

# Five 'Stans Autumn Mega Tour Sept 7th - October 8th 2024 Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan



## 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 Nomad Games, the Registan and Ashgabat, 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 unforgettable experience of the **Nomad Games**

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**

Take in the **Gates of Hell** in all it's glory

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

Travel to the 'Stans and beyond

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



## Tour Details:

**DATES:** September 7th -  
October 8th 2024

**PRICE:** \$4945 USD (twin share),  
Single Supplement \$1650 USD

**START:** Astana, Kazakhstan

**FINISH:** Ashgabat, Turkmenistan



### INCLUSIONS:

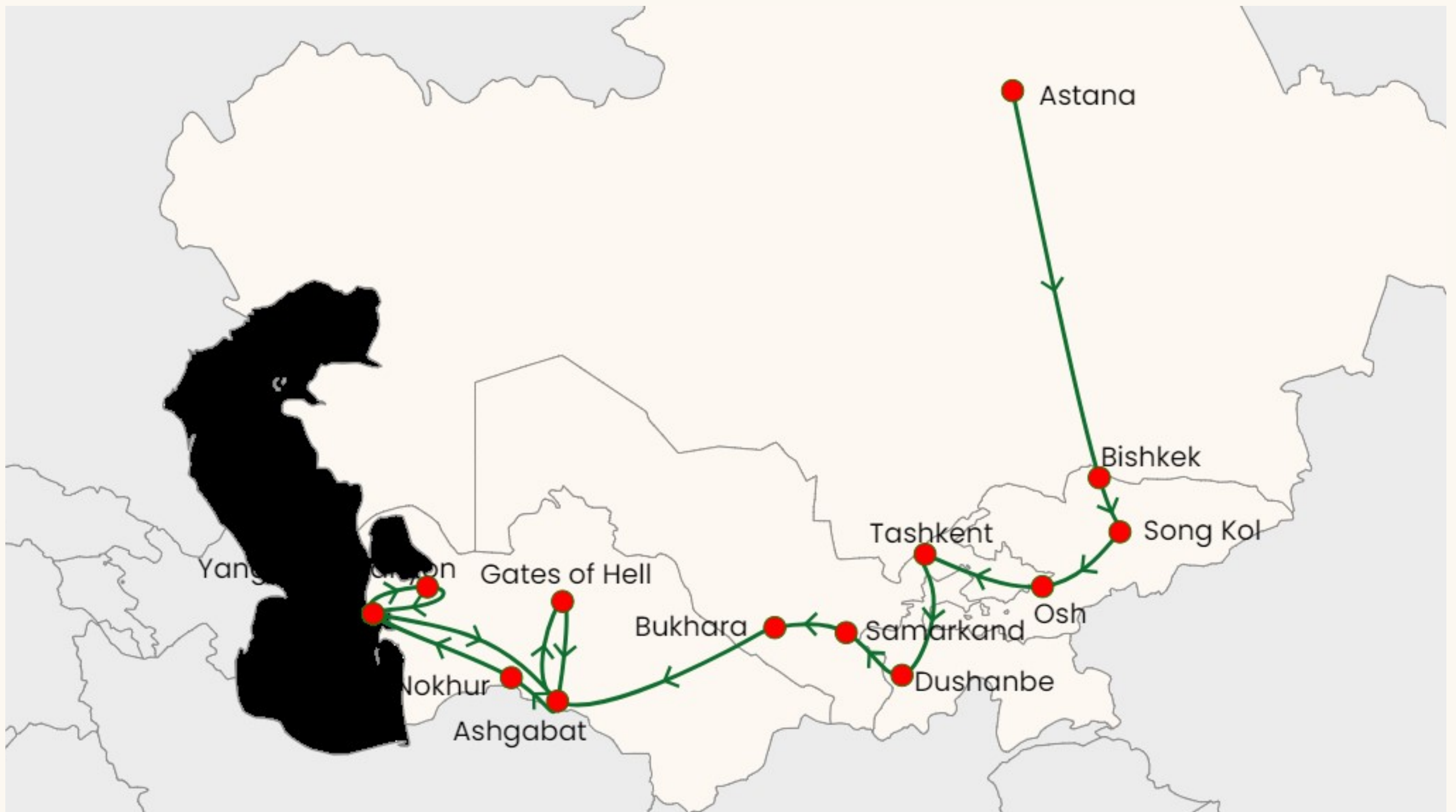
- Accommodation in twin share at roughly 3 star hotels/guesthouses, breakfast included
- Where itinerary mentions yurt or homestay accommodation, single supplement and twin share may be affected
- Transport as per itinerary
- Entrance fees to most sites (as per itinerary)
- SAIGA guide and local guides

