Tour Code
CA3

ADVENTURESABROAD

THE FIVE STANS

Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Republic & Kazakhstan

21 days

Created on: 28 Mar, 2024

Day 1 Arrival in Tashkent

Today we arrive in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan (hotel check-in from 2 pm).

Overnight in Tashkent.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Tashkent: City Tour

Today we tour Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan, the third largest of the former Soviet Republics.
Uzbekistan is prospering under independence and this shows in the modern capitol building at the centre of town.

We visit the Old City, which has mosques and madrassas (Islamic schools) housing craft workshops and dating from the 14th century. Chorsu Bazaar, a huge open market beside Kukeldash, draws crowds of people from the countryside, many in traditional dress. We also include Kafelsashi Mausoleum, Barak Khana Medressah, Tila Shaikh Mosque and archives.

Later we have an orientation drive by Independence Square and Amir Timur's Square. We will also make a stop for a visit of the Applied Arts Museum.

Overnight in Tashkent.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Tashkent - Fly to Nukus - Ayaz Kala - Toprak Kala - Khiva

This morning we fly to Nukus (approx 2 hours), the capital of the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan (arguably the "Sixth Stan" of our tour to Central Asia) to visit the famous Savietsky Museum with its avant-garde art collection. Karakalpakstan is considered to be autonomous due to their ethnic and cultural similarities with neighbouring Kazakhstan. The Soviets once included Karakalpakstan within the boundaries of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic but transferred it to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936 as part of Stalin's divide and rule strategy in Central Asia.

Our destination within Karakalpakstan is the region known for the Ellik-Qala, or Fifty Fortresses. These ruins date as far back as 2,000+ years ago and they represent the varied settlements of the famed Khorezm empire. We will visit two of the well-known Qalas (fortresses) on our journey. We begin with Toprak Qala (4th-5th century A.D.), now left as a series of mud walls and excavated rooms that entails a short hike up to the top of the complex for great views of the surrounding area. Nearby is Ayaz Qala, commanding a great view over the arid plains surrounding this promontory.

We continue our road journey to Khiva, once the most remote of the Silk Road's oasis cities. Upon arrival in the late afternoon we check into our hotel.

Overnight in Khiva.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Khiva: City Tour

Legend has it that Khiva was founded when Shem, son of Noah, discovered a well here. The town certainly existed by the 8th century, as a

minor fort and trading post on a Silk Road branch to the Caspian Sea and the Volga. In the early 16th century, Khiva was made capital of the Timurid Empire, becoming a busy slave market and pivot of the khanate for the next three centuries. Khiva is an ancient walled city and looks much like it did in centuries past; it is one of the few sites in Central Asia where one can easily imagine life during the time of the emirates.

We will spend the morning wandering its maze of ruins and great mosques. Our tour includes Ichan Kala (walled city), Kalta Minor Minaret, Kunya Ark (inner citadel), and Madrassa Rakhimkhon. Later we walk to see Mausoleum of Pakhlavan Makhmud, Islam Khodja Minaret and Museum, the medieval Friday Mosque, and Tashauli Palace and Harem.

Your afternoon is free to further explore the walled city.

Tomorrow's journey to Turkmenistan: Your Tour Leader can arrange to have our big bags shipped ahead to Bukhara for us, which can make the border crossing into Turkmenistan crossing easier as it involves a "no man's land" of a considerable distance between border posts, over which you much carry/wheel your luggage (there is no one available/allow to help). This is not mandatory, but if you choose to go this route, please bring a collapsible bag (ie duffle) that you can fill with things you will need until we arrive in Bukhara.

Overnight in Khiva.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Khiva, Uzbekistan - Darvaza Gas Crater, Turkmenistan

Today we travel by road to the Turkmenistan border, arriving about mid-morning.* We complete immigration and customs formalities and then proceed to the nearby Turkmen city of Dashauz (Dashoguz), where we will have the opportunity to have some lunch.

We then embark on our drive (4WD vehicles) to the Darvaza gas crater, known locally as the "Door to Hell" or ''Gates of Hell". This is a natural gas field collapsed into an underground cavern located in Derweze (Darvaza). Legend has it that Soviet archaeologists intentionally set it on fire to prevent the spread of methane gas, and it is thought to have been burning continuously since 1971. We'll travel to/from the crater in 4WD vehicles; on arrival we'll have our initial view of the crater. We'll then enjoy a BBQ dinner at the nearby yurt camp, after which we'll view the crater again.

Tonight we will overnight in the yurt camp situated very close to the gas crater. The yurts are basic but comfortable. Toilets and showers are located approximately 25-70 metres from the yurts.

