

Getting Started

Central Asia isn't the easiest place to travel through. You'll need to invest some serious time tracking down visas, permits and the latest travel information, preferably months before you depart. You won't meet many travellers on the road and there are certainly no video cafés serving banana muesli. But this is part of the attraction of a land that has been largely off-limits to travellers for the last 2000 years.

Travel today is generally getting easier every year, with new accommodation options, vastly improved food and a network of shared taxis that will shuttle you around cheaply and in relative comfort. Do your research on Central Asian epic history in particular and you'll find the region quickly addictive. The more you put in, the more you'll get out of this Asian heartland.

WHEN TO GO

At lower elevations spring and autumn are the overall best seasons, in particular April to early June and September through October. In March/April the desert blooms briefly and the monotonous ochre landscapes of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan become a Jackson Pollock canvas of reds, oranges and yellows. Autumn is harvest time, when market tables heave with freshly picked fruit.

Summer (mid-June to early September) is ferociously hot in the lowlands of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, with sizzling cities and desert temperatures as high as 40°C or more. Winters (November to March) are bitterly cold even in the desert.

July through August is the best time to visit the mountains of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and southeast Kazakhstan, and to trek (earlier and later than that, herders and other summer residents will have returned to the lowlands). Snow starts to fall in November and mountain passes fill with snow until April or even May. Bishkek and Almaty might have snow in April. Northern Kazakhstan is comfortable right through the summer but freezes in the sub-Siberian winter.

For more details see the Climate and When to Go sections of the individual country chapters.

See Climate Charts (p446) for more information.

'STANS AT A GLANCE

Kazakhstan One of the last great blanks in the map, with interesting and quirky sites separated by vast amounts of nothing. Good hiking in the southeast and increasingly popular ecotourism options. Sub-Siberian Russian cities in the north.

Kyrgyzstan Vowel-challenged republic of Alpine mountains, yurts and high pastures. The best place in Central Asia for hiking and horse riding. Community tourism programmes and a wide network of homestays give you a grass-roots adventure on the cheap. Plus it'll give you a gazillion points at Scrabble.

Tajikistan The region's most outlandish high-altitude scenery, home to Central Asia's best road trip, the stunning Pamir Hwy. This is the cutting edge of adventure travel. Obtaining permits requires some preparation. Fabulous trekking and the region's most humbling hospitality.

Turkmenistan The 'North Korea of Central Asia'. Hard to get into (tourist visas require you to hire a guide) but fascinating once you are there, not least for the bizarre personality cult of Turkmenbashi. An uncertain future follows the death of President Niyazov in December 2006 and the election of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow on 11 February 2007, though reforms are promised.

Uzbekistan Home to historic Silk Road cities, epic Islamic architecture and the region's most stylish private guesthouses. The heart of Central Asia. Don't miss it.

You might want to time your visit with the region's two major celebrations – Navrus (around 21 March) and the various independence days (around September/October). See p449 for details.

COSTS & MONEY

HOW MUCH?

Snickers bar US\$0.40 to US\$0.50

100km bus ride US\$0.40 (Turkmenistan) to US\$2 (Kazakhstan)

One minute phone call to the US US\$0.50 (Tajikistan) to US\$2 (Kazakhstan)

Internet connection per hour US\$0.75 (Kyrgyzstan) to US\$1.75 (Kazakhstan)

Traditional hat US\$2 (Tajikistan) to US\$10 (Kazakhstan)

LONELY PLANET INDEX

Litre of bottled water US\$0.25 to US\$0.50

Bottled beer US\$0.20 (Turkmenistan) to US\$1 (Kazakhstan)

Shashlyk US\$0.30 (Uzbekistan) to US\$1 (Kazakhstan)

Litre of petrol US\$0.50 (Uzbekistan) to US\$1.50 (Turkmenistan)

By travelling with a friend, staying in homestays, eating in *chaikhana* (tea-houses) and hiring the odd taxi when there is no public transport, you can get around Central Asia for around US\$15 to US\$20 per person per day (more like US\$20 to US\$40 in Kazakhstan). For a minimum of comfort you'll probably have to part with US\$20 for a hotel in bigger towns. In order of expense, the cheapest countries are Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and (most expensive) Turkmenistan. Budget accommodation costs are highest in Kazakhstan, transport costs are highest in the Pamirs of Tajikistan.

You can shave down costs further by self-catering in shops and bazaars, staying in private homes and the occasional bottom-end place, sharing hotel rooms with other travellers, getting around town by local bus instead of taxi, riding overnight trains to save hotel costs, and spending less time in (expensive) cities.

Trekking trips start at around US\$50 per person per day with professional trekking agencies but you can arrange a trip for a fraction of this through community tourism organisations such as Community Based Tourism (CBT) in Kyrgyzstan (p277) and Murgab Ecotourism Association (META) in the Pamir region of Tajikistan (p388).

For midrange travel in Uzbekistan, you'll be looking at spending US\$15 to US\$30 per person for a stylish B&B; throw in US\$10 per day for taxi hire between towns. Where there are any, four-star hotels run to around US\$100 per double.

Don't forget to factor in visa costs, which can mount up, especially in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and of course long-haul transport to get you to and from Central Asia.

