

Turkmenistan

By far the most mysterious and unexplored of Central Asia's 'stans, Turkmenistan became famous for the truly bizarre dictatorship of Saparmyrat Niyazov, who ruled as 'Turkmenbashi' ('leader of the Turkmen') until his death in 2006, covering this little-known desert republic with golden statues of himself and grandiose monuments to the achievements of his 'golden age'. But the least-visited of Central Asia's countries is actually far more than the totalitarian theme park it's often portrayed as being, and is an ancient land of great spirituality, tradition and natural beauty.

The ancient cities of Merv, Misrian and Konye-Urgench inspire visions of slow-moving caravans plodding along the ancient Silk Road, while the haunting beauty of the Karakum desert and other quirky natural phenomena, from vast coloured canyons and dinosaur footprints to burning gas craters, are less expected but equally mesmerising sights. But the full Turkmen experience is ultimately about mingling with the Turkmen themselves, only a couple of generations removed from a nomadic lifestyle and a welcoming people whose hospitality is the stuff of legend. Women are seen decked out in colourful headscarves and ankle-length dresses decorated with Turkmen motifs, while everyone from young boys to *aksakal* (literally 'white beards', revered elders) will greet you warmly with a two-handed clasp and a slight bow.

Xenophobia runs deep in the upper echelons of Turkmen authority, which constricts independent travel. Anyone with a tourist visa is required to hire a guide to accompany them through the country. While this may dampen your independent spirit, it is for now the only way to fully experience the country.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 488,100 sq km
- **Capital** Ashgabat
- **Country code** ☎ 993
- **Famous for** Multiple personality cults, gas reserves, Akhal-Teke horses, carpets
- **Off the map** Pretty much anywhere, but for true adventure try the Yangykala Canyon
- **Languages** Turkmen, Russian, Uzbek
- **Money** manat (M); US\$1 = 2.85M, €1 = 3.64M
- **Phrases in Turkmen** *salam aleykum* (peace be with you/hello); *sagh bol* (thanks); *siz nahili?* (how are you?)
- **Population** 4.88 million



HOW MUCH?

- **Snickers bar** US\$0.70
- **Bus ride in Ashgabat** US\$0.07
- **Traditional hat** US\$9
- **Good dinner in Ashgabat** US\$18
- **1L petrol** US\$0.70
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.24
- **Entry to major archaeological sites** US\$4

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Konye-Urgench** (p457) Ancient minarets, mausoleums and palaces that stand testament to the former glories of the Khorezmshah empire.
- **Darvaza Gas Craters** (p442) A bizarre combination of human accident and natural phenomenon, and a vision of hell amid the incredible lunar landscapes of the Karakum desert.
- **Ashgabat** (p430) Extraordinary Turkmen capital laden with marble palaces, golden statues and more fountains than Las Vegas; home to the wonderfully chaotic *Tolkuchka Bazaar*.
- **Yangykala Canyon** (p445) A painted desert that wouldn't look out of place in a John Ford film, great for camping and exploration.
- **Merv** (p451) Extensive ruins of Merv, littered with ancient foundations and pottery shards, with *Gonur*, the largest archaeological excavation in the Near East, nearby.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Arriving on a transit visa, see Ashgabat (p430) in a day and wander *Tolkuchka Bazaar*. Cross the Karakum desert (p442) and then wrap things up with a visit to historic Konye-Urgench (p457).
- **One week** Spend at least three days around Ashgabat before heading east to visit the ancient sites of Merv (p451) and *Gonur* (p453). From here, return to Ashgabat and travel north to Konye-Urgench, camping en route at the unforgettable *Darvaza Gas Craters* (p442).
- **Two weeks** Along with the sights mentioned above, head west to Dekhistan

(p445), the Yangykala Canyon (p445) and Turkmenbashi (p446). While in the Karakum desert, scope out some remote villages for the chance to overnight in a yurt.

- **Three weeks** Explore the above sights at a slower pace and take the time for some activities, such as horseback riding in *Geok-Dere* (p436), cave exploration in *Kugitang Nature Reserve* (p456) and hiking in *Nokhur* (p443).

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Turkmenistan is the hottest country in Central Asia, although its dry desert climate means that it's not always uncomfortably warm. That said, only the insane or deeply unfortunate find themselves in Ashgabat in July and August, when the temperature can push 50°C. The best times to visit are between April and June, and September to early November. Winters can be very cold throughout the country and aren't a great time to visit, though you may equally find bright blue skies and spring-like warmth even in the depths of December, but it's a gamble.

HISTORY**From Conquerors to Communists**

Stone Age sites have been identified in the Big Balkan Mountains but the first signs of agricultural settlements appeared in *Kopet Dag* in the 6th millennium BC. More Bronze Age sites have been located in the *Margiana Oasis*, where archaeologist *Viktor Sarianidi* has identified a sophisticated culture that encompassed several villages and an extensive capital. Rivers that shifted over the centuries caused the abandonment of these settlements, but paved the way for a great civilization around Merv. Alexander the Great established a city here on his way to India.

Around the time of Christ, the Parthians, Rome's main rivals for power in the West, set up a capital at *Nissa*, near present-day Ashgabat. In the 11th century the Seljuq Turks appropriated Merv, Alexander's old city and a Silk Road staging post, as a base from which to expand into Afghanistan.

Two centuries later Chinggis (Genghis) Khan stormed down from the steppes and through *Trans-Caspia* (the region east of the Caspian Sea) to lay waste to Central Asia. Entire city-states, including Merv and Konye-Urgench, were razed and their populations