



Central Asia



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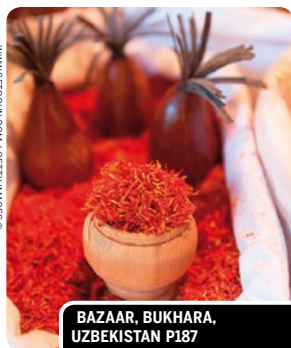
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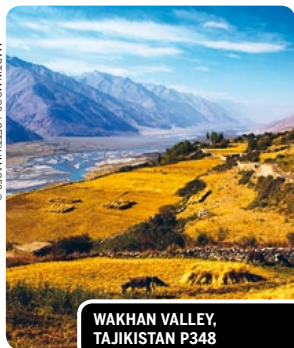
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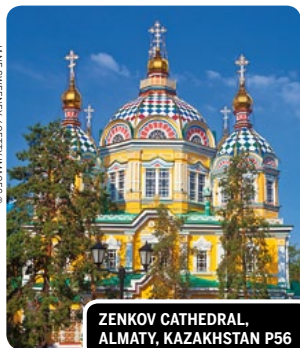
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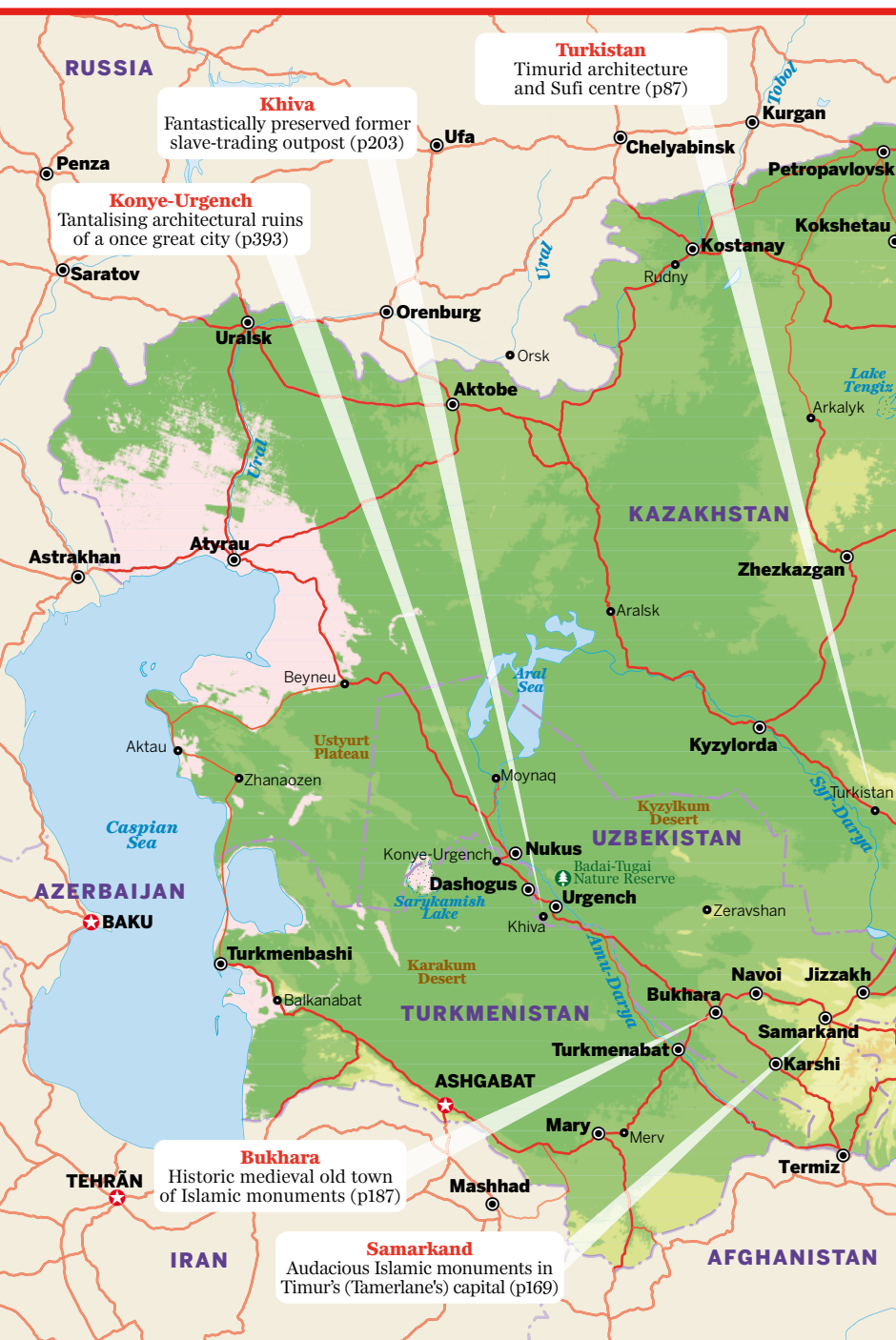
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Central Asia