Money is best brought in a combination of cash in US dollars (perhaps around two-thirds of your funds), a credit card (and PIN) and a few emergency travellers cheques (which are the least useful form of currency in this destination).

TRAVEL LITERATURE

See the directories in the individual country chapters for recommended books on specific republics.

Lonely Planet's coverage of neighbouring countries includes *China; Pakistan & the Karakoram Highway; Afghanistan; Iran; Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan; The Trans-Siberian Railway; and Russia & Belarus*. Lonely Planet also produces a dedicated *Central Asia phrasebook*.

Beyond the Oxus; Archaeology, Art & Architecture of Central Asia by Edgar Knobloch is an oddly appealing book for a specialist cultural history

TRAVELLING SAFELY IN CENTRAL ASIA

In general Central Asia is a pretty safe place to travel despite the media's presentation of the region as a hot spot of environmental disaster, human rights violations and Islamic insurgency.

Most travellers eventually come face to face with crooked officials, particularly policemen, as checks are endemic throughout the region. You shouldn't have any problems as long as your documents are in tip-top shape. You will find specific safety information about each country at the start of each individual country chapter.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- A fistful of visas (see p456 and the Visas sections of the individual country chapters) and plans set in motion for any travel permits (p456) you might need.
- The latest government travel warnings (p447).
- A sun hat, sunglasses and sunscreen for the strong desert and mountain sun, plus a torch (flashlight) for overcoming iffy electricity supplies in the countryside.
- Water purification – essential if you plan to get off the beaten track.
- Slide film – impossible to find in Central Asia.
- Maps – hard to find in Central Asia.
- A sleeping bag – very useful for winter or for rural Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in summer.
- Mementos from home (eg postcards and photos) and gifts to help break the ice at homestays and yurtstays.
- Long, loose, nonrevealing clothes. These will win you friends in Islamic Central Asia, particularly in rural areas and the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan. Leave the singlets and shorts behind.
- A Russian phrasebook.

of Central Asia, perhaps because it's so rich in all the background information, reconstructions, floor-plans and close-ups that nobody in Central Asia seems to know about any more.

Central Asia; A Travellers' Companion by Kathleen Hopkirk is a handy and very readable historical background on the region (although not half as entertaining as her husband Peter's books). It's an excellent companion book for those keen to know more about the places they're seeing. Half the book covers Chinese Central Asia.

The Great Game by Peter Hopkirk is a fast-paced, very readable history of the Great Game – the 19th-century cold war between Britain and Russia – as it unfolded across Europe and Asia. It's carried along in Hopkirk's trademark style, in a series of personal stories – all men, all Westerners, all resolute and square-jawed, with Victoria Crosses for everybody – real *Boys' Own* stuff; melodramatic, but essentially true.

Setting the East Ablaze, also by Peter Hopkirk, takes up where *The Great Game* stops – a gripping cloak-and-dagger history of the murderous early years of Soviet power in Central Asia, and Communist efforts to spread revolution to British India and China.

The Lost Heart of Asia by Colin Thubron is a worthwhile read – the author is deservedly praised for his careful research, first-hand explorations, delicate observations and baroque prose. *Shadow of the Silk Road* is Thubron's follow-up a decade later, covering a transcontinental trip from Xi'an to Antioch, via Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

From the Peter Hopkirk school of history, *Tournament of Shadows* by Karl E Meyer looks at some lesser-known Great Game characters and brings the Game up to date with the present scramble for oil in the Caspian Sea. A modern regional follow-up by the same author is *Dust of Empire*.

If you fancy some fiction, try Tom Bissell's *God Lives in St Petersburg*, a collection of six well-crafted short stories set in Samarkand, Tashkent, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Also check out Hamid Ismailov's recent novel *The Train Station* (see p71) or something by the Kyrgyz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov (p275). Pack Dostoyevsky's hefty *The Brothers Karamazov* for the long train trip up to Semey in northeastern Kazakhstan, where the author was exiled for two years and began his famous novel.

Land Beyond the River: The Untold Story of Central Asia by Monica Whitlock, the BBC's former Central Asia correspondent, pieces together the history of Soviet Central Asia through the lives of half a dozen witnesses. It's strong on modern Tajikistan but can make for dry reading in places.

By contrast, *Silk Road to Ruin* by Ted Rall is a rollicking, subversive and satirical portrait of the region that is part travelogue, part graphic novel. It's fresh and edgy and neatly captures the realities of travel in the region.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Some of the best Central Asian websites are those of the major local travel agencies (see p457), Central Asian embassies abroad (see also p457) and US embassies in Central Asia.

For country-specific sites see the Internet Resources headings in the relevant country Directory.

Central Asia News (www.centralasianews.net) Regional news service. Also try www.ferghana.ru.

Discovery Central Asia (<http://silkipress.com>) An excellent quarterly tourism magazine full of interesting articles and cultural details from across Central Asia.

EurasiaNet (www.eurasianet.org) News and cultural articles, with resource pages for each country.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) The dedicated Central Asia branch of the Thorn Tree is one of the best places anywhere to get up-to-date info on visas, border crossings and more.

