



Central Asia



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PLAN YOUR TRIP

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UZBEK WOMAN IN TRADITIONAL DRESS



KALTA MINOR MINARET, P264, KHIVA, UZBEKISTAN

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Itineraries



Silk Road Cities

This loop route through Uzbekistan takes in almost all of Central Asia's greatest historical and architectural sites. Fly into **Tashkent** 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**, which is comfortably seen in a day. Then take a taxi for a day trip to the crumbling **Elliq-Qala** desert cities of neighbouring Karakalpakstan.

From Khiva see if the new express train is running to **Bukhara** (if not, take a shared taxi from Urgench). Bukhara deserves the most time of all the Silk Road cities so try to spend at least two full days to take in the sights, shop the bazaars and explore the backstreets.

If you want to get off the beaten track make a detour to **Nurata** and then overnight at either a yurt camp at Lake Aidarkul or a mountain village homestay at **Sentyab**.

From here take the golden (actually tarmac) road to **Samarkand** 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**, the birthplace of Timur (Tamerlane).



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

From Tashkent take the new morning train to **Kokand** in the Fergana Valley to see the khan's palace, then continue to **Margilon** to shop for silks. From here head to **Andijon** to catch the twice-weekly Jahon Bazaar and then cross the border to the bustling bazaar town of **Osh**, before swinging north along the mountain road to relaxed **Bishkek**. From Bishkek cross the border into Kazakhstan to cosmopolitan **Almaty**, 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**, visiting the summer pastures around **Kochkor** and Son-Köl and the photogenic caravanserai at **Tash Rabat**, 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 **Osh** by shared taxi into the high and scenic Alay Valley, before finally crossing the remote **Irkeshtam Pass** to Kashgar.



Kazakhstan – South to North

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

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

Back in **Shymkent** stock up on supplies before heading out for some rural hiking, horse riding and tulip-spotting at **Aksu-Zhabagly Nature Reserve** or **Sayram-Ugam National Park**, 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 cultural and club scene. Walk off the next day's hangover on a hike to **Bolshoe Almatinskoe Lake**, set in the lovely spurs of the Tian Shan. From Almaty take the high-speed overnight train to the gritty coal city of **Karaganda**. Touch Soviet-era rocket parts at the excellent Ecological Museum and then take a sobering day trip to the former gulags at Dolinka and Spassk.

Just a few hours away across the steppe is the modern capital of **Astana**. After ogling 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** and then a long drive to **Rakhmanovskiy Klyuchi** 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 required permits.



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**. The border crossing between Samarkand and Penjikent remains frustratingly closed, so either fly from Dushanbe, or cross into Tajikistan from Uzbekistan at Oybek/Bekabad, transit through **Khojand** and continue through **Istaravshan** 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**.

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

You can drive from Khorog to Murgab in a day, but there are lots of interesting detours here, so take a full day to take in the beautiful **Wakhan Valley** and its storybook Yamchun and Abrashim forts. With hired transport, you can cut from **Langar** to the Pamir Hwy and continue to Murgab.

There are loads of side trips to be made from **Murgab**, so try to spend a few days here and visit a local yurt camp in the surrounding high pastures. Heading north, **Kara Kul** is a scenic highlight and worth at least a lunch stop or picnic. Once over the border in Kyrgyzstan at Sary-Tash, it's worth detouring 40km to **Sary-Mogol** for its fine views of towering Peak Lenin. For the absolute best views, overnight at the stunning **Tulpar Kól** yurtstay at the base of the peak. There are some fine day hikes from the yurt camp.

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



3
WEEKS

Over the Torugart – Lakes, Herders and 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**, with visits to Panfilov Park and the Central State Museum and a soak in the Arasan Baths. It's an easy four-hour drive to Kyrgyzstan's capital **Bishkek**, 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** and on to the Kyrgyz border through the immense, silent Karkara Valley to Karakol.

Spend a couple of days trekking or instead visit the alpine valleys around **Karakol**. The idyllic valley of **Altyn-Arashan** 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 and visit an eagle-hunter en route to Kochkor. If you are low on time head straight to Kochkor from Bishkek.

In small and sleepy **Kochkor** 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 yurtstays by horse, although most can be visited in an overnight trip. The most popular trip is to the herders' camps around peaceful **Lake Son-Köl**, 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** and then the Silk Road caravanserai of **Tash Rabat**, 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** and into China to wonderful Kashgar for its epic Sunday Market.

Map Legend

Sights

- Beach
- Bird Sanctuary
- Buddhist
- Castle/Palace
- Christian
- Confucian
- Hindu
- Islamic
- Jain
- Jewish
- Monument
- Museum/Gallery/Historic Building
- Ruin
- Sento Hot Baths/Onsen
- Shinto
- Sikh
- Taoist
- Winery/Vineyard
- Zoo/Wildlife Sanctuary
- Other Sight

Activities, Courses & Tours

- Body surfing
- Diving/Snorkelling
- Canoeing/Kayaking
- Course/Tour
- Skiing
- Snorkelling
- Surfing
- Swimming/Pool
- Walking
- Windsurfing
- Other Activity

Sleeping

- Sleeping
- Camping

Eating

- Eating

Drinking & Nightlife

- Drinking & Nightlife
- Cafe

Entertainment

- Entertainment

Shopping

- Shopping

Information

- Bank
- Embassy/Consulate
- Hospital/Medical
- Internet
- Police
- Post Office
- Telephone
- Toilet
- Tourist Information
- Other Information

Geographic

- Beach
- Hut/Shelter
- Lighthouse
- Lookout
- Mountain/Volcano
- Oasis
- Park
- Pass
- Picnic Area
- Waterfall

Population

- Capital (National)
- Capital (State/Province)
- City/Large Town
- Town/Village

Transport

- Airport
- Border crossing
- Bus
- Cable car/Funicular
- Cycling
- Ferry
- Metro station
- Monorail
- Parking
- Petrol station
- Subway station
- Taxi
- Train station/Railway
- Tram
- Underground station
- Other Transport

Routes

- Tollway
- Freeway
- Primary
- Secondary
- Tertiary
- Lane
- Unsealed road
- Road under construction
- Plaza/Mall
- Steps
- Tunnel
- Pedestrian overpass
- Walking Tour
- Walking Tour detour
- Path/Walking Trail

Boundaries

- International
- State/Province
- Disputed
- Regional/Suburb
- Marine Park
- Cliff
- Wall

Hydrography

- River, Creek
- Intermittent River
- Canal
- Water
- Dry/Salt/Intermittent Lake
- Reef

Areas

- Airport/Runway
- Beach/Desert
- Cemetery (Christian)
- Cemetery (Other)
- Glacier
- Mudflat
- Park/Forest
- Sight (Building)
- Sportsground
- Swamp/Mangrove

Note: Not all symbols displayed above appear on the maps in this book



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 Franklin, London, Melbourne, Oakland, Dublin, Beijing and Delhi, 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



Stephen Lioy

Kyrgyzstan Stephen is a photographer, writer, hiker, and travel blogger based in Central Asia. A 'once in a lifetime' Eurotrip and post-university move to China set the stage for a semi-nomadic lifestyle based on sharing his experiences with would-be travellers and helping provide that initial push out of comfort zones and into all that the planet has to offer. Follow Stephen's travels at www.monkboughtlunch.com or see his photography at www.stephenlioy.com.



Anna Kaminski

Kazakhstan Originally from the Soviet Union, Anna grew up in Cambridge, UK. She graduated from the University of Warwick with a degree in Comparative American Studies and a background in the history, culture and literature of the Americas and the Caribbean. Her restless wanderings led her to settle briefly in Oaxaca and Bangkok and her flirtation with criminal law saw her volunteering as a lawyer's assistant in the courts and prisons of Kingston, Jamaica. Anna has

contributed to almost 30 Lonely Planet titles. When not on the road, Anna calls London home.



Bradley Mayhew

Uzbekistan Bradley has been writing guidebooks for 20 years. He started travelling while studying Chinese at Oxford University, and has since focused his expertise on China, Tibet, the Himalaya and Central Asia. He is the co-writer of Lonely Planet guides *Tibet*, *Nepal*, *Trekking in the Nepal Himalaya*, *Bhutan*, *Central Asia* and many others. Bradley has also fronted two TV series for Arte and SWR, one retracing the route of Marco Polo via Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan,

Central Asia and China, and the other trekking Europe's ten most scenic long-distance trails.



Jenny Walker

Tajikistan Despite having travelled to more than 120 countries from Mexico to Lesotho, Jenny's main interest is in the Middle East where she has been Associate Dean (PD) of Caledonian College of Engineering in Muscat for the past eight years. Her first involvement with the region was as a student, collecting bugs for her father's book on entomology in Saudi Arabia; she went on to write a dissertation on Doughty and Lawrence (Stirling University), an MPhil thesis on the Arabic Orient in British Literature (Oxford University) and she is currently writing a PhD on the Arabian desert as trope in contemporary British literature (Nottingham Trent University).

Turkmenistan The writer of our Turkmenistan chapter has chosen to remain anonymous.

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