

**ACTIVE UZBEKISTAN****Mountain & Village Walks, Iconic Silk Road Cities****16 days**

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**Day 1      *Arrival in Tashkent***

Welcome to Uzbekistan!

Tashkent, the capital and the biggest city in Uzbekistan, is located near the Chatkal Mountains and Chirchik River. It is situated at an elevation of approximately 450 meters. Dating back to the 2nd century BC, the city has lived through a variety of cultural periods including having been conquered by the Arabs and later established as a Russian military outpost and part of the former USSR. Our tour begins and ends in this city that is considered to be a central hub for traveling to not only Uzbekistan but the entire Central Asian region.

Overnight in Tashkent.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

**Day 2      *Tashkent: City Tour***

After breakfast at our hotel, we start our full day Tashkent city tour which will include a pleasant stroll around the Old City and Khast Imom Square, featuring a mausoleum, a mosque, a museum and a medressah. Afterwards we will continue our city tour with visits to Independence Square, the memorial complex to the Tashkent Earthquake of 1966, Amir Timur Square and the walking area of "Broadway" and its outdoor artists market. Continuing our exploration we will have stops at the Alisher Navoi Opera & Ballet Theatre, and the Museum of History of Uzbekistan. We may even have an opportunity to get a taste of the ornate metro stations that Tashkent is famous for in the former-Soviet sphere. Given the lingering effects of jetlag and our early start tomorrow, we include lunch instead of dinner.

Walk summary: 4-5 hours of guided walking in the city itself throughout the day. Distance covered is 6-7 km for the day. Walking is done generally on paved roads, stairs used to cross the roads at Independence Square underground station. The places we will be visiting are all located on ground level with an easy level of climbing a few stairs where necessary.

Overnight in Tashkent.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

**Day 3      *Tashkent - Fly to Urgench - Ayaz Kala - Khiva***

Today we will take an early morning flight on Uzbekistan Airways to Urgench, located in the northwest region of the country. Upon landing in Urgench we will drive to the Ancient Khorezmian ruins of Ayaz Kala and Toprak Kala for a tour. What is considered to be the Khorezmian region has seen the ebb and flow of historical empires with its territory settled by Persian, Greek, and Turkic peoples and influences over the span of 2,000+ years. The region we will be visiting is known as Ellik-Qala ("Fifty Fortresses"). In the modern day polity of Karakalpakstan, a semi-autonomous region of Uzbekistan that has a stronger identification with neighbouring Kazakhstan, we can find examples of the many ruins of settlements that existed over the course of the region's complex history. Ayaz Kala, an archeological site consisting of three fortresses, is considered to have played a major role in defending the area against the raids by nomads. On the other hand, Toprak Kala was an ancient palace city and the capital of Khorezm (Chorasmia) in the 2nd-3rd centuries AD. Keep your eye out for the colour of the soil when you are here. In spring, the presence of white on the ground looks deceptively like snow. Instead, it is salt! The farmers and agriculturalists typically need to "wash" the soil each spring before seeding. The large drainage ditches lining many of the roads collect all of the water used during the washing process. This is definitely a tiring and labour-intensive endeavour.

After our visits to these ancient ruins we will drive in the later afternoon to our overnight destination of Khiva, the famed ancient Silk

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Road settlement.

Walk summary: 2-3 hours of guided walking in the archeological sites of Ayaz Kala and Toprak Kala. Distance covered is approximately 2-2.5 km for the day in total. Walking is done generally in a hilly area in the ruins with no paved roads. Khorezm and nearby regions are 80-120 meters above sea level.

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 once can easily imagine life during the time of the khans.

We will spend the day wandering the maze of ruins and great mosques and medressahs. Our tour includes Ichan Qala (“Inner City”), Kalta Minor minaret, Kunya Ark (the inner citadel), and Medressah Rakhimkhon. Later we will walk to see the Mausoleum of Pakhlavan Makhmud, Islam Khodja Minaret (exterior), the medieval Friday Mosque and Tashauli Palace and Harem. You will have some free time in the later afternoon to explore on your own this exotic and visually-inspiring mini-city.

Tonight your Tour Leader will take you to a locally-owned and operated family restaurant in the old town. There may be a very good chance that you will have an opportunity to try the famous Khorezmian dish “shivit-oshi”, a noodle specialty where dill provides its distinctive green colour.

Walk summary: 4-5 hours of guided walking in Ichan Kala. The distance covered is approximately 5-6 km for the day in total. Walking is done inside Ichan Kala on paved roads and some narrow streets with no paved road (cobblestones). The terrain is mostly level besides a few short flights of steps. Options exist in free time to explore some of the higher vantage points of the city (for a small access fee) on flights of steps in narrow passageways and steep steps with poor lighting – namely the West Gate viewpoint and the Islam Khoja Minaret. Khorezm and nearby regions are 80-120 meters above sea level.

Overnight in Khiva.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 5**      ***Khiva - Bukhara***

Today we will take a little break from our walking and settle in for a long drive (approximately 480km – 8 hours of drive time) to Bukhara with a few breaks along our way as we make our way through the Kyzyl-kum Desert. The terrain is mostly semi-arid with sparse vegetation and a chance to see sand dunes here and there. While relaxing on the drive, keep an eye out for possible wildlife spotting – wolves, jackals and foxes call the desert here their home, as does the enigmatic Asiatic wild dog (threatened species). If you are a bird enthusiast, you can keep your peepers out for Eurasian collared and laughing doves, Wedgewood-blue European rollers, various bee-eaters and, if you are really lucky, the famed Pander’s ground jay. A bird the size of a thrush, its body is a pale gray colour and the wings are black and white. It is found only here and in some remote parts of Kazakhstan. They may be spotted on a telegraph pole or on a saxual bush. Alert your Tour Leader if you do as these jays are a rare sighting!

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

Upon arrival in Bukhara in later afternoon, we will check into the hotel and then we will have some time to relax and enjoy a walk by the Lyabi Hauz complex in the old town before we make our way to dinner. You may have an option to try a specialty dish of this city

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known as “Emir’s Ears” at your restaurant tonight. This is similar to a deep-fried tortellini and is so-called because it resembles the shape of (you guessed it) an ear.

Walk summary: there will likely be a short walking tour that can be done today shortly after arrival into Bukhara. Due to the nature of the drive and the distance between the two cities that take us most of the day we won’t have much time for any more than that. The evening stroll will be easy with mostly flat terrain and some short flights of steps. Bukhara is 190-230 meters above sea level.

Overnight in Bukhara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 6 *Bukhara: City Tour*

Bukhara, being one of the most famous towns along the Ancient Silk Road, is considered to be the city with the most historical sights. Our day walk of the old town will take us to many interesting places including the Mausoleum of Somoni, the oldest structure in Bukhara (circa 900 AD). It was unearthed during the Soviet period in almost perfect condition. Other stops along the way include the famed Ark Fortress, former seat of government to the Emir of Bukhar; the Bolo Hauz Mosque, known locally as the 40-pillar mosque; the 12th century Kalan Minaret (once the tallest building in Asia); the ancient trading domes; and the Lyabi Hauz complex (you may have had time to visit the Lyabi Hauz complex yesterday before dinner). As all of the historical sights on our itinerary are located in the old town, we will be walking the most part of the day to enjoy the views at a leisurely pace.

In the later afternoon, you may choose to accompany your guide and driver to the Emir’s Summer Palace – 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 1880’s, 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 Bukhara (20 minute drive).

Walk summary: 6 hours of guided walking in the old town. Distance covered is approximately 6-7 km for the day in total. The terrain is mostly flat with some cobblestones and some steps required to negotiate. There is a short but steep set of ramps to negotiate within the Ark. A late afternoon walk is also recommended further after the guided part of the tour finishes. Walking time in the Emirs Summer Palace is approximately 1 hour.

Overnight in Bukhara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 7 *Bukhara - Nuratau Village - Yangikishlak Village*

After breakfast today we will begin our drive to the Nuratau mountain range northeast of Bukhara. On the way we make a stop in Gijduvan to visit a family owned ceramics studio, where we will get a tour to learn about and watch how the ceramics are made on-site.

Afterwards we drive to Nuyratau village, where we will visit the Chashma Complex. Here lies the sacred spring of legend which links the pool as one of the seven places that Hazrat Ali (son-in-law to the Prophet Muhammad) was said to have instructed his followers to bury some of his body parts throughout the lands of Islam at that time. We will also be able to see the ruins to the south of town known as Alexander’s Fort. Alexander the Great instructed one of his generals to construct an impenetrable fortress and it still remains to this day.

In the afternoon we drive through the Nuratau Mountains to Yangikishlak village where, upon arrival, we accommodate at a family house (part of a Community Based Tourism, or CBT, project), that includes dinner and our overnight at the guest-house. CBT is a program supported both by US Aid and the EU in helping develop local tourism to directly benefit the communities that welcome and host tourists. The guesthouse is basic but features clean rooms, private bathrooms, and a wonderfully authentic atmosphere. We will have a chance to sample the fresh homemade cooking of the region and enjoy a welcome break from the more touristy parts of the

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country and a chance to recharge in the pure air of the country.

Walk summary: Approximately 2 hours of guided walking in total in Gijduvan and Nuratau village at the Chashma. Toured distance covered is approximately 1-2 km for the day in total. A late afternoon walk is also recommended further upon arrival in our final stop for the day at Yangikishlak village. Villages in the Nuratau mountain range are located 740-800 meters above sea level. Total drive time is approximately 6 hours (280 km).

Overnight in Yangikishlak Village.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 8 Yangikishlak Village**

Hidden away in the green valleys of Nuratau Range, Yangikishlak is a village that is rarely visited by foreigners due to a lack of historical monuments, but attracts true lovers of nature and easy walks. The area has a variety of birds, animals and insects listed in the Red Book. No – we don't mean the Communist Red Book! Instead, there was a document prepared in the early 1960's by Soviet scientists to list the endangered species found in the former USSR and in the years of post-independence, this program of recognizing the species under threat has continued and is still referred to as the Red Book. Possible sightings of wildlife include Severtsov wild sheep, lammergeier vultures, golden eagles, and Eurasian griffins.

We will be walking through the villages of the region and the walking paths that connect them, exploring the everyday life of locals with easy hikes through the Nuratau range. Traditional stone houses, groves of pistachio and walnut trees, waterfalls, and encounters with friendly villager will feature in our hiking experiences. We may also be able to participate in learning how to bake bread like a local, participate in some bird watching, and other activities based on what your Tour Leader and Tour Guide can plan for you in this charming rural environment where you will get a true sense of the wonderful hospitality that Uzbekistan is known for.

Walk summary: 7-8 hours of guided walking in the Nuratau eco-reservoir area and the village itself. Walking distance covered is approximately 8 km for the day in total. Walking is done generally in hilly terrain with no paved roads and easy trekking. Donkeys are available in our host village for transportation as well.

Overnight in Yangikishlak Village.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 9 Yangikishlak - Samarkand**

After breakfast we hop on our tour bus and drive off to our next destination and one of the highlights of our tour – Samarkand! Once the capital of the Timurid dynasty and main trading point on the Silk Road, the city was made justifiably famous in the West with the publication of The Golden Road to Samarkand by James Elroy Flecker. Sometimes referred to as the “Rome of the Orient”, Samarkand was already flourishing when Rome and Babylon were founded. In modern Uzbekistan, Samarkand boasts being the second largest city and the wealthiest city of the nation.

Upon arrival, we will make our way to our hotel. In the afternoon we will walk to the world-famous Registan Square. The impressive Registan (meaning “sandy place” in Tajik) has been compared favourably to the Wonders of the World. Here the three medressahs stand solemnly: the Ulug Bek Medressah (built 1417-1420) to the west, the Tilya-Kori Medressah (built 1646-1660), and the Sher-Dor Medressah (built 1619-1636). Our sightseeing will take us through a careful exploration of the Medressahs, now filled with various arts and crafts demonstrations, old photos of the monuments before they were reconstructed by the Soviets, and many varied handicrafts for sale.

Walk summary: Approx. 2 hours of guided walking in the afternoon. Toured distance covered is approximately 1-2 km in Samarkand. Samarkand is 550-600 meters above sea level. Drive time from Yangikishlak to Samarkand is approx. 2 hours (110 km).

Overnight in Samarkand.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 10 **Samarkand Touring**

A full-day guided walking tour today will take us to some of the most well-known places of Samarkand including Gur-i-Emir Mausoleum (burial place of Emir Timur, or Tamerlane, as he is better known in the West), Bibi-Khanum Mosque and the Observatory of Ulugbek. The latter site is where Ulugbek, 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 territory of the ancient Afrosiab archaeological site. The ancient core of Samarkand is located on the Afrosiab 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 Afrosiab with ancient Sogdian capital Marakanda, destroyed in the 4th century BC by Alexander the Great.

You will have some time in the later afternoon to explore the Siyob Bazaar, Samarkand's famed and extensive central market, located next to the Bibi-Khanum Mosque.

Walk summary: Approx. 5-6 hours of guided walking tour with extra time for Siyob Bazaar visit. Toured distance covered is approximately 7-8 km in Samarkand.

Overnight in Samarkand (dinner on your own this evening).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

### Day 11 **Samarkand - Shakhrisabz - Maidanak - Shakhrisabz**

Today we will meet our sedan-style cars to drive the pass (approximately 2+ hours) running over the mountain range of Zeravshan on the way to Shakhrisabz. The drive will afford us some stunning views on a road that features several vantage points over the nearby mountains.

Upon arrival in Shakhrisabz we will meet up with our tour bus and have a tour of this historically important city centre. This city has recently undergone a huge makeover by the government to beautify it and create large open spaces. The archaeological ruins are the key feature to this city as Emir Timur (Tamerlane) was born in a village nearby in 1336 and he originally intended to be interred in his family crypt located here. Our walking tour of the centre will feature visits to the Ak-Saray (White Palace), of which a massive portal remains of the structure that Timur originally commissioned in 1380 and reaches 65 metres in height; the Dor at-Tilyavat Complex; and the Dor as-Siadat Complex located close to one another and both feature classic 14-15th century Timurid architecture. Shakhrisabz is famous in Uzbekistan as THE place for newlyweds to have their photos taken in Amir Timur Park and we may be able to see not just one, but several couples strolling around the gardens followed by their retinue.

After a lunch break we will later in the afternoon drive to Maidanak village to the south of Shakhrisabz to visit the Maidanak Astronomical Observatory. The observatory lies on the spurs of the Pamir and Alai mountain ranges at 2600 m above sea level. Mount Maidanak was selected for astronomical observations in the late 1960s. Since 1996, Maidanak Observatory has been involved in a number of international observational and astronomical research programs. We will take an easy hike to the top of the hill to visit the observatory for a tour.

Afterwards we return to Shakhrisabz for our overnight stop.

Walk summary: We spend around 2 hours of walking in the city centre of Shakhrisabz (approx. 4-5 km. and then there will be approx. 3-4 hours of guided walking tour to climb up to the top of the hill in Maydanak to visit the observatory. Toured distance covered is approximately 2-3 km in Maydanak. Maydanak Observatory is located 2600 m above sea level.

Overnight in Shakhrisabz.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 12      *Shakhrisabz - Samarkand - Tashkent***

This morning we will complete any sightseeing that we may have missed yesterday in Shakhrisabz. As we depart Shakhrisabz we will travel to the small village of Urgut, famous for its Sunday bazaar offering local handicraft products. The Urgut bazaar is open daily but, in particular, its suzani and jewelry sections are the main attractions and most selection is available on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays. Urgut is notable for its location in the foothills of the Zeravshan mountain range and for the stand of plane trees some of which date back further than 1,000 years ago.

From Urgut we will retrace our steps to Samarkand to catch the evening high-speed train to Tashkent (18:00 departure, 2.25 hours).

Overnight in Tashkent.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 13      *Tashkent - Chimgan - Amirsoy***

Today after breakfast we will drive eastward to the Western Tian Shan mountains (80 km from Tashkent, 1.5 hour drive). Upon arrival in Chimgan we will begin our walk of approximately an hour long ascent (+220m) to Gulkam Pass (1820 m above sea level) along a trail with beautiful views of the mountains and local flora. In the early afternoon we will start our descent to the canyon and the Gulkamsay River and its multiple waterfalls. In later afternoon we come down from our walk to meet our driver and drive to Amirsoy Mountain Resort.

Amirsoy, located in 900+ hectares of beautiful land in the Chatkal mountains is a first of its kind in Central Asia, with chalets for accommodation, 2 restaurants, and perhaps most importantly, the modern cable car to get to the top of the mountain for amazing views of the surrounding ranges (during winter season the resort hosts both heli-skiing and snowboarding). In the afternoon we will take the cable car to the top of Maigashkan mountain to soak in the views. Returning later in the afternoon to Amirsoy Resort, we will have the chance to walk around and explore the natural surroundings of the property itself.

Walk summary: Approx 5-6 hours of walk in Chimgan - Charvak area (1800-1850 m above sea level) with nature views and waterfalls along the way.

Overnight in Amirsoy resort.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 14      *Amirsoy & Charvak***

Today most of the day will be spent with easy hiking in the villages by the Chatkal River: Birchmulla, Pskem, Koku and Ugam villages and the reservoir of Lake Charvak. This reservoir was created in 1970 to form Lake Charvak after a rock dam was constructed at the confluence of the Pskem, Kok-Su and Chatkal rivers. In the aftermath of the devastating earthquake of 1966, Soviet engineers rapidly developed the dam and resulting reservoir to supply hydroelectric power to the capital, Tashkent. Lake Charvak quickly filled in with beautiful scintillating blue waters running down from the glaciers and melting snows of the Tien Shan mountains which creates the beautiful hue of the water from reflecting silicates in the waters. Unfortunately, due to the speed of the Soviet construction to get the hydroelectric dam up and running, there were numerous sites of ancient petroglyphs covered by the rising waters. Nowadays, the lake and surrounding area has become a popular location for locals from Tashkent to come with their families in both summer and winter. Summer months in Tashkent can reach over 45 degrees Celsius and the respite provided by the altitude of the mountains and the cool waters in the lake themselves well to various watersports. Winter attracts the well-to-do of Tashkent to the ski resorts.

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The villages we will be passing through on our walk are located in the Ugam-Chatkal National Park and, at 1620 meters above sea level, are at the foothills of the Big Chimgan range. Along our hike today we will pass alongside the water reservoir as the backdrop of our walk and plenty of small waterfalls. Depending on the time of year, we will also possibly encounter the fauna of the reservoir (possible sightings include mountain goats, porcupines, wolves, foxes, black bears and wild boar). The National Park also features more than 20 species of birds, including the white-winged woodpecker, the yellow-breasted tit, and the white crowned penduline tit.

We will return to Amirsoy for our overnight in the late afternoon and relax and enjoy optional activities at the mountain resort.

Walk summary: Approx 7 hours of walk in Chatkal Mountains, with locations being from 1600 to 1700 meters above sea level on rudimentary paths.

Overnight in Amirsoy Resort.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 15     *Amirsoy - Charvak - Tashkent***

Today after breakfast we have a bit of free time to relax and enjoy the mountains, and later in the morning we pack up and take our tour minibuses to Charvak water reservoir for some photo ops and possibly some water activities. In the afternoon we drive back to Tashkent (80 km - 1.5 hours) and spend the late afternoon in Tashkent, where we will get the chance to walk around the town or relax before the farewell dinner tonight.

Walk summary: Approx 2-3 hours of walk in the Charvak water reservoir area.

Overnight in Tashkent.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

**Day 16     *Departure***

Departure from Tashkent.

BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast