

# Four 'Stans Summer Tour Extended Version July 16th - August 19th 2022 Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan



## **INTRODUCTION:**

This tour is for those who want to really get a great insight into Central Asia. There is so much to see and you could spend months in each country, but we've carefully mapped out a route that we think balances showing you as much as possible in a relatively short amount of time, whilst still having time to take in where you are. We've included all the must-sees like Lake Song Kol, the Pamir Highway, the Registan and Turkistan, but we've added our SAIGA spin by also including some of our favourite spots that are the reason you travel with us. A couple of Soviet sanatoriums, a meteorology station, some formerly closed mining towns, a solar furnace – the kinds of things you either can't get to by yourself, or just simply wouldn't find.

## **HIGHLIGHTS:**

Take in the breathtaking views on the **Pamir Highway**

Soviet urban exploration: Abandoned factories in **Kyrgyzstan** to Mining towns in **Kazakhstan**

Go back in time in the Silk Road gems of **Samarqand, Bukhara and Khiva**

See the environmental disaster that is the **Aral Sea**

**Excited? Come with SAIGA to Central Asia**

**Travel to the 'Stans and beyond**

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## Tour Details:

**DATES:** July 16th - August 19th 2022

**PRICE:** \$4995 USD (twin share),  
Single Supplement \$875 USD

**START:** Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

**FINISH:** Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan



### INCLUSIONS:

- Accommodation in twin share at roughly 3 star hotels/guesthouses, breakfast included
- Where itinerary mentions yurt or homestay accommodation, single supplement and twin share may be affected
- Transport as per itinerary
- Entrance fees to most sites (as per itinerary)
- SAIGA guide and local guides

### EXCLUSIONS:

- Visa fees if necessary
- Visa support if necessary
- Some activities, eg. treatments at sanatorium (as per itinerary)
- Meals other than breakfast
- Transport to and from the start and end of tour
- Personal expenses such as souvenirs or any optional activities
- PCR Tests and any other COVID related expenses

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Day 1	Bishkek
Day 2	Bishkek - Burana Tower - Petroglyphs - Cholpon Ata
Day 3	Cholpon Ata - Karakol - Jeti Ögüz Health Spa
Day 4	Jeti Ögüz - Valley of the Flowers - Kyzyl Suu
Day 5	Kyzyl Suu - Barskoon - Beltam Yurt Camp
Day 6	Beltam - Kochkor - Song Kol
Day 7	Song Kol - Kurtka - Moldo Ashoo Pass - Kazarman
Day 8	Kazarman - Jalalabad
Day 9	Jalalabad - Osh
Day 10	Osh - Sary Tash
Day 11	Tajikistan border crossing at Kyzyl Art - Murghab



Day 12	Langar Valley - Lake Yashilkul - Langar
Day 13	Langar - Yamg - Ishkashim - Khorog
Day 14	Khorog - Kalaikhum
Day 15	Kalaikhum - Dushanbe
Day 16	Dushanbe - Khoja Obi Garm
Day 17	Cross border to Uzbekistan - Samarqand
Day 18	Samarqand
Day 19	Samarqand - Bukhara
Day 20	Bukhara - Khiva
Day 21	Khiva - Nukus
Day 22	Nukus - Aral Sea
Day 23	Aral Sea - Nukus - Tashkent
Day 24	Tashkent - Yangiabad
Day 25	Yangiabad - Parkent - Tashkent
Day 26	Tashkent - Turkistan
Day 27	Turkistan - Kentau - Achisay - Zhanatas
Day 28	Zhanatas - Bayzhansay - Taraz
Day 29	Taraz - Almaty
Day 30	Almaty
Day 31	Almaty - Semey
Day 32	Semey - Atomic Lake - Kurchatov
Day 33	Kurchatov - Polygon nuclear test site - Ekibastuz
Day 34	Ekibastuz - Nur-Sultan
Day 35	Nur-Sultan - ALZHIR - End of Tour

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## Itinerary:

