Tour Code
CA5

ADVENTURESABROAD

THE FIVE STANS & THE CAUCASUS

Ancient Crossroads from the Silk Road to the Caucasus

35 days

Created on: 8 Nov, 2026

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

Day 2 Tashkent: Old City, Centre for Islamic Civilization & Chorsu Bazaar

Today we explore Uzbekistan's bustling capital. Tashkent has witnessed remarkable progress and prosperity since independence, evident in modern architecture alongside centuries-old landmarks.

Our exploration begins in the Old City, a captivating district steeped in history and culture. We wander through narrow streets lined with ancient mosques and madrassas, Islamic schools that once served as centres of learning and religious instruction. These architectural gems, dating back to the 14th century, are adorned with intricate carvings and ornate details. We visit the Kafelsashi Mausoleum, the Barak Khana Medressah, and the Tila Shaikh Mosque, all clustered within the historic Hazrati Imam complex.

Adjacent to the complex, we visit the Centre for Islamic Civilization, Uzbekistan's most ambitious cultural project. Opened in 2026 beneath a striking 65-metre blue dome, this vast facility combines museum galleries, a research library of 200,000 volumes, and restoration laboratories. The galleries trace Central Asian history from pre-Islamic civilizations through the Islamic Golden Age and Timurid Renaissance to modern Uzbekistan, with interactive installations bringing to life the contributions of scholars like al-Farabi and al-Biruni. The centrepiece is the 7th-century Mushaf of Uthman, one of the world's oldest Qur'anic manuscripts and a UNESCO Memory of the World treasure, formerly held in the nearby Hast Imam library.

We continue to the Chorsu Bazaar, a sprawling open market that draws crowds from the surrounding countryside. The vibrant atmosphere is filled with the sights, sounds, and aromas of traditional Uzbek life. Vendors in colourful attire display a wide array of goods, from fresh produce and spices to handcrafted textiles and souvenirs.

Overnight in Tashkent.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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

This is a full-day of travel and sightseeing.

This morning we fly to Nukus (approx 2 hours, not including transfers, check-in/security, baggage claim), the capital of the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan (arguably the "Sixth Stan" of our tour).

Here we 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 paints a vivid picture of Khiva's origins, tracing its foundation to Shem, the son of Noah, who discovered a well in this fertile land. While the exact date of its establishment remains shrouded in mystery, historical records confirm Khiva's existence as a minor fort and trading post along a branch of the Silk Road by the 8th century. In the early 16th century, Khiva ascended to prominence as the capital of the Timurid Empire. During this era, the city flourished as a bustling slave market and a pivotal point within the khanate for the following three centuries.

Stepping into Khiva is like stepping back in time. The ancient walled city, Ichan Kala, has remarkably preserved its historic charm, offering a glimpse into life during the emirates. As we wander through its labyrinthine streets, we encounter a captivating blend of architectural wonders and archaeological treasures.

Our exploration begins with the iconic Kalta Minor Minaret, a towering structure that stands as a testament to Khiva's architectural prowess. We then delve into the heart of the city, visiting the Kunya Ark, the inner citadel that once served as the residence of the khan. The Madrassa Rakhimkhon, a grand Islamic school, offers a glimpse into the city's educational heritage.

In the afternoon, we venture beyond the walled city to discover more of Khiva's treasures. The Mausoleum of Pakhlavan Makhmud, a revered Sufi saint, is a place of pilgrimage and a symbol of the city's spiritual significance. The Islam Khodja Minaret and Museum showcase the city's rich history and cultural heritage. We also explore the medieval Friday Mosque, a magnificent structure that has witnessed centuries of worship. Finally, we visit the Tashauli Palace and Harem, offering a glimpse into the lives of the rulers and their families.

With the afternoon at our leisure, we have the opportunity to further immerse ourselves in Khiva's enchanting atmosphere. Whether it's exploring hidden corners of the walled city, savoring local cuisine, or simply soaking up the serene ambiance, our time in Khiva is an unforgettable journey through the heart of Central Asia.

Tomorrow's journey to Turkmenistan: Your Tour Leader will arrange to have our big bags shipped (included in tour price) ahead to Bukhara for us, which will 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 would have to carry/wheel your luggage (there is no one available/allow to help). Please bring a collapsible bag (ie duffle) for your overnight items and clothing for the 3 days in Turkmenistan. You will need to carry this a good distance yourself across the border multiple times.

Overnight in Khiva.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Khiva, Uzbekistan - Dashauz, Turkmenistan - Fly to Ashgabat

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 and visit the local bazaar, brimming with fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, and much, much more. Great photo opportunities abound here!

Later in the afternoon we will transfer to the airport and fly from Dashauz (Dashoguz) to Ashgabat (Ashkhabad), +/- 50 minutes.

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.

* 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). This can be a long day with the border crossing acting as a bit of a "wild card."

Overnight in Ashgabat.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Ashgabat: City Tour

Today, we embark on a comprehensive journey through the heart of Ashgabat, immersing ourselves in the city's rich history, culture, and architectural marvels.

Our day begins with a visit to the vibrant Russian Bazaar, a bustling marketplace where we can experience the lively atmosphere and discover a diverse range of goods, from local handicrafts to fresh produce. As we wander through the colourful stalls, we'll have the opportunity to interact with friendly vendors and perhaps even bargain for a unique souvenir.