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800 km
500 miles**Astana**

Surreal modern architecture
on the steppe (p98)

Lake Song-Köl

Horse treks and yurtstays
at this lovely lake (p273)

Almaty

Central Asia's most
cosmopolitan city (p56)

Belukha
(4506m)

ALTAY MOUNTAINS

Lake Zaysan

CHINA

Karakol

Base for fabulous
Tian Shan trekking (p258)

Fergana Valley

Join the locals for some
Silk Road haggling (p160)

High Roads to China

Cross the Torugart or Irkeshtam
passes to Kashgar (p310)

Fan Mountains

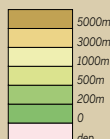
Turquoise lakes and great
trekking (p326)

Pamir Highway

One of the world's great
mountain road trips (p351)

Wakhan Valley

Silk Road forts and views
of the Hindu Kush (p348)

ELEVATION

Itineraries



2
WEEKS

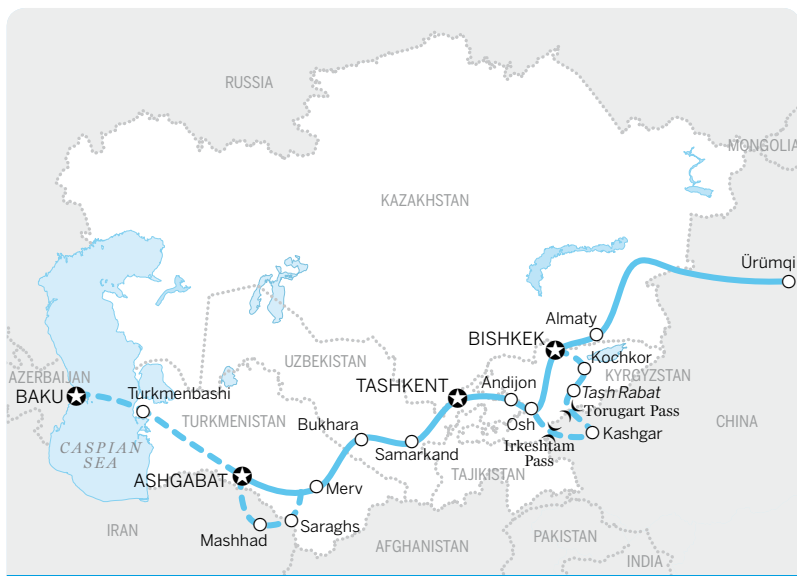
Silk Road Cities

This loop route through Uzbekistan takes in almost all of Central Asia's greatest historical and architectural sites. Fly into **Tashkent** (p139) and get a feel for the big city before taking a domestic flight to Urgench and then a short bus or taxi ride to **Khiva** (p203), comfortably seen in a day. Then take a taxi for an overnight trip to one or two of the crumbling **desert cities** of ancient Khorezm, around **Urgench** (p200).