Oriental Express Central Asia (www.orexca.com) Lots to explore in this virtual travel guide focusing on Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

PERSONAL HIGHS & LOWS OF CENTRAL ASIA *Bradley Mayhew*

Favourites

- Sitting in a teahouse with a cold Tian-Shansky beer, a round of kebabs and hot nan bread – magic!
- Shared taxis, when you score the front seat
- Finally crossing the Torugart Pass
- White-bearded *aksakals* (literally 'white beard', revered elders) resplendent in stripy cloaks and turbans
- Turquoise-blue domes and mesmerising Timurid tilework
- Trekking, almost anywhere
- Central Asian handshakes, with a slight bow and a hand on the heart
- Overnighting in a yurt in Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan or a traditional courtyard house in Uzbekistan
- Central Asian melons and grapes, and Kyrgyz *kaimak* (cream) and honey (for breakfast)

Pet Peeves

- The taste of congealed mutton fat on the roof of your mouth
- Local bus trips that take seven hours to go 100km, when you don't have a seat and there are sweaty armpits in your face
- Getting turned back at the Torugart Pass
- Aggressive drunks who think you are Russian
- Soviet hotel architecture
- Bride of Frankenstein receptionists with dyed cherry-red hair, all mysteriously called Svetlana
- The fifth vodka toast to 'international friendship', with the sixth lined up behind it...
- Visa hassles and *militsia* (police) checks
- The smell of Soviet canteens

Pamirs (www.pamirs.org) Superb travel site on the Pamir Mountains of Tajikistan.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (www.rferl.org) Click on 'News by Country' for a range of interesting reports. There's also a weekly news report on Central Asia at <http://rfe.rferl.org/reports/centralasia/>, which you can get by email.

Registan.net (www.registan.net) News and views on Central Asia.

Roberts Report (www.roberts-report.com) Biting political blog from US Central Asia expert Sean Roberts, with an emphasis on Kazakhstan.

Turkic Republics & Communities (www.khazaria.com/turkic/index.html) Music, books and excellent links for the entire Turkic world.

Unesco (www.unesco.kz) Website of the Unesco regional office for Central Asia, with lots of cultural info.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Tourism is still relatively new to Central Asia, so please try to keep your impact as low as possible and create a good precedent for those who follow you.

One of the best ways to ensure your tourist dollars make it into the right hands is to support community tourism projects, such as CBT (p277) in Kyrgyzstan, META (p388) in Tajikistan and several programmes in Kazakhstan (see p112). Elsewhere try to engage local services and guides whenever possible and choose companies that follow ecofriendly practice (eg Ecotour in Bishkek, see p282).

The following are a few tips for responsible travel:

- Be respectful of Islamic traditions and don't wear singlets, shorts or short skirts in rural areas or the Fergana Valley.
- Don't hand out sweets or pens to children on the streets, since it encourages begging. Similarly, doling out medicines can encourage people not to seek proper medical advice. A donation to a project, health centre or school is a far more constructive way to help.
- You can do more good by buying your snacks, cigarettes, bubble gum etc from the enterprising grannies trying to make ends meet rather than state-run stores.
- Don't buy items made from endangered species, such as Marco Polo sheep and snow leopards. Don't accept Marco Polo sheep meat in the Pamirs.
- Don't pay to take a photo of someone and don't photograph someone if they don't want you to. If you agree to send someone a photo, make sure you follow through with it.
- Discourage the use of scarce fuels such as firewood and *tersken* in the eastern Pamirs (see p359).
- If someone offers to put you up for the night make sure you don't put your host under financial burdens. Don't let them sacrifice an animal in your honour (common in the Pamirs) and try to offer money or a gift in return for your host's hospitality. See also p63 for more hints on responsible travel.
- Don't let your driver drive too close to archaeological sites and try to stick to existing tracks when driving off road.
- Try to give people a balanced perspective of life in the West. Point out that you are only temporarily rich in Central Asia and that income and costs balance out in Amsterdam just as they do in Almaty. Try also to point out the strong points of the local culture – strong family ties, comparatively low crime etc.
- Make yourself aware of the human rights situation in the countries you travel through; don't travel blindly.

'A donation to a project, health centre or school is a far more constructive way to help'

For hints on trekking responsibly see p94.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

SILK ROAD CITIES OF UZBEKISTAN

10 to 14 Days

Fly into **Tashkent** (p194) and get a feel of the big city before taking a domestic flight to Urgench and then a short bus or taxi ride to **Khiva** (p252), comfortably seen in a day. Then take a taxi for an overnight trip to one or two of the **desert cities** (p251) around Urgench.

From Urgench take the long bus or taxi ride down to **Bukhara** (p236), which deserves the most time of all the Silk Road cities. Try to budget a minimum of three days to take in the sights and explore the backstreets.

From here take the golden (actually tarmac) road to **Samarkand** (p223) for a day or two. Soak in the glories of the Registan and Shah-i-Zinda and, if you have time, add on a day trip to **Shakhrisabz** (p232), Timur's birthplace.

An alternative to this route is to tack on Turkmenistan, visiting **Konye-Urgench** (p432) from Khiva before crossing the desert to **Ashgabat** (p405) and then travelling to Bukhara via the Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar at **Merv** (p426).

This loop route through Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, starting and finishing in Tashkent, is a historical and architectural tour that links Central Asia's most popular tourist sites. You'll need at least 14 days if you tack on Turkmenistan.



