

## ASHGABAT TO DUSHANBE ALONG THE SILK ROAD

Price: €4,100 per person. Deposit: €500. Payment can also be made in USD or CHF.  
Single supplement available for €700 and required for solo travelers.

### Guaranteed departures in 2022:

- **15 April – 1 May 2022**
- **17 June – 3 July 2022**
- **16 September – 2 October 2022**

*In 17 days you can explore the heart of the Great Silk Road, winding your way across deserts and through a mountain range from Ashgabat in Turkmenistan, via Uzbekistan, to Dushanbe in Tajikistan. These three Central Asian republics offer a fascinating diversity of cultural experiences and natural wonders, making for an unforgettable tour.*

*History lovers will relish the huge number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites along the way. The ruined desert cities of Merv and Konya Urgench contrast sharply with the still-thriving metropolises of [Bukhara](#), [Khiva](#), and [Samarkand](#), with their dazzlingly tiled mosques, madrassas, and mausoleums. Bukhara was one of the most important intellectual and religious centers of the medieval world, and it remains a place of Sufi pilgrimage.*

*Traveling in the spring or fall when temperatures are at their most pleasant, you'll see the seasons on the cusp of change. The desert has an undeniable romance, especially when a herd of Bactrian camels wanders by; and there are few places more beautiful than turquoise Iskanderkul (Alexander's Lake), surrounded by the snow-capped peaks of the Fann Mountains.*

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Combine the cultural highlights and natural beauty of Central Asia in a single tour
- Visit three of Central Asia's most exciting capital cities, [Ashgabat](#), [Tashkent](#), and [Dushanbe](#)
- Explore the ruins of Merv, Konya Urgench, and Sarazm, three ancient UNESCO World Heritage Sites
- Marvel at Registan Square and other wonders of Timurid architecture in [Samarkand](#)
- Lose yourself in the bustling streets of [Khiva](#) and [Bukhara](#), surrounded by dazzling medieval monuments
- Shop in authentic oriental bazaars for everything from hand-woven silks to spices
- Feast on a barbecue next to the dramatic burning gas crater known as "the Gates of Hell"
- Visit Iskander Kul, the idyllic mountain lake named after Alexander the Great

## ITINERARY OVERVIEW

- Day 1: **TURKMENISTAN:** Ashgabat Arrival  
Day 2: Ashgabat City Tour  
Day 3: Ashgabat – Mary (Merv) – Ashgabat (roundtrip flight)  
Day 4: Ashgabat – Goekdepe – Ashgabat - Darvaza Gas Crater (400 km, c. 6h)  
Day 5: **UZBEKISTAN:** Darvaza – Kunya Urgench – Nukus (350 km)  
Day 6: Nukus City Tour & Savitsky Museum  
Day 7: Nukus – Khiva (200 km, c. 4h)  
Day 8: Khiva Walking City Tour  
Day 9: Khiva – Bukhara (train, c. 6h)  
Day 10: Bukhara City Tour  
Day 11: Bukhara – Tashkent (train, c. 4h)  
Day 12: Tashkent City Tour – Samarkand (train, c. 2h)  
Day 13: Samarkand City Tour  
Day 14: Samarkand City Tour  
Day 15: **TAJIKISTAN:** Samarkand – Iskander Kul – Dushanbe (340 km, c. 8h)  
Day 16: Dushanbe City Tour  
Day 17: Departure from Dushanbe

## MAP



## ITINERARY

### Day 1: Ashgabat Arrival

Welcome to Central Asia and Turkmenistan! Most of the flights arrive early in the morning. Transfer to the hotel for immediate check-in. Have a rest after the long flight and free time. Meet your fellow travelers in the hotel lobby in the evening.

The Turkmenistan welcome dinner will be accompanied by a folk performance at the Bagt Koshgi restaurant. On the way to the hotel, we will stop by the viewpoint at the Wedding Palace to take pictures.

*Overnight at Hotel Diwan (4\*) or similar*

*Meals: Breakfast, Dinner*

### Day 2: Ashgabat City Tour

The capital of Turkmenistan, literally translated “the City of Love,” has been rebuilt several times throughout its long history. Today, Turkmenistan’s natural gas wealth is evident in the capital’s opulent marble architecture, which holds a Guinness record for the highest density of white marble buildings in the world. As you will see during today’s city tour, the city boasts several other world records as well.

We will start the city tour with a visit to the Halk Hakydasy National Memorial Complex with its World War II and earthquake memorials. We will then drive on to the Old Nisa fortress, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the earliest of the Parthian Empire’s capitals. It is located on a hilltop at the foot of the Kopet-Dag Mountains. 14 hectares in size, the fort incorporates two semi-excavated complexes from the Parthian period (3rd century BC – 3rd century AD), which have been identified as a royal residence and a temple complex.

Back in Ashgabat, we will visit the Alem Ferris Wheel (the world’s largest indoor ferris wheel), as well as the Arch of Neutrality. We will eat lunch and then continue to the Park of Independence, the Ertogrul Gazi Mosque, and, finally, the Russian Bazaar.

In the evening, we will be invited for dinner at the private house of a local family and then marvel at Ashgabat’s nighttime illuminations on the way back to the hotel.

*Overnight at Hotel Diwan (4\*) or similar*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

### Day 3: Ashgabat – Mary (Merv) – Ashgabat (roundtrip flight)

On today’s day trip, we will take the domestic flight from Ashgabat to Mary (9:50 am – 10:30 am) to explore the vast archaeological site of Merv, just outside the modern city of Mary. Merv was founded in the Bronze Age and was an important city on the ancient Silk Road. Merv was one of the world’s largest cities until it was destroyed by the Mongols in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and its loss was hugely detrimental to civilization.

We will have a comprehensive tour of the ruins of ancient Merv (which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and then return to Mary for late lunch. Our tour will continue at the local history museum, Juma mosque, and Russian Orthodox church. The flight back to Ashgabat departs at 7:10 pm, and on arrival in the capital, we will return to the hotel for dinner.

*Overnight at Hotel Diwan (4\*) or similar*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

#### **Day 4: Ashgabat – Goekdepe – Ashgabat - Darvaza Gas Crater**

After a late breakfast, we will drive to a farm in Goekdepe, about 50 km west of Ashgabat, to see Turkmenistan's famous Akhal Teke horses. Stopping on the way back at the Turkmenbashi Mosque and Mausoleum in Kipchak, we will then have lunch, pick up our luggage from the hotel, and transfer to 4WD cars to visit Darvaza, the burning gas crater in the Karakum Desert. Arriving at Darvaza before sunset, we will have dinner in a yurt camp right next to the dramatically flaming gas crater which has been appropriately nicknamed “the Door to Hell”. Fittingly, our dinner will be barbequed over the fire, and we will spend the night in the yurts.

*Overnight in a yurt camp (shared bathroom facilities)*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

#### **Day 5: Darvaza – Kunya Urgench – Nukus**

Today, which will inevitably come too soon, is our last day in Turkmenistan as after breakfast we will drive towards Nukus, Uzbekistan. Just before the border, we will stop at Turkmenistan’s other remarkable UNESCO-listed archaeological site, Kunya Urgench. Here we will visit the most important mausoleums and also see the Kutlug Timur Minaret, built in 1011.

After lunch, we will cross the Khojeyli border post into Uzbekistan. Be prepared for some lengthy border procedures. It is then a half-hour drive to the city of Nukus, but we will stop en route for a photo stop at the Mizdarkhan necropolis, parts of which date back to the 4th century BC.

In the evening our tour manager will give a welcome to Uzbekistan talk, and there will also be a chance to reflect on your experiences of the trip so far. Dinner will be served in the hotel restaurant and we will then learn more about the cultural significance of Nukus through a wonderful film, *Desert of Forbidden Art*. The movie tells the extraordinary story of Igor Savitsky, a Soviet painter, archaeologist, collector, and avant-garde art connoisseur who single-handedly founded the State Art Museum of the Republic of Karakalpakstan (also known as Nukus Museum, or the Savitsky Museum), which we will visit tomorrow.

*Overnight at Hotel Jipek Joli (3\*)*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

#### **Day 6: Nukus City Tour & The Savitsky Museum**

Nukus is the capital of the autonomous Karakalpakstan Republic. Due to its secluded location near the Aral Sea, Nukus was a closed city throughout the Soviet period, when the Red Army researched and developed chemical warfare weapons here.

After a leisurely breakfast, we will walk the short distance from the hotel to the Savitsky Museum, where we will be met by a curator and art specialist. The museum houses thousands of ancient treasures and important ethnographic objects, along with the world’s second-largest collection of Russian avant-garde art, which Savitsky kept hidden from the watchful eyes of the KGB in this isolated desert location. We will eat lunch at the museum and in the afternoon have some free time to explore the city independently.

Later on, a local professor will talk about the Aral Sea disaster, a tragic topic he is studying in-depth. Then, we will drive to the home of a local Karakalpak family to enjoy some home-cooked food accompanied by a performance of traditional music and dance.

*Overnight at Hotel Jipek Joli (3\*)*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

**Day 7: Nukus – Khiva**

It is now time to drive through some of the remotest areas of Uzbekistan to reach the oasis town of Khiva. Although the road conditions are not easy, our four-hour journey will take us through a region with stunning ancient fortresses. We will make a short stop at one of them, Chilpik Kala, which was inhabited by Zoroastrians two millennia ago.

Lunch will be served once we arrive in Khiva. We will have time to settle into our hotel and then head into the Ichan Kala, the walled city, to visit a craft center where local children are learning the traditional art of woodcarving.

*Overnight at Zarafshan Boutique Hotel (3\*) or similar*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

**Day 8: Khiva Walking Tour**

After breakfast, we will start sightseeing in earnest. Khiva is one of the oldest cities in ancient Khorezm, a pearl of eastern architecture. Legend has it that it was founded by Shem, the son of Noah, and archaeological records trace its origins back to the 4th or 5th century BC. Today, Khiva is the most architecturally intact of Uzbekistan's UNESCO-listed Silk Road cities. The entire citadel is an open-air museum, protected as a World Heritage Site.

Khiva is packed with rich cultural sites: there are more than 50 historic monuments and hundreds of traditionally-built houses within the Ichan Qala alone. As you walk through the enormous city gates, you are confronted by a glistening beacon of Islam, the Kalta Minor, a bejewelled minaret. The guide will lead us through Khiva's labyrinthine streets to explore magnificent buildings including the dazzlingly-tiled harem within the Tash Khauli (Stone Palace) and the Juma Mosque, with its beautifully carved wooden pillars, every one of which is unique. We will watch the sunset from the top of the Kunya-Ark, which grants us a perfect panorama of the Ichan Qala in the early evening light, before enjoying dinner, music, and dancing courtesy of Khorezm's finest local musicians.

*Overnight at Zarafshan Boutique Hotel (3\*) or similar*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

**Day 9: Khiva – Bukhara**

Rising early, we will transfer to the train station and ride the rails from Khiva to Bukhara, crossing the Kyzylkum Desert, the 16th largest desert on the planet. Lunch will be served on board, and we will arrive in Bukhara at 1:35 pm.

Bukhara was a major staging point on the Silk Road, its wealth derived from overland trade. In the medieval period, Bukhara was also a hugely important religious and intellectual center, rivaling Baghdad. A UNESCO-listed World Heritage Site, 2,500 years of history and traditions are well preserved in the Old City. On this first day in Bukhara, you will have time to walk, admiring some of the 300+ mosques and monuments before enjoying a delicious dinner at a local restaurant.

*Overnight in Hotel Safiya (3\*) or similar*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

**Day 10: Bukhara City Tour**

The day will begin with a visit to the Ismail Somoni Mausoleum, a unique monument dating from the 10th century which was the architectural inspiration for later domed mausolea across Central and South Asia. Nearby, the Chashma Ayub Mausoleum is a local pilgrimage site connected with the Old Testament Prophet Job.

Our tour itinerary will continue at the elegant Bolo Hauz Mosque and the Ark Citadel, Bukhara's original fortress, which was founded at least 2,000 years ago. We will eat lunch together and then visit the Poi Kalon complex, a highlight of the city, where the Kalon Mosque, Kalon Minaret, and the Mir-i-Arab Madrassah surround an open plaza teeming with local vendors and their colorful stalls.

We will also visit Lyabi Hauz, the social hub of Old Bukhara, where locals come to meet friends, eat, drink, and relax in the shade. The Nodir Devon Begi Khanagha, built as a rest house for Sufi dervishes, overlooks this attractive square. It is only a short stroll from here to the famous trading domes where Silk Road merchants sold their exotic goods and their modern descendants still trade. We will have some free time in the late afternoon and then regroup for dinner at a local house.

*Overnight at Hotel Safiya (3\*) or similar*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

### **Day 11: Bukhara – Tashkent**

This morning you can choose to wander independently in Bukhara's Old City, and perhaps indulge in some shopping, or join the guide to visit the Sitorai Mokhi Khosa, the summer palace of the last emir of Bukhara. The palace was built from 1912-18 on the outskirts of the city, and it has an eclectic architectural and decorative style which includes both Russian and local influences.

We will have a last lunch in Bukhara and then board the high-speed Afrosiob train to Tashkent 3:50 pm. We will arrive in Tashkent, Uzbekistan's modern capital, at 7:45 pm and transfer to the hotel for check-in and dinner.

*Overnight at Hotel Wyndham (4\*) or similar*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

### **Day 12: Tashkent City Tour – Samarkand**

With a population of over 3 million people, Tashkent is the largest city in Central Asia. Its history dates back to the first century BC when an urban settlement grew up around a major caravan crossroad on the Silk Road. Much of what you see today, however, dates from the late 20th or 21st centuries, as a devastating earthquake in 1966 destroyed much of the older city. Rebuilding Tashkent was a major Soviet infrastructure project, with laborers coming to work here from across the Soviet Union.

We will start the day's sightseeing at the Monument of Courage, which remembers the victims of the earthquake. We will then walk to Independence Square, a symbol of freedom for Uzbekistan's citizens, who declared their independence when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Next, we drive to Chorsu Bazaar, Tashkent's green-domed market, with its acres of spices, fresh produce, and traditional crafts. Our last stop before lunch is the Barak Khan Madrassah, a historical monument that has become a center for local artists and craftsmen. We will also get to Uzbekistan's holiest relic, the world's oldest Koran.

Lunch will be served at the Central Asian Plov Center: you had better be hungry! Full of delicious plov, Uzbekistan's national dish, we will then visit the Museum of Applied Arts, an ornate, rainbow-colored building that was previously the official residence of the Russian Ambassador. We are saving the best until last, however, and we will now go underground to discover the subterranean art gallery that is Tashkent Metro. Each station has been designed by leading Uzbek architects and artists, and their inspirational themes vary from the Soviet space program to the literature of national poet, Alisher Navoi.

At 6:45 pm we will drive to the railway station to get the high-speed Afrosiob train to Samarkand, arriving at 8:53 pm for a late dinner and a comfortable night in the hotel.

Overnight at Hotel Rabat (3\*) or similar

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

### **Day 13: Samarkand City Tour**

Sublime Samarkand was the imperial capital of Emperor Timur, one of history's greatest (and most ruthless) conquerors. His vast empire stretched across the Eurasian steppe, reaching as far as Ankara and Delhi. As well as a successful military leader, Timur patronized the arts and literature. Much of his architectural heritage has been preserved, allowing us to see how the city might have been at the peak of its power.

We will start the day with a visit to the Gur-e-Amir, the gilded mausoleum where Timur is buried. We will hear about his astonishing life and how his investment in Samarkand's monuments created much of the city we see today. In the Registan, arguably Uzbekistan's most famous landmark, we will explore the three beautiful madrassahs (religious schools) which frame Samarkand's central square, Ulugbek, Sher-Dor, and Tillya Kori. Next, we will stroll through the spacious courtyard of the Bibi-Khanum Mosque, which legend has it was built for Timur as a gift by one of his wives. Siab Bazaar is right next door, where fruit and vegetables grown in the rich soil of the Zarafshan Valley are sold in a colorful market.

We will finish today at a bakery in one of the backstreets of the Old Town, where a family bakes bread for the local community. You are welcome to try making a loaf of your own. Before dinner, we will watch a fashion show at Valentina Romanenko's Ayesha Studio. Valentina is a well-known designer in Uzbekistan. She creates her stunning original designs from hand-painted silks, antique lace, and traditional suzani embroidery, enhanced with her secret, plant-based dyeing techniques.

*Overnight at Hotel Rabat (3\*) or similar*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

### **Day 14: Samarkand City Tour**

We need more time to explore majestic Samarkand, so today is another full day in the city. We will start at Afrasiyab Museum, which showcases the ancient history of Samarkand (then known as Afrasiyab) before it was destroyed by the Mongols in the early 13th century. Then, we will go to the Shah-i Zinda, the family necropolis of the Timurid dynasty, which has the finest tilework of any site in Uzbekistan. At Ulugbek's Observatory, you will learn about the Timurids' sophisticated understanding of astronomy, and how Emperor Ulugbek used a huge sextant to enrich our knowledge of the stars.

As part of the My City project, we plan to meet local English teachers and students. They will be your local hosts, guiding you around their homes and neighborhoods, and to see their community centers and schools. This immersive activity allows you to appreciate firsthand what life is like in Samarkand, and to have your burning questions answered.

In the evening, Farida and Olim, two natives of Samarkand, will welcome us in their home. Together we will prepare manti, One of Uzbekistan's most popular dishes, with the family.

*Overnight at Hotel Rabat (3\*) or similar*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

**Day 15: Samarkand – Iskander Kul – Dushanbe**

The time has come to say goodbye to the Silk Road cities and deserts of Uzbekistan and head towards mountainous Tajikistan. After breakfast, we will drive to the Uzbek-Tajik border, which takes about one hour. Crossing the border on foot, we will meet our Tajik guide and driver on the other side.

Shortly after the border, we will stop at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Sarazm, the ruins of which date from the 4th to 2nd millennia BC. We have a short look around the site and then continue driving past the town of Penjikent and through the verdant Zeravshan Valley. We will take a detour for lunch to Iskander Kul, a turquoise mountain lake about 30 kilometers off the main road. The high altitude lake, named after Alexander the Great, is triangular in shape and considered one of the most exquisite lakes in the former Soviet Union. If you wish, you can take a short hike to a nearby waterfall.

In the afternoon, we will depart from Iskander Kul and drive to Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. It's a wonderfully scenic route along the Varzob River and through the Varzob Gorge, a popular weekend getaway from Dushanbe. In the evening we will arrive in Dushanbe, check-in at a comfortable city center hotel, and have dinner.

*Overnight at Hotel Serena (5\*) or similar*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

**Day 16: Dushanbe City Tour**

As well as being the capital, Dushanbe is the largest city in Tajikistan. It was a small village with a market every Monday. The Persian word for Monday is *Dushanbe*, and that's how the settlement got its name. It was not until the Soviet period that Dushanbe grew into the political and industrial center of Tajikistan.

Our Dushanbe city tour will start at the large, modern National Museum of Tajikistan to get an overview of the country we are about to explore. We will see the Navruz Palace, which was conceived as the largest teahouse in the world, but became so impressive during its construction that it is now used as a palatial venue for official government meetings and conferences. It's over the top inside and out! This contrasts with the peaceful atmosphere of Rudaki Park, dedicated to the great Persian poet Rudaki; and our final stop, the golden statue of Ismail Somoni, which commemorates the 1,100th anniversary of the foundation of the Samanid State, a golden age in Tajik history when science and the arts flourished.

*Overnight at Hotel Serena (5\*) or similar*

*Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

**Day 17: Dushanbe Departure**

On the final morning, you will transfer to the airport at an appropriate time to catch your flight back home.

Meals: Breakfast

### Price includes

- All transfers, including airport collection and drop-off
- Accommodation based on two people sharing a double/twin room, with breakfasts included
- Full board (all lunches and dinners) on most days, except where mentioned in the itinerary
- English speaking local guide in each country, plus one tour leader accompanying the group for the duration of the trip
- All entry fees as per the itinerary
- Train tickets from Khiva-Bukhara, Bukhara-Tashkent, and Tashkent-Samarkand
- Economy class flights from Ashgabat-Mary-Ashgabat
- Visa support

### Price does not include

- International air fares to and from Central Asia
- Hotel charges for additional services
- Consular fees for tourist visas
- Travel insurance
- Personal expenses (e.g. souvenirs etc)
- Alcoholic beverages
- Tips for guides and drivers (optional)

### Important notes

- All listed departures are guaranteed
- The maximum group size is 16 people
- One tour leader will accompany the group for the whole trip
- Segments of the tour can be booked individually. We can also arrange extra nights before or after the trip, and suggest private tour extensions.
- We can advise and take care of all visas for you. Citizens of most countries are eligible for an e-visa for Tajikistan, and a visa on arrival for Turkmenistan, with a letter of invitation pre-arranged by us. Uzbekistan is visa free for most nationalities and for others we can get an electronic visa.
- A €500 per person deposit is required at the time of booking, and the balance is due 30 days prior to departure. Please take note of our [Terms & Conditions](#).
- Read more about [food in Central Asia](#) and see our [books recommendations](#)
- We are happy to suggest flights to get to Central Asia and back home: please contact us