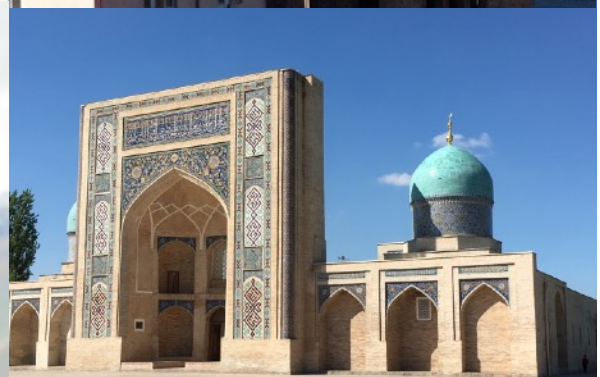




Blue Dot Travel





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, April 2027 (date tbc) FROM AUSTRALIA

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

Day 1 TASHKENT (UZBEKISTAN)

On arrival to Tashkent, we'll have a light dinner at the hotel and our welcome meeting, then a good night's rest before exploring the city tomorrow. **D**

Day 2 TASHKENT

Today we'll take a walking tour of Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent. We'll visit Tashkent's main squares, stroll along its tree-lined streets, and explore the metro stations—an attraction in their own right. Share your first of many cups of tea at a family run ceramic workshop, and learn about one of Uzbekistan's oldest art forms. Take some time to refresh at the hotel, before meeting for dinner at a local restaurant. **B/D**

Day 3 TASHKENT

Prepare for sensory overload this morning at Chorsu Bazaar, Tashkent's expansive local market. Visit the Khast Imam Complex with its stunning mosques and mausoleums as well as the Applied Arts Museum. We'll learn about Uzbekistan's more recent history at the

memorial museum and finish our day at a well-known local restaurant serving Central Asia's most traditional meal, plov. **B/D**

Day 4 TASHKENT TO SAMARKAND

We'll start early today, taking the comfortable high-speed 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, Bibi Khanym Mosque and Gur-e-Amir Mausoleum. Check in to our hotel in Samarkand for a two-night stay. **B/D**



Day 5 SAMARKAND

This morning we'll continue our exploration of the city's most famous landmarks including the surprisingly beautiful Shah-i-Zinda, the fascinating Ulugbek Observatory and Afrosiyob Museum. In the afternoon,

we'll visit the silk paper centre and the carpet factories that produce the silk carpets the region is famous for. Return to the city for dinner at a local restaurant. **B/D**

Day 6 SAMARKAND – BUKHARA

This morning, we'll take another fast train journey from Samarkand to Bukhara (approx 1.5 hours). We'll leave our luggage at the hotel and head out to explore this



lovely city, which has been a hub for traders and travellers since its foundation over 2000 years ago. Our guided tour will include the Labi Hauz complex, 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 three nights here. **B/D**

Day 7 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 a local handicraft. This evening we'll enjoy a folk show at Devonbegi Medressah. **B/D**

Day 8 BUKHARA

Today we'll explore more of the delights of fascinating Bukhara. This includes the summer palace of the last emir of Bukhara and the mausoleum of Baha al-Din Naqshband. We'll also visit the local synagogue and a puppeteer workshop, and if time permits you can wander the



fabulous trading domes again and haggle for a memento or two. Dinner is at a local restaurant. **B/D**

Day 9 BUKHARA – MARY (TURKMENISTAN)

Today is a challenging travel day, as we say goodbye to Uzbekistan for a few days and cross into Turkmenistan. The roads are arduous and the border formalities can be lengthy and often frustrating. However, this is part of the experience of visiting lesser-travelled countries. We'll meet our new guide and driver for the journey through the desert to Mary, for a one-night rest stop. **B/D**

Day 10 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 formed one of the most complex urban centres on the Silk Route of Central Asia. We'll explore the well-preserved remains, then return to Mary to visit the local History Museum. It presents an astounding array of archaeological finds dating from 3000 BC to the late 19th century. In the afternoon, we'll continue our desert drive to Ashgabat, Turkmenistan's capital, where we'll spend the next two nights. **B/D**