OVER THE TORUGART – LAKES, HERDERS & CARAVANSERAI

Two Weeks

This trip takes in fabulous mountain scenery, a taste of life in the pastures and the roller-coaster ride over the Torugart Pass to Kashgar. There are lots of opportunities for trekking or horse riding on this route.

From easy-going **Bishkek** (p278) head east to the blue waters and sandy beaches of **Issyk-Köl** (p294), the world's second-largest alpine lake. Take in a couple of days' trekking or visiting the alpine valleys around **Karakol** (p300). The idyllic valley of **Altyn Arashan** (p306) offers great scope for horse riding or a short trek to alpine Ala-Köl and the glorious Karakol Valley. If you have time you can explore the little-visited southern shore en route to Kochkor. If you are low on time head straight to Kochkor from Bishkek.

In small and sleepy **Kochkor** (p316) take advantage of the Community Based Tourism (CBT) programme and spend some time in a yurt or homestay on the surrounding *jailoos* (summer pastures). This is one of the best ways to glimpse traditional life in Kyrgyzstan. Try to allow three days to link a couple of yurtstays by horse, although most can be visited in an overnight trip. The most popular trip is to the herders' camps around the peaceful lake **Song-Köl** (p318), either by car or on a two-day horseback trip. The pastures are popular with herders and their animals between June and August.

From here head to **Naryn** (p319) and then the Silk Road caravanserai of **Tash Rabat** (p323), where you can stay overnight in yurts and even take a difficult horse trip to a pass overlooking Chatyr-Köl. From Tash Rabat it's up over the Torugart Pass (*insha'Allah*) to wonderful Kashgar.

If you want to experience traditional life in the high pastures while enjoying stunning scenery, take this trip through Kyrgyzstan from Bishkek to Kashgar, over the Torugart Pass.



CENTRAL ASIA OVERLAND – THE SILK ROAD**Three Weeks**

There are dozens of different route options for traversing Central Asia. Much of this itinerary follows ancient Silk Road paths.

Western roads into Central Asia lead from Mashhad in Iran to Ashgabat in Turkmenistan, or from Baku in Azerbaijan (by boat) to Turkmenbashi, also in Turkmenistan. If you only have a three-day transit visa for Turkmenistan you can travel from Mashhad to Mary (to visit the World Heritage-listed ruins of Merv) in one long day via the crossing at Saraghs, giving you more time at Merv and bypassing Ashgabat.

From **Ashgabat** (p405) the overland route leads to **Merv** (p426) and the Silk Road cities of **Bukhara** (p236), **Samarkand** (p223) and **Tashkent** (p194). From here head into the Fergana Valley and swing north along the mountain road to relaxed **Bishkek** (p278). From Bishkek cross the border into Kazakhstan to cosmopolitan **Almaty** (p113) and make some excursions from the city before taking the train (or bus) to Ürümqi in China.

An alternative from Bishkek is to arrange transport to take you over the **Torugart Pass** (p325) visiting the *jailoos* (summer pastures) around **Kochkor** (p316) and Song-Köl and the caravanserai at **Tash Rabat** (p323), before crossing the pass to Kashgar. You can then continue down into Pakistan to join the main overland trail into India and Nepal.

A third alternative if you are in a hurry is to travel from Tashkent to Andijon, cross the border to **Osh** (p334) and then take a bus or a combination of bus and taxi over the **Irkeshtam Pass** (p340) to Kashgar.

The trip from Mashhad/Baku to Ürümqi/Kashgar fits nicely into an overland route from the Middle East to Asia. Much of this trip follows ancient Silk Road paths and can be completed in three weeks.

**TASHKENT TO BISHKEK (THE LONG WAY)****Three Weeks**

From **Tashkent** (p194) take in the sights of **Samarkand** (p223), and maybe also Bukhara, before taking a shared taxi across the border into Tajikistan. Check out the Sogdian archaeological site of **Penjikent** (p372) and maybe hire a car for the day trip to the Marguzor Lakes. The next day take a taxi through the mountains to lake **Iskander-Kul** (p373), which offers a great base for trekking or just relaxing on the lake shore.

Continue the taxi ride through and then over some really stunning vertical scenery to Tajikistan's capital **Dushanbe** (p359) to pick up your Gorno-Badakhshan (GBO) permit. Day trip to the deserted fort and medressas of **Hissar** (p367) while waiting. From Dushanbe follow the Pamir Hwy to **Osh** (p334), stopping in Khorog and Murgab (see the Pamir Highway itinerary, p28). Try to do the road trip from Dushanbe to Khorog in daylight as the scenery is superb. Osh deserves a day of sightseeing for its bustling bazaar and city comforts.

From Osh take the mountain road to **Kazarman** (p322), visiting Central Asia's most spectacular petroglyphs at **Sailmaluu Tash** (p323), a rough overnight trip from Kazarman. From here continue to Naryn and see the sights of central Kyrgyzstan (see the Over the Torugart – Lakes, Herders & Caravanserais itinerary, p25) before heading to Bishkek. If you have less time you can shoot from **Jalal-Abad** (p332) to Bishkek directly in a day, or take a three-day detour to **Lake Sary-Chelek** (p329).

A three-week wild, untrammelled and scenically splendid route through the heart of Central Asia's mountains, from Tashkent (Uzbekistan) to Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan).



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

PAMIR HIGHWAY

10 to 14 Days

The stretch from **Khorog** (p379) to Murgab could be done in a day, although there are lots of interesting detours. In a reliable 4WD you could go up to the lake of Turuntai-Kul. The Murgab Ecotourism Association (META) can arrange a yurt or homestay for you in gritty Bulunkul, where you can explore the banks of Yashil-Kul, or in a Kyrgyz yurt in the Alichur Valley. From the latter an adventurous 4WD excursion leads to the archaeological site of Bazar-Dara.

The **Wakhan Valley** (p384) is well worth tacking on for its stunning scenery and rich collection of historical sights. Marco Polo travelled through this valley in 1275. Make sure you visit the 12th-century Yamchun Fort (and the nearby Bibi Fatima Springs) and Abrashim Qala, another fort that offers amazing views across to Afghanistan and the Hindu Kush. From **Langar** (p385), with your own transport, you can connect with the Pamir Hwy and continue to Khorog. If hitching you probably have to return to Khorog and take the main highway.

There are loads of side trips to be made from **Murgab** (p387), so try to budget a few days here. Lake **Kara-Kul** (p391) is a scenic highlight. From **Sary Tash** (p339) it's worth detouring 40km to **Sary Moghul** (p341) for its fine views of towering Pik Lenin (Koh-i-Istiqlal). From here you can continue to **Osh** (p334). Exit Kyrgyzstan via **Irkeshtam** (p340) for Kashgar and then continue down the Karakoram Hwy to Gilgit in Pakistan.

One of the world's most beautiful and remote mountain road trips, through Tajikistan from Dushanbe to Osh, this is not one to rush; hire a vehicle for at least part of the way.



JOURNEY TO SHAMBHALA

Two to Three Weeks

This little-travelled itinerary through Kazakhstan is a good one for explorers, trekkers and fans of the road *much* less travelled.

Start off in **Almaty** (p113), picking up the necessary invitations for permits required later. Take in some hiking or a short trek in the mountains south of the city (p130) and maybe even splurge on a helicopter flight round **Khan Tengri** (p137).

From here head northeast by shared taxi to **Taldyqorghan** (p138), which you can use as a jumping-off point for the surrounding areas. Take advantage of the homestay programme at **Lepsinsk** (p139) for some hiking in the glacier- and fir-covered Zhungar Alatau.

Head north to **Semey** (p173), a memorial to its nuclear-test victims and place of exile for famed Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky. From here you can take a train further along the Turk-Sib railway line to Barnaul in the Russian Altay. A better option is to head east to the pleasant sub-Siberian city of **Ust-Kamenogorsk** (p169) and then explore the foothills of 4506m Mt Belukha from the health resort of **Rakhmanovskie Klyuchi** (p172).

From here, remote Asian border junkies will get a kick out of determining a way to cross the border between Ridder and Gorno-Altai in Russia's Altay Republic and then taking the road east, to cross the equally remote border post at Tashanta into Mongolia's ethnically Kazakh and scenically spectacular Bayan-Ölgii region.

Alternatively take a bus or train into Russia from Ust-Kamenogorsk. It's also possible to take the weekly flight between Ust-Kamenogorsk and Ölgii in Mongolia or the equally offbeat border crossing via Maykapshagay to Altai in China's Xinjiang province.



This Kazakhstan itinerary, from Almaty to the Altay, will suit those who love to explore off the tourist trail. You'll need to apply for a border zone permit a month in advance for Taldyqorghan, Lepsinsk and the Altay.

TRANSCASPIA

Two Weeks

There are three major excursions inside Turkmenistan; to the north, to the west and to the east. For a shorter trip, pick just one of the following three spokes.

Headed from **Bukhara** (p236), make first for Mary and base yourself there for day trips to **Merv** (p426) and **Gonur**. Budget a couple of days in **Ashgabat** (p405), visiting the various monuments, gold statues of the president and the National Museum. Don't miss **Tolkuchka Bazaar** (p411) and the new cable car into the **Kopet Dag Mountains** (p411). Then visit an Ahal Tekke farm for a day of horse riding.

From Ashgabat, visit **Nissa** (p416), **Gypjak** (p417) and the **Köw Ata Underground Lake** (p418) before visiting **Nokhur** (p418), a friendly and photogenic village that offers good hiking in the mountains. Most visitors spend two nights here, sleeping in a guesthouse. From Nokhur, continue west to the pilgrimage site of **Parau Bibi** (p419), and then remote **Dekhistan** (p420), one of many cities decimated by the Mongols. From the city of Balkanabat, head north to scenic **Yangykala Canyon** (p420), before driving back to the capital. Alternatively continue to the sleepy port town of **Turkmenbashi** (p421) and fly or train back from there.

The third leg leads into northern Turkmenistan. From Ashgabat travel to the spectacular **Darvaza Gas Crater** (p418). If you are well-equipped it's possible make a desert excursion to some remote Turkmen villages, such as **Damla**, overnighing in a yurt. From Darvaza, continue north to see the ruins of **Konye-Urgench** (p432), once capital of Khorezm, before heading into **Khiva** (p252), Uzbekistan (or flying back to Ashgabat).