### Day 1: Bishkek

- We'll spend our first day doing a walking tour of Bishkek, a quintessential Soviet city with an amazing mix of Stalinist and Brezhnev era architecture. The wide boulevards and Brutalist apartment blocks, in stark contrast to the snow-capped mountain backdrop.
- We'll start with the Frunze Museum, dedicated to Mikhail Frunze, whom the city of Bishkek used to be named after (and why the airport code is still FRU!).
- Making our way past Victory Square, the circus and Tsum, we'll visit the Lenin Statue and Ala Too Square, home to the National Museum of Kyrgyzstan and a large Kyrgyz flag. Although this flag isn't quite as famous as their world-record holding neighbours, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, it is still impressive and every hour, on the hour, there's a changing of the guards.
- We'll continue on to Osh Bazaar, passing the White House on the way, and we'll finish off the day learning about some of the weird and wonderful produce and delicacies you'll find in the market.
- For your first night in Kyrgyzstan, we'll try some local Kyrgyz food for dinner, and afterwards can go out and experience some of Bishkek's rapidly gentrifying nightlife, maybe at Save the Ales or some of the many other cool ever-emerging options.

### Day 2: Bishkek - Burana Tower - Petroglyphs - Cholpon Ata

- Our first stop will be in the town of Tokmok, a stereotypical Soviet town and home of the former air force training base. To honour the town's past, there's a MiG-23 mounted as a memorial.
- Our next stop will be at Burana Tower, which was once the minaret of a mosque in Balassagyn city, and you can climb to the top of it for some great views over the nearby landscape.
- Next up is a real local treat - a game of Kok Boru, which is played on horseback, and the aim is to get a newly decapitated goat into the other team's goal. They'll also demonstrate other horseback sports such as shirtless wrestling.
- If you're game you can even have a go yourself, whether it's just seeing if you can pick up the dead goat (not as easy as they make it look!), or getting on a horse and actually trying to play.
- We'll stop for a home-cooked lunch in a local family home before continuing on to Cholpon Ata, on the northern side of the lake.
- Check in to the hotel and for the rest of the day we'll just chill like we're locals on a summer holiday - swim in the lake or a swimming pool, sit around and drink or eat, chat with whoever you stumble across, play games with some locals, go for a walk, or simply relax and soak in the atmosphere.

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## Day 3: Cholpon Ata - Karakol - Jeti Ögüz Health Spa

- We'll visit the famous 4,000 year old petroglyphs. It's a very strange and unique view, huge boulders dotted over the side of the otherwise barren and sparse hillside, and the lake visible in the distance.
- On the way back to the main road, we'll drive down the old runway which was part of the Cholpon Ata airport that no longer exists. Back in the heyday, all sorts of dignitaries and celebrities flew into the resort town (including Yuri Gagarin who was a regular here), but it went out of use in 2003.
- Continuing around the lake, today we'll visit Karakol, at the very eastern point of Issyk Kol, stopping on the way into town at the museum of N.M.Prjevalskii, a renowned Russian explorer of the 1800s.
- A small town with a big reputation, Karakol has a couple of pretty cool things to see, including the Dungan Mosque, unexpectedly shaped like a Chinese pagoda, and the Russian Orthodox Church.
- We'll stop for lunch and have traditional Dungan food before heading on to a SAIGA favourite - the Jeti Ögüz Health Spa, a Soviet sanatorium which is very tired and dated (as you'd expect a Soviet health spa to be!) but still functioning. You'll have a chance to explore the grounds and buildings, get a massage, see all the weird treatments available and generally take a step back in time. Depending on who we find, we might be able to get radon baths, electric shock therapy, pulsating circulation treatment as well as mud baths, acupuncture and who knows what else!
- For anyone who loves the weird and wonderful, this creepy night will be right up your alley!

## Day 4: Jeti Ögüz Health Spa - Valley of the Flowers - Jeti Ögüz Gorge - Kyzyl Suu Meteorology Station

- After breakfast, we say goodbye to the sanatorium and the babushkas we've no doubt made friends with and head along the south shore of Issyk Kol. You'll have already realised how huge the lake is, but now you'll start appreciating how different the two sides of it are. To the north the land is much flatter and more like farmland, the mountains very close to the shore. In the south though, it's all canyons, gorges and waterfalls. It's much more rugged, yet the mountains are much further away.
- Today you'll get to see some of Kyrgyzstan's natural beauty, with stops at Kök-Zhaik, which means "Valley of Flowers", and Jeti Ögüz, which translates directly into English as "Seven Bulls" Gorge.
- After lunch we'll switch vehicles from our minibus into a huge Soviet 4x4 bus to take us up the river to our overnight destination - a mountain hut at Kyzyl Suu. The drive in this vehicle is another SAIGA favourite, bouncing around in the huge all-terrain vehicle, winding our way up a rocky dried riverbed, and the hair-raising moment when we cross a fast-flowing river. Then we'll arrive at our home for the night, which has literally made people cry because of the untouched beauty.
- We'll be staying in the mountain hut of the family who lives here and looks after the nearby Soviet Meteorology Station and the Institute of Glaciers Foundation. Once we've settled in they'll take us for a little tour around the two setups. It's fascinating seeing the old Soviet ways of measuring everything, compared to the high-tech modern ways of measuring the same things.
- After dinner we'll no doubt have a bonfire and just relax, taking it all in.

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## Day 5: Kyzyl Suu - Barskoon - Beltam Yurt Camp

- Beginning our descent back down the mountains, stop and have a dip at a small natural hot spring, right on the edge of the glacial river, before leaving the mountains and getting back to Issyk Kol.
- Stop at the town of Barskoon to see the monument to Yuri Gagarin, carved into a huge rock.
- Next we'll visit Aalam Ordo. Building was started in 2009, and it was supposed to be a large centre of knowledge, culture and spirituality, but was never completed. Now it lies abandoned and half finished, but the ornate high wall catches everybody's eye as they drive past.
- Arriving at Beltam Yurt Camp, we'll get our yurts and make ourselves at home, taking in our surrounds at the edge of Issyk Kol, the second largest saline lake in the world (based on volume, actually it's only fifth biggest based on surface area!). Heard of glamping? Well this is glurting, with each yurt decked out like a hotel room, with power outlets, lights, and real mattresses.
- Take a walk to the nearby abandoned Soviet campground. We've made friends with the local security guard, so we'll be able to explore the dorms, industrial kitchens, shower block, theatre, and whatever else you can find. A keen urban explorer can easily spend hours here.
- We'll have a home-cooked meal inside a huge yurt, and spend the rest of the evening relaxing.

## Day 6: Beltam - Kochkor - Song Kol

- Just 100m from our yurt camp, we'll have the opportunity to visit a fascinating old Soviet heavy water factory. Opened in 1955, needless to say, the experiment was a disaster from the beginning. Enduring almost 30 years of issues and failures though, Manufacturing Workshop Number 7 wasn't closed until 1982. Now it lies abandoned as a relic of one of the USSR's many failed projects.
- Begin the four-hour drive to Song Kol, stopping in the town of Kochkor where we'll visit the market, take a short walk through the streets, and have lunch in a local family's home.
- After the epic drive, we'll arrive at Song Kol. Set high in the mountains, the lake itself is in the middle of a fertile plateau, dotted with horses, sheep and yurts. Tonight's yurt is a bit more authentic than at Beltam, but still very comfortable. Even though it's summer and we'll have been hot down in Bishkek and Issyk Kol, we'll now be very glad to have stoves on in each yurt for warmth.
- Depending on how early we arrive, you'll have the opportunity to go horse riding, or just take a walk around the area or if you're really brave, a dip in the lake. Either way it'll be a relaxing and peaceful evening under the stars.
- Dinner will be in the main yurt at our camp, cooked by the family we're staying with.

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## Day 7: Song Kol - Kurtka - Moldo Ashoo Pass - Kazarman

- After breakfast, leave for Kazarman Village via Moldo Ashoo Mountain Pass. This is a breathtaking drive, with loads of photo stops. There isn't much to do on this drive, but the views of mountains and valleys, with cute villages dotted across the hillsides, will be plenty to keep you enthralled.
- We'll stop for lunch in the village of Kurtka, before continuing on to Kazarman.
- You'll have some time to explore Kazarman, known as a "tough mining town", and definitely rough around the edges, formerly a gold mining town. With decreased employment opportunities a lot of the young people have left for the bigger cities, and we'll get to see the sadder side to economic change in Kyrgyzstan and a part of the country a bit down on its luck.

## Day 8: Kazarman - Jalalabad

- Continuing our drive through the mountains, we'll arrive in Jalalabad in the afternoon, and go to the Mineral Spa. Located in the hills just outside the city centre, the Jalalabad Sanatorium is another great example of some funky Soviet architecture. We can have a drink of the healing mineral water, freshly out of the ground, whilst taking in the brilliant views over the town.
- Returning to the town, we'll visit Madumar Ata Chaikhana, the most famous chaykhana in Jalalabad. Chaikhana, translating to tea house, and are common all over Central Asia. The building itself is worth a stop at, a huge gleaming hall, the outside walls covered in pictures of teapots.

