

GRAND TOUR OF CENTRAL ASIA

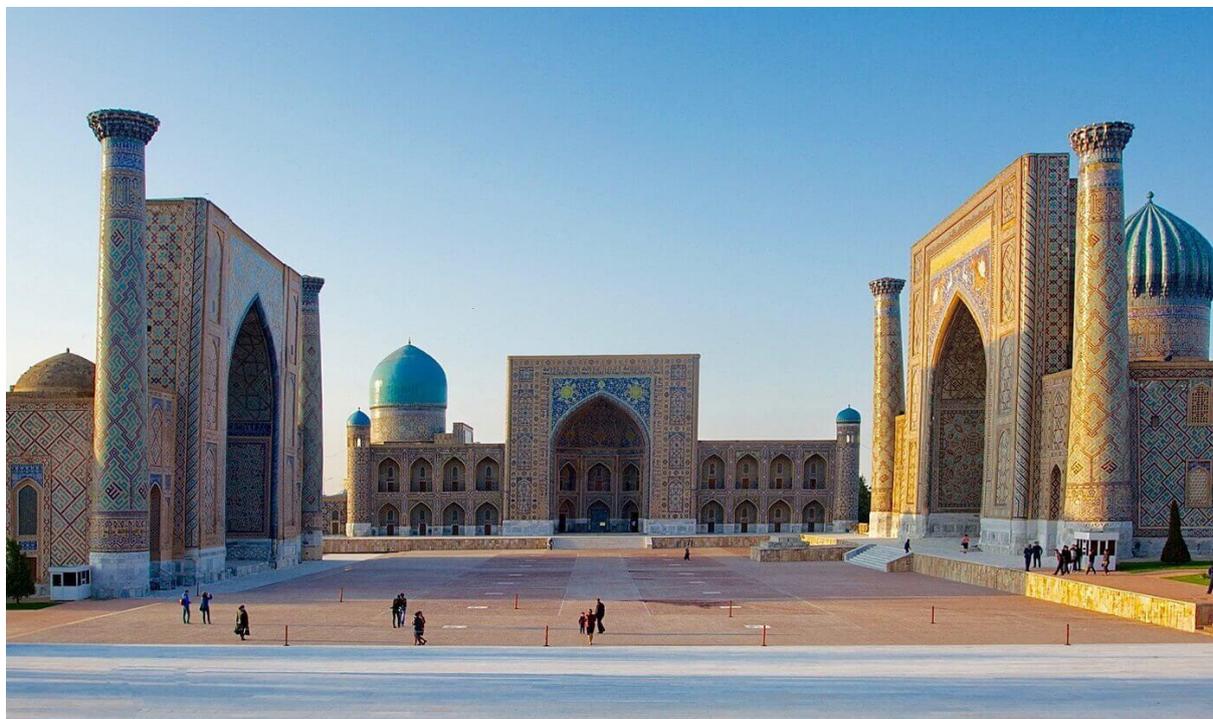
Price: €10,250 per person. Deposit: €1,000. Payment can also be made in USD or CHF.
Single supplement available for €1,500 and required for solo travelers.

Guaranteed departure: May 24 – July 4, 2023

Central Asia is a vast and diverse region, where the typical tourist barely has time to scratch the surface. In the [Grand Tour of Central Asia](#), Kalpak Travel gives you the opportunity to travel further and explore more deeply, getting to know each of the five Central Asian republics — better known as the ‘Stans — on an epic six-week itinerary. In each of the ‘Stans we have carefully selected the most fascinating places and experiences for you to enjoy in the company of an engaging and hugely knowledgeable local tour leader.

This trip is a chance for you to discover the past and present in each state, comparing and contrasting the cultural treasures and traditions of the nomadic populations who have crossed the region for centuries, and those who have settled in its cities. Nothing can prepare you for the eclectic, often over-the-top modern architecture of [Nur-Sultan](#) or [Ashgabat](#), “the city of love”. But the sprawling Soviet-styled cities of [Almaty](#), [Bishkek](#), and [Dushanbe](#), have their charms, too, and the days you spend in the [great Silk Road](#) cities, which epitomize the flourishing of Islamic culture in the medieval period, will create indelible memories.

For every remarkable historic or cultural attraction, Central Asia has a natural wonder to rival it. The Grand Tour of Central Asia allows you the time to explore the places in between, crossing mountain passes in the majestic Pamir and Tien Shan ranges, traversing deserts and steppes, and following the banks of life-giving rivers. If you want the most comprehensive, immersive tour of the ‘Stans available, The Grand Tour of Central Asia is the choice for you.



