

5 Stans Augutmn Mega Tour September 6th - October 8th 2023

Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan



INTRODUCTION:

We'll begin this tour in Kyrgyzstan's capital city of Bishkek. Venturing through the famously spectacular countryside of Kyrgyzstan, we'll sleep in yurts, ride in a Soviet 4x4 up a dry riverbed, wind through spectacular canyons and valleys, and explore some abandoned Soviet gems.

Crossing the border in the beautiful Karakara Valley, we'll take in the famous Charyn Canyon, and Kolsai and Kaindy Lakes, before arriving in Central Asia's most cosmopolitan and developed city - Almaty.

We'll hop on a flight to Tashkent, from where we'll do a few SAIGA favourites, including the world's second largest solar furnace and a Soviet mountain resort town. Winding our way through the Fann Mountains in Tajikistan through Khujand, Iskanderkul Lake, and Dushanbe, we'll re-enter Uzbekistan to visit the ancient cities of Samarkand and Bukhara.

Crossing the land border into Turkmenistan, we'll fly on Turkmenistan Airlines to join up with the Turkmenistan Independence Day Mega Tour, taking in the magical Independence Day events in Ashgabat, followed by an extensive tour of parts of Turkmenistan that very few (including Turkmens!) ever see.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Explore some **little-known Soviet relics** in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan

Navigate the **mountains, valleys and lakes** of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan

Go back in time in the Silk Road gems of **Samarkand and Bukhara**

Experience the unique and epic **Turkmenistan Independence Day** events.

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Tour Details:

DATES: September 6th -
October 8th 2023

PRICE: \$4959 USD (twin share),
Single Supplement \$1600 USD

START: Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

FINISH: Ashgabat, Turkmenistan



INCLUSIONS:

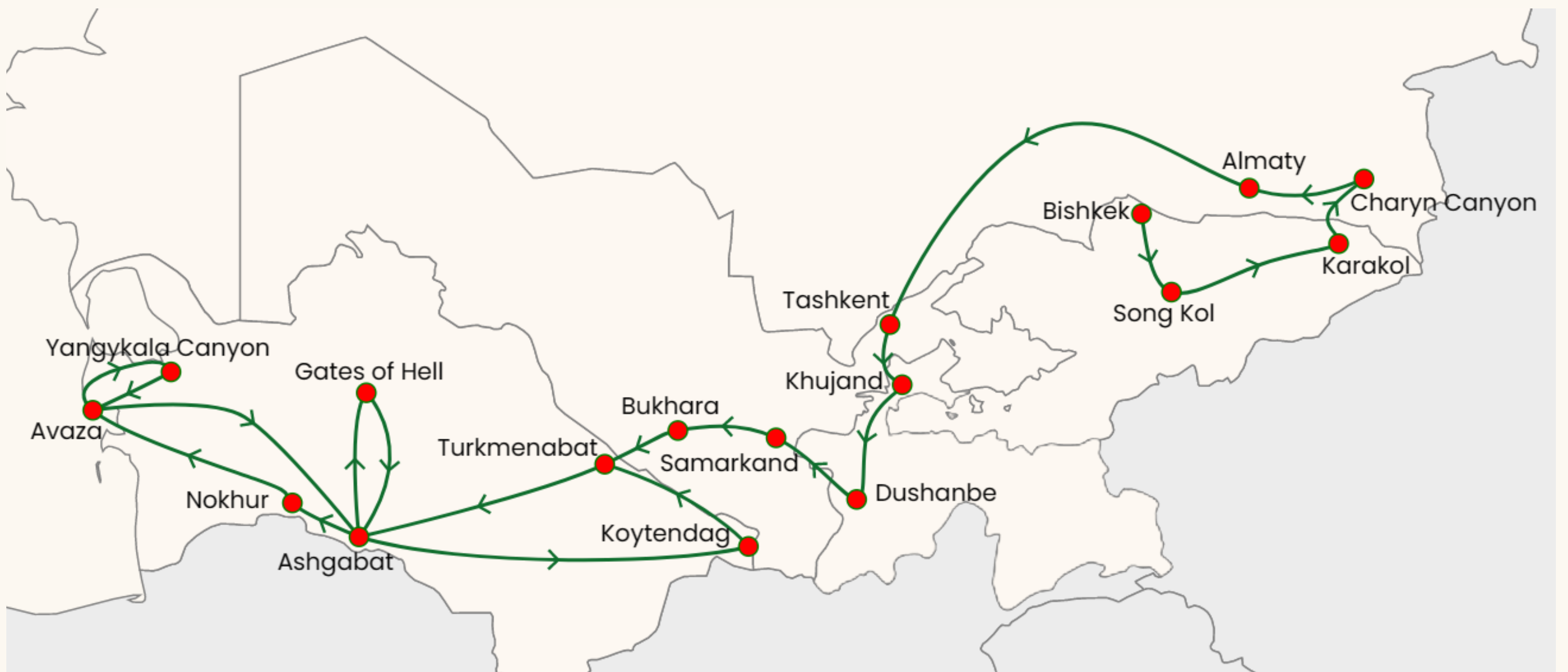
- Letter of Invitation for Turkmenistan
- Accommodation in twin share at roughly 3 star hotels/guesthouses, breakfast included
- Where itinerary mentions yurt or homestay accommodation, single supplement and twin share may be affected
- Transport as per itinerary
- Entrance fees to most sites (as per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

EXCLUSIONS:

- Visa fees if necessary
- Visa support if necessary, other than Turkmenistan
- Some activities, eg. mineral spas (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

- We'll start the day by 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.
- In the afternoon there will be some free time so you can do some exploring yourself.

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Day 2: 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 3: Song Kol

- Before leaving Song Kol in the morning, you'll have a chance to do any more horse riding, walking, swimming, or simple view-watching, that you might want.
- Leaving Song Kol, we'll stop 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.
- Arriving at our yurt camp right on the shores of Lake Issyk Kol, 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.

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Day 4: Issik Kol, Barskoon - Kyzyl Suu Meteorology Station

- 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.
- Abandoned uranium mine.
- We'll stop at the town of Barskoon to see the monument to Yuri Gagarin, carved into a huge rock.
- 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.

Day 5: Kyzyl Suu - Valley of the Flowers - Jetty Ögüz

- 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.
- After breakfast we'll head along the south shore of Issyk Kol, and you'll start realising how huge the lake is. 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.
- Next we'll head 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 little adventure will be right up your alley!
- We'll then head into the town of Jeti Ögüz to spend the night with a lovely family in a yurt/homestay.

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Day 6: Jetty Ögüz - Karakol - Karakara Border Crossing - Kolsai and Kaindy Lakes - Saty

- This morning we'll explore Karakol, at the very eastern point of Issyk Kol . 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 cross the border into Kyrgyzstan at the Karakara border, which is only open from May until October due to it being located on a mountain pass. Unlike the main crossings this is a little more off the beaten track.
- After dealing with border formalities, we'll make our way to The Kolsai Lake National Park is famous for its immense beauty and of course its lakes. The main sight is Kaindy Lake. Kaindy Lake, despite looking prehistoric, was only created by an earthquake in 1911, thus why there are still hundreds of tree trunks sticking out of the water, where it once was a forest.
- After a long day of sightseeing we'll head to Saty Village, where we'll stay at a local homestay. Saty is the main town in the area that accommodates local tourists who come here to enjoy the region's pristine nature and awesome adventure tourism options.

Day 7: Charyn Canyon - Almaty

- In the morning, we'll head to Charyn Canyon. Created by the Charyn River, this impressive natural monument has gained colorful formations of varying shapes and sizes. The Valley of Castles is probably the most famous sight in Charyn Canyon, with rock deposits resembling towers thought to be created by giants. The Valley of Castles is over 2 km in length, and its width reaches from 20 to 80 m in some places.
- Our next stop will be at one of the Soviet Union's main radio posts. Radio Centre Number 7 is located near the village of Shelek and was only decommissioned in the 90s. These huge radio towers were designed to block incoming radio signals from China and south from India and Afghanistan, while also sending Soviet radio across the globe.
- We'll arrive in the amazingly chic and cosmopolitan city of Almaty in the evening, and go out for dinner at one of the many options there are.

Day 8: Almaty

- We'll spend today exploring Almaty, 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 start with a walking tour of 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.

