

# INSPIRING FIVE STANS

WHERE TO GO, WHAT TO DO & MORE



# WELCOME TO THE FIVE STANS



## INSIDE...

### Where will you travel to next?

At Inspiring Vacations, we're on a mission to inspire you to see the world. If you're dreaming of travelling to the most iconic destinations across the globe, you're in the right place. We couldn't be more excited to get you there.

Inside these pages, we showcase our newest Central Asian destinations, the Five Stans.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan offer so much to the first time visitor and repeat explorer alike—one visit is just not enough. By the end of this eBook, we're sure you'll be as eager to visit the Five Stans as we are to get you there!

Happy travel planning and, as always—safe travels.

**Paul Ryan**  
CEO  
Inspiring Vacations

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Cover: Registan Madressa facade, Getty Images/Samarkand (da-kuk)

# WHY TRAVEL WITH INSPIRING VACATIONS?



## GLOBAL EXPERTS

When you travel with Inspiring Vacations, you can expect thoughtfully curated tours to iconic destinations across the globe. Our authentic and culturally-rich tours are packed with must-see sights, lesser-known locations and enriching local experience, all at an unbeatable price.



## ONLINE ADVANTAGES

Browsing and shopping for your next Inspiring Vacations tour couldn't be easier. We are an online company which means you can shop at your own convenience—anytime, anywhere, even while on tour. Our award-winning website is user-friendly and easy to navigate. We want our customers to be empowered to be able to access and manage their booking at any time—manage upgrades, book optional tours, and more.



## INSPIRING COMMUNITY

Our travel articles, eBooks, destination videos and member-only Facebook community groups will inspire your wanderlust with like-minded travellers. Or, if you prefer, have a phone chat with one of our travel specialists for their recommendations.

✎ Around 90% of Kyrgyzstan's terrain is mountainous, hence the nickname the 'Switzerland of Central Asia'

# WHY VISIT THE FIVE STANS NOW?



## UNTOUCHED WINDOW

The Five Stans—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan—offer a window into a part of the world still largely untouched by mass tourism. From ancient Silk Road cities to dramatic mountain landscapes and enduring nomadic traditions, this is a region where history and culture run deep.



## IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Central Asia is stepping into the spotlight, drawing travellers with its blend of old-world charm and modern accessibility. Once overlooked, these five countries are now opening up with improved infrastructure, relaxed visa policies, and a growing focus on culture and nature-based tourism.



## ARCHITECTURE, MONUMENTS & SCENERY

Uzbekistan's restored cities of Samarkand and Bukhara showcase some of the finest Islamic architecture, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan appeal to those drawn to rugged mountain scenery and remote trekking routes. Kazakhstan's modern capital and Turkmenistan's surreal desert monuments add even more variety to the journey.



## UNBEATABLE VALUE

There's never been a better time to explore this diverse and intriguing region. Our itineraries are designed to connect travellers with the stories, landscapes and local communities that make the Five Stans so compelling.



**Brendon Cooper**

CHIEF PRODUCT OFFICER  
Inspiring Vacations

# WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO VISIT THE FIVE STANS?

Central Asia's Stans are five countries with fascinating cultures, history, and natural beauty. But, when is the best time to go?

## SPRING

From April to June, spring is an ideal time to travel to most regions. You can expect mild and pleasant temperatures throughout Central Asia, especially in countries with more mountainous terrain like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Daytime temperatures range from 15°C to 25°C (59°F to 77°F), perfect for outdoor activities like trekking and sightseeing. For those wanting to explore the ancient Silk Road cities and visit cultural sites like Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva (Uzbekistan), and Ashgabat (Turkmenistan) will find the springtime temperatures most suitable as you'll skip the intense heat of the summer. The conditions are ideal for wandering the ancient streets, exploring landmarks, and enjoying the outdoor markets without the heat. Spring is the best season to trek the Tian Shan mountains and visit Issyk-Kul Lake (both in Kyrgyzstan).

## SUMMER

Summer temperatures in July and August, as expected, can be scorching hot, especially in the desert areas of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, with temperatures exceeding 35°C (95°F), even reaching up to 45°C (113°F) in places like Bukhara and Khiva. High-altitude regions like Tian Shan and the Pamir Mountains enjoy cooler temperatures and exploring alpine lakes like Song-Kol and Issyk Kul is best on summer days.

In Uzbekistan, touring the famous cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, and their ancient mosques, madrassas, and bazaars is doable during the day, while the summer evenings are ideal for walking around these historical cities as the heat eases. In Kazakhstan, head to the cool Altai Mountains for hiking, and the tranquil shores of Lake Balkhash, bring pleasant temperatures in the evening.

The summer months also bring lively cultural celebrations in Kazakhstan's cities, where locals gather for outdoor concerts and street festivals. In Tajikistan, the Fann Mountains offer excellent summer trekking with pleasant temperatures at higher elevations. The crystal-clear Iskanderkul Lake and the Pamir Mountains are perfect for a cool escape. In Turkmenistan, summer is intense so keeping activities to early mornings or late evenings is best. In the capital city of Ashgabat, its sprawling parks offer some respite from the desert heat, as do visiting attractions like the National Museum of Turkmenistan.

## ...THE LANDSCAPE IS BEAUTIFUL WITH AUTUMN COLOURS FILLING THE VALLEYS AND MOUNTAINS—IT IS ONE OF THE BEST TIMES TO EXPLORE CENTRAL ASIA “ ”

### AUTUMN

When autumn hits, from September to October, so do the local festivals and harvest season, and the hiking and trekking trails get busy.

Temperatures are moderate and the landscape is beautiful with autumn colours filling the valleys and mountains—it is one of the best times to explore Central Asia. Daytime sightseeing temperatures hover around 15°C to 25°C (59 to 77°F), and alongside outdoor pursuits, the famous Silk Road festivals in Bukhara and Samarkand are the perfect addition to your must-do list.

Autumn also brings harvest feasts across Central Asia, where you can taste-test fresh fruit, nuts, and seasonal vegetables. The Kazakh city of Almaty also plays host to a variety of autumn festivals and harvest markets. The Almaty Apple Festival, held over three days in September, is the most adored, celebrating all things apple-themed, including cider making.

For adventure-seekers, hiking and trekking opportunities are particularly colourful during this time, especially around Kyrgyzstan's Issyk Kul Lake, where the surrounding mountains are

painted with reds, oranges and gold. Autumn is also the time for wildlife enthusiasts to visit as migrating birds and animals can be spotted in the region's national parks.

In autumn, in particular, experiencing a stay at a yurt camp is the perfect opportunity to witness the region's culture and hospitality in a beautiful setting. Similarly, in nearby Samarkand, the golden hues of autumn bring a striking contrast to the ancient architecture of Registan Square, making it an ideal time to explore this historic landmark.

### WINTER

In winter, from November to March, the weather in Central Asia can be very cold, especially in high-altitude areas and it's common for temperatures to drop below freezing. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, winter temperatures in Almaty and Bishkek can dip below -10°C (14°F) and can plunge far lower in some parts of Kazakhstan.

Winter sports enthusiasts will love the skiing and winter trekking options in the mountains. The ski season in Central Asia generally starts in late November, with resorts like Shymbulak in Kazakhstan



*Below (from top to bottom) Issyk-Kol Lake in Kyrgyzstan is the second largest mountain lake in the world; winter in Chavrak in Uzbekistan; Tian Shan mountains in Kyrgyzstan*



and Jyrgalan in Kyrgyzstan offering fantastic skiing conditions and fewer crowds. Temperatures in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan remain mild, but it can still be chilly in the evenings.

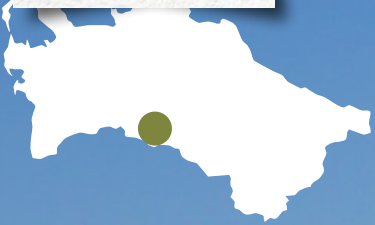
Tajikistan's Pamir Mountains also offer adventurous and experienced visitors the chance to enjoy winter trekking in remote areas, although the cold can be extreme, so it's not suited to beginners. Visiting major centres like Ashgabat and Samarkand without the crowds is pleasant, just remember to layer up for sightseeing and outdoor activities.

While temperatures in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan remain milder than in the mountains, it's still chilly, especially in the evenings. In Samarkand, Uzbekistan, the clear winter air offers a quieter and more peaceful time to visit the city's ancient Silk Road sites, such as Registan Square without the usual crowds.

A winter visit to the Darvaza Gas Crater, also known as Door to Hell, in Turkmenistan is especially memorable during the colder months. The chill in the air contrasts with the intense heat of the crater, creating a dramatic atmosphere. The evenings can be cold, but daytime temperatures remain relatively mild, making outdoor activities comfortable.

Central Asia really does have a season to suit everyone.

When will you go?



# INTRODUCING→ TURKMENISTAN

Independence Park

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# CITY GUIDE ASHGABAT

Welcome to a city where design, history, and bold ambition collide—these are the must-see attractions

**ASHGABAT**, the capital of Turkmenistan, is a city shaped by centuries of cultural exchange and imperial legacies. It lies near the ancient city of Nisa, a key site of the Parthian Empire (247 BC–224 AD). Located along historic trade routes connected to the Silk Road, Nisa played a vital role as a cultural and political centre. The Parthians were known for their religious tolerance, and the region became a crossroads of Zoroastrian traditions, Persian customs, and Hellenistic influences. While Ashgabat is a modern city today, its proximity to Nisa ties it to a richly layered past shaped by centuries of empire and cultural exchange.

Today, Ashgabat presents a striking contrast to its ancient surroundings. This meticulously ordered capital offers a fascinating and unexpected travel experience. As Turkmenistan's tourism sector steadily grows, Ashgabat stands out for its surreal blend of modern opulence and quiet charm.

Known as 'The White City,' Ashgabat is famed for its gleaming white marble buildings, vast squares, and symmetry, a vision largely realised during the presidency of Saparmurat Niyazov (1985-2006).

Yet beneath the polished exterior lies a city deeply rooted in tradition. Soviet-era influences and ancient Turkmen heritage are evident in the city's architecture and monuments, while everyday customs reflect a continuity with the past. Ashgabat may appear futuristic, but its soul is firmly grounded in history. ►



Clockwise from bottom left: Ashgabat's skyline is filled with bright white marble and golden domes; Alem Cultural and Entertainment Center; Independence Monument

## MUST-SEE ASHGABAT ATTRACTIONS

Ashgabat has grand boulevards and monumental squares down pat—and they're as striking as you'd imagine. Make time to experience local life, too: visit a bazaar, share a meal, and take part in traditional tea culture.

### The Arch of Neutrality

One of the most iconic landmarks in the city, the Arch of Neutrality is a 75-metre-high (246 feet) gold monument erected to celebrate Turkmenistan's policy of neutrality, which was endorsed by the United Nations in 1995. A statue of President Saparmurat Niyazov originally sat on top of the arch and rotated to face the sun throughout the day, symbolising the country's focus on growth and prosperity. The monument was relocated from central Ashgabat to the south of the city in 2010, and the statue no longer rotates. Its prominent placement ensures it remains a fundamental part of the city's landscape.

### The Neutrality Park and Monument

A green retreat from Ashgabat's grandiose architecture and adjacent to the Arch of Neutrality, the Neutrality Park and Monument has been designed with ample gardens, fountains, and walking paths, and is symbolic of the peaceful coexistence that Turkmenistan seeks to promote both internally and on the international stage.

### The Independence Monument

Another striking structure in the heart of the city is the Independence Monument, which celebrates Turkmenistan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. It features a 118-metre (387 feet) column crowned with a golden crescent and five stars, symbolising unity and identity. The base of the column is in the shape of a yurt, which is said to represent the country's nomadic roots. Surrounding the monument are 27 statues of significant figures in Turkmen history. The surrounding square is a central public space used for national ceremonies, celebrations and events. The grandeur of the monument is especially evident at night when it's illuminated.



INSPIRING  
VACATIONS



Below (top to bottom): A silhouette of a statue at sunset in Independence Park; Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque



### Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque & Mausoleum

Located just outside the city centre is the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque and Mausoleum, also known as the Gypjak Mosque, which was built to honour President Niyazov. It's as lavish as you expect: entirely made from white marble with a golden dome that was designed to be visible from a distance. The president was laid to rest in the mausoleum in 2006 and continues to be a pilgrim site for his supporters today. ►



## TEA CEREMONIES ARE WOVEN INTO THE FABRIC OF EVERYDAY LIFE, WHERE OFFERING A CUP OF CHAY SYMBOLISES HOSPITALITY AND WARMTH “”

### Bazaars

Alongside sites of national significance, no Turkmenistan travel guide (or visit) is complete without local shopping spots. Altyn Asyr Bazaar, located on the outskirts of Ashgabat, is now Turkmenistan's largest open-air market and a vibrant hub of everyday life and culture. This expansive market offers a wide array of goods, including Turkmen rugs, handicrafts, silks and other fabrics, spices, fresh fruit and vegetables. Camel trading, a tradition that was once a hallmark of the old Tolkuchka Bazaar—which was demolished to make way for this modern marketplace—continues to thrive here alongside the stalls. The bazaar's lively atmosphere (especially on Sundays) is an experience in itself,

a sensory overload of spruiking vendors and bargain-hunting buyers awaits!

### Turkmen tea & coffee culture

For centuries, Ashgabat and the wider Turkmen culture have been known for its infamous tea-drinking traditions. Tea ceremonies are woven into the fabric of everyday life, where offering a cup of *chay* symbolises hospitality and warmth. Tea houses (known as *chaykhana*) have long been spaces for socialising, where people could enjoy a break in their day with tea served in delicate glass cups. This tea ritual remains deeply cherished in the city but with Ashgabat's modernisation, coffee drinking has made a noticeable entry onto the scene.

### Flavourful cuisine

Food brings people together and no visit to Ashgabat would be complete without experiencing the vibrant street food scene. Street vendors across the city offer quick tasty snacks (like kebabs on sticks), and markets and smaller food stalls also offer homemade honey and dried fruit.

Street eats to try include *samsa*, a savoury pastry stuffed with lamb or beef, onions, and spices; skewered grilled vegetables (often made up of peppers, tomatoes, and eggplant), provide a delicious veggie partner to the grilled meat, and *pide*, a boat-shaped, savoury Turkish flatbread topped with minced meat, vegetables, or cheese is a really common and beloved street food snack.

Swapping street food for a restaurant meal, you'll notice that at the heart of Ashgabat's dining scene is traditional Turkmenistan cuisine, known for its hearty and flavourful dishes, like lamb, rice, and fresh vegetables. A staple in Turkmen households and on every restaurant menu is *plov* (pilaf), a tasty rice dish made which is often served during celebrations and gatherings.

Aside from the rich local dining on offer, a variety of international cuisines are now available in upscale restaurants. Turkish and Persian restaurants are particularly popular in Ashgabat and for those craving a more European experience, the number of Italian restaurants and Western-style cafés continues to grow, making Ashgabat's dining scene more international than you may expect.

## WHAT TO EXPECT ON A VISIT TO ASHGABAT →

### INTERESTING HISTORY

Explore ancient landmarks dating back to the Parthian and Seljuk empires.

### MODERN MARVELS

Grand monuments and white marble buildings rule.

### CULTURE CULTURE

Visit the Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque and Tolkuchka Bazaar for a taste of local life.

### ICONIC LANDMARKS

See the Arch of Neutrality and Independence Monument, symbols of Turkmenistan's independence.

### DELICIOUS CUISINE

Try street foods like *samsa*, *pide*, and local coffee with a twist.

### AN ORDERLY CITY

Enjoy a quiet, well-maintained city with a relaxed atmosphere and little tourist crowds.

INTRODUCING →  
TAJIKISTAN

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(Image: Tom McDonald)



Museums, forts,  
and gardens: the  
best places to visit  
in Tajikistan's  
capital

# DUSHANBE UNCOVERED

**WANDER THROUGH** lively bazaars, relax in leafy parks, or visit the tranquil Botanical Garden and you'll discover Dushanbe is the kind of place that's easy to enjoy from the moment you arrive. Dushanbe is an easy city to enjoy. It's also a natural starting point for exploring the landscapes and cultures of wider Tajikistan.

Here are eight must-visit Dushanbe attractions to add to your bucket list.

## 1 THE BOTANICAL GARDEN OF DUSHANBE

Whether you're a nature lover, a photographer, or just seeking a tranquil pocket in the city, the Botanical Garden of Dushanbe will provide the perfect setting. Spanning over 100 hectares, the garden features a diverse collection of plants, including native Tajik flora. One of the highlights is the orchid house, where you can see rare and exotic orchids in bloom. The garden is also a haven for local wildlife, with birds and butterflies making it their home. Don't miss the Japanese Garden, designed in collaboration with Japan, and features traditional elements such as koi ponds, stone lanterns, and bonsai trees, with footbridges that cross over ponds. The garden's ambience makes it an ideal corner to stop and escape the noise of the city.

Best of all, the Botanical Garden is not just a place of beauty but also an important site for plant conservation and education, making it one of the must-visit cultural sites in Dushanbe.

### DID YOU KNOW? →

The Botanical Garden of Dushanbe was founded in 1933 by Russian plant pathologist and botanist, Boris Alexeevich Fedtschenko.

(Image: Adobe Stock/Matyas Rehak)



### 3 THE ORIENTAL BAZAAR

Like many marketplaces, the Oriental Bazaar is no different: expect a sensory overload of colours, scents, and sounds! The bazaar is one of the best places to visit in Tajikistan's capital city. Don't miss the huge variety of fragrant herbs, saffron, and pomegranates, too—this market is also famous for its spices, dried fruits and nuts, which will give you a taste of Central Asia's rich agricultural offering. Don't leave without picking up some Tajik snacks—samosas or *shashlik* (grilled meat skewers)—to enjoy.

#### DID YOU KNOW? →

The bazaar has been a hub for selling and exchanging goods for centuries when it was part of the Silk Road.

### 4 HISSAR FORT

A short drive from Dushanbe, the Hissar Fortress, located on top of a hill with panoramic views of the surrounding valley, is more than 2,500 years old. It is believed that the fortress was continuously occupied since the early Sassanid period (around the 5th century CE) and as part of the Silk Road, it protected merchants, travellers, and traders passing through the area.

Today, the fortress is one of the must-visit cultural sites in Dushanbe, attracting those interested in history and archaeology. There's a small museum where visitors can learn about the fortress's history, see the ruins recovered from the area, and of course, take in those stellar views of the Hissar Valley (also known as the Vakhsh Valley), and the majestic Hissar Mountains.

#### DID YOU KNOW? →

There are many Tajik legends surrounding Hissar Fortress, one of which tells of Righteous Caliph Ali. Arriving on his horse, Dul-Dul, Ali preached Islam from a hill near the fortress. When he was attacked, Dul-Dul, brought him the Zulfiqar sword which Ali used to kill his enemies, including the evil magician who controlled the fortress at that time. Two huge trees, about 500-700 years old, grow near the fortress, witness to this legendary tale.



### 2 NATIONAL MUSEUM OF TAJIKISTAN

One of the most significant cultural institutions and an essential place to start your introduction to the history and culture of the country is the National Museum of Tajikistan. Historically referred to as the United Museum, it's located in the heart of Dushanbe. You'll be greeted by a grand entrance and a pretty courtyard on arrival, and most first-time visitors are often surprised at the museum's

vast collections, ranging from ancient Bactrian and Silk Road civilisations, right through to more modern Islamic artwork by notable Tajik artists.

#### DID YOU KNOW? →

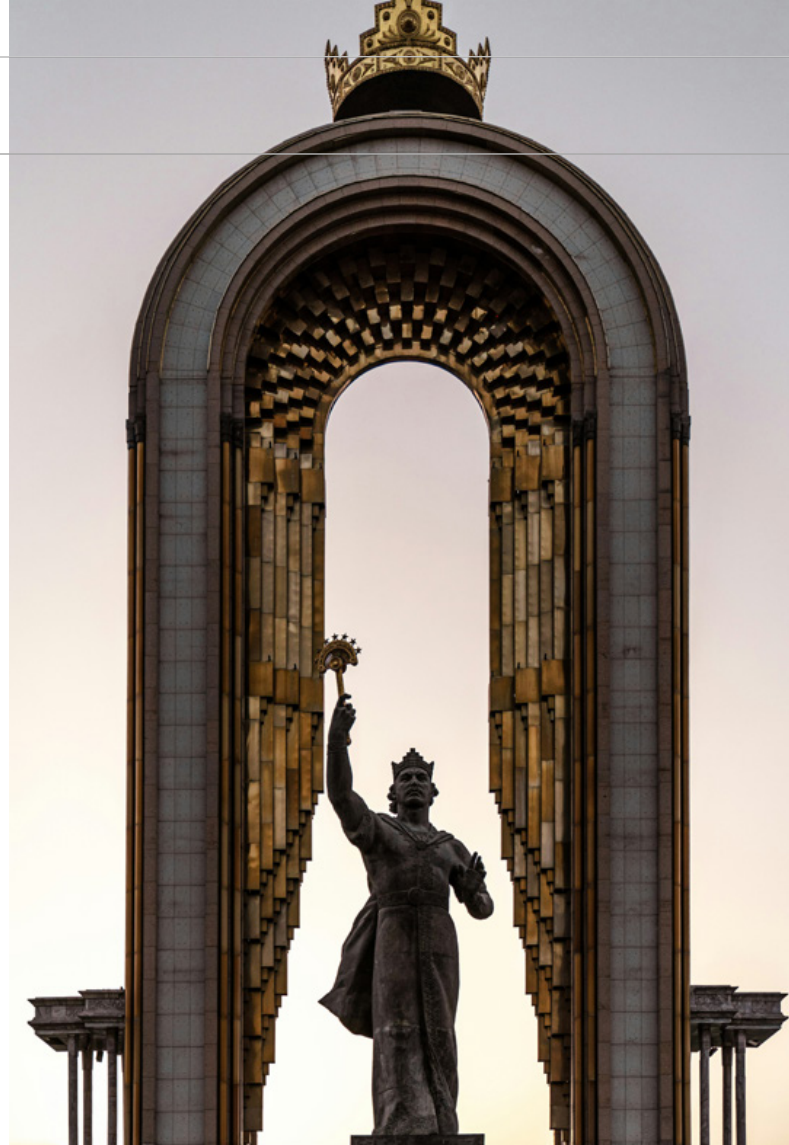
The museum also has a paleontological section where you can view fossils from prehistoric creatures that once roamed the area. It's a rare glimpse into Tajikistan's ancient natural history.

## 5 NAVRUZ PALACE (KOKHI NAVRUZ)

A ginormous man-made lake, cinemas, go-karting area, bowling alley, and an opulent tea house—what's not to love? Unlike most traditional palaces, this is one palace that is not a royal residence. Instead, it was built in 2011 as a ceremonial and cultural centre and a place to celebrate Tajikistan's Navruz (Persian New Year) and other national holidays. And that tea house? A beautifully decorated space, featuring intricate woodwork and colourful décor, where visitors can enjoy everything from herbal brews to green tea—served as part of a traditional Tajik tea ceremony.

### DID YOU KNOW? →

The construction process of the palace took about five years. Renowned Tajik artisans were invited in to bring the artistic vision to life, contributing their expertise in wood carving, Florentine mosaics, gypsum molding, and stonework.



Clockwise from top: The Ismoil Somoni Monument; Parliament of Tajikistan building; Rudaki Park

## 6 RUDAKI PARK

Must-visit cultural sites in Dushanbe often include green spaces, and we love the 12-hectare (29.7 acre) Rudaki Park located in the centre. A popular green oasis featuring lakes, fountains, statues, monuments and plenty of quiet spots to enjoy the respite from the city noise. The park is named after Abu Abdallah Rudaki, the 10th-century poet and father of Persian poetry. His works are widely celebrated in Tajikistan and beyond. A bronze statue of the poet and park namesake will greet you at the entrance.

### DID YOU KNOW? →

In the Soviet era, the park was used as a meeting place for parades and hosted celebrations but when Tajikistan gained independence in 1991, the park underwent a transformation and Lenin statues and other Soviet symbols were replaced with Tajik figures.

## 7 DUSHANBE FLAGPOLE

When it comes to Dushanbe attractions, a flagpole might not immediately spring to mind. Still, at 165 metres (541 feet), the Dushanbe Flagpole is an impressive record-holder and a powerful symbol of national pride. Visible from all over the city, the green on the flag symbolises

agriculture and the land, white represents purity and peace, and red, the battle for independence. After dark, the flagpole transforms into an even more striking sight, dramatically illuminated and glowing against the night sky.

### DID YOU KNOW? →

The Dushanbe Flagpole held the record for the tallest flagpole in the world until 2014, when the record was surpassed by a flagpole in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. There are some impressive flagpoles in the region: National Flag Square in Azerbaijan is the third tallest, and the fifth tallest is the Ashgabat Flagpole in Turkmenistan.

## 8 STATUE OF ISMOIL SOMONI

One of the must-visit cultural sites in Dushanbe, the Statue of Ismoil Somoni pays homage to the 10th-century founder of the Samanid dynasty. The statue, erected in 1999, was designed by Tajik architect Umarali Alimov, with its construction a part of a larger effort to modernise the city. The statue's gold casing and its Friendship Square location has made it an admired key attraction.

### DID YOU KNOW? →

In his right hand, Ismail Somoni holds a sceptre with seven stars, representing the stars found on the flag.

# INTRODUCING → UZBEKISTAN



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↘  
Ancient City Walls of Khiva

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(Image: Getty Images/Melny)



Po-i-Kalyan courtyard with the madrasa and minaret

# MUST-SEE → THE TREASURES OF UZBEKISTAN



(Image: Getty Images/Melny)

INSPIRING  
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Bucket list  
cultural icons  
& ancient  
cities

**UZBEKISTAN OFFERS A REWARDING** journey through a country known for its impressive architecture, historic cities, and rich Silk Road heritage. Located at the heart of this ancient trade route, Uzbekistan is home to some of the best-preserved Islamic architecture in the region. From the grand Registan in Samarkand to the maze-like streets of Khiva, every stop reveals layers of cultural exchange, artistic expression, and historical importance.

These historic cities of Uzbekistan offer an immersive journey into the country's rich past, each with distinct landmarks, cuisines, and cultural traditions. ▶



*Clockwise from below: The Registan Madressa in Samarkand; Toqi Sarrofon Bazaar in Bukhara; Shah-i-Zinda in Samarkand; walking the streets of Bukhara; The Pahlavon Mahmud complex in Khiva*

INSPIRING  
VACATIONS



## BUKHARA: A SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL CENTRE

Bukhara offers one of the richest and most immersive collections of Uzbekistan heritage sites, making it a must-visit for travellers interested in culture and history. With a recorded history spanning more than two millennia, Bukhara was a key stop along the Silk Road and a renowned centre for Islamic theology, science, and philosophy.

Unlike many historic cities that showcase a few remaining relics, Bukhara presents an entire old town where more than 140 architectural monuments have been preserved within walking distance of each other.

The city's sandstone-hued skyline is punctuated by grand minarets, intricate mosaics, and centuries-old domes. Its maze-like streets lead you through madrassas, caravanserais, and trading domes that once bustled with merchants from China, India, Persia, and beyond. Among the city's most iconic landmarks is the Mir-i-Arab Madrasa, an exquisite example of 16th-century Islamic architecture that continues to function as a theological school to this day. The atmosphere here is slower-paced, reflecting Bukhara's spiritual roots. Long regarded as the intellectual and religious heart of Central Asia, the city was home to famous scholars such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and remains a pilgrimage site for many today. ▶



## SAMARKAND: A JEWEL OF SILK ROAD UZBEKISTAN

Few places capture the grandeur of Uzbekistan like Samarkand. Once the capital of Timur's empire, Samarkand became one of the most important cultural and economic centres on the Silk Road.

For centuries, it drew scholars, architects, and traders from across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The city thrived under Timur's reign in the 14th century, when monumental buildings were commissioned and scientific advancements flourished. Samarkand's architecture reflects this rich legacy—layers of Persian, Mongol, and Islamic influences can be seen across its iconic landmarks.

## DON'T MISS →

**REGISTAN SQUARE**  
a trio of stunning madrassas,  
famed for their mosaic facades  
and towering arches

**SHAH-I-ZINDA**  
a serene necropolis  
of elaborately tiled mausoleums

**BIBI-KHANYM MOSQUE**  
a partially restored giant of  
14th-century Islamic architecture

**ULUGH BEG OBSERVATORY**  
a 15th-century site of major  
scientific discovery where  
astronomy flourished

↘  
Clockwise from below: Kalyan Mosque in Bukhara; Kalta Minor Minaret in Khiva; visiting a traditional tea house in Fergana; Shah-i-Zinda in Samarkand; view of Islam Khoja Minaret in Khiva; spices for sale in Khiva



From the moment you step into its historic centre, you feel transported—not just to a different time, but to a place where tradition continues to breathe through architecture, artisanship, and daily rituals. Wandering through Bukhara's old town offers a sense of continuity of the lives lived in the same courtyards for generations. This is where Uzbekistan landmarks come especially alive.

## DON'T MISS →

**PO-I-KALYAN ENSEMBLE**  
featuring the iconic Kalyan Minaret, mosque, and madrasa.

**ARK OF BUKHARA**  
an ancient fortress that once housed emirs, soldiers, and scholars.

**LYABI-HAUZ**  
a charming plaza with a pond at its heart, lined by teahouses and centuries-old buildings.

**CHOR MINOR**  
a quirky madrasa with four distinct minarets.

## KHIVA: A STORYBOOK CITY FROZEN IN TIME

Tucked away in the remote Khorezm region of western Uzbekistan, Khiva is a city where history feels tangible in every step. As a vital Silk Road stopover, it once served as a trading post and a centre of Islamic learning. Today, it stands as one of the most complete examples of a preserved ancient city in Central Asia.

The walled old town, Ichan Kala, is a UNESCO-listed site that looks almost exactly as it did centuries ago, with mud-brick walls enclosing a tightly packed collection of palaces, mosques, madrassas, and minarets.

Walking through Khiva can feel like stepping into a storybook. The narrow alleyways reveal beautifully restored buildings with intricate tilework and carved wooden doors. The city's skyline is dotted with turquoise domes and distinctive silhouettes, such as the Kalta Minor Minaret, which was intended to be the tallest in Central Asia before construction abruptly stopped. Unlike more modernised cities, Khiva maintains a quiet, almost surreal atmosphere—especially in the early morning or late evening, when the soft light casts long shadows across the ancient sandstone structures.

Khiva may be one of the smallest of Uzbekistan's major historic cities, but it leaves a lasting impression through its remarkable preservation and immersive atmosphere.



## DON'T MISS →

**KALTA MINOR MINARET**  
famous for its vivid turquoise tiles.

**KUNYA-ARK FORTRESS**  
a sprawling royal complex.

**TASH KHAULI PALACE**  
home to elaborately decorated rooms and courtyards.

**JUMA MOSQUE**  
with over 200 carved wooden columns dating back centuries. ➤



*Clockwise from far left: The Tashkent television tower; the Memorial to the Victims of Repression at Alisher Navoi National Park in Tashkent; a local at Hazrati Imam Mosque, Tashkent; Alisher Navoi Metro Station in Tashkent; Barakhan Madrasah Tashkent*

## TASHKENT: WHERE PAST AND PRESENT COLLIDE

Often overlooked in favour of Uzbekistan's older cities, Tashkent is a capital full of contrast and character. Once a minor oasis town, it rose to prominence under successive empires before becoming a major Soviet-era centre, something still visible in its wide boulevards and monumental buildings.

Tashkent today mixes Islamic landmarks with 20th-century Soviet structures and modern developments. Green spaces, public squares, and decorative metro stations give it a distinctive energy, while museums and theatres reflect its cultural life.

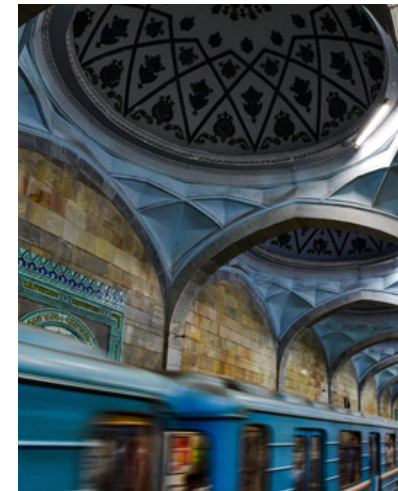
Despite its modern feel, Tashkent remains connected to the Silk Road story. From the Hazrati Imam Complex to the bustling Chorsu Bazaar, it offers a taste of Uzbek history and tradition. For many travellers, it's the starting point to explore deeper into the country.

## DON'T MISS →

**KHAST IMAM COMPLEX**  
a spiritual centre and home to one of the oldest Qur'ans.

**CHORSU BAZAAR**  
a sensory feast with colourful domes and endless stalls.

**TASHKENT METRO**  
each station is a gallery of mosaics, chandeliers, and marble.



## TIPS FOR EXPLORING UZBEKISTAN'S CULTURAL SITES →

Dress modestly, especially at religious sites

Pack comfortable shoes. Streets are cobbled and distances add up

Learn a few Uzbek or Russian phrases; a little effort goes a long way

While card use is growing, cash is still widely preferred

Respect photography rules. Always check signage or ask your guide

(Images: Pexels/AXPhotography; Unsplash/Farnodion Chirbadiev & Sergio Capuzzinati; Getty Images/Eddie Gerold)

↘  
Oimo Tash Ethno  
Complex, Issyk-Kul



INTRODUCING →

# KYRGYZSTAN

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From nomadic feasts to fermented delicacies, the food of Kyrgyzstan is woven into its mountains, valleys, and nomadic spirit

# THE TASTE OF TRADITION → WHAT TO EAT & DRINK IN KYRGYZSTAN

**EVERY DISH CARRIES** a piece of history, shaped by herders, travellers, and time. It's a cuisine born from survival, celebration, and deep-rooted hospitality. Rich in meat, dairy, and old customs, Kyrgyz food offers a unique window into the country's traditions, hospitality, and way of life. This guide takes you through the essentials of traditional Kyrgyz dishes, local drinks, and the dining culture you'll experience as a guest in this stunning corner of Central Asia. ►

(Image: Unsplash/Irene Strong)



Clockwise from right: Fried manti or dumplings filled with minced meat; flatbread on display at Osh Bazaar; lagman; Kyrgyz hospitality

## WHAT IS KYRGYZ CUISINE KNOWN FOR?

Kyrgyzstan cuisine traces its soul to the rhythms of a nomadic life, shaped by wind, livestock, and long journeys across the steppe. Meals are often simple, hearty, and meat-heavy, reflecting a lifestyle that valued high-energy foods and ingredients that could travel well. Traditional Kyrgyz food makes generous use of lamb, beef, horse meat, dairy, wheat-based noodles, and root vegetables. Fermentation is also a key part of food preservation, giving rise to unique drinks and flavours. Eating is rarely rushed. Sharing food is a symbol of Kyrgyz hospitality, and most meals involve a strong sense of community and warmth.



## MUST-TRY DISHES IN KYRGYZSTAN

When planning what to eat when visiting Kyrgyzstan, start with the most iconic dishes. These are the meals locals are proud to serve and visitors remember long after their trip.

### Beshbarmak

Kyrgyzstan's national dish, *beshbarmak*, translates to "five fingers." The name refers to the traditional way of eating it by hand. The meal consists of boiled meat (usually lamb or horse), laid over wide, hand-cut noodles and served in a light onion broth. It's more than just food. It's a cultural experience, often shared at family gatherings, weddings, or funerals. While it may appear simple, every family adds their own touch to the dish.

### Manti

*Manti* (or *manty*) are steamed dumplings stuffed with minced meat and onions, occasionally mixed with a bit of fat to enhance flavour. The dough is soft yet strong enough to hold in the juices as they cook. Manti in Kyrgyzstan are usually larger than similar dumplings in other countries and are often served with sour cream or a splash of vinegar. They're a staple on restaurant menus and a comfort food in many homes.

### Lagman

*Lagman* is a standout in the Kyrgyz food scene, thanks to its rich, colourful broth and chewy hand-pulled noodles. Originally from the Dungan and Uyghur communities, this dish blends meat, tomatoes, capsicum, garlic, and spices into a fragrant stew. It's especially popular in urban areas like Bishkek and Osh, and it's a go-to choice for anyone wanting something warming and flavourful.

### Samsa

*Samsa* are savoury pastries stuffed with meat, pumpkin, or cheese. They're traditionally cooked in a clay oven called a *tandyr*, giving the outside a crisp finish and the inside a soft, juicy centre. A common street food, *samsa* are ideal for grabbing on the go when exploring local bazaars. They're part of the everyday Kyrgyzstan food culture and offer a tasty introduction to regional snacks.

... IT'S MORE  
THAN JUST FOOD.  
IT'S A CULTURAL  
EXPERIENCE, OFTEN  
SHARED AT FAMILY  
GATHERINGS,  
WEDDINGS, OR  
FUNERALS

(Images: Getty Images/Sergio Antti; Emad Aljumar; Pixabay/Israa; Wikimedia Commons/Petar Milošević)

## Shorpo

This hearty soup is made from lamb or beef, simmered with potatoes, carrots, and herbs. It's a warming, soul-soothing dish popular throughout rural and urban Kyrgyzstan. Served piping hot, *shorpo* often comes with a side of bread and a small dish of chopped herbs or onions to add to your bowl. It's especially good during colder months or after long days of hiking or exploring.

## Plov

Although more commonly associated with Uzbekistan, *plov* (or pilaf) is also a staple in Kyrgyz cuisine. The dish includes rice cooked with lamb or beef, grated carrots, and onions, sometimes topped with garlic cloves or dried fruits. It's usually made in large quantities and served during big gatherings. If you're after famous Kyrgyz meals to try, a plate of freshly cooked plov is a must.



Clockwise from left: Yak meat at Osh Bazaar in Bishkek; *kumis*, fermented mare's milk served in a wooden bowl; *chak-chak*; *plov* is a staple in Kyrgyz cuisine; beef *shorpo*, a traditional Kyrgyz soup

## SWEET AND BREADY KYRGYZ DISHES

### Kattama

*Kattama* is a layered flatbread, similar to naan, that's fried that's fried until golden. Its crispy edges and chewy centre make it a delicious side to soups or a snack with tea. Sometimes topped with butter or herbs, it's simple but satisfying. Bread is sacred in Kyrgyz culture. It's never thrown away, and it's always placed right side up.

### Chak-chak

*Chak-chak* (fried honey cakes) is a sweet treat made from small pieces of fried dough bound together with honey. It's crunchy, sticky, and often shaped into mounds or towers. Found at celebrations and festive tables, it's a beloved dessert for many Kyrgyz families.

### Boorsok

These small fried dough pieces are served as a starter or snack with tea. Light, fluffy, and slightly sweet, *boorsok* are often placed in the centre of the table for guests to pick at throughout a meal.

### Dried fruits and nuts

Markets across Kyrgyzstan overflow with dried apricots, raisins, figs, walnuts, and almonds. These are an easy vegetarian snack and an energy-boosting option when travelling between towns or trekking in the mountains.

## THE DRINKS HERE ARE UNLIKE ANYTHING ELSE. THEY'RE MADE FROM GRAINS, DAIRY, OR HERBS AND HAVE BEEN PASSED DOWN THROUGH GENERATIONS

## KYRGYZ DRINKS AND TEA CULTURE

So what to drink in Kyrgyzstan as a local? The drinks here are unlike anything else. They're made from grains, dairy, or herbs and have been passed down through generations.

### Kumis

Trying fermented mare's milk in Kyrgyzstan is an essential part of understanding Kyrgyz food culture and traditional dining. Known as *kumis*, this iconic drink is made by fermenting mare's milk until it becomes slightly sour and lightly alcoholic. It's served cold in yurts and roadside stalls during spring and summer. Locals swear by its health benefits, including improved digestion and immunity.



Clockwise from below: Dried fruit and nuts on display in Karakol;  
roadside fruit and vegetables; berries and citrus fruit tea in Bishkek

### Maksym and jarma

*Maksym* is made from fermented barley or wheat, cooked with malt, and lightly carbonated. It's darker and has a stronger flavour than its counterpart, *jarma*, which is smoother and sometimes mixed with yoghurt. Both are sold in plastic cups from barrels on street corners during the warmer months. They're refreshing, filling, and very local.

### Bozo

*Bozo* is a thicker drink, slightly sweet and mildly alcoholic, made from millet or wheat. It's often homemade and not as widely available commercially, but if you're lucky enough to try it during a home visit or cultural tour, it's a fascinating part of Kyrgyz drinks culture.

### Kyrgyz tea

Kyrgyz tea and drink culture is central to daily life. Black tea is the most popular drink, often served in small bowls instead of cups. It's customary to refill your guest's bowl before they finish as a sign of respect and care. In some areas, green tea or fruit tea is preferred.. Tea is served with every meal and usually accompanied by sweets, bread, or boorsok. It's more than a drink. It's an expression of Kyrgyz hospitality.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF KYRGYZ DINING

Kyrgyz food culture and traditional dining focus on hospitality, ritual, and respect. Meals usually begin with hand-washing, followed by a blessing from the eldest person present. Guests are seated according to age or importance. Bread is broken and passed around, and tea flows freely. If you're invited into someone's home or yurt, expect to eat well. Leaving a little food on your plate is considered polite. It shows your host has fed you generously.

## VEGETARIAN OPTIONS

While Kyrgyzstan food is heavily meat-based, vegetarian options do exist, especially in urban areas. Many traditional side dishes are plant-based, and you can request lagman or plov without meat. Samsa with pumpkin or potato are popular vegetarian-friendly options. Breads like kattama and boorsok are also meat-free. In larger cities like Bishkek, you'll find cafes offering salads, soups, and even vegetarian versions of classic Central Asian dishes.



## EATING OUT: MARKETS, BAZAARS, AND LOCAL HOMES

You don't need to dine in restaurants to experience the best Kyrgyz foods for tourists. Some of the most memorable meals come from market stalls or local homes. Visit Osh Bazaar in Bishkek for fresh fruit, flatbreads, and grilled meats. Sample samsa hot from the tandyr oven, or buy a bottle of homemade kumis from a roadside vendor.

## PLANNING WHAT TO EAT IN KYRGYZSTAN

So, wondering what the must-eats are in Kyrgyzstan? Start with the classics: beshbarmak, manti, lagman, samsa, and plov. These traditional Kyrgyz dishes explained through flavour and presentation will give you a strong understanding of the country's culinary roots. Don't forget to try the local drinks, from kumis to Kyrgyz tea. Sampling the cuisine isn't just about food, it's about people, places, and centuries of shared tradition. Be open, curious, and hungry.

(Images: Wikimedia Commons/Maxim Van den Bossche; Getty Images/Sergio Armiti & Andrew Geiger)

# INTRODUCING → KAZAKHSTAN



INSPIRING  
VACATIONS



Charyn Canyon on  
the Sharyn River

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(Image: Getty Images/BNBB Studios)

# DISCOVER → KAZAKHSTAN'S SECRET NATURAL WONDERS

Alpine lakes,  
colourful canyons,  
pristine mountains  
and forests are among  
Kazakhstan's  
best-kept secrets

**WHEN MOST PEOPLE** think of Kazakhstan, they picture sprawling steppes and Soviet-era cities. But beyond Almaty's busy streets and Astana's futuristic skyline lies a landscape that's wild, vast, and full of surprises.

For travellers keen to swap crowds for silence and well-trodden routes for winding trails, these are the places worth making time for.

## KOLSAI LAKES

A trio of alpine lakes set deep in the Kazakhstan mountains, the Kolsai Lakes are often visited alongside Lake Kaindy and are considered one of the region's most scenic natural attractions. Each lake offers something a little different: the lower lake is the most accessible and perfect for a relaxed day by the water; the middle lake rewards hikers with panoramic views; and the upper lake, reachable only on foot or horseback, is framed by dramatic peaks and dense pine forest. Known for their mirror-like reflections, crisp mountain air, and peaceful atmosphere, the lakes are especially stunning in early morning light. For anyone passionate about hiking or photography, this area is a must. ▶

(Image: Unsplash/Evgeny Matveyev)



Clockwise from right: Kaindy Lake; Big Almaty Lake; colourful canyons await in Kazakhstan

INSPIRING  
VACATIONS

## THE VALLEY OF CASTLES, GETS ITS NAME FROM THE NATURAL TOWERS AND BUTTRESSES THAT RESEMBLE AN ANCIENT FORTRESS RISING FROM THE EARTH “ ”



### CHARYN CANYON

Often called the Grand Canyon's little cousin, Charyn Canyon is one of the most dramatic natural formations in Central Asia. Stretching for over 150 kilometres (93 miles), this colourful canyon cuts through the dry Kazakh steppe in a series of narrow gorges, towering cliffs, and twisted rock formations. Its most famous

section, the Valley of Castles, gets its name from the natural towers and buttresses that resemble an ancient fortress rising from the earth. Sculpted by wind, rain, and time, the canyon's surreal layers of reds, oranges, and ochres create a landscape that feels almost otherworldly, especially at sunrise or sunset when the rocks glow with colour.



### LAKE KAINDY

One of the most surreal Kazakhstan lakes, Lake Kaindy was formed in 1911 when an earthquake caused a massive landslide, damming a forested gorge and flooding the spruce trees that once grew there. The result is a striking alpine lake where the ghostly, bleached trunks of trees rise from crystal-clear water, creating an eerie and unforgettable scene. The water's colour, ranging from deep blue to turquoise, only adds to its dreamlike quality, especially when framed by snow-capped peaks and evergreen forest. Reaching the lake involves a bumpy but scenic drive followed by a short walk, making the journey feel like a hidden discovery. Despite its remote feel, it's a popular spot for photographers and hikers looking for something truly special.



### BIG ALMATY LAKE

Just 30 kilometres (19 miles) from the city of Almaty, Big Almaty Lake is a scenic alpine reservoir set at nearly 2,500 metres (8,200 feet) above sea level. Surrounded by snow-capped peaks, pine forests, and high-altitude meadows, the lake's setting is postcard-perfect in every season. Its vivid turquoise water shifts colour depending on the time of day and the angle of the light, creating a constantly changing

scene that has become a favourite among local photographers and day-trippers. While swimming is prohibited due to its role as a drinking water source, walking trails nearby offer peaceful views and crisp mountain air. The lake is also a launching point for hikes deeper into the Ile-Alatau National Park, making it a gateway to some of the best nature in the country.

(Images: Unsplash/Anatoli Sticherbyna; Getty Images/BBB Studio & Olen Stobodenik)



Clockwise from below: Aksu-Zhabagly Nature Reserve; Katon-Karagay National Park; the Aktau Mountains in Altyn-Emel National Park

## EXPLORE KAZAKHSTAN'S NATIONAL PARKS

In addition to its famous canyons and lakes, Kazakhstan is home to dozens of national parks, some of them are surprisingly accessible from major cities, while others require a bit more effort.

### 1 Altyn-Emel National Park

This remote park, located northeast of Almaty, is famous for its towering singing dunes. These sand ridges create a low, rumbling hum when the wind shifts just right. Beyond the dunes, you'll find colourful mountains, open plains with wild horses, and ancient petroglyphs etched into rocky outcrops. Altyn-Emel National Park combines desert landscapes with mountain backdrops.

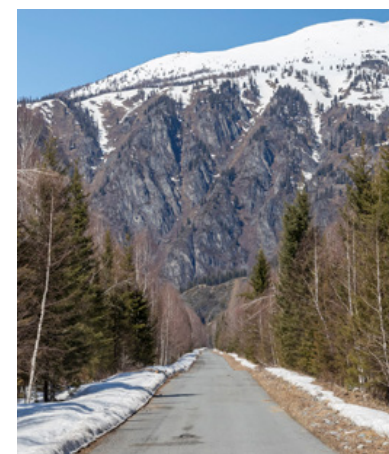
### 2 Aksu-Zhabagly Nature Reserve

Established in 1926 making it Kazakhstan's oldest nature reserve, Aksu-Zhabagly is nestled in the western Tian Shan Mountains. It's especially beautiful in spring, when alpine meadows erupt with wildflowers. Home to snow leopards, ibex, and over 1,300 plant species, it's a paradise for hikers and naturalists. Trails wind through deep canyons and open fields, offering views of snowy peaks and blooming valleys.



### 3 Katon-Karagay National Park

Located in the easternmost corner of the country, bordering Russia and China, Katon-Karagay is Kazakhstan's largest national park. It's home to remote alpine valleys, crystal-clear rivers, and the rugged Altai Mountains. This park is perfect for intrepid travellers looking for genuine wilderness.



## BEST OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES FOR NATURE LOVERS →

If you're the kind of traveller who prefers mountain passes to museums, Kazakhstan delivers. From spring to autumn, outdoor adventures abound:

### HIKING

Through remote valleys, along riverbanks, and up to high-altitude lakes

### CAMPING

In national parks and alpine meadows

### HORSE RIDING

A traditional Kazakh mode of transport, especially in mountain regions

### BIRDWATCHING

Especially in the steppe and wetlands of central Kazakhstan

### 4WD EXPEDITIONS

Across deserts, salt flats, and mountain passes

### STARGAZING

Kazakhstan's remote regions have some of the clearest night skies in Central Asia

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Our customers love our Five Stans tours — here's what some of them have to say

**"A fantastic experience from start to finish"**

★★★★★

*The Five Stans tour was a fantastic experience from start to finish. The guides were very knowledgeable, friendly and helpful, and managed our group expertly through each Stan. The local lunches, yurt stays, cooking classes and local shows really made the experience so memorable. This is an amazing part of the world to visit and I would highly recommend it!*

Claire, via Trustpilot  
June 2025

**"I was part of the first Five Stans group"**

*Well organised, comfortable transport, great sights and good hotels. The mountains in Kyrgyzstan are spectacular, and the Soviet architecture and statues are still very prevalent in parts.*

Mike, via Travel Lounge by Inspiring Vacations Facebook group  
May 2025

»

*Right: Uzbekistan is attracting travellers from all over the world with its culture, history and beauty*

**"It was fantastic"**

*We have just returned from this tour, it was fantastic. Everything went like clockwork—great guides, great food, fantastic scenery and so much more than we expected. Anybody doing this is in for an awesome experience!*

Ross, via Travel Lounge by Inspiring Vacations Facebook group  
July 2025

**"Highly recommended"**

*The Five Stans trip was excellent and highly recommended.*

Diana, via Travel Lounge by Inspiring Vacations Facebook group  
June 2025



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(Image: Joëlle Moreau/Pixabay)

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