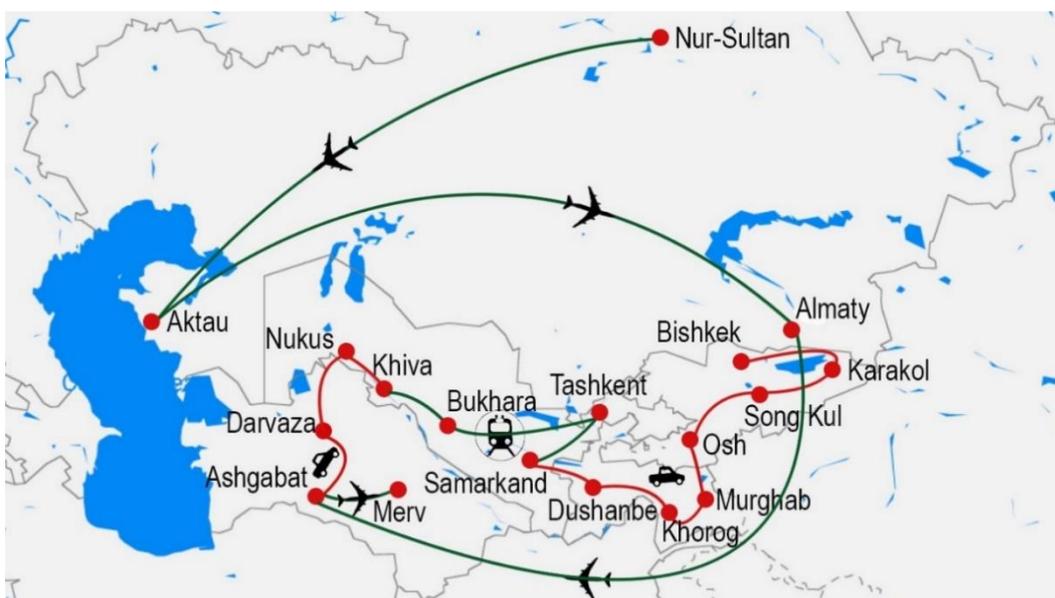
HIGHLIGHTS

- Combine the cultural highlights and natural beauty of Central Asia in a single tour
- Visit the diverse [capitals of all five Central Asian republics](#)
- Gaze upon the turquoise alpine lakes of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan
- Sleep in traditional yurts and experience Kyrgyz nomadic culture firsthand
- Marvel at Registan Square and other architectural wonders of in ancient [Samarkand](#)
- Wander the bustling streets of UNESCO World Heritage Sites of [Khiva](#) and [Bukhara](#)
- Shop in authentic oriental bazaars for everything from hand-woven silks to spices
- Feast on a barbeque next to Turkmenistan's burning gas crater known as "the Gate of Hell"
- Drive over "the Roof of the World" along the [Pamir Highway](#), one of the best road trips
- Camp amidst spectacular canyons in the Mangystau region of western Kazakhstan

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

- Departure is guaranteed
- The maximum group size is 16 people
- Tour leader Abdu Samadov 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. Other countries are visa free for most nationalities.
- A €1000 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

MAP



TOUR LEADER – ABDU SAMADOV

For this signature Kalpak Travel trip we are proud to confirm one of the best guides in Central Asia, Abdu Samadov, as the tour leader. Born in 1984 and raised in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, Abdu has been leading long, five 'Stans trips in Central Asia for the last few years. His passion for his job and his many years of education in the UK, US, and at home in Uzbekistan are reflected in the wonderful client feedback we always receive from the groups he guides. Abdu is very much looking forward to joining you on this epic journey for the whole six weeks.

We have asked Abdu to introduce himself by answering a few questions:

- **Who is your dream travel partner?**

My dream travel partner is someone who wants to experience life as the locals do in every region we travel: they want to eat local food, speak to the locals (both asking questions and answering questions), and to find similarities and differences in the places we visit. They should love traveling while using all of their senses and relish the many hands-on experiences in the places we visit.

- **What do you most like to do in your spare time?**

During my spare time, I read books and do gardening. I have many fruit trees that I take care of throughout the year.

- **What are your three secret tips for your country?**

In Samarkand, go to the local Plov House where native people eat authentic food. Walk the backstreets of Bukhara to meet with the people who live there and chat with the bakers, shoe repairers, and street cleaners. In Khiva, walk along the top of the city wall: this is how you get the best views..

