



MIR: Journeys to Legendary Destinations at the Crossroads of Europe & Asia

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## ISAC Central Asia

Ashgabat • Merv • Gonur Depe • Kunya Urgench • Nukus • Khiva •  
Bukhara • Samarkand • Tashkent • Fergana

June 10 - 27, 2024

Led by Gil Stein



## **Overview Daily Itinerary**

Day 1, Mon, Jun 10	Arrive Ashgabat, Turkmenistan
Day 2, Tue, Jun 11	Ashgabat
Day 3, Wed, Jun 12	Ashgabat • Mary • Merv
Day 4, Thu, Jun 13	Mary • Gonur Depe • Ashgabat
Day 5, Fri, Jun 14	Ashgabat • Dashoguz • Kunya Urgench • Nukus, Uzbekistan
Day 6, Sat, Jun 15	Nukus
Day 7, Sun, Jun 16	Nukus • Khiva
Day 8, Mon, Jun 17	Khiva
Day 9, Tue, Jun 18	Khiva • Bukhara
Day 10, Wed, Jun 19	Bukhara
Day 11, Thu, Jun 20	Bukhara • Samarkand
Day 12, Fri, Jun 21	Samarkand
Day 13, Sat, Jun 22	Samarkand • Tashkent
Day 14, Sun, Jun 23	Tashkent
Day 15, Mon, Jun 24	Tashkent • Fergana
Day 16, Tue, Jun 25	Fergana
Day 17, Wed, Jun 26	Fergana • Tashkent
Day 18, Thu, Jun 27	Depart Tashkent

## **Descriptive Daily Itinerary**

### **Day 1, Mon, Jun 10**

### **Arrive Ashgabat, Turkmenistan**

On early arrival in Ashgabat, your local guide will meet the group for a transfer to the hotel. After resting at the hotel, enjoy breakfast, followed by a city tour of Ashgabat.

### **Today's Highlights**

- **Discover Ashgabat**
- **National Museum of Turkmenistan**

### **Discover Ashgabat**

In spite of its location on a trade route, Ashgabat never achieved the status and influence of other Silk Road cities like Khiva or Bukhara. Originally known as Konjikala, the city was destroyed by Mongols in the 13th century. In 1881 the Russians built a fortress on the site as a buffer against English-dominated Persia, and by the early 20th century Ashgabat was a prosperous and flourishing city. In 1948 a massive earthquake leveled the city, killing over two-thirds of the population. Recently Ashgabat has seen a boom in new construction, which has had a major impact on the look of the city. Modern marble and gold monuments have sprung up all over town. In fact, in





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2013 the Guinness Book of World Records awarded Ashgabat the record for the highest density of white marble buildings in the world.

### **National Museum of Turkmenistan**

The National Museum of Turkmenistan, with its grand approach and panoramic views, introduces modern Turkmenistan on the ground floor and ancient history in the galleries above. The historical exhibits begin with artifacts ranging from Stone Age tools to carved ivory drinking horns used for Zoroastrian rituals and special occasions (called rhytons), and move through time, telling the story of Turkmenistan through the ages. Other galleries display beautiful ceramics, coins, amulets, and gold and silver artifacts. The museum also features a fantastic selection of Turkmen carpets located on the ground floor.

#### Oguzkent Hotel or similar

*Elegant yet traditional, the five-star Oguzkent Hotel is situated in Ashgabat's city center, across from Neutrality Park. Designed for comfort and convenience, rooms come with a minibar, safe, air conditioning and WiFi. Three restaurants, a spa and mall are also located within the hotel.*

*Meals: B D*

### **Day 2, Tue, Jun 11**

#### **Ashgabat**

Today enjoy a full day in Ashgabat exploring the archaeological site of Nisa and the National Museum of Turkmen Carpets.

#### **Today's Highlights**

- **Nisa**
- **National Museum of Turkmen Carpets**

#### **Nisa**

The beautiful Kopet-Dag Mountains rise up around Nisa, a site 15 miles outside of Ashgabat that was once a major center of the ancient Parthian Kingdom. More than two thousand years ago the Parthian Empire spread out from Nisa and took its place among such kingdoms as the Achaemenid under Cyrus the Great and the Macedonian under Alexander the Great. Though Nisa was ruled by a succession of dynasties, it remained an important center in the ancient world until the 13th century, when the Mongols sacked it. Today archaeological work continues at Nisa, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2007.

#### **National Museum of Turkmen Carpets**

Ashgabat's excellent Museum of Carpets and Textiles displays an abundance of gorgeous carpets, kilims, cushions and costumes and explains the nuanced differences in carpet and textile patterns among different Turkmen tribes and regions. One of the largest hand-knotted carpets in the world can be seen here. The museum is a great place to learn about Central Asian carpets.

Overnight at Oguzkent Hotel or similar

Meals: B L D

**Day 3, Wed, Jun 12**

**Ashgabat • Mary • Merv**

Today we take a morning flight to Mary and visit the ancient Merv.

**Today's Highlights**

- **Tour of Ancient Merv**
- **Archaeological Museum in Mary**

**Tour of Ancient Merv**

The fertile oasis of Merv has supported human life for over 4,000 years now. Formed from the rich silt at the mouth of the Murghab River where it soaks into the Kara Kum Desert, the oasis was a major center of civilization in the early Bronze Age. Several cities have existed here throughout history, the earliest of which is attributed to Cyrus the Great dating back to 6th century BC. Throughout its evolution, Merv can lay claim to having been one of the major centers of Islam, a busy hub on the Silk Road, and a city absolutely integral to Central Asia's development.

Merv was the center of several civilizations and became an important way station on the Great Silk Road between the 2nd and the 13th centuries, when it was sacked and burned by the Mongols. Admire the tall square mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar, built in the 12th century, and the massive ribbed Gyz Gala, or “Maiden’s Fortress.” The ruins of Merv were listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999 because of the wealth of ongoing information they offer regarding the evolution of urban centers.



**Archaeological Museum in Mary**

Visit the Museum of History and Ethnography in Mary. The museum is housed in an old merchant's house dating from the 19th century, which was reconstructed and refurbished a few years ago. Displays include discoveries from Merv, Gonur-Depe and other Turkmen archaeological sites.

Time permitting, discover the highlights of Mary such as the local bazaar, Russian Orthodox church, and Juma Mosque.

Mary Hotel or similar

*The modern Mary Hotel is pleasant and comfortable. Rooms offer air conditioning, satellite TV and telephones.*





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*Meals: B L D*

**Day 4, Thu, Jun 13**

**Mary • Gonur Depe • Ashgabat**

Today embark on a 4WD visit to Gonur Depe. Return to Mary at the end of the day for the evening flight back to Ashgabat.

**Today's Highlights**

- **Gonur Depe**

**Gonur Depe**

Uncovered by Soviet archeologists in the mid-20th century, the fortress town of Gonur Depe was once a thriving urban center of the mysterious Bronze Age "Oxus Civilization." The Bronze Age site dating back to around 2000 BC was surrounded by strong fortress walls, and made up of adobe homes and buildings, the remnants of which are still subsiding in this rural corner of Turkmenistan located about 45 miles north of Merv.

The site has produced a multitude of artifacts, ranging from figurines and pottery, as well as advanced infrastructure and a draining system that indicates a highly complex society for the time. Over the years archaeologists have also uncovered thousands of graves, both human and animal, and a royal tomb that demonstrate the unique Zoroastrian burial practices.

The site is still undergoing regular archeological digs that reveal more and more about this society.

Overnight at Oguzkent Hotel or similar

*Meals: B L*

**Day 5, Fri, Jun 14**

**Ashgabat • Dashoguz • Kunya Urgench • Nukus, Uzbekistan**

Set off early this morning with a flight from Ashgabat to Dashoguz in the north of Turkmenistan. From here drive to Kunya Urgench. After exploring This UNESCO site, cross the border to Nukus, Uzbekistan.

**Today's Highlights**

- **Kunya Urgench**
- **Mizdakhn Necropolis**
- **Discover Nukus**

**Kunya Urgench**

Kunya Urgench is an agricultural center of about 30,000 near the Uzbek border. It is the site of the ancient capital of Khorezm, which was razed by both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. About half a mile south of the town lie the remains of the UNESCO-listed old city, including the 11th-century Kutlug-Timur Minaret, ringed with 18 bands of decorative mud brick and blue majolica tiles. The minaret was for many years the tallest in Central Asia. Also admire the domed hall of the Turabek Khanym

Mausoleum. Notable for the interlocking design of its remarkably well-preserved ceiling, the mausoleum was built for the daughter of one of the leaders of the Golden Horde.

### **Mizdakhan Necropolis**

In the village of Khojayli, near Nukus, visit the necropolis of Mizdakhan, whose graves wander up and down the two hills it covers. The oldest grave mounds date back to the 2nd century BC. Tombs include early kurgans, Zoroastrian alabaster ossuaries and Muslim graves marked with the crescent moon of Islam.

### **Discover Nukus**

The small city of Nukus in western Uzbekistan is the capital of the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan, home to the Karakalpaks, a Turkic people more closely related to Kazakhs than to Uzbeks. A modern city, Nukus is at the center of an area crisscrossed by old caravan routes and dotted with ancient ruins. The surrounding cotton fields testify to the monoculture that stole the water from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, the rivers that fed the Aral Sea. About 230 km north is Mo'ynoq and the former seashore. A city tour of Nukus includes a visit to the Karakalpak State Art Museum, also known as the Savitsky Museum.

#### Jipek Joli Hotel, New Building or similar

*The new part of the Jipek Joli, or "Silk Road," hotel is decorated in the traditional Karakalpak national style. The bright rooms feature wooden beds, handmade silk curtains, and ornamental carpets. The non-smoking hotel features a spacious dining area serving international cuisine.*

*Meals: B L D*

### **Day 6, Sat, Jun 15**

#### **Nukus**

Today is a full day trip from Nukus to Mo'ynoq, capped off with a Throat Singers Performance during dinner.

#### **Today's Highlights**

- **Aral Sea day trip to Mo'ynoq**
- **Throat Singers Performance**

#### **Aral Sea day trip to Mo'ynoq**

Mo'ynoq, formerly the Aral Sea's biggest fishing port, is a ghost town, scattered with the hulks of rusted fishing boats and freighters. Once the fourth-largest inland sea in the world, the Aral Sea barely exists today, and what remains is too salty to support life. From the 60s on, in an attempt to force the arid land to produce cotton, Soviet planners



diverted the flow of the sea's two feeder rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, and it began inexorably to shrink. Alarmed, the people of Mo'ynoq dug a canal from the port to the receding shore, but the water disappeared too fast for them to keep up with the gargantuan task. As the body of water shrank, it became more and more salty, and its fish began to die. The surrounding cotton fields became more saline and less productive. Today, there are few jobs left in Mo'ynoq, and chemicals from the cotton fields are often swept into the clouds of salt that blow across the region.

### **Throat Singers Performance**

Enjoy a performance of Karakalpak musicians including throat singing.

*Overnight at Jipek Joli Hotel, New Building or similar*

*Meals: B L D*

### **Day 7, Sun, Jun 16**

#### **Nukus • Khiva**

Start the day at the in Nukus with a visit to the Art Museum before driving to Khiva after lunch.

### **Today's Highlights**

- **Savitsky Art Museum (Karakalpak Museum of Arts)**

#### **Savitsky Art Museum (Karakalpak Museum of Arts)**

Explore the wonderful Savitsky Art Museum. This remote desert museum houses the incredible life's work of founder, Igor Savitsky, who was able to amass a collection of thousands of banned avant-garde Soviet art pieces without interference from Moscow and keep it hidden from the watchful eyes of the KGB. The story of this collection has been told in the award-winning documentary, "Desert of Forbidden Art." The collection is the second-largest gathering of Russian avant-garde art after the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg.

*Asia Khiva Hotel or similar*

*Located just outside of Ichon Qala and a two-minute walk from the city wall, Hotel Asia Khiva offers a beautiful lobby, a restaurant with its own bakery, bar, conference hall, Internet, pool and sauna. All rooms have air-conditioning, satellite TV, phone and minibar.*

*Meals: B L D*

### **Day 8, Mon, Jun 17**

#### **Khiva**

Enjoy a full day discovering the city of Khiva.

### **Today's Highlights**

- **Discover Khiva**
- **Ichon Qala (Inner City)**
- **Tash-Hauli Palace**

- **Juma Mosque**
- **Pahlavan Mahmud Mausoleum**



### **Discover Khiva**

Legend says that the ancient Silk Road oasis of Khiva was founded at the place where Shem, son of Noah, discovered water in the desert, and that the city got its name from Shem's joyful shout, "Hey va!" at the discovery. Today the living city is part museum town, part re-creation of life hundreds of years ago.

Archaeologists have found traces of human habitation around Khiva dating from the 5th century BC. It was for hundreds of years a stop on the old Silk Road and a fortress town, but it was not until the 16th century that Khiva became the capital of the Khorezm Khanate. The khanate ruled the surrounding area for over 300 years.

### **Ichon Qala (Inner City)**

Khiva's Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, has been extensively preserved and restored, and exists today much as it did hundreds of years ago. Approaching the old town, modern-

day travelers face the same sight as Silk Road caravans did, the dun-colored city walls, the main gate opening on a dusty stone thoroughfare, merchants hawking their wares from each side, and the distinctive minarets watching over the whole scene.

The walled Old City was an independent entity and the seat of the Khanate of Khiva. The largest of the existing buildings is the Tash Hauli Palace, the home of the Khan and his four legal wives. The intricate blue and white tilework in the open-air throne room offsets the airy space set aside by the carved wooden columns.

Wood carving is a traditional specialty of Khiva, and more wooden columns are found at the Juma Mosque. The mosque is partially below ground level and the 115 carved columns that support the wooden ceiling create a forest-like effect around two square light wells.

The Kunya Ark was originally built in the 12th century as the khan's fortress and residence, and encompassed numerous small courtyards surrounded by administrative buildings, sleeping quarters, kitchens, guardhouse, stables, parade area and weapons strongholds. Much of it was lost when Persia invaded the Khivan Khanate in the 18th century, but what remains, including the mosque, harem and throne room are beautifully decorated with ceramic tiles and majolica.





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There are several places that offer aerial views of the city, and from any 3rd- or 4th-story balcony the unique minarets with their blue-green tiles stand over the domes, mud-brick walls, and quiet feel of this museum town.

### **Tash-Hauli Palace**

The largest of the existing buildings in the Ichon Qala is the Tash-Hauli Palace, the former home of the khan and his four legal wives. Built between 1832 and 1841, the palace was designed as a more sumptuous replacement for Kunya Ark, encompassing more than 150 rooms surrounding nine courtyards. They include a throne room, a ceremonial and banqueting hall with brick bases for yurts, and the khan's own personal harem quarters, beautifully decorated with elaborate blue and white tilework, wooden columns, and intricately carved and painted plaster known as *ganche*.

### **Juma Mosque**

Wood carving is a traditional specialty of Khiva, and filigreed wooden columns are found at the Juma Mosque. The mosque is partially below ground level and the 115 carved columns that support the wooden ceiling create a forest-like effect around two square light wells.

### **Pahlavan Mahmud Mausoleum**

The mausoleum of Pahlavan Mahmud was built in 1810 to honor the patron of Khiva, Pahlavan Mahmud, a poet and wrestler who died in the 14th century and is thought to be buried here. Its full turquoise dome has become a symbol of Khiva, along with the nearby Islam Khoja Minaret, banded in dark and light blue.

*Overnight at Asia Khiva Hotel or similar*

*Meals: B L*

### **Day 9, Tue, Jun 18**

#### **Khiva • Bukhara**

Today is a travel day with overland drive from Khiva to Bukhara. After arrival, you will have some free time to discover the city of Bukhara.

### **Today's Highlights**

#### **• Discover Bukhara**

### **Discover Bukhara**

An oasis in the desert, UNESCO-listed Bukhara offers cool shade and rest to the modern traveler as it did to the camel caravans that plied the Silk Road hundreds of years ago. Bukhara is as old as Samarkand, and has preserved its ancient architecture and design to an arguably larger extent than that city. The Old Town in Bukhara has a unified feel, drawn together by a central reflecting pool and plaza, by commonality in the structure of the domed bazaars and by the major monuments ringing the Old Town: the Kalon Assembly, the Zindan Prison, and the Ark Citadel.

Bukhara was the site of one of the best-known episodes (to westerners) in Central Asian history, the 19th century capture and ultimate execution of two British spies posing as explorers. They were involved in what was then known as the Great Game between Russia and England for control over Central Asia, and access to India. The last emir of Bukhara was a notoriously brutal and crafty leader, and kept the men imprisoned at great length before their public execution.

The city was also an important merchant center of Sephardic Jewry. The term “Bukharan Jews” refers to a large community of Jews originally from Persia who lived in the lands formerly ruled by the emir of Bukhara.

#### Alexia Hotel or similar

*Opened in 2023, the Alexia brings a new boutique hotel experience to the heart of old town Bukhara. Alexia Hotel has 17 well-equipped and tastefully decorated guest rooms, each with its own spacious, private bathroom featuring heated floors.*

*Meals: B L D*

### **Day 10, Wed, Jun 19**

### **Bukhara**

Today offers a busy day exploring the city of Bukhara.

#### **Today's Highlights**

- **Labi-Hauz Plaza**
- **Kukeldash Madrassah**
- **Kalon Mosque and Minaret**
- **Ark Citadel**
- **Zindan Prison**
- **Bazaar: Trade Domes of Bukhara**
- **Miniature Painting Workshop**
- **Jewish Quarter**
- **Museum of Blacksmith's Art**

#### **Labi-Hauz Plaza**

With the feel of a true oasis in an oasis town, the Labi-Hauz Plaza is at the center of Bukhara’s old town and is – as it has been throughout history – a place to meet friends, to eat, to drink, and to relax in the shade. The atmosphere is cooled by the long rectangular reflecting pool that makes up the center of the plaza, and by the shade of the trees that ring the plaza. The mulberry trees here are hundreds of years old and frame the 16th- and 17th-century madrassahs that make up three of the four edges of the ensemble.

#### **Kukeldash Madrassah**

The Kukeldash Madrassah on the north side of the Labi-Hauz reflecting pool is the largest Koranic school in Central Asia. Named for the statesman and general Kulbaba Kukeldash, the madrassah was

built in 1568.

### **Kalon Mosque and Minaret**

Visit Poi Kalon, also called the Bukhara Forum. The 12th century Kalon assembly, including the Kalon Mosque and Minaret, and the Mir-i-Arab Madrassah, surrounds an open plaza teeming with merchants and local vendors. The minaret towers over the dusty square, looking down from a height of more than 150 feet, and casting its shadow between the mosque and the madrassah. Fourteen distinct and unique bands of brickwork circle the tower at intervals, and at the top of the minaret resolve into a traditional stalactite formation.



### **Ark Citadel**

The Ark Citadel is the original fortress of Bukhara and likely dates back two thousand years or more. The current structure has been built and rebuilt on the same site throughout its history, and has preserved something of the form, purpose and function of the first Ark. Like the medieval castle complexes of Europe, the Bukhara Ark served the Emirs of Bukhara as a residence, audience hall, as protection from neighboring enemies and for more mundane purposes, such as a trade center and a police station.

### **Zindan Prison**

Just behind the Ark Citadel is the infamous Zindan Prison and the even more infamous "bug pit" or "black hole," the cell where two of Britain's finest Great Game players were imprisoned before their execution.

### **Bazaar: Trade Domes of Bukhara**

Wander the covered bazaar, admiring deep stacks of vivid handwoven carpets, felt hats, exotic jewelry and gorgeous embroidered suzani. Constructed in the 16th century to sell the wares that arrived with the caravans, the arched trade domes organized the merchandize and crafts by types, as well as kept the traders cool. Four of the stately domed markets remain, originally occupied by currency exchanges, metalware, carpets, books, jewelry and fabrics.

### **Miniature Painting Workshop**

Miniature painting has a long history and important role in the Islamic world, especially in Central Asia, Turkey, Iran, and India. Visit the studio of a master miniaturist. Learn more about his art and view some of his work. Then try your hand at the skill, under the expert guidance of the master.



### **Jewish Quarter**

Visit Bukhara's old Jewish Quarter, in the heart of the Old Town, where in the mid-19th century 2,500 families of prosperous merchants were estimated to have been living. Cut off in the 15th century from contact with other Jews, the Bukharan Jews developed their own dialect of the Tajik-Persian language that incorporates many Hebrew words, their own style of dress, and their own unique form of Judaism. The only Bukharan synagogue allowed by the Soviets to remain in the Old Jewish Quarter is an unassuming place near the Labi-Hauz pool. Almost underground and still somewhat run-down, the synagogue is the center of life for Bukhara's greatly diminished Jewish community. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, between 70,000 and 100,000 Jews have left Uzbekistan.

### **Museum of Blacksmith's Art**

Visit the Blacksmiths' Museum-workshop, located in the 16th century Kulita Caravanserai. Learn about the art of forging metals and observe and participate in making metal objects. Admire the collection of metal armor, swords, chain mail and more.

Overnight at Alexia Hotel or similar

*Meals: B L*

### **Day 11, Thu, Jun 20**

### **Bukhara • Samarkand**

Start the morning with a visit to Shafirkan Village. After lunch in Bukhara, you have an afternoon transfer from Bukhara to Samarkand on the high-speed train. You will discover Samarkand before dinner and a musical performance at the home of a local family.

### **Today's Highlights**

- **Suzani Cooperative in Shafirkan Village**
- **Discover Samarkand**
- **Musical Performance at the Home of a Local Family**

### **Suzani Cooperative in Shafirkan Village**

Venture outside Bukhara approximately 45 minutes to a village studio specializing in the art of suzani. See a demonstration of the process from start to finish: silk cocoons, dying, design, drawing, and embroidery in this home workshop of a multi-generational family who has been practicing the art for many years.

"Suzani" is derived from the Persian word for "needle," an apt term for the decorative, richly colored Central Asian embroidered textiles created by hand using needles, naturally dyed silk threads, basma and chain stitches. Flowers, pomegranates, vines, suns and moons are favorite motifs in this needlework. Suzanis were originally created from strips of cotton or silk fabric sewn together; a complex design was drawn on it; the fabric strips were then taken apart and individually sewn by women in a family or village. Once completed, the strips were sewn back together into one large

piece. Suzanis were traditionally made by brides for their dowries, with embroidery styles varying from town to town.

### **Discover Samarkand**

Perhaps the most well-known of Silk Road towns, Samarkand, fabled oasis on the fringes of the Kyzyl Kum Desert, has been settled since the 6th century BC. Because of its location on the plains where the Zeravshan River spills out from the Pamir Mountains, Samarkand became a major Silk Road crossroads.

A World Heritage Site, Samarkand is called "Crossroad of Cultures" by UNESCO. It has been visited through time by many of the world's conquerors — Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. Alexander said of Samarkand, "Everything I have heard about the beauty of the city is indeed true, except that it is much more beautiful than I imagined." Tamerlane made it his capital city and gathered the finest architects, builders and artisans of the time to enhance its beauty.

### **Musical Performance at the Home of a Local Family**

Enjoy a musical performance while you dine in the home of a local family.

#### *Grand Samarkand Superior or similar*

*Opened in 2012, the lovely four-star Hotel Grand Samarkand Superior features traditional decor, a nice restaurant serving regional delicacies, a fitness center and sauna. The stylish rooms include air conditioning, complimentary WiFi, minibar, satellite TV and hair dryer.*

*Meals: B L D*

### **Day 12, Fri, Jun 21**

### **Samarkand**

Spend a full day getting to know the city of Samarkand.

#### **Today's Highlights**

- **Registan Square**
- **Gur-Emir Mausoleum**
- **Bibi Khanum Mosque**
- **Siab Bazaar**
- **Shah-i-Zinda Complex**
- **Afrosiab History Museum**
- **Ulug Bek Observatory**

#### **Registan Square**

Registan Square is the centerpiece of Samarkand, and the most recognizable landmark for visitors. The three emblematic madrassahs frame the square, and loom over the empty space in the center. It was this central space that originally gave the place its name, for "registan" simply means "place of sand." This sandy place was at the center of ancient Samarkand and was a public square and



marketplace before the Ulug Bek, Tillya-Kori, and Shir Dor madrassahs were built. In its reconstruction, the square maintains the majesty that it has radiated through the ages.

### **Gur-Emir Mausoleum**

Gur-Emir Mausoleum is the final resting place of Tamerlane, but was originally built for his grandson after the latter's death, at the turn of the 15th century. The interior of the mausoleum has been restored and is brilliant in gold leaf and fresh tile. The heavily gilded central dome opens over the set of tomb-markers resembling sarcophagi (the bodies are located well below, but are on site). All are marble, with the exception of Tamerlane's, which is a slab of solid jade reportedly from Mongolia.

### **Bibi Khanum Mosque**

See the massive and beautiful Bibi Khanum Mosque, built by Tamerlane to be the largest mosque in the Islamic world, and dedicated to the memory of his favorite wife. Architects from India and Persia were brought in to build the mosque, and 95 elephants were used to transport the marble and other building materials from India to Samarkand.

When construction on the mosque began in 1399, it pushed the boundaries for cutting-edge architecture at the time, with a 41-meter high, blue-tiled dome and 38-meter entrance portal. Yet, much of the work was rushed and quality less than optimal; not long after completion in 1404, tiles and walls began to crumble, with the entire structure collapsing in an 1897 earthquake. Major sections of the mosque were rebuilt in the Soviet era, and completely restored in 2007. Today Bibi Khanum is a quiet place for prayer inside the mosque and outside in the leafy courtyard. Legend says that barren women who crawl under and through the massive stone Koran lectern will soon conceive.



### **Siab Bazaar**

Browse the animated Siab Bazaar, just across the street from the Bibi Khanum Mosque. Vividly dressed women oversee neat stacks of brilliant produce and burlap sacks of nuts and spices. Uzbek and Tajik men in black and white skullcaps, called doppi, sell cabbage rolls and shashlik. For a pittance, an entrepreneur with a brazier of special incense will cleanse you of all bad luck.

### **Shah-i-Zinda Complex**

The row of tombs and mausoleums collectively called Shah-i-Zinda, or "place of a living king," stretches between the present and the past. At

its front is living Samarkand, and at its back the dusty slopes at the edge of ancient Afrosiab. Even on hot summer days the mausoleums remain shady and cool and seem to lure the traveler to approach

the oldest tomb at the far end. Behind the complex and set into the hill lies an active cemetery with grave sites dating back as far as the 9th century, and as recently as the present day.

### **Afrosiab History Museum**

Just outside of modern-day Samarkand lie the dusty hills of the ancient city of Afrosiab, once a potent capital, now an archaeological site guarding treasures of antiquity. Scientific digs here began in the 1800s under Russian rule, and continue to this day. On site is the Afrosiab History Museum, which houses artifacts from the area, including pottery and tile found among the excavated walls of the town.

### **Ulug Bek Observatory**

Though concerned with conquest, politics and other matters of terrestrial importance, Tamerlane's grandson, Ulug Bek, found his true interest in the heavens. The astronomer-king was fascinated by the stars and the cosmos and built one of the most advanced observatories of the ancient world. The observations, which he undertook with the naked eye only, predated the telescope by over 150 years. They were aided by the building itself, which housed a large vertical half-circle, only a quarter of which remains today. By using careful methods, rigorous observation and meticulous recording, Ulug Bek calculated the length of the year to within a minute of the modern accepted value. He also created the most comprehensive (to that date) catalog of the heavens, earning his place in history.

*Overnight at Grand Samarkand Superior or similar*

*Meals: B L*

### **Day 13, Sat, Jun 22**

### **Samarkand • Tashkent**

Spend the day learning the process of carpet and paper making in Samarkand before taking an evening high-speed train to Tashkent. You will have a late dinner upon arrival in Tashkent.

### **Today's Highlights**

- **Afghan-Uzbek Silk Carpet Factory**
- **Paper-making Workshop**

### **Afghan-Uzbek Silk Carpet Factory**

This joint venture carpet factory uses natural vegetable dyes to color the thread used in its carpets. Tour the gardens outside the factory where the weavers grow indigo, coleus, and dahlias to use for dye. Observe the entire process of dying the thread and weaving the carpets, with an opportunity to shop afterward.

### **Paper-making Workshop**

Visit a workshop where handcrafted paper is made according to traditions handed down from the 8th century, when papermaking began in Samarkand. Founded in 1997 with the support of UNESCO, the

workshop of Abdurakhim Mukhtarov, located in the village of Koni Gil on the outskirts of the city, produces lovely paper crafts and stationery as you watch.

*Lotte City Hotel Tashkent Palace or similar*

*Located in the heart of the city, the updated Lotte City Hotel Tashkent Palace re-opened in 2013. The elegant hotel features two restaurants, one of them on the rooftop, serving regional and international cuisine. A piano bar, fitness center, outdoor pool, sauna and spa services round out the amenities. Rooms include deluxe beds, air conditioning, WiFi, satellite TV, minibar and hairdryer.*

*Meals: B L D*

**Day 14, Sun, Jun 23**

**Tashkent**

Today is a full day exploring the city of Tashkent.



**Today's Highlights**

- **Discover Tashkent**
- **State Museum of History**
- **Independence Square**
- **Museum of Applied Arts**
- **Old Town Tour of Tashkent**
- **Oldest Koran**
- **Rakhimov Family Ceramics Studio**

**Discover Tashkent**

Although it doesn't look it today, Tashkent is one of the oldest cities in Uzbekistan. Rock paintings in the Chatkal Mountains about 50 miles away show that

humans have been here since perhaps 2000 BC. In the 2nd century BC the town was known as Ming Uryuk. A major caravan crossroads, it was taken by the Arabs in 751 and by Genghis Khan in the 13th century. Tamerlane feasted here in the 14th century and the Shaibanid khans in the 15th and 16th. The Russian Empire arrived in 1865, and Uzbekistan was not an autonomous country again until 1991.

Tashkent lost much of its architectural history in a huge earthquake in 1966, and although it is an old city, most of it has been built since then. Today, the city is a jumble of wide tree-lined boulevards, oversized 20th century Soviet buildings and reconstructed traces of the old city with mud-walled houses, narrow winding lanes, mosques and madrassahs (Islamic religious schools).

**State Museum of History**

The State Museum of History was founded in 1876, making it one of the oldest museums in Central Asia. The extensive exhibits include artifacts and bones from the Neanderthal site at the Teshikdash caves, Bronze Age implements and weapons from Chust in the Fergana Valley, and a rich collection of Buddhist art.

## **Independence Square**

The history of Independence Square (Mustakillik Maydoni) is revealed in the different names it has borne throughout its existence. Originally named Cathedral Square in honor of the Orthodox cathedral built here by Konstanin Kaufman, the first Russian Governor-General of Turkestan, it became Red Square in 1917. In 1966 it was designated Lenin Square, and it was not until 1992 that it became Independence Square.

Enter the spacious park-like square through a silver arch embellished with white storks. The golden globe of the Monument of Independence, constructed in 1991, sits above the 20-foot Happy Mother statue, who gazes lovingly at her child, the future of Uzbekistan. Among the fountains and flower beds other, sadder, mother figures wait for their sons around an eternal flame that honors the many Uzbeks who perished during WWII. On the outskirts of the square are Tashkent's administrative and government buildings.

## **Museum of Applied Arts**

Browse the Applied Arts Museum. A wealthy czarist diplomat to Turkestan admiring Uzbek architecture, Alexander Polovtsev built a traditional mansion in 1898 and invited artisans from Samarkand, Bukhara and Fergana to decorate the interior. Featuring the painted carved plaster called ganache, carved wood, and tile work, the house itself is a main attraction. Exhibits include the Uzbek embroidered wall coverings called suzani, ceramics, jewelry, rugs, and musical instruments.



## **Old Town Tour of Tashkent**

Explore Old Tashkent, beginning with a visit to Khast-Imam Plaza, with its 16th century Kaffal-Shoshi Mausoleum and al-Bukhari Madrassah; Chorsu Bazaar with its 16th century Kukeldash Madrassah; the recently renovated Juma Mosque on the square where executions used to be held; and Sayilgoh, a pedestrian street where one can shop for art and souvenirs. Dip down underground to admire the beautifully decorated Tashkent subway stations.

## **Oldest Koran**

The Uthman Koran, considered by Sunni Muslims to be the oldest Koran in the world, is safeguarded in the library of the Tillya Sheikh Mosque in the Muy Muborok Madrassah, where several of Mohammed's hairs are said to have been enshrined. Written on calfskin some time after the death of Mohammed, the manuscript is believed to have been compiled in Medina by Uthman, the third caliph of Islam. (Shi'a Muslims believe that Uthman's successor, Ali, was the first true caliph, and his version of the Koran is held to be the only true version.) Only a third of the manuscript remains, about 250 large

pages bound into a huge book. It has been inscribed onto the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. The experience of viewing this 7th century sacred document is a powerful one.

### **Rakhimov Family Ceramics Studio**

The acclaimed private studio of the Rakhimov family offers stunning examples of ancient traditional Uzbek ceramics – many of them previously displayed in Europe and Japan. Alisher Rakhimov is a sixth-generation Uzbek ceramicist whose family has been making pottery since the 1790s. He and his father, Akbar, have made an extensive study of the history and methods of Uzbek ceramics, with a scholarly emphasis on the period from the 2nd century BC to the 15th century AD. The massive work of their father/grandfather (Mukhitdin Rakhimov), "Artistic Ceramics of Uzbekistan," is considered a fundamental must-read for anyone desiring to learn about these ancient Uzbek styles and techniques; for his life's work Mukhitdin was awarded the prestigious Soviet-era title of People's Artist of the USSR.

Following in the footsteps of their ancestors, Alisher and Akbar are adept in ancient glazing and dyeing techniques, reproducing the golden ceramics of the Surkhandarya style and the stamped decorations of the Kashgari region. The father-son artistic duo has revived the lost art of natural dye use, teaching contemporary Uzbek ceramicists their rediscovered techniques. In true Uzbek hospitality, enjoy fragrant tea and sweets while conversing with Alisher and Akbar about their art and passion for preserving and passing on their family's prized ceramics legacy.

Overnight at Lotte City Hotel Tashkent Palace or similar

*Meals: B L*

### **Day 15, Mon, Jun 24**

### **Tashkent • Fergana**

Start the day transferring from Tashkent to the Fergana Valley by train. You will be met by bus to visit several stops in the valley before arriving at the hotel in the evening.

### **Today's Highlights**

- **Discover Kokand**
- **Palace of Khudayar-Khan**
- **Rishton Ceramic Master's Workshop**

### **Discover Kokand**

Kokand was first mentioned by Arab travelers in the 10th century as an oasis town on the trade route between India and China. Kokand was known throughout history as a prosperous trading and religious center and during the 19th century, it was the centerpiece of a powerful khanate stretching from the Fergana Valley to the southern Kazakh steppes.



### **Palace of Khudayar-Khan**

The Palace of Khudayar-Khan was built between 1863-1873. At the time of its construction, it was one of the most luxurious palaces in Central Asia. Only 27 of the original 113 rooms have survived around six beautifully restored courtyards. Today the former palace is the Kokand Regional Studies Museum.

### **Rishton Ceramic Master's Workshop**

The village of Rishton is famous for its ceramics. There is evidence of earthenware in the foothills of the Alai Range dating back one thousand years. Pottery became prominent in this region due to the unusual amount and excellent quality of locally accessible raw materials – red clay and pigments made of minerals and mountain grasses.



Modern Rishton ceramics are characterized by elaborate floral and geometric designs in bright blue and green hues painted on a creamy white background. The skills used to produce Uzbek ceramics have been passed down father-to-son for countless generations.

### Asia Fergana Hotel or similar

*Located within walking distance of the town center, the pleasant modern Asia Fergana Hotel features an indoor and outdoor restaurant serving Uzbek and European cuisine, WiFi in the public areas and a swimming pool. Rooms include air conditioning, satellite TV and minibar.*

*Meals: B L D*

### **Day 16, Tue, Jun 25**

### **Fergana**

Continue exploring the Fergana Valley with stops to enjoy a silk tour and visit a silk factory.

### **Today's Highlights**

- **Discover Fergana**
- **Margilan silk tour**
- **Margilan Silk Factory**

### **Discover Fergana**

The city of Fergana is the newest settlement in the Fergana Valley, established in 1876 as a Russian garrison town under General Mikhail Skobolev. Located in the southern Fergana valley near the 16,000-foot Alai Mountains, Fergana can in places feel more Russian than Uzbek. Its first settlers were encouraged to plant trees, and today it has the reputation of being one of the greenest cities in Uzbekistan. The first building was the fortress, which still stands in the downtown part of the city.



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### **Margilan silk tour**

About 13 miles out of Fergana is the old town of Margilan, known as a center of silk production since the 9th century. A survey of the town includes a stop at Al-Margilony Park and the local bazaar, said to be one of the most authentic in the valley.

### **Margilan Silk Factory**

Visit this now famous center of silk textile production. The workshop uses natural dyes to produce stunning pieces using traditional Uzbek ikat designs. Silkworms are raised here on mulberry leaves.

Overnight at Asia Fergana Hotel or similar

Meals: B L D

### **Day 17, Wed, Jun 26                      Fergana • Tashkent**

Today we will transfer back from Fergana to Tashkent on a morning train. After check into the hotel, the day is free for you to explore Tashkent independently. Gather in evening for the farewell dinner.

Overnight at Lotte City Hotel Tashkent Palace or similar

Meals: B L D

### **Day 18, Thu, Jun 27                      Depart Tashkent**

Following breakfast at the hotel, flights times permitting, there will be a transfer to the airport for international departures.

Meals: B

*(This itinerary is subject to change.)*

### **Tour pricing:**

**\$8,695 per person in a double occupancy**  
**(\$1,050 Single supplement)**

To book this tour, please contact Matt Welton: [mwelton@uchicago.edu](mailto:mwelton@uchicago.edu) or call 773-834-9777.  
\$1,500 per person is required for a tour deposit.

Final payment is due by April, 24, 2024.

Cancellations received after the final payment date will result in penalties according to the following schedule:

Cancellations between 44 and 31 days out are penalized at 50% of the cost of the trip

Cancellations at 30 or fewer days out are penalized at 100% of the cost of the trip

*International airfare to and from your point of origin is not included in the tour price. All international airfare within the tour dates is included in the tour price.*