### 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

Travel to the 'Stans and beyond

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



|        |  |
|--------|--|
| Day 1  | Astana                                     |
| Day 2  | World Nomad Games Opening Ceremony         |
| Day 3  | Nomad Games                                |
| Day 4  | Astana - Bishkek                           |
| Day 5  | Bishkek, Burana Tower, Kok Boru, Song Kol  |
| Day 6  | Song Kol, Kyzyl Oi                         |
| Day 7  | Kyzyl Oi, Toktogul                         |
| Day 8  | Toktogul, Osh                              |
| Day 9  | Osh  |
| Day 10 | Osh, cross border to Uzbekistan, Yangiabad |
| Day 11 | Parkent, Tashkent                          |

Travel to the 'Stans and beyond

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
 Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



|        |   |
|--------|---|
| Day 12 | Tashkent  |
| Day 13 | Tashkent, Cross the Border to Tajikistan, Khujand   |
| Day 14 | Khujand, Fann Mountains, Khoja Obi Garm             |
| Day 15 | Khoja Obi Garm, Dushanbe                            |
| Day 16 | Dushanbe, Cross the border to Uzbekistan, Samarkand |
| Day 17 | Samarkand   |
| Day 18 | Train from Samarkand to Bukhara                     |
| Day 19 | Bukhara, Cross border to Turkmenistan, Turkmenabat  |
| Day 20 | Turkmenistan Independence Day                       |
| Day 21 | Independence Day, Nisa, Kipchak, Ashgabat           |
| Day 22 | Horse racing, Gates of Hell                         |
| Day 23 | Gates of Hell, Kow Ata, Nokhur, Serdar              |
| Day 24 | Balkanabat, Avaza, Turkmenbashy                     |
| Day 25 | Yangykala Canyon, Turkmenbashy                      |
| Day 26 | Turkmenbashy, Ashgabat                              |
| Day 27 | Ashgabat, Turkmenabat, Koytendag                    |
| Day 28 | Koytendag, Goat Massage, Kugitang                   |
| Day 29 | Dinosaur Plateau, Kyrk Gyz Cave, Kugitang           |
| Day 30 | Kugitang, Turkmenabat                               |
| Day 31 | Turkmenabat, Ashgabat                               |
| Day 32 | Ashgabat, End of Tour                               |
|        |   |
|        |   |
|        |   |

**Travel to the 'Stans and beyond**

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
 Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



## Itinerary:

### Day 1: Astana

- We will spend today exploring this very spread out, but ridiculously impressive city. With the Nomad Games starting the following day, the city will be bustling and lively, so it's a great time for us to be there.
- Built in 1997, Astana 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 Astana'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 Astana, it was known as Nur Sultan (after the first President of Kazakhstan Nur Sultan Nazarbayev) from 2019 until 2022, before that the city was known as Astana for the first time. Before 1997 it was Tselinograd, and before that it was Akmola or Akmolinsk in Russian.

### Day 2: World Nomad Games Opening Ceremony

- Today will mark the start of this epic event. The exact program is yet to be announced, however from our experience at the first three Nomad Games, the Opening Ceremony won't disappoint, with performances from various sports people and teams, local and foreign pop stars, traditional music, and a lot of very picturesque traditional clothing on display! Not to mention an overall festive atmosphere.
- Typically there have been four venues - the hippodrome which is where all horse games take place; a sports centre for indoor activities; an outdoor area for some wrestling events and other outdoor sports, and then an amazing yurt village.
- We will spend today visiting the Opening Ceremony, exploring the grounds of the events, and just taking it all in.