This route through Turkmenistan begins and ends in Uzbekistan. You can easily do it in reverse or even exit at Turkmenbashi on the ferry to Azerbaijan. If you fly in and out of Ashgabat you'll have to do some backtracking but domestic flights are cheap.



TAILORED TRIPS

COMMUNITY TOURISM

Kyrgyzstan leads the world in small-scale ecotourism projects that connect travellers with local families, guides and shepherds.

Kochkor (p316) is a fine place to find a homestay, watch your host make *shyrdaks* (felt carpets) and arrange a horse and guide for the two-day trek to **Song-Köl** (p318), where real shepherds will put you up in a real yurt.

In the little-visited pastures of the **Talas Valley** (p328) and **Suusamyr Valley** (p328) are two other ecotourism projects; hardy travellers are guaranteed to have these to themselves.

From Talas you can arrange a great five-day trek to **Lake Sary-Chelek** (p329). The nearby valley has a CBT coordinator who can organise yurts and guides for a two-day hike to the lake. At **Arslanbob** (p330) you can make a multiday trek to a chain of holy lakes or blaze some mountain trails.

In spectacular high-altitude Tajikistan, **Murgab** (p387) has a great tourism programme that can arrange homestays and jeep hire for trips to local archaeological sites, petroglyphs and lakes.

Kazakhstan's best ecotourism option is probably **Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve** (p146) in the south of the country. Overnight horse trips into the mountains, past springtime tulips are very pleasant. Other homestay and hiking options are at **Lepsinsk** (p139) and **Korgalzhyn Nature Reserve** (p165), which offers the opportunity to spot the world's northernmost community of pink flamingos.



OFFBEAT CENTRAL ASIA

First stop is wacky Turkmenistan, 'the North Korea of Central Asia'. In **Ashgabat** (p405), watch the golden statue of Turkmenbashi revolve with the sun, then stroll past the 'Ministry of Fairness' and pick up your own Niyazov bust in the Ministry of Culture shop.

The dinosaur footprints at **Kugitang Nature Reserve** (p431) are off the wall, but nothing compares to the burning desert around the **Darvaza Gas Craters** (p418), especially at night. Bizarre future Turkmen attractions include an ice palace/skating rink in the mountains and a huge US\$9 billion artificial lake in, where else, the middle of the desert. Until then (or if someone comes to their senses), you'll have to settle for a surreal swim in the underground lake of **Köw Ata** (p418).

In **Moynaq** (p260) or, better, outside **Aralsk** (p150), see beached fishing boats 150km from what's left of the Aral Sea. And if the mind-numbing steppes of Kazakhstan appeal, go to **Aktau** (p155), 300km from...anywhere. From here track down the underground mosques of **Mangistau** (p157). Alternatively, visit the new Kazakh capital, **Astana** (p159; Kazakh for, er, 'capital'), and stare open-mouthed at the world's largest tent (150m tall) after dining in Kazakhstan's only Jamaican Restaurant. You know we couldn't make this stuff up!



JOURNEYS THROUGH HISTORY

At every turn in Central Asia you will face multiple layers of history on a breathtaking scale. The following are just a few historical highpoints.

Amateur archaeologists should not miss the five overlapping historic cities of **Merv** (p426) in Turkmenistan, the 'Queen of the World' and the world's most populous city in the 12th century. If you've made it this far it would be a shame not to visit the former Parthian capital of **Nissa** (p416).

Up in the far northwest of Uzbekistan you can add a pinch of fun to your history lesson by staying at a yurt camp in the desert near the ruined 2500-year-old desert citadels of **Toprak-Qala** (p251) and **Ayaz-Qala** (p251).

Fans of the Great Game era will want to visit **Bukhara** (p236), which was visited by everyone from Alexander 'Bokhara' Burnes to the British officers Arthur Conolly and Charles Stoddart (who were held in a pit for two years before being executed in front of the Ark). Don't miss the Kalon Minaret that so awed Jenghiz Khan in 1220.

Timur's capital **Samarkand** (p223) still glitters, but fewer travellers make it to the frescoes of **Afrosiab** (p227), the city visited by Alexander the Great. The archaeologically dedicated can pop over the border to glimpse ancient Sogdian remains at **Penjikent** (p372).

Slightly less tangible sites include **Otrar** (p147) in Kazakhstan, where the pivotal murder of 450 Mongol envoys fatefully deflected Mongol rage from China to Central Asia, forever changing the face of the region, and where Timur breathed his last.



ACTIVITIES

The austere **Fan Mountains** (p373) have long been one of Central Asia's premier trekking destinations, easily visited from Samarkand, and offering a wide range of route options. Donkey hire is possible here.

The lush, forested alpine valleys of the Tian Shan around **Karakol** (p300) also offer great versatility for both trekking and horse trips and are probably the most popular trekking destination in Central Asia. The **Zailiysky Alatau range** (p134) south of Almaty also has great trekking just an hour from the city.

One of the easiest and yet most scenic hikes in the western Pamirs is up the **Geisev Valley** (p383) in Tajikistan, where you can stay and eat in local villages. And yes, the scenery looks better without the 20kg backpack.

Horse riding is the natural way to traverse the pastures around **Kochkor** (p316), where community-based tourism groups can arrange multi-day horse treks to places such as Song-Köl.

Nothing conjours up the spirit of the Silk Road like travelling by camel. For the desert experience try **Lake Aidarkul** (p236) or **Ayaz-Qala** (p251) in Uzbekistan; for Bactrian camel trekking on the roof of the world try **Rang-Kul** (p389) in the Pamirs.

Mountaineers who know what they are doing can tackle **Pik Lenin** (Independence Peak; p375), one of the world's easier 7000m peaks. Few mountain amphitheatres can compare to base-camp on the **Inylchek Glacier** (p313), where ascents can be made to peaks around Khan Tengri.



Snapshot

Since independence from the USSR in 1991, the Central Asian republics have forged differing paths, while facing many shared challenges. All have grappled with population shifts and economic migration. All have weathered economic difficulties and resurgent Islam and are attempting to modernise while maintaining and redefining their national character. All have reinvented their past and rehabilitated historical heroes, while reinforcing their national languages. All are feeling pressure from Russia seeking to reassert its interests, while opening themselves, more or less, to new spheres of influence from Turkey, Iran, China and the industrialised West. The initial rush of post-independence joy has been replaced everywhere by a yearning for stability and the search for new ideals.

Politically speaking, many of the faces remain familiar, even from the Soviet era. Presidents Nazarbaev (in power since 1989), Karimov (1990) and Rakhmanov (1993) continue to rule without active opposition. President Niyazov (Turkmenbashi) of Turkmenistan upped the ante further, proclaiming himself 'president for life' in 1999. Only his death in December 2006 forced him out of office; he was replaced by his former dentist (and health minister) Gurbanguli Berdimukhadedov.

Only in Kyrgyzstan has 'people power' made any real headway, sweeping President Akyev from power during the 'Tulip Revolution' of 2005 and forcing curbs on the new president's power in 2006. Contrast this to the Andijon (Andijan) massacre of May 2005, when hundreds of government troops, some in helicopters, shot up to 1000 unarmed Uzbek protestors in the streets (see p191).

A lack of economic and political reform hampers the entire region but no more so than in suffocating Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Despite attempts to portray independence as 'a new golden age', isolated Turkmenistan limped through the last decade in a cycle of Stalinesque purges and appointments. The recent replacement of health care professionals with military conscripts has merely sped up the dismantling of health and education facilities. Tajikistan in particular suffers from chronic unemployment; 70% of the population lives under the poverty line and more than one million Tajiks have left the country to find work in Russia.

Yet there are major differences within the region. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are the only republics which seem to have bright economic possibilities - sitting pretty on enormous reserves of oil and gas. Tajikistan is the only country which has experienced the nightmare of ethnic violence and civil war. The iron-fisted regimes of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have completed their slide into pariah states, where political abductions, torture and trumped-up charges are commonplace and where stagnation is regularly confused for stability. What will happen in a post-Turkmenbashi Turkmenistan is anyone's guess. Optimists see an opening for a transition to democracy; pessimists fear a chaotic struggle for power in the energy-rich state.

Tensions remain among the Central Asian nations. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are no great friends. Disputes over water and gas supplies bubble just under the surface, and the lack of regional cooperation means that regional issues such as the Aral Sea, the drug trade and economic cooperation rarely even make it onto the agenda. Drug smuggling is a particular regional problem and the soaring rise in domestic drug use is fuelling some of the world's fastest growing rates of HIV/AIDS, especially in Kazakhstan.

The Caspian region of Central Asia is sitting atop an estimated 200 billion barrels of crude oil.

Rates of HIV/AIDS infections are doubling annually in Kazakhstan.

Central Asia now has an estimated half a million drug users.

Islamic fundamentalism is the bogeyman which the majority of Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan, uses to justify its increasing repressive policies. Bombings in Uzbekistan in 2004 and an alleged assassination attempt against President Niyazov in 2002 underscored this, although in reality the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan seriously diminished the growth of fundamentalist activities in the region. Yet as long as the issues of reform, poverty and corruption remain unaddressed by Central Asian regimes, the region will be a fertile breeding ground for dissent of all kinds.

The US 'War on Terror' temporarily raised the strategic importance of Central Asia, as the US used bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to launch bombing raids on Afghanistan. In a remarkable turnaround, relations with the West have soured in recent years and favour has swung back towards the Russian, as foreign NGOs and American military personnel leave Uzbekistan in droves. All the republics are busy balancing the security interests of the US with the energy needs of China and their historical ties to Russia, while all the time trying to score the best deals for themselves. There are few clearer symbols of the struggle for Central Asia's soul than the two rival military bases that face off at each other in Bishkek, one Russian, the other American.

But it's not all political dictatorships and environmental disaster. Life has settled for many Central Asians. Economies are finally growing and standards of living are slowly rising. Grassroots community tourism projects are flourishing in much of the region. International crossings have been retied with China, Afghanistan and Iran, opening up new opportunities for both trade and tourism.

Investment and nationalism are reshaping the very face of Central Asia. Kazakhstan has built an entire new capital, Astana, from scratch. Impressive new state buildings and surreal statues have transformed Ashgabat. Cities across the region have been brought up to date by the arrival of Turkish supermarkets, new restaurants and international-standard hotels.