Next, we'll delve into the world of Turkmen textile artistry at the Carpet Museum. A guided tour will reveal the incredible craftsmanship and intricate designs of traditional Turkmen carpets. From the bold geometric patterns to the delicate floral motifs, these carpets are a testament to the country's rich cultural heritage.

Our exploration continues with a visit to the Spiritual Mosque of Turkmenbashi, a grand Islamic complex dedicated to the memory of the country's first president. The mosque's impressive architecture, combined with its serene atmosphere, offers a peaceful respite from the bustling city.

To gain a deeper understanding of Ashgabat's architectural beauty, we'll embark on an orientation tour of the capital. We'll admire the city's wide boulevards, modern skyscrapers, and historic landmarks. From the towering Independence Monument to the elegant government buildings, Ashgabat's architecture showcases a harmonious blend of traditional and contemporary styles.

Venturing beyond the city limits, we'll take a short drive to the ancient Parthian capital of Nissa. This UNESCO World Heritage site offers a glimpse into the region's rich history, with well-preserved ruins of palaces, temples, and fortifications. Exploring Nissa provides a fascinating opportunity to connect with the past and learn about the ancient civilizations that once thrived in Turkmenistan.

Our day wouldn't be complete without witnessing the majestic Akhal-Teke horses, a breed that has long been a source of pride for the Turkmen people. We'll have the chance to admire these elegant and spirited horses, known for their unique golden coat and graceful movements. Interacting with these magnificent creatures will be a truly unforgettable experience.

Overnight in Ashgabat.

Day 7 Ashgabat - Merv (Mary)

This is a full-day of travel and sightseeing.

Today we embark on a full-day journey to the city of Mary, a historic gateway to the famed Silk Road city of Merv. Situated in a strategically significant location, Merv has witnessed the rise and fall of numerous civilizations, serving as a vital hub for cultural exchange and political power. It is claimed that in the 12th century, Merv briefly held the title of the world's largest city, a testament to its historical importance.

Upon arriving in Mary, we take a well-deserved break for lunch before delving into the rich history of the region. Our first stop is the fascinating museum,* which houses a treasure trove of archaeological finds unearthed from the ancient city of Merv. These artifacts offer a tangible connection to the past, providing insights into the lives, customs, and beliefs of the people who once inhabited this vibrant metropolis.

Afterward, we venture to the vast expanse of ancient Merv, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Our exploration begins at the Hellenistic fortress of Gaiyur Kala, a testament to the city's early history and its connections to the Greek Empire. We then continue to the sites of Erk Kala and Sultan Kala, remnants of the city's later periods.

As we wander through these ancient ruins, we are transported back in time, imagining the bustling streets, bustling markets, and towering structures that once dominated this landscape. The sense of history is palpable, and the scale of the ancient city is truly awe-inspiring.

Our journey culminates at the impressive mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar, one of the most powerful Khorezmian rulers. This magnificent monument stands as a testament to the sultan's legacy and the grandeur of his reign. As we explore the mausoleum's intricate architecture and admire the intricate carvings, we gain a deeper appreciation for the rich cultural heritage of the region.

* PLEASE NOTE depending on timing, we may visit the National Museum in Ashgabat instead.

Overnight in Merv.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Merv, Turkmenistan - Bukhara, Uzbekistan

This is a full day of travel and sightseeing; our border crossing can also impact the overall length of our day.

After breakfast, we set off on our road trip through the Karakum Desert, also known as the "Black Desert." This vast expanse of sand dunes stretches across Turkmenistan, offering a dramatic and otherworldly landscape. As we traverse the desert, we witness the stark beauty of its dunes, the shimmering oasis, and the nomadic settlements that dot the landscape.

Our journey takes us to the border crossing, * where we navigate the necessary formalities before entering Uzbekistan. As we cross into the country, we are greeted by a change in scenery, transitioning from the arid desert to the fertile plains of Uzbekistan.

Our destination is the historic city of Bukhara, once the capital of the powerful Emirate of Bukhara. As we approach the city, we are captivated by its ancient architecture and the timeless atmosphere that permeates its streets.

En route, we make a stop at the Chor Bakr Necropolis,** a vast cemetery that spans over a thousand years of history. This sacred site offers a glimpse into the city's past, with its intricate tombstones and mausoleums.

Upon arriving in Bukhara, we immerse ourselves in its enchanting ambiance. The city's well-preserved center, which has remained largely unchanged for two centuries, offers a unique opportunity to experience pre-Russian Turkestan. We explore the massive royal fortress, a symbol of the city's former power, and wander through the labyrinthine streets lined with ancient madrassas, 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

Today, we embark on a leisurely walking tour through the enchanting old quarter of Bukhara. This region has been inhabited for an astonishing five millennia, while the city itself has existed for half that time. As a vital hub along the Silk Road, Bukhara has long served as a center of trade, scholarship, culture, and religion. Recognizing its exceptional historical and architectural significance, UNESCO has designated the historic center of Bukhara as a World Heritage Site.

Our exploration begins at Labi-hauz, a picturesque 17th-century plaza centered around a tranquil pool. This charming oasis offers a respite from the bustling city, inviting us to relax and soak up the serene atmosphere.

From Labi-hauz, we venture into the city's vibrant bazaars, each with its own unique character. The three domed bazaars, renowned for their architectural beauty and bustling atmosphere, offer a feast for the senses. As we wander through the labyrinthine streets, we encounter a colourful array of goods, from handcrafted textiles and spices to exquisite jewelry and souvenirs.

A highlight of our tour is the towering Kalan Minaret, a 12th-century masterpiece that once held the title of the tallest building in Asia. This

iconic landmark stands as a testament to Bukhara's architectural prowess and its historical significance.

Our tour concludes at the Mausoleum of Ismail Samani, a remarkable structure that dates back to around AD 905. This ancient mausoleum, considered one of the most elegant in Central Asia, offers a glimpse into the city's early history and the sophisticated craftsmanship of its builders.

We usually have a block of free time from +/- 13:00.

Overnight in Bukhara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Bukhara - Train to Samarkand

Today, we bid farewell to Bukhara and embark on a journey to Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa, the former summer residence of the last Emir of Bukhara. This picturesque oasis, nestled amidst lush gardens and tranquil ponds, offers a glimpse into the opulent lifestyle of the city's royal family.

The history of Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa dates back to the mid-19th century, during the reign of Emir Nasrullakhan. It was under his rule that the first structures in this idyllic location were established. However, it was his successor, Muzaffarkhan, who truly transformed Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa into a magnificent summer palace.

Driven by his love for his wife Sitora-bonu, Muzaffarkhan spared no expense in creating a sumptuous retreat. The most skilled craftsmen from Bukhara were sent to Russia to learn the finest techniques of country residence construction. Upon their return, they embarked on a grand project to build a series of opulent rooms, including a breathtaking throne room. The resulting palace is a harmonious blend of European and Asian architectural styles, reflecting the eclectic tastes of its royal occupants.

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 for a nicely-placed 3-night stay,.

Overnight in Samarkand.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Samarkand: City Tour

Today, we embark on a full-day exploration of Samarkand, a city steeped in history and renowned as the "Rome of the Orient." Its origins date back to a time when Rome and Babylon were mere fledglings, underscoring its enduring significance.

Our journey begins at the Bibi Khanum Mosque, a magnificent architectural masterpiece that was commissioned by Tamerlane's wife, Bibi Khanum. This grand structure, with its towering minaret and intricate mosaics, stands as a testament to the city's former glory.

Next, we visit the Mausoleum of Tamerlane, a revered figure in Central Asian history. This imposing structure, adorned with exquisite tilework and adorned with the legendary "Black Stone of Tamerlane," is a place of pilgrimage and a symbol of the city's historical significance.

Our exploration continues at the Observatory of Ulugbek, a remarkable astronomical observatory established by the grandson of Tamerlane. Here, we delve into the fascinating world of pre-telescope astronomy, marveling at Ulugbek's groundbreaking achievements in the 15th century.

We also visit the regal mausoleums of Shah-i Zinda, a sacred Islamic shrine that has attracted pilgrims for centuries. The complex boasts a collection of ornate mausoleums, each with its own unique architectural style and historical significance.

To delve deeper into Samarkand's ancient past, we visit the museum located at the archaeological site of Afrosiab. This ancient settlement, dating back to the 8th-early 7th centuries BC, occupies a vast area protected by natural barriers. During the Achaemenid period, the city was fortified with a massive wall, complete with an internal corridor and towers. Scholars believe that Afrasiab corresponds to the ancient Sogdian capital, Marakanda, which was tragically destroyed by Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC.

Overnight in Samarkand.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Samarkand: Registan Square

Today, we begin our day with a leisurely visit to Registan Square, a captivating oasis of tranquility amidst the bustling city of Samarkand. This iconic square, often likened to the Wonders of the World, is a testament to the city's architectural grandeur.

Three majestic madrassas adorn Registan Square, each a masterpiece of Islamic architecture. To the west stands the Ulug Bek Madrassah, built between 1417 and 1420, a testament to the intellectual pursuits of its namesake. To the east, the Tilya-Kori Madrassah, constructed between 1646 and 1660, dazzles with its intricate golden mosaics and ornate decorations. Between these two architectural marvels lies the Sher-Dor Madrassah, built between 1619 and 1636, renowned for its majestic lions depicted on its facade.

As we explore these magnificent madrassas, we are immersed in a world of artistry and craftsmanship. The once-grand educational institutions now serve as vibrant cultural centers, showcasing a variety of arts and crafts demonstrations. We admire the intricate details of the architecture, marvel at the old photographs that capture the monuments before their Soviet reconstruction, and browse through the diverse collection of handicrafts on display.

After our formal sightseeing, the remainder of the day is yours to explore Samarkand at your own pace. Wander through the labyrinthine streets, discover hidden gems, or simply soak up the enchanting atmosphere of this historic city.

Overnight in Samarkand.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Samarkand, Uzbekistan - Penjikent, Tajikistan

Today, we bid farewell to the vibrant city of Samarkand and embark on a journey across the Uzbek-Tajik border, venturing into the picturesque city of Penjikent. Our journey begins with a coach ride to Jarteppa, the border crossing that connects Samarkand with Penjikent, Tajikistan's third-largest city.

After completing the necessary border formalities, we say goodbye to Uzbekistan and step into the enchanting landscape of Tajikistan. On the Tajik side, we board our small vehicles for a scenic drive that takes us through the foothills of the majestic Fann Mountains. The journey offers breathtaking vistas of rugged peaks, lush valleys, and crystal-clear rivers.