Travel to the 'Stans and beyond

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



## Day 3: Nomad Games

- Today is our opportunity to experience a lot of the events of the Games.
- Salbuurun is a sport based on the nomadic hunting routines. They would go on several day long group hunts, for which the best eagles, horses, riders, hunters and dogs would be selected. While returning home, the most nimble horseman would put the body of a wolf that they'd caught across the saddle and would gallop ahead of the group. The others would try to catch up with him and grab the wolf, attempting to display their own strength and agility. In the end the most best rider would return home to the village and to show everyone his victory, would throw the wolf's carcass at the elder's yurt. And thus, Kok Boru was born.
- The most famous and possibly most novel sport is Kok Boru, known in Afghanistan and Tajikistan as Buzkashi, and sometimes referred to in English as "Dead Goat Polo". "Kok Boru" literally means "Grey Wolf" and originates from when Kyrgyz nomads would hunt wolves and play games with them. Nowadays the game involves two teams of men on horseback, each trying to get the decapitated goat or sheep which is the centre of the game, into the other team's goal, which is actually a large pit at the end of the pitch. It's absurdly fast-paced, very rough, and extremely exciting, but the decapitation of the animal at the beginning of the game is definitely not a site for the squeamish. (Don't worry, if you don't want to see the animal actually losing its head and limbs, you can easily not watch this part!)
- In the nearby Genghis Khan style yurt village, there will be eagle hunting, equestrian displays, and demonstrations of arts and crafts and other ancient domestic traditions, just to name a few.

## Day 4: Astana, Bishkek

- This morning we will fly to Bishkek, and will start with 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.

Travel to the 'Stans and beyond

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



## Day 5: Bishkek, Burana Tower, Kok Boru, Song Kol

- 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 continue on 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.

## Day 6: Song Kol, Kyzyl Oi

- Leaving Song Kol in the morning, we will drive through the Jumgal Valley, crossing the Kara-Keche Pass, stopping for a picnic lunch on the way.
- We'll arrive in the later afternoon at our destination for the day - Kyzyl Oi, an old village located in the Suusamyr Valley in a narrow gorge of the powerful Kokomeren River.
- At 1800 metres above sea level, and characterised by scattered reddish clay houses, it gets its name which means "Red Bowl" from the formation caused by the high red mountains surrounding it.
- Dinner and overnight in a homestay in Kyzyl-Oi.

**Travel to the 'Stans and beyond**

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



## Day 7: Kyzyl Oi, Toktogul

- Today we will continue through rural Kyrgyzstan, to the town of Toktogul, which was originally named after Toktogul Satylganov, a well-known Kyrgyz poet and musician. His contributions and talent were so extensive that he is featured on the 100 Som note.
- Dinner and overnight at a homestay in Toktogul.

## Day 8: Toktogul, Osh

- This is our last drive through rural Kyrgyzstan, and on the way we'll cross Suusamyr Valley and Chyckan Gorge, before arriving in Toktogul, 1000 metres above sea level.
- Arriving in Osh in the late afternoon we'll have the chance for an evening walk before going out for dinner.
- Overnight in Osh.

## Day 9: Osh

- Our last stop in Kyrgyzstan, 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.
- If there's time 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 since being in Central Asia.

## Day 10: Osh, cross border to Uzbekistan, Yangiabad

- Today we will leave Kyrgyzstan and cross the border into Uzbekistan.
- We'll drive through the Fergana Valley 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 no one 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.





## Day 11: 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 12: Tashkent

- 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.
- In the afternoon we'll visit Tashkent Land, Central Asia's answer to Disneyland. With its faded welcome sign, crumbling gift shop and creaky rides, this is definitely a 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 jungle land.
- You'll most likely have tried plov by now, but nothing will prepare you for the Plov Centre. This gigantic hall, decorated as if for a wedding in the 1980's, is set up for large numbers of people to eat plov in. Mixed and cooked just outside by an army of Uzbek women, it is some pretty good plov, but more than that, it is an exceptionally unique experience.
- Visit the Tashkent TV Tower for fabulous views of the city, and if it's open, a coffee or a beer in a Soviet-built revolving restaurant.

Travel to the 'Stans and beyond

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



- We'll take several rides on the Tashkent Metro while we're there, one of only two metro systems in Central Asia (the other one being in Almaty). As with most Soviet built metros, the stations are unnecessarily lavish, but Tashkent's are particularly ornately decorated. Until June 2018 it was illegal to take photos inside them, but fortunately now pictures of these incredibly photogenic stations are allowed.
- 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.
- Overnight in Tashkent.

## Day 13: Tashkent, Cross the border to Tajikistan, Khujand

- This morning we'll head to Tajikistan and cross the border into our fourth Stan.
- Arriving in Khujand around lunchtime, we'll have a sightseeing tour in that afternoon, including the Orient bazaar Panjshanbe – the famous Panjshanbe city market and one of the most interesting sights of Khujand, Sheikh Muslihiddin Mosque and the Mausoleum of Khujand.
- A highlight of Khujand will be the massive Lenin statue, standing majestically on the side of a hill overlooking the city, this is now the largest statue of Lenin still standing.

## Day 14: Khujand, Fann Mountains, Khoja Obi Garm

- Today we will be doing a full day drive south through the famous Fann Mountains towards Dushanbe.
- We'll be driving via Istiklol Tunnel, sometimes known as the "Death Tunnel", 2,630m above sea level.
- There will be plenty of stops on the way though for photos, toilets and of course lunch.
- The best stop though will be at Iskanderkul Lake (2,255m above the sea level), where there will be an opportunity to go for a 40 minute hike to the local waterfall after arriving at the lake, or if you'd prefer, you can just relax by the lake or go on a shorter walk around it.
- Arriving at today's destination, 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.

Travel to the 'Stans and beyond

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



## Day 15: Khoja Obi Garm, Dushanbe

- This morning you'll have a chance to get some more treatments, take some photos in different light, or just explore the buildings and grounds some more, before we head off towards Dushanbe.
- Arriving around lunchtime, we'll take a tour of Dushanbe's 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.
- Then we'll visit the Museum of National Antiquities with the reclining Buddha in Nirvana, before continuing on to the Botanical Gardens, the Somoni Monument, and the Building of National Spirit (unfortunately it's not possible to go inside, but it's still impressive from the outside).
- Overnight in Dushanbe.

## Day 16: Dushanbe, Cross the border to Uzbekistan, Samarkand

- Leave Dushanbe first thing in the morning, we'll cross the border back into Uzbekistan, and head to Samarkand.
- Once known as the "Pearl of the Muslim World", Samarkand is a city synonymous with the Silk Road, full of towering minarets, shimmering domes and home to a splendid technicolour bazaar, which you will have time to wander around and discover for yourself.
- We'll start our time in Samarkand 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 Samarkand's centre piece and a pride of the Silk Road. We'll have our tour and then you'll have a chance to continue exploring the Registan by yourself.
- Optional wine tasting at the Khovrenko Winery, a small local wine factory with adjoining museum.
- Dinner at a local restaurant.

**Travel to the 'Stans and beyond**

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



## Day 17: Samarqand

- Today we will explore the main sites of Samarkand. 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 18: Samarqand - Bukhara

- This morning we will catch the fast "Sharq" train to Bukhara. Not only is it a quicker way to get between these two cities, but it's also an integral part of any Uzbekistan experience and a great way to see how locals, expats and tourists travel in modern Uzbekistan.
- Arriving in Bukhara in the late morning, we will spend the afternoon doing a walking tour of the old town of Bukhara.
- In the evening we'll meet up for dinner at Lyabi Hauz.

## Day 19: Bukhara, Cross border to Turkmenistan, Turkmenabat

- Those doing the 4 Stans can return to Tashkent today or the previous day for your departure flight.
- Today we will cross the land border at Farap, into Turkmenistan, our fifth and final Stan.
- Arriving in Turkmenabat in the afternoon, we'll visit the Lebap Regional Museum. You wouldn't expect much, but it's actually a pretty cool little museum, with a fascinating array of taxidermy, multiple dioramas, and huge models and murals of the surrounding area, including depictions of dinosaurs making the footprints in the plateau we will have just seen. Not to mention some very informative displays about the wheat production and oil production of Turkmenistan of course.
- Dinner will be at our favourite Fitchi House - a local hotspot. And you'd never believe it, but it's not the only one. They also have a branch in Seattle!

### Travel to the 'Stans and beyond

Saiga Tours Almaty Kazakhstan [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
Whatsapp: +77079148146 Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



## Day 20: Independence Day Ashgabat

- We are here for Independence Day, and each year the specific events that we are invited to change slightly. Over time we've gotten a pretty good idea of what will happen, but depending on exactly how things transpire, the order of the itinerary during this first couple of days in Ashgabat might change a bit.
- You're going to be in awe of everything that the capital has to offer. We'll spend the day taking in all the main sites of Ashgabat, including all those crazy monuments you've probably seen pictures of, as we begin explaining all the weird and wonderful aspects of Turkmenistan that make it such a special place.
- We'll start with a driving tour of Ashgabat's main sites, including Independence Park and Independence Monument, the Monument to the Constitution, the Arch of Neutrality, Lenin Park, and a drive-by of the Olympic Complex which was built for the 2017 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games. The complex is home to the famous Horse Stadium (the largest structure in the shape of a horse in the world – you'll hear plenty more of these records!), but unfortunately is closed to the public.
- A highlight of the day will likely be the Alem Centre, which is the complex in which the Wheel of Enlightenment is, the largest indoor ferris wheel (yes, there's another one). And YES, for just \$1, you can even take a ride!
- In the afternoon we'll visit the university bookshop, a great chance to pick up some very cool, unique Turkmenistan swag, including where you can find amazing coffee table books written by and about the president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, as well as ones about Ashgabat and Turkmenistan. You can even get them in English! They also have postcards and posters, and if you're lucky they might even have a copy of the Ruhnama, the book written by Turkmenbashy.
- In the evening, we'll take a night tour of Ashgabat. With the white marble buildings lit up by brightly coloured neon lights, Ashgabat is a truly spectacular place after dark.
- Spend the night at the Ak Altyn Hotel.

## Day 21: Independence Day, Nisa, Kipchak, Ashgabat

- Happy Independence Day!
- Today we'll start off by leaving the city, to visit Nisa, a UNESCO site which was once the capital of the Parthian Empire.
- We'll then continue on to Kipchak to see the resplendent Turkmenbashy Mosque and Mausoleum, where Turkmenbashy is buried beside his mother, father and two brothers in their white marble mausoleum. There aren't too many Turkmenbashy related sites still around, but this one is truly spectacular.



- Return to Ashgabat in the afternoon and depending on the specific timing of the concert we'll attend, you'll have some free time to enjoy a beer by the pool at the hotel or take a walk around the old part of the city where the hotel is located.
- In the evening we'll be guests at the Independence Day concert - think North Korean Mass Games, crossed with an Olympics Opening Ceremony, with a bit of Turkmen charm added to it. A delightful and unique combination of gross disorganisation, along with rigid rules. The synchronised dancing on the stadium floor, along with the matching costumes and choreographed claps and cheers from the "spectators", we will be the only people there who don't have to be. This isn't an event you can buy tickets too - we will be taking the place of a particular work group. And if the President is in attendance, we will be sitting very close to him. We know this for sure because they'd never put a group of raggedy mis-matching foreigners in the midst of the carefully laid out stands in a place where he'd have a view of it!

## Day 22: Horse racing, Gates of Hell

- This morning will be another exciting and incredibly unique experience, at the Akhalteke Horse Sport Complex. This is actually the President's favourite event, so he will most likely be here. It will be a very early morning, as there are a lot of restrictions in place around our arrival, especially if the President is there. We have to go in special buses, in a particular order, and everyone needs to be seated before the President starts his journey. There will be students lining the roads waving flowers and flags, and again we will be the only people not dressed in the matching outfits.
- We will see some races (guess whose horses win!), there will be prize ceremonies and musical items, but most interesting will just be taking it all in, in all its bizarreness.
- Afterwards we'll head back into Ashgabat to have lunch at Berkarar Shopping Centre, where you can go ice-skating, play in the games centre, ride a miniature double-decker bus, and even have a cappuccino in a hipster café - bet you weren't expecting that!
- Here we will go to the supermarket to pick up supplies for the rest of the day and dinner that night.
- After lunch we'll drive 250km north to Darvaza, The Gates of Hell.
- One the way we'll make a few stops - including to see a salt lake, two other craters (one full of mud, one full of water), and of course maybe for a toilet (not a luxurious one!).
- Crossing the sand dunes to get to Darvaza, we'll arrive in time to watch the sunset over the fiery crater and experience dusk turn to dark at this breathtaking site.
- Set up tents near the Gates of Hell and camp near the fiery crater.



## Day 23: Gates of Hell, Kow Ata, Nokhur, Serdar

- Drive back towards Ashgabat, and those finishing the tour here will have some free time and be driven to the airport.
- The rest of the group head west to Kow Ata, an underground thermal cave lake which is said to have many medical attributes, but is also used by locals as a swimming hole and makes for a very fun and relaxing swim.
- After a refreshing swim in the cave lake, we'll sit down and chill for a while with some shashlik from one of the restaurants just outside the entrance to the cave.
- We'll continue driving west, away from Ashgabat, to the village of Nokhur, situated in the Kopet Dag mountains. Unlike the rest of Turkmenistan, even during the Soviet Union and the era of Turkmenbashy, this village were largely left to their own devices and as such live a much more traditional lifestyle than most Turkmens.
- Here we'll visit Nokhur Cemetery, where each grave is adorned with the horns of a mountain goat and a small market next to a wishing tree where you can buy all sorts of natural teas and potions.
- Keep driving to the town of Serdar where we'll spend the night in a local hotel.

## Day 24: Balkanabat, Avaza, Turkmenbashy

- Today we'll complete the drive towards the Caspian Sea, arriving in Turkmenbashy in the late afternoon.
- We'll stop in Balkanabat on the way for some lunch and a quick look at a monument to the caravans of the Silk Road.
- Arriving in Avaza in the afternoon, this is the epitome of bizarre modern day Turkmenistan. Although the facilities are extravagant and the buildings futuristic, the town is somehow best described as a ghost town.
- We'll have dinner at the one café that will be open, and from there you can explore the amusement parks, beaches, and hotels of Avaza, and if you're game, take a swim in the notoriously cold Caspian Sea.
- Overnight in Turkmenbashy.
- Avaza is currently closed to foreigners, as of April 2023. We are working on the assumption that it will open before the time of this tour, however there is a chance that it won't. If it is unavailable we will change around the itinerary accordingly and as always we will work with the situation on the ground at the time to ensure that the tour is as well-rounded as possible.

Travel to the 'Stans and beyond

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



## Day 25: Yangykala Canyon, Turkmenbashy

- Today we'll visit Yangykala Canyon. Until recently most Turkmens didn't even know that this place existed, and still not many have been there. Wide and vast, the area was once a seabed, and scattered with all sorts of fossils, it stretches as far as the eye can see. In 4x4s, we'll drive over the canyon walls, through the canyon itself, and up the other side, stopping at a couple of different viewpoints along the way.
- We will take a packed lunch with us so we can enjoy it whilst taking in all the shapes and colours of this spectacular natural phenomenon.
- Returning to Turkmenbashy in the afternoon you'll have some free time before we head out for dinner.

## Day 26: Turkmenbashy, Ashgabat

- We'll fly on Turkmenistan Airlines (an experience in itself!) back to Ashgabat in the morning.
- We'll spend the rest of the day doing a couple of our favourite quirky things in Ashgabat, starting with a ride up the Kopetdag mountains in a cable car. It reaches almost all the way to the Iranian border and at the top you'll get spectacular views over the city, the health path and the tv tower.
- We'll then do a bit of a drive around the outskirts of the city. We'll visit the outside of the TV tower, the largest building in the shape of a star in the world.
- Serdar Yoly, the "health path". Stretching 28km along the Kopetdag mountain range, this fitness project was instigated by Turkmenbashy, but being a keen health fanatic himself, Gurbanguly continued to encourage people to make the trek. You won't have time to walk much of the path, but we can just soak in the atmosphere in the park at the bottom. If you would like to arrange to walk all or some of Serdar Yoly, let us know and it can be planned for before the tour.
- For dinner this evening we'll go to the Yyldiz Hotel

## Day 27: Ashgabat, Turkmenabat, Koytendag

- Those finishing the tour here will be taken to the airport according to their flight times.
- In the morning we'll fly to Turkmenabat, in the north east of the country.
- From here we will drive into the Koytendag mountains.
- Straight away you'll be struck by how different this part of the country feels to anywhere you've been so far. If you thought Ashgabat was off the beaten track - try Koytendag! You will likely come across people who have literally never seen a western tourist before.
- We'll be able to wander around the village a little bit and get a feel for the place, and we'll have dinner in a local restaurant.
- Spend the night at a lodge in Kugitang.





## Day 28: Koytendag, Goat Massage, Kugitang

- We'll spend today exploring the Koytendag mountains. We'll visit one gorge which becomes a river when it rains, but assuming it's possible we'll climb through it, and at the end is a massive waterfall of snow melt. Locals will be running under the waterfall, screaming from the cold and laughing as they jump straight back out again. If you're game you can join them! And at the end of the gorge families will be set up in the shade with mangals (barbeques), picnic tables and rugs, and food and drink for the day.
- There are a number of other swimming or climbing opportunities, so we can play it by ear and do as much or as little as people feel like.
- Probably a highlight of the tour will be getting a goat massage. An old guy who lives in the area and owns some land and some animals has devised this unique and fun activity, that he calls goat massages. In reality though it's having a goat (of the weight of your choice) walk and stand on your back and shoulders. Some people love it, some people would rather just watch others loving it, but whichever camp you fall in it's certainly a unique and hilarious experience!
- We'll return to the lodge in Kugitang in the evening and have some dinner and settle in for the evening.

## Day 29: Dinosaur Plateau, Kyrk Gyz Cave, Kugitang

- Another highlight! We'll start the day with walking up onto the Dinosaur Plateau, the largest repository of dinosaur footprints in the world. Discovered in 1980, the limestone slab that sits at a 20 degree angle on the side of the mountain, is covered in pre-historic footprints ranging from 20-70cm in size. Although scientifically explained as this, one local legend tells us that the plateau was a place where white elephants gathered to perform sacred dances, and another tells us that the footprints are those of battle elephants brought by Alexander the Great.
- It's quite a walk to get up there, and the hillside itself is quite steep, but once we get there you can explore as much as you like, or simply sit next to some footprints and take in the spectacular view.
- Once we've had our dinosaur footprint fix, we'll continue on to Kyrk Gyz Cave. This cave is covered in a peculiar layer of stalactites, which are in fact cloth rags dangling from the ceiling. Legend has it that anyone who can fling a mud pie with a cloth attached to it, and make it stick, will have a wish come true. So obviously we'll all give it a go!
- Return to Kugitang for our last night in the lodge.

Travel to the 'Stans and beyond

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)



## Day 30: Kugitang, Turkmenabat

- Today we'll make the picturesque drive to Turkmenabat, with loads of stop along the way in odd little towns, beautiful scenery, and Astana Baba Mausoleum and Alamberdar Mausoleum.
- We'll have a wander through the bazaar and have lunch in the small town of Atamyrat, where we'll more than likely be spotted by some locals who've never seen a tourist before and end up with some good company over lunch.
- Arriving in Turkmenabat in the afternoon, we'll visit the Lebap Regional Museum. You wouldn't expect much, but it's actually a pretty cool little museum, with a fascinating array of taxidermy, multiple dioramas, and huge models and murals of the surrounding area, including depictions of dinosaurs making the footprints in the plateau we will have just seen. Not to mention some very informative displays about the wheat production and oil production of Turkmenistan of course.
- Dinner will be at our favourite Fitchi House - a local hotspot. And you'd never believe it, but it's not the only one. They also have a branch in Seattle!

## Day 31: Turkmenabat, Ashgabat

- Today you'll fly on Turkmenistan Airlines again!
- Arriving back in Ashgabat, the rest of the day will be free time. You can take this chance to re-visit some of the places we've already been to that you might like to spend more time at, or you might like to visit some of the museums that aren't on the main itinerary, such as the Carpet Museum, the National Museum, or the President's Museum. Or you might like to just relax at the hotel, do some last-minute souvenir shopping, or stroll around the streets of Ashgabat. Of course we'll be around to help you make arrangements for any of these things, or to point you in the right direction of what you might like to do.
- We'll have our last dinner tonight. Maybe we'll re-visit the Yyldiz Hotel (usually a favourite!), or we might go somewhere more local like Zip Bar or Berk Bar.

## Day 32: Ashgabat, End of tour

- Last day of the tour.
- Transfers to the airport for your flights, or if you'd like to spend longer in Turkmenistan [let us know](#) and we can help you arrange something.

Travel to the 'Stans and beyond

Saiga Tours | Almaty Kazakhstan | [www.saigatours.com](http://www.saigatours.com)  
Whatsapp: +77079148146 | Email: [tours@saigatours.com](mailto:tours@saigatours.com)