

Turkmenistan Comprehensive Tour March 30th-April 11th 2024



INTRODUCTION:

This is a show-stopper of an itinerary, and whether you've been to Turkmenistan before or not, you're going to love this.

We'll begin in Ashgabat, the white and gold capital city. Famous for its magnificent monuments and wide, empty streets, we'll show you everything that this incredibly unique city has to offer.

A highlight of any tour is always the Gates of Hell, but we're also going to do some less famous things outside of Ashgabat. Not only will we spend a night at the Ashgabat-esque glitzy-yet-abandoned resort town of Avaza, and drive out to the desert to see Yangykala Canyon, but we'll also venture into the far east of the country to the Koytendag area.

Here you'll really feel like you're in the proper middle of nowhere. As if Turkmenistan isn't obscure enough itself, Ashgabat will feel positively touristy and like an international metropolis compared to this area. We'll explore some of the unbelievable nature - we'll swim in hot springs, climb through a gorge, stand under a freezing cold waterfall, throw cloth onto the walls of the bizarre Kyrk Gyz Cave, get goat massages, and best of all - hike up onto the Dinosaur Plateau.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Explore the glimmering white and gold monuments of Ashgabat

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

Stand on the edge of the vast and vibrant Yangykala Canyon

Climb onto the Dinosaur Plateau, in one of the least visited spots in Turkmenistan

Excited? Come with SAIGA to Turkmenistan!

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Tour Details:

DATES: March 30th-April 11th 2024

PRICE: \$2015 USD (twin share),
Single Supplement \$600 USD

START: Ashgabat, Turkmenistan

FINISH: Ashgabat, Turkmenistan



INCLUSIONS:

- Letter of Invitation
- Accommodation in twin share at roughly 3 star hotels (breakfast included), camping at Gates of Hell
- Transport as per itinerary, beginning and ending in Ashgabat
- Entrance fees to all sites mentioned in the itinerary
- SAIGA guide and local guides

EXCLUSIONS:

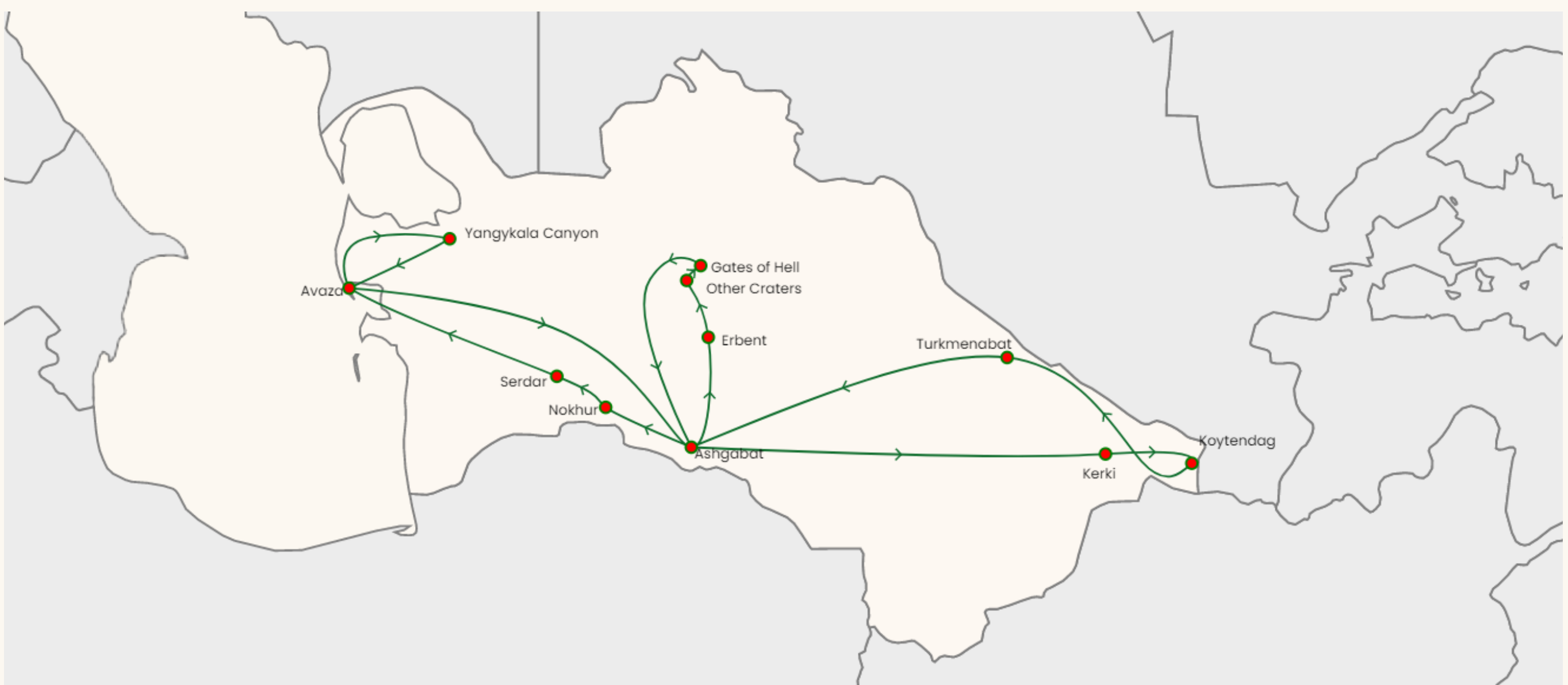
- Visa fee (can be paid on arrival at the airport or land border, or at an embassy beforehand)
- Meals other than breakfast at hotels
- Transport to and from Ashgabat the start and end of tour
- Accommodation and any other services before or after the tour
- Personal expenses such as souvenirs or any optional activities
- Any COVID related expenses

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Day 1	Ashgabat
Day 3	Nisa - Ashgabat - Night Tour
Day 3	Kow Ata - Nokhur - Serdar
Day 4	Balkanabat - Avaza - Turkmenbashy
Day 5	Yangykala Canyon - Turkmenbashy
Day 6	Turkmenbashy - Ashgabat - Gates of Hell
Day 7	Gates of Hell - Ashgabat
Day 8	Ashgabat - Kerki - Koytendag
Day 9	Koytendag - Goat Massage - Kugitang
Day 10	Dinosaur Plateau - Kyrk Gyz Cave - Kugitang
Day 11	Kugitang - Turkmenabat
Day 12	Turkmenabat - Ashgabat
Day 13	Ashgabat



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Day 1: Ashgabat - Saturday March 30th

- Our first day in 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!
- 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 2: Nisa, Ashgabat, Night Tour - Sunday March 31st

- 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 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, before we set off in the evening.
- Night tour of Ashgabat. With the white marble buildings lit up by brightly coloured neon lights, Ashgabat is a truly spectacular place after dark. We'll make a stop at the Palace of Happiness in the foothills of the Kopetdag Mountains, from where you can get a fantastic panorama of the whole city.
- 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: Kow Ata, Nokhur, Serdar - Monday April 1st

- Checking out of our hotel in Ashgabat, we'll begin heading west, with our first stop at 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.

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Day 4: Balkanabat, Avaza, Turkmenbashy - Tuesday April 2nd

- 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.

Day 5: Yangykala, Turkmenbashy - Wednesday April 3rd

- 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 6: Turkmenbashy, Ashgabat, Gates of Hell - Thurs April 4th

- We'll fly on Turkmenistan Airlines (an experience in itself!) back to Ashgabat in the morning, where we'll have a chance to have a little rest or just get yourself organised for the night ahead!
- We'll stop at a 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 7: Gates of Hell, Ashgabat - Friday April 5th

- Drive back to Ashgabat in the morning, arriving around lunch time.
- 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 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 8: Ashgabat, Kerki, Koytendag - Saturday April 6th

- In the morning we'll go to the airport and fly to the tiny town in the very north east of the country, called Kerki.
- 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 9: Koytendag, Goat Massage, Kugitang - Sunday April 7th

- 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 10: Dinosaur Plateau, Kyrk Gyz Cave - Monday April 8th

- 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.

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Day 11: Kugitang, Turkmenabat - Tuesday April 9th

- 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 12: Turkmenabat, Ashgabat - Wednesday April 10th

- 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.
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Day 13: Ashgabat, End of Tour - Thursday April 11th

- 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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