## Day 9: Jalalabad - Osh

- We didn't choose these days by accident - today is Saturday so that we can get the epic and unique experience of visiting Jalalabad's animal market. From early in the morning, the marketplace comes to life with incredible numbers of cows, sheep, goats and horses, all being bought and sold in what seem to be some kind of theatrical code between farmers and traders.
- Arriving in Osh in the afternoon, we'll take a city tour of the 3,000 year old town. Although in some ways it'll feel like we've re-entered civilisation after a few days in the Kyrgyz countryside, Osh feels a lot different to Bishkek. There's a bit of a rugged, wild west sort of feel, that's quite charming.
- We'll visit the sacred Sulaiman Too Mountain, the main attraction in Osh. We'll walk to the top of the rocky outcrop, no doubt meeting lots of local pilgrims happy to have a chat on the way.
- Not only is the scraggy hill a site in itself, but it's also home to Sulaiman Too Museum, one of those famous crazy Soviet buildings that appear on all the lists of weird Soviet structures.
- Next we'll go to the Osh bazaar, one of Central Asia's largest open-air markets. This is a great opportunity to find some cool souvenirs - hats, coats, rugs, fabrics, ornaments, loads of the cool stuff you've been admiring on locals and in their houses over the past few days.





## Day 10: Osh - Sary Tash

- Today we'll drive to Sary Tash. In itself it's not much of a destination, but as the start of the Pamir Highway, it's a great place to spend a relaxing afternoon and evening before we start the next part of this epic drive.

## Day 11: Tajikistan border crossing at Kyzyl Art - Murghab

- Drive to Murgab through the Ak Baytal Pass. At over 4,600m high, this is the highest section of road in the former Soviet Union.
- We'll stop near Karakul Lake for picturesque views of Lenin Peak. At 7,134m, Lenin Peak is partly in Tajikistan and partly in Kyrgyzstan, and is the second highest mountain in each country. The highest in Tajikistan is Somoni Peak, which was previously called Peak Stalina. Lenin Peak is the easiest to climb mountain over 7,000m, with the most ascends per year, for a mountain of that size.
- Arrive in Murghab, a small city in the Alichur Valley. Surrounded by high snow-covered mountains, this area is inhabited by Kyrgyz and Pamir Tajik people. From here you'll get great views of the high summit of Muztagh Ata Peak, which is 7,546m, but actually in China.
- Take a walk to explore the city and its traditional market. We'll stop for a picture at the Lenin statue of course. A large number of the shops here are constructed using shipping containers giving the local market a very colourful unique feeling.
- Overnight in homestay in Murghab.

## Day 12: Langar Valley - Lake Yashilkul - Langar

- We'll keep driving along the next section of the Pamir Highway, on a section of road that was completed in 1931. We'll stop at Yashilkul and Bulung Kul, two more spectacular lakes, then we make our way through the Khargush Pass.
- This part of the Pamirs was made famous by the Chevy Chase and Dan Akroyd film Spies Like Us.
- We won't actually be in the Wakhan Corridor, but as we drive along the River Panj, we'll be just across the river from it, the Hindu Kush to the south and the Pamirs to the north.
- After a pretty exciting day of driving and sight-seeing, we'll arrive in Langar and spend the night there.

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## Day 13: Langar - Yamg - Ishkashim - Khorog

- Our first stop will be in Vrang, where we'll see the caves dug by the Buddhists who used to live here.
- Then we'll stop in Yamg village to see the tomb and reconstructed house museum of Sufi mystic Mubarak Kadam, along with the stone that was used as a solar calendar 700 years ago.
- We'll check out Kah-Kakha Fortress and Abrashim Fortress, before arriving in Ishkashim, and continuing on towards Khorog.
- In the afternoon, before we arrive in Khorog, we'll stop at the Garam Chashma hot springs to relax after another day driving the Pamir. There are also cafes here for those who would rather relax with a beverage and bite to eat.
- Arriving in Khorog you'll have a chance to explore the city yourself. Although it was once of strategic importance to the Soviet Union, this is now a really poor area of Tajikistan.

## Day 14: Khorog - Kalaikhum

- Today we'll drive to Kalaikhum, a cute little town of 1,600 people, nestled into the valley. From here you can easily see across the river Panj into Afghanistan.
- I'm sure it's not just us that finds something really strange and exhilarating about looking across a border. It's just a few metres, you could throw a rock there, and yet it's like a whole different world. Especially when the other country is one that is so special and unique.

