

# Uzbekistan

## Ўзбекистан

No country in Central Asia seems to have it so good, yet at the same time have it so bad, as Uzbekistan. The region's cradle of culture for more than two millennia, it is the proud home to a spellbinding arsenal of architecture and artefacts, all deeply infused with the raw, fascinating history of the country. But as students of that history know, it's also sprung a few bad apples over the years. Tyrants enamoured of the country's physical bounty have run the territory we now call Uzbekistan since time immemorial.

Concentrating on the good, if there was a Hall of Fame for Central Asian cities, Uzbekistan would own the top three entries: Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. The names practically epitomise the region, conjuring up images of knife-twirling dervishes, serpentine desert caravans and architecture that blends with the sand.

Seen in person, the Big Three do not disappoint (the occasional overzealous restorative effort notwithstanding). Alas, they sometimes overshadow the country's other attractions, which include dazzling bazaars, ancient desert fortresses and an impressive array of largely unsung natural attractions.

All of that is enough to eclipse the bad memories evoked by names such as Chinggis (Genghis) Khan, Timur, Nasrullah Khan and Stalin. The country's long-serving current leader, Islam Karimov, is no saint either. Despite it all, the Uzbek people remain good-spirited and genuinely hospitable – yet another prime attraction in this oddly endearing country.

### FAST FACTS

- **Area** 447,400 sq km
- **Capital** Tashkent
- **Country Code** ☎ 998
- **Famous for** *plov*, tasty pomegranates, Samarkand, Timur (Tamerlane), President Karimov's socialite/singer daughter Gulnara ('Googoosha')
- **Languages** Uzbek, Russian, Tajik, Karakalpak
- **Money** Uzbek som (S); US\$1 = 2300S; €1 = 2900S (black market, and sliding fast; see the boxed text on p284 for more)
- **Off the Map** Boysun, Surkhandaryya province (p254)
- **Phrases** *asalam aleykum* (hello); *rakhmat* (thank you)
- **Population** 27.8 million



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Samarkand** (p240) The breathtaking Registan leads a formidable cast of larger-than-life Timurid architectural gems.
- **Bukhara** (p257) Exquisitely preserved holy city boasting stunning 15th-century medressas, awesome B&Bs and fascinating history.
- **Quirky Cultural Gems** *Carmen* for a dollar at Tashkent's Alisher Navoi Opera & Ballet Theatre (p225) and Central Asia's greatest art collection in Nukus' Savitsky Karakalpakstan Art Museum (p278).
- **Khiva** (p270) The last independent khanate frozen in time amid the desert.
- **Crafty Uzbekistan** Silk in Margilon (p238), ceramics in Rishton (p239), and everything under the sun in Bukhara (p266).

## ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Start in Bukhara (p257), either with a domestic flight from Tashkent or overland from Turkmenistan. Wander around Lyabi-Hauz (p259), tour the Ark (p261), and gape at the 47m Kalon Minaret (p261) and the stunning medressa (Islamic academy or seminary) ensembles. Pamper yourself in a bodacious B&B, then zip to Samarkand (p240) the next morning to explore the four pearls of Timurid-era architecture: the Registan (p243), Bibi-Khanym Mosque (p244), Shah-i-Zinda (p244) and Gur-e-Amir Mausoleum (p244). On day three exit to Tajikistan, taking a detour on the way to Shakhrisabz (p251) or the Urgut bazaar (p250).
- **One week** Fly to Urgench (p268), from where it's a short shared-taxi ride to the 'museum city' of Khiva (p270). Spend a day wandering around the walled old city, Ichon-Qala (p272). The next day travel by shared taxi to Bukhara and Samarkand, giving each place an extra day. On your last day in Tashkent (p212) catch an opera and a museum or two.
- **Two weeks** Fly west to Nukus (p276) and spend a half-day appreciating Central Asia's greatest art collection in the Savitsky Karakalpakstan Art Museum (p278). Head south to Khiva via the ancient ruined fortresses of Elik-Qala (p270). Around Bukhara, take a time-out from architecture with a yurtstay near Lake Aidarkul (p256). After three days cover-

## HOW MUCH?

- **Snickers bar** US\$0.50
- **100km bus ride** US\$1
- **One-minute phone call to the US/UK** US\$0.60
- **Internet per hour** US\$0.40-0.60
- **Uzbek skull cap** US\$3
- **1L petrol** US\$0.55
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.40
- **Domestic beer (bar)** US\$0.75-2
- **Domestic beer (store)** US\$0.50
- **Shashlyk** US\$0.50-\$1.50

ing Samarkand and vicinity, history buffs should head south to the archaeological oasis of Termiz (p253) before flying back to Tashkent for some museum hopping, good food and a night or two on the town. Bazaar lovers should consider the Fergana Valley (p232) instead of Termiz.

- **One month** All of the above sights can be seen in a month at a more relaxed pace. You can hit both Termiz and the Fergana Valley and devote more time to exploring Uzbekistan's natural wonders, including hiking, rafting or skiing in Ugam-Chatkal National Park (p230), and camel trekking, hiking and community-based tourism near Lake Aidarkul and the Nuratau Mountains (p257).

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Large areas of Uzbekistan are desert. Summer is long, hot and dry; spring is mild and rainy; autumn has light frosts and rains; and winter, although short, is unstable with snow and temperatures below freezing.

From June to August average afternoon temperatures hit 32°C or higher. The average annual maximum temperature is 40°C in June. Most rain falls in March and April.

The summer furnace of 35°C days lasts from mid-July to the end of August. The worst of winter lasts from Christmas to mid-February; see also Climate Charts on p499.

In this chapter, the high season is spring (mid-March to the end of May) and autumn (September to the beginning of November). Summer is from June to August, and winter is from December to February.