Day 11 ASHGABAT AND SURROUNDS

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. Next, we'll visit a local stud farm to meet the family and learn about their pure-blood Akhal-Tekke horses. 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 at the National Museum of History, home to over 325,000 objects including artefacts from many of Turkmenistan's archaeological sites. **B/L/D**

Day 12 ASHGABAT – DASHOGUZ

Prepare to be surprised! Ashgabat is one of the quirkiest cities ever, made of white Carrara marble that positively shines in the desert sun. This morning we'll explore the city's main monuments, then at lunch we'll try our hand at preparing our own "somsa" in a cooking class. Finally we'll visit the fascinating National Carpet Museum, home to the world's largest carpet and other exquisite objects. In the late afternoon we'll transfer to the airport for our evening flight to Dashoguz (1 hour), where we stay for one night. You can grab a snack for dinner at Ashgabat airport, if you have room after lunch! **B/L**

Day 13 DASHOGUZ – KHIVA (UZBEKISTAN)

After breakfast, we'll visit the UNESCO-listed Kunya Urgench, with its wonderful architecture and monuments dating back to the 11th century. Then we'll drive 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. **B/D**

Day 14 **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 **KHIVA – TASHKENT**

We'll continue exploring Khiva this morning, visiting the sites we didn't have time for yesterday. The fascinating Silk Museum showcases the traditional silk-making process, from silkworm cultivation to weaving, within the historic setting of the ancient Itchan Kala. We'll have lunch at a local restaurant, followed by free time before our evening flight to Tashkent (1.5 hours). We'll overnight at a hotel near the airport, before flying to Dushanbe in the morning. **B/L**

Day 16 **TASHKENT – DUSHANBE (TAJIKISTAN)**

This morning we'll take an early morning flight to



Dushanbe (which means Monday), a relatively new city named after the traditional bazaar that was historically held on Mondays here. We'll meet our new guide and visit some of the city's key sites including the decadent Navruz

Palace and Tajik Buddha. This 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 city's Archeological Museum is a fascinating visit, with exhibits from its many civilisations (Greek, Buddhist, Hindu, Zoroastrian and Islamic). Dinner is at a local restaurant tonight, and we stay here for three nights. **B/D**

Day 17 **ISKANDERKUL LAKE DAY TRIP**

Today we'll take a scenic day trip to Iskanderkul Lake, nestled in the heart of the Fann Mountains (approx 3 hrs). The mountain roads will be rough, but the beautiful views of the lakes along the way are worth it. Named after Alexander the Great and sitting at an altitude of 2,200 metres, this glacial lake is simply stunning. We'll have lunch overlooking the shores of the lake and then spend some time walking in the area. The hike to the nearby waterfall is approximately 1.5 hours and rated as challenging. Return to Dushanbe for dinner. **B/L/D**

Day 18 **DUSHANBE**

This morning we'll continue our tour of the delightful capital, visiting the central mosque, National Museum of Tajikistan and the impressive Friendship Square. Time permitting, we'll take a stroll through extensive Rudaki Park, named after the Tajik poet. After lunch we'll visit Hissar Fortress, the residence of Bukhara Emirs during the 18th century, with its original city walls and arched gateways. We'll return to the city for dinner in a local restaurant. **B/D**

Day 19 **DUSHANBE – BISHKEK (KYRGYZSTAN)**

Today is another travel day, as we fly from Dushanbe to Bishkek (via Tashkent). Pack a good book, as the flight schedules often result in a few hours wait in Tashkent. On arrival to Bishkek, we'll transfer to our hotel for dinner and a two-night stay. **B/D**

Day 20 **BISHKEK AND SURROUNDS**

This morning we'll head out of Bishkek to the breathtaking Ala-Archa Alpine National Park, in the Tian-Shan Mountains for a light hike. There are some 20 glaciers within the park, and it is also home to the endangered and very rare snow leopard. We'll return to the city to explore the highlights of the capital, including the colourful atmosphere of the Osh Bazaar, and Lenin Square. At tonight's dinner we'll try the traditional Kyrgyz hunting dish "Tash Mangal", followed by a folklore show and Manas performance. **B/D**



Day 21 **BISHKEK – CHON-KEMIN**

This morning we'll continue our sightseeing in Bishkek, visiting its impressive monuments, tree-lined boulevards, gardens and historic city squares. After lunch 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 dinner, and spend the next two nights here. **B/D**

Day 22 **CHON-KEMIN**

Today we'll experience local life in the Chon Kemin Valley, starting with a demonstration of felt carpet making and then horse games played by locals. After lunch, we'll visit Kalmak Ashuu Gorge on a horse and cart (a light hike is also possible). In the afternoon there'll be free time to explore the local village and soak up the stunning mountain scenery. 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 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 arrive to our guesthouse for dinner and spend the next two nights in Karakol. **B/L/D**



Day 24 DAY TRIP TO JYRGALAN

This morning we'll visit the local livestock market. Kyrgyz come from all over the region to buy and sell horses, sheep, and cattle - and also to socialise! This is the only animal market in Kyrgyzstan, and people may travel for days with their livestock to reach it. It's the perfect place to dive into local culture. After this, we'll set out through the beautiful landscapes and traditional villages of the Jyrgalan Valley. We'll visit a local home and learn how to cook a Kyrgyz bread called Boorsok - small pieces of dough fried in a Kazan (steel pot) over an open fire - followed by a barbecue lunch. You'll love the freshly cooked boorsok served with jam or honey! Walking through the area is a great way to learn more about Kyrgyz rural life. We'll return to Karakol for dinner. **B/L/D**



Day 25 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. There'll be time to explore the farm before our organic lunch prepared from products grown on the farm. We'll continue to Cholpon-Ata where we finish our day with dinner and a boat trip on the beautiful alpine lake surrounded by snow-capped mountains. Overnight in Cholpon Ata. **B/L/D**



Day 26 CHOLPON ATA – ALMATY (KAZAKHSTAN)

This morning we'll visit the fascinating open-air Petroglyphs museum which features over 5,000 ancient rock carvings, dating back to 1500 BC. Then we'll begin our journey towards Kazakhstan. The border crossing is approx 3 hours drive, where we'll change drivers and guide. We'll continue travelling to Almaty (another 3 hours), where we spend the next four nights. We'll freshen up and then meet for dinner at our hotel. **B/D**



Day 27 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 then Kok-Tobe Hill, where there is a great viewing deck souvenir shops, and, bizarrely enough, a bronze monument devoted to the Beatles. Dinner is at a local restaurant tonight. **B/D**



Day 28 DAY TRIP TO ESİK VILLAGE

Today we'll head out to explore the beautiful local countryside. 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. In the afternoon we'll drive on to Ile-Alatau National Park, famous for its wildlife and scenic beauty. We'll return to Almaty for our farewell dinner at a local restaurant. **B/D**



Day 29 ALMATY

Today, we'll continue our sightseeing in Almaty with visits to Republic Square, Independence Monument, and Arbat Street, a popular area filled with artists selling their works. The Central Historical Museum, showcases Kazakhstan's history from bronze-age burial mounds to the 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. In the afternoon, we'll sample some of Kazakhstan's surprisingly good wines then return to the hotel to rest, as it's an early start tomorrow! There'll be a light dinner available at the hotel. **B/D**

Day 30 DEPARTURE

We'll transfer to the airport for our flight departing early this morning. Flights are via Dubai and will arrive home on Sunday morning.

If you'd like to combat the jet lag with a stopover in Dubai, this can be arranged when we book your flights.



Icon indicates a day where there is **moderate physical exertion**. A basic level of fitness is required: eg. A trek over 'mostly flat' terrain or climbing several flights of steps without the support of handrails or elevators.



Icon indicates a day where there is a **particularly active section**. A good level of fitness is required: eg. A longer trek over non-groomed, uneven terrain, or ascending to reach a panorama. May also include exposure to higher altitude. An alternate activity may be offered if you choose to sit out an active section. Please call - we are happy to discuss each tour in more detail.