

THE FIVE STANS OF CENTRAL ASIA with Jesuits of Canada

Finding God on the Silk Road

17 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Today we arrive in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan (hotel check-in from 2 pm).

Overnight in Tashkent.

NOTE regarding meals – In addition to breakfast, there will be another meal provided each day, lunch or dinner, which will depend on the logistics of the day (your tour leader will advise in advance).

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Tashkent: City Tour - Fly to Urgench - Drive to Khiva

Tour Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan, the third largest of the former Soviet Republics. Uzbekistan is prospering under independence and this shows in the modern capitol building at the centre of town.

Visit the Old City, which has mosques and madrassas (Islamic schools) housing craft workshops dating from the 14th century. Chorsu Bazaar, a huge open market beside Kukeldash, draws crowds of people from the countryside, many in traditional dress. We also include Kafelsashi Mausoleum, Barak Khana Madrassa, Tila Shaikh Mosque and archives.

Orientation drive by Independence Square and Amir Timur's Square before driving to the airport for evening flight to Urgench, drive 45 minutes to Khiva.

Overnight in Khiva.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Khiva: City Tour

Legend has it that Khiva was founded when Shem, son of Noah, discovered a well here. The town in the 8th century had as a minor fort and trading post on a Silk Road branch to the Caspian Sea and the Volga. In the early 16th century, Khiva was made capital of the Timurid Empire, becoming a busy slave market and pivot of the khanate for the next three centuries. Khiva is an ancient walled city and looks much like it did in centuries past; it is one of the few sites in Central Asia where one can easily imagine life during the time of the emirates.

The morning will be spent wandering Khiva's maze of ruins and great mosques. The tour includes Ichan Kala (walled city), Kalta Minor Minaret, Kunya Ark (inner citadel), and Madrassa Rakhimkhon. Later walk to see Mausoleum of Pakhlavan Makhmud, Islam Khodja Minaret, the medieval Friday Mosque, and Tashauli Palace and Harem.

The afternoon is free to further explore the walled city.

Tomorrow's journey to Turkmenistan: Big bags will be shipped ahead to Bukhara for us, which can make the border crossing into Turkmenistan easier as it involves a "no man's land" of a considerable distance between border posts, over which you have to carry/wheel your luggage (there is no one available/allow to help). This is not mandatory, but if you choose to go this route, please bring a collapsible bag (i.e. duffel) that you can fill with things you will need until we arrive in Bukhara.

Overnight in Khiva.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

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Day 4 Khiva, Uzbekistan - Dashoguz, Turkmenistan - Ashgabat

Travel by road to the Turkmenistan border, arriving about mid-morning. Complete immigration and customs formalities and then proceed to the nearby Turkmen city of Dashauz (Dashoguz).

Lunch and visit to the local bazaar, brimming with fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, and much, much more.

Fly in the afternoon to Ashgabat.

Overnight in Ashgabat.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Ashgabat: City Tour - Fly to Mary (Merv)

Ashgabat is located in a spectacular natural setting, between the Kara-Kum Desert and the Kopet-Dag mountain range. A settlement on the site of the city was successively occupied by the Parthians, Seljuk Turks, and the Mongols. Under Russian control, it became the administrative capital of the Trans-Caspian oblast, and was the centre of trade between the Russian empire and Persia; the Trans-Caspian railway reached here in 1885. The transliteration of the town's name was changed in 1992 to more accurately reflect the Turkmen original.

Full-day tour of Ashgabat, including a visit to the Russian Bazaar, the massive Spiritual Mosque of Turkmenbashi, (Turkmenistan's first president), and an orientation tour of the capital's incredible architecture. Explore the ancient Parthian capital of Nissa, a short drive from the city.

In the early evening, transfer to the airport for flight to Mary, located nearby the famous Silk Road city of Merv. Several cities have existed on this site, which is significant for the interchange of culture and politics at a site of major strategic value. It is claimed that Merv was briefly the largest city in the world in the 12th century. The site of ancient Merv has been listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

Overnight in Merv.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Merv, Turkmenistan - Bukhara, Uzbekistan

Drive to the vast site of ancient Merv, visiting the ancient Hellenistic fortress of Gaiyur Kala, and the sites of Erk Kala and Sultan Kala. See the impressive mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar, one of the most powerful Khorezmian rulers.