Upon arriving in Penjikent, we delve into the city's rich history and cultural heritage. Our exploration begins at the Ancient Panjikent Town ruins, a well-preserved walled city that offers a glimpse into the region's past. We continue our journey to the Sarazm Settlement, an archaeological site dating back to the Bronze Age, revealing the early history of the region.

To gain a deeper understanding of Penjikent's cultural heritage, we visit the Rudaki Museum of History and Regional Study. This museum showcases a fascinating collection of artifacts, providing insights into the region's past and present. We also explore the Olim Dodkho Mosque and Medressah, two significant religious structures that reflect the city's Islamic heritage.

* 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

This is a full day of travel and sightseeing.

Today's scenic drive takes us to to Dushanbe, passing through the picturesque landscape of Tajikistan. Our journey begins with a leisurely breakfast, followed by a drive to Iskanderkul Lake, a hidden gem nestled amidst the majestic mountains.

Upon reaching Iskanderkul Lake, we have the opportunity to enjoy some free time to explore its shores, capture breathtaking photos, and indulge in a leisurely walk along the lake's tranquil waters. The serene beauty of the lake, surrounded by towering mountains and lush greenery, provides a perfect escape from the hustle and bustle of city life.

After our leisurely time at Iskanderkul Lake, we continue towards Dushanbe, traversing through the dramatic mountain range. The road winds through scenic valleys, offering panoramic views of the rugged peaks and lush landscapes. We reach a peak of 2500 meters (8200 feet), the highest point on our tour, before descending towards the capital city.

As we approach Dushanbe, we are greeted by a city that blends the charm of its rural hinterland with the modernity of its urban center. The city is surrounded by grassy pastures and snow-capped mountains, creating a picturesque backdrop. Dushanbe's urban landscape is characterized by its numerous parks, lakes, and fountains, providing a refreshing and inviting atmosphere.

The city has undergone significant development in recent years, with the frenetic building projects of the past decade nearing completion. This transformation has resulted in a palpable sense of satisfaction and progress in the city center. The grand plane tree boulevard, Rudaki, serves as a central artery, connecting the city's historic landmarks with its modern icons of statehood. As we stroll along Rudaki Boulevard, we witness a harmonious blend of the old and the new, showcasing Dushanbe's rich cultural heritage and its aspirations for the future.

Overnight in Dushanbe.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Dushanbe: City Tour

Today, we delve into the rich cultural heritage of Dushanbe with a visit to the Museum of Antiquities. This fascinating museum houses a vast collection of artifacts that offer a glimpse into Tajikistan's ancient past. Among the highlights are the colossal reclining Buddha, the burial place of the Sarazm princess, a treasure trove of Tajik antiques, and ancient wall paintings from Penjikent.

The city's name, Dushanbe, translates to "Monday" in Tajik, reflecting its origins as a village that served as a popular Monday marketplace. As we explore Dushanbe, we witness the city's transformation from a humble village to a thriving capital.

Our tour also includes a visit to the Navruz Palace, a magnificent cultural center that showcases the talents of skilled local artisans. This privately funded project is a testament to the city's cultural vitality and the passion of its citizens.

We continue with a visit to the city's beautiful Botanical Gardens, a serene oasis that offers a respite from the urban hustle and bustle. Our final stop is the Bag-i-Rudaki, a picturesque park named after the renowned Tajik poet, Ismail Somoni. The park features a towering statue of Somoni, a symbol of Tajik national pride.

Overnight in Dushanbe.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Dushanbe, Tajikistan - Fly to Almaty, Kazakhstan

Today, we fly to Almaty (+/- 2 hours), the vibrant cultural capital of Kazakhstan. Depending on our flight arrival time, we may have the opportunity to explore some of the city's fascinating attractions.

One of the highlights of our visit is Zhenkov's Cathedral, an extraordinary example of Russian Orthodox church architecture built entirely of wood. This magnificent cathedral, constructed in 1904, stands as a testament to the city's rich history and cultural diversity.

Zhenkov's Cathedral is nestled within the picturesque Panfilov Park, a popular destination for families and locals alike. As we stroll through the park, we can soak up the peaceful ambiance, admire the lush greenery, and enjoy the relaxed atmosphere.

Flight time-permitting, we may have the opportunity to visit the Museum of Musical Instruments, showcasing a diverse collection of musical instruments from around the world, offering a glimpse into the rich musical heritage of Kazakhstan and beyond.

This is a fairly easy-going day; however, the flight time can impact the convenience factor.

Overnight in Almaty.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Almaty: City Tour

Today, we have a full-day tour of Almaty, a relatively young city compared to its Central Asian counterparts. Founded in 1854 by Russian settlers, Almaty initially existed as a small fort. Its name has evolved through various stages, from Zailisky to Verny, before finally settling on Alma-Ata ("Father of Apples") in 1929. In 1993, the city's name was changed to Almaty.

Our tour begins with a visit to the renowned Medeo high-altitude speed-skating complex, a world-class facility nestled amidst the scenic mountain landscape. We also explore the nearby Medeo Dam, a vital infrastructure project that plays a crucial role in the region's water supply.

For panoramic views of the city and the surrounding Zailiyskiy Alatau mountain range, we ascend to Kok-Tobe, a large promontory that offers breathtaking vistas. From this vantage point, we can appreciate the city's urban layout, its natural beauty, and the majestic mountains that form its backdrop.