From Urgench take the long bus or taxi ride down to **Bukhara** (p187), which deserves the most time of all the Silk Road cities. Try to budget a minimum of three days to take in the sights and explore the backstreets.

From here take the golden (actually tarmac) road to **Samarkand** (p169) for a day or two. Soak in the glories of the Registan and Shah-i-Zinda and, if you have time, add on a day trip to **Shakhrisabz** (p181), the birthplace of Timur (Tamerlane).

A potential add-on to this route is to tack on a few days to visit Turkmenistan, visiting **Konye-Urgench** (p393) from Khiva before crossing the desert to **Ashgabat** (p374) and then travelling to Bukhara via the Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar at **Merv** (p388).



Central Asia Overland: The Silk Road

Much of this itinerary follows ancient Silk Road paths and modern travellers will likely make the same route decisions as early traders, based on cost, ease of transport and the time of year.

Western roads into Central Asia lead from Mashhad in Iran to Ashgabat in Turkmenistan, or from Baku in Azerbaijan (by boat) to Turkmenbashi, also in Turkmenistan. If you only have a transit visa for Turkmenistan you can travel from Mashhad to Mary (to visit the Unesco World Heritage-listed ruins of Merv) in one long day via the crossing at Saraghs, giving you more time at Merv and bypassing Ashgabat.

From **Ashgabat** (p374) the overland route leads to **Merv** (p388) and the Silk Road cities of **Bukhara** (p187), **Samarkand** (p169) and **Tashkent** (p139). Figure on at least three full days in Bukhara and two full days each in Samarkand and Tashkent, preferably more. In Tashkent take a ride on the grand metro, shop Chorsu Bazaar and visit the History Museum and Fine Arts Museum of Uzbekistan, two of Central Asia's best.

From Tashkent head into the Fergana Valley and swing north along the mountain road to relaxed **Bishkek** (p232). From Bishkek cross the border into Kazakhstan to cosmopolitan **Almaty** (p56), visit the sights, attend the opera and make some excursions from the city before taking the train (or bus) to Ürümqi in China.

An alternative from Bishkek is to arrange transport through an agency to take you over the dramatic **Torugart Pass** (p310), visiting the summer pastures around **Kochkor** (p276) and Song-Köl and the photogenic caravanserai at **Tash Rabat** (p284), before crossing the pass to Kashgar. You can then continue along the northern or southern Silk Roads into China proper.

A third alternative if you are in a hurry is to travel from **Tashkent** (p139) to **Andijon** (p168) in the Fergana Valley, cross the border to the bustling bazaar town of **Osh** (p289) and then take a bus, or a combination of bus and taxi, into the high and scenic Alay Valley and over the remote **Irkeshtam Pass** (p310) to Kashgar.



3
WEEKS

Over the Torugart: Lakes, Herders & Caravanserais

This trip takes in fabulous mountain scenery, a taste of traditional life in the pastures and the roller-coaster ride over the Torugart Pass to Kashgar. There are lots of opportunities for trekking or horse riding on this route.

Kick off with a couple of days in cosmopolitan **Almaty** (p56), with visits to Panfilov Park, the Central State Museum and a soak in the Arasan Baths. From here it's an easy four-hour drive to Kyrgyzstan's capital **Bishkek** (p232), from where you can head east to the blue waters and sandy beaches of Issyk-Köl, the world's second-largest alpine lake.

For an adventurous alternative between Almaty and Issyk-Köl, hire transport to take you to the colourful, eroded **Charyn Canyon** (p77) and on to the Kyrgyz border through the immense, silent Karkara Valley to Karakol.

Take in a couple of days' trekking or visiting the alpine valleys around **Karakol** (p258). The idyllic valley of **Altyn Arashan** (p265) offers great scope for horse riding or the short trek to alpine Ala-Köl and the glorious Karakol Valley. If you have time you can explore the little-visited southern shore, visiting an eagle-hunter en route to Kochkor. If you are low on time head straight to Kochkor from Bishkek.

In small and sleepy **Kochkor** (p276) take advantage of the community-based tourism (CBT) program and spend some time in a yurt- or homestay on the surrounding *jailoos* (summer pastures). This is one of the best ways to glimpse traditional life in Kyrgyzstan. Try to allow three days to link a couple of yurttays by horse, although most can be visited in an overnight trip. The most popular trip is to the herders' camps around the peaceful lake **Song-Köl** (p273), either by car or on a two-day horseback trip. The pastures are popular with herders and their animals between June and August.

From here head to **Naryn** (p280) and then the Silk Road caravanserai of **Tash Rabat** (p284), where you can stay overnight in yurts and even take an adventurous horse trip to a pass overlooking Chatyr-Köl. From Tash Rabat it's up over the **Torugart Pass** (p310) and into China to wonderful Kashgar for its epic Sunday Market.



To Osh via the Pamir Highway

This wild three-week jaunt ranks as one of the world's most beautiful and remote mountain road trips and is not one to rush. Hire a vehicle for at least part of the way and do the drives in daylight.

There are several options to get to **Penjikent** (p331). If the border crossing between Samarkand and Penjikent has reopened, this is your best option. Otherwise, fly from Dushanbe, or cross into Tajikistan from Uzbekistan at Bekabad, transit through **Khojand** (p335) and continue through **Istaravshan** (p334) by shared taxi over the Shakhristan Pass.

In Penjikent you can check out the Sogdian-era archaeological site and then either hire a car for a day trip up to the Marguzor Lakes or arrange a taxi through the mountains to scenic lake **Iskander-Kul** (p326).

Continue the taxi ride through stunning vertical scenery to Tajikistan's mellow capital **Dushanbe** (p316), where you should budget a couple of days to arrange the flight, shared 4WD or hired car for the long but impressive trip along the Afghan border to **Khorog** (p343) in Gorno-Badakhshan.

You can drive from Khorog to Murgab in a day, but there are lots of interesting detours here, especially the beautiful **Wakhan Valley** (p348) and its storybook Yamchun and Abrashim forts. With hired transport, you can cut from **Langar** (p350) to the Pamir Highway and continue to Murgab.

There are loads of side trips to be made from **Murgab** (p353), so try to budget a few days here to visit a local yurt camp in the surrounding high pastures. Headed north, **Kara-Kul** (p356) is a scenic highlight and worth at least a lunch stop or picnic. Once over the border in Kyrgyzstan, at **Sary Tash** (p296), it's worth detouring 40km to **Sary Mogol** (p296) for its fine views of towering Peak Lenin (Ibn Sina).

From here you can continue over the mountains to the Silk Road bazaar town of **Osh** (p289) or better still exit Central Asia via the **Irkeshtam Pass** (p310) to Kashgar, China.



Kazakhstan: South to North

This Kazakh taster takes you from Central Asia into sub-Siberian northern Kazakhstan. From **Tashkent** (p139) it's a half-day trip across the border to vibrant **Shymkent** (p81), with its Central Asian-style bazaars and chaikhanas (teahouses).

From here detour west to **Turkistan** (p87) to soak up Kazakhstan's only architectural masterpiece, the blue-domed 14th-century Timurid tomb of Kozha Akhmed Yasau. Keep the historical vibe going with a side trip to the nearby ruined Silk Road city of **Sauran** (p89) and a visit south to **Otrar** (p87), the spot where Chinggis (Genghis) Khan's troops first attacked Central Asia and where Timur breathed his last.

Back in Shymkent stock up on some supplies before heading out for some rural hiking, horse riding and tulip-spotting at **Aksu-Zhabagly Nature Reserve** (p85) or **Sayram-Ugam National Park** (p86), both of which have homestays and ecotourism programs.

An overnight 'Silk Road by rail' train trip will drop you in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city. There is plenty to do here, including visiting the iconic Scythian-era Golden Man, before hitting Central Asia's most active club scene. Walk off the next day's hang-over on a hike to **Bolshoe Almatinskoe Lake** (p73), set in the lovely spurs of the Tian Shan.

From Almaty take the high-speed overnight train to the gritty coal city of **Karaganda** (p108). Touch Soviet-era rocket parts at the excellent Ecological Museum and then take a sobering day trip to visit the former gulags at Dolinka and Spassk.

Just a few hours away across the steppe is the modern capital of **Astana** (p98). After oggling the bizarre mix of architecture you can visit the Oceanarium and guess how far you are from the nearest sea (1700km).

Plenty of international flights serve Astana but to continue exploring take a flight to **Ust-Kamenogorsk** (p112) and then a long drive to **Rakhmanovskie Klyuchi** (p111) to start some fabulous hikes or horse treks through the valleys of the Altay, with views of mystical Mt Belukha. You'll need to arrange a tour a month or more in advance to get the required permits.



OUR STORY

A beat-up old car, a few dollars in the pocket and a sense of adventure. In 1972 that's all Tony and Maureen Wheeler needed for the trip of a lifetime – across Europe and Asia overland to Australia. It took several months, and at the end – broke but inspired – they sat at their kitchen table writing and stapling together their first travel guide, *Across Asia on the Cheap*. Within a week they'd sold 1500 copies. Lonely Planet was born.

Today, Lonely Planet has offices in Melbourne, London and Oakland, with more than 600 staff and writers. We share Tony's belief that 'a great guidebook should do three things: inform, educate and amuse'.

OUR WRITERS



Bradley Mayhew

Coordinating Author Since first penning the *Odyssey Guide to Uzbekistan* in 1995, Bradley has travelled to almost every corner of Central Asia. This is the fifth time he has coordinated this title. Bradley is the co-author of Lonely Planet guides to Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan, as well as several guides to the Silk Road. He has lectured on Uzbekistan to the Royal Geographical Society and in 2009 travelled from Venice to China in the footsteps of Marco Polo for a five-part Arte/SWR documentary film. An

expat Brit, Bradley currently lives in Yellowstone County, Montana. See what Bradley is up to at www.bradleymayhew.blogspot.com.



Mark Elliott

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan Back in 1994 Mark Elliott first stumbled into Central Asia with an out-of-date USSR map, a two-day transit visa and the crazy plan of writing a backpacker's guidebook. That guide grew to cover most of the continent, and left Mark with an abiding fascination for the Kyrgyz *jailoos* and a growing tolerance to vodka. He's since driven, hitched, ridden and hiked across most of the region but still feels that the mountain republics, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, are the area's true gems.



Tom Masters

Uzbekistan Tom has been travelling in Central Asia since his student days in Russia, and his fascination with the region grew even further when working at the BBC Central Asian & Caucasus Service after finishing his degree. For this edition of Central Asia, Tom researched Uzbekistan and had a fascinating journey from Tashkent to Moynaq and back again, seeing just how much has changed in the decade since he first visited 'the big three' now that international tourism seems to have arrived for

good. Tom lives in Berlin and can be found online at www.tommasters.net.



John Noble

Kazakhstan John, from England, has been visiting and travelling in Kazakhstan since the early post-Soviet years and has witnessed a quantum leap both in the lifestyles of the country's luckier citizens and in facilities and opportunities for travellers – even backpacker hostels now! Top moments of this latest trip: discovering the less-visited western end of Aksu Canyon in Sayram-Ugam National Park and finally getting inside Astana's Khan Shatyr. Wish list: better intercity buses and the reopening of the Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan 'green border'.

Turkmenistan We have chosen not to name the author of our Turkmenistan chapter as revealing their identity would put certain people inside Turkmenistan at risk.

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