

5 Stans Summer Tour June 17th - July 8th 2023 Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan



INTRODUCTION:

This is the tour for those who want to get a great snapshot of what Central Asia has to offer, and there is plenty of amazing, special and weird stuff for us to explore. Starting in Turkmenistan's bizarre and unique capital of Ashgabat, we'll visit the unbelievable Gates of Hell, before crossing into Uzbekistan where we'll include the must-sees in Uzbekistan such as the Registan and the old town of Bukhara, and our tour of Tashkent and surrounds has some pretty cool SAIGA specials, including a solar furnace and a formerly closed Soviet mining town.

We'll explore the spectacular Fann Mountains in Tajikistan, with a night in a Soviet sanatorium, before navigating the mountains and lakes of Kyrgyzstan, fitting in some little-known Soviet relics, and eventually arriving in the cosmopolitan city of Bishkek, with our last stop being in the trendy and progressive city of Almaty.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Spend the night mesmerised by the horrendous but exhilarating **Gates of Hell**

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

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

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

Excited? Come with SAIGA to Central Asia!

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Tour Details:

DATES: June 17th - July 8th 2023

PRICE: \$2680 USD (twin share),
Single Supplement \$900 USD

START: Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

FINISH: Almaty, Kazakhstan



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: Ashgabat - Gates of Hell

- No trip to Turkmenistan is really complete without a day spent exploring Ashgabat.
- 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!
- 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 2: Gates of Hell - Ashgabat

- Drive back to Ashgabat, where we'll check into the hotel before going to one of our favourite bazaars in Central Asia – the Russian Bazaar. Here we'll have some free time during which you can get lunch, do some souvenir shopping, or if you're in the market for a Turkmen carpet we can show you a good place to get them.
- In the afternoon we'll 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.
- 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.

Day 3: Ashgabat - Turkmenabat - Bukhara

- Today will be the last day for those in Group A. If you're finishing here, you will be taken to the airport according to your flight times.
- Those continuing will fly to Turkmenabat in the morning.
- Visit the Lebap Regional Museum. This museum is home to a fascinating array of taxidermy, dioramas, and huge models and murals of the surrounding area. Not to mention some very informative displays about the wheat production and oil production of Turkmenistan.
- Cross the border into Uzbekistan – this in itself can be quite the experience. Hopefully there won't be many locals crossing and it'll be relatively quick, but you need to have your wits about you for this crossing.
- Once we've made it to Uzbekistan we'll drive to Bukhara and check into our hotel, where we'll meet up with those in Group B.
- Depending how long the border crossing takes 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.

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Day 4: Bukhara - Samarkand

- This morning we'll take a walking tour of Bukhara, including the Samanid Dynasty Mausoleum, Lyabi Hauz Square, Bolo-Hauz Mosque, the Poi Kalon Complex, the Minarte Kalyan, the elegant blue-tiled Ulughbek Madrassa (Islamic school), the summer palace of Bukhara's last Emir and much more.
- 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 late afternoon we'll drive to Samarkand where we'll check into our hotel and have free time for the rest of the evening.

Day 5: 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.
- And so as not to keep you waiting any longer, what everybody's waiting for when they go to Samarkand - 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.
- As well as the Registan, you'll see Ulughbek's Observatory, the enormous Biki Khanum Mosque, the Shah-i-Zinda ensemble, a remarkable collection of tombs and mausoleums from the 14th and 15th Centuries, and the eclectic central bazaar.
- You'll have some free time in the evening to wander the streets of the old town yourself, or go back and visit the Registan after dark.

Day 6: Samarkand - Dushanbe

- Drive to Dushanbe, crossing the border at Jarteppa.
- Stop on the way at Penjikent, roughly 270km in total.
- In Penjikent you'll visit the Museum of Rudaki, the local bazaar, and the ruins of Sogdian and Sarazm.
- In the evening we will arrive in Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital city.
- Overnight in Dushanbe.

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Day 7: Dushanbe - Khoja Obi Garm

- 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).
- 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 8: Dushanbe - Iskanderkul Lake - Khujand

- Today we will be doing a full day drive through the famous Fann Mountains to Khujand.
- 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.
- Overnight in Khujand.

Day 9: Khujand - Tashkent

- Start the morning with a sightseeing tour in Khujand 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.
- In the afternoon, cross the border into Uzbekistan.
- Drive to Tashkent. Despite certain likenesses between Tashkent and Ashgabat, with their wide boulevards, artificially manicured lawns and pristine facades in front of crumbling buildings, Tashkent is a vibrant capital city with lots to do.
- Overnight in Tashkent.

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Day 10: Tashkent

- Today will be the last day for those in Group B, whilst Group C will start arriving. Everyone will be taken to and from the airport according to your flight times, and can join in with the day's activities around that.
- 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.
- 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 Kyrgyzstan, Osh

- We'll drive through the Fergana Valley in the morning, crossing the border into Uzbekistan around lunch time, and arriving in Osh in the afternoon.
- Our first 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 13: Osh - Toktogul

- Our drive today is through very rural Kyrgyzstan, and on the way we'll cross Suusamyr Valley and Chyckan Gorge, before arriving in Toktogul, 1000 metres above sea level.
- The town of Toktogul 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.

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Day 14: Toktogul - Kyzyl Oi

- Leaving Toktogul, we'll drive to Kyzyl Oi, an old village located in the Suusamyr Valley in a narrow gorge of the powerful Kokomeran 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.

Day 15: Kyzyl Oi - Song Kol

- Today we'll drive to Song Kol Lake through the Jumgal Valley, crossing the Kara-Keche Pass, stopping for a picnic lunch on the way.
- 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.
- Even though it's summer and we'll have been hot up until now, we'll now be very glad to have stoves on in each yurt for warmth, and you might even pull out a jumper in the evening.
- 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 16: Song Kol - Kochkor - Bishkek

- Today we'll drive to Song Kol Lake through the Jumgal Valley, crossing the Kara-Keche Pass, stopping for a picnic lunch on the way.
- 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.
- Even though it's summer and we'll have been hot up until now, we'll now be very glad to have stoves on in each yurt for warmth, and you might even pull out a jumper in the evening.
- 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 17: Bishkek - Almaty

- We'll start the day by doing a short 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.
- If there's time 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.
- We'll drive to Almaty after lunch, arriving in the late afternoon or early evening.
- Overnight in Almaty.

Day 18: Almaty - End of Tour

- Last day of the tour.
- Transfers to Almaty airport for onward travel, or if you wish to stay longer in Kazakhstan check out our [Kazakhstan Extension](#), or let us know what you'd like to do and we can help you out with organisation or advice.

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