



**Journey Through Central Asia:
The Five 'Stans
2020**



Journey Through Central Asia: The Five 'Stans

A Classic Silk Road Survey

Eight departures in 2020 – Premier Series – 22 Days

April 4-25 • April 18-May 9 • May 9-30 • August 15-September 5 •

September 5-26 • September 12-October 3 • October 10-31 • October 17-November 7

More than 2,000 years ago, the great trade routes that linked Europe and China opened Central Asia to foreign cultures, customs and religions. Historically linked with such names as Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, Central Asia has been religiously and politically influenced by the Islamic world, the West and Russia in turn. This in-depth visit to the five 'Stans offers a rare and exciting view into the cultural personalities of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Admire masterpieces of Islamic architecture, interact with locals in vibrant bazaars and witness the daily life of these countries – visiting eight awe-inspiring UNESCO World Heritage Sites along the way.



Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Saturday	Arrive Almaty, Kazakhstan
Day 2, Sunday	Almaty
Day 3, Monday	Almaty • Lake Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyzstan
Day 4, Tuesday	Lake Issyk-Kul
Day 5, Wednesday	Lake Issyk-Kul • Cholpan-Ata • Bishkek
Day 6, Thursday	Bishkek • fly to Osh • Fergana, Uzbekistan
Day 7, Friday	Fergana • day trip to Margilan, Rishtan, Kokand
Day 8, Saturday	Fergana • Khujand, Tajikistan
Day 9, Sunday	Khujand • Tashkent, Uzbekistan
Day 10, Monday	Tashkent • Samarkand
Day 11, Tuesday	Samarkand
Day 12, Wednesday	Samarkand • Shahrissabz • Bukhara
Day 13, Thursday	Bukhara
Day 14, Friday	Bukhara
Day 15, Saturday	Bukhara • Khiva
Day 16, Sunday	Khiva
Day 17, Monday	Khiva • Nukus
Day 18, Tuesday	Nukus • Kunya-Urgench, Turkmenistan • Dashoguz • fly to Ashgabat
Day 19, Wednesday	Ashgabat • day trip to Nisa
Day 20, Thursday	Ashgabat • day trip to Mary/Merv
Day 21, Friday	Ashgabat
Day 22, Saturday	Depart Ashgabat



MIR Signature Features

- Enjoy the views of the Tien Shan Mountains from Central Asia's most beautifully situated city, Almaty.
- Listen to a Kazakh folk performance while dining on traditional dishes.
- Attend an exciting exhibition of traditional horse games in Kyrgyzstan.
- Listen to selections from the traditional Kyrgyz poem, *The Epic of Manas*.
- Visit Kyrgyzstan's second largest city, Osh, and meet with local students.
- Learn about the life and work of local silk and ceramic artisans during visits to their workshops in the rural Fergana Valley and Tashkent.
- Dine at the homes of local Uzbek families and sample traditional Central Asian dishes.
- Applaud the unsurpassed majesty of the Registan and learn about the architectural marvels of fabled Samarkand.
- Experience the timeless character of Bukhara's Old Town with its winding streets, colorful markets, and *chaikhanas* (tea houses).
- Admire the trove of rescued Russian art with an expert at the Savitsky Museum, a gem in the desert in remote Nukus.
- Learn about the environmental impact of the shrinking Aral Sea from a local expert.
- Explore the extensive ruins of the ancient city of Merv, and learn about its turbulent history from an expert guide.
- Venture outside Ashgabat to visit a horse-breeding farm devoted to the renowned Akhal-Teke horse, arguably the world's oldest cultured horse breed.

Tour Highlights

Almaty	Tien Shan Mountain Range, Central State Museum, Panfilov Park and Zenkov Cathedral, falconry demonstration
Lake Issyk-Kul	Second-largest high-altitude lake in the world, petroglyphs at Cholpan-Ata
Burana Tower	One of the only remaining Silk Road watchtowers in Kyrgyzstan
Bishkek	Capital city of Kyrgyzstan, Ala-Too Mountain Range, listen to part of "Epic of Manas" (on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list)
Osh	Sulaiman-Too Sacred Mountain (UNESCO World Heritage Site), view of Babur's House
Fergana Valley	Margilan market, ceramics master in Rishtan, Kokand including Khan's Palace
Khujand	Second-largest city in Tajikistan, Syr Darya River, Muslihiddin Madrassah, Sogdian Museum, Panjshanbe Bazaar
Tashkent	Independence Square, Kaffal-Shashi Mausoleum, Tillya Sheikh Mosque, Uthman Koran, Museum of Applied Arts
Samarkand	"Crossroad of Cultures" (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Registan, Shah-i-Zinda, Bibi-Khanum Mosque, Ulug Bek Observatory, silk carpet factory
Shahrisabz	"Historic Center of Shahrisabz" (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Ak Saray (White Palace)
Bukhara	"Historic Center of Bukhara" (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Lyabi-Hauz Plaza, Kukeldash Madrassah, Kalon Mosque and Minaret, Ark Citadel, Zindan Prison, Ismail Samani Mausoleum, Summer Palace of the Last Emir
Khiva	Ichon Qala (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Kyzyl Kum Desert, Amu Darya River, Tash-Hauli Palace, Juma Mosque, Kunya Ark
Nukus	Capital of the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan, Savitsky Art Museum, with the world's second largest collection of Russian avant-garde art
Kunya-Urgench	(UNESCO World Heritage Site), 11th-century Kutlug-Timur Minaret, Turabek Khanum Mausoleum
Ashgabat	National Museum of Turkmenistan, Russian Bazaar, Kipchak Mosque, Akhal-Teke horse farm



Nisa
Merv

Parthian Kingdom of Nisa (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Kopet-Dag Mountains
Ruins of Margiana and Archaeological Museum in Ancient Merv (UNESCO World
Heritage Site), Kara Kum Desert

Daily Itinerary

Important note: If you are considering a pre-tour night, please see the notes at the end under “Pre- and Post-tours.” Hotels in Almaty may be more expensive than travelers expect, so please discuss options for early arrival with your MIR Tour Specialist.

For clients considering a flight itinerary with early a.m. Saturday arrival in Almaty, MIR is pleased to let you know that early access to the hotel room Day One is guaranteed and is included in your tour package price. **There is no additional cost if landing in Almaty 12:01 a.m. and onward on Saturday, Day One of your tour.**

Day One, Saturday Arrive Almaty, Kazakhstan

Today is left free as an arrival day. Following customs procedures, transfer to the tour hotel to rest and prepare for touring, which begins on Day Two.

Meals: Independent – Dostyk Hotel or similar

Day Two, Sunday Almaty

This morning after breakfast, begin an exploration of **Almaty** and its environs. Spread out at the foothills of the Zaili Ala-Too Mountains in the **Tien Shan range**, Almaty is the commercial capital of Central Asia’s richest country, Kazakhstan. Present-day Almaty sits on the site of an old Silk Road oasis town called Almatu; laid waste by the Mongols in 1211, the city left no ancient remains. Almaty’s name means “the place with apples,” and the many varieties of wild apple in the vicinity give scientists reason to believe that this is where apples were first cultivated. Today the city is thriving on the considerable foreign investment it has attracted, primarily in the oil and gas industries.