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Day 9: Almaty - Tashkent

- Today we'll fly to Tashkent, on Air Astana, leaving Almaty at 12:05 and arriving in Tashkent at 12:40 (gaining an hour!).
- Arriving in Tashkent in the afternoon, we'll check into the hotel and have a chance to relax a bit before heading out for a late afternoon/evening wander and explore.
- We'll take a walk from Independence Square, formerly Lenin Square, through the park and past the statue of Amir Timur. We'll continue on through the Broadway, taking in the atmosphere that is modern Tashkent around dusk. We can stop and browse in the small market full of old Soviet trinkets, sit under a shady pagoda for a cold drink or ice cream, check out the miriads of food trucks and market stalls, and find somewhere nice to have dinner.

Day 10: Tashkent

- Today we'll spend the day exploring this hustling and bustling city.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

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Day 11: Tashkent - Parkent - Yangiabad

- Heading out of 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.
- From here we'll continue 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 got down to just over 300, and it felt like a crumbling little Russian enclave within Uzbekistan. However, in the past couple of years the mountain air and scenic views have grabbed the attention of Tashkentians, and the area has become a popular local tourism spot.
- We'll spend the afternoon wandering the streets of the town, exploring the Soviet architecture, and soaking in the atmosphere – a difficult-to-describe mix of lively and summery, and decrepit and derelict.
- 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 12: Yangiabad - Cross the border into Tajikistan, Khujand

- This morning we'll head to Tajikistan and cross the border into our third 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 13: Yangiabad - Cross the border into Tajikistan, Khujand

- 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.

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Day 14: 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 15: 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.

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Day 16: Samarkand

- 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 17: Samarkand - Bukhara

- This morning you'll have some free time to explore Samarkand yourself, before we head to Bukhara in the afternoon.
- Arriving after lunch, you'll have some free time to start exploring the old town before we have dinner next to the lake in Lyabi Hauz square, a beautiful setting right in the centre of the old town.
- In the evening we'll sit by the lake, chilling out and taking it all in over a cold drink and a chat.

Day 18: Bukhara

- Today we will have a full day to explore this astounding ancient city.
- We'll take a walking tour of the old town in the morning 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.

Day 19: Bukhara - Cross the border into 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!

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Day 20: Turkmenabat - Ashgabat

- Today we'll fly on Turkmenistan Airlines to Ashgabat.
- We will start exploring Ashgabat, and taking in the atmosphere of the upcoming Independence Day celebrations.

Day 21: Ashgabat - Independence Day

- 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!
- Stop for 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!
- 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.

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Day 22: 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 23: 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.

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Day 24: 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 Turkmenbashi, 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 25: Balkanabat - Avaza - Turkmenbashi

- 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 Turkmenbashi, this village were largely left to their own devices and as such live a much more traditional lifestyle than most Turkmens.
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- Keep driving to the town of Serdar where we'll spend the night in a local hotel.

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Day 26: 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 27: 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 this mountainous area on 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. The building itself is off limits, but you can drive almost right up to the entrance for a great view of the tower and spectacular perspective over the city.
- 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 - the newest and most expensive hotel in Turkmenistan, where you can have a real 5 Star restaurant experience for 1 Star prices, complete with 360 degree views of the city.

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Day 28: Ashgabat - Turkmenabat - Koytendag

- Those finishing the tour here will be taken to the airport according to their flight times.
- We'll have a slow morning today, so you can either go and have an explore by yourself, or simply relax at the hotel and have a late breakfast.
- Then 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 29: Koytendag - Goat Massage - Kugitang

- Those finishing the tour here will be taken to the airport according to their flight times.
- We'll have a slow morning today, so you can either go and have an explore by yourself, or simply relax at the hotel and have a late breakfast.
- Then 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 30: Dinosaur Plateau - Kyrk Gyz Cave - Kugitang

- Day 28: Ashgabat - Turkmenabat - Koytendag
- Those finishing the tour here will be taken to the airport according to their flight times. We'll have a slow morning today, so you can either go and have an explore by yourself, or simply relax at the hotel and have a late breakfast. Then 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.

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Day 31: 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 32: Turkmenabat - Ashgabat

- Today you'll fly on Turkmenistan Airlines again!
- Arriving back in Ashgabat, this is our chance to do 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 this mountainous area on 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. The building itself is off limits, but you can drive almost right up to the entrance for a great view of the tower and spectacular perspective over the city.
- Serdar Yoly, the "health path". Stretching 28km along the Kopetdag mountain range, this fitness project was instigated by Turkmenbashi, 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.

Day 33: 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.

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