## Day 15: Kalaikhum - Dushanbe

- Today we will arrive in Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital city. We'll take a tour of the city centre, including Rudaki Street, the Somoni Monument and Central Park, where you can gawk at the huge flagpole which was the largest in the world from 2011 to 2014.
- We'll visit the largest teahouse in the world, where you can either just enjoy a locally made tea, or have something to eat in this iconic building.



## Day 16: Dushanbe - Khoja Obi Garm

- Leaving Dushanbe, we're going to spend the afternoon and evening at an amazing building which really encapsulates what we're all about. Khoja Obi Garm is a Brutalist behemoth Soviet-era sanatorium that is still in operation. The drive there is like the opening scene from the film *The Shining*. It's run by the Tajikistan Trade Union organisation to provide workers with rest and relaxation. The treatments are a little unorthodox as they include radon baths, electric shock therapy, pulsating circulation treatment as well as mud baths and acupuncture (treatments not included in tour price). It's an absolute dream for any lovers of weird Soviet stuff.

## Day 17: Cross border to Uzbekistan - Samarqand

- Leave early in the morning to drive to Samarqand. Farewelling Tajikistan, we'll cross at the Panjakent border, and arrive in Samarqand in the early afternoon.
- Once known as the Pearl of the Muslim World, Samarqand is a city synonymous with the Silk Road. Full of towering minarets, shimmering domes and home to a splendid technicolour bazaar, it is the oldest continuously inhabited city in Central Asia.
- We'll start our time in Samarqand with a visit to the famous and spectacular Registan Square which is flanked by three beautifully decorated, sparkling blue mosaic madrassas. Once the city's commercial centre, Registan Square is modern Samarqand's centre piece.
- Optional wine tasting at the Khovrenko Winery, a small local wine factory with adjoining museum.

## Day 18: Samarqand

- Today we will explore the main sites of Samarqand. Having already visited the Registan the day before, we'll start today's tour with a walk through the centre of town.
- Having died in September 2016, Islam Karimov, the First President of Uzbekistan, now has his mausoleum on the newly renamed Islam Karimov Street.
- Winding through the narrow streets of the old city, we'll stop at a particularly unique synagogue. Totally unrecognisable from the outside, it looks like any of the typical houses on either side, but inside is a bizarre and unique mixture of Uzbek and Jewish décor.
- We'll also pay visits to Bibi Khanum Mosque, Siyab Bazaar, and the grave of St. Daniel which is said to grow a foot in length every ten years.
- Visit Romanenko House, a place that is difficult to describe. This small suburban house has been transformed into a completely unique textile workshop where thirty men and women redesign ancient Central Asian clothing into colourful, modern designs.



## Day 19: Samarqand - Bukhara

- Catch the train to Bukhara in the morning, and then we'll take a walking tour of the old town, including Lyabi Hauz Square, Bolo-Hauz Mosque, and the elegant blue-tiled Ulughbek Madrassa.
- On your way in and out of town you won't be able to miss a huge structure that looks like a giant ark. Known as the Ancient Ark Fortress, this was the Palace of Bukhara's Emirs, and parts of it are still open for us to visit.
- In the evening we'll sit by the lake, chilling out and taking it all in over a cold drink and a chat.

## Day 20: Bukhara - Khiva

- You might like to get up for a sunrise view over Bukhara. With minarets a-plenty, there are loads of great viewing points, and the sunrise can be quite spectacular over the old city.
- After breakfast, we'll leave for Khiva, stopping for lunch at a roadside restaurant along the way.
- Arriving in Khiva in the afternoon, you might like to start exploring yourself. It's a very compact old town, so you can easily walk around and get a really good feel for the place.

## Day 21: Khiva - Nukus

- In the morning we'll take a walking tour of Khiva, before driving to Nukus, the capital of the Republic of Karakalpakstan.
- In the afternoon we'll visit the Museum of Savitskiy. The Karakalpakstan State Museum of Art hosts the world's second largest collection of Russian avant garde art (after the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg). Savitskiy himself went to great lengths to save prohibited pieces of art during the Soviet Union, and amazingly you can see some of them now in this museum.

## Day 22: Aral Sea

- Departure from Nukus first thing in the morning to drive towards the Aral Sea. Stopping at some Silk Road ruins and a canyon on the way, we'll drive up on to the Usturt Plateau.
- Picnic lunch at a ruined Soviet gulag, near the edge of one of the small parts of the remaining sea.
- Arriving at the main part of the sea, if you're game, you can go for a swim. There used to be 10mg of salt per litre in the sea, but now with 160g (yes, grams, not miligrams, so 16,000 times more!) it's not far off the Dead Sea (180g/l), and now you can easily float on top of the water. That's if you can bring yourself to get to the water, past all the oil and grime that's collected at the side of the sea.
- We'll spend the night in a yurt camp near the shore, from where you can watch the sun set over the rapidly disappearing sea.

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## Day 23: Aral Sea - Nukus - Tashkent

- You can wake up early to see the sun rise over the water, otherwise it's breakfast then on to Moynak village, which used to be a thriving coastal town, but is now a disheveled and quiet desert town, most famous now for the ship cemetery.
- Ships lay abandoned on the old seabed as the sea receded. A lot of them were removed and destroyed, supposedly so the metal could be recycled, but a dozen or so of them were saved and are now in Moynak.
- Back in Nukus in the early evening to fly to Tashkent.
- There will have been various points during the trip where you've felt like you've returned to civilisation to different extents - arriving in Osh after Song Kol and Jalalabad, then Dushanbe after the Pamirs, Samarqand after Khoja Obigarm, but Tashkent really is the big smoke, and it will be quite exciting to get there.

## Day 24: Tashkent - Yangiabad

- Our first stop in Tashkent will be the famous Chorsu Bazaar, with its iconic blue dome that's now home to meat, dairy and dried fruits. Exploring the stalls you'll learn about traditional bread-making methods, local remedies for everything including of course virility issues, and how Uzbek babies are taught to go to the toilet.
- Take a walk from Independence Square, formerly Lenin Square, through the park and past the statue of Amir Timur. Stop and browse in a small market in the park, full of old Soviet trinkets and sit under a shady pagoda for a cold drink or ice cream.
- Leaving Tashkent again, we'll drive into the mountains to visit the town of Yangiabad. A closed town during the Soviet Union, not even appearing on maps, it was built as a mining town where exiles were sent. Once home to about 10,000 people, the population is now a little over 300, and noone pays them much attention. We'll spend the afternoon wandering the streets, peeking into abandoned buildings and listening to stories from locals.
- We'll spend the night at a nearby Soviet "resort". If it's hot you can go for a swim in the river, or if you just want to relax, we might be able to find the massage lady.

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## Day 25: Yangiabad - Parkent - Tashkent

- Heading back towards Tashkent, we'll drive to Parkent, where we've been granted permission to visit a spectacular example of Soviet technology and architecture – the solar furnace. Still functioning, though never really having managed to fulfil its purpose, it's not open to the public.
- Return to Tashkent just in time for lunch. You'll probably have tried plov by now, but there's no better place to have it than at the Plov Centre. This gigantic hall, decorated as if for a wedding in the 1980s, is set up for large numbers of people to eat plov in. Prepared just outside by an army of Uzbeks, it is some pretty good plov, but more than that, it is an exceptionally unique experience.
- Go to Tashkent TV Tower for fabulous views of the city.
- Visit Tashkent Land, Central Asia's answer to Disneyland. With its faded welcome sign, crumbling gift shop and creaky rides, this is another step back in time. Most tourists don't make it to this gem of Soviet infrastructure, but we just can't resist it. If you're really game you can try out the “Boomerang” rollercoaster, or if you'd like something a bit more relaxing you can take a ride on the “African tour”, a boat trip through the jungleland.
- Next we'll visit the Museum of Railway Techniques'. This outdoor museum is full of all sorts of old locomotives, and they don't mind us climbing all over them. We can even take a little train ride around the train museum. You don't have to be a train lover to enjoy this charming museum.

## Day 26: Tashkent - Turkistan

- Saying goodbye to Tashkent and to Uzbekistan, we'll cross the nearby Kazakhstan border and head to Shymkent where we'll stop for lunch.
- Drive to Otrar, an ancient, abandoned town on the Silk Road, that existed from as early as the 5th century B.C. right up until the 18th century A.D and is now a well-preserved archaeological site.
- Next stop is the ruins of Sauran, a large city surrounded by walls, which for a time was the capital of Ak Orda and the largest city in Kazakhstan. The city was a major player on the Silk Road, having strong diplomatic relations with world powers, but like Otrar, Sauran saw its decline alongside the Silk Road itself.
- In Turkistan, we'll find the mausoleum of Khawaja Ahmed, which was instructed to be built by Amir Timur in 1389 but was never finished as building was stopped upon Timur's death.

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## Day 27: Turkistan – Kentau – Achisay – Zhanatas

- Make sure you wear some comfortable shoes and get ready for some nostalgia, as we explore several semi-abandoned old industrial towns. Kentau, Achisay and Zhanatas are old Soviet monogorods (mining towns), but with the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of centralised planning, the towns have bowed to market forces and largely depopulated.
- Best of all for us, there are still plenty of Soviet murals, awesome public art, old Palaces of Culture and the usual 1950s Khrushchevka apartment blocks. Exploring these towns will be like entering a time machine, and any lovers of Soviet nostalgia, or those partial to a bit of urbex, will be in heaven.
- On the road between Ashysai and Zhanatas, we'll stop by an old caravanserai by itself in the middle of the Kazakh steppe.
- We'll spend the night in Zhanatas, a town which has probably had very few if any foreign travellers.

## Day 28: Zhanatas - Bayzhansay - Taraz

- Today we'll take the abandoned Soviet feel to the next level, stopping in Bayzhansay, a completely abandoned Soviet town. There is now no one living here and the town can be extremely eerie. It is this type of town that encapsulates the demise of the Soviet Union and its economic model.
- In the afternoon we'll head to Taraz where you'll have the rest of the day to explore. Taraz is over 2000 years old, but is also a modern city and one of the fastest growing in Kazakhstan.
- There are several easily accessible things to do in Taraz including the Aisha-Bibi Mausoleum, the Kali-Yunus bathhouse, and Abdykadyr Mosque just to name a few. Others might wish to just stroll in the local park, or otherwise relax at a local café or chaykhana (tea house).

## Day 29: Taraz - Almaty

- It's a 500km drive from Taraz to Almaty, so we'll need to make sure we've got some good trivia questions and stories to tell. We'll stop on the way for a few rests and lunch, before we arrive in the largest city in Kazakhstan, and until 1997, its capital. As is becoming increasingly common in Kazakhstan, Almaty was formerly known as Alma-Ata and before that Verny.
- We'll check into our hotel for the next two nights, then head out for Almaty's number one attraction and a great friend of SAIGA – the Almaty Walking Tour. This one will take in such famous sites as the Green Bazaar, the Arbat and Panfilov Park, named after the 28 Panfilov Guardsmen from Almaty, who died during the Battle of Moscow in 1941, which is right next to Zenkov Cathedral. A Russian Orthodox Church, its claim to fame is being the largest wooden structure in the world constructed with only joins, and no nails.
- If you like to have a night out of any type, whether it's fine dining, a cosy bar, a noisy pub or even the ballet, Almaty is the city you're going to want to do it in.



## Day 30: Almaty

- Today we'll drive to a few of the destinations not within walking distance.
- We'll pass Old Square and Republic Square, the two places where the Kazakh Parliament used to take place before moving to Astana in 1997. These are also where we recently saw fatal riots in January 2022, along with the images of the destroyed city hall and presidential residence.
- We'll show you Medeo, the highest ice-skating rink in the world, and then on to Big Almaty Lake.
- Driving out to the suburbs of Almaty, we'll make a stop that isn't on other tour itineraries, and in fact most people in Almaty aren't even aware of this gem of Soviet history. Hidden in amongst medium density housing, there's a park which is now home to all the unwanted Soviet statues that were moved from their original places throughout the city and dumped unceremoniously here. Our favourite is the giant Lenin which used to be in Old Square, removed from his plinth and just standing flat on the ground with no sign or plaque to be seen.
- Back in the city centre, we'll take a ride on the Almaty metro. One of only two metros in Central Asia (the other being in Tashkent), it has just nine stations, so is largely useless to most people. However, like many metros in the former Soviet world, the stations themselves are ornately decorated, sparkling clean, and well worth a look at.

## Day 31: Almaty - Semey

- We head north today, and while it would be great to go overland, the distance we'll be covering would take a couple of days, so instead we'll catch a flight to the city of Semey.
- Semey is definitely not on the normal tourist trail. Some will know it by its Russian name - Semipalatinsk. Semey is the epitome of Soviet Kazakhstan and was formerly one of the main cities in the north of the country, although it's now overshadowed by nearby Astana (Nur-Sultan). Semey is also said to have a much stronger Russian character compared with most of Kazakhstan, owing to the closeness to the Russian border and the large scientific community.
- We'll take a look around town admiring the mosaics and public art as well as the famous Lenin Alley and 'Stronger than Death' anti-nuclear monument.

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## Day 32: Semey - Atomic Lake - Kurchatov

- This is when we finally see the nuclear sites themselves. Our first stop is the famous atomic lake. This lake was made by an explosion 25 times greater than Hiroshima. While it might look like the lake was an interesting consequence of the testing, it was in fact an intentional side effect, as the experiments were designed for earth-moving purposes to artificially create lakes, harbours and canals. Unbelievably, locals fish in the lake, despite warnings by authorities that it is hazardous.
- In the afternoon we'll check on the Chagan abandoned airbase. During the Cold War this was home to one of the Soviet Union's main air force bases for the deployment of long-range bombers carrying nuclear weapons. The location is interesting as it's on the Chinese border. Part of the reason for its location was the rising tensions due to the Sino-Soviet split.
- We'll then head to the town of Kurchatov, a formerly closed city, named after Igor Kurchatov, the founder of the Soviet nuclear programme, where the headquarters of the nuclear testing was based. Most of the town is derelict now as there is no employment to sustain the town's population, providing an opportunity to explore the old Soviet apartment blocks.
- The accommodation tonight will also be a very Soviet experience.

## Day 33: Kurchatov - Polygon Nuclear Test Site - Ekibastuz

- Before leaving Kurchatov, we'll visit the Museum of the Semipalatinsk Test Site, which not just anyone can visit - they require a permit organised in advance, but don't worry, that's what we're here for. This small museum gives you an idea of the history and effects of the nuclear testing done here.
- We'll then continue on to more of the nuclear test site - known as the Polygon. 456 Nuclear tests were conducted here, and the effects can be witnessed first-hand with the destroyed surroundings and large craters caused by the explosions.
- We'll explore the bunkers used by those performing the tests and the epicentres of the explosions.
- Leaving the test site behind, we'll make a stop in Aksu, before continuing to Ekibastuz for the night.



## Day 34: Ekibastuz - Nur-Sultan

- Ekibastuz is a large industrial town in north-eastern Kazakhstan. Home of the world's tallest chimney (at 419.7m tall), the most powerful power lines, and Bogatyr – the largest open-cast coal mine. How's that for some world records?!
- Ekibastuz isn't just an industrial back water, it also has a political history as it was a place of political exile for dissidents such as Alexandr Solzhenitzyn.
- We'll arrive in the capital of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan, mid-afternoon, with plenty of time to do a driving tour of this very spread out, but ridiculously impressive city.
- Built in 1997, Nur-Sultan resembles in many ways other cities such as Ashgabat, or to a lesser extent Baku. Clearly built from nothing at the snap of a finger, several of the world's most iconic architects were given carte blanche and tasked with the epic job of designing an incredibly unique city.
- We'll start the city tour with a visit to Bayterek. Sometimes referred to as the "Chupa Chup" because it looks like one, Bayterek has become a symbol of Astana. From the viewing platform, which is 97 meters high, symbolising the year of the city becoming capital, you can get spectacular views over the new city.
- Next we'll visit the Palace of Independence, the shopping and entertainment centre "Khan Shatyr", probably Nur-Sultan's most famous building. The building is in the shape of a giant, slightly lop-sided tent, and it's got everything inside that you might want. Restaurants, luxury shops, and even an aquapark which has sand imported from the Maldives.
- What's in a name? Although currently known as Nur-Sultan (after the first President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev), the city was known as Astana until 2019. Before 1997 it was Tselinograd, and before that it was Akmolinsk in Russian.

## Day 35: Nur-Sultan - ALZHIR - End of Tour

- Our final day sees us taking a short trip out of the city to ALZHIR – the Camp of Wives of Traitors to the Motherland. In the middle of the Kazakh steppe, you'll find this camp where the family of dissidents and so-called traitors were sent. Today it's now a memorial and museum where we'll learn about this dark part of the country's history.
- We'll arrive back in Astana with some free time in the afternoon before we have our farewell dinner in a local Kazakh restaurant.
- Transfers to the airport according to your flight times.
- If you would like to spend longer in Astana, let us know and we can help you make your plans.