

Understand Central Asia

CENTRAL ASIA TODAY408

Political repression, regional rivalry and the competition for massive energy reserves dominate contemporary Central Asia.

HISTORY410

Continent-spanning empires, Silk Road cultural exchange and imperial intrigue; Central Asia's history is as colourful as it gets.

THE SILK ROAD 431

The international exchange of goods, beliefs and aesthetics make the Silk Road Central Asia's cultural high point.

PEOPLE & CULTURE435

The lands of Eurasia are a fascinating blend of Turkic and Persian, settled and nomadic, Russian and Asian.

ISLAM IN CENTRAL ASIA442

Islam rules here but it's the softer Sufi brand that dominates after 70 years of Soviet atheism.

THE ARTS446

Bukhara carpets, nomadic bards and Persian poets give Central Asia much of its colour and grace.

ARCHITECTURE 451

Remnants of some of the Islamic world's greatest architectural monuments stand as Central Asia's greatest cultural legacy.

ENVIRONMENT.....455

Disappearing seas, desertification and nuclear fallout make for few feel-good environmental stories here.

Central Asia Today

For the people of ex-Soviet Central Asia it's been a turbulent couple of decades since independence in 1991. Each of the republics have grappled with economic collapse, population shifts and resurgent Islam. All have reinvented their past, rehabilitating historical heroes and reinforcing their national languages in an attempt to redefine and shore up what it means to be Central Asian. Despite years of political repression and faltering economies, life is improving slowly, if unevenly, across the region.

Best of Print

The Lost Heart of Asia

(Colin Thubron)

Our favourite travel writer captures the region in beautiful prose. Also try his more recent *Shadow of the Silk Road*.

The Great Game

(Peter Hopkirk)

Fast-paced and immensely readable account of 19th-century Victorian derring-do.

The Land that Disappeared

(Christopher Robbins)

Excellent contemporary account of Kazakhstan.

Best News Websites

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

www.rferl.org

New Eurasia

www.neweurasia.net

Registan

www.registan.net

EurasiaNet

www.eurasianet.org

Differing Paths

In addressing their shared post-independence challenges the Central Asian governments are forging quite different paths. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are the only republics that seem to have bright economic prospects – sitting pretty on enormous reserves of oil and gas.

Tajikistan is the only one to have experienced the horror of civil war, while the others are all in dread that they will be next to succumb to Islamic fundamentalism and political meltdown. Uzbekistan and (to a lesser extent) Turkmenistan have faced this challenge by sliding into pariah states, where political abductions, torture and trumped-up charges are commonplace.

Only Kyrgyzstan has embraced democracy, with mixed results. The street demonstrations and political violence that unseated Kyrgyz president Bakiev and pushed Kyrgyzstan to the brink of civil war in 2010 have continued with regular street protests.

Political Tensions

The Central Asian republics (particularly Uzbekistan) look south to turbulent Afghanistan in horror, using the perceived threat of Islamic insurgency to justify their increasingly repressive policies. Isolated bombings in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have underscored the threat but it's hard to say whether armed attacks are the cause for repression, or rather a result of it.

Despite claims of Central Asian fraternity, tensions persist. Disputes over water, electricity and gas supplies simmer under the surface and the lack of trust means that regional issues such as the Aral Sea, the drug trade from neighbouring Afghanistan and economic