



Treasures of Travel

The Jewels of Central Asia ~ Uzbekistan & Turkmenistan, 2023 ~ 22 days / 20 nights ~

For over two millennia, this area has formed a bridge between Europe and Asia, mingling people and trading goods via the thoroughfare that came to be known as the Silk Road. Central Asia's storybook content combined with stunning scenery will captivate you, and the generous instinctive hospitality of the people here will warm your heart. The atmosphere of the ancient trading posts and the evidence of nomadic empires will haunt you throughout the journey.

Day 1

Depart the USA on overnight flight.

Day 2

Fly to Europe and take connecting plane to Ashgabat.

Day 3 ~ Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

As you arrive early morning at Ashgabat airport; you will be met and transferred to your hotel. After some sleep and breakfast we will start our tour to explore this ever changing city. In the morning we will visit the **Carpet Museum of Turkmenistan** to see the biggest carpet in the world which is included in the Guinness book of World Records and to learn about the history of famous Turkmen carpet weaving.

Then will have a **cable car ride** to have a great view over Ashgabat followed by city sightseeing tour which includes the **Arch of Neutrality** (erected in 1998 to celebrate Turkmenistan's endorsement of a policy of political neutrality), the **Independence Square**, surrounded with extravagant palaces and ministry buildings. Overnight in Ashgabat.

Day 4 ~ Ashgabat

We will start our day with visiting the **UNESCO site** of the ancient Parthian Kingdom of **Nissa**, surrounded with beautiful Kopet-Dag Mountains.

Founded as the capital of the Parthians in the 3rd century BC later it became the part of such kingdoms as the Achaemenid under Cyrus the Great and the Macedonian under Alexander the Great. One ruling dynasty replaced another until the 13th century Mongol invasion when the city was razed to the ground. Archaeological excavations still continue at Nissa at present.

Our next stop will be **The History and Ethnography Museum** which introduces modern Turkmenistan on the ground floor and ancient history in the galleries above. The historical exhibition includes artifacts ranging from stone-age tools to carved ivory drinking horns. Other galleries have the collections of weapons, applied arts such as carpets and jewelry, and the flora and fauna of Turkmenistan. Be sure to examine the huge meteor, complete with unknown elements in its composition. Overnight in Ashgabat.

Day 5 ~ Ashgabat

This morning we'll **fly to Mary** to explore the ruins of the ancient Merv known as Marghiana or Margush in Alexander the Great's time, located 22 miles from the city.

Merv is Turkmenistan's **UNESCO World Heritage site** and of immense historic significance to the whole Central Asia. The fertile oasis of Merv has supported human life for over 4,000 years. Formed from the rich silt at the mouth of the Murghab River where it soaks into the Kara Kum Desert, the oasis was an early Bronze Age center. The oldest of the five Merv cities Erk kala is an Achaemenid city thought to date from the 6th century BC. Merv reached its heights during the peak of the silk route in the 11th and 12th centuries, but it was completely eradicated in 1221 under the onslaught of the Mongols. We'll **fly back to Ashgabat** after our visit in Merve is completed. Overnight in Ashgabat.

Day 6 ~ Damla

Today after breakfast we will drive through the famous Karakum (Black Sand) Desert to the second largest in the world nomadic **village of Damla**. In the village we will see and experience real Turkmen nomadic way of life and enjoy their hospitality. After dinner we will sleep in Turkmen National Yurt. Overnight in Damla (in Yurt).

Day 7 ~Dashoguz

In the morning we will head to **Darvaza gas crater** which was created by a massive gas explosion in 1986 when Soviet experts were searching for natural gas in Turkmenistan. We'll continue to experience the unique drive through Karakum Desert to **Dashoguz** for overnight.

Day 8 ~Nukus, Uzbekistan

In the morning we will drive from Dashoguz to the famous city of **Kunye Urgench** which is the **UNESCO-listed old city**. First site we will see is the 11th century **Gutlug-Timur Minaret**, decorated with bands of brick and few turquoise tiles. Also admire the domed hall of the **Turabeg Khanym Mausoleum**. Its geometric patterns are in effect a giant calendar signifying humanity's insignificance in the march of time. Its cupola is rather unique in the context of early Islamic architecture and has its equal only in Shiraz, Iran.

Next we will travel to the border crossing point for Uzbekistan, after border formalities we will drive to Nukus for overnight.