Returning to the city center, we delve into its cultural heritage at the Central State Museum. This museum boasts an impressive collection of Scythian art, showcasing the rich artistic traditions of the region's ancient inhabitants. We also explore the rock drawings that depict the ancient Nestorian pilgrim movement along the Great Silk Routes, offering a glimpse into the city's historical significance.

The museum's ethnic section is a highlight, featuring a dedicated hall that showcases the diverse cultures and traditions of Kazakhstan's nomadic tribes. This section provides valuable insights into the region's rich heritage and the nomadic lifestyle that has shaped its identity.

To experience the city's modern infrastructure, we may take a short detour to explore a couple of Almaty's metro stations, which were completed in 2011. The metro system features two lines, each adorned with unique and artistic designs that reflect the city's culture and history.

Overnight in Almaty.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Almaty, Kazakhstan - Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic

Today, we cross the border* into the Kyrgyz Republic to the vibrant city of Bishkek, the capital of the Kyrgyz Republic. Originally known as Pishpek, the city's name has evolved through the years, reflecting the political changes that have shaped its history.

In 1926, Pishpek became the capital of the Kyrgyz Autonomous Republic. Later, in 1936, it was renamed Frunze in honour of a prominent political organizer of the Civil War who hailed from the city. Today, Bishkek stands as a modern metropolis, characterized by its vast squares, bustling bazaars, impressive administrative centers, and thriving educational institutions.

Our exploration of Bishkek begins with a visit to Oak Park, a serene green space that offers a respite from the city's bustling streets. We continue our journey to Central Square, a vibrant hub of activity where locals gather and tourists explore. The iconic Statue of Manas, a legendary Kyrgyz hero, stands proudly in the center of the square.

We also visit Victory Square, a monument dedicated to the country's war heroes. This poignant site serves as a reminder of Kyrgyzstan's sacrifices during World War II.

T0 dive deeper into the country's history and culture, we visit the National Historical Museum. This impressive building, once the Lenin Museum, has been transformed to reflect Kyrgyzstan's newfound independence. While two of its three floors have been repurposed to showcase the nation's rich heritage, one floor remains dedicated to the memory of Lenin, complete with a towering statue that serves as a

reminder of the Soviet era.

* 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, we enjoy a scenic drive along the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul, a breathtaking natural wonder that ranks as the tenth largest lake in the world by volume. Surrounded by snow-capped peaks, this saline lake defies the elements, remaining unfrozen throughout the year, hence its name, which translates to "warm lake" in Kyrgyz.

As we journey along the lake's picturesque coastline, we reach the town of Cholpon-Ata, a charming destination nestled amidst the natural beauty of the region. Our exploration begins with a visit to the petroglyphs located above the town. These ancient etchings, dating back between 1,900 and 2,800 years, offer a glimpse into the lives of the Saka-Usun peoples who inhabited this area before the arrival of the Kyrgyz.

The petroglyphs depict a variety of scenes, including animals such as wolves and deer, and the hunters who pursued them. These intricate carvings provide a tangible connection to the region's distant past, offering insights into the cultural practices, beliefs, and daily life of its ancient inhabitants.

To delve deeper into the region's history and culture, we visit a small regional museum that showcases a fascinating collection of artifacts and ethnological displays. The museum offers a glimpse into the diverse heritage of the area, highlighting the unique traditions, customs, and artistic expressions of its people.

This full-day excursion, filled with scenic drives and cultural exploration, provides a leisurely and enriching experience. As we journey around Lake Issyk-Kul and explore its ancient treasures, we gain a deeper appreciation for the natural beauty and cultural richness of this remarkable region.

Overnight at Lake Issyk-Kul.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 Lake Issyk-Kul - Bishkek

Today's journey takes us back to Bishkek, retracing the scenic route we took to Lake Issyk-Kul. Along the way, we make a stop at the Burana Tower, a historic monument located at the mouth of the Shamsy Valley.

Dating back to the 11th century, Burana Tower stands as a testament to the region's rich history. Restored by the Soviets in the 1950s, this iconic structure offers visitors the opportunity to climb its minaret for panoramic views of the ancient city walls of Balasagun, a fortification built by the Sogdians.

As we explore the surrounding area, we witness a fascinating demonstration of nomadic games, performed by skilled horsemen from the nearby village. These traditional games showcase the equestrian skills and athletic prowess of the local people. One of the highlights is "horse wrestling," where two riders compete to unseat each other from their horses. The intensity and agility of the riders are truly impressive. Another captivating game is "snatching up bags," where riders gallop at full speed, attempting to grab bags from the ground. The skill and precision required for this feat are remarkable.

Finally, we witness the exhilarating game of "Kok-Boru," a unique form of horse polo. In this game, players use a headless, limbless goat as the object of competition, aiming to score it into the opposing team's goal. The physical strength and coordination needed to wrestle and carry the goat are extraordinary.

The winners of these traditional games are rewarded with the goat, which will be used for the evening meal in their village. This practice reflects the cultural significance of these games and their role in the community's traditions and celebrations.

This is a full day but a relatively short distance broken up with several stops of interest. This evening back in Bishkek we'll enjoy our last Central Asian dinner.

Overnight in Bishkek.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 21 Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic - Baku, Azerbaijan

Today we fly to Baku and transfer to our hotel - Welcome to Azerbaijan!*

This evening we will be meeting any participants who are arriving on their tour of the Caucasus (tour AZ1).

* Due to the low-volume nature of this route, we will likely have a connection (ie in Turkiye), possibly making this a full day of travel.

Overnight in Baku.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 22 Baku: City Tour

Within the fortress walls of Iceri Sehir, we step into a living museum where 12th-century stones tell stories of Silk Road traders and Shirvan shahs. The Maiden's Tower rises before us like a stone sentinel, its ancient fire beacon once guiding caravans across desert routes that connected distant empires. Local legend claims a princess leaped from its heights rather than marry against her will—a tale that echoes through narrow alleyways where craftsmen still work silver and silk.

The Palace of the Shirvanshahs unfolds its 15th-century elegance, revealing ornate courtyards where Persian poetry once filled evening air. Each carved stone arch and geometric pattern speaks of Islamic architectural mastery, while underground chambers whisper secrets of royal intrigue and diplomatic negotiations that shaped regional power.

Later, we encounter Baku's bold architectural future at the Heydar Aliyev Cultural Center, where flowing white curves seem to defy gravity itself. This Zaha Hadid masterpiece embodies Azerbaijan's confident leap into the 21st century, hosting world-class exhibitions that celebrate both local heritage and global artistic innovation.

Overnight in Baku.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 23 Baku: Gobustan National Park

Our morning excursion carries us south toward ancient mysteries carved in stone. At Gobustan National Park, we discover humanity's longest-running art gallery—40,000 years of petroglyphs scattered across wind-carved boulders rising from Azerbaijan's semi-desert. These rock engravings reveal Stone Age hunters pursuing wild horses, Bronze Age warriors wielding spears, and ritual dancers celebrating harvests under prehistoric skies.

The UNESCO-protected landscape stretches endlessly, punctuated by bubbling mud volcanoes that gurgle and pop like natural cauldrons. These geological wonders, created by underground gas pressure, emerge from earth in miniature volcanic formations that seem almost alien against the barren plateau.

Returning to Baku, we pause at Martyrs' Cemetery, where fallen heroes rest on hillsides overlooking the Caspian Sea. The view encompasses the entire capital—from medieval towers to modern skylines—revealing how geography shaped this strategic port city's destiny. Later, we stroll Seaside Boulevard, the beloved promenade where Bakuvians gather at sunset, creating a Mediterranean atmosphere along Caspian shores that has charmed visitors for generations.

Overnight in Baku.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 24 Baku - Shemakha - Sheki

This is a full day of travel and sightseeing.

Today we embark on a journey through the heartland of Azerbaijan, exploring ancient cities steeped in history and natural beauty. Our first stop is Shemakha, once a thriving capital and trade center. We'll visit the majestic Juma Mosque, a magnificent 19th-century architectural marvel. The Yedi Gumbez, or Seven Tombs, will offer a glimpse into the region's royal past, as we explore the ornate mausoleums of the Khans of Shemakha.

Continuing our journey, we arrive in the picturesque town of Sheki, nestled amidst the forested hills of the Caucasus Mountains. This ancient settlement, dating back over 2,700 years, boasts stunning architecture and a rich cultural heritage. We'll visit the Khan's Palace, a masterpiece of Islamic architecture adorned with intricate mosaics. The History Museum will provide insights into the region's past, while a stroll through the bustling market will offer a taste of local life.

Overnight in Sheki.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 25 Sheki, Azerbaijan - Telavi, Georgia

The Greater Caucasus foothills guide us toward new frontiers as we approach the Azerbaijan-Georgia border at Lagodekhi. Here, customs formalities (which can take a while) remind us we're crossing between nations, yet the landscape speaks a common language of soaring peaks and ancient trade connections. This remote crossing follows routes that once carried Chinese silk and Indian spices toward European markets, a fragment of the legendary Silk Road that linked civilizations.

Georgia welcomes us with towering white poplars and glimpses of snow-capped summits piercing morning haze. In Kakheti Province, we discover architectural monuments that survived centuries of invasion and transformation. Alaverdi Cathedral rises like a stone prayer from the 11th century, its walls echoing with Georgian Orthodox chants that have resonated here for nearly a millennium.

At Gremi Complex, we explore remains of a once-flourishing Renaissance town that controlled regional trade until Persian armies reduced it to romantic ruins. The surviving bell tower and palace walls reveal how Georgian kingdoms balanced between Byzantine Christianity and Persian Islamic culture, creating unique architectural fusion.

Overnight in Telavi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 26 Telavi - Davit Gareja Monastery - Tbilisi

Kakheti's legendary wine country unfolds around us -- rolling vineyards that have produced amber wines for 8,000 years, creating the world's oldest viticulture region. Ancient qvevri clay vessels buried in cellars continue traditional fermentation methods that predate Roman conquests, their amber wines capturing Georgia's soul in every sip.

We venture into semi-desert landscapes to discover Davit Gareja Monastery, a 6th-century marvel carved into cliff faces by Syrian monks seeking spiritual isolation. Founded by Saint David of Gareja, these cave complexes house frescoes from the 8th to 13th centuries -- Byzantine artistry preserved in stone that tells stories of Georgia's golden age when Queen Tamara ruled an empire stretching from Black Sea to Caspian shores.

The area and footing can suffer from very changeable weather conditions. Your Tour Leader can provide further information en route, but kindly be advised that the nature, duration, and content of our visit is the prerogative of your Tour Leader.

As evening approaches, we reach Tbilisi, where sulfur springs first attracted King Vakhtang Gorgasali to establish his capital in this strategic valley between mountain ranges.

Overnight in Tbilisi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 27 Tbilisi: City Tour

Tbilisi awakens around us like a living chronicle of Caucasian civilization, its name derived from "tbili" meaning warm—a reference to the sulfur springs that have drawn visitors since the 4th century. By the 12th century, this crossroads city had become one of the Silk Road's most important stops, where caravans paused to rest and trade between European and Asian markets.

We explore the Old Town's remarkable cultural harmony, where mosque minarets rise beside Orthodox church domes, and synagogues neighbour Armenian apostolic cathedrals. This tolerance reflects Georgia's position as a bridge between civilizations, where Persian, Byzantine, Arab, and Russian influences created unique architectural fusion. The famous sulfur baths of Abanotubani continue traditions that hosted everyone from Pushkin to local kings seeking therapeutic waters.

At Metekhi Church, we stand where Georgia's patron saint Shota Rustaveli might have walked while composing his epic "The Knight in the Panther's Skin." The National Museum reveals Georgia's complex relationship with Soviet occupation, while Rustaveli Avenue showcases 19th-century grandeur that earned Tbilisi the nickname "Paris of the Caucasus."

This afternoon, you can discover hidden courtyards and artisan workshops on your own explorations.

Overnight in Tbilisi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 28 Tbilisi - Mtskheta - Kazbegi (Stepantsminda)

This morning we leave the capital and depart for Mtskheta, an ancient town of extraordinary importance to the Georgian nation, located about 20km out of Tbilisi. It was the capital of the eastern Georgian kingdom of Iberia (not to be confused with the European peninsula) from the 3rd century BC to the 5th century AD. Mtskheta was the site of Georgia's adoption of Christianity in 334 and remains the headquarters of the Georgian Orthodox Church. We visit the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral (11th c.) and Jvari Monastery (6th c.); both are among the finest architectural monuments in Georgia.

We continue along the Georgian Military Highway, a historical road leading north from Tbilisi into Russia. It passes the spectacular Ananuri Fortress (we'll make a stop here), and then climbs the sides of the dramatic Aragvi River Valley, over the Jvari Pass (2395m / 7,857 ft) and down into Kazbegi (officially Stepantsminda; 1700m / 5577 ft). Surrounded by gigantic mountains, Kazbegi is a picturesque settlement overlooked by the biggest of them all -- Mount Kazbek (5047m / 16,558 ft) -- one of the six 5000+ metre peaks of the Caucasus.

Time permitting upon arrival, we'll begin our area sightseeing. The town and rugged surrounds provide some of the most picturesque scenes in Georgia.

Overnight in Kazbegi.

Day 29 Kazbegi Area

Mount Kazbek towers above us, one of the Caucasus's six peaks exceeding 5,000 meters, its glaciated summit piercing clouds that have gathered here since the last ice age. According to Greek mythology, this mountain chained Prometheus after he stole fire from the gods—a fitting legend for peaks that seem to scrape heaven itself.

We journey to Gergeti Trinity Church, perched at 2,170 meters (7,120 feet) like a stone prayer against the mountain's massive flanks. Whether we hike mountain trails or drive winding roads, the 14th-century church rewards us with panoramic views across valleys where avalanches carved their signatures in stone. From this sacred vantage point, the Caucasus reveals its true scale—an endless procession of peaks that separate Europe from Asia.

The village of Kazbegi (officially Stepantsminda) spreads below us, a mountain community where traditions survive in houses built to withstand winter storms that can isolate residents for months. Local shepherds still drive flocks to high pastures each summer, following transhumance patterns their ancestors established centuries ago when these valleys provided refuge from lowland invasions.

Overnight in Kazbegi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 30 Kazbegi - Uplistsikhe - Akhaltsikhe

We descend from the mountains toward Gori, birthplace of Joseph Stalin, history's most controversial Georgian. We make a short stop at the small house where he was born, seen from outside, and consider how this city lives alongside a legacy it still struggles to reconcile with pride and historical trauma. We keep Gori brief so the day belongs to Uplistsikhe.

Eight kilometres away, Uplistsikhe ("the Lord's Citadel") reveals Georgia's pre-Christian past carved directly into living rock. This cave city flourished from the 7th century BC through the 15th century AD, its tunnels and chambers serving as a strategic Silk Road stronghold. We take our time here, exploring the large central hall where pagan rituals once honoured ancient gods, underground wine cellars that stored amber vintages, and a 9th-century church that marked Christianity's triumph over older beliefs, with time to wander the rock-cut streets and take in the views over the river valley.

Evening brings us to Akhaltsikhe, a multicultural crossroads where Georgian, Armenian and Ottoman influences created a unique architectural heritage. For centuries, this city of 50,000 served as an Ottoman administrative centre, its population predominantly Armenian until 20th-century upheavals reshaped demographics. Tonight, we rest in this historically complex city that embodies the Caucasus's intricate ethnic tapestry.

Overnight in Akhaltsikhe.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 31 Akhaltsikhe - Vardzia, Georgia - Gyumri, Armenia

Vardzia awaits us like a medieval dream carved into cliff faces—a 12th-century cave city that Queen Tamara commissioned during Georgia's golden age. Between 1186 and 1189, craftsmen hollowed out an intricate network of tunnels, chambers, and churches that could shelter 50,000 people during invasions. This architectural marvel demonstrates medieval engineering genius, with sophisticated ventilation systems and hidden passages that connected multiple levels.

We explore tunnels where monks once chanted prayers echoing through stone corridors, royal chambers where Georgia's most celebrated queen held court, and the Church of the Dormition with its miraculously preserved frescoes depicting Queen Tamara herself—one of the few contemporary portraits of this legendary ruler who expanded Georgian territory from Black Sea to Caspian shores.

After crossing into Armenia at Bavra border, we reach Gyumri, a city that embodies Armenian resilience through centuries of triumph and tragedy. Founded as Alexandropol during Russian expansion, this cultural center showcases elegant 19th-century architecture built from local black tuff stone. Despite devastating earthquakes and political upheavals, Gyumri maintains its reputation as Armenia's cultural heart, where traditional crafts and contemporary arts flourish side by side.

Overnight in Gyumri.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 32 Gyumri - Garni Temple & Geghard Monastery Complex - Yerevan

Our journey toward Yerevan pauses at two sacred sites where ancient and Christian Armenia express their deepest beliefs. Garni Temple rises from basalt cliffs like a piece of classical Greece transplanted to Caucasian highlands—the only surviving pagan temple in Armenia, dedicated to Mithra, god of light and truth. Built in the 1st century AD, this Hellenistic marvel served Armenian kings as a summer residence until Christianity's triumph relegated pagan gods to memory.

The 1679 earthquake reduced Garni to rubble, but 1970s reconstruction restored its elegant Ionic columns and sacrifice altar, creating Armenia's most photographed ancient monument. From temple steps, we gaze across Azat River gorge where geological forces carved "Symphony of Stones"—natural basalt columns that resemble a massive pipe organ frozen in volcanic rock.

At Geghard Monastery, 4th-century Christian faith carved its devotion directly into mountain stone. This "Monastery of the Spear" once housed the lance that pierced Christ's side, creating Armenia's most sacred pilgrimage site. The main chapel, built in 1215, demonstrates medieval Armenian architecture at its finest, while chambers carved from living rock amplify Gregorian chants into ethereal harmonies.

We visit a brandy factory for tastings that reveal why Armenian cognac earned legendary status, then enjoy lunch at a private home where traditional hospitality creates lasting memories.

Due to the size of our lunch today, we do not include dinner.

Overnight in Yerevan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 33 Genocide Memorial, Khor Virap & Lake Sevan

We begin at Tsitsernakaberd, the Genocide Memorial and Museum, which bears witness to the tragedy of 1915 when Ottoman policies destroyed Armenian communities across Eastern Anatolia. The eternal flame burns above the valley where Yerevan's founders built their fortress, while the museum's restrained exhibits honour 1.5 million victims through photographs, documents and testimonies that refuse to let history forget.

We continue south to Khor Virap Monastery, which rises from the Ararat Valley beneath biblical Mount Ararat, where Noah's Ark is said to have found refuge after the flood. The complex marks the birthplace of Armenian Christianity, built over the dungeon where King Trdat imprisoned Saint Gregory the Illuminator for 13 years before converting to Christianity. Weather permitting, the monastery's setting against Ararat's snow-capped peak is one of the most iconic views in Armenia.

From the Ararat plain we head north to Lake Sevan, set about 1,900 m/6,200 ft above sea level and one of the largest high-altitude freshwater lakes in the world. Its deep blue water, ringed by mountains, shows a very different side of Armenia. We stop for lunch beside the lake, then take a boat trip on the water, weather permitting.

Overnight in Yerevan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 34 Yerevan: City Tour & Leisure Time

Yerevan spreads around us like an open history book written in pink tuff stone, its rosy hue earning the capital nickname "Pink City." Founded in 782 BC, 29 years before Rome, this ancient settlement has witnessed Urartian kings, Persian satraps, Arab caliphs and Soviet commissars, each leaving architectural signatures in one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, a title Damascus often claims too.

At Matenadaran Manuscript Repository, we discover treasures beyond gold: ancient Armenian texts that preserved classical Greek philosophy, Persian poetry and medieval science when European libraries burned. These illuminated manuscripts, including works by Aristotle and Plato surviving only in Armenian translation, represent humanity's intellectual heritage rescued by scribes who understood knowledge's fragility.

Republic Square showcases Soviet-era grandeur interpreted through Armenian architectural tradition, its arches and bas-reliefs echoing

10th-13th century spiritual monuments. The National History Museum chronicles Armenian civilization from prehistoric times through modern independence, while pink tuff stone quarried from nearby mountains gives Soviet utilitarian buildings unexpected warmth and beauty.

This afternoon is yours for independent exploration of the galleries, cafes and markets that make Yerevan one of the world's most liveable capitals.

This evening, we gather for farewell dinner at a traditional Armenian restaurant where live music celebrates the resilient culture that survived millennia of challenges while maintaining its unique identity, language and traditions.

Overnight in Yerevan.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 35 Departure

Departure from Yerevan.

BON VOYAGE!!