Looking to the future, the region is a mother lode of energy and raw materials and has a potential for great wealth, a fact which quietly drives many countries' Central Asian policies. All eyes are on Kazakhstan, Central Asia's brightest economy, sitting pretty on what is estimated to be the world's third-largest oil reserves (see p107), but don't forget Turkmenistan, which boasts the world's fourth-largest reserves of natural gas. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan also have major natural gas reserves. New pipelines to Turkey and China and proposed routes through Iran and Afghanistan are just the beginning of the economic turnaround. This superpower scramble for oil and gas in the region – dubbed 'round two of the Great Game' – is a drama that will unfold in the decades ahead.

Following the pipelines are grand plans for a new Eurasian transport corridor, with transcontinental rail links extending down into Afghanistan, with transit on to Karachi and the Persian Gulf.

As Central Asia's new economic and cultural ties strengthen, oil routes open and Silk Roads are redrawn, this little-understood region will undoubtedly become increasingly important to the security, economy and politics of Russia, Asia and even the world. The Central Asian governments look set to continue to tread a dangerous tightrope between authoritarianism and Islamisation as they face the long-term challenge of meeting the religious, secular and economic desires of their people. Whatever happens, one thing is sure; Central Asia matters.

The Turkmen government supplies its citizens with free natural gas, electricity, water and salt and has committed to doing so until 2030!

Some 5km below the surface of the Caspian Sea, Kazakhstan's Kashagan oil field holds probably the world's second-largest concentration of oil, some 30 million barrels.

The Authors



BRADLEY MAYHEW

Coordinating Author, Tajikistan

It must be a taste for mutton that has driven Bradley repeatedly to almost every corner of Inner Asia since spending six months in Uzbekistan writing the *Odyssey Guide to Uzbekistan*. He has coordinated the last three editions of *Central Asia* and is also the co-author of Lonely Planet guides *Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Jordan* and *Yellowstone & Grand Teton National Parks*. He has lectured on Central Asia to the Royal Geographical Society and contributed chapters to *Silk Road: Monks, Warriors and Merchants on the Silk Road* and the Insight Guide to the Silk Road. An expat Brit, Bradley lives in Yellowstone County, Montana.

Life on the Road

Research, like any travel in Central Asia, is an intriguing mix of the exotic and banal. Sure, there are some world-class sights here, but what really makes travel in Central Asia such a riot are the eccentricities of the region. If Central Asians had bumper stickers, they would read ‘(weird) sh*t happens’.

Every Central Asian research trip has its moments of insanity. After four hours in the back of a snub-nosed bus to Sary-Chelek, with no other passengers left on board, my wife and I were still swinging wildly on the hand bars like a pair of demented monkeys, eyes rolled up in our heads, with the driver looking at us nervously through the rear-view mirror.

The high Pamirs offered challenges of a more cloak-and-dagger nature. Once the local KGB got whiff that I was a writer, plain-clothes security officers suddenly appeared out of the woodwork in even the smallest town and my name magically appeared on blacklists at several military checkpoints. All of which made arriving in Shaimak, and later Zor-Kul, thrilling moments. Score one for the guidebook writers.



GREG BLOOM

Uzbekistan

On his previous mission to Tashkent, Greg trained Uzbek newspaper reporters in Western journalism techniques for the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ), an American NGO. That was in 2003, before the ICFJ's partner, Internews, was kicked out of Uzbekistan in the wake of the bloodshed at Andijon. Returning to Uzbekistan three years later, Greg reports that surprisingly, despite Uzbekistan's well-publicised political troubles, the country remains an ideal destination for individual travel – safe, hospitable, (relatively) hassle-free and utterly fascinating. Formerly the editor of Ukraine's *Kyiv Post*, Greg is now based in Manila and writes frequently for Lonely Planet about the Philippines and former Soviet countries.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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JOHN NOBLE

Kazakhstan

John, with colleague John King, pioneered Lonely Planet's coverage of the Soviet Union with *USSR* (1991). After Soviet disintegration, John worked on the first editions of several LP guides to the successor states, including *Central Asia* (1996), for which he covered Kazakhstan and parts of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. He then took a 10-year breather before returning to Kazakhstan for this edition. He found the country as big, bleak and beautiful as ever, its people just as warm but more open, travel getting steadily easier, and the restaurants and hotels unrecognisable. He hopes this book will somehow encourage more travellers to get acquainted with one of the world's last unknown gems.



DEAN STARNES

Kyrgyzstan

A one-time English teacher in Japan, children's palaeontology presenter and now a travel writer and part-time graphic designer in New Zealand, Dean first came across the 'stans' of Central Asia while travelling to India from Iran. His unjustified aversion to flying (why fly over what you can travel through?) and a deep-rooted desire to improve his shoddy geography (how long have these been here?) meant it was only a matter of time until he ended up lost in Kyrgyzstan. An unfortunate visa error (long story – but he assures us he's innocent) and an unnatural taste for *kymys* (fermented mare's milk) meant that he stayed long enough to see the wrong side of a Kyrgyz winter, but the right side of everything else. Photographs and travel stories from this and other trips can be viewed at his website www.deanstarnes.co.nz.

ANONYMOUS

Turkmenistan

The author of the Turkmenistan chapter has chosen to remain anonymous to protect the people who helped him/her during research.

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