Day 9 ~ Khiva

Nukus is the isolated capital of Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan Republic, home to the Karakalpaks, a Turkic people more closely related to Kazakhs than to Uzbeks. The city is the gateway to the fast-disappearing Aral Sea; the surrounding cotton fields testify to the monoculture that stole the water from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, the rivers that fed the Aral Sea; and it is also home to a remarkable Art Museum founded by Igor Savitsky, thanks to him many of the early 20th century Russian paintings which were banned by Moscow found the protection here. The story of this collection has been told in the award-winning documentary: *Desert of Forbidden Art*.

We will see the collection of **Savitsky Art Museum**, which is the second-largest gathering of Russian avant-garde art after the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. After our visit to Savitsky Art Museum we will drive to Khiva. Overnight in Khiva.

Day 10 ~ Khiva

The exact age of **Khiva** is not known. Legend has that it was founded when Shem, son of Noah, discovered a well here; the city's name was derived from Shem's joyful shout "Hey va" on seeing the well. As a result of a Soviet conservation program in the 1970-80s it's now official 'city museum'.

Khiva certainly existed by 8th century as a minor fort and trading post on the Silk Road, but it was not until the 16th century that Khiva became the capital of the Khorezm Khanate and a well-known slave-trading center. The Khanate ruled the surrounding area for over 300 years. Today, Khiva evokes a most remote and exotic feel with its compact old walled city full of minarets, a khan's fort, cobbled alleys, mosques and tombs.

We will spend the day exploring Khiva on foot. The tour includes the **UNESCO World Heritage Old Town, or Ichon-Qala**, including the **Tosh-Khovli Palace**, built in the 19th century by Alloqli khan; the **Juma Mosque** interesting for 218 wooden pillars supporting its roof; the **Kukhna Ark**, the original residence of the khans with its harem, mint, stables, arsenal, barracks, mosque and jail; and the ancient well of Khievak, the source of city's foundation.

Woodcarving workshop, UNESCO workshop - Khiva Silk Carpet Workshop has three main collections of carpets and suzanis: **Timurid Collection**, which are carpets and suzanis based on designs taken from fifteenth century miniatures, **Khiva Majolica Collection** based on the dazzling turquoise, white and deep blue tiles that adorn the madrasahs, mausoleums and palaces of Khiva, and finally **Khiva Doors and Pillars Collection**, based on the intricate carved wooden doors and pillars in Khiva. We will also visit **Applied Art Museum**. Overnight in Khiva.

Day 11 ~ Bukhara

This morning we'll head for another great city of Uzbekistan, Bukhara. We will take the road across **Kyzul Kum, or Red Sand Desert**, the same route taken by loaded Silk Road camel caravans. Stop on the way to take a look at the **Amu Darya River**, which used to be called the Oxus, and loosely parallels the Uzbek-Turkmen border. Overnight in Bukhara.

Day 12 ~ Bukhara

We will spend today exploring **UNESCO World Heritage Site -the "Historic Centre of Bukhara"** which has buildings spanning a thousand years of history, and a thoroughly lived-in old city. An oasis in the desert, Bukhara offers cool shade and rest to the modern traveler as it did to the camel caravans travelling on the Silk Road hundreds of years ago.

Our sightseeing begins at **Lyab-i-Hauz Plaza**, built around a pool in 1620 right in the heart of the old town; it is shaded by mulberry trees as old as the pool and serves - as it has had throughout history--a place to meet friends, eat, drink, and relax.

We will visit the nearby **Kukeldash Madrassah**, the largest of Central Asia's Koran schools, which dates from 1417. A stroll through artisans' shops will take us to the 12th century Kalon assembly which consists of the **Kalon Mosque and Minaret**, and the **Mir-i-Arab Madrassah**. At the time of foundation Kalon Minaret was probably the tallest building in Central Asia, its 14 ornamental bands, all different, include the first use of the glazed blue tiles that were to saturate Central Asia under Timur.

In the evening you will have some time to explore the city on your own or relax. Overnight in Bukhara.

Day 13 ~ Bukhara

This morning first we will tour nearby located **Ark Citadel**, a royal town-within-a-town which is Bukhara's oldest structure, occupied from the 5th century right up until 1920; the ancient fortress and seat of government for the Emirate of Bukhara is now a collection of museums and mosques. The Bukhara Ark being the trade center served the emirs of Bukhara as a residence, audience hall, as protection from neighboring enemies. Behind the Ark is **Zindon Prison**, with its infamous "bug pit" where two British spies Stoddart and Conolly were brutally imprisoned as part of the 19th century struggle in the great game between Britain and Russia for influence over this strategic oasis town.

Next we will stop at the **Ismael Samani Mausoleum**. The 10th century resting place of Ismael Samani, founder of the Persian Samanid Dynasty, is detailed with sixteen different styles of brickwork. The little mausoleum was buried under centuries of sand and not discovered until the 20th century.

This afternoon we will drive to the **Last Emir's Summer Palace** called **the Palace of Moon and Stars** located only 6 km (3.73miles) north of Bukhara. The present buildings were a joint effort for Alim Khan by Russian architects and local artisans to create luxurious place for khan but with Russian intention to keep him out of city in political impotence.

We will end our day with **traditional Uzbek performance** this evening. Overnight in Bukhara.

Day 14 ~ Samarkand

On the way to Samarkand we will stop in Tamerlane's hometown **Shakhrisabze** (Green City) which is the **UNESCO World Heritage** site. The town was formerly called Kesh but later renamed by Timur. Here one can see the ruins of Timur's summer palace **Ak Saray (White Palace)**. It was probably Tamerlane's most ambitious projects but what's left now are the bits of gigantic, 40m (131ft)-high entrance covered with gorgeous blue, white and gold mosaics.

In the evening we will arrive in **Samarkand**, a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**, built on the ruins of ancient Afrosiab, once known to the Greeks as Marakanda. Its location between China and the western world secured its importance as a trade center and a hub for cultural exchange. Its strategic location and cultural wealth made Samarkand an attractive target for the world's most famous conquerors. Overnight in Samarkand.

Day 15 ~ Samarkand

After his conquest, Tamerlane made Samarkand the capital of his empire and worked to improve the city, which had suffered under the Mongols. Under Tamerlane and his grandson Ulughbek architecture and decorative art flourished. They both had access to the best building and decorative materials, as well as the finest and most skilled architects and artisans, ever assembled in one place at one time.

We start the exploration of Samarkand with a visit to **Registan**, which is the centerpiece of the city and the most recognizable landmark for visitors. There are three *madrasahs* framing the square, with Ulughbek madrasah being the oldest. It was this central space that originally gave the place its name, as "registan" means "place of sand." This sandy place at the center of ancient Samarkand was a public square and marketplace before the Ulughbek, Tillya-Kori, and Shir Dor *madrasahs* were built.

Our next stop is at **Gur-Emir Mausoleum**. Tamerlane, his two sons and two grandsons, including Ulughbek, lie beneath this surprisingly modest mausoleum. The interior of the mausoleum has been restored and is beautifully decorated with gold leaf and fresh tile. Underneath the central dome there is the set of tomb-markers resembling sarcophagi (as with other Muslim mausoleums the stones are just markers, the actual crypts are in a chamber beneath). All are marble, with the exception of Tamerlane's, which is a slab of solid jade reportedly from Mongolia.

Our last stop will be at the **Bibi-Khanum Mosque**, built by Tamerlane to be the largest mosque and the jewel of his empire, dedicated to the memory of his favorite Chinese wife. Overnight in Samarkand.

Day 16 ~ Samarkand

Today we will carry on touring, thus learning more about Samarkand making the first stop at **Ulughbek's Observatory**. While Tamerlane built the world's largest mosque of his time, his grandson Ulughbek constructed the world's most accurate observatory; he was probably more famous as an astronomer than as a ruler. He was fascinated by the stars and the universe and built an immense astrolab for observing them. As a result of the observations he undertook with the naked eye only, he calculated the length of the year to within a minute of the modern accepted value; and predated the telescope by over 150 years. He used the building itself, which housed a large vertical half-circle, only a quarter of which remains today. Ulughbek also created at that time the most comprehensive catalog of the heavens, earning his place in history.

Next we'll continue to the avenue of tombs at **Shahr-i-Zindah** which means the 'tomb of a living king' and refers to the holiest shrine-what is probably the grave of Qusam ibn-Abbas, a cousin of Prophet Mohammed who is said to have brought Islam to this area. Except of this and few other early tombs, the rest belongs to Timur's and Ulughbek's family and favorites. After lunch you will be able to enjoy some free time in Samarkand. Overnight in Samarkand.

Day 17 ~ Fergana Valley

After Breakfast we will head to **Fergana Valley**, which is one big oasis surrounded by the Tian Shan in the North and the Pamir Alay Mountains in the South with Syr-Darya flowing gently westward. Already by the 2nd century BC the Greeks and Persians found a prosperous kingdom based on farming with some 70 towns and villages which became rich with irrigated fields producing grains, fruits, silk, cotton, nuts and vegetables, and supporting cattle, horses, sheep and camels. A major branch of the Silk Road also wound through the valley.

The Russians were quick to realize the valley's fecundity and Soviet rulers enslaved it to an obsessive raw-cotton monoculture which still exists today. Like in ancient times the valley still produces the abundance of the seasonal fruits and Central Asian silk.