The city tour of Almaty includes the **Central State Museum**. This history museum features exhibits that detail the development of Kazakhstan and its people from the Bronze Age through the Russian Empire, the Communist Period and the present day. One of the exhibits is a replica of the country’s chief archaeological treasure, the Golden Man, a warrior’s armor made from 4,000 gold pieces. There are also displays of Kazakh handicrafts and souvenir shops selling rugs and jewelry.

Kok-Tobe is the next stop, a 3,800-foot hill on the outskirts of Almaty with an aerial tramway leading to a recreation area at the top. The view of Almaty from Kok-Tobe is great, and the attractions and restaurants



add to the sense of release from the city.

Next observe **traditional Kazakh falconry** at a falcon farm outside of Almaty. Hunters on horseback wearing traditional costumes give an exclusive demonstration of how the beautiful birds are used for hunting in Kazakhstan. Enjoy an **authentic Kazakh welcome lunch** and a **musical performance**.

After lunch, return to the city center to visit **Panfilov Park** with its Zenkov Cathedral. Panfilov Park, a green oasis in Almaty's central area, was renamed by the Soviets in honor of 28 Kazakh soldiers led by General Panfilov who died on the outskirts of Moscow during WWII. A monument in the park honors the soldiers, and an Eternal Flame memorializes all those who died during the war. Also in the park is **Zenkov Cathedral**, a wooden Orthodox church built at the turn of the century. A widespread myth says that the cathedral was built without the use of nails, due to the precision of its building.

Visit the delightful **Museum of Musical Instruments**, located in a 1907 Russian style wooden building formerly called the House of Officers. Created in 1980, the museum exhibits a collection of traditional Kazakh instruments, including the *dombra*, a two-stringed instrument ubiquitous in Central Asia.

Dinner this evening is independent.
Meals: B, L – *Dostyk Hotel or similar*

Day Three, Monday

Almaty • Lake Issyk-Kul, Kyrgyzstan

Get an extra early start today, setting off overland for Kyrgyzstan. Travel on the western road, and arrive at the hotel on the shores of **Lake Issyk-Kul** by early evening. Kyrgyzstan's beautiful Lake Issyk-Kul is the second-largest high-altitude lake in the world, after Titicaca. Located at an altitude of 5,279 feet, Issyk-Kul is a slightly saline lake with no outlet, surrounded by the rugged Tien Shan Mountains. Some evidence suggests that a 2nd century BC trade center is submerged under the lake water.



Note: if weather permits, travel today may instead be by the eastern road, which skirts Kazakhstan's scenic Charyn Canyon and offers the opportunity for a scenic walk or light hiking as well.

Dinner at the hotel. The evening is free to relax and enjoy the lake.
Meals: B, L, D – *Karven Issyk-Kul Hotel, Caprice Resort, or similar*

Day Four, Tuesday

Lake Issyk-Kul

Spend today in the Issyk-Kul area, exploring and absorbing the beautiful landscapes here. First drive to **Cholpan-Ata**, where you can see petroglyphs thought to have been created by the tribes of the Neolithic period. The images are mainly primitive long-horned ibex, horses, camels and snow leopards. There are several thousand petroglyphs here, providing a glimpse into the world of the Iron Age.



If the weather permits, enjoy a boat ride on the lake, getting a new, waterborne, perspective on the area, before continuing to **Grigorievka Gorge**. The gorge is named for the village at its foot, though the name in Kyrgyz is Chon-Ak-Suu. This area encompasses 32 km of wooded slopes, waterfalls, glacial lakes and fantastic views – there may be an opportunity for a short hike here.

Next pay a visit to the **Eco-farm Reina-Kench**, which is known for breeding a new Kyrgyz and Russian trotter breed of horses. Founded in 1996, the Reina-Kench is the leading farm in livestock breeding in the Issyk-Kul region.

Return to the lakeside hotel for dinner and overnight.

Meals: B, L, D – *Karven Issyk-Kul Hotel, Caprice Resort, or similar*

Day Five, Wednesday

Lake Issyk-Kul • Cholpan-Ata • Bishkek

This morning, depart to the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek. Have lunch en route and enjoy an opportunity to see an **exhibition of the local traditional horse games**.

Next, stop at the **Burana Tower**, one of the only existing watch towers remaining from the old Silk Road. The settlement that formerly surrounded it, Balasagun, has disappeared. The open-air museum here features a collection of ancient *bal-bals*, carved stone figures used as monuments.



Continue to **Bishkek**, arriving by early evening, and check in to the hotel. The capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek was founded as the Russian garrison of Pishpek. The city is set before a backdrop of the northern edge of the **Ala-Too mountain range**, and was originally a heavily forested rest stop on the Silk Road. Appropriated by the Russians in 1877, the city was eventually renamed Bishkek when Kyrgyzstan achieved its independence at the break-up of the Soviet Union. Two rivers, the Alamedin and Ala-Archa, run from the mountains through the city into the Chu River, which also forms the Kazakh border. Bishkek is graced with large boulevards, friendly people and more trees than any other Central Asian city. On clear days, the permanently snow-capped mountains looming over the city provide spectacular views.

After some light touring, check in to the hotel. Enjoy dinner at a local restaurant, with a **performance of selections from the traditional Kyrgyz poem, *The Epic of Manas***.

Meals: B, L, D – *Hyatt Regency or similar*



Day Six, Thursday

Bishkek • fly to Osh • Fergana, Uzbekistan

This morning depart on a flight to **Osh**. On arrival in Kyrgyzstan's second largest city, located in the Fergana Valley, travelers are met by a local coach and guide. Here, learn about Osh through the eyes of locals during a **visit with students**.

Visit **Sulaiman-Too Sacred Mountain**. Nicknamed Kichik-Mecca (Little Mecca), Sulaiman-Too Sacred Mountain is one of the holiest Islamic sites in Central Asia, though even before the prophet Sulaiman was said to have been buried here, it was known as a peaceful retreat and was called Bara-Kuh (Beautiful Mountain). Pilgrims travel to the hill from all over the world to meditate and to undertake the climb up to Babur's House. The small stone shelter is where Babur, the 14th century Muslim leader who founded the Mughal Dynasty in India, came at 14 years of age to perform his *chilla*, a forty-day fast for meditation. The sacred mountain was declared a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** in 2009.



Late this afternoon, cross the border into Uzbekistan and drive to the city of Fergana. En route, time may permit a brief stop to stretch your legs at a spot where **locals like to congregate**, catch

up on the day's news and relax with a cup of tea. Arrive in Fergana for dinner at the hotel and overnight. Please note, patience is required for today's border crossing, as there can be busy crowds and long lines. Meals: B, L, D – *Asia Fergana* or similar



Day Seven, Friday

Fergana • day trip to Margilan, Rishtan, Kokand

Following breakfast at the hotel, depart on a guided tour of the **Fergana Valley**. Surrounded by the Tien Shan Mountain Range and watered by tributaries of the Syr Darya River, the Fergana Valley is the most fertile part of Central Asia. Alexander the Great founded a city here in the southwestern mouth of the valley in 329 BC. Traders from China came this way as they created the trade route we call the Silk Road in the 1st century BC. The whole valley became a rich oasis, with irrigated fields producing grains, fruits, silk, cotton, nuts and vegetables, and supporting horses, cattle, sheep and camels. There is evidence that Buddhism made its way here from China before the advent of Islam during the 8th century AD.

The city of **Fergana** is the newest settlement in the Fergana Valley, established in 1876 as a Russian garrison town under General Mikhail Skobelev. Located in the southern Fergana Valley near the 18,000-foot Alai Mountains, Fergana seems more Russian than Uzbek. Its first settlers were encouraged to plant trees, and today the streets are lined with plane and poplar trees, giving the city its reputation as one of the greenest cities in Uzbekistan. The first building was the fortress, which still stands in the downtown part of the city.



After a short introductory drive around Fergana, continue to 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 centerpiece of a powerful khanate stretching from the Fergana Valley to the southern Kazakh steppe. Spend some time viewing the ruins of the **Khudayar Khan's Palace**, built in 1873. Restoration efforts continue today as Muslim artisans work to return the 113-room palace to its former beauty. One can see the impressive Jami Mosque, a remnant from the time when Kokand was filled with 600 mosques and 15 madrassahs.

Next spend some time at the **Margilan market**. Margilan was a major Silk Road stop by the 9th century, but local legends proclaim that its history dates back to the time of Alexander the Great. Margilan, like much of the valley, is known as a traditional stronghold of Islam. In the 19th century Margilan had a dozen *madrassahs* (Islamic religious schools) and over 200 mosques, most of which were destroyed by the Russians in the late 19th century. Following a short city tour, visit a **silk workshop** to observe the process of silk-making, and learn more about the traditional *ikat* and *khan atlas* or “king of silk” pattern distinctive to Uzbek silk fabrics.



The next stop is in the old town of **Rishtan**, famous for its ceramics. There is evidence of earthenware in the foothills of the Alai Range dating back one thousand years. Pottery became prominent in this region due to the unusual amount and excellent quality of locally accessible raw materials – red clay and pigments made of minerals and mountain grasses.



photo: Ana Filonov

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, father to son, for countless generations. Enjoy lunch at the **home of a master artist**, and tour his private studio to learn more about the process of making these authentic ceramics.

Return to Fergana in the evening for dinner and overnight at the hotel.

Meals: B, L, D – *Asia Fergana or similar*

Day Eight, Saturday **Fergana • Khujand, Tajikistan**

This morning after breakfast, drive to the Tajik border. Border formalities can be time-consuming.

After crossing the border into Tajikistan, continue to **Khujand**. Situated at the entrance to the Fergana Valley on the Syr Darya River, Khujand is the second largest city in Tajikistan. Its origins have been attributed to both Alexander the Great (in 329 BC) and Cyrus the Great of Persia (several centuries earlier); whichever is true, the city is an ancient one. A former religious center and an important Silk Road stop, Khujand is home to several medieval monuments. A city tour includes a visit to the **Muslihiddin Madrassah**, the **Sogdian Museum** and the exciting **Panjshanbe Bazaar**.

Khujand's pink-painted covered bazaar is filled with goods to buy – both local and imported clothing, shoes and sundries. Outside the huge columned structure, rows of tables are covered with bags of brilliant spices and nuts, straw-bedded melons with macramé handles and piles of vegetables.

Twelfth century leader and poet Muslihiddin Khujandi is buried here in the **Muslihiddin memorial complex**, which has been rebuilt many times since that time. Today the complex includes a 16th century mosque and 19th century minaret as well as the poet's mausoleum.

Enter the **Historical Museum of Sogdiana** through a reconstructed medieval city gate. Displays include ancient Sogdian artifacts and exhibits from more recent Tajik history. On the left bank of the Syr Darya in the middle of Khujand are the remains of its 10th century citadel, restored in 1999. Archaeological excavations around the walls have uncovered artifacts from the 4th century BC.

Enjoy dinner at a local restaurant and an overnight at a Tajik hotel.

Meals: B, L, D – *Khujand Grand Hotel or similar*



Day Nine, Sunday

Khujand • Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Make a quick stop after breakfast today to see the **new statue of Ismail Somoni** in the city center. He resides where the **statue of Lenin** used to be. Lenin has been moved to the outskirts, and we'll stop there as well on the way out of town. Then depart for Uzbekistan's capital, **Tashkent**. Although it doesn't look it today, Tashkent is one of the oldest cities in Uzbekistan. Rock paintings in the Chatkal Mountains about 50 miles away show that humans have been here since perhaps 2000 BC. In the 2nd century BC the town was known as Ming Uryuk. A major caravan crossroads, it was taken by the Arabs in 751 and by Genghis Khan in the 13th century. Tamerlane feasted here in the 14th century and the Shaibanid khans in the 15th and 16th. The Russian Empire arrived in 1865, and Uzbekistan was not an autonomous country again until 1991.

Tashkent lost much of its architectural history in a huge earthquake in 1966, and although it is an old city, most of it has been built since then. Today, the city is a jumble of 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 *madrassahs*.

The tour today includes **Independence Square**, the **Navoi Theater** exterior, and the **Tillya Sheikh Mosque**, to see one of the oldest Korans in the world. Time permitting this afternoon, visit the **Tashkent Museum of Applied Arts**.

The history of **Independence Square** (Mustaqillik Maydoni) is revealed in the different names it has borne throughout its existence. First named Cathedral Square in honor of the Orthodox cathedral built here by Konstantin Kaufman, the first Governor-General of Russian Turkestan, it became Red Square in 1917. In 1966 it was designated Lenin Square, and it was not until 1992 that it became Independence Square.



Alisher Navoi, who lived and wrote at the end of the 15th century, is Uzbekistan's most beloved poet. The **Navoi Opera and Ballet Theater** was built in 1947 by Japanese prisoners of war. The repertory of the theater includes Uzbek music and dance, and international operas and ballets. Note: In general, time will permit only exterior views of this lovely building.

Visit Tashkent's Old Town. The 16th century **Kaffal-Shashi Mausoleum**, the tomb of one of the first imams of the Muslim world, and Barak-Khan Madrassah, also 16th century, are flanked by the 19th century al-Bukhari Madrassah and the early 20th century Tillya Sheikh Mosque, which houses the oldest Koran in the world.

The **Uthman Koran**, considered by Sunni Muslims to be the oldest Koran in the world, is safeguarded in the library of the **Tillya Sheikh Mosque** in the Muy Mubarak Madrassah, where several of Mohammed's hairs are said to have been enshrined. Written on deerskin 19 years after Mohammed's death, the manuscript was compiled in Medina by Uthman, the third caliph of Islam. (Shi'a Muslims believe that Uthman's successor Ali, was the first true caliph, and his version of the Koran is held to be the only true version.) It has been inscribed onto the **UNESCO Memory of the World Register**. The experience of viewing this 7th century sacred document is a powerful one.



Time tonight should permit a **tour of Tashkent's Metro** for those who would like to see it. Tashkent boasts the first metro in Central Asia, and each station has a different theme, some incorporating Central Asian decorative motifs and some resembling Russian palaces. With granite and marble, chandeliers and mosaics, the stations on Tashkent's three lines are intended to be "art galleries for the people."

Enjoy a free evening to explore independently.

Meals: B, L – *Lotte City Hotel or similar*

Day Ten, Monday Tashkent • Samarkand

This morning, head to the train station and set off early by high-speed train for Samarkand, a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** called the "**Crossroad of Cultures.**" Begin sightseeing right after the train's arrival this morning.

Modern Samarkand is built on the ruins of ancient Afrosiab, and once went by the name of Marakanda. Its location between China and the Western world secured its importance as a trade center and a clearinghouse for cultural exchange. Islamic beliefs from the Near East crossed paths with spices from Southeast Asia and silk from the Middle Kingdom. Its strategic location, cultural wealth and worldly riches made Samarkand an attractive target for the world's most famous conquerors.



Sightseeing begins at **Gur-Emir Mausoleum**, the final resting place of Tamerlane, but originally built for his grandson after the latter's death, at the turn of the 15th century. The interior of the mausoleum has been restored and is brilliant in gold leaf and fresh tile. The heavily gilded central dome opens over the set of tomb-markers resembling sarcophagi (the bodies are located well below, but are on site). All are marble, with the exception of Tamerlane's, which is a slab of solid jade reportedly from Mongolia.

Visit the **Registan**, which is considered to be Central Asia's noblest square. Registan Square is the centerpiece of Samarkand, and the most recognizable landmark for visitors. The three emblematic *madrasahs* frame the square, and loom over the empty space in the center. It was this central space that originally gave the place its name, for "registan" simply means "place of sand." This sandy place was at the center of ancient Samarkand and was a public square and marketplace before the Ulug Bek, Tilya-Kori, and Shir Dor *madrasahs* were built. In its reconstruction, the square maintains the majesty that it has radiated through the ages.

Meals: B, L, D – *Grand Samarkand Superior, Emir Han Hotel or similar*

Day Eleven, Tuesday Samarkand

This morning continue exploring Samarkand with a visit to the **Bibi-Khanum Mosque**, built by Tamerlane to be the largest mosque in the Islamic world, and dedicated to the memory of his favorite wife.





Continue to the row of tombs and mausoleums collectively called **Shah-i-Zinda**, or “place of a living king,” stretched between the present and the past. At its front is living Samarkand, and at its back the dusty slopes at the edge of ancient Afrosiab. Even on hot summer days the mausoleums remain shady and cool, and seem to lure the traveler to approach the oldest tomb at the far end. Behind the complex and set into the hill lies an active cemetery with gravesites dating back as far as the 9th century, and as recently as the present day.

Visit a **silk carpet factory** that uses natural vegetable dyes to color the thread used in its carpets. Tour the

gardens outside the factory where the weavers grow indigo, coleus and dahlias to use for dye. Observe the entire process of dyeing the thread and weaving the carpets, with an opportunity to shop afterward.

Make a stop at **Ulug Bek Observatory**. Though concerned with conquest, politics and other matters of terrestrial importance, Tamerlane’s grandson Ulug Bek found his true interest in the heavens. The astronomer-king was fascinated by the stars and the cosmos and built one of the most advanced observatories of the ancient world. The observations, which he undertook with the naked eye only, predated the telescope by over 150 years. They were aided by the building itself, which housed a large vertical half-circle, only a quarter of which remains today. By using careful methods, rigorous observation and meticulous recording, Ulug Bek calculated the length of the year to within a minute of the modern accepted value. He also created the most comprehensive (to that date) catalog of the heavens, earning his place in history.

After lunch, visit a workshop where **hand-crafted paper is made** according to traditions handed down from the 8th century, when paper-making began in Samarkand. Founded in 1997 with the support of UNESCO, the workshop of Abdurakhim Mukhtarov, located in the village of Koni Gil on the outskirts of the city, produces lovely paper crafts and stationery as you watch.

Just outside of modern-day Samarkand lie the dusty hills of the ancient city of Afrosiab, once a potent capital, now an archaeological site guarding treasures of antiquity. Scientific digs here began in the 1800s under Russian rule, and continue to this day. On site is the **Afrosiab History Museum**, which houses artifacts from the area, including pottery and tile found among the excavated walls of the town. After time for a short rest at the hotel, attend a **performance of a young Uzbek dance troupe** before dinner this evening.

Meals: B, L, D – *Grand Samarkand Superior, Emir Han Hotel or similar*



Day Twelve, Wednesday

Samarkand • Shahrisabz • Bukhara

This morning get an early start and depart for **UNESCO-listed Shahrisabz**, the birthplace of Tamerlane, **stopping en route at Sharif Baba's**, a popular waypoint built around the private home of a 70-year old local man.

Shahrisabz itself was originally founded under the name of Kesh, and was renamed Shahri-sabz (Green City) by Tamerlane himself. Here one can see the ruins of **Ak Saray (White Palace)**, built in the 14th century and one of Tamerlane's most expansive undertakings. The palace complex included a massive portal covered with incredible blue, white and gold ceramic tile mosaics and standing over 213 feet high. After lunch, continue on to Bukhara for check-in at the bed & breakfast and a late dinner.

Meals: B, L, D – *Sasha and Son's Bed & Breakfast, Amelia Hotel, or similar*



Day Thirteen, Thursday

Bukhara

Spend today exploring Central Asia's most ancient living city and **UNESCO World Heritage Site**, the **"Historic Center of Bukhara."** An oasis in the desert, Bukhara offers cool shade and rest to the modern traveler as it did to the camel caravans that plied the Silk Road hundreds of years ago. Bukhara is as old as Samarkand, and has preserved its ancient architecture and design to an arguably larger extent than that city. The Old Town in Bukhara has a unified feel, drawn together by a central reflecting pool and plaza, by

commonality in the structure of the domed bazaars and by the major monuments ringing the **Old Town**, the Kalon Assembly, the Zindan Prison, and the Ark Citadel.

This morning, sightseeing begins at the **Ismail Samani Mausoleum**. The 10th century resting place of Ismail 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.

The **Chashma Ayub Mausoleum**, visited next, is not a true mausoleum, but a *kadamdjoy*, or site visited by a holy person. The Koranic prophet, Ayub – the Biblical prophet, Job – reportedly struck the ground with his staff here, and water immediately bubbled up from a spring. The oldest part of this multi-domed building was probably built in the 12th century. Under its many roofs are the sacred spring and the Water Supply History Museum of Bukhara.

Investigate **Zindan Prison**, with its infamous "bug pit" where two British spies 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.



The 12th century Kalon assembly, including the **Kalon Mosque and Minaret**, and the Mir-i-Arab Madrassah, surrounds an open plaza that teems with merchants and local vendors. The minaret towers over the dusty square, looking down from a height of more than 150 feet, and casting its shadow between the mosque and the *madrassah*. The minaret can be seen from all over the old town, as it is easily the tallest structure in the old part of Bukhara. When viewed up close the detailed brickwork becomes apparent; fourteen distinct bands of brickwork circle the tower at intervals, and at the top of the minaret resolve into a traditional stalactite formation.

See **Lyabi-Hauz Plaza**, located in the heart of the old town. With the feel of a true oasis in an oasis town, the plaza is at the center of Bukhara's old town and is – as it has been throughout history – a place to meet friends, to eat, to drink, and to relax in the shade. The atmosphere is cooled by the long rectangular reflecting pool that makes up the center of the plaza, and by the shade of the trees that ring the plaza. The mulberry trees here are hundreds of years old and frame the 16th and 17th century *madrassahs* that make up three of the four edges of the ensemble.

Visit the nearby **Kukeldash Madrassah**, the largest of Central Asia's Koran schools, which dates from 1417. Stroll through the capmaker and spice bazaars and then meander past street-level mosques and *madrassahs*.

After lunch, visit the **Ark Citadel**, the ancient fortress and seat of government for the Emirate of Bukhara for over one thousand years, and now a collection of museums and mosques. The current structure has been built and rebuilt on the same site throughout its history, and has preserved something of the form, purpose and function of the first Ark. Like the medieval castle complexes of Europe, the Bukhara Ark served the emirs of Bukhara as a residence, audience hall, as protection from neighboring enemies and for more mundane purposes, such as a trade center and a police station.



During touring today, meet with a **local Bukharan architect** who will provide an interesting look into the current state of historical architectural renovation in Bukhara. Enjoy a **traditional Uzbek performance** this evening along with dinner at a former *madrassah*.

Meals: B, L, D – *Sasha and Son's Bed & Breakfast, Amelia Hotel, or similar*

Day Fourteen, Friday
Bukhara

Today start with the **Bahauddin Naqshband Mausoleum**. Bahauddin Naqshband was a 14th century Sufi mystic and founder of the Naqshbandi order of Sufis. His mausoleum complex grew from a simple



tomb over his grave to a 16th century hostel for visiting dervishes, then to a spiritual complex in the 17th century with a mosque added in the 18th century. The complex was restored in 1993 for the celebration of the 675th anniversary of the saint's birth.

Visit the **Emir's Summer Palace** and stop at its **Museum of National Crafts** to admire the vivid *suzani*, embroidered coverlets, that Uzbekistan is known for. A short distance outside of the city sits the palace, also known as the Palace of Moon and Stars, built at the turn of the century after the Russians took control of Bukhara. The palace itself is something of a showpiece, as it was designed to keep the emir in luxury, but removed from the city, in isolation and political impotence. The main palace is a mixture of local materials, regional influences, and Russian style. Western furniture abounds, but design choices reflect traditional Uzbek decorations.

Timing after lunch should permit a visit to a private studio to learn from a **master marionette-maker** the process of creating traditional Uzbek puppets. The expressive puppets have unique faces and are dressed in traditional Uzbek garments. It may take seven or eight days to finish a puppet.

Admire the early 19th century **Chor Minor Madrassah**, whose four slender, blue-topped minarets give it its name.

Meals: B, L, D – *Sasha and Son's Bed & Breakfast, Amelia Hotel, or similar*

Day Fifteen, Saturday

Bukhara • Khiva

This morning head for the last great city on the Uzbek itinerary, Khiva. The drive today traverses long stretches of the **Kyzyl Kum, or Red Sand, Desert**. This is the same route taken by loaded Silk Road camel caravans and once plagued by brigands on hand to plunder their riches. Stop en route to take a look at the **Amu Darya River**, once called the Oxus, and loosely parallel to the Uzbek-Turkmen border.

Arrive in Khiva in time for dinner and overnight.

Meals: B, L, D – *Asia Khiva Hotel or similar*

Day Sixteen, Sunday

Khiva

Legend says that the ancient Silk Road oasis of **Khiva** was founded at the place where Shem, son of Noah, discovered water in the desert, and that the city got its name from Shem's joyful shout, "Hey va!" at the discovery. Today the living city is part museum town, part re-creation of life hundreds of years ago.

Archaeologists have found traces of human habitation around Khiva dating from the 5th century BC. For hundreds of years it was a stop on the old Silk Road and a fortress



town, but it was not until the 16th century that Khiva became the capital of the Khorezm Khanate. The khanate ruled the surrounding area for over 300 years, and was a well-known slave-trading center. 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.

Spend the day exploring Khiva on foot. The tour includes the monuments of the **UNESCO-listed Old Town, or Ichon Qala**. Khiva's Old Town has been extensively preserved and restored, and exists today much as it did hundreds of years ago. Approaching the old town, modern-day travelers face the same sight as Silk Road caravans did, the dun-colored city walls, the main gate opening on a dusty stone thoroughfare, merchants hawking their wares from each side, and the distinctive minarets watching over the whole scene.

The **mausoleum of Pakhlavan Makhmud** was built in 1810 to honor this patron of Khiva, a poet and wrestler who died in the 14th century and is thought to be buried here. Its full turquoise dome has become a symbol of Khiva, along with the nearby Islam Khodja Minaret, banded in dark and light blue.

Wood carving is a traditional specialty of Khiva, and filigreed wooden columns are found at the **Juma Mosque**. The mosque is partially below ground level and the more than 200 carved columns that support the wooden ceiling create a forest-like effect around two square light wells.

Also visit the **Tash-Hauli Palace**, or Stone House, which was built in the 19th century for the reigning khan and his four wives, and the **Kunya Ark**, the original residence of the khans, partially destroyed in the Persian invasion of the 18th century.

Meals: B, L, D – *Asia Khiva Hotel or similar*

Day Seventeen, Monday

Khiva • Nukus

Depart today for the small city of **Nukus** in western Uzbekistan. Nukus is the **capital of the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan**, home to the Karakalpaks, a Turkic people more closely related to Kazakhs than to Uzbeks. A modern city, Nukus is at the center of an area crisscrossed by old caravan routes and dotted with ancient ruins. 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. About 125 miles northwest is Muynak, once a thriving fishing port but today 100 miles from the Aral Sea shoreline. Learn about the environmental impact of the shrinking Aral Sea from a local expert.

Visit the incredible **Savitsky Art Museum**, whose founder, Igor Savitsky, was able to amass a wonderful collection of banned avant-garde Russian art pieces without interference from the Soviets. The story of this endeavor



has been told in the award-winning documentary, *Desert of Forbidden Art*. The **collection is the second-largest collection of Russian avant-garde art** after the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg.

Dine this evening at a private home and say farewell to Uzbekistan.
Meals: B, L, D – *Hotel Jipek Joli or similar*

Day Eighteen, Tuesday

Nukus • Kunya-Urgench, Turkmenistan • Dashoguz • fly to Ashgabat

Depart by coach from Nukus to the Turkmen border. Customs formalities can be time consuming, so patience is a virtue this morning.

After the crossing, visit **Kunya-Urgench**, an agricultural center of about 30,000 near the Uzbek border. It is the site of the ancient capital of Khorezm, which was razed by both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. About half a mile south of the town lie the remains of the **UNESCO-listed old city, including the 11th-century Kutlug-Timur Minaret**, ringed with 18 bands of decorative mud brick and blue majolica tiles. Also admire the domed hall of the **Turabek Khanum Mausoleum**. Notable for the interlocking design of its remarkably-preserved ceiling, the mausoleum was built for the daughter of one of the leaders of the Golden Horde.

Drive to the city of **Dashoguz** and visit a local market before the transfer to the airport for a flight to Ashgabat. Following an hour-long flight over the Kara Kum, or Black Sand desert, arrive in **Ashgabat** and transfer to the hotel for overnight.
Meals: B, L – *Oguzkent Hotel or similar*

Day Nineteen, Wednesday

Ashgabat • day trip to Nisa

Following breakfast at the hotel, visit the **UNESCO site** of the ancient **Parthian Kingdom of Nisa**. The beautiful **Kopet-Dag Mountains** rise up around Nisa, a site 15 miles outside of Ashgabat that was



once a major center of the ancient Parthian Kingdom. More than two thousand years ago the Parthian Empire spread out from Nisa and took its place among such kingdoms as the Achaemenid under Cyrus the Great and the Macedonian under Alexander the Great. Though Nisa was ruled by a succession of dynasties, it remained an important center of the ancient world until the 13th century, when the Mongols sacked it. Today archaeological work continues at Nisa.



The **National Museum of Turkmenistan**, with its grand approach and panoramic views, introduces modern Turkmenistan on the ground floor and ancient history in the galleries above. The historical exhibits begin with artifacts ranging from stone-age tools to carved ivory drinking horns used for Zoroastrian rituals and special occasions (called rhytons), and move through time, telling the story of Turkmenistan through the ages. Other galleries display beautiful ceramics, coins, amulets, and gold and silver artifacts. The museum also features a fantastic selection of Turkmen carpets located on the ground floor.

After lunch, venture outside the city to visit a horse-breeding farm devoted to the renowned **Akhal-Teke horse**, arguably the oldest cultured breed of horse in the world. The owner accompanies you on the tour to talk about the workings of the farm and about the breed. These elegant horses have long, slender necks, small heads, long legs and narrow chests. They are said to have lent their genes to both the Arabian horse and the American Quarter Horse.

Return to the hotel after a festive dinner at the home of a local family and a folklore program.
Meals: B, L, D – *Oguzkent Hotel or similar*

Day Twenty, Thursday **Ashgabat • day trip to Mary/Merv**

This morning fly to Mary for a guided exploration of the ruins of the ancient remains of **Margiana (Merv)** as it was once called by classical Roman and Greek writers, located 22 miles from the city of Mary. Note: depending on flight schedules this may be a very early start today.

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 earliest of the five ancient cities at Merv is attributed to Cyrus the Great in the 6th century BC. Merv was the center of several succeeding civilizations, and became an important way station on the Great Silk Road between the 2nd and the 13th centuries, when it was sacked by the Mongols.



The ruins of Merv were listed as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999** because of the wealth of ongoing information they offer regarding the evolution of urban centers. The 13th-century geographer Yaqut lived there for three years and wrote “Verily but for the Mongols I would have stayed and lived and died there. Hardly could I tear myself away.”

Return to Ashgabat by an evening flight. Dinner tonight will be independent.

Meals: B, L – *Oguzkent Hotel or similar*



Day Twenty-one, Friday Ashgabat

Today, continue touring Ashgabat. In spite of its location on a trade route, Ashgabat never achieved the status and influence of other Silk Road cities like Khiva or Bukhara. Originally known as Konjikala, the city was destroyed by Mongols in the 13th century. In 1881 the Russians built a fortress on the site as a buffer against English-dominated Persia, and by the early 20th century Ashgabat was a prosperous and flourishing city. In 1948 a massive earthquake leveled Ashgabat, killing over two-thirds of the population. Recently Ashgabat has

seen a boom in new construction, which has had a major impact on the look of the city. This morning, enjoy a tour of the city. Operating schedules permitting, see the enormous \$100-million-dollar **Kipchak Mosque** in former Turkmen President Niyazov's hometown of Kipchak. Inaugurated in 2004, the mosque is large enough to hold 10,000 people; its 164-foot golden dome was so wide it had to be lowered in place by helicopter. Verses from Niyazov's own spiritual book, the *Ruhnama*, are etched on the walls alongside Koranic verses. Niyazov was buried here in the family mausoleum that he built, along with the mosque, with government funds.

The **Russian Bazaar** in the center of Ashgabat is a large covered market selling all kinds of foodstuffs, including prepared foods, fruits, nuts, vodka, caviar and traditional breads. Before independence, this was where most ethnic Russians would shop, but today anyone is welcome. Turkmen women in traditional dress make up the majority of the sales force.

Admire the stately **Ertugrul Ghazi Mosque**, inaugurated in 1998. Designed to be reminiscent of Istanbul's Blue Mosque, the white marble building with its four minarets has an interior decorated with stained glass.

After a festive **farewell lunch**, enjoy time at leisure to prepare for departure. Dinner and overnight at the hotel tonight.

Meals: B, L, D – *Oguzkent Hotel or similar*



Day Twenty-two, Saturday

Depart Ashgabat

Most departures are very early this morning, in which case travelers may be transferred to the airport on late Friday night. For those with later flights, the tour will conclude with departure transfers after breakfast today.

Meals: B (flight schedules permitting)

Dates for 2020 – Eight Departures – Premier Series

The land itinerary is scheduled to be operated on the following dates. Please note you will need to depart the U.S. at least one day prior to the tour start date, due to airline flight schedules.

April 4-25, 2020

April 18-May 9, 2020

May 9-30, 2020

August 15-September 5, 2020

September 5-26, 2020

September 12-October 3, 2020

October 10-31, 2020

October 17-November 7, 2020

Package Prices – 2020

5-16 passengers, \$7,995 per person, double occupancy

Plus internal air \$350 (economy class, subject to change)

Single supplement \$1,350

Land Tour Price Includes

- Accommodations as noted in itinerary.
- 21 breakfasts, 20 lunches, and 16 dinners. A few dinners are not included so that you may enjoy a chance to experiment on your own.
- Bottled water at group meals.
- Restaurant tips for included meals.
- Services of experienced, English-speaking local guides, drivers and other staff, including a MIR Tour Manager
- Arrival/departure airport transfers. MIR will arrange for all travelers to be met on arrival and seen off on departure whether we make your airfare arrangements or not, provided you arrive and depart on the tour start/end dates in the tour start/end cities.
- Ground transportation throughout itinerary by private coach or van (size of vehicle depends on group size).
- Guided sightseeing tours and entrance fees as outlined in itinerary.
- Special events, excursions and cultural performances per the itinerary.
- Baggage handling where available.
- Gratuities to local guides, drivers, porters and other service personnel.
- Complete pre-departure information including detailed packing list, reading list, *Touring with MIR* hand-book with country-specific information, maps, and travel tips.
- Customized visa application and instruction kit (please note, visa fees are not included in the tour price).
- Final document packet including luggage tags, final updates, and more.



Not Included in Land Tour Price

- Internal airfare (internal airfare is quoted separately and is subject to change by airlines).
- International airfare or taxes/fuel surcharges.
- Meals not specified as included in the itinerary.
- Single supplement charge, if requested or required.
- Items of a personal nature (phone calls, email, laundry, alcohol, excess baggage, etc).
- Gratuities to Tour Manager.
- Visa/passport fees, airport departure fees.
- Expenses incurred as a result of delay, modification or extension of a tour due to causes beyond MIR's control.
- Travel entry pass to Turkmenistan payable on arrival, currently \$12-\$15, subject to change.
- Travel and trip cancellation insurance.

Interested in travel insurance?

To learn more about all the benefits of purchasing a Travel Guard travel insurance plan, please visit www.travelguard.com/mircorp or contact Travel Guard at 1.877.709.5596.

Start Planning Next Year Now

Dates for 2021– Six Departures – Premier Series

At the time of writing, the land itinerary for this program next year is projected to be generally as depicted for this year. Next year's dates and prices are shown below – please call if you're ready to book now.

April 3-24, 2021
April 17-May 8, 2021
May 8-29, 2021
August 14-September 4, 2021
September 4-25, 2021
October 9-30, 2021

Package Prices – 2021

5-16 passengers, \$8,195 per person, double occupancy
Plus internal air \$350 (economy class, subject to change)
Single supplement \$1,395 per person.

Premier Series

MIR's Premier Series programs feature some of our most distinctive tour concepts and include uncommon and educational experiences, including visits to small towns and villages outside the major urban areas and capital cities. While all MIR trips feature comfortable, well-located hotels, Premier Series programs take advantage of five-star or best-in-class properties along the way wherever possible. In some cities properties are chosen for location over actual star ratings.



Important Notes: Is This Trip Right For You?

While the accommodations are as comfortable as possible for the region, they will vary from four and five star properties to relatively basic and simple hotels in the more remote cities we visit. It is important to keep in mind that the countries of Central Asia are, in general, not up to the standards North American travelers expect. Services are improving in the region; nevertheless, you may encounter problems with plumbing, bureaucratic service, road conditions, unpaved sidewalks, uneven surfaces and steps, variety of locally available foods, and availability and quality of public restrooms. You are traveling in some areas which, relatively speaking, have seen few travelers, and the infrastructure is not yet fully developed.

While this program is designed to be the most comfortable possible for travel in this region, it is rated as **rigorous touring** due to the daily walking involved, the length of some bus rides and the overall shortcomings of the tourism infrastructure. This itinerary features a significant amount of touring on foot. Many streets are of packed dirt, and some attractions are only accessible via steep staircases with tall uneven steps. In particular, spiral staircases at architectural sites (such as Burana Tower) can involve steep steps inside a narrow passageway with limited light. In addition, there are fairly steep staircases with roughly 80 steps at the Shah-i-Zinda site in Samarkand. Some other sites and hotels may not offer elevators. To reap the full rewards of this adventure, travelers must be able to walk at least two miles a day, keeping up with fellow travelers. Border crossings may require crossing a relatively **long distance by foot** while managing your own bags – up to about a half-mile. Bags may need to be carried during these crossings, rather than rolled, as the road/sidewalk surface is not always paved or smooth. Flexibility, a sense of humor and a willingness to accept local standards of amenities and services are essential components to the enjoyment of this trip.

Every effort has been made to make the information in this schedule accurate. However, trip itineraries are always subject to change. We will do our best to inform you in advance of any changes, but due to the nature of travel in Central Asia, this may not always be possible. Only those willing to accept these conditions should consider joining this program.

Important Notice Regarding Prescription Drugs

Please be advised that some countries in Central Asia, most notably Turkmenistan, but also Uzbekistan, have recently stepped up their border/customs inspection and enforcement activities for arriving and departing travelers concerning pharmaceutical drugs. While baggage search has always been possible, as of late there are reports of much greater frequency for baggage search at border crossings than has been the case based on our experience in the past. If you need to carry prescription medications with you of any kind, you are reminded to **carry an amount suitable for personal use only, in original labeled packing and with a copy of the prescription**. If you are not able to bring a copy of the prescription, please bring an official printed list of your medications that includes the drug name, dosage, doctor's name and all other relevant information. Package labeling should clearly indicate the same information.

Please note that some prescription drugs, including certain pain relievers such as **Tramadol** and **Hydrocodone**, which are somewhat common in the U.S., are completely prohibited from entry into Turkmenistan, even for personal use with a foreign prescription. Anti-anxiety medications such as **Lorazepam** can be problematic, as can sedatives such as **Zolpidem**. Another prohibited medication in Turkmenistan is **pseudoephedrine**. Please be sure to bring alternative medication with you as these drugs (**among others** – call for details) are simply not allowed at the present time.

If you have concerns about prescription drugs you need to take with you as you travel through Central Asia, please contact your Tour Specialist before your departure for more information.



Are You Prepared?

A Travel Guard travel insurance plan can help cover your vacation investment, offset expenses from travel mishaps and provide you with emergency travel assistance. To learn more about all of the benefits of purchasing a Travel Guard travel insurance plan, please visit www.travelguard.com/mircorp

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Kazakhstan here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/kazakhstan-travel-advisory.html>

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Uzbekistan here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/uzbekistan-travel-advisory.html>

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Kyrgyzstan here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/the-kyrgyz-republic-travel-advisory.html>

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Tajikistan here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/tajikistan-travel-advisory.html>

Please read the U.S. State Department's Travel Advisory regarding travel to Turkmenistan here: <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/turkmenistan-travel-advisory.html>

If you are not already enrolled in STEP, Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, a free service to enroll your trip with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate.

Weather

Planning your adventure should take all aspects of your destination into account, including the weather that you're likely to experience while on the road. Keep in mind that the weather at all times of the year is highly unpredictable and planning the best time of year should always be coupled with flexible packing, to allow you to make the best of any situation that comes up.

Central Asia experiences hot summers and cold winters. The best times to travel to these countries are in spring and fall, to catch the best temperatures between the hot parts of the summer and the cold winters. Rain is minimal. April-May brings temperatures ranging from 60 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit, while late August-September temperatures are typically 75-95+. Those whose plans don't allow travel in April-May or August-September can still catch great opportunities to visit as early as March, or as late as October-November. At these times, comfortable touring weather is still called for, with warm days and cooler nights/early mornings. Travelers to Central Asia in March and November might want to bring along some additional warmer layers to help adjust to the difference between mountainous areas and desert areas.

Our group tours are scheduled to be in Central Asia at the best times for most people. Due to the long distances covered on many of our programs and the amount of time spent on the road, it is fair to say you will experience a range of temperatures and conditions over the course of your trip. One recent group had unusual snow flurries at the beginning of their tour, and ended in short sleeves and sunglasses. We recommend checking temperature ranges online. Research using sites such as Weatherbase, available online at www.weatherbase.com, will help you get a snapshot of daily average temperatures as well as precipitation days and more.



International Airfare

MIR's in-house, full-service air department is available to assist with your air travel needs. Check with MIR before booking air on your own, as we are happy to research and compare the best fares available through multiple channels. Airfare varies depending on a wide variety of factors, such as dates of travel and seasonality, seat availability, special airline promotions, how restrictive ticket changes are, how long the fares can be held without purchase, routing considerations such as stopovers, and more. Tour dates are based on the land tour only. Our preferred carriers for this tour are Lufthansa and Turkish Airlines, as they offer convenient itineraries and competitive rates from multiple cities across the U.S. to Central Asia.

Please call us at 800-424-7289 to discuss air options and routings for this program, and to request a quote for your specific plans and dates of travel. We will be happy to put together a no-obligation suggested air itinerary and estimate for you at your request.

Visas

At the time of writing, U.S. passport holders require three visas for this tour: Uzbek (**double-entry**), Turkmen, and Tajik. You may also need a visa for any additional country you fly via to join the tour (such as Russia or Turkey). Uzbek and Tajik visas are now e-visas, while Turkmen is a traditional sticker visa.

An estimate of the current visa costs for U.S. passport holders, based on standard processing time through our preferred provider, is \$346. Your exact visa fees may differ as visa costs can depend on a number of factors, such as state of residence, processing time, and return shipping. Visa fees are always subject to change.

Visa processing for the one physical visa for this tour will generally take 2-3 weeks. Travelers should prepare to be without their passports for that amount of time. Required pre-authorizations can be very time consuming for MIR to receive on your behalf and may cause delays in processing beyond the expected time spent in the Turkmen embassy. Due to the length of time required to get the Turkmen visa support, travelers with extensive travel plans in the period prior to the tour start may run out of time to get the Turkmen visa processed in Washington D.C. If that is the case, there is an option to process the Turkmen visa on the Uzbek-Turkmen border, which has worked well for MIR clients and staffers in this position in the past. Please contact us with any questions you may have regarding the timeline for visa processing.

Extensive pre-tour paperwork is necessary to apply for these visas, which in some cases requires a foreign government approval authorization to be issued prior to submission of your application materials to the Embassies/Consulates. A valid passport with six months validity from the end of the tour is also required.

In the past some travelers have made their own visa arrangements instead of using MIR's preferred provider for their visa processing; either using their own visas service or attempting to process directly with the websites/embassies/consulates. We strongly recommend you discuss it with us before choosing an alternate visa processing method, to help avoid difficulties and visa problems. **In the event that you plan to process visas without going through MIR's preferred provider, please contact us first so we can pass you detailed instructions with critical trip-specific information.**



Pre- and Post- Tours

Day One of this tour is left free as an arrivals day with no scheduled touring, and the touring program begins on the morning of Sunday, Day Two.

Many flights into Almaty arrive overnight or in early a.m. hours. Some clients will arrive overnight between Saturday and Sunday. Immediate access to the room will be provided, but these travelers may find the amount of resting time somewhat limited, as touring starts after breakfast on Day Two.

To help travelers have extra time to rest up while limiting extra expense, MIR is pleased to be able to let you know that for clients considering a flight itinerary with early a.m. Saturday arrival in Almaty, we are also able to guarantee early access to the hotel at no additional cost. **There is no additional cost if arriving Almaty 12:01 a.m. and onward on Saturday, Day One of your tour.**

If you prefer to land in Almaty on Friday or earlier, additional hotel costs will apply. Those clients planning to land on Friday or earlier **should expect a pre-tour night and a hotel transfer to total around around \$200 per room per night.** Your tour specialist can help you make the best plan if considering early arrival.

Contact us for more details, at 1-800-424-7289, 8:30am-5:30pm Pacific Time.

Also Nearby...

For more tours to Central Asia, you may want to check out:

Flexible Essential Trips – Classic Private Journeys

Essential Central Asia, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, 13 days. Explore the markets, mosques and minarets of oasis towns on the fringes of the Kyzyl Kum and Kara Kum deserts. Here spiritual beliefs were the greatest commodities to flow along trade routes, and civilizations blossomed amidst austere natural beauty.

Essential Kyrgyzstan, 8 days. On this comprehensive journey among the soaring peaks, glacial lakes and steep valleys of the Kyrgyz outback, spend a night with a village family, learning the traditional way to make felt, bake flatbread in a clay oven and milk a mare. Visit with a seasoned eagle hunter and admire dramatic landscapes of ochre and umber sandstone formations.

Essential Tajikistan, 8 days. Rarely-visited Tajikistan is wreathed in spectacular mountains and colored with the influence of Persia, the Islamic world and Russia. Meet local people at Fergana Valley markets, explore the ruins of ancient Penjikent and share a meal in a warm Tajik home. Visit the country's capital, Dushanbe, where an airy, light-filled space is home to the modern National Museum of Tajikistan.

Essential Turkmenistan, 12 days. From the golden monuments of Ashgabat and the ruins of Parthian Nisa, head into the mountains to visit a silk weaver in his tribal village home. Visit the Caspian seaport, Turkmenbashi, explore UNESCO-listed Merv and learn about traditional crafts. Camp at the "Door to Hell" and survey Kunya-Urgench, ancient capital of Khorezm.

Essential Kazakhstan, 7 days. Begin in the new city of Astana, capital of Kazakhstan only since 1997. Fly to Chimkent and discover the historic city of Turkistan with its UNESCO-listed mausoleum of a revered Sufi sheikh. Fly to Almaty and explore spectacular Charyn Canyon, with its strange rock formations and colorful strata.



Essential Uzbekistan, 10 days. Beginning in the modern capital, Tashkent, roam the great Silk Road oases of Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva, all of them UNESCO Sites. Admire their mosques, *madrassahs* and minarets clad in ceramic tiles the color of the desert sky.

Small Group Tours

Return to the North Caucasus, 14 days. Discover the ravishing mountain landscapes, medley of cultures, and overflowing hospitality of North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan in the North Caucasus region, where ancient mountain tribes have guarded their way of life for thousand of years.

Silk Route Odyssey: Caravan Across Uzbekistan, 15 days. The center of Central Asia, Uzbekistan is home to three of the most renowned of the Silk Road oases — Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. Journey through these UNESCO Sites, the incredible Savitsky Museum in Nukus and the lush Fergana Valley, where Central Asia's silk production began with two cocoons hidden in the headdress of a royal Chinese bride.

Conditions of Participation

Your participation on a MIR Corporation trip is subject to the conditions contained in the 2020 Tour Reservation Form and Release of Liability and Assumption of Risk Agreement. Please read this document carefully and contact us with any questions.

Cancellation and Refund Policy

Payment Terms: Non-refundable deposits are accepted by check, Visa, MasterCard or American Express. Final land payments may be made by check or credit card for reservations made directly with MIR. If booking through a travel agent, please contact your agent to find out what form of payment they accept. (MIR can accept final payment from travel agents by agency check only.) Air fares are subject to change until ticketed; payment policies vary by carrier.

If you cancel your trip please notify MIR in writing. Upon MIR's receipt of notice the following charges apply to land tours (policies for air tickets, custom group trips vary):

Scheduled MIR Small Group Tours

Cost of cancellation, if received:

61 or more days prior to departure, deposit due or paid in full of \$750;

31-60 days prior to departure, 50% of land tour cost

30 days prior to or after trip departure, no refund

References

We encourage you to speak directly with satisfied past travelers. Please request a list of references.

Why MIR?

Regional knowledge is crucial to the success of any trip to our corner of the world. MIR combines detailed information about geography and infrastructure, history and art, language and culture, with the depth of knowledge that comes only from decades of regional experience. You may wonder how we differ from other tour operators...



Destination Specialization

MIR focuses exclusively on the exceptional region at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. This area has been our overriding passion since 1986; we don't do the rest of the world. Our hard-earned expertise gained over the last three decades can take you from end to end of the largest country in the world – Russia – and to all of its neighbors. We specialize in travel to Siberia, the Silk Route, St. Petersburg & Beyond. Our destinations include: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), Turkey, Mongolia, China, Tibet, and Central/East Europe (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia).

30 Years of Experience

A travel company doesn't last more than 30 years in the business without a solid track record. MIR has helped thousands of individuals achieve their travel goals. Our dedication and experience have earned us their trust and the trust of many well-respected institutions. Today MIR is the preferred tour operator for museum, alumni and special interest organizations across the country.

Recommended & Respected

MIR has twice been rated one of the “Best Adventure Travel Companies on Earth” by *National Geographic Adventure*. Several of our tours have won awards in top travel publications, such as *Outside* magazine and *National Geographic Traveler*. Our trips have been featured in books such as *Riding the Hula Hula to the Arctic Ocean* and *1,000 Places to See Before You Die*.



More Questions?

Please feel free to call us with questions at 1-800-424-7289, 8:30am-5:30pm Pacific Time.

MIR Corporation

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