

# Tajikistan

## Тоҷикистон

A Persian-speaking outpost in a predominantly Turkic region, Tajikistan is in many ways the odd one out in ex-Soviet Central Asia. With its roots in ancient Sogdiana and Bactria, the modern country is a fragile patchwork of mountain valleys, clans, languages and identities, forged together by little more than Soviet nation-building and the shared hopes for a peaceful future.

That peace was shattered in the 1990s, when a brutal civil war claimed over 60,000 lives, turning the remote mountainous republic into the bloodiest corner of the former Soviet empire. Though the wounds are still raw and the political situation fragile, over a decade after the war most Tajiks are moving forward with their lives and a mood of guarded optimism has returned.

The good news for travellers is that today Tajikistan is safe, stable and scenically spectacular. The Pamir region – the ‘Roof of the World’ – is easily the country’s highlight, offering breathtaking high-altitude scenery, excellent ecotourism options, humbling mountain hospitality and the awesome Pamir Hwy – one of Asia’s greatest road trips.

Once the playing fields of ‘Great Game’ spies and explorers, Tajikistan is now the playground for cutting-edge adventure travel, from walks and 4WDs through the Wakhan Valley to nights in remote Kyrgyz yurt camps. For fans of big mountain scenery, or anyone who ranks places like northern Pakistan or western Tibet as their favourite travel destinations, Tajikistan will glimmer as the most exciting republic in Central Asia.

### FAST FACTS

- **Area** 143,100 sq km
- **Capital** Dushanbe
- **Country Code** ☎ 992
- **Famous for** Pamir Hwy, trekking, mountain hospitality, drug trafficking
- **Languages** Tajik, Russian, Uzbek and half a dozen Pamiri languages
- **Money** Tajik somani (TJS); US\$1=4.42TJS, €1=6.12TJS
- **Off the Map** Pamirs (p399), Istaravshan p393), Yagnob Valley p398), Southern Tajikistan (p384)
- **Phrases in Tajik** *khob* (OK); *mebakhshed* (sorry); *khair* (goodbye)
- **Population** 7.35 million (2009 estimate)



**HOW MUCH?**

- **Snickers bar** US\$0.60
- **100km shared taxi ride** US\$7-10
- **Internet connection per hour** US\$0.70-1.20
- **Tajik skullcap** US\$2
- **Homestay B&B** US\$10
- **1L of petrol** US\$1
- **1L of bottled water** US\$0.45
- **Bottle of beer** US\$0.80
- **Shashlyk** US\$0.80

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- **Pamir Highway** (p411) One of the world's great road trips, offering jaw-dropping high-altitude lakes and fine community-based homestays.
- **Wakhan Valley** (p409) Remote and beautiful valley bordering Afghanistan, with Silk Road forts, Buddhist ruins and spectacular views of the snowbound Hindu Kush.
- **Yurtstays** (p414) Your chance to get up close and personal with Kyrgyz herders, under a spectacular nighttime Pamiri sky.
- **Fan Mountains** (p396) Austere but beautiful trekking destination of turquoise lakes and Tajik shepherds, easily accessible from Penjikent or Samarkand.
- **Iskander-Kul** (p396) Lovely lake at the eastern end of the Fan Mountains and a great place to relax or go hiking.

**ITINERARIES**

- **Three days** Drive from Samarkand or Khojand (p390) to Dushanbe (p381); with an overnight stop in Iskander-Kul if you hire your own taxi) and then fly out of Dushanbe to Bishkek or Almaty. Alternatively, visit Penjikent (p393) from Samarkand, continue to Khojand via Istaravshan (p393) and then dip back into Uzbekistan.
- **One week** Khojand to Dushanbe with stops in Istaravshan, Iskander-Kul (p396) and Hissar (p389). Or perhaps a short trek in the Fan Mountains (p397).
- **Two weeks** Ten days is really the minimum amount of time required to travel from

Dushanbe to Osh via the Pamir Hwy (p411), especially if you plan to arrange things as you go. Figure in an overnight in the Wakhan Valley (p409) and a yurt-stay in the eastern Pamirs, as the area has much to offer.

- **Three weeks** This will be enough time to get you from Penjikent over the mountains to Dushanbe and then along the Pamir Hwy to Osh (in Kyrgyzstan), with maybe a short trek in the Fan Mountains. Try to add on an overnight trip from Murgab (p412) to somewhere like Jalang (p415), Pshart Valley (p414) or Bulunkul (p411).

**CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO**

Northern, central and southern Tajikistan sizzle in summer (June to September), with temperatures over 40°C. Unfortunately this is the best time to visit the mountains. Spring (March to May) brings mild temperatures but frequent heavy showers. April is the best time to visit southern Tajikistan in bloom. In winter (November to February) temperatures in Dushanbe hover near freezing, while temperatures in the Pamirs plummet to between -20°C and -45°C.

March, April, September and October are probably the best times to visit. The best time of year for trekking is mid-June to early October, with September perhaps the optimum month. The Pamir region is best visited from July to late September, though the Pamir Hwy technically remains open year-round. During early summer (June and July), melt-water can make river crossings dangerous in mountainous areas.

**HISTORY**  
**Tajik Ancestry**

Tajik ancestry is a murky area, with roots reaching back to the Bactrians and Sogdians. Tombs from the eastern Pamir show that Saka-Usun tribes were grazing their flocks here from the 5th century BC, when the climate was considerably lushier than today.

In the 1st century BC the Bactrian empire covered most of what is now northern Afghanistan. Their contemporaries, the Sogdians, inhabited the Zeravshan (Zeravshan) Valley in present-day western Tajikistan (where a few traces of this civilisation remain near Penjikent). Alexander the Great battled the Sogdians and besieged