Travel by road and cross the border back into Uzbekistan and Bukhara,* former capital of the once powerful Emirate of Bukhara. En route stop at the Chord Bakr Necropolis.

With buildings spanning 1,000 years of history and a thoroughly lived-in city centre that hasn't changed much in two centuries, Bukhara is one of the best places in Central Asia to catch a glimpse of pre-Russian Turkestan. Most of the city centre is an architectural preserve and includes a massive royal fortress, plenty of former madrassas, a number of ancient public baths and the remnants of a once-vast market complex.

Free time this afternoon to wander and enjoy this atmospheric town.

* This border crossing also involves a "no-man's land" over which we should be able to utilize vans to bridge the distance. You will still need to be independent with your luggage between buildings.

Overnight in Bukhara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Bukhara: City Tour

Explore the old quarter of Bukhara on foot.

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

The highlights of today tour include Labi-hauz, a 17th century plaza built around a pool; three domed bazaars; the 12th century Kalan Minaret, once the tallest building in Asia; and the Mausoleum of Ismail Samani, the town's oldest structure (completed around AD 905) and surely one of the most elegant in Central Asia.

Overnight in Bukhara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Bukhara - Train to Samarkand

Depart for Bukhara and via Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa, the summer residence of the last Emir of Bukhara. The first structures in this picturesque area were built in the mid-19th century during the rule of Emir Nasrullakhan. In the 1880s, his successor Muzaffarkhan built a palace for his beloved wife Sitora-bonu. The most skillful Bukhara craftsmen were sent to Russia to learn the best practices of country residence construction. Soon after that they constructed a sumptuous set of rooms, including throne room, which had a peculiar mixture of European and Asian architectural styles.

Return to old town in Bukhara (our bus leaves to Samarkand with our luggage) and take the afternoon bullet train from Kagan train station (40 minutes' drive from Bukhara) to Samarkand (2 hours 15 minutes). Transfer to hotel.

Overnight in Samarkand.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Samarkand: City Tour

Samarkand, sometimes called the 'Rome of the Orient', was already flourishing when Rome and Babylon were founded. Tour the Bibi Khanum Mosque, Mausoleum of Tamerlane, Observatory of Ulugbek, and the site where Uleg Bek, grandson of Tamerlane, made some of the greatest achievements of the pre-telescope era of astronomy in the 15th century.

Visit the regal mausoleums of Shah-i Zinda, site of Central Asia's most sacred Islamic shrine. The ancient core of Samarkand is located on the Afrasiab hill, named after the legendary Turanian king. The settlement arose in the 8th-early 7th centuries BC and occupied more than 200 hectares; river bluffs on the north and east and deep ravines in the south and west protected it. During the Achaemenids period, the city was encircled with a massive wall having an internal corridor and towers. Scholars identify Afrasiab with ancient Sogdian capital Marakanda, destroyed in the 4th century BC by Alexander the Great.

Overnight in Samarkand.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Samarkand, Uzbekistan - Penjikent, Tajikistan

Depart Samarkand by coach and transfer to the Uzbek-Tajik Jarteppa border connecting Samarkand with Penjikent,* Tajikistan's third largest city.

After border formalities, leave Uzbekistan and travel in small vehicles on the Tajik side to the city, a scenic journey that takes in some of the

foothills of the Fann Mountains. In Penjikent, visit the Ancient Panjikent Town ruins – a walled inter-city, Sarazm Settlement, Rudaki Museum of History and Regional Study, Olim Dodkho Mosque and Medressah.

* This is the longest distance (approx. 700m) that you will be expected to transport your luggage between border points. It is a flat surface and there will be plenty of time to stop and rest along the way. Recently, there have been luggage carts available but these are not given.

Overnight in Penjikent.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Penjikent - Dushanbe

Drive to Dushanbe via Iskanderkul Lake. Short stop for photos.

Continue the panoramic drive through the dramatic mountains of Tajikistan towards Dushanbe, briefly reaching a peak of 2500m / 8,200 ft. before descending to Dushanbe (706m).

With a rural hinterland of grassy pastures and snow-capped mountains visible from downtown, Dushanbe is a delightful city built around parks, lakes and fountains. With the frenetic building project of the past decade mostly complete, there is a palpable air of satisfaction about the city centre. Its grand plane tree boulevard, Rudaki, threads past pastel-hued remnants of the Soviet era and just as proudly past the modern icons of statehood.

Overnight in Dushanbe.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Dushanbe: City Tour

Visit the huge reclining Buddha, the burial place of the Sarazm princess. Tajikistan antiques and ancient wall paintings from Penjikent can all be found here. Dushanbe means "Monday" in Tajik, and the name reflects the fact that the city grew on the site of a village that originally was a popular Monday marketplace. Visit the privately funded Navruz Palace, a magnificent cultural centre recently completed by skilled local artisans.

Overnight in Dushanbe.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Dushanbe, Tajikistan - Fly to Almaty, Kazakhstan

Fly to Almaty. Depending on arrival time, there may be some Almaty sightseeing. Zhenkov's Cathedral, built in 1904, and an extraordinary example of a Russian Orthodox church built in wood and Panfilov Park in which the Cathedral is located.

Overnight in Almaty.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Almaty: City Tour

Half-day tour of Almaty.

Compared to other cities in Central Asia, Almaty is quite young. It was founded in 1854 by Russians in the valley of Almaty and was just a fort at first. Its name was Zailisky, then it was named Verny. In 1921 it became Alma-Ata ("Father of Apples") and in 1929 it became the capital of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1993 the name was changed to Almaty.
Afternoon free.

Overnight in Almaty.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Almaty, Kazakhstan - Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic

Travel by road across the border* to Bishkek in the Kyrgyz Republic. City tour on arrival.

Originally, Bishkek was called Pishpek; in 1926 Pishpek became the capital of the Kyrgyz Autonomous Republic. In 1936, as the capital of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, Pishpek was renamed Frunze in honour of a major political organizer of the Civil War who was born in Pishpek to a Moldavian family. Today Bishkek is a modern city with vast squares, crowded bazaars, impressive administrative centers, and educational institutions.

Our tour includes Oak Park, Central Square, Statue of Manas, and Victory Square and the outside the State History Museum. At the northern end of Bishkek's central square, this enormous example of socialist realist architecture was once the Lenin Museum, entirely devoted to the man himself. After independence, two of its three floors were cleared to make way for exhibits that reflected Kyrgyzstan's new status as an independent state. One floor has been preserved, along with a huge centrepiece statue of Lenin leading the revolutionary masses (time-permitting you may enter on your free time)

* This is an easy crossing with a short distance across a bridge.

Overnight in Bishkek.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Burana Tower & Nomadic Games

We depart for a day trip to the Burana Tower, located at the mouth of the Shamsy Valley.

This is an eleventh-century monument, restored by the Soviets in the 1950's. There is an opportunity for an optional climb up the minaret to view the old city walls of Balasagun, a fortification built by the Sogdians.

Nearby Burana Tower, witness a demonstration of some of the nomadic games carried out on horseback. Young men from the village will perform examples of "horse wrestling" (where two riders compete with one another to try and wrestle each other off of the horse); snatching up bags from the ground while the horses gallop at top speed; and a game of "Kok-Boru" or horse polo. However, in this version, instead of a ball they take a headless, limbless goat and use that as the object to score into the opposing team's goal. The effort to wrestle and carry this off demands great strength and skill as the two teams face off against one another. The winners get to keep the goat which will be used for the evening meal in their village.

This evening we enjoy a farewell dinner.

Overnight in Bishkek.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Departure

Departure from Bishkek.

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SAFE JOURNEY!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast