic open-air Art Gallery. We'll finish our tour with time to shop for local crafts or enjoy the



colourful

atmosphere of the Osh Bazaar. Tonight's dinner is at the Supara Ethno complex, where we can try the traditional Kyrgyz hunting dish "Tash Mangal", followed by a folklore show and Manas performance. (depending on weather, dinner may be on the outdoor terrace or inside the yurt restaurant).

 **Day 21, Thursday 24th April**
BISHKEK AND SURROUNDS

It's time to put on the walking shoes as we head out to Bishkek's breathtaking Ala-Archa Alpine National Park in the Tian-Shan Mountains for a light hiking tour. There are some 20 glaciers within the park, and it is also home to the endangered and very rare snow leopard. We'll share a picnic lunch in the park, then return to the city, arriving late in the afternoon. *B/L/D*

 **Day 22, Friday 25th April**
BISHKEK – CHON-KEMIN

Today, we'll travel to the beautiful Chon-Kemin Valley. We'll stop en route at the Burana Historical Complex, an open-air archeological museum of Balbals (carved stone warriors). We'll arrive at our guesthouse for lunch, followed by a demonstration of felt carpet making and horse games played by locals. This afternoon, an optional excursion to the Kalmak Ashuu Gorge on a horse and cart (a light hike is also possible). This evening, there will also be free time to explore local life in the village. A delicious homemade dinner will be served on the terrace, opening to the panoramic view of the mountains and village. *B/L/D*

 **Day 23, Saturday 26th April**
CHON-KEMIN – KARAKOL

We'll take a scenic 5-hour drive to Karakol today via Issyk-Kul Lake. In Bokonbaev village, we'll visit a local hunter who keeps golden falcons in his home. He will share his stories about falconry and demonstrate eagle

hunting for us. We'll then have lunch at a local villager's home. We'll continue to Jeti Oguz Gorge, a scenic regional township of beautiful hills and streams. For those up to it, there is an hour (or so) light trek to enjoy the views and the fresh mountain air. Those who prefer not to trek can stay with the bus and enjoy the scenic surroundings. Time permitting, we'll take a sightseeing tour of Karakol either this afternoon or tomorrow. We'll see the Russian church made entirely of wood (no nails) and the Dungan mosque (the Dungan are a minority group of Muslims living in this region and originally from Western China). We'll also visit the One Village-One Product shop - a great initiative offering handmade food and felt products from local women in the Issyk Kul region. We'll arrive in Karakol for dinner and spend the next two nights here. **B/L/D**

 **Day 24, Sunday 27th April**
DAY TRIP TO JYRGALAN

Today is an early start! We'll visit the Livestock Market this morning with its vast concentration of horses, sheep and cattle traded in two enclosures. Kyrgyz come from all over the region to visit the market and to buy, sell and socialise, sometimes travelling for days with their livestock to reach it. The bazaar gives a good insight into the culture and the livelihood of the people here. This is



the only animal market in Kyrgyzstan and the perfect place to dive into local culture. We'll return to the hotel for breakfast, then set out through the beautiful landscapes and traditional

villages of the Jyrgalan Valley. We'll walk through a local village and learn how to cook a Kyrgyz bread called Boorsok – small pieces of dough fried in a Kazan (steel pot) over an open fire. You'll love the freshly cooked boorsok served with jam or honey. We'll join another Kyrgyz family for a barbecue lunch. In the afternoon, there is the option for a half-day hike exploring the lush, verdant mountains of the area or staying in the village and meeting with locals to learn more about Kyrgyz rural life. We'll return to Karakol for dinner. **B/L/D**

 **Day 25, Monday 28th April**
KARAKOL – CHOLPON ATA

This morning, we'll visit the Museum of Explorer Nikolai Przhevalsky, then travel to the Reina-Kench Ranch on the banks of the Jyrgalan River. After a guided tour of the farm, we'll share an organic lunch prepared from products grown on the farm. Our day concludes at Cholpon-Ata where we'll visit the open-air Petroglyphs Museum and enjoy dinner on a boat tour on the lake. Overnight in Cholpon Ata. **B/L/D**

 **Day 26, Tuesday 29th April**
CHOLPON ATA – ALMATY (KAZAKHSTAN)

Today is another day of predominantly transfers. We'll travel from Cholpon Ata towards the border crossing into Kazakhstan (approx 3 hours). We'll complete border crossing formalities in Kordai and meet our next guide and driver. We'll then continue travelling to Almaty

(another 3 hours), where we spend the next three nights. We'll have some time to freshen up and then meet for dinner at our hotel. **B/D**

 **Day 27, Wednesday 30th April**
ALMATY

Today, we'll enjoy a walking tour of Almaty – the former capital of Kazakhstan. At Panfilov Park, an eternal flame commemorates the fallen soldiers of 1917-20 (the Civil War) and 1941-45 (WWII) and burns in front of a giant black monument of soldiers from all 15 Soviet republics. We'll visit the Museum of National Musical Instruments' collection of traditional Kazakh instruments - wooden harps, horns, bagpipes, and the lute-like two-stringed dombra. We'll continue to the Green Bazaar and the Rakhat ("pleasure" in Kazakh) chocolate factory and finally to Kok-Tobe Hill. Along with a giant TV tower, there is a great viewing deck offering sweeping panoramic views of Almaty, souvenir shops, and, bizarrely enough, a bronze monument devoted to the Beatles. **B/D**

 **Day 28, Thursday 1st May**
DAYTRIP TO ESIK VILLAGE

We'll have a full day of exploring the beautiful countryside today. Our first stop is Esik Village, lying on the Issyk River at the foot of the Tian Shan Mountains. Here, archaeologists found the grave of a Scythian warrior, which contained an elaborate costume decorated with thousands of pieces of gold. It has come to be known as the gravesite of the Golden Warrior. We'll drive on to Ile-Alatau National Park for some light trekking (for those up to it) this afternoon. This area is famous for its wildlife and scenic beauty. We'll return to Almaty for our final dinner together. **B/D**

Day 29, Friday 2nd May
ALMATY & DEPARTURE

Today, we'll visit the Medeo Gorge, a picturesque valley some 15 kilometres above Almaty city. The Kazakhs are very proud of their speed skating rink, which they claim to be the largest in the World and is an obligatory stop on any Kazakh itinerary. Take a cable car to Shymbulak Gorge for a coffee, then return to town and visit the Republic Square, Independence Monument, and Arbat Street, a popular area filled with artists selling their works. Our last stop is the Central Historical Museum, showcasing Kazakhstan's history from bronze-age burial mounds to modern day. One of our favourites is the ethnographic display, which features yurts, horse and camel gear, jewellery and exotic costumes dating back to the 18th century. We'll return to the hotel to freshen up before we head to the airport in the evening for our flight home. Flights will be via Seoul, arriving back in Australia on Sunday morning. **B/L**

We are excited to offer this comprehensive itinerary covering all 5 Stans of Central Asia. For travellers who are short on time, there is the possibility of leaving the tour in Almaty on Tuesday, 29th April.