

# Welcome to Central Asia

*With its medieval blue-domed cities,  
kinetic bazaars and remote yurtstays,  
Central Asia encapsulates the romance of  
the Silk Road like nowhere else.*

## Footprints of History

From Alexander the Great to Chinggis (Genghis) Khan to Timur (Tamerlane), Central Asia's page-turning history litters the land at every turn. Viewed from the right angle, the storied oasis caravan stops of Samarkand and Bukhara, with their exotic skylines of minarets and medressas, really do seem to be lifted directly from the heyday of Marco Polo. Share a round of kebabs with an Uzbek trader or wander an ancient caravanserai, and historical romantics will find the past and present begin to blur into one.

## Mountains & Yurts

East of the desert and steppe settlements rise the snowcapped Pamir and Tian Shan ranges of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, home to traditional herding communities and some truly epic mountain scenery. Here community-based tourism projects can bring you face to face with nomadic Kyrgyz herders, meeting them in their yurts and on their terms. Ride out to remote lakes on horseback, hike from one village homestay to another, or take a 4WD out to remote archaeological sites. The scope for adventure and exploration here is almost limitless.

## Travel off the Map

For decades – centuries even – much of the world has regarded Central Asia as little more than a blank on the map, synonymous with the middle of nowhere, rather than the heartland of Asia. For a certain type of traveller, this is all part of the attraction of a land that has been largely off-limits to travellers for the past 2000 years. Head even a little bit off the beaten track and you'll likely have the place to yourself. Authentic cultural interactions can be found across Central Asia. The region's little-visited oddities, namely Turkmenistan and most of Kazakhstan, are even further removed from the modern world and offer an addictive interest all of their own.

## A Warm Welcome

Whether you want to explore the architectural gems of Bukhara or take a horse trek across the high Pamirs, everywhere in Central Asia you'll be greeted with instinctive local hospitality and offered a shared meal, a helping hand or a place to stay. Add to this the intrinsic fascination of a forgotten region fast emerging as a geopolitical pivot point and you have one of Asia's most absorbing hidden corners.



## Why I Love Central Asia

By Bradley Mayhew, author

Each republic in Central Asia has its own joy for me. In Tajikistan I love the unrivalled mountain scenery and the incredible tradition of hospitality among the local Wakhi and Kyrgyz. In Uzbekistan it's the glorious weight of history and the sense of travelling in the sandprints of some of history's greatest travellers and invaders. There's also something unique and even slightly weird about Central Asia, as if the normal rules of tourist engagement don't quite apply. For me it's a completely addictive place; I'm a total shashlyk-phile.

**For more about our authors, see page 520.**