* This border crossing involves crossing a "no-man's land" of about 1km. This is made easier by the availability of vans to ferry group members across (it may take several trips).

Overnight at Darvaza Gas Crater yurt camp.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Darvaza - Ashgabat: Afternoon City Tour

We depart early this morning for our drive by 4WD toward Ashgabat (Ashkhabad), meeting our coach halfway between the crater and the capital to continue the drive (total drive time of 4+ hours).

Ashgabat is located in a spectacular natural setting, between the Kara-Kum Desert and the Kopet-Dag mountain range. A settlement on the site of the city was successively occupied by the Parthians, Seljuk Turks, and the Mongols. Under Russian control, it became the administrative capital of the Trans-Caspian oblast, and was the centre of trade between the Russian empire and Persia; the Trans-Caspian railway reached here in 1885. The transliteration of the town's name was changed in 1992 to more accurately reflect the Turkmen original.

After a break for lunch we have an afternoon tour of Ashgabat, including a guided tour of the incredible collection at the Carpet Museum, a visit to the National Museum, and an orientation tour of the capital's incredible architecture. We will also have the opportunity to see the famous Akhal-Teke horses of Turkmenistan, a source of immense pride for the Turkmen people.

Overnight in Ashgabat.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Ashgabat: Morning City Tour - Fly to Merv (Mary)

After breakfast, we continue our touring of the capital. We begin by driving out to the ancient Parthian capital of Nissa, a short drive away from the city. We then continue to the massive Spiritual Mosque of Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan's first president. We will then continue to the city centre to explore the Russian Bazaar.

Later this afternoon we fly to the city of Mary, located nearby the famous Silk Road city of Merv. Several cities have existed on this site, which is significant for the interchange of culture and politics at a site of major strategic value. It is claimed that Merv was briefly the largest city in the world in the 12th century. The site of ancient Merv has been listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

Upon arrival at the airport, we will transfer to our hotel in Mary.

Overnight in Merv.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Merv, Turkmenistan - Bukhara, Uzbekistan

After an early breakfast, we will depart for our drive to the vast site of ancient Merv, visiting the ancient Hellenistic fortress of Gaiyur Kala, and the sites of Erk Kala and Sultan Kala. We shall also see the impressive mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar, one of the most powerful Khorezmian rulers.

After our visit and a chance for lunch we travel by road across the Karakum Desert ("Black Desert") toward the city of Turkmenabat. We will cross the border in the late afternoon and back into Uzbekistan to drive to Bukhara,* former capital of the once powerful Emirate of Bukhara.

En route we stop at the Chor Bakr Necropolis**. With buildings spanning 1,000 years of history and a thoroughly lived-in city centre that hasn't changed much in two centuries, Bukhara is one of the best places in Central Asia to catch a glimpse of pre-Russian Turkestan. Most of the city centre is an architectural preserve and includes a massive royal fortress, plenty of former madrassas, a number of ancient public baths and the remnants of a once-vast market complex.

* This border crossing also involves a "no-man's land" over which we should be able to utilize vans to bridge the distance. You will still need to be independent with your luggage between buildings.

** If our border crossing delays us longer than expected, we will take the opportunity to visit Chor Bakr later in our time in the Bukhara area.

Overnight in Bukhara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Bukhara: City Tour

We spend today exploring the old quarter of Bukhara on foot.

The region around Bukhara has been inhabited for at least five millennia and the city itself has existed for half that time. Located on the Silk Road, the city has long been a center of trade, scholarship, culture, and religion. The historic center of Bukhara has been listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

The highlights of today tour include Labi-hauz, a 17th century plaza built around a pool; three domed bazaars; the 12th century Kalan Minaret, once the tallest building in Asia; and the Mausoleum of Ismail Samani, the town's oldest structure (completed around AD 905) and surely one of the most elegant in Central Asia.

Overnight in Bukhara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Bukhara - Train to Samarkand

This morning we depart Bukhara and travel via Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa, the summer residence of the last Emir of Bukhara. The first structures in this picturesque area were built in the mid-19th century during the rule of Emir Nasrullakhan. In the 1880s, his successor Muzaffarkhan built a palace for his beloved wife Sitora-bonu. The most skillful Bukhara craftsmen were sent to Russia to learn the best practices of country residence construction. Soon after that they constructed a sumptuous set of rooms, including throne room, which had a peculiar mixture of European and Asian architectural styles.

We return to old town in Bukhara (our bus leaves to Samarkand with our luggage) and take the afternoon bullet train from Kagan train station (40 minutes' drive from Bukhara) to Samarkand (2 hours 15 minutes). Upon arrival in Samarkand we will be met by our tour bus and transferred to our hotel.

Overnight in Samarkand.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Samarkand: City Tour

Samarkand, sometimes called the 'Rome of the Orient', was already flourishing when Rome and Babylon were founded. During the course of our full day tour we visit the Bibi Khanum Mosque, Mausoleum of Tamerlane, Observatory of Ulugbek, and the site where Uleg Bek, grandson of Tamerlane, made some of the greatest achievements of the pre-telescope era of astronomy in the 15th century. We also visit the regal mausoleums of Shah-i Zinda, site of Central Asia's most sacred Islamic shrine, and the museum on the site of the ancient Afrosiab archaeological site. The ancient core of Samarkand is located on the Afrasiab hill, named after the legendary Turanian king. The settlement arose in the 8th-early 7th centuries BC and occupied more than 200 hectares; river bluffs on the north and east and deep ravines in the south and west protected it. During the Achaemenids period, the city was encircled with a massive wall having an internal corridor and towers. Scholars identify Afrasiab with ancient Sogdian capital Marakanda, destroyed in the 4th century BC by Alexander the Great.

Overnight in Samarkand.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Samarkand: Registan Square

We keep our sightseeing program to a relaxing visit to the Registan Square this morning. The impressive Registan ("Sandy Place" in the Tajik language) has been compared favourably to the Wonders of the World. Here three Madrassahs stand solemnly: the Ulug Bek Madrassah (built 1417-1420) to the west, the Tilya-Kori Madrassah (built 1646-1660), and the Sher-Dor Madrassah (built 1619-1636). Our sightseeing will take us through a careful exploration of the Madrassahs, now filled with various arts and crafts demonstrations, old photos of the monuments taken before the reconstruction by the Soviets and many varied handicrafts for sale.

After our formal sightseeing visit, you are free for the rest of the day to further explore the Registan and other lane ways and alleys of Samarkand, the second largest city in Uzbekistan.

Overnight in Samarkand.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Samarkand, Uzbekistan - Penjikent, Tajikistan

We depart Samarkand by coach and transfer to the Uzbek-Tajik Jarteppa border connecting Samarkand with Penjikent,* Tajikistan's third largest city. After undergoing border formalities, we say goodbye to Uzbekistan and meet our small vehicles on the Tajik side to take us to the city, a scenic journey that takes in some of the foothills of the Fann Mountains. Upon arrival in Penjikent, we will visit the Ancient Panjikent Town ruins – a walled inter-city, Sarazm Settlement, Rudaki Museum of History and Regional Study, Olim Dodkho Mosque and Medressah.

* This is the longest distance (approx 700m) that you will be expected to transport your luggage between border points, though it is a flat surface and we will have plenty of time to stop and rest along the way. Presently there are usually no vans available.

Overnight in Penjikent.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Penjikent - Iskanderkul - Dushanbe

After breakfast we drive to Dushanbe via Iskanderkul Lake where we will have some free time to enjoy photos and some easy walking by the lake. Afterwards we continue our panoramic drive through the dramatic mountains of Tajikistan towards Dushanbe, briefly reaching a peak of 2500m/8,200 ft (the highest point on our tour) before descending to Dushanbe (706m).

With a rural hinterland of grassy pastures and snow-capped mountains visible from downtown, Dushanbe is a delightful city built around parks, lakes and fountains. With the frenetic building project of the past decade mostly complete, there is a palpable air of satisfaction about the city centre. Its grand plane tree boulevard, Rudaki, threads past pastel-hued remnants of the Soviet era and just as proudly past the modern icons of statehood.

Overnight in Dushanbe.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Dushanbe: City Tour

Today we include a tour of the Museum of Antiquities in Dushanbe. The huge reclining Buddha, the burial place of the Sarazm princess, Tajikistan antiques and ancient wall paintings from Penjikent can all be found here. Dushanbe means "Monday" in Tajik, and the name reflects the fact that the city grew on the site of a village that originally was a popular Monday marketplace. Our tour will also include a visit to the privately funded Navruz Palace, a magnificent cultural centre recently completed by skilled local artisans. We will also tour the city's beautiful Botanical Gardens, and we will take a walk through the Bag-i-Rudaki (Rudaki Gardens), featuring the towering statue to Tajik hero, Ismail Somoni.

Overnight in Dushanbe.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Dushanbe, Tajikistan - Fly to Almaty, Kazakhstan

Today we fly to Almaty. Depending on our flight time, we may accomplish some Almaty sightseeing shortly after arrival. we will aim to visit Zhenkov's Cathedral, built in 1904, and an extraordinary example of a Russian Orthodox church built in wood. We will also take the opportunity to visit Panfilov Park in which the Cathedral is located, enjoying the afternoon family atmosphere. Furthermore, we will have a chance to visit the recently reopened Museum of Musical Instruments, also located in the park.

Overnight in Almaty.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Almaty: City Tour

Today we have a full-day tour of Almaty.

Compared to other cities in Central Asia, Almaty is quite young. It was founded in 1854 by Russians in the valley of Almaty and was just a fort at first. Its name was Zailisky, then it was named Verny. In 1921 it became Alma-Ata ("Father of Apples") and in 1929 it became the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1993 the name was changed to Almaty.

We will begin our tour of the Almaty area with a visit to the high-altitude speed-skating complex of Medeo and the Medeo Dam. We will also visit Kok-Tobe, a large promontory featuring stunning views over the city and the nearby Zailiyskiy Alatau mountain range.

Back in Almaty we'll visit the Central State Museum with its excellent displays of Scythian art and some rock drawings depicting the ancient Nestorian pilgrim movement on the Great Silk Routes. A hall dedicated to the nomadic tribes of Kazakhstan is the highlight of the ethnic section of the museum.

We may also take the opportunity to have a short visit of a couple of the Almaty metro stations (completed quite recently in 2011). The metro currently features two lines, with several stations adorned with unique and artistic designs, reflecting local culture and history.

Overnight in Almaty.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Almaty, Kazakhstan - Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic

Today we travel by road across the border* to Bishkek in the Kyrgyz Republic and embark on a city tour on arrival.

Originally, Bishkek was called Pishpek. In 1926 Pishpek became the capital of the Kyrghiz Autonomous Republic. In 1936, as the capital of the Kyrghiz Soviet Socialist Republic, Pishpek was renamed Frunze in honour of a major political organizer of the Civil War who was born in Pishpek to a Moldavian family. Today Bishkek is a modern city with vast squares, crowded bazaars, impressive administrative centers, and educational institutions.

Our tour includes Oak Park, Central Square, Statue of Manas, and Victory Square. We will also visit the National Historical Museum. At the northern end of Bishkek's central square, this enormous example of socialist realist architecture was once the Lenin Museum, entirely devoted to the man himself. After independence, two of its three floors were cleared to make way for exhibits that reflected Kyrgyzstan's new status as an independent state. Luckily for visitors one floor has been preserved, along with a huge centrepiece statue of Lenin leading the revolutionary masses.

* This is an easy crossing with a short distance across a bridge.

Overnight in Bishkek.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 19 Bishkek - Lake Issyk-Kul

Today's scenic drive takes us along the shores of scenic Lake Issyk-Kul (1607m/5,272 ft), the tenth largest lake in the world by volume and the second largest saline lake after the Caspian Sea. Although it is surrounded by snow-capped peaks, it never freezes; hence its name, which means "warm lake" in the Kyrgyz language.

In and around the town of Cholpon-Ata, on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul, we will have the opportunity to view the Petroglyphs located above the town. Most of these etchings are from the time of the Saka-Usun peoples who lived in the area before the arrival of the Kyrgyz. These carvings are between 1,900 and 2,800 years old. Many of the carvings depict animals such as wolves and deer, and include the hunters that pursued them. We will also visit a small regional museum that feature many artifacts from the region and ethnological displays.

Overnight at Lake Issyk-Kul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 Lake Issyk-Kul - Bishkek

We depart for our drive back to Bishkek along the same road that we took to get to the lake. On the way back to Bishkek, we will stop and visit the Burana Tower, located at the mouth of the Shamsy Valley. An eleventh century monument, restored by the Soviets in the 1950's, you may choose to climb the minaret to get a view over the old city walls of Balasagun, a fortification built by the Sogdians.

Nearby Burana Tower, we will have an opportunity to witness a demonstration of some of the nomadic games carried out on horseback. Young men from the village will perform examples of "horse wrestling" (where two riders compete with one another to try and wrestle each other off of the horse); snatching up bags from the ground while the horses gallop at top speed; and a game of "Kok-Boru" or horse polo. However, in this version, instead of a ball they take a headless, limbless goat and use that as the object to score into the opposing team's goal. The effort to wrestle and carry this off demands great strength and skill as the two teams face off against one another. The winners get to keep the goat which will be used for the evening meal in their village.

This evening back in Bishkek we'll enjoy our last Central Asian dinner.

Overnight in Bishkek.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 21 Departure

Departure from Bishkek.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast