

Central Asia Directory

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Most of this chapter refers to general information on travelling through the ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia. For country-specific information, refer to the individual country directories in each country chapter. For Afghanistan-specific information see p490.

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation alternatives are springing up all over Central Asia, so thankfully the smoky, disintegrating Soviet-era leftovers need only be used as a last resort. Private places are almost always preferable to government-run places.

Options are somewhat uneven across the region. The excellent homestays of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and the B&Bs of Uzbekistan offer the best alternatives to the few remain-

ing Soviet-era fossils. Budget travellers in Kazakhstan will still find the latter a regular companion, alongside railway and bus-station hotels, though there are now plenty of good midrange options. Tajikistan's Pamir region in particular has an informal network of homes and yurts that offer a fascinating and intimate look at the way local people live.

Oddball accommodation options include sleeping in a former medressa in Khiva (p275) or an astronomical observatory outside Almaty (p144).

In this book, budget accommodation is considered anything under around US\$25 for a double room in high season. Midrange options run up to around US\$70 (US\$100 in Kazakh cities) and top-end choices are above that.

B&Bs

These are small private guesthouses, as opposed to homestays, though the distinction can be a fine one. The majority are to be found in the Uzbek cities of Bukhara, Khiva and Samarkand, where the best are stylish boutique-style hotels. Rates tend to be around US\$15 to US\$25 per person and include breakfast. Meals are extra but can normally be provided for around US\$5 each.

Camping

In the wilds there's normally no problem with you camping, though there is always an inherent security risk with this. If you are obviously on someone's land then you should try to ensure that you have permission. Staying anywhere near habitation will result in an immediate audience. Popular trekking routes have established camping areas, frequented by Soviet alpinists during the Soviet era. You can normally camp at a *turbaza* (Soviet-era holiday camp) or yurt camp for a minimal fee.

Homestays

These are happily on the rise. For a bed of duvets on the floor and some type of breakfast you'll probably pay between US\$10 (in rural Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) to US\$15 per person (in Uzbekistan and cities) per night. Travel in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in par-

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ticular has been revolutionised by the homestay networks of the Murgab Ecotourism Association (META; p413), Community-Based Tourism (CBT; p302) and Shepherd's Life organisations (p302). Kazakhstan also has some homestays at between US\$25 and US\$35 per person with all meals.

Do not expect hotel-style comforts; rural toilets, for example, are likely to be squatters in the garden. Don't expect anything exotic either – in larger towns you may well end up in a block of flats, in front of a TV all evening. Levels of privacy vary. You might get access to a kitchen, especially if you are in an apartment.

Potential hosts may accost you as you alight at a station or enter a tourist hotel; older people, generally women, tend to be the best to deal with. Sympathetic hotel reception staff may put you in touch with private homes in some cities. Many local private travel agencies can set you up with someone, though prices may be double local rates.

Even though prices are listed in this book as 'dorms' you will usually not be expected to share rooms with strangers; however, friends travelling together will be expected to share a room.

Locals you meet on the road may invite you home and ask nothing for it, but remember that most ordinary people have very limited resources, so offer to pay anything from US\$5 to US\$10 (rural Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) to US\$10 in larger towns (add on around US\$5 for dinner and breakfast in rural areas). Another option in regions without formal homestays is to contact locals or expats through sites like CouchSurfing (www.couchsurfing.com), or social networking sites like Facebook (www.facebook.com) or its regional equivalent V Kontakte (www.vkontakte.ru). Accommodation is free or cheap and it's often a good way to meet locals and get an inside perspective on a place.

In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, staying with someone who hasn't gone through official channels with the Office of Visas & Registration (OVIR; *Otdel Vis i Registratsii* in Russian) could put them at risk, especially if your own papers aren't in order. For details on potential registration problems for homestay and campers in Uzbekistan, see p285.

Hotels

Though some are better than others, you often don't get what you pay for in government or Soviet-era tourist hotels, largely because tourists pay higher rates than locals. Windows that don't open or close properly, chronically dim or missing light bulbs and toilets that leak but don't flush are common problems. All beds are single, with pillows the size of suitcases. That said, a lot of Soviet-era hotels have spruced themselves up in recent years and the situation is constantly improving.

Uzbekistan leads the way in stylish private hotels, which are popping up all over the place. There is also a limited number of party or government guesthouses, *dacha* (holiday bungalows) and former government sanatoria, which are now open to all. Most cities have a choice of several modern and comfortable private-sector hotels catering mostly to local and international *biznesmen*, where nouveau riche is the dominant style.

If you're staying at a budget hotel that doesn't have hot water, ask about the local *banya* (public bath), which will.

Some hotels will take your passport and visa for anywhere from half an hour to your entire stay, to do the required registration paperwork and to keep you from leaving without paying.

LATE-NIGHT TELEPHONE CALLS

Those late-night calls to your room aren't wrong numbers. All hotels with significant numbers of foreigners attract prostitutes, especially, it seems, in Kazakhstan (or was that just us?). Women guests rarely seem to get unexpected calls but several men have received calls from someone who knew their name, so somebody at the front desk knows what's going on. All you can do is work out how to temporarily disable your telephone and don't answer the door.