Upon arrival in the evening we will check in at the hotel for overnight.

Day 18 ~ Fergana Valley

Margilan has been around for a long time probably since 1st century BC, although there is little to show for it. It was one of major Silk Road stops throughout the history and its merchant clans were the key players in Central Asia's commerce and silk trade. After a short city tour and a visit to a local bazaar, we will visit a **Silk Factory** to observe the process of silk-making, and learn more about the traditional *ikat* and *khanatlas* or "king of satin" patterns which are so distinctive to Uzbek silk fabrics. Overnight in Fergana.

Day 19 ~ Fergana Valley

In the morning we will drive to the old village of **Rishtan**, famous for its ceramics and home to a group of master potters utilizing the fine local clay. There is evidence of earthenware in the foothills of the Alai Range dating back one thousand years. Modern Rishtan ceramics are characterized by elaborate floral and geometric designs in bright blue and green hues painted on a creamy white background. The skills used to produce Uzbek ceramics have been passed down from father to son for many generations. Here we will enjoy master's private studio to learn more about the process of making these authentic ceramics.

Our next stop will be in the city of **Kokand**. First mentioned by Arab travelers in the 10th century as an oasis town on the trade route between India and China, Kokand was known throughout history as a prosperous trading and religious center. During the 19th century, it was the capital of a powerful Kokand khanate stretching from the Fergana Valley to the southern Kazakh steppe. Overnight in Fergana.

Day 20 ~ Tashkent

Today we depart for **Tashkent**, the capital of Uzbekistan. Although nowadays it looks modern, Tashkent is one of the oldest cities in Uzbekistan. Rock paintings in the Chaktal Mountains about 50 miles away show that humans have been here since 2000 BC. The city's earliest incarnation might have been the settlement of Ming-Uruk (Thousand Apricot Trees) in the 2nd or 1st century BC. When Arabs took it in 751 it was a major caravan crossroads. It was given the name Tashkent (City of Stones) in about the 11th century. Khorezmshahs and Genghis Khan brought a lot of destruction in the 13th century; but it recovered and grew more prosperous under Tamerlane in the 14th century and the Shaibanid khans later in the 15th and 16th centuries. The Russians arrived in 1865, and Uzbekistan was not able to get freedom again until 1991.

Tashkent was largely rebuilt after huge earthquake in 1966, as a result of which its old, historical buildings were lost. Today, the city houses wide tree-lined boulevards oversized 20th century Soviet buildings and reconstructed traces of the old city with mud-walled houses, narrow winding lanes, mosques and *madrasahs*.

Once we arrive in Tashkent we will have an orientation tour before dinner. Overnight in Tashkent.

Day 21 ~ Tashkent

Our Sightseeing today includes visiting the old and the new parts of Tashkent which offer sites like the **Tillya Sheikh Mosque**, to see one of the oldest Korans in the world and **Chorsu Bazaar; Amir Timur Square and the Square of Independence**. This afternoon we will visit the Tashkent **Museum of Applied Arts**.

The **Samarkand Kufic Quran** (also known as the **Uthman Quran, Samarkand codex, Samarkand manuscript and Tashkent Quran**) is a 7th-century manuscript Quran written in the territory of modern Iraq in the Kufic script. It is believed by local Uzbek Muslims that it belonged to the third Caliph, Uthman ibn Affan one of the companions of Islamic Prophet Mohammad and is the oldest Quran in the world. Today it is kept in the Hast Imam library, in the Tillya Sheikh Mosque in Tashkent where it was brought by Tamerlane in the 14th century. It has been inscribed onto the **UNESCO Memory of the World Register**. The experience of viewing this 7th century sacred document is a powerful. Overnight in Tashkent.

Day 22

Transfer to the airport for early morning departing flight to home.

Departure Dates: Based on 22 days/20 nights

April 10 ~ May 1

October 9 ~ 30

Tour Price:

\$ 4,200 per person in double room based on 10 ~ 12 guests traveling together

\$900 single supplement

Price Includes:

- Accommodation for 20 nights at selected 3 or 4 star hotels or as described in the itinerary
- All breakfasts
- All dinners
- Daily private sightseeing by comfortable minibus or van
Including professional driver and his expenses
- English-speaking tour guide and his/her expenses
- Local guides as appropriate
- Entrance fees to the sites indicated in bold on the itinerary
- Two domestic flights (Ashgabat-Mary-Ashgabat)

- Arrival and departure transfers
- Baggage handling
- Complete information package with itineraries, travel and visa information, and luggage tags
- Visa support letters for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan