

Central Asia Mega Tour August 6th-30th 2023 Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan



INTRODUCTION:

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

HIGHLIGHTS:

See the surreal **Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site** and explore the Soviet city of **Kurchatov**

Get a peak across the **Panj River** at the mysterious country of **Afghanistan**

Enjoy the natural beauty of **Song Kol**

Excited? Come with SAIGA to Central Asia!

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Tour Details:

DATES: August 6th-30th 2023

PRICE: \$3550 USD (twin share),
Single Supplement \$1200 USD

START: Dushanbe, Tajikistan

FINISH: Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan



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
- Land transport as per itinerary
- Flight from Semey to Almaty
- 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. mineral spas (as per itinerary)
- Meals other than breakfast
- Flight Dushanbe to Astana
- 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: Dushanbe

- Arrive in Dushanbe and transfer to the hotel.
- We will spend our first day exploring Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital city. We'll take a tour of the city centre, including Rudaki Street, the Somoni Monument and Central Park, where you can gawk at the huge flagpole which was the largest in the world from 2011 to 2014.
- Next we'll visit the the National Museum of Tajikistan, where we'll see one of the biggest (literally and figuratively) objects of Tajik pride - the "Buddha in Nirvana" (Reclining Buddha), an impressive 13 metre high clay statue.
- We'll visit the largest teahouse in the world, where you can either just enjoy a locally made tea, or have something to eat in this iconic building.

Day 2: Dushanbe - Kalaikhum

- Leaving Dushanbe we'll start driving east today, towards to Pamirs. We'll cover about 310km, which will take 7-8 hours.
- Crossing the Sagirdasht Pass, we'll get our first of many spectacular panoramic views of snow-capped mountains, valleys, rivers and waterfalls.
- We'll arrive in Kalaikhum in the early evening, a cute little town of 1,600 people, nestled into the valley. From here you can easily see across the river Panj into Afghanistan.
- I'm sure it's not just us that finds something really strange and exhilarating about looking across a border. It's just a few metres, you could throw a rock there, and yet it's like a whole different world. Especially when the other country is one that is so special and unique.

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Day 3: Kalaikhum - Khorog

- Leaving Kalaikhum, we will be driving along the River Panj, which forms Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan, and this is a fascinating drive. On the Tajik side of the river, the road is made, there is electricity and buildings are constructed using metal and glass. On the Afghan side however, just a few metres away across the narrow river, the roads are unmade, and the houses are small mud structures. It's not like this part of Tajikistan is cosmopolitan and well-developed, but there's still a stark contrast.
- We'll arrive in Khorog, the capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), which we require special permits for, after about 5-6 hours, covering 260km. Although it was once of strategic importance to the Soviet Union, this is now a really poor area of Tajikistan.
- We'll visit the Khorog bazaar, the museum and the pretty incredible Botanical Gardens, which has been newly renovated and is the highest botanical gardens in the world! And all the while, Afghanistan is just over there.

Day 4: Khorog - Ishkashim - Yamg

- Just outside Khorog, we'll stop at the Garam Chashma hot springs to get ourselves off to a relaxing start, before another day driving the Pamir. There are also cafes here for those who would rather relax with a beverage and bite to eat.
- Today we'll travel about 160km, over the course of 5-6 hours.
- We'll check out the ruins of Kah-Kakha Fortress, left over from the Kushan era of the 4th Century AD.
- Arriving in Yamg we'll see the tomb and reconstructed house museum of Sufi mystic Mubarak Kadam, along with the stone that was used as a solar calendar 700 years ago.

Day 5: Yamg - Vrang - Langar

- Today will be a bit of a slower day, with only about 3-4 hours of driving, travelling 100km.
- We won't actually be in the Wakhan Corridor, but as we drive along the River Panj, we'll be just across the river from it, the Hindu Kush to the south and the Pamirs to the north.
- Our first stop will be at the Yamchun Fort. Although desolate and remote now, the Wakhan Corridor and Pamir Highway was once an important section of the Silk Road, and the area is littered with ruins of caravanserais, fortresses, stupas, towers and palaces. Sadly though, over centuries of war, earthquakes and mudslides, most of them are either completely ruined, or barely recognisable. This one is the best preserved, and there it is also believed by some that there is a Zoroastrian fire temple within this fort.
- Then we will be in Vrang, where we'll see the caves dug by the Buddhists who used to live here.

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Day 6: Langar - Khargush Pass - Alichur Valley - Murghab

- We'll keep driving along the next section of the Pamir Highway, on a section of road that was completed in 1931. It will take us about 7-8 hours to travel 260km today.
- Crossing the Khargush Pass, the terrain here will be getting drier and more barren, the lush Wakhan Valley far behind us now.
- Coming down out of the pass, we'll stop at Yashilkul and Bulung Kul, two more spectacular lakes.
- This part of the Pamirs was made famous by the Chevy Chase and Dan Akroyd film Spies Like Us.
- After a pretty exciting day of driving and sight-seeing, we'll arrive in Murghab and spend the night there.
- Arrive in Murghab, a small city in the Alichur Valley. Surrounded by high snow-covered mountains, this area is inhabited by Kyrgyz and Pamir Tajik people. From here you'll get great views of the high summit of Muztagh Ata Peak, which is 7,546m, but actually in China.
- Take a walk to explore the city and its traditional market. We'll stop for a picture at the Lenin statue of course. A large number of the shops here are constructed using shipping containers giving the local market a very colourful unique feeling.

Day 7: Murghab - Koi Tezek Pass - Gunt Valley - Khorog

- Today we will head back towards Khorog. The Pamir Highway used to typically be done by starting in Osh in Kyrgyzstan, and ending in Dushanbe, or vice versa, but with the border between the two countries being closed, we have to do it as a circuit now. There are some places where we'll have to travel back on the same road, but today we'll be on a new road. We'll do about 320km today, and it will take roughly 7-8 hours.
- There will be loads of photo stops today. Almost every corner we turn we'll want to get out and take a picture. We'll pass several high plateau lakes, and after crossing the Koi Tezek Pass, we'll stop in Jelondy Village where we can use the hot springs. This one is particularly famous with locals and people come from all over the country for its healing properties.
- Continuing along the Gunt Valley, we'll arrive in Khorog in the evening.

Day 8: Khorog - Kalaikhum

- Today we'll be driving back along the River Panj. We'll do about 260km in 7-8 hours, with loads of photo stops along the way.
- Even though it's not our first time skirting the Afghan border, you'll notice different things this time and we'll probably end up stopping in different spots for photos.

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Day 9: Kalaikhum - Kulob - Danghara - Nurek

- Leaving Kalaikhum, we'll head back towards Dushanbe, but on a completely different road to the one we took at the start of the tour.
- We'll drive through Kulob, which with a population of 100,000, will feel like a huge city after where we've just been.
- Driving out of town we'll visit Hulbuk Fortress.
- Our next stop will be in Danghara, which is the hometown of the President, Emomali Rahmon, as well as the country's first Deputy Prime Minister, Asadullo Ghulomov, and a number of other senior government officials and members of parliament.
- Next we'll stop at the Nurek Hydro Electric Station, usually known simply as Nurek Dam. Completed in 1980, this was one of the Soviet Union's successful infrastructure projects. Standing a proud 300m tall, it was the tallest man-made dam at the time, and was only out done in 2013 by Jinping-I Dam in China.

Day 10: Nurek - Khoja Obi Garm

- Today will mark our last full day in Tajikistan. We'll drive past Dushanbe, and 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 11: Dushanbe - Astana

- We'll leave the Soviet splendour of the previous night behind us as we return to Dushanbe.
- Arriving back in the capital around lunchtime, we'll go straight to the airport to fly to Astana (Nur Sultan).
- We'll arrive in the capital of Kazakhstan in the early evening, just in time to go to our favourite restaurant in this city, Epokha. It's Soviet themed, but to the next level, and descriptions just won't do it justice.

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Day 12: Astana

- We will spend today exploring this very spread out, but ridiculously impressive city.
- 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.
- We'll have an early dinner and head to the train station to catch an overnight train to Kurchatov.

Day 13: Nuclear Test Sites - Kurchatov

- We'll arrive at Degelen Train Station early in the morning. For anyone following a map, or familiar with these locations, you might be wondering why we're getting off at Degelen, a town 130km south of our actual destination of Kurchatov. During the Soviet Union, this was one of the most prestigious and important towns in the whole country, but it was also equally as secretive, and they literally named the train station after a different town so that the location wasn't given away.
- Leaving the town, we'll start seeing the nuclear sites themselves. Our first stop is the famous atomic lake. This lake was made by an explosion 25 times greater than Hiroshima. While it might look like the lake was an interesting consequence of the testing, it was in fact an intentional side effect, as the experiments were designed for earth-moving purposes to artificially create lakes, harbours and canals. Unbelievably, locals fish in the lake, despite warnings by authorities that it is hazardous.
- We'll then head back to Kurchatov, a formerly closed city, named after Igor Kurchatov, the founder of the Soviet nuclear programme, where the headquarters of the nuclear testing was based. And we'll spend the evening exploring this eerie and bizarre town. Due to its importance and the stature of the residents, this was a resplendent town, full of grandeur - wide boulevards, impressive buildings with grand entrances, the most expensive housing available. Most of the town is derelict now as there is no employment to sustain the town's population, so it's a great place to explore and get your abandoned Soviet stuff fix.
- The accommodation tonight will also be a very Soviet experience, in the only hotel in town.

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Day 14: Kurchatov - Polygon - Semey

- Before leaving Kurchatov, we'll visit the Museum of the Semipalatinsk Test Site, which not just anyone can visit – they require a permit organised in advance, but don't worry, that's what we're here for. This small museum gives you an idea of the history and effects of the nuclear testing done here.
- We'll then continue on to more of the nuclear test site – known as the Polygon. 456 Nuclear tests were conducted here, and the effects can be witnessed first-hand with the destroyed surroundings and large craters caused by the explosions.
- We'll explore the bunkers used by those performing the tests and the epicentres of the explosions.
- In the afternoon we'll check on the Chagan abandoned airbase. During the Cold War this was home to one of the Soviet Union's main air force bases for the deployment of long-range bombers carrying nuclear weapons. The location is interesting as it's on the Chinese border. Part of the reason for its location was the rising tensions due to the Sino-Soviet split.
- We'll arrive in Semey in the evening. Semey is definitely not on the normal tourist trail, though it will feel a lot more like civilisation compared to Kurchatov. Some will know it by its Russian name – Semipalatinsk. Semey is the epitome of Soviet Kazakhstan and was formerly one of the main cities in the north of the country, although it's now overshadowed by nearby Astana (Nur Sultan). Semey is also said to have a much stronger Russian character compared with most of Kazakhstan, owing to the closeness to the Russian border and the large scientific community.
- We'll take a look around town admiring the mosaics and public art. We'll stop at the "I Love Semey" sign, see examples of pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet architecture, and the "Stronger than Death" anti-nuclear monument. We'll end up at what will probably be a highlight of Semey - the famous Lenin Alley. It's literally a line of Lenin busts and statues

Day 15: Semey - Almaty

- Free time in the morning.
- We head south today, and while it would be great to go overland, the distance we'll be covering would take a couple of days, so instead we'll catch a flight to 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 check into our hotel for the next two nights, then head out to start exploring Almaty. We will take in such famous sites as the Green Bazaar, the Arbat and Panfilov Park, named after the 28 Panfilov Guardsmen from Almaty, who died during the Battle of Moscow in 1941, which is right next to Zenkov Cathedral. A Russian Orthodox Church, its claim to fame is being the largest wooden structure in the world constructed with only joins, and no nails.
- If you like to have a night out of any type, whether it's fine dining, a cosy bar, a noisy pub or even the ballet, Almaty is the city you're going to want to do it in.

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Day 16: Almaty

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

Day 17: Almaty - Charyn Canyon - Saty

- Bidding farewell to the amazingly chic and cosmopolitan city of Almaty, we'll make our first stop 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.
- After lunch, 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.
- 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.

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Day 18: Saty - Kolsai and Kaindy Lakes - Karakol

- 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.
- 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 Karakol where we'll check in to our accommodation and try some local Dungan food for dinner.

Day 19: Karakol - Jeti Ögüz Sanatorium

- 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. Continuing around the lake, today we'll visit Karakol.
- We'll visit the museum of N.M. Prjevalskii, a renowned Russian explorer of the 1800s.
- We'll stop for lunch and have traditional Dungan food before heading on to a SAIGA favourite - the Jeti Ögüz Health Spa, a Soviet sanatorium which is very tired and dated (as you'd expect a Soviet health spa to be!) but still functioning. You'll have a chance to explore the grounds and buildings, get a massage, see all the weird treatments available and generally take a step back in time. Depending on who we find, we might be able to get radon baths, electric shock therapy, pulsating circulation treatment as well as mud baths, acupuncture and who knows what else!
- For anyone who loves the weird and wonderful, this creepy little adventure will be right up your alley!
- We'll then head into the town of Jeti Ögüz to spend the night.

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Day 20: Valley of the Flowers - Jetty Ögüz Gorge - Kyzyl Suu Meteorology Station

- 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.
- 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 21: Kyzyl Suu - Barskoon - Issyk Kol Yurt Camp

- Beginning our descent back down the mountains, stop and have a dip at a small natural hot spring, right on the edge of the glacial river, before leaving the mountains and getting back to Issyk Kol.
- Stop at the town of Barskoon to see the monument to Yuri Gagarin, carved into a huge rock.
- Next we'll visit Aalam Ordo. Building was started in 2009, and it was supposed to be a large centre of knowledge, culture and spirituality, but was never completed. Now it lies abandoned and half finished, but the ornate high wall catches everybody's eye as they drive past.
- Arriving at 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 22: Issyk Kol - Kochkor - Song Kol

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

Day 23: Song Kol - Burana Tower - Bishkek

- Leaving Song Kol, our first 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.
- After lunch we'll stop 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.
- Arriving in Bishkek in the evening, you'll probably be pretty happy to have some non-Central Asian food, and make the most of the night-life. We could have Japanese, Korean, burgers, pub food, Chinese, pizza, whatever we like.

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Day 24: Bishkek

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

Day 25: Bishkek - End of Tour

- Your Central Asian adventure unfortunately comes to an end here in Kyrgyzstan's capital.
- Transfer to airport according to your flight time.
- If you need any help with your onward journey, please let us know.

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