

Best of Central Asia Tour

Best of Kyrgyzstan & Uzbekistan in 2 Weeks

Discover cultural and natural highlights of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan & Uzbekistan.

Best of Central Asia Tour combines cultural highlights and natural beauty of five countries in one epic journey. Travel through the modern and historic capitals of five Central Asian states. Explore the cultural treasures and traditions of the nomadic people who have crossed the region throughout centuries, and of the people who have settled in its cities. Discover the modern marvel and architectural glory of Astana as well as “city of love” – Ashgabat. Travel the sprawling Soviet-styled cities of Almaty, Bishkek, and Dushanbe. Visit the architectural legacies of a flourishing Islamic culture and the medieval Timurid Empire. Traveling through Central Asia you will experience centuries of change and development of the “Five Stan countries”.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Combine cultural highlights and natural beauty of Central Asia in one tour
- Visit diverse capitals of all Central Asian countries
- Enjoy the view at turquoise lakes of Tajikistan and alpine lakes of Kyrgyzstan
- Sleep in yurts and get to know nomadic culture in Kyrgyzstan
- Marvel at Registan Square and other wonders of the ancient Samarkand
- Witness history brought to life at the UNESCO World Heritage Sites of Khiva and Bukhara
- Shop in oriental bazaars
- Camp beside the burning gas crater the “Gate of Hell” at Darvaza

Dates: June 17 – July 8, 2018 | July 15 – August 5, 2018 | August 19– September 16, 2018 | 22 Days

Price: 3970 EUR

Single Supplement: 750 EUR | Deposit: 250 EUR

ITINERARY

Day 1: Astana City Tour

Most Central Asia flights arrive early in the morning in Astana. We will meet you at the airport and transfer to the hotel, where you can check in right away. You can have a rest after the long flight, take a shower and have breakfast. Meet your fellow travelers and your guide at 10:00 in the hotel lobby to start the city tour.

Astana is Central Asia’s youngest capital and a showpiece for the 21st century Kazakhstan. Talented architects have made major contributions to this futuristic city with its almost surreal skyline. But before exploring the modern city we drive 40km to the Memorial Museum Alzhir to learn more about the dark history of Kazakhstan. Alzhir was the biggest concentration camp in USSR for wives of “betrayers of the homeland”. There you will get an understanding of how people lived, worked and survived in Soviet concentration camps, the infamous “Gulags”. Back in Astana, we will have lunch. In the afternoon, we enjoy nice city view from the top of Baiterek Tower, which has become the symbol

of Astana. Its shape represents a poplar tree with a golden egg laid by a magic bird from Kazakh folk tales. We will as well visit Hazrat Sultan Mosque, the National History Museum of Kazakhstan and have a walk on the Nurzhol Boulevard. Along the boulevard, which was designed by Kisho Kurokawa, most of Astana's modern buildings are placed. We will end the walk at Khan Shatyr, giant tent-like shopping center designed by architect Norman Foster.

Overnight in hotel Kazzhol or similar.

Day 2: Astana – Bishkek | City Tour

This morning we need to get up early to catch our flight to Bishkek departing 08:00 with Air Astana. Upon arrival at 09:45 in the Kyrgyz capital, your Kyrgyz guide will meet you and transfer to the hotel, where you can leave your luggage. You will have lunch and we will do some light touring in the charming capital of Kyrgyzstan, the greenest city in Central Asia. Our sightseeing program in Bishkek includes stops at the newly renovated National History Museum, Oak Park, the Central Square Ala Too and the Philharmonic Hall.

Overnight in hotel Asia Mountains or similar.

Day 3: Bishkek – Burana – Song Kul (380km, 7h)

This is quite long and tough day, you should be ready for a long drive on bumpy roads. The first stop after 80km is at Burana Tower. The minaret was built in the 11th century in the medieval town of Balasagun, capital of the mighty Karakhanid empire. You can climb up the winding staircase to enjoy a nice view of the Chuy Valley. There is also an open-air museum featuring a collection of ancient balbals, carved stone figures used as monuments. We then continue driving to the village of Kochkor, where we stop for lunch. From Kochkor it's another 3-4 hour mostly on dirt road driving up to lake Song Kul and driving along its southern shore to the yurt camp. The lake is situated on around 3000m altitude and only accessible in summer.

There will be time before dinner to walk to the lake shore and enjoy the amazing scenery. It is also possible to rent horses and do some horse-riding in Kyrgyzstan. Tonight, you can see the sky full of stars and sleep in a traditional nomad yurt.

Overnight in yurt – 4 people in a yurt, facilities are outside (Western toilet, shower with heated water)

Day 4: Song Kul – Kochkor – Tosor (300km, 6h)

After breakfast, it is time to leave Song Kul and drive to Issyk Kul – the "Pearl of Kyrgyzstan". On the way, we stop in Kochkor to see a presentation of how traditional felt carpets are made and you can even try to make your own. Shortly after Kochkor we arrive at Issyk Kul and drive along the southern shore to the "Skazka" or "Fairytale" canyon. The canyon derived its name from its bizarre landscape with fabulous formations from rocks. From there it is just a few more minutes' drive to our overnight stay – a nice yurt camp about 200 meters from the beach of lake Issyk Kul. Usually, in summer the hot weather is inviting to take a swim.

Lake Issyk Kul is the second-largest mountain lake in the world, after Titicaca. Located at an altitude of 1600m, it is a slightly saline lake with no outlet, surrounded completely by the Tien Shan Mountains. Some evidence suggests that ruins of an old trade center from 2nd century BC can be found under the water.

Overnight in yurt – 2-4 people in a yurt, facilities are outside (Western toilet, shower with heated water)

Day 5: Tosor – Jety Oguz - Karakol (160km, 3h)

After breakfast, we drive further eastwards along the southern shore of Issyk Kul towards the town of Karakol. On the way to Karakol, we drive into the side valley of Jety Oguz, famous for its two red rock formations called “Seven Bulls” and “The Broken Heart”. You will see these rocks and your guide will tell you the legend behind their interesting names.

In Karakol, we will have lunch and have a short sightseeing tour of the town’s most interesting sights. The tour includes the Dungan Mosque, built in 1904 with no metal nails and the wooden Russian Orthodox Church which has been standing since 1869. We will also visit the small Historical Museum of Karakol with the photo exhibition of Ella Maillart, Swiss traveler, who embarked on an extensive journey through Central Asia in the 1930s. She wrote an interesting book about her travels called “Turkestan Solo”.

From Karakol, it is another 30km driving north to the village of Tepke where we will spend the night in a nice guesthouse of farmers who breed Kyrgyz horses. You can see their horses and learn how “Boorsok” (deep fried bread, typical for Kyrgyzstan) is made.

Overnight & dinner in guesthouse “Reina Kench” – Twin/ Single rooms with shower and toilet in the room

Day 6: Karakol– Charyn Canyon - Almaty (400km, 7-8h)

Today we cross the mountains into Kazakhstan and drive to Almaty, former capital and biggest city of Kazakhstan. It is a very long ride and partly on a bad road. About half-way between Karakol and Almaty, we will stop for lunch (picnic) at one of the most famous natural sights of Kazakhstan – Charyn Canyon. The canyon is often compared to the Grand Canyon, although it is much smaller in size with a total length of 80-90 kilometers. The part of the canyon you will visit is known as “Valley of Castles” for its unusual rock formations. It is 3 kilometers long and 100 meters deep. We will walk these 3 kilometers down to the river, where we will have a picnic. In the evening, we arrive in Almaty on time for dinner.

Overnight in hotel Kazzhol or similar

Day 7: Almaty City Tour

Almaty is the largest city of Central Asia’s richest country, Kazakhstan. Until 1997 it was the country’s capital and it remains today the country’s business and educational center. Roads are wide and tree-lined and there are good views of the Zailisky Ala-Too mountains that form a backdrop to the city. The name Almaty means “the place with apples” and it is believed that this is where apples originated from.

We will visit Panfilov Park to see the most famous sight of Almaty, Zenkov Cathedral. It was built in 1904 without a single metal nail and is one of the world’s tallest wooden buildings. In the same Park is the impressive Soviet Glory Memorial, a tribute to 28 men who, as the narrative goes, repulsed 50 German tanks from the outskirts of Moscow during World War II. Adjacent to the park is the Museum of Musical Instruments. On display are many traditional instruments from the region. At the Green Bazaar, you get a chance to explore local Kazakh culture as you shop for fresh fruits and vegetables. In the afternoon, we drive half an hour up to Medeo ice skating rink and take a cable car to enjoy a nice view at the top of Shymbulak skiing area. It will be quite chilly and windy on top at 3200m altitude, so make sure to bring a sweatshirt or light jacket.

Overnight in hotel Kazzhol or similar

Day 8: Almaty - Dushanbe | City Tour

After breakfast transfer to Almaty Airport to catch Air Astana flight to Dushanbe, departing at 11:10. At 12:00 arrive in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. Originally, Dushanbe was a small village around a market that took place every Monday. The word Dushanbe translated from Persian means Monday. It was during the Soviet Union that it became the industrial center of Tajikistan.

Meet your Tajik guide, transfer to hotel for check in and have lunch in the city. In the afternoon, we will have a walk in the shade of the trees in the Botanical Garden. We will then visit Ismail Samani statue. The large monument commemorates the 1100th anniversary of the Samanid State, the heyday of the Tajik nation, when science and arts flourished. From there we walk up to Rudaki park, dedicated to great Persian poet Rudaki, who also lived during Samanid time in the 9th century. Overnight in hotel Sheraton or similar

Day 9: Dushanbe – Iskander Kul – Penjikent (290km, 7h)

Today after an early breakfast we drive to Iskanderkul Lake, named after Alexander the Great. Triangular in shape, it is considered one of the most exquisite lakes in all of the former Soviet Union nations, nestled in the Fan Mountains on 2,200m altitude. The route is a delightful one, past rugged mountains scenery. At the shore of the lake we will have lunch and you can go for a swim if you like. We then take a short hike to a nearby waterfall, also called the Niagara Falls of the Fan Mountains.

We then continue driving for another 4 hours to reach the town of Penjikent, where we arrive just in time for dinner and will stay for overnight in a hotel.

Overnight in hotel Umaryon or similar

Day 10: Penjikent City Tour OR Seven Lakes Day Trip

Penjikent is a town of around 130,000 inhabitants, famous for its past as a Sogdian trade center. However, except for some ruins unfortunately there is not too much left of its glorious past.

Today you have the choice between the following *two options*:

You may decide to spend the day in Penjikent and have a relaxed city tour, including the Rudaki Museum of History, the historically important sights of Old Penjikent and UNESCO World Heritage Site of Sarazm, and visit of the local market.

You may instead want to take a bumpy ride into the mountains, to explore the area of the “Seven Lakes”. This option includes a hike from the 6th to the 7th lake and some walks in traditional Tajik villages. The mountain valley is not far from Penjikent, but due to the terrible road condition this trip takes a full day.

Your guide will explain to you above listed two options in more details. Overnight in Penjikent.

Overnight in hotel Umaryon or similar

Day 11: Penjikent – Istarafshan – Khujand (270km, 6h)

From Penjikent we drive up North to Istarafshan first and finally to Khujand. The road to Istaravshan is very scenic, crossing Shahrison Pass. Istarafshan was founded by Cyrus the Great in the 6th century BC and recently celebrated its 2500th anniversary. The Timurids of the 14th century then called Istaravshan Ura-Tube and the city’s artisans were highly regarded in Central Asia. Today, Istarafshan is well known in Tajikistan for its blacksmiths, hand-crafting knives of high quality. We will visit the workshops of the blacksmiths near the entrance of the market. We will also meet a famous wood carving master, who will tell you more about his work and passion.

From Istarafshan it is another one and a half hours driving to Khujand. Check in at the hotel and have dinner in the second largest city of Tajikistan.

Overnight in Grand Hotel or similar

Day 12: Khujand City Tour

Khujand is situated not far from the Fergana Valley on the Syr Darya river. It is another ancient city with history dating back to Cyrus the Great of Persia and Alexander the Great. Today it is the second largest city in Tajikistan with Tajikistan's biggest market – Panjshanbe Bazaar. City tour of Khujand includes the bazaar and the adjacent Maslihaddin Mosque, the historical Museum of Khujand, and Arbob palace.

In the evening we will have a walk around Kmaoli Khujand park and see the Lenin statue.

Overnight in Grand hotel or similar

Day 13: Khujand – Tashkent (180km, 4h)

After breakfast transfer to Oybek border point. On the Uzbek side of the border you will meet the new guide and driver. Transfer to Tashkent. Transfer to the hotel and start city tour of Tashkent, the biggest city in Central Asia. Tashkent is one of the oldest cities in Uzbekistan, but most of its historic buildings were destroyed in a major earthquake in 1966.

We will visit the Old City area of Tashkent where you will discover ancient historical sites: the Khast Imom Complex, which contains ancient Quran book of Caliph Uthman (from 7th century!) and the mausoleum of the Islamic saint, Abu Bakr Kaffal Shashi. Join the animated throng of traders at Chor-Su Bazaar before taking a ride on the former-Soviet Tashkent Metro and visiting the Amir Temur & Independence Square and Applied Arts Museum.

Overnight in hotel Ichan Khala or similar

Day 14: Tashkent – Samarkand (270km, ca. 2h)

At 07:00 transfer from your hotel to railway station. High-speed train "Afrosiyob" departs Tashkent at 08:00 and arrives in Samarkand at 10:10 (300 km). Samarkand evokes an almost mythical past full of romance and intrigue. This was the domain of Timur, one of history's great conquerors. Much of his architectural heritage has been preserved, allowing us to see how the city might have been at the peak of his power. We will begin in spectacular Registan Square, the focal point of ancient Samarkand and framed by three beautiful madrassas. We will go on to explore more of the city's unmissable sights, the Bibi Khanum Mosque & Gur Emir Mausoleum, before delving into the Siyob Bazaar to haggle for dried fruit and souvenirs to take home.

Overnight in hotel Platan or similar

Day 15: Samarkand – Bukhara (280km, 5h)

Today, we'll pay a visit to the Afrasiab Museum and the Tomb of Saint Daniel. Later, we'll drive to Koni Ghil village to explore the traditional way of making Samarkand paper from mulberry. In the afternoon depart Samarkand and drive to Bukhara. Stop on the way at Rabati-Malik Caravanserai. Continue driving to Bukhara. Arrive in Bukhara, check in to the hotel.

Overnight in hotel Asia or similar

Day 16: Bukhara City Tour

The second of our UNESCO World Heritage stops, even the very name Bukhara conjures up images of the exotic Orient. Today, as for centuries, it's an important trading post and you'll have numerous opportunities to see traditional Uzbek products being bought and sold. The Old Town has been well preserved and is crammed full of minarets, mosques, and madrassas. Its once notorious canals and pools, the source of many an epidemic, have now been drained but the most famous, Lyabi-Hauz, is still there, an oasis shaded by mulberry trees at the heart of the city.

Overnight in hotel Asia or similar

Day 17: Bukhara – Khiva (480 km, 8h)

We leave Bukhara, following the highway that takes us right into the Kyzylkum desert. The mighty Amudarya River cuts through the desert and we will stop on route to see this important waterway that flows into what remains of the Aral Sea. It is a long day on shaky roads, so prepare yourself with plenty of snacks and charge up your devices so the music does not run out. At the end of this arduous drive, the reward will be Khiva, where we will arrive in the evening, just in time for dinner.

Overnight in hotel Asia or similar

Day 18: Khiva City Tour

Khiva is packed with historical sites and today you will get a chance to see them all. You will visit the walled inner city of Khiva, an area called Ichan-Kala and completely protected as UNESCO World Heritage Site. This district preserves more than fifty historic monuments and hundreds of old houses dating back hundreds of years.

As you walk through the enormous city gates, you will be confronted by the glistening Islamic beacon, the Kalta-minor Minaret. Delve deep into the town's history on a guided tour that embraces all of the city's unmissable sites and includes an ascent of Islam Khodja Minaret. Enjoy sweeping views of Old Khiva atop the Kunya-Ark Citadel. Invest your free time during the afternoon to enjoy more of the city and shop for souvenirs, or perhaps enjoy a drink at one of the many cafes littered around the ancient city. In the evening during dinner, we will experience a national folklore show.

Day 19: Khiva – Kunya Urgench – Darvaza Gas Crater (450km, 8h)

Today it is time to enter the last of the five "Stans", Turkmenistan. In the morning drive to Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan border point Shavat-Dashoguz (60 km, 1 h.). Go through border formalities on both checkpoints. Cross 1.5 km neutral zone (transportation may not be available). Meet your Turkmenistan guide and drive to the ancient city of Kunya Urgench (100 km, 1.5h). Visit mausoleums of Turebek-Khanym, Sultan Tekesh, Sultan II Arslan, Najmad-din-Kubra, Sultan Ali. Discover the Kutlug Timur Minaret and Kyrk Molla hill. In the afternoon continue driving on 4WD vehicle from Kunya-Urgench to Darvaza Gas Crater burning non-stop for almost 50 years in the middle of Karakum desert.

Day 20: Darvaza – Erbent- Ashgabat (280km, 5h)

After camp style breakfast drive to Ashgabat via water crater and Erbent desert community. Arrival in Ashgabat around noon. Have lunch, check in at the hotel and have some rest during the midday heat and after the long and shaky ride of the past couple days.

In the afternoon have a short sightseeing tour in Ashgabat – capital of Turkmenistan which has experienced a boom of “Marble Architecture” for the past 25 years. Tour includes visit of the Spiritual Mosque, one of the biggest mosques in Central Asia, the National Museum of History, the Arch of Neutrality, Presidential Square, Ertogrul Ghazy Mosque, and the newly built Independence Park.

Overnight at Grand Turkmen Hotel or similar

Day 21: Ashgabat – Kov Ata – Nokhur – Ashgabat (250km, 5h)

Today we have another busy day. After breakfast we drive to a farm nearby Ashgabat, where you can see the famous Turkmen horses called Akhal Teke. If you like, you can take the unique chance to ride on such a beautiful horse. Our next destination is Kov Ata underground lake, located about 90km to the West of Ashgabat. The Turkmen word “Kov Ata” translates as “father of the caves”. The water has a constant temperature of 33-37° Celsius. Swimming in the lake apparently is good for your health, so we suggest you go ahead and give it a try! After a picnic for lunch we continue driving a bit further West to the village Nokhur. The village is in the valleys of the Kopet-Dag mountains and unique Turkmen traditions have survived there. The villagers claim to be direct descendants of Alexander the Great. In fact you can find there fair-skinned people with blue eyes and red hair. Testimony of the unique culture in the village is the cemetery with hundreds of overgrown graves, each one equipped with impressive horns of mountain goats. In the evening we drive back to Ashgabat for our farewell dinner.

Overnight at Grand Turkmen Hotel or similar

Day 22: Ashgabat Departure

Transfer to Airport for departure flight back home. We hope you enjoyed your trip to Central Asia and will return soon to discover more places in this beautiful part of the world!

IMPORTANT NOTES

- Travel insurance is required for this tour. You are free to choose any insurance company of your choice. We recommend for example using World Nomads.
- Departure for this tour is guaranteed

Comfort level: 2

2 out of 5 = You might sleep a few nights in yurts or very simple homestays with drop toilets outside. The weather can be very cold and windy in the mountains – even in Summer. Choice of food is limited and different from home, by following local customs you avoid causing offense, and you might spend many hours per day driving on bad roads.

Physical Rating: 2

2 out of 5 = With an average fitness level there is no need to prepare for this trip. You might spend some nights at a high altitude of up to 4'000 meters – however, not without prior acclimatization. Some short and easy hikes in the mountains can be included in the tour and you may try out horse riding for a couple hours.

Price includes:

- All transfers, pick – ups and drop-offs
- Accommodation based on two people sharing a double/twin room; breakfasts included
- Full board (all lunches & dinners)
- English speaking local guide accompanying the group in each country
- All entry fees as per itinerary
- Economy class tickets for flights Astana – Bishkek, Almaty – Dushanbe
- Business class ticket for train from Tashkent – Samarkand
- Visa support letters for tourist visa

Price does not include:

- International air fares to and from Central Asia
- Hotel charges for additional services
- Consular fees for tourist visas
- Travel insurance policy
- Personal expenses (e.g. souvenirs etc)
- Alcoholic beverages
- Tips for guides and drivers

Testimonials:

Horse riding in Kyrgyzstan, walking through the white marble city Ashgabat in Turkmenistan or exploring the most beautiful and remote lakes of Tajikistan: Those are just a few amazing memories I'll carry the rest of my life. If you have the possibility, go on this adventure of a lifetime!

Sander from Netherlands

I travelled with Kalpak recently on their Best of Central Asia trip and I must say that the whole trip exceeded my expectations. First of all, all my queries were answered promptly and the booking process was straightforward. Everything seemed to be organized well and all the guides we had in each country were enthusiastic and knowledgeable. We stayed at a variety of accommodations - from luxury hotels, family run guesthouse and yurts. Kazakhstan excels with their modern glitzy buildings while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have mountains and lakes that make your jaw drop. Uzbekistan in the other hand is full of interesting and photogenic historical madrassas. I feel safe throughout the whole trip and the people were generally friendly. Besides that, travelling with a small group of like-minded people is more fun than doing it alone. I would definitely recommend using Kalpak Travel to anyone who is thinking of visiting Central Asia.

Hafiz from Australia

I have just arrived from an incredible trip to Central Asia in a group of 6 people from different parts of the world. It was an amazing and wonderful experience. I've been in places I've never imagined before, with beautiful scenery, hiking, bathing in the lake, picnic and many mosques and places that are UNESCO world heritage, with lots of history. And all this done through the agency KALPAK TRAVEL, which I had the great pleasure and luck to find in a survey made online. They were from the beginning, extremely solicitous, kind and whenever I needed they were there to help me. From the help with the purchase of my air ticket, to the details of the necessary visas, and to several questions that I had before the trip and that were always answered with a lot of education, patience and dedication. And I can say with total conviction that they are very prepared, they love what they do and it makes a lot of difference on a trip like that.

Marilu from Brazil