- **What do you want to pass on to the guests on your tour?**

It is important to me to show the universality of human experience. We all have the same hopes and dreams, no matter where we live. I do, however, also like to show off the differences in our cultures and histories which make each nation unique.

- **What can guests expect from you on the tour?**

Strong leadership, an engaging atmosphere, and welcoming experiences.

- **What will surprise your guests on the tour?**

You will be surprised by literally everything in Central Asia: the history, people, traditions, current developments, etc.

- **Does the tour require any previous knowledge, skills, or equipment?**

Enthusiasm alone is enough.

ITINERARY OVERVIEW

- Day 1: KAZAKHSTAN: [Nur-Sultan](#) Arrival & City Tour
Day 2: Nur-Sultan City Tour – Aktau (flight)
Day 3: Mangystau Offroad Tour: Aktau – Valley of Balls – Sherkala – Tuzbair
Day 4: Mangystau Offroad Tour: Tuzbair Valley – Boszhira Valley
Day 5: Mangystau Offroad Tour: Boszhira – Aktau
Day 6: Aktau City Tour – [Almaty](#) (flight)
Day 7: Almaty – Charyn Canyon – Kaindy Lake – Satty (300km, c. 5-6h)
Day 8: Satty - Kolsay Lakes – Almaty (300 km, c. 5-6h)
Day 9: Almaty City Tour
Day 10: **TURKMENISTAN:** Almaty – [Ashgabat](#) (flight)
Day 11: Ashgabat City Tour
Day 12: Ashgabat – Mary (Merv) – Ashgabat (roundtrip flight)
Day 13: Ashgabat – Goekdepe – Ashgabat - Darvaza Gas Crater (400 km, c. 6h)
Day 14: **UZBEKISTAN:** Darvaza – Kunya Urgench – Nukus (350 km)
Day 15: Nukus City Tour & Savitsky Museum
Day 16: Nukus – [Khiva](#) (200 km, c. 4h)
Day 17: Khiva Walking City Tour
Day 18: Khiva – [Bukhara](#) (train, c. 6h)
Day 19: Bukhara City Tour
Day 20: Bukhara – [Tashkent](#) (train, c. 4h)
Day 21: Tashkent City Tour – [Samarkand](#) (train, c. 2h)
Day 22: Samarkand City Tour
Day 23: Samarkand City Tour
Day 24: **TAJIKISTAN:** Samarkand – Iskander Kul – [Dushanbe](#) (340 km, c. 8h)
Day 25: Dushanbe City Tour
Day 26: Dushanbe – Kulob - Kalai Khumb (370 km, c. 8h)
Day 27: Kalai Khum – Khorog (260 km, c. 6h)
Day 28: Khorog – Ishkashim (140 km, c. 4h)
Day 29: Ishkashim – Hissor (150 km, c. 5h)
Day 30: Hissor – Bulunkul – Murghab (250 km, c. 6-7h)
Day 31: **KYRGYZSTAN:** Murghab – [Tulpar Kul Lake](#) (280 km, c. 7-8h)
Day 32: Tulpar Kul – Osh (240 km, c. 5-6h)
Day 33: Osh City Tour
Day 34: Osh – Kazarman Village (280 km, c. 7-8h)
Day 35: Kazarman – [Song Kul](#) (240 km, c. 6-7h)
Day 36: Song Kul – Kochkor (140 km, c. 3-4h)
Day 37: Kochkor – Kyzyl Tuu – Skazka Canyon – Tamga (180 km, c. 4h)
Day 38: [Tamga – Jety Oguz - Karakol – Tepke](#) (150 km, c. 4h)
Day 39: Tepke – Cholpon Ata (160 km, c. 2-3h)
Day 40: Cholpon Ata – [Burana Tower](#) – Bishkek (280 km, c. 5-6h)
Day 41: [Bishkek](#) City Tour
Day 42: Bishkek Departure

ITINERARY

Day 1: Nur-Sultan Arrival & City Tour

Welcome to Central Asia and Kazakhstan! 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 then breakfast. Meet your fellow travelers and your guide in the hotel lobby at 1:00 pm to start the city tour.

Nur-Sultan (previously named Astana) is Central Asia's youngest capital and a showpiece for 21st century Kazakhstan. Talented and well-known architects have made major contributions to the surreal skyline of this futuristic city in the steppe. We will start our city tour with a relaxed stroll along the main street of Nur-Sultan, Nurzhol Boulevard, which was designed by Kisho Kurokawa. From the Ak Orda Presidential Palace, we will continue to Baiterek Tower and then finish at the Khan Shatyr shopping mall, a giant, tent-like structure designed by Norman Foster. After this walk, we will have a welcome dinner in a traditional Kazakh restaurant.

Overnight at the Sheraton (4) or similar*

Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

Day 2: Nur-Sultan City Tour – Aktau (flight)

After breakfast, today's city tour will begin at the Independence Monument, where the guide will talk about Kazakhstan's long journey to independence. Next, we will visit the National Museum to learn more about the country's rich history. The biggest collection of Scythian gold is exhibited here, as well as displays about the heritage of the mysterious Scythian Empire. From the museum, we will continue to Kazakhstan's main mosque, Hazret Sultan. After lunch, we will visit the futuristic Expo 2017 complex, which has the biggest spherical building in the world, the Nur-Alem Museum of the Future. Before its transformation into a museum, the building was the Kazakh Pavilion during the Expo.

In the late afternoon, we will transfer to the airport to catch the domestic Air Astana flight to Aktau, departing at 6:15 pm. Upon arrival in Aktau at 8:10 pm we will have dinner and then check-in at a comfortable hotel for a good night's rest.

Overnight at the Holiday Inn (4) or similar*

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 3: Aktau – Valley of Balls – Sherkala – Tuzbair Valley

Would you like to walk on the bottom of the ocean? There is a place on Earth where you can wander for days on what was once the bed of the ancient ocean, rarely meeting another tourist. It is one of the best-protected nature reserves, since its topography and the absence of infrastructure condemn visitors to travel hundreds of kilometers by jeep, something only very few visitors will attempt. This place is the Ustyurt Plateau, 200,000 square kilometers (77,000 square miles) of clay and stony desert divided between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Its main eastern boundary is the Aral Sea, and on the west, it borders with the Mangyshlak Peninsula on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. The Ustyurt Reserve was established in 1984 and it includes monumentally eroded rock cathedrals on the western edge of the plateau. It's one of the largest geomorphological features of the Earth's surface and clearly visible from space.

Today marks the start of our three days off-road trip to the Ustyurt Plateau. You will see some of the most fascinating and dramatic landscapes on the planet, but should be prepared for rough roads and two nights of wild camping.

We will depart in the early morning departure from Aktau in 4WD cars (2-3 people per car). Our first stop is the Valley of Balls, where ferromanganese nodules are scattered across the plateau-like huge billiard balls. They were formed at the bottom of the sea, but as they were more resistant to weathering, they remained on the surface while other limestone and dolomites were eroded by water.

After walking in the valley, we will continue to Sherkala, the name of which translates as the Lion's Castle. It's a giant, impregnable mountain in the kingdom of the desert. We will visit the spectacular Airakty Shomanay Mountains, and then finish the long day in the fantastic Tuzbair Valley, a place of pure beauty with three striking colors: white (salt, clay), blue (sky), and brown (soil). We will spend the night in tents under the bright stars with hot tea and a freshly-made dinner.

Overnight in tents

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 4: Tuzbair Valley – Boszhira Valley

Our second day of this offroad trip will start with a magical sunrise over the Tuzbair Valley (only if you like to get up early, of course!). We will have a leisurely breakfast and then drive to the dramatic Boszhira Valley, making photo-stops on the way at the most breath-taking viewpoints. Lunch will be served somewhere en route when you have built up an appetite for an open-air meal. We will reach Boszhira before sunset, which is the best time of day to capture beautiful photos. In the evening there will be another delicious dinner and a good night's sleep under canvas and the starry sky.

Overnight in tents

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 5: Boszhira - Aktau

After breakfast, you can climb up the hill for impressive views and a good stretch of your legs, or just relax for a while and admire the landscape. We will then drive to an amazing viewpoint nearby, looking out on an expansive desert of white clay which stretches for hundreds of kilometers and is punctuated by two sharp stone formations called the Boszhira Tusks. You can stand on the edge of this dangerously-high precipice regarding an other-worldly panorama. Afterward, we will drive back to Aktau city, seeing working oil-pumps near Zhana-Ozen and driving through the Karagie Depression (the lowest point in Central Asia, at an altitude of 132 meters below sea level) on the way. We will reach Atyrau in the late evening, where you can enjoy a well-deserved rest in your hotel room.

Overnight at the Holiday Inn (4) or similar*

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 6: Aktau – Almaty (flight)

After breakfast, we will explore the city of Aktau, located on the shore of the Caspian Sea. We will drive through the city and have a walk on the modern promenade alongside the beach. In the early afternoon, we will take the domestic flight to Almaty (1:55 pm – 5:55 pm, a three-hour flight with one hour's time difference). We will then transfer to the hotel in the city center and dine in a restaurant next to the hotel.

Overnight at the Novotel (4) or similar*

Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

Day 7: Almaty – Charyn Canyon – Kaindy Lake – Satty

There is a long and exciting day in front of you! After three hours of driving, we will arrive at Charyn Canyon. It is one of Kazakhstan's most unique natural monuments. The canyon is about 12 million years old and its dramatic vertical cliffs are reminiscent of ancient castles, albeit ones created by wind, sun, and rain. We will walk around 3 km down to the Charyn River where we will have a picnic on the riverbank. After taking time to relax we will then re-ascend to the rim of the canyon, which will take around one hour. We will then drive on to the village of Satty, and from there to Kaindy Lake. The last 30 minutes of this journey is offroad.

The unusual and someone mysterious-looking Kaindy Lake (Birch Lake) is located at an altitude of 2,000 meters above sea level. It was formed after a powerful earthquake in 1911 when a huge landslide blocked the river and the water flooded the valley. This is why there are Tien Shan fir trees in the middle of the lake. The water of the lake is very cold. This preserves the needles of the flooded trees and leaves them clearly visible through the transparent water. Trees' dry trunks stand out above the surface of the lake.

In the evening we will leave Kaindy Lake and drive back to Satty village, where we will have a hearty dinner and stay the night at the guesthouse of a local family.

Overnight in family-run guesthouse (shared bathroom facilities)

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 8: Satty - Kolsay Lakes – Almaty

Today you will choose from two options.

Active option: If you would like to challenge yourself with a mountain hike, get up early and we will drive to the first Kolsai Lake (15km, 30 min) and start hiking to the second lake. Hiking takes around three hours to get up and two hours to go down (16 km in total). We will start hiking at 7:00 am and will return to the starting point around 1:00 pm.

Comfortable option: After a leisurely breakfast, enjoy some free time in the village and before we drive to the first Kolsai Lake (15 km, 30 min). Here you will be able to admire the mountain scenery and take a boat ride. If you don't mind the cold water you can also have a bracing swim!

Everybody will rendezvous for a picnic lunch at the first Kolsai Lake and we will then drive back to Almaty (c. 4 hours) in the afternoon. You will dine independently in Almaty.

Overnight the Novotel (4) or similar*

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 9: Almaty City Tour

The last two days will have been quite active, with lots of driving and hiking. Today we will slow down and enjoy Almaty on a relaxed half-day city tour. Almaty was the Kazakh capital until 1997 and is still the largest city in Kazakhstan. Its name translates as "the place of apples" as it is believed this is the place where apples first grew. Almaty is a charming and green city, with wide, tree-lined roads and the Zailisky Ala-Too Mountains forming the backdrop to the city.

Today we will visit Panfilov Park, which is named after World War II General Panfilov. An impressive monument has been erected in the center of the park in honor of Panfilov's division. Almaty's most famous sight, the wooden Zenkov Cathedral built in 1904, is situated in Panfilov Park as well.

At Green Bazaar, you will have the chance to explore local Kazakh culture as you shop for fresh fruits and vegetables. After the market, we will take the cablecar to Kok Tobe, a hilltop overlooking the city

with panoramic views. The rest of the day will be spent at leisure: you might want to join the guide at the museum or head up to the Shymbulak ski resort above Almaty to enjoy more mountain scenery and fresh air.

Kazakhstan is a multicultural country with more than 130 ethnicities living peacefully together. We will have our farewell dinner for Kazakhstan in a Georgian restaurant.

Overnight in the Novotel (4) or similar*

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 10: Almaty – Ashgabat (flight)

You will have free time this morning and then check out from the hotel at 11:00 am to transfer to the airport, where there will be time for you to catch lunch before taking the direct Turkmenistan Airways flight to Ashgabat, Turkmenistan which departs at 2:00 pm. Upon arrival in Ashgabat at 4:00 pm, you will get your Turkmenistan visa and meet your Turkmen guide and driver in the arrival hall. Together you will transfer to the hotel and check-in.

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 11: Ashgabat City Tour

The capital of Turkmenistan, nicknamed “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 12: 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 13th 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 13: 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 barbecued 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 14: 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 15: 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 16: 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 17: 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 18: 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 19: 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 20: 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 that includes both Russian and local influences.

We will have a last lunch in Bukhara and then board the high-speed Afrosiob train to Tashkent at 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 21: 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 22: 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 23: 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 24: 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 25: 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 26: Dushanbe – Kulob - Kalai Khumb

Gently gaining altitude, we leave Dushanbe behind and begin our journey towards the Pamir Mountains. The roads are rough enough to shake your bones and it is going to be a long day, so do not forget your snacks, and charge up your batteries to make sure your chosen soundtrack lasts until evening. Of course, we will make plenty of stops to stretch our legs and take photos, the first of which is at the Nurek Reservoir.

In the city of Kulob in Tajikistan's southern region of Khatlon, we will have lunch before driving north-east and slowly gaining slowly altitude. The road will take us up and over the Shuraba Pass at 2267m. The scenery becomes wilder and more dramatic as we climb; it's the backdrop for countless adventures. The roaring Panj River will be our constant companion. It forms the natural and political boundary between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, which is clearly visible on the opposite riverbank.

Tonight, our accommodation is in an immaculate, modern hotel in the small town of Kalai Khumb, the gateway of the Pamir region.

Overnight at Hotel Karon (3)*

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 27: Khalai Kum – Khorog

Today's scenic journey then continues along the glacial Panj River. Looking across the water you can spot Afghan villages clinging to the cliffs, and pathways that traverse and snake their way through the rocky mountains. On the way, we visit Castle Karon, a vast and until recently unknown archeological site. On a mountaintop above the Panj River, there was once an extensive city with a citadel, water and fire temples, and a polo field with stands for 10,000 spectators. Archeologists are still excavating the site.

We expect to reach Khorog, the biggest city, and capital of the Pamir region, in the mid-afternoon. We will visit the bazaar, which often has visiting traders from Afghanistan, and also the botanical garden, which is high above the valley and thus offers panoramic views on Khorog and the surrounding peaks. You may notice the characteristic features which distinguish the Pamiri people; unlike other Tajiks, a high proportion of Pamiris have blonde hair, fair skin, and blue eyes.

Overnight in a simple 2 hotel*

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 28: Khorog – Ishkashim

On the drive south from Khorog, our first stop is at Garm Chashma, a naturally occurring hot spring, for an (optional) dip in the mineral-rich waters. We will then reach the Wakhan Corridor, a remote region shared by Tajikistan and Afghanistan, which became famous in the 19th century when it functioned as a buffer zone between the Russian and British Empires during the Great Game.

The Wakhan's history is much older than this, however: it was a Silk Road pass through the mountains for millennia, and even Marco Polo calmed to have walked this way. The border town of Ishkashim is the regional administrative center, but it feels more like a large village. We will check-in at a guesthouse and have some time to explore before dinner. In the evening we will enjoy a folk show performed by a local Wakhi group of dancers and musicians.

Overnight at Hanis Guesthouse (shared western toilet and shower)

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 29: Ishkashim – Hissor

Our journey continues along the Wakhan Corridor today, with several points of interest to see along the way. In the village of Namadgut we will find the Kah Kakha Fortress, which dates from the 3rd century, and we will also scramble up to the dramatically situated Yamchun Fort a little further along the valley.

Lunch will be a picnic at the Bibi Fatima Hot Springs, which is named after the Prophet Mohammed's sister. Local women believe that taking the waters here will increase their fertility. We will visit the

Sufi Muborakqadam Museum with its solar calendar, then take another from driving at Vrang, a 4th-century Buddhist stupa that was once part of a much larger monastery. Locals will tell you that there is a stone on top of the stupa which is imprinted with the Buddha's footprint, and this made it an ancient place of pilgrimage.

We will arrive in the afternoon in a warm and welcoming family-run guesthouse in the village of Hissor. After check-in, we will have some free time. Dinner will be served in the guesthouse, and once night falls we highly recommend you step outside for the most brilliant star gazing to be found anywhere on Earth.

Overnight in a simple guesthouse in Hissor (shared western toilet and shower)

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 30: Hissor – Bulunkul – Murghab

We will leave the lush valleys behind and climb steadily to the rockier, almost lunar environment which characterises the high altitude desert of the Great Pamir. We will cross the dramatic Kargushi Pass at an elevation of 4,300 meters above sea level before dropping back down slightly. This reconnects us to the world famous Pamir Highway: the stretch between Khorog and Osh was completed in 1931 and at points, it reaches almost 4,000 meters above sea level.

A bit off the main road, we will visit the beautiful mountain lakes of Yashikul and Bulunkul. The Eastern Pamirs are part of Tajikistan but are mostly inhabited by ethnic Kyrgyz, many of whom still live a semi-nomadic lifestyle, inhabiting villages during the harsh winter months, then in last spring moving their yurts into the lush summer pastures where their cattle can graze. You will start to notice Kyrgyz yurts and herds of sheep, horses, and yaks as we drive towards Murghab, the center of Eastern Pamirs and our endpoint for today.

Overnight at the Pamir Hotel (simple rooms, but private bathroom)

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 31: Murghab – Tulpar Kul Lake

The high point of the tour — and the highest pass in the former Soviet Union -- is on our agenda for today: Ak Baital Pass (4,655 meters). We will descend from there to Karakul, at a more comfortable 3,800 meters. The name Karakul translates as "Black Lake", as it appears dark when it's not in direct sun. It's one of the highest navigable lakes in the world, and hosts the Roof of the World Regatta. We will cross one more pass, Kyzyl Art (4,280 meters), and by doing so enter Kyrgyzstan to be met by our Kyrgyz guide and driver. By evening we will reach the yurts where we'll stay overnight, situated beside Tulpar Kol, a picturesque lake at the foot of majestic Peak Lenin (7,139 meters).

Overnight in yurt (2-4 people in one yurt, shared toilets, no shower)

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 32: Tulpar Kul – Osh

In the morning we will have time to appreciate this beautiful area and go for a light hike if you would like. After lunch, we will drive as far as Sary Tash, then leave the Pamir Highway and the Pamir-Alay mountain range behind us. The landscape now changes completely, and we will be surrounded by lush farmland and small villages on the way to the scenic Taldyk Pass (3500 meters). The road is for the most part in quite a good condition, and we plan to arrive in 3,000-year-old Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second-largest city, just in time for dinner and to check-in at the comfortable hotel.

Overnight at Hotel Rayan (4*) or similar

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 33: Osh City Tour

Osh is known as “the capital of the south”. It has an estimated three millennia of history, but unfortunately not much has survived from pre-Soviet times. Our city tour in Osh will be very relaxed. In the morning, when it is not too hot, we will visit the most important sight in Osh, sacred Suleiman Mountain. Nicknamed “Kichik-Mecca” (Little Mecca), this UNESCO World Heritage Site is a major place of Islamic and pre-Islamic pilgrimage. On top of the mountain is a stone shelter known as Babur’s House. It is named after the 15-16th century ruler who meditated and fasted here for 40 days before later founding the Mughal Dynasty in India. From the mountaintop, you will have a fabulous view of the city.

Next, we will get to meet a blacksmith who makes traditional knives. He will show you the technology and processes used in making these metal artworks. Afterward, we will visit a tandyr workshop. For more than 200 years, the men of this family are engaged in the manufacture of tandyr. A tandyr is a special clay oven designed for baking lepushka (Kyrgyzstan's round bread) and samsa. The production of tandyr is a very time-consuming business because the technology is not automated and everything is done with the help of hands and feet. These master craftsmen come from a family with a 200-year long tradition of tandyr making, and they will be delighted to show you how their ovens are made. We will be lucky enough to eat bread fresh from the tandyr for lunch, and also to try organic products from Alaiku Organics, a small company that is reviving forgotten recipes for natural foods and drinks. There will be some time in the afternoon, and we will gather again in the evening for dinner in the city.

Overnight at Hotel Rayan (4*) or similar

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 34: Osh – Kazarman Village

After breakfast, we will depart from Osh towards the Tien Shan Mountains in the north of Kyrgyzstan. In Uzgen, not far from Osh, we will make our first stop to visit a Karakhanid-era minaret, dating from the 11-12th century. We will cross the Kuk Art Ashuus Pass (3,300 meters), which offers breathtaking panoramic views. In the late afternoon, we will arrive in the mountain village of Kazarman, where we will spend the night in a hospitable, family-run guesthouse.

Overnight in a simple guesthouse (shared western toilet and shower)

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 35: Kazarman – Song Kul

Today we have another long ride on a bumpy dirt road, but the compensation is the amazing mountain landscapes, and two dramatic passes: Koo Ashuusuu (2,800 meters) and then Moldo Ashu (3,360 meters). Lunch will be a picnic on the way. Finally, we will arrive at Song Kul, an idyllic lake surrounded by meadows filled with a whole range of alpine plants, including Edelweiss. The meadows are used as summer pastures by shepherds from the region for their cattle. We will dine and stay and overnight in a yurt camp.

Overnight in a yurt camp (two people per yurt, shared western toilets and shower)

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 36: Song Kul – Kochkor

In the morning you will have free time to observe nomadic life and go on a walk or horse ride to the shore of the lake. Later we will see Ulak Tartysh, a traditional spectacle of horsemanship. After the performance, you will be able to take photos with the horses and their athletic riders. Lunch will be

in the yurt camp. In the afternoon, we will depart from Song Kul and drive c. 3-4 hours down to the village of Kochkor to check in at Nomad Lodge. Dinner will be served in a family guesthouse.

Overnight at Nomad Lodge (3*)

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 37: Kochkor – Kyzyl Tuu – Skazka Canyon – Tamga

Before breakfast, you will see how boorsok (small, deep-fried breads which are a local delicacy) are made, and then eat your fill of this popular Kyrgyz breakfast food. In the village, we will visit the women's cooperative specializing in hand-making traditional Kyrgyz carpets from felt, which are called shirdak.

We will then drive to Issyk Kul, "the pearl of Kyrgyzstan" and the second-largest mountain lake in the world. At an altitude of 1,600 meters, it is warm enough in summer for swimming and a popular beach destination for the Kyrgyz and Kazakh people. We will have several interesting stops along the way.

Our first stop is in the village of Kyzyl Tuu, where we will meet a yurt maker and learn more about this traditional nomadic dwelling. Many people in this village are involved in yurt making business. Near Bokonbayevo, we will meet an eagle hunter, who will show us his eagle and give a short demonstration for us. At Skazka (Fairytale) Canyon, which derives its name from its bizarre landscape made of fabulous rock formations, we will walk for around one hour. From here, it is then just half an hour to reach our destination, a yurt camp near the shore of Issyk Kul. We will arrive well before dinner, so you can go swimming or have some rest. In the evening we will have a cooking class to prepare a local meal of manty (dumplings).

Overnight in a yurt camp (two people per yurt, one toilet, and shower per yurt)

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 38: Tamga – Jety Oguz - Karakol – Tepke

After breakfast, we will drive further eastwards along the southern shore of Issyk Kul towards the town of Karakol. We will take a diversion into the side valley of Jety Oguz, famous for its two red rock formations called Seven Bulls and The Broken Heart. Here your guide will tell you the legend behind their interesting names.

In Karakol, we will have a short tour of the town's most interesting sites. These include the Dungan Mosque (built in 1904), and the wooden Russian Orthodox Church, which has stood since 1869. We will also visit the museum dedicated to the Russian explorer Przhevalski. Lunch in Karakol will be in the home of an Uighur family. From Karakol, it is another 30 kilometers drive north to the village of Tepke where we will spend the night in a lovely guesthouse. The owners breed horses and will show the horses to us during our stay. Dinner will be at the guesthouse.

Overnight at Reina Kench Guesthouse (shower and toilet in the room)

Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 39: Tepke – Cholpon Ata

This morning's transfer to Cholpon Ata is via the northern shore of Issyk Kul. On the way we will visit the Nomads Museum in the village of Jarkynbaevo and also the open-air museum of petroglyphs (stone inscriptions) at Cholpon Ata. Our hotel is right on the beach, so in the afternoon you can either relax there or opt for a one-hour motor-boat cruise. Dinner will be served at the hotel.

Overnight in Hotel Raduga (3*) or similar
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 40: Cholpon Ata – Burana Tower – Bishkek

Today we will transfer to Bishkek, the final capital city on our tour. We will break up the drive with stops at the Museum of Nomadic Civilizations on the northern shore of the lake and also at Burana Tower, near to the town of Tokmok. This minaret was built in the 11th century in the medieval settlement of Balasagun, the capital of the mighty Karakhanid Empire. You can climb up the winding staircase to enjoy a nice view of the Chuy Valley, and will also be able to see the open-air museum featuring a collection of ancient balbals, carved monumental figures made of stone. Upon arrival in Bishkek, we will check in at the hotel and have the rest of the day at leisure, dining independently.

Overnight at Hotel Plaza (4*) or similar
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

Day 41: Bishkek City Tour

This morning we will lightly tour the charming capital of Kyrgyzstan, the greenest city in Central Asia. Our sightseeing program in Bishkek includes stops at the central market of the city, Osh Bazaar; as well as Oak Park, Ala-Too Square, and Victory Square. We will have more free time in the afternoon with some optional activities and a chance for last-minute souvenir shopping.

Our final, farewell dinner together will be in the Supara restaurant, accompanied by an authentic folk show.

Overnight at Hotel Plaza (4*) or similar
Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 42: Bishkek 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 Nur-Sultan-Aktau, Aktau-Almaty, Almaty-Ashgabat, and 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)
- Alcoholic beverages
- Tips for guides and drivers (optional)