

# Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan's dual persona is omnipresent. The lavish palaces in the capital, gold statues and marble monuments are as captivating as the deep mysticism and legend that hangs over pilgrimage sites and ancient ruins. This is a land that is at one time gripped by authority and yet overcome by spirituality.

Ancient cities like Merv, Dekhistan (also known as Misrian) and Konye-Urgench inspire visions of slow-moving caravans plodding along the ancient Silk Road. Remnants of their urban tissue are still there, slowly disintegrating under the weight of tribal warfare and time. Nature-lovers will also appreciate the haunting beauty of the Karakum (Black Sand) desert and the occasional quirks of coloured canyons, dinosaur footprints and burning gas craters.

The full Turkmen experience is ultimately about mingling with the Turkmen themselves, only a couple of generations removed from a nomadic lifestyle, they are a welcoming people whose hospitality is the stuff of legend. Proud of their heritage, women are seen decked out in colourful headscarves and ankle-length dresses decorated with Turkmen motifs. Everyone from young boys to *aksakals* (literally 'white beards', revered elders) will greet you warmly with a two-hand clasp and a slight bow.

Xenophobia runs deep in the upper echelons of Turkmen authority, a fact that constricts independent travel. Anyone with a tourist visa is required to hire a guide and despite hopes for change, the situation remains the same in this post-Niyazov era. While this may dampen your independent spirit, it is for now the only way to fully experience the country. Despite this inconvenience, Turkmenistan offers numerous off-beat experiences; you can overnight in a yurt, ride an Akhal-Teke horse or simply disappear for a few days into the desert wilderness.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 488,100 sq km
- **Capital** Ashgabat (Aşgabat)
- **Country Code** ☎ 993
- **Famous For** Golden statues of Turkmenbashi, gas reserves, horses, carpets
- **Languages** Turkmen, Russian, Uzbek
- **Money** manat (M); black market US\$1 = 24,500M
- **Phrases in Turkmen** Peace be with you./ Hello. (*salam aleykum*); Thanks. (*sagh bol*); How are you? (*siz nahili?*)
- **Population** approximately five million



## HOW MUCH?

- Snickers bar US\$0.40
- 100km bus ride US\$0.40
- Phone call to the US or UK (three-minute minimum) US\$4
- Traditional hat US\$8
- Good dinner in Ashgabat US\$5
- Litre of bottled water US\$0.25
- Litre of petrol US\$0.02 (budget US\$1.50 per litre to cover road tax)

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Konye-Urgench** (p432) Ancient minarets, mausoleums and palaces that stand testament to the former glories of the Khorezmshah empire.
- **Karakum Desert** (p417) A formidable expanse of shifting sands and incredible lunar landscapes dotted with hardy Turkmen villages and bizarre gas craters.
- **Ashgabat** (p405) Former President Niyazov's self-congratulatory city, laden with gold statues, portraits and monuments of himself. It's also home to the wonderfully chaotic Tolkuchka Bazaar.
- **Yangykala Canyon** (p420) A painted desert that wouldn't look out of place in a John Ford film, and is great for camping and exploration.
- **Merv** (p426) History buffs will find joy at the extensive ruins of Merv, littered with ancient foundations and pottery shards. The largest archaeological excavation in the Near East, Gonur, is nearby.

## ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Arriving on a transit visa, see Ashgabat in a day, making sure to ride up the Monument to the Independence of Turkmenistan and wander Tolkuchka Bazaar. Cross the Karakum Desert and then wrap things up with a visit to historic Konye-Urgench.
- **Seven days** Spend at least three days around Ashgabat before heading east to visit the ancient sites of Merv and Gonur. From here, return to Ashgabat and travel north to Konye-Urgench, camping en route at the unforgettable Darvaza Gas Crater.
- **Two weeks** Along with the above-mentioned sights, head west to Dekhistan,

the Yangykala Canyon and Turkmenbashi. While in the Karakum Desert, scope out some remote villages for the chance to overnight in a yurt.

- **Three weeks** Explore the above sights at a slower pace and take the time for some activities, such as horseback riding in Geok-Dere, cave exploration in Kugitang Nature Reserve and hiking in Nokhur.

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Turkmenistan is the hottest country in Central Asia, although its dry desert climate means that it's not always uncomfortably warm. That said, only the insane or deeply unfortunate find themselves in Ashgabat in July and August, when the temperature can push 50°C. The best times to visit are between April and June, and September and early November. Winters are very cold in the north, although southern Turkmenistan almost never freezes.

## HISTORY

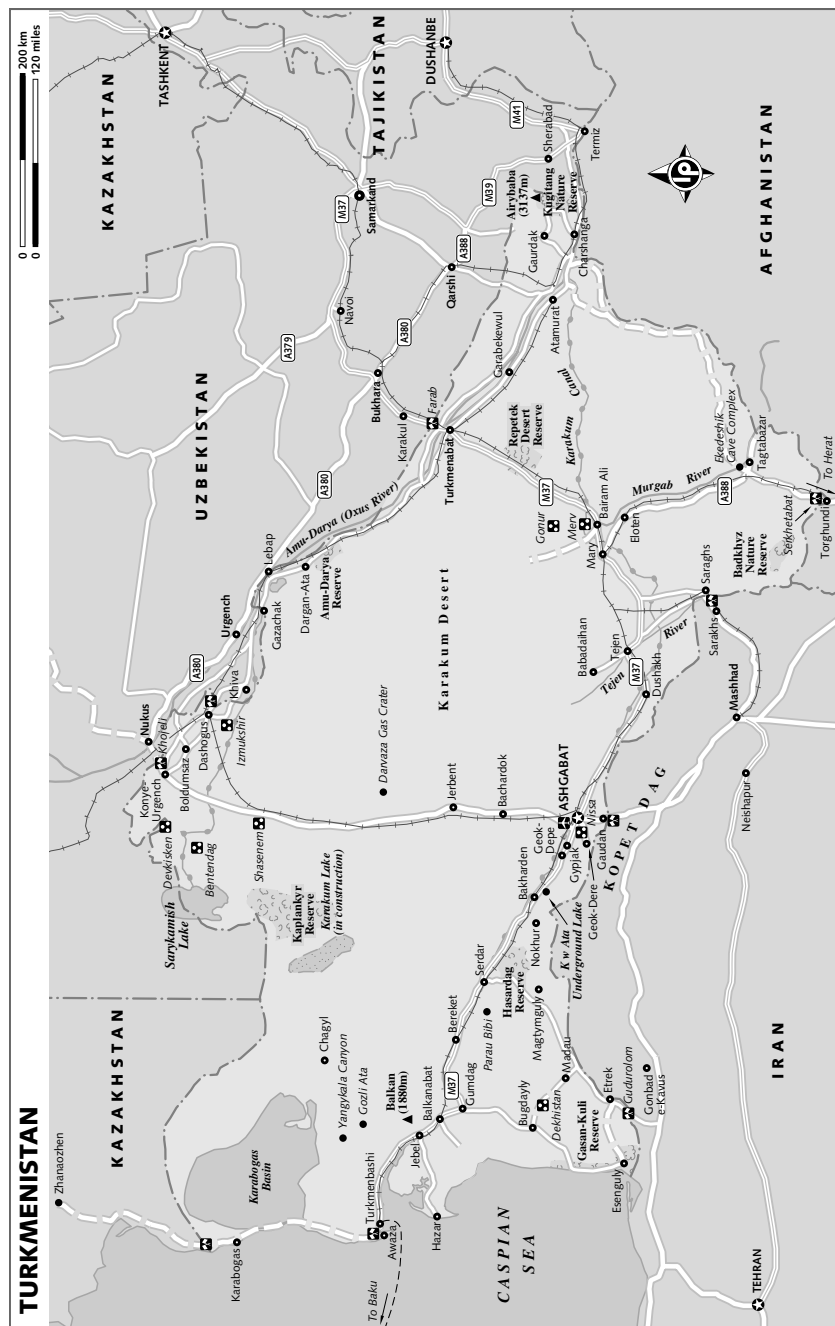
### From Conquerors to Communists

Stone Age sites have been identified in the Big Balkan Mountains but the first signs of agricultural settlements appeared in Kopet Dag in the 6th millennium BC. More Bronze Age sites have been located in the Margiana Oasis, where archaeologist Viktor Sarianidi has identified a sophisticated culture that encompassed several villages and an extensive capital. Rivers that shifted over the centuries caused the abandonment of these settlements, but paved the way for a great civilization around Merv. Alexander the Great established a city here on his way to India.

Around the time of Christ, the Parthians, Rome's main rivals for power in the West, set up a capital at Nissa, near present-day Ashgabat. In the 11th century the Seljuq Turks appropriated Merv, Alexander's old city and a Silk Road staging post, as a base from which to expand into Afghanistan.

Two centuries later Jenghiz Khan stormed down from the steppes and through Trans-Caspia (the region east of the Caspian Sea) to lay waste to Central Asia. Entire city-states, including Merv and Konye-Urgench, were razed and their populations slaughtered. Unlike Samarkand and Bukhara, the cities to the south failed to recover.

It's not known precisely when the first modern Turkmen appeared, but they are believed to have arrived in modern Turkmenistan in



### TEN CRAZY THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT TURKMENISTAN *Bradley Mayhew*

- Turkmenistan plans to build Central Asia's largest artificial lake in the middle of the Karakum Desert at a cost of up to US\$8 billion. Turkmenistan is already home to the world's longest irrigation canal, at 1370km.
- The Turkmen language has its own unique, copyrighted alphabet called 'Elipbi'.
- In 2003 the government confused everybody in Ashgabat by replacing all street names with a four-digit number code.
- The Turkmen Carpet Museum houses the world's largest hand-woven carpet, woven for the 10th anniversary of Independence.
- Central Asia's largest mosque is built on the site where former President Niyazov's mother and two brothers were killed by an earthquake in 1948.
- Turkmenosaurus is the name suggested by scientists for the dinosaur that left hundreds of footprints across the east of the country.
- The archaeological site of Anau has some of the world's earliest evidence of grain cultivation.
- Petrol in Turkmenistan costs US\$0.02 per litre at the pumps.
- In Turkmenistan natural gas is free but matches aren't, with the result that many Turkmen keep their gas stoves burning 24 hours a day.
- The largest banknote in Turkmenistan is worth less than US\$0.50.

the wake of the Seljuk Turks some time in the 11th century. A collection of displaced nomadic horse-breeding tribes, possibly from the foothills of the Altay Mountains, they found alternative pastures in the oases fringing the Karakum desert and in Persia, Syria and Anatolia (in present-day Turkey). Being nomads they had no concept of, or interest in, statehood and therefore existed in parallel to the constant dynastic shifts that so totally determined Central Asia's history.

Terrorising the Russians, who had come to 'civilise' the region in the early 19th century, Turkmen captured thousands of the tsar's troops, and sold them into slavery in Khiva and Bukhara. This invited the wrath of the Russian Empire, which finally quelled the wild nomads by massacring thousands of them at Geok-Depe in 1881.

After the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, the communists took Ashgabat in 1919. For a while the region existed as the Turkmen *oblast* (province) of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, before becoming the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in 1924.

### The Turkmen SSR

Inflamed by Soviet attempts to settle the tribes and collectivise farming, Turkmen resistance continued and a guerrilla war raged until 1936. More than a million Turkmen fled

into the Karakum desert or into northern Iran and Afghanistan rather than give up their nomadic ways. The Turkmen also fell foul of a Moscow-directed campaign against religion. Of the 441 mosques in Turkmenistan in 1911, only five remained standing by 1941.

Waves of Russian immigrants brought with them farming technology and blueprints for cotton fields. Turkmenistan's arid climate was hardly conducive to bumper harvests, and to supply the vast quantities of water required the authorities began work in the 1950s on a massive irrigation ditch – the Karakum Canal. The 1100km-long gully runs the length of the republic, bleeding the Amu-Darya (Oxus River) to create a fertile band across the south. Cotton production quadrupled, though the consequences for the Aral Sea have been catastrophic (see p77).

In 1985 the relatively unknown Saparmurat Niyazov was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan (CPT) and retained power until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although totally unprepared for the event, Niyazov was forced to declare independence for Turkmenistan on 27 October 1991.

### Independence & The Golden Age

Determined to hold onto power, Niyazov renamed the CPT the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan for the sake of appearances

before oxymoronically banning all other parties. His cult of personality began to flourish, starting with an order that everyone call him 'Turkmenbashi', which translates as 'leader of the Turkmen'. The president erected gold statues of himself and plastered buildings with his image. His Nazi-inspired slogan 'Halk, Watan, Turkmenbaşı' ('People, Nation, Me') was ubiquitous.

Tapping Turkmenistan's vast oil and gas reserves, Niyazov promised a Kuwait-style economy with enormous private wealth. Most of the profits, however, ended up funding Niyazov's ostentatious public-works projects. Public dissent was somewhat placated by enormous government subsidies for gas, water and electricity. The free ride was part of Niyazov's much touted 'Turkmen Golden Age' (Altyn Asyr).

Orwellian control of the media caused Reporters Without Borders to rank Turkmenistan second to last in its press freedom index (one spot ahead of North Korea). The repression was only highlighted after reporter Ogulsapar Muradova (Radio-Free Europe) was found dead in prison in 2006. She was jailed after she assisted a French filmmaker

to produce a documentary on the president (*Turkmenistan: Welcome to Niyazovland*).

Having drained the economy on his marble capital, Niyazov slashed pensions and funds for education. Libraries outside Ashgabat closed and university acceptances were limited to a privileged few. This paled in comparison to Niyazov's human-rights record, blackened by the jailing of thousands of political prisoners. The threat of sanctions by the EU had little effect.

## CURRENT EVENTS

An attack on the president's life occurred on the morning of 25 November 2002 when gunmen opened fire on his motorcade. The assassination attempt failed but provided grounds for an immense bloodletting of the remaining political opposition, including Niyazov's outspoken critic Boris Shikhmuradov. The one-time ambassador and dissident leader was tried, jailed and has not been heard from since.

Despite avoiding an assassin's bullet, President Niyazov proved mortal when he passed away on 21 December 2006, the result of a massive heart attack. Having groomed no heir, the death left a power vacuum that for a

brief moment opened the door for democratic reform and the return of exiled dissidents. Instead, a surprisingly smooth transfer of power occurred when Deputy Prime Minister Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov grabbed the reins of power and won backing from Niyazov's inner circle. He was rubber stamped into power after elections in February 2007 (having won 90% of the popular vote). Berdymukhamedov had been Turkmenistan's health minister and according to reports from the exiled opposition, he is the former president's illegitimate son. While their relationship may never be known, the two men do bear an uncanny resemblance.

Berdymukhamedov began his presidency with positive reforms in the health and education sectors, lighting some fire under initiatives cut by Niyazov. However, state security remains as tight as ever, the media is still strictly controlled and democracy is alien terminology. Travellers wishing to visit the country continue to go through the same rigorous visa channels.

Turkmenistan's foreign policy is also unchanged; good news for Russia, which secured promises that its lucrative energy contracts would be honoured by the new regime. Niyazov's declaration of neutrality and his ability to keep out radical Islam in a volatile region allowed it to safely fend off harsh criticism from the West. Berdymukhamedov is expected to follow suit, so while the USA and EU continue to press Turkmenistan for democratic reforms, it's unlikely that anything more than carrot-dangling will be used to break the cycle of repression.

## PEOPLE

Turkmen remain nomadic at heart, if not still in practice, and carry themselves in a simple yet dignified manner that reflects their rural lifestyle. Nomadic rules, including the treatment of guests, still dominate home life. You can expect an embarrassing amount of attention when visiting a home; a younger member of the family may even be assigned to ensure that all your needs are catered to.

Turkmen are guided spiritually by a unique form of Central Asia animism. Holiday breaks are thus used for pilgrimage time. Women in particular use these pilgrimages as an opportunity to take a break from their home life, and you may see caravans of women on buses, headed to places like Parau Bibi (p419).

Despite Sovietisation, women who live outside Turkmenistan's towns are generally homemakers and mothers, and the men the breadwinners. The oldest woman in the household, however, wields the most authority in decision making.

## Population

If you believe the government's figures, the population of Turkmenistan is rising dramatically – over six million at present by the official count, although the UN and US government put that figure at five million in July 2006. Uzbeks, who make up about 5% of the population, live in the border cities of Konye-Urgench, Dashogus and Turkmenabat. Russians have left in huge numbers since independence, as it becomes increasingly hard to work without speaking Turkmen. Today they make up around 4% of the population. Turkmen ethnic groups make up 85% of the population, with other groups accounting for 6% of the population.

## RELIGION

Turkmen are deeply religious people; their traditional animist beliefs have been blended over centuries of time with Islam. Evidence of this is clear at mosques and mausoleums, which are often decorated with animist features such as snakes and rams' horns. Likewise, pilgrims arrive at these sites bearing tokens such as crib models, indicating a desire for children.

Sunni Islam is the state religion and each year 188 people (the number that can fit on a Turkmenistan Airlines plane) are hand-picked for a pilgrimage to Mecca. Turkmenistan's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but Islam and Orthodox Christianity are the only freely practised religions. Other faiths, mainly Christian sects, have been forced to curtail their activities under government pressure, although the state-sponsored repression seen in the 1990s has eased somewhat.

## ARTS

Turkmen carpets are world famous and can be seen just about everywhere, although the best place to see them is in the bazaar. Silk, embroidery and jewellery are other crafts that have been perfected over the centuries. Museums often have fine displays of traditional silverwork used to decorate women's clothing.

### TURKMENBASHI – LEADER OF THE TURKMEN

Former President Saparmurat Niyazov may be dead, but his personality cult is alive and well. Born in 1940 in Gypjak, a village near Ashgabat, Niyazov knew tragedy from a young age – his father was killed in action during WWII, and his mother and brothers were killed in the 1948 earthquake that wiped out Ashgabat. Both his parents formed important parts of the personality cult – especially his mother Gurbansoltan Eje, after whom he renamed the month of April.

The young president grew up in an orphanage and went to study at St Petersburg's prestigious Technical Institute, returning to Ashgabat to work as an engineer at the Bezmeyn Power Plant just outside the Turkmen capital. Joining the Communist Party in 1962, Niyazov's first taste of real power came when he was appointed head of the party's Ashgabat City Committee. He was later selected by Mikhail Gorbachov to head the Communist Party of Turkmenistan – fingered for the position as he was seen as a deferent and obedient functionary.

The seamless transfer to president of an independent Turkmenistan after the USSR's collapse revealed, however, another side to Niyazov – one that loved nothing more than mass flattery, golden statues and lavish palaces.

Niyazov padded his legacy by penning poetry books and the *Ruhnama*, his version of Turkmen history and culture. Endearing himself to the public, he was frequently televised on national holidays passing out US\$100 bills to children who sang to him. This was small change compared to the fortune he has amassed for himself; the NGO Global Witness claims Niyazov had around US\$3 billion in slush funds at the time of his death.

Other publicity stunts included a weekly televised cabinet meeting in which Niyazov regularly sacked ministers and other high-ranking officials, usually on the basis of corruption. Under his rule, thousands of Turkmen were jailed, tortured, sent into internal exile or forced out of the country. Despite this, when he died in December 2006, delegates from 40 countries attended his funeral and hundreds of thousands of ordinary Turkmen arrived to pay their last respects.

### BOOK OF THE SOUL

Part of Niyazov's cult-building mission was the promotion of his book the *Ruhnama* (Book of the Soul), which was first published in 2001. This incredibly bizarre piece of writing sets out Niyazov's version of Turkmen history, culture and spirituality. At its heart, the *Ruhnama* is about traditional Turkmen values and advice on how each Turkmen should uphold them. There are discussions on Turkmenistan's neutrality and the exclusion of foreign influences. Much of the history section is revisionist and tends to favour mythology over historical fact.

Niyazov made *Ruhnama* compulsory reading for all Turkmen. Knowledge of the *Ruhnama* is needed to pass everything from college entrance exams to driving tests (Turkmen driving skills make it clear that the actual driving part is irrelevant in the test). Volume II was published in 2004.

Travellers will see the *Ruhnama* on display in all public buildings and on the shelves of bookshops. The book is also found in *Ruhnama* reading rooms, located in shopping malls and hospitals. A *Ruhnama* University is expected to open in 2010. The book has even been blasted into space and will orbit Earth for the next 150 years! Copies of *Ruhnama* (complete with glowing reviews) can be found on amazon.com, or you can read portions at www.rukhnama.com. There is some incentive to read the book – according to Niyazov, reading it 100 times guarantees you a place in heaven.

Certain forms of Western art were frowned upon by Niyazov, resulting in a ban on opera and ballet. Film making is likewise virtually nonexistent. Theatres do remain active, albeit with Turkmen-only song and dance acts, concerts and drama performances. The most impressive traditional singing, *bakhshi*, deals with folklore, battles and love, and is accompanied by a *dutar* (two stringed guitar). Shukur Bakhshi, singing competitions, can be heard at festivals.

Between the Soviets and Niyazov, contemporary Turkmen literature has been all but destroyed. Rahim Esenov was Turkmenistan's best literary hope until he was jailed following publication of his book *The Crowned Wanderer*, which portrays a history of Turkmenistan different from the *Ruhnama*. Esenov, in his late 70s, was arrested for attempting to smuggle copies of his book into the country. While in jail the books were burned although he did win an award from the PEN American Centre. Instead, Turkmen are encouraged to read the writings of poet Magtymguly Feraghy (1733–83) and, of course, former President Niyazov.

### BOOKS

*Unknown Sands: Journeys Around the World's Most Isolated Country* (Dusty Spark, 2006), by John W Kropf, is a travel memoir by an American who spent two years living in Ashgabat. Despite living within the confines of the diplomatic community (his wife is a US diplomat), Kropf manages to sneak away from

the capital to give us a perspective of life on the ground for ordinary Turkmen.

*Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (2006), by Adrienne Lynn Edgar, is a scholarly account of the Soviet creation of Turkmenistan, with well-researched details on Soviet nation building of the 1920s and 1930s. The book also provides an understanding of Turkmen language and tribal law.

### ENVIRONMENT

The landscape in Turkmenistan is dramatic and more varied than you'd expect from a place where the Karakum desert takes up 90% of the country's area. To the east are the canyons and lush mountains of the Kugitang Nature Reserve, while to the south the Kopet Dag range rises up in a line towards the Caspian Sea. The territory littoral to the Caspian is particularly unusual – vast mud flats, coloured canyons and the enormous bulk of the Big Balkan massif make this one of the more bleakly beautiful places in the country.

### Wildlife

The most famous of Turkmenistan's many interesting species is the Akhal-Teke horse, a beautiful golden creature that is believed to be the ancestor of today's purebred. Dromedaries (Arabian camels) are everywhere, wandering scenically between villages and towns. Many of the Karakum's nastiest inhabitants are really exciting to see in real life – most importantly the grey *varan*, or *zemzen*, a large monitor lizard.

Despite its large size and particularly painful bite, Turkmen have traditionally welcomed the giant lizard as it devours or scares away snakes (such as cobras), eats mice and eradicates colonies of sandflies.

You are also likely to see desert foxes, owls and the very common desert squirrel.

Tarantulas and black widows are both indigenous to Turkmenistan, although you are unlikely to see them. Snake season is from April to May. Cobras, vipers and scorpions can all be found in the desert, so tread with caution. Turkmen folklore has it that once a snake has looked at you, you'll die shortly afterwards unless you kill it first.

### Environmental Issues

Turkmenistan has paid a heavy price for the irrigation of its southern belt using source water bound for the Aral Sea. While the Aral Sea is in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, its disappearance has led to desperate environmental problems in northern Turkmenistan, with the salination of the land taking its toll on the health of local people. Overfishing is another concern, as caviar-bearing sturgeon become rarer in the Caspian Sea. There is very little environmental consciousness in Turkmenistan, where no-one bothers to save gas, electricity or water because all are subsidised by the government. The result in Ashgabat is a thin layer of semipermanent smog.

### Nature Reserves

Turkmenistan's eight nature reserves are not designed for public use – they have been set aside for scientific research, as per the Soviet model. A permit is required to visit a reserve and these are available from the **Ministry of Nature** (☎ 39 60 02; 2035 köçesi 102, Ashgabat). It can take up to three weeks to process the application and these are usually only available in the low-season (October to May).

### FOOD & DRINK

Similar to other Central Asian countries, *plov* (rice, meat and carrots) and *shashlyk* are the staple dishes across Turkmenistan. *Plov* is produced with cottonseed oil, which provides its distinctive aroma, while *shashlyk* is considered at its best when cooked over the branches of a saxal tree. Other favoured snacks include *samsa* (samosa, meat-filled pastries) and a variation on the meat pastry called *fitchi*, which is larger and round in shape.

*Dograma*, made from bread and pieces of boiled meat and onions, is a traditional Turkmen meal, although you will probably only see this during special occasions. A more common soup is *chorba* (soup of boiled mutton with potato, carrot and turnip, known elsewhere in the region as *shorpa*). *Manty* (steamed dumplings) served with sour cream is another popular dish.

Bread (*çörek*) is round, flat and delicious when it's fresh out of the oven, although it does harden quickly. *Çörek* holds a place of honour in Turkmenistan and it is surrounded by superstition; it must be handled with utmost respect and never served or left upside down, even crumbs are collected and left in a safe place. Never throw bread away and if you must discard it, don't leave it where it could be kicked or stepped on. *Çörek* is cooked in a *tamdyr*, a large earthen oven that is also considered holy. It's bad luck to destroy an old *tamdyr*, so these are simply left to disintegrate.

At breakfast you'll be served sour milk or *chal* (fermented camel's milk) in the desert. Mineral water is sold everywhere and is of good quality, while beer and vodka – a legacy of the Russians – are both popular alcoholic drinks. There are several decent Turkmen brands of both, although the most common beers are Berk and Zip.

## ASHGABAT

📍 12 / pop 650,000

With its lavish marble palaces, gleaming gold domes and vast expanses of manicured parkland, Ashgabat ('the city of love' or Ashkabad in Arabic) has reinvented itself as a showcase city for the newly independent republic. Built almost entirely off the receipts of Turkmenistan's oil and gas sales, the city continues to boom, with whole neighbourhoods facing the wrecking ball in the name of progress.

Originally developed by the Russians in the late 19th century, Ashgabat became a prosperous, largely Russian frontier town on the Trans-Caspian railway. However, at 1am on 6 October 1948, the city vanished in less than a minute, levelled by an earthquake that measured nine on the Richter scale. Over 110,000 people died (two-thirds of the population), although the official figure was 14,000; this was the era of Stalin, when socialist countries didn't suffer disasters.

Ashgabat was rebuilt in the Soviet style, but its modern incarnation is somewhere between Las Vegas and Pyongyang, with a mixture of Bellagio fountains and Stalinist parade grounds. But at heart it's a fairly relaxed city, with good-value accommodation and a few quirky sights, making it a pleasant place to relax before a long haul across the desert.

**ORIENTATION**

The main arteries of the city are Turkmenbashi şayoli (avenue), running all the way from the train station to the new suburb of Berzengi, and Magtymguly şayoli, running east to west. Many of the city's landmarks and institutions are on or near these streets.

**ASHGABAT**

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In 2002 former President Niyazov renamed all the streets with numbers. Pushkin köçesi (street) is now 1984 köçesi, for example. This pointless exercise has only served to confuse, as nobody seemed to know the names of the streets anyway – some have changed as many as four times since the 1990s. For the most part, post-Soviet names have been used in

this chapter, as they remain the most widely recognised.

**INFORMATION**  
**Bookshops**

Turkmen bookshops are little more than propaganda storefronts to promote national glory. Most central is **Miras Bookshop** (Turkmenbashi şayoli 29; ☎ 10am-7pm), where over half the books are authored by Turkmenbashi.

**Emergency**

Dial ☎ 01 for fire service, ☎ 02 for the police or ☎ 03 for an ambulance. The operators will speak Turkmen or Russian only.

**Internet Access**

Your best chance to get online is at one of the top-end hotels. The President, Nissa and Grand Turkmen all have internet, but only the latter allows nonguests to use it. Bear in mind that the authorities monitor web traffic.

**Matrix** (☎ 35 54 59; World Trade Complex, 2005 köçesi 1; per hr US\$2.20; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) This is one of only a handful of internet cafés in the city. Expect a terribly slow connection and blocked websites.

**Laundry**

Drycleaning can be done for reasonable rates at **Brilliant** (☎ 39 06 39; Magtymguly şayoli 99) and more expensively at the **Yimpaş** (Turkmenbashi şayoli 54; ☎ 9am-11pm) Turkish department store. Floor maids at most hotels will do a load of laundry for around US\$5.

**Left Luggage**

There is a left-luggage service (*kamera khraneniya*) at Ashgabat's main train station, where you can leave bags for about US\$0.25 overnight.

**Medical Services**

The main medical provision in Ashgabat is the vast **Central Hospital** (☎ 45 03 03, 45 03 31; Emre köçesi 1). Foreigners have to pay for their treatment, so insurance is essential. Among the staff is Dr Yahya, a Jordanian doctor who speaks English and is recommended by both the British and US embassies. The facility also includes a dental clinic. There is also the **International Medical Centre** (☎ 51 90 06, 51 90 08) in Berzengi. In the city centre is **Lechebni Hospital** (☎ 39 08 77; Shevchenko şayoli), which is less well equipped.

<p><b>SLEEPING</b></p> <p>Ak Altyn Hotel.....45 C3</p> <p>Amanov Homestay.....46 D5</p> <p>Bezirgen Hotel.....47 B3</p> <p>Grand Turkmen Hotel.....48 E4</p> <p>Hotel Ashgabat.....49 F3</p> <p>Hotel Dayhan.....50 D4</p> <p>Hotel Nissa.....51 F5</p> <p>Hotel Syyahat.....52 A4</p> <p>Hotel Turkmenistan.....53 E4</p>	<p><b>EATING</b></p> <p>Altyn Jam.....54 E3</p> <p>Ay Peri.....55 D3</p> <p>Ay Ayni.....56 D3</p> <p>Coffee House.....(see 15)</p> <p>Dip Club.....57 C4</p> <p>Italian Restaurant.....(see 51)</p> <p>Sai Baba.....58 D3</p> <p>Sazada.....(see 72)</p>	<p><b>DRINKING</b></p> <p>British Pub.....59 E4</p> <p>City Pub.....60 D4</p> <p>Iceberg Bar.....61 C2</p>
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### ASHGABAT MUST-SEES

**Arch of Neutrality** (opposite) For the best views of the capital, ride the glass elevator to the top of this magnificently awful structure.

**Turkmenbashi Cableway** (p411) Survey the city with its desert backdrop from the top of this 3.5km long gondola.

**Tolkuchka Bazaar** (p411) As unlike modern Ashgabat as anywhere else on earth, and truly one of Central Asia's greatest and most colourful sights.

**National Museum** (p410) Enjoy the fine collection of historic artefacts and relics found here.

**Independence monument** (p410) Known as 'the plunger', this enormous marble and gold tower is surrounded by gushing fountains and bronze statues and contains the curious 'Museum of Turkmen Values'.

**Walk of Health** (p417) You don't have to be crazy to build staircases into the mountainside, but it helps. A visit to this spectacular waste of money and time is strangely compelling.

### Money

The best rates for black-market exchange can be found outside the **Turkmenistan Trade Centre** (Turkmenistan Söwda Merkazi; Magtymguly şayoli). The preferred currency is US dollars in cash.

There are several banks in the city centre, but they're not of much use to travellers as they don't have ATMs or change travellers cheques.

If you have a Visa card, use the **State Bank for Foreign Economic Affairs** (☎ 40 60 40; Garashyzyk şayoli 32; ☎ 9.15am-4pm Mon-Fri), which is 4.5km south of downtown and 1.5km north of the Berzengi Hwy (Archabil şayoli). The bank charges a 4% commission on withdrawals.

If you use a MasterCard, go to **Senagat Bank** (☎ 45 44 21; Turkmenbaşı şayoli 42; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) located next to the Yimpaş department store. It charges a 3% commission on withdrawals.

### Post

The main **post office** (☎ 35 15 55; Mopra köçesi 16; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat & 9am-1pm Sun) is very small. A letter to the USA is very reasonable at around US\$0.08.

### Registration

**OVIR** (State Service for the Registration of Foreign Citizens; ☎ 39 13 37; 2011 köçesi 57; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm) For tourist registration see p438.

### Telephone & Fax

Most hotels offer international direct dialling (IDD) and fax facilities, although for better rates you can call from the **International Call Centre** (Karl Liebknecht köçesi 33; ☎ 8am-7pm). Faxes can be sent from all top-end hotels and the International Call Centre.

### Travel Agencies

Any traveller not simply in transit through Turkmenistan will usually have made contact with one of the following (or a foreign travel agency working through them) to organise their letter of invitation (LOI). The following agencies offer comprehensive services including LOIs, guides, drivers, hotel bookings, city tours and other excursions.

**Aşgabatşyýahat** (☎ 35 77 77, 352 015; fax 39 66 60; Grand Turkmen Hotel, Görögly köçesi 7)

**Ayan Travel** (☎ 35 29 14, 35 07 97; www.ayan-travel.com; Magtymguly şayoli 108-2/4)

**DN Tours** (☎ 39 58 28; www.dntours.com; Magtymguly şayoli 48/1)

**Stantours** (in Kazakhstan ☎ 7 3272 63 13 44; www.stantours.com; Kunyaeva 163/76, Almaty)

**Tourism-Owadan** (☎ 39 18 25; www.owadan.net; Azadi köçesi 65)

### DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Be aware that all top-range hotel rooms are bugged, as are many offices, restaurants and anywhere foreigners meet. Reserve sensitive conversations, especially any with Turkmen citizens (who are far more likely to get into trouble than you) for safe places, preferably outside. Also take care when photographing public buildings, ask the nearest police officer for permission first.

The most common problem encountered by foreigners is abiding by the 11pm curfew. Foreigners caught breaking the curfew can be arrested and things get worse if you happen to be drunk. Foreign men will also have to explain themselves if they are walking with a local woman late at night (police will assume she is a prostitute). If you are arrested, your tour guide (if you are on a tourist visa) should

### THE EVER-CHANGING FACE OF ASHGABAT

Ashgabat's post-Soviet face-lift is a work in process. Niyazov spent the better part of his presidency transforming the capital into an all-marble 'White City', and still today whole neighbourhoods are being demolished to make way for palaces, apartments, fountains and enormous sculptures.

One of the most recent projects was a US\$63 million artificial river that slices through the city for 11km. New buildings include the 'House of Free Creativity' with work space for more than 200 journalists. The US\$17 million edifice was constructed in the shape of a book.

The demolitions have left hundreds of people homeless and the city authorities have no provision for rehousing or compensation. Turkmenbashi World of Fairytales, a new amusement park, was one of many projects that required the eviction of hundreds of families.

The destruction of old buildings is not limited to Ashgabat. During one trip to the Karakum desert, President Niyazov stopped at the town of Darvaza and, not pleased with its dilapidated state, had the village razed to the ground à la Jenghiz Khan. Apparently it was not living up to the lofty standards of the 'Golden Age'. The people living there were moved to other villages and the name 'Darvaza' was deleted from the maps.

Be aware that the Ashgabat map is particularly vulnerable to change during the lifetime of this book.

be able to help, but don't count on it. Take taxis after 11pm to avoid problems.

### SIGHTS

#### Central Ashgabat

Being all but wiped from the earth in 1948, Ashgabat's sights can be divided neatly into two halves – the politicised, monolithic constructions of the Soviet government and the politicised, monolithic constructions of President Niyazov, with the latter increasing in number almost monthly while he was alive.

At the centre of Niyazov's monolithic Ashgabat is the embarrassing large **Arch of Neutrality** (admission US\$0.15; ☎ 8am-10pm), erected to celebrate the Turkmen people's unsurprisingly unanimous endorsement of Turkmenbashi's policy of neutrality in 1998. Above the arch itself is the real gem, a comic 12m-high polished-gold **statue of Niyazov**, which revolves to follow the sun throughout the day. Trips to the top give commanding views of the enormous **Independence Square**, on which sits the golden-domed **Palace of Turkmenbashi**, the **Ministry of Fairness**, the **Ministry of Defence** and the **Ruhyyet Palace**, all of which were built by the French corporation Bouygues Construction, the court builder to Niyazov. Behind this is the **Majlis** (parliament).

The Palace of Turkmenbashi is relatively restrained, but just walking towards the gates will cause soldiers to harass you, even though information about its construction is written in English, presumably for visitors to read.

Also in the vicinity is the **Museum of Fine Arts** (☎ 35 31 29; Alishera Navoi köçesi 88; admission US\$10; ☎ 9am-5pm Wed-Mon), located in a beautiful new building with a big rotunda, two tiers and lots of gold ornament. The collection contains some great Soviet-Turkmen artwork: happy peasant scenes with a backdrop of yurts and smoke-belching factories. There is also a collection of Russian and Western European paintings, including one by Caravaggio, and a fine selection of Turkmen jewellery and traditional costumes.

Next to the Arch of Neutrality is the **Earthquake Memorial**, a bombastic bronze rendering of a bull and child (the baby Niyazov), under which lurks the **Earthquake Museum** (admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm). This is perhaps Ashgabat's most touching museum and the display includes once-banned photos of pre-1948 earthquakes as well as information about the five-year clean-up effort, the burying of 110,000 bodies and the building of a new city. Unfortunately the museum is usually locked (asking a guard nearby might get you inside).

Further down this long, manicured strip is the **Soviet war memorial**, a pleasingly subtle structure with an eternal flame at its centre. Off to the right is the **Presidential Administration** building, once the presidential residence and the Turkmen Communist Party Central Committee building in more austere times, and most recently the nerve centre of Turkmenbashi's private staff. The strip ends with **Ashgabat State University**.

The **statue of Lenin**, off Azadi köçesi, is a charmingly incongruous assembly of a tiny Lenin on an enormous and very Central Asian plinth. Right around the corner is the brand-new Magtymguly Theatre. Across the road, Lenin faces an austere concrete building that was once the **Archive of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan**. Its walls feature modernist concrete sculptures made by Ernst Neizvestny, the Russian artist who lived and worked in Ashgabat during the 1970s.

The **Carpet Museum** (Görogly köçesi 5; adult/student & child US\$2/1; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) is an excellent museum for anyone interested in the history of Turkmen carpet weaving. The 'expert commission' at the back of this new and well-curated space is the place to have your carpets valued and taxed, and the necessary documentation issued for export. While there's a limit to the number of rugs the average visitor can stand, the central exhibit, the world's largest hand-woven rug, really is something to see. Shutterbugs may want to restrain themselves as the camera fee is US\$2 per shot.

### East of Downtown

More a statement of foreign-policy leanings than a sign of religious awakening, the **Azadi mosque** stands just south of Magtymguly şayoli, 600m east of the junction with Turkmenbashi. Similar in appearance to the Blue Mosque in İstanbul, the mosque sees few worshippers because of several accidental deaths during its construction.

The modern **mosque of Khezrety Omar**, off Atamurat Niyazov köçesi, is also worth visiting for its wonderfully garish painted ceilings. The angular, futuristic **Iranian mosque**, illuminated with green neon, is on Görogly köçesi on the western outskirts of the city on the way to Nissa.

The **Ashgabat Zoo** (2011 köçesi; admission US\$0.20; ☎ 8am-7.30pm) is a curious diversion if you happen to be walking nearby, although animal-lovers may be appalled at the tiny living quarters set aside for the animals. The resident lion and bear in particular look severely downtrodden. At the time of writing, a new zoo was being planned, in which case this one will likely close.

Further west, the most famous graduate of **School No 20** was Saparmurat Niyazov, who attended classes here as a boy. There is a small museum inside and a classroom containing period desks. To find the school, walk north

on 2060 köçesi, past the Azady World Languages Institute and take the next main left. Outside the school is a statue of the president lecturing a young girl.

### Berzengi

South of Moskovsky şayoli the surreal world of Berzengi begins – an entirely artificial brave new world of white-marble tower blocks, fountains, parks and general emptiness that culminates in the Berzengi Hwy (Archabil şayoli), which is home to a huge number of hotel complexes.

Altyn Asyr Shopping Centre, the curious pyramidal shopping centre at the northern end of **Independence Park** is reputedly the biggest fountain in the world. Inside it's rather less than impressive – an all but empty two-floor shopping centre, although there's a restaurant at the top (Minara, see p413), that's popular for weddings.

The **Monument to the Independence of Turkmenistan**, known universally to the foreign community as 'the plunger' (for reasons obvious as soon as you see it), is a typically ostentatious and tasteless monument that houses the **Museum of Turkmen Values** (☎ 45 1954; admission US\$10, camera US\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm), a rather empty and overpriced look at traditional Turkmen clothing and jewellery. This is a popular spot for wedding groups to take photographs with a golden statue of the president, and the fountains are pleasant enough (a kind of totalitarian *Waterworld*, if you will).

Looking like a lost palace in the desert, the **National Museum** (☎ 48 90 20; Archabil şayoli 30; admission US\$10; ☎ 10am-5pm) occupies a striking position in front of the Kopet Dag. The lavish Ancient History Hall includes Neolithic tools from western Turkmenistan and relics from the Bronze Age Margiana civilisation, including beautiful amulets, seals, cups and cult paraphernalia. There is also a model of the walled settlement uncovered at Gonur (see p428). The Antiquity Hall houses amazing rhytons – horn-shaped vessels of intricately carved ivory used for Zoroastrian rituals and official occasions.

Between the National Museum and downtown is **Turkmenbashi World of Fairytales** (Garashyzyk şayoli; admission US\$0.04, each ride US\$0.04; ☎ 9am-6pm). The US\$50 million amusement park was unveiled with great fanfare in 2006, just in time for the nation's 15th anniversary celebrations. The park has 54 attractions, in-

cluding a roller coaster that swoops over a giant map of the Caspian Sea.

### Tolkuchka Bazaar

The sight of withered men haggling for shaggy sheepskin hats, a braying camel suspended in midair by a crane or a sheep being driven away in a sidecar are a few of the oddities you can expect from the Tolkuchka Bazaar, one of Central Asia's most spectacular sights. The enormous market sprawls across acres of desert on the outskirts of Ashgabat, with corals of camels and goats, avenues of red-clothed women squatting before silver jewellery, and villages of trucks from which Turkmen hawk everything from pistachios to car parts. Whatever you want, it's sold at Tolkuchka.

Expect to haggle. A *telpek* (sheepskin hat worn by Turkmen males) should go for around US\$10, although the best *telpek* do go for US\$15 or more. A fair price for a *khalat* (the attractive red-and-yellow striped robe worn by Turkmen men) is roughly US\$15, while sequined skullcaps and embroidered scarves cost between US\$2 and US\$3.

Above all, Tolkuchka is the place for carpets. Predominantly deep red, most are the size of a double bed or a bit smaller, and the average price ranges from US\$150 to US\$250. Haggling might shave off US\$50. Remember that you'll still need to get an export certificate for the carpet before taking it out of the country (see p435), these are available at the 'expert commission' behind the Carpet Museum (opposite).

Tolkuchka is in full swing every Saturday and Sunday from around 8am to 2pm and, on a slightly smaller scale, on Thursday morning. Watch out for pickpockets. The site is about 8km north Ashgabat, past the airport and just beyond the Karakum Canal. A taxi should cost around US\$1.50. Buses go there from the corner of Magtymguly şayoli and 1958 köçesi (1958 is a block east of Turkmenbashi şayoli).

### Turkmenbashi Cableway

For some spectacular views of Ashgabat and the surrounding desert, take a ride up the **Turkmenbashi Cableway** (admission 1000M; ☎ 9am-10pm). The US\$20 million cable car system, opened in 2006, starts from the base of the Kopet Dag (south of the National Museum) and climbs to a height of 1293m above sea level on a lower peak of the Kopet Dag. The

upper terminal has souvenir shops, a restaurant, café, picnic spots, several high-powered telescopes for sightseeing and an 80m-high artificial waterfall. It takes 10 minutes to travel the 3.5km-long cableway.

### ACTIVITIES

Akhal-Teke horses are Turkmenistan's pride and joy, and many visitors come to Turkmenistan specifically to ride one. Highly recommended is the Alaja Farm, run by Katya Kolestnikova and located in Geok-Dere (also called Chuli). This is a professional stable, where the horses are well cared for and well fed (not always the case elsewhere). Riding here costs US\$15 an hour or US\$120 per day, worth the price for the beautiful golden stallions and some wonderful riding in the canyons around Geok-Dere. Contact Katya (☎ 800-66330362), or call her colleague Gulya Yangbaeva (☎ 42 63 58, 800-66340198), otherwise you can just turn up as the farm operates seven days a week. Take the Geok-Depe road out of Ashgabat and turn left at the sign for Geok-Dere. Continue through the village and Alaja is at the end on the right.

Another option for horse trips is the Shahmenguly stable operated by Hemra Gulmedov. You can do rides of a few hours or overnight pack trips into the desert. The stable is located 2km west of Geok-Depe village, which is northwest of Geok-Depe town. Hemra can be contacted through the travel agents in Ashgabat (see p408).

The only ice-skating rink in the country, **Milli Olimpiya Sport Ice Rink** (☎ 48 92 70; Berzengi; admission US\$0.25; ☎ 9am-7pm) is hugely popular with locals so if you want to skate there you may need to call and make a reservation. It's on the Berzengi Hwy, a couple of hundred metres north of the Independence monument.

**Bowling** and **billiards** are both available on the 3rd floor of the Yimpaş department store (p415).

**Atlant** (☎ 36 26 16; per day US\$2; ☎ 9am-10.30pm) is a modern gym located on the eastern side of the Kopet Dag stadium. Swimmers may want to check out the **Olympia Sport Water Palace**, a brand-new pool facility, located on Garashyzyk şayoli, opposite the puppet theatre.

### SLEEPING

Ashgabat has a range of affordable accommodation options, although it's thin in the midrange category. Niyazov's bizarre

obsession with building hotels has left an enormous number of largely deserted and perfectly comfortable hotels in the suburb of Berzengi. Most tour companies suggest that their clients stay in these, although we've found them depressingly isolated.

## Budget

**Amanov Homestay** (☎ 39 36 72; 2028 köçesi 106; dm US\$5) This eccentric homestay is located in a quiet neighbourhood a short taxi ride from downtown. The rooms are functional and clean, with constant hot water and decent shared toilets. The family also keeps pigeons. Not an option for people with tourist visas (see p435) as this is an unofficial hotel, but great for people who are transiting. Taxi drivers still know this street as Shaumyana. Ask for Murat when you arrive.

**Hotel Dayhan** (☎ 35 73 44, 35 73 72; Azadi köçesi 69; dm/s/d US\$10/20/30; 🚻) Among the budget hotels, this one has the best location, smack in the middle of downtown. Yet its quality leaves plenty to be desired as the rooms are pretty dingy and the bathrooms decrepit. It's also a busy place so a solo traveller might have to pay for all the beds in the room during high season.

**Bezirgen Hotel** (☎ 34 06 44; Mopra köçesi 45; s/d/lux US\$10/20/30; 🚻) This small hotel doesn't get much attention, but the rooms are surprisingly good value, especially for the solo traveller. The very large *lux* room has a sofa, TV and separate bedroom. The single room is likewise comfortable and well appointed. If you need to pass the time there is a billiards hall in the basement. It's located near the Azady World Languages Institute.

**Hotel Syyahat** (☎ 34 45 08, 34 42 20; Görogly köçesi 60a; s/d/tr US\$15/30/33; 🚻) Making a decent first impression, this hotel is on a leafy section of Görogly and sports a comfortable lobby with an enormous bronze profile of Turkmenbashi. Rooms come in varying states of decay and each seems to have its own wallpaper pattern. The bathrooms are not a highlight. For an extra US\$5 you get a half-*lux* room that comes with TV. Hotel amenities include a bar and sauna. Breakfast is included in the rates. It's located a short taxi ride from downtown, or take trolleybus 6.

**Hotel Ashgabat** (☎ 35 74 05; Magtymguly şayoli 74; s/d US\$20/30; 🚻) Ashgabat's old Soviet standby recently gave its lobby a marble makeover, but the renovations have thus far failed to reach

the guest rooms. Rooms are small and run-down, and the bathrooms lack sinks, but it's a decent choice because of the nice location, walking distance from most sights. For an extra US\$5 per person, you can upgrade to a half-*lux* room with a TV, improved bathroom and a better view facing Magtymguly.

## Midrange

### CENTRAL ASHGABAT

**Hotel Turkmenistan** (☎ 35 05 44, 35 09 60; Bitrap Turkmenistan şayoli 19; s/d/ste US\$40/50/60; 🚻 🚿) A little overpriced, but has an excellent location near the Arch of Neutrality. The rooms are unexciting and a little cramped, but the newly renovated bathrooms are good and the place is clean. Amenities include a Turkish bath in the basement.

### BERZENGI

This surreal, totally deserted strip of hotels nestles beneath the attractive Kopet Dag, a 10-minute drive from the city centre. The hotels are all government-run guesthouses and most are enormous, despite never having more than 20 rooms and looking more like private villas than hotels. There are some good bargains here if you don't mind the desolate location.

**Hotel Aziya** (☎ 48 01 80; Archabil şayoli 31; s/d US\$25/30 🚻) Besides the mysterious dark blotches on the carpet, the rooms here seem OK. It attracts an interesting cast of characters in the evening but maybe they are just here for the food – there is an excellent Chinese restaurant downstairs. Breakfast is included.

**Hotel Ahal** (☎ 48 87 37; Archabil şayoli 35; s/d incl breakfast US\$40/50; 🚻 🚿) Designed like a Timurid palace, the Ahal sports attractive, bright rooms and hardwood floors. It has a restaurant and an indoor pool, but no bar. Breakfast is included

**Hotel Independent** (☎ 48 87 00; Archabil şayoli 33; s/d US\$40/45; 🚻 🚿) This huge hotel features an impressive vaulted ceiling and a spiral staircase at its entrance. Large rooms are en suite with a kitchenette and include breakfast. It's part of the Ahal Group, giving you access to the swimming pool next door and internet facilities at the President Hotel.

## Top End

**Hotel Nissa** (☎ 48 87 00/1/2/3/4; fax 48 81 55; Atabayev köçesi 18; s/d/ste US\$50/60/90; 🚻 🚿) This excellent hotel is one of the best in the city, and it is surprisingly cheap (perhaps as it is controlled

by the president's son), with large, comfortable rooms and extras including an internet centre, breakfast buffet and 24-hour room service. Most travel agents can get discounts of up to 60% on the walk-in price.

**Ak Altyn Hotel** (☎ 36 37 00; akaltyn@online.tm; Magtymguly şayoli 141/1; s/d/ste US\$60/65/120; 🚻 🚿) Occupying a leafy location west of downtown, this 109-room hotel has well-appointed rooms and a fitness centre. The unusual name, which means 'White Gold', is a reference to cotton, and the exterior design is meant to look like a cotton ball. Sheraton had been managing the hotel for a time and has given the place a much needed upgrade. Breakfast is included.

**our pick Grand Turkmen Hotel** (☎ 51 05 55; fax 51 12 51; Görogly köçesi 7; s/d/ste US\$75/80/140; 🚻 🚿) Blessed with an unbeatable location, the Grand Turkmen is a great choice. The standard rooms are a bit cramped and the TV is small, but the rooms are in excellent shape. The suites are divided into a bedroom and cosy living room. It's a lively downtown place, walking distance to many restaurants and shops, and inhouse amenities include a fitness centre and sauna. Before checking in, make sure your room can be properly air-conditioned, as it's not terribly effective in all rooms.

**President Hotel** (☎ 40 00 00; presidenthotel@online.tm; Archabil şayoli 54; s/d/ste US\$110/120/180; 🚻 🚿) This 151-room behemoth is the newest, brashiest hotel in Ashgabat. It has two swimming pools (one indoor, one outdoor), a gym, sauna, gift shop and grand marble hallway. Gaudy rooms come with little niceties like a bathrobe and a safe. The Italian restaurant on the top floor is one of the best in town. While the prices are reasonable (and groups get a 40% discount), its Berzengi location is fairly desolate. Breakfast is included in the rates.

## EATING

Ashgabat is not known for its cuisine and hygiene standards tend to be pretty low so have some GI-meds on hand to counteract the inevitable stomach bug. Still, meals are cheap and you can eat well on US\$2 to US\$3. Restaurants are mainly open for lunch and dinner. All shut at about 11pm, so it's best to get to a restaurant by 10pm at the latest.

## Restaurants

**Altyn Jam** (☎ 39 68 50; Magtymguly şayoli 101; 🕒 11am-11pm) Known as AJs to the foreign community, the 'Golden Bowl' is a pleasant place for lunch

and has tasty and reliable European food. Deserts are especially good here, and it will deliver pizza to your hotel room.

**Erzurum** (☎ 27 53 71; Shevchenko köçesi 53; US\$150-3; 🕒 10am-10.30pm) Smart and simple, the Erzurum serves up tasty Turkish fare including *pide* (Turkish pizza), and tasty cheese bread. The service is attentive and swift, although it can get very hot in the summer months due to the wood-fired oven.

**Minara Restaurant** (☎ 47 22 86; Altyn Asyr Shopping Centre, Independence Park; dishes US\$2-4; 🕒 10am-11pm) This classy restaurant is located on the 5th floor of the enormous waterfall-mall in Independence Park. The views are great and the menu is varied, if not a little amusing – dishes include 'squirrel salad,' and 'English-style small cakes with brains'. The carp stewed in beer is recommended.

**Dip Club** (☎ 33 05 11; Görogly köçesi 117; dishes US\$3-4; 🕒 11am-4pm & 6-11pm) Lebanese restaurant serving up tasty Middle Eastern favourites like hummus, *dolma* (vegetables stuffed in grape leaves), *moutabal* (grilled eggplant) and chicken *shawarma* (chicken cut from a spit and served in a pita). The atmosphere is a bit bland, but it does play Arabic music and has live music on weekends.

**Ay Peri** (☎ 39 50 69; Magtymguly şayoli 112; dishes US\$3-5; 🕒 10am-11pm) This authentic Chinese joint specialises in spicy Sichuan dishes. The red lanterns add to the Asian décor, while the menu offers a few delicacies, including 'penis of maral Chinese vodka,' considered a health product. Whatever the health benefits, travellers should resist eating dishes that include endangered species such as the maral deer.

**Italian Restaurant** (☎ 22 11 35; Hotel Nissa, Atabayev köçesi 18; dishes US\$6-7; 🕒 11am-11pm) Enjoys the reputation of being one of the best eateries in the city. The Parmesan is fresh, pepper is served from suitably enormous mills and there's a decent selection of Italian wine.

**Sim Sim** (☎ 45 33 43; Andaliba köçesi 50/1; 🕒 10am-11pm) Hidden among apartment blocks, Sim Sim serves an array of dishes you probably won't find anywhere else in the city, including shrimp shashlyk (US\$7) and frogs legs in white wine (US\$15). It attracts a young, hip crowd who eat and drink on the lively balcony and in the main dining room. To find this place take a taxi.

**our pick Ayna** (☎ 39 10 56; Kemine köçesi 156a; dishes US\$8-15; 🕒 11am-11pm Mon-Sat, 5-11pm Sun) A seafood restaurant is no easy feat to pull off in Central



Asia, but this place manages by flying all its ingredients in from Moscow and Dubai. The tasteful interior is appropriately decorated with model ships and the service is friendly. Starters include an excellent seafood soup (US\$5) and the tsar's salad (US\$5), which includes red caviar, potato and sour cream. Baked scallops (US\$15) and a pricey lobster (US\$45) are among the mains.

### Quick Eats

**Şazada** (☎ 39 57 64; Turkmenistan Söwda Merkazi, Magtymguly şayoli; ☎ 8am-11pm) A bizarre tribute to kitsch Americana, you'll find posters of Frank Sinatra, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis, rusting license plates and car fenders poking out from the walls. The food is a fairly lamentable attempt at hot dogs, burgers, sandwiches and pizza, but it's still a fun place for a drink or to see how young Ashgabatans spend their leisure time.

**Sai Baba** (☎ 39 57 64; Magtymguly şayoli 113; cake US\$0.80; ☎ 8am-11pm) Dessert-lovers will appreciate this cake, ice-cream and coffee shop.

**Coffee House** (☎ 39 60 06; Turkmenbashi 15A; dishes US\$3; ☎ 9am-11pm) The eclectic menu, excellent service and European-style atmosphere make this one of the more attractive restaurants in the city. As the name indicates, there is a nice selection of coffees imported from Indonesia, Africa and Latin America. Breakfast includes omelettes and pastries while afternoon appetisers might see you sampling the hummus or tabuleh. This place is very popular with Ashgabat's expats.

### DRINKING

There are few dedicated bars in Ashgabat and those that exist cater mainly to expats living in the city. For a cool drink on a hot summer day, check out one of the patio bars located in First Park. If you prefer to buy your own booze, make sure the bottle has a seal and try to spend more than US\$1 (the super cheap stuff could blind you). One last reminder, pouring your own drink is bad form, wait for a friend to fill your cup.

**Iceberg Bar** (☎ 36 18 08; cnr Kemine köçesi & Revfov köçesi; ☎ 10am-11pm) This tranquil beer garden, located behind the circus, serves up frothy pints of microbrewed beer and sizzling sticks of shashlyk.

**British Pub** (Florida; ☎ 39 33 36; Görögly köçesi 8; beer US\$2; ☎ 10am-4am) If it's pub grub, expats and large mugs of imported beer you're after then

step into British Pub, which has been around for quite awhile, albeit under different names and management. The low-lit, dark-wood atmosphere is a bit sombre, but gets going at night with live music and free-flowing alcohol. The menu (dishes US\$3) includes burgers, fish and chips, and steak; the fajitas are recommended. For something more ethnic, expats recommend trying Tandoori, located adjacent the British Pub.

**City Pub** (☎ 35 22 88; Alishera Navoi köçesi 54a; beer US\$2.50; ☎ 9am-11pm) In a worrying trend, City Pub is another real British pub that has found its way to Central Asia. Like a home away from home it contains scarves of every imaginable English football team, and is popular with both locals and expats.

### ENTERTAINMENT Cinemas

There are no cinemas in the city since Niyazov declared motion pictures 'un-Turkmen'. However, there is a **DVD Cinema** (☎ 45 42 66) in the Yimpaş department store. All the films are in Russian, but if you are the only customer you may be able to get them to put on the undubbed English version.

### Live Music

The best place to try for live music is the British Pub (see left), which hosts local rock bands a few nights a week. Fun, yet extremely tourist-oriented 'folk evenings' are organised by most travel agents for around US\$20 per person, including dinner and a full programme of traditional dancing and singing.

### Nightclubs

There are a handful of nightspots operating in Ashgabat – anyone operating beyond 11pm needs a special licence, and so things are limited. Besides the following you could also check out the nightclubs inside the big hotels, such as the Nissa, Grand Turkmen and the Ak Altyn; these are all popular, but as they get lots of foreign businessmen they also attract large numbers of prostitutes.

**Kumush Ay** (Florida; ☎ 39 33 36, 39 33 51; Görögly köçesi 8; ☎ 11pm-4am) The biggest, brashiest nightclub in Ashgabat is this newly renovated venue, located above the British Pub and owned by the same people. The dance room is a flashing inferno of strobe lights and lasers, while a second room contains a huge bar and lots of padded nooks where you can sit and watch

the action. Note that some taxi drivers may know this place by its alternative name, the Florida Nightclub.

**Mukan Club** (☎ 35 18 54; First Park; ☎ 10am-11pm) Lively local bar that attracts an enthusiastic crowd of regulars.

### Sport

Ashgabat is a great place for horse-lovers. Every Sunday from the end of March until May, then again from the end of August until mid-November, the Hippodrome plays host to dramatic Turkmen horse races. It's 5km east of the city centre – either bus 4 down Magtymguly or a US\$0.50 taxi ride.

The local football team is Kopet Dag, which plays at the Kopet Dag stadium. You should have no trouble picking up a ticket on match days.

### Theatre & Concert Halls

Ashgabat offers some excellent venues for watching musical and dramatic productions centred on Turkmen folklore and traditional music. The best place to watch Turkmen drama is at the **Mollanepes Drama Theatre** (☎ 35 74 63; Magtymguly şayoli 79; admission US\$0.25). Performances are held Wednesday to Sunday at 7pm, although in summer (July to October) the theatre will probably be shut. For Turkmen musical performances, visit the **Magtymguly Theatre** (☎ 35 05 64; Shevchenko köçesi; admission US\$0.25), which has shows Friday to Sunday at 7pm. It is also usually shut during the summer months.

While Turkmen productions flourish, the Russian Theatre is dying a slow death. No longer supported by the government, the once-proud **Pushkin Russian Drama Theatre** (☎ 36 41 93; Magtymguly şayoli 142; admission US\$0.25) saw its original theatre demolished and was moved into a smaller facility near Gunesh Park. Performances are held at 7pm on Saturday and Sunday. Ballet and opera are not performed in Ashgabat, thanks to a presidential decree banning both.

### SHOPPING

The biggest and best supermarket in town is the **Yimpaş** (☎ 45 42 66; Turkmenbashi şayoli 54; ☎ 7am-11pm), a huge Turkish shopping complex featuring, among other things, the only escalators in Turkmenistan. Here you can buy everything from frozen lobster to Doritos. If you want to buy inexpensive cotton clothing,

visit the **Altyn Asyr Marketing Centre**, opposite the Grand Turkmen Hotel, which has outlet shops for the textile industry. For carpets, try the government-run **Carpet Shop** (☎ 35 25 50; Görögly köçesi 5), east of the Carpet Museum.

If you are looking to buy some locally produced art, try **Muhammed Art Gallery** (☎ 39 59 31; Görögly köçesi 12a), run by artist Allamurat Muhammedov. The unique collection has Muhammedov's own works set around his studio, plus a museum of ancient artefacts. The gallery is next to City Pub (look for the metal gate with the stained-glass horse design). Muhammedov, who speaks English, has displayed his art in galleries worldwide and welcomes foreign visitors in for tea.

The best shopping experiences are to be had at one of Ashgabat's many markets. While **Tolkuchka Bazaar** (see p411) is possibly the most fabulous in Central Asia, there are others in the town centre. The Russian Bazaar is great for CDs and clothing, while the **Tekke Bazaar** is recommended for foodstuffs, fruit and flowers. Niyazov books, calendars and lapel pins can be bought at the small **Ministry of Culture shop** (Asudaliq köçesi 33).

### GETTING THERE & AWAY Air

For information about flights from outside Central Asia see the Transport in Central Asia chapter (p461). Within Central Asia, Turkmenistan Airlines and Uzbekistan Airways both link Ashgabat and Tashkent (one way US\$140).

Domestic Turkmenistan Airlines flights are heavily subsidised to make the ticket prices amazingly low. Consequently, demand is massive and flights need to be booked in advance as far ahead as possible. Timetables also change regularly but there are approximately five daily flights to Dashogus (US\$11), three daily to Turkmenabat (US\$12), two daily to Mary (US\$11), two daily to Turkmenbashi (US\$12), as well as regular flights to Kerki (Atamurat; US\$10, via Turkmenabat) and three weekly to Balkanabat (US\$11).

### AIRLINE OFFICES

The following airlines fly to/from Turkmenistan (except where stated) and have offices in Ashgabat.

**Aeroflot** (☎ 39 87 92; Turkmenistan Söwda Merkazi; Magtymguly şayoli 73) No flights to Turkmenistan but this office can handle Aeroflot connections.

**Aerosvit Ukrainian Airlines** (☎ 35 01 64; www.aerosvit.com; Turkmenistan Söwda Merkazi, Magtymguly şayoli 73) Has twice weekly flights from Kiev via Baku for US\$340 one way.

**Armavia** (☎ 39 05 48; Turkmenbaşy şayoli 15) Weekly flights to/from Yerevan.

**British Airways** (☎ 51 07 99; www.britishairways.com; Grand Turkmen Hotel, Görogly köçesi 7) British Airways doesn't fly to Ashgabat, but this office is useful as a travel agency.

**Lufthansa** (☎ 33 20 37, 33 20 56; www.lufthansa.com; Main concourse, Saparmurat Turkmenbashi Airport) Three flights per week from Frankfurt via Baku.

**Turkish Airlines** (☎ 39 29 19, 35 66 19; www.turkishairlines.com; Magtymguly şayoli 73) Four flights weekly from İstanbul to Ashgabat.

**Turkmenistan Airlines** (domestic ☎ 35 26 43, international 39 39 00; www.turkmenistanairlines.com; Magtymguly şayoli 82) From Ashgabat to Abu Dhabi, Amritsar, Bangkok, Birmingham, Delhi, Frankfurt, İstanbul, London and Moscow.

**Uzbekistan Airways** (☎ 37 82 03; www.uzairways.com; Main Concourse, Saparmurat Turkmenbashi Airport) Two flights a week connecting Tashkent.

### Bus, Marshrutka & Shared Taxi

Bus stands in Ashgabat are organised by destination, and are also used by shared taxis and marshrutki as much as buses. Fares for private cars fluctuate by demand and the make of the car.

Transport for Mary and Turkmenabat leaves from the hub to the left of the main train station, as you look at it. There are marshrutki to Mary (four hours, US\$3) and Turkmenabat (6½ hours, US\$5).

Transport for Balkanabat and Turkmenbashi leaves from the Old Airport (*stary aeroport*). There are marshrutki and shared taxis to Balkanabat (4¼ hours, both US\$4) and Turkmenbashi (six hours, both US\$6.25). Near the private taxi lot is an official bus station, which runs three buses per day to Mary (4½ hours, US\$1), four to Tejen (2½ hours, US\$0.80), one to Serakhs (four hours, US\$1) and one to Balkanabat (five hours, US\$1.20). These buses depart early in the morning and by 2pm the bus station is locked up.

Transport for Dashogus and Konye-Urgench leaves from the Dashogus Bazaar (also called Azatlyk Bazaar). A marshrutka to Konye-Urgench costs US\$4 (10 to 12 hours), while a seat in a shared taxi is US\$6. Chartering a whole taxi will cost US\$24. Prices to Dashogus are slightly higher: Lvov buses will

take 18 hours for the trip (US\$3.50) including a two-hour stop for lunch on the way. Ikarus buses (15 hours) are faster, while marshrutki (US\$5) make the trip in 12 to 14 hours. A place in a taxi will cost US\$9 and the trip takes 11 to 12 hours.

Short-distance destinations west of Ashgabat (eg Old Nissa) depart from the western side of Tekke Bazaar. A spot in a minibus to Bagyr (for Old Nissa) costs US\$0.20.

### Train

The Ashgabat **train station** (☎ 39 38 04) is at the northern end of Turkmenbashi şayoli, a short taxi ride from downtown. There are two trains per day to Turkmenbashi (11 hours, US\$2), three departures for Mary (8½ hours, US\$1) and Turkmenabat (15 hours, US\$1.50) and one incredibly slow train to Dashogus (24 hours, US\$2). Trains are the slowest way to travel around the country and are not particularly comfortable either. Prices quoted above are for *kupe*/2nd-class.

### GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

The best way to get into central Ashgabat from the airport is to take a taxi. They are both plentiful and cheap, especially if shared. Expect to pay US\$1, but agree before getting in. Drivers are likely to try their luck asking for anything from US\$5 to US\$10 initially.

### Public Transport

Buses are crowded and slow, but dirt cheap and modern. With taxis being so cheap, there's little reason to use buses – unless you happen to be on a bus route and living out of the city centre. Ashgabat has no metro system or trams.

### Taxi

Official taxis are not particularly plentiful, but you can flag down cars with ease almost anywhere. Expect to pay US\$0.15 to US\$0.20 for a short trip within the city, and US\$0.45 for a longer one. If in doubt, agree on a price beforehand, otherwise just hand the money over on arrival with extreme confidence. To order a taxi call ☎ 35 34 06.

### AROUND ASHGABAT Nissa & Around

Founded as the capital of the Parthians in the 3rd century BC, in its prime **Nissa** (admission US\$1; ☎ 8am–6pm) was reinforced with 43

### STAIRCASE TO...?

One of Niyazov's more idiosyncratic projects, the **Walk of Health** is a concrete staircase built into the side of the Kopet Dag mountains. There are two walks – one 8km and one 37km. Once a year the Turkmen ministers and parliament members (along with thousands of other civil servants) head up the mountain in suits and ties. Niyazov used to see them off at the start then travel to the finish by helicopter so as to greet them as they come wheezing to the conclusion of the course. The president oft lamented that his heart was not good enough to do the walk himself, and so it was.

towers that sheltered the royal palace and a couple of temples. It was surrounded by a thriving commercial city. One ruling dynasty replaced another until the 13th century when the Mongols arrived, laid siege to the city and after 15 days razed it to the ground.

The ridges surrounding the plateau were the fortress walls; the steep, modern approach road follows the route of the original entrance. In the northern part of the city are the remains of a large house built around a courtyard, with wine cellars in nearby buildings.

The main complex on the western side includes a large circular chamber thought to have been a Zoroastrian temple. Adjoining it is the partly rebuilt 'tower' building. On the far side of the western wall are the ruins of a medieval town, today the village of Bagyr.

Coming by car from Ashgabat it is possible to take the road past Berzengi along the presidential highway. On the way you'll pass the **Palace of Orphans**, another bizarre Niyazov project with massive futuristic marble buildings, sporting facilities and its own mosque. The children in this village are educated to be government officials.

### Gypjak

The boyhood home of President Niyazov, Gypjak, is 11km west of Ashgabat. The major sight here is the gleaming **Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque**; the biggest structure of its kind in Central Asia, it can hold 10,000 worshippers. Four minarets soar above the gold-domed mosque, each 91m tall, representing the year of Turkmenistan's independence. The inscription over the main arch states '*Ruhnama* is

a holy book; the Koran is Allah's book' and there are quotes from the *Ruhnama* etched into the minarets. Inside, you can contemplate the grandeur and extravagance of it all while sitting on enormous handwoven carpets. Next to the mosque is an elegant **mausoleum** containing the grave of former President Niyazov. Turkmenbashi was buried alongside his two brothers and his mother, the marker for his father is ceremonial.

The mosque and mausoleum are clearly visible from the main Ashgabat–Balkanabat road. Parking shouldn't be a problem – there is an enormous underground car park big enough for 400 vehicles.

### Geok-Depe

Midway on the main road between Ashgabat and Bakharden is the village of **Geok-Depe** (Green Hill), site of the Turkmen's last stand against the Russians. During the Soviet era the uncommemorated site of the breached earthen fortress, where 15,000 Turkmen died, was part of a collective farm. Today the large futuristic **Saparmurat Hajji Mosque**, and its sky-blue domes, stands beside the telltale ridges and burrows. The mosque's name refers to the president's pilgrimage to Mecca, from which he returned with US\$10 billion in aid from the Saudi government. Niyazov's request that all Turkmen visit the mosque once a year is only loosely followed.

### KARAKUM DESERT

The Karakum desert is a sun-scorched expanse of dunes and sparse vegetation in the centre of Turkmenistan. It's Central Asia's hottest desert but manages to support a handful of settlements, including the oasis town of **Jerbent**, 160km north of Ashgabat. A ramshackle collection of homes, battered trucks, yurts and the occasional camel, Jerbent is being slowly consumed by the desert as sands continue to blow off the overgrazed dunes. While it doesn't look like much, the village does offer a glimpse of rural Turkmen life, and you can watch traditional cooking methods and sit down for tea inside a yurt.

If you have time, money and a sense of adventure, a travel agency can organise 4WD trips further into the desert towards ever more remote villages. As this requires much time, extra fuel and possibly a backup vehicle, you'll need to request that your guide lists agreed details of your trip on the itinerary.

Off-road trips usually require at least two vehicles, which costs around US\$200 per day (depending on how many people are travelling, but this price is for groups of three to four people).

Although the village of **Darvaza** was recently demolished on the orders of the president, you'll still see it marked by the road on some maps. Darvaza is the halfway post between the capital and Konye-Urgench. It's also at the heart of the Karakum desert and has the added attraction of the **Darvaza Gas Craters**, one of Turkmenistan's most unusual sights. Apparently the result of Soviet-era gas exploration in the 1950s, the three craters are artificial. One has been set alight and blazes with an incredible strength that's visible from miles away. The other two craters contain bubbling mud and water.

The fire crater is best seen at night, when the blazing inferno can only be compared to the gates of hell. There is a naturally sheltered camping place behind the small hill, just south of the crater. Getting to the crater is a serious off-road ride and drivers frequently get lost or get stuck in the dunes. There is really no-one around to give directions, except perhaps at a kiosk near the railroad tracks. If you intend to walk from the road, just follow the light and bear in mind that it takes a good two hours to reach the crater.

All buses and marshrutki headed from Ashgabat to both Konye-Urgench and Dashogus go through Jerbent. There is irregular transport from Jerbent; it's a matter of asking around the village for a ride, and leaving when the vehicle is full. Let the driver know that you want to get off, although you'll probably have to pay the full price to Ashgabat, Konye-Urgench or Dashogus (p434). The gas crater is about four to five hours from Ashgabat and six to eight hours from Konye-Urgench.

## WESTERN TURKMENISTAN

Rather off-the-beaten path, even by Turkmenistan standards, the western part of the country is one of haunting moonscapes, ruined cities and minority tribes such as the mountain-dwelling Nokhurians. The region is economically crucial to Turkmenistan, being home to vast oil and gas reserves, as

well as the fishing and caviar business centred on the Caspian Sea. Most people simply pass through here on the way to the port of Turkmenbashi, from where it's possible to continue on to Azerbaijan by ferry. But with a slower pace it's possible to see a handful of extraordinary sights, including some of the country's best natural phenomena, the Kopet Dag mountains and Yangykala Canyon, and the historically important Dekhistan (Misrian).

### KÖW ATA UNDERGROUND LAKE

Like entering Milton's underworld, only with changing rooms and a staircase, a visit to the **Kōw Ata Underground Lake** (admission US\$10; ☎ dawn-dusk) is a unique experience. You enter a cave at the base of a mountain and walk down a staircase, 65m underground, which takes you into a wonderfully sulphurous subterranean world. At the bottom awaits a superb lake of clear water naturally heated to about 36°C. Underground swimming is one of Central Asia's more unusual activities, and worth it if you don't mind the steep entry fee.

Follow the main road to Balkanabat from Ashgabat for the best part of an hour; the turn off to the lake is clearly marked to the left with a large sign for Kōw Ata. By marshrutka or bus to Balkanabat or Turkmenbashi you could easily ask the driver to stop at the Kōw Ata turn-off, although it's a good 90-minute walk from the road.

### NOKHUR

Wedge into the mountains just a few kilometres from Iran, this village offers a unique opportunity to hike in the hills and soak up some rural life. Nokhur was once a byword among Soviet Turkmen for everything rural and backwards. Thanks to their isolation, Nokhuris have retained unique traditions and a particular dialect of Turkmen. They claim ancestry from Alexander the Great's army and prefer to marry among themselves rather than introduce new genes to the tribe.

There are two sights in this fascinating village. One is the town's **cemetery**, where each grave is protected by the huge horns of the mountain goats that locals consider sacred – indeed many houses in the village have a goat's skull hanging on a stick outside to ward off evil spirits. You should not enter the cemetery, as it's for locals only, although photo-

graphy is perfectly acceptable. A short walk beyond the cemetery is **Qyz Bibi**, a spiritualist-Muslim shrine, where people from all over the country come on pilgrimage. Qyz Bibi was the pre-Islamic patroness of women and the goddess of fertility. She is believed to dwell in the cave (the entrance of which is just 30cm to 40cm in diameter) at the end of a winding pathway that passes a huge, ancient tree where pilgrims tie colourful material in the hopes of conceiving a child.

There are four impressive waterfalls in the mountains beyond Nokhur, all of which can be visited by hiring a UAZ 4WD in Nokhur (ask your guide to ask around). The routes are fairly arduous, but great fun for day-tripping and taking in the impressive scenery.

For accommodation, it is possible to stay with a local family. The best homestay is with Gaib and Enebai, a local couple who welcome guests to their large mountain house (complete with satellite TV). They charge US\$15 per person per night. Ask anywhere for Kinomekanik Gaib – he was the village's cinema projectionist before he retired.

There is a daily bus from Tekke Bazaar in Ashgabat to Nokhur (US\$1, two hours) at 8am. The bus leaves from Nokhur at 8am the next day.

### PARAU BIBI

The **Mausoleum of Parau Bibi** has been an important place of pilgrimage since ancient times. According to lore, Parau Bibi was a virtuous young woman living in the area. During a time of enemy siege, Parau Bibi prayed that the mountain would open up and swallow her, lest she be carried off by the barbarian tribes. The mountain heard her pleas and accordingly engulfed her in the nick of time.

Locals later honoured her selfless act by creating a fertility shrine on the spot. The small white tomb, built from a cave in the cliffs, contains offerings such as model cribs, indicating the desire of the pilgrim. It is located at the top of a staircase 269 steps high, which you trudge up with other devotees. The mystical surroundings are enhanced by the steppe behind you, stretching endlessly into the distance.

Nearby, on the hillside, you can spot holes in the ground, delineating the underground *karyz* irrigation canals. A century ago there were more than 500 such canals in Turkmenistan, only 10 remain today.

The turn-off for Parau Bibi is 19km west of Serdar, follow the road another 8km to reach Parau Bibi. If it's late it's possible to spend the night under the pilgrim tents, although it does stay busy most of the night, so don't expect to get much sleep.

### BALKANABAT

☎ 222 / pop 110,000

Tucked below a range of imposing mountains and the only sign of civilisation as far as the eye can see, Balkanabat is the logical stopover on the long haul across western Turkmenistan. Oil was discovered in the vicinity in 1874 and a small refinery was built, only to be abandoned for 50 years after being bankrupted by competition from the Baku oil industry.

Originally called Nebit Dag, Balkanabat is a staging point for trips to Dekhistan and Yangykala Canyon. It may be necessary to over-night here between these destinations, bearing in mind that accommodation ranges between wretched and plush with nothing in between.

The main axis is Magtymguly şayoli, running east-west and parallel with the railway. At its midpoint is Niyazov Sq, watched over by a lonely statue of the former president. Note that Balkanabat uses both street names and block numbers (*kvartal*).

**Balkansyyahat** (☎ 45338; kvartal 198) is a travel agency that can organise trips to Dekhistan or Big Balkan Mountain at somewhat inflated prices (a trip to Dekhistan costs around US\$200). The office is located in the Hotel Nebitchi.

### Sights

The **Regional History Museum** (☎ 49126; Gurtgeldi Annayev köçesi; admission US\$1.20; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun) contains an agglomeration of ethnography, archaeology and wildlife exhibits of the Balkan region. Note the display of local carpets, which contains anchor designs – symbols of the Caspian-dwelling Yomut Turkmen. There are also photos of Dekhistan to whet your appetite if you are headed that way. The museum is located opposite the Cultural Palace of Oil Workers.

A couple of blocks north of the museum, the **Balkanabat Carpet Factory** (Azady köçesi; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) gives free tours of its facilities where you can watch young women painstakingly weave giant carpets by hand. There is a small museum featuring products churned out by the factory and a reasonably priced carpet shop.

On the west side of the city, you can take a look at the pretty **Russian Orthodox Church**, which stands just north of the defunct oil rig. Heading west, on the road to Turkmenbashi, is the **Monument to the Desert Explorers**, a handsome concrete statue of caravan men urging forward their obstinate camel in the midst of a fierce sandstorm.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Nebitdag Hotel** (☎ 4 61 92; Kyartel 115; dm US\$1.30) This will appal even the most seasoned backpackers – prison-like rooms have four uncomfortable beds, crumbling walls and broken windows. Shower blocks are dysfunctional and the bathrooms down the hall are filthy. Mangy cats prowl the corridors to add a finishing touch. The only saving grace is the large balcony where you can escape for some fresh air. You have the option of paying for all the beds in a dorm if you want some semblance of privacy.

**Hotel Nebitchi** (☎ 4 53 35/6/7/8/9; Kvartal 198; s/d/ste US\$70/100/150; ☎ ☎ ☎) The yurt-shaped Nebitchi offers surprisingly swank top-end accommodation, rivalling almost anything in Ashgabat. The 38 rooms are spacious and come with satellite TV and double beds. The restaurant in the lobby is perhaps the best in town and the hotel is the only place around with the internet. Note that the pool is only open in summer.

**Victoria** (☎ 4 03 06; Kvartal 197; dishes US\$1.50; ☎ 10am–11pm) With its African masks and vines, Victoria attempts to create a jungle atmosphere, although the menu offers a fairly standard range of quasi-European dishes.

**Ruslan Restaurant** (☎ 4 07 40; Kvartal 200; dishes US\$2; ☎ 11am–11pm) The disco ball and blaring Russian pop indicate this place is more bar than restaurant, and Ruslan has been known to host live music acts. But locals also claim it's the best restaurant in town, with a full European menu of meat, chicken, pork and fish dishes.

### Getting There & Away

The **train station** (☎ 7 09 35) is 1km west and 400m south of Niyazov Sq. There are two trains a day to Turkmenbashi (3½ hours), and two to Ashgabat (seven hours), one of which continues to Turkmenabat and Dashogus. The more convenient train to Turkmenbashi departs at 6.16am while the better train to Ashgabat departs at 7.50pm.

Marshrutkas and shared taxis gather in the lot in front of the train station. These

travel to Ashgabat (US\$2 to US\$3, six hours) throughout the day. A taxi will do the trip for US\$15.

Turkmenistan Airlines flies between Balkanabat and Ashgabat (US\$11) on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. The airport is 2km east of the city. A **booking office** (☎ 3 35 25) is inside the railway station.

### DEKHISTAN

The ruined city of Dekhistan (also known as Misrian) lies deep in the barren wastelands south of Balkanabat, midway between the tumbledown villages of Bugdayly and Madau. The surrounding desolation begs the question: how did a city come to be here in the first place? Yet in the 11th century it was a Silk Road oasis city with a sophisticated irrigation system rivalling Merv and Konye-Urgench. It even managed to revive itself after destruction by the Mongols. It seems that some time in the 15th century the region suffered an ecological catastrophe. The forests of the Kopet Dag to the east had been exploited for centuries until the water supply failed and the well-watered slopes finally became a barren, deeply eroded lunar landscape.

Not much remains on the 200-hectare site, apart from two truncated 20m-high **minarets** from the 11th and 13th centuries, and the decorated remains of a portal that once stood before the Mosque of the Khorezmshah Mohammed. Excavations here have also revealed the remains of several caravanserais that once served the Silk Road traders.

The **cemetery**, 7km north of Dekhistan at Mashat, features five semiruined mausoleums, including the Shir-Kabir Mosque-Mausoleum, the earliest mosque in the country.

Unless you have your own vehicle, Dekhistan is difficult to get to. Public transport is nonexistent, although you should be able to get a taxi from Balkanabat. The round trip should cost US\$50, including waiting time. Balkansyyahat (see p419) runs overpriced tours. In fair weather you can make good time over the flat *taky* (clay) landscape, but after rain in the spring or autumn the *taky* turns to mush, making Dekhistan all but unreachable.

### GOZLI ATA & YANGYKALA CANYON

A respected Sufi teacher in the early 14th century, Gozli Ata had a large following until his untimely death at the hands of Mongol invad-

ers. His **mausoleum** (GPS: N40° 20.051', E054° 29.249'), located in a natural depression of rocky desert, is now a popular place of pilgrimage. Gozli Ata's wife is buried in an adjacent mausoleum and according to custom visitors must first pray at her last resting place. A cemetery has sprung up nearby where gravestones contain a notch in the top where water can collect to 'feed' the soul of the deceased. Gozli Ata is 135km north of Balkanabat; an experienced driver is needed to find it.

From the turnoff to Gozli Ata (marked with a 9km sign), another road continues north to **Yangykala Canyon** (GPS: N40° 27.656', E054° 42.816'). With bands of pink, red and yellow rock searing across the sides of steep canyon walls, Yangykala is a breathtaking sight and one of the most spectacular natural attractions in Turkmenistan. Just as alluring as the beautiful views is its solitary isolation in the desert; few Turkmen are aware of its existence.

The canyons and cliffs slash for 25km towards the Garagogazol basin and lie approximately 165km north of Balkanabat and about 160km east of Turkmenbashi, making it

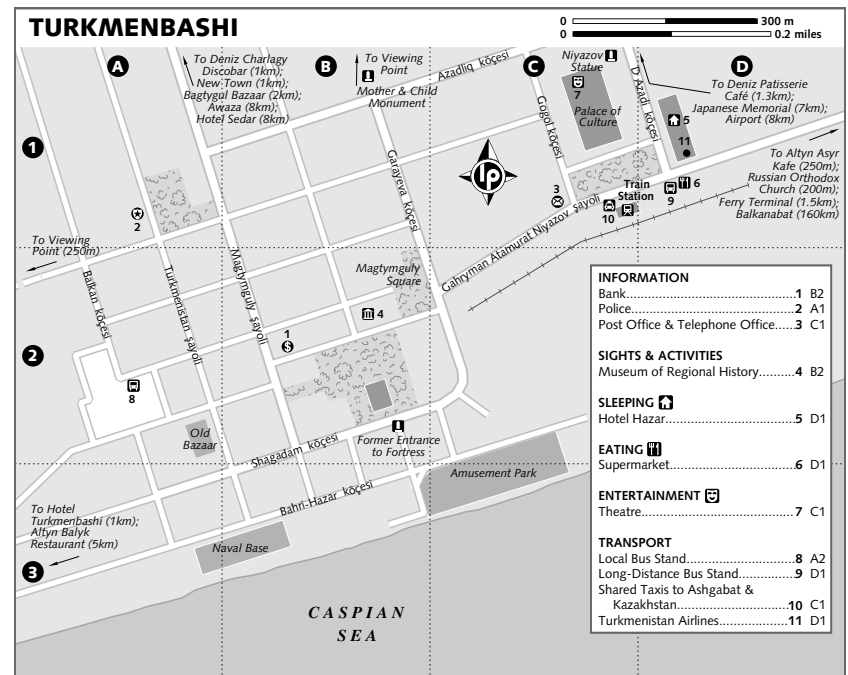
easy to slot the canyon between the two cities. It's possible to camp on the plateau above the canyon, although it can get windy here. While most tour companies run trips here, not all include it on their standard itineraries, make inquiries when planning your trip.

### TURKMENBASHI

☎ 243 / pop 60,000

Turkmenbashi isn't quite the Mazatlan of the Caspian Sea but there is a certain relaxed air about the place, with a few nice beaches and some surprisingly good cafés. There is no reason to come all this way for the city itself, but it makes a useful base if you are catching the Caspian ferry to Baku or heading into Kazakhstan through the backdoor.

The first settlement here, Krasnovodsk, was established when a unit of Russian troops under Prince Alexander Bekovich set ashore in 1717 with the intention of marching on Khiva. They chose this spot because it was close to the place where the Oxus River (now the Amu-Darya) had once drained into the Caspian Sea, and the dry riverbed provided the best road across the desert. But the mission failed,



Bekovich lost his head and the Russians didn't come back for more than 150 years. In the late 1800s, Krasnovodsk grew in importance with the arrival of the Trans-Caspian railroad. Thousands of Japanese POWs were dumped here after WWII and ordered to construct roads and buildings. Since then the town has become somewhat cosmopolitan, with a mix of Russians, Turkmen, Azeris and a handful of Western oil workers.

## Sights

**The Museum of Regional History** (admission US\$0.10, guided tour US\$0.15; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) is located in a quaint old structure west of Magtymguly Sq. The collections include disintegrating taxidermy, some interesting maps, models of the Caspian Sea, traditional Turkmen clothing and a yurt. In the last room a photo exhibition recalls an expedition made in 1936 by a group of fishermen from Krasnovodsk. Travelling in small boats, the fishermen made their way along the Caspian Sea shore and up the Volga river to Moscow, a 4650km journey that was completed in three months. One of their boats has become part of the exhibit.

There's a charming light-blue **Russian Orthodox church** set back from the sea front, a testament to the city's past as a Russian fortress town. All that remains of the fortress itself are the gates – distinct creations with red stars mounted about them – which can be found in the park below the museum.

Japanese travellers often pay their respects to their fallen countrymen at a **Japanese memorial** located near the airport. The monument commemorates the thousands of Japanese POWs who spent years in Krasnovodsk constructing roads and buildings. A Japanese graveyard is nearby.

The beaches near town are a bit rocky and not great for swimming, considering the proximity of the town oil refinery. There are better beaches at Awaza, 8km west of the city. North of Awaza it's a 20-minute drive to some spectacular sand dunes, sea views and an abandoned lighthouse, but you'll need a 4WD and a driver who knows the way.

## Sleeping

**Hotel Hazar** (☎ 2 46 33; Azadi köçesi; s/d US\$28/43) If you like your tap water brown, your furniture threadbare and your bathrooms utterly decrepit, check into the Hotel Hazar. The main

problem here, besides the miserable condition of the place, is that you are only allowed to pay in manat changed at the official state rate (you have to show a certificate from the bank), which makes the rooms terrible value for money.

**Hotel Turkmenbashi** (☎ 2 17 17, 2 13 14, 2 18 18; Bahri-Hazar köçesi; s/d US\$100/120; ☎ ☎ ☎) Four-star-quality rooms with sea views and a range of facilities make this a great choice, especially from October to May when prices fall 50% out of peak season. The 90-room hotel includes a gym, bar, decent restaurant, laundry and the only internet access in the city. It's about 2km west of downtown, on the road to Awaza.

**Hotel Sedar** (☎ 2 15 81, 5 12 25; sedaroteli@online.tm; Awaza; s/d/ste US\$100/120/200; ☎ ☎) With sweeping coastal views, luxurious rooms and total isolation, this is about as close as Turkmenistan gets to a holiday resort. Prices include breakfast and use of the sauna, indoor pool and fitness centre. Prices drop by 50% from October to May. Sedar is located 8km from town, with no eating or shopping facilities apart from what's at the hotel.

## Eating

There is a supermarket next to the train station if you need to stock up for the journey inland or out to sea. Bagtygul Bazaar, also called Cheryomushki, is located on Magtymguly şayoli in the western part of town. You can buy black caviar here for around US\$22 per half kilo.

**Deniz Patisserie Café** (☎ 1 42 54, 2 56 53; Azadi köçesi 54; dishes US\$1-2; ☎ 8am-10pm) Expats living in Turkmenbashi swear by this small, Turkish-run café, 1.5km up the road from the Hotel Hazar. The pleasantly designed eatery has a simple menu of skewered fish, kebabs with yogurt, grilled chicken, pasta and burgers. It also does an excellent Turkish lentil soup.

**Altyn Asyr Kafe** (☎ 2 07 52; Gahryman Atamurat Niyazov şayoli; dishes US\$1-2; ☎ noon-11pm) Russian-style restaurant gone heavy on the drapery, the Altyn Asyr is a popular place for shashlyk and salads. It's about 600m east of the train station, near the Russian church.

**Altyn Balyk Restaurant** (Golden Fish; ☎ 7 74 05; Bahri-Hazar köçesi; dishes US\$1.50-2; ☎ 11am-11pm) A popular local hangout, this place specialises in *dolma* – lamb stuffed in vine leaves, but also does a tasty borsch and a range of pizzas. A billiards hall is located upstairs.

## Entertainment

**Deniz Charlagy Discobar** (☎ 2 56 53; Magtymguly şayoli; ☎ 11pm-4am) The lone nightclub in the city sports an oceanic theme and ship décor. It plays a mix of Russian and US pop. There is plenty of alcohol upstairs and a small restaurant downstairs.

## Getting There & Away

From the Turkmenbashi **ferry terminal** (☎ 2 44 91) there are several unmetabled ferries everyday to Baku in Azerbaijan (see p468).

Turkmenistan Airlines flies to and from Ashgabat (US\$12) twice daily and to Dashogus (US\$11). The **airline office** (☎ 2 54 74) is south of the Hotel Hazar in the same building. The airport is 8km east of the ferry terminal (located at the port).

Shared taxis leave outside the colourful train station on Atamurat Niyazov köçesi for Ashgabat (US\$8 per seat or US\$25 for the whole car, six hours). They also run north along the bad road to Kazakhstan (US\$40 per car, seven hours), crossing the border and stopping at the town of Zhanaozen (Novy Uzen). Marshrutki also leave from here to Ashgabat via Balkanabat; they cost the same as a seat in a shared taxi and are far less comfortable.

An overnight train leaves daily from Turkmenbashi at 4.05pm for Ashgabat (arriving at 7.55am). A *kupe* (2nd-class seat) is US\$1.20. Call ☎ 9 94 62 for information on train services.

## Getting Around

Turkmenbashi's local bus station is just off Balkan köçesi, about 500m west of the museum. From here you can catch infrequent transport to the airport, the seaport and Awaza at prices that are almost negligible. Taxis also hang around here, as well as near the train station, and charge around 3000M for most destinations around town, or 5000M for a ride to Awaza.

# EASTERN TURKMENISTAN

Squeezed between the inhospitable Karakum desert and the rugged Afghan frontier, the fertile plains of eastern Turkmenistan have long been an island of prosperity in Central Asia. The rise of civilisations began in the Bronze

Age, reaching their climax with the wondrous city of Merv. The invading Mongols put paid to centuries of accumulated wealth but even today the region continues to outpace the rest of Turkmenistan, thanks mainly to a thriving cotton business. For visitors keen on history, eastern Turkmenistan offers some of the best sights in the country, including Merv, Gonur and the cave city at Ekedeshik. Nature-lovers may also want to throw Kugitang Nature Reserve into the itinerary, although getting there does take time and effort. The region is at its best in the autumn when harvest festivals add an element of colourful ambience to otherwise dreary Soviet-built cities.

## MARY

☎ 522 / pop 123,000

The capital of the Mary region is a somewhat spartan Soviet confection of administrative buildings and vast gardens disproportionate to the size of the city. Mary (pronounced mah-rih) is also the centre of the major cotton-growing belt, which gives the city an air of prosperity; the markets bustle on weekends and commerce is surprisingly brisk.

Mary's history dates back to the 1820s when the Tekke Turkmens erected a fortress here, preferring the site to ancient Merv, 30km east. In 1884, a battalion of Russian troops, led by one Lieutenant Alikhanov, convinced the Turkmens to hand over control of the fort before things got bloody. Cotton production quickly picked up and the guarantee of continued wealth came in 1968 when huge natural gas reserves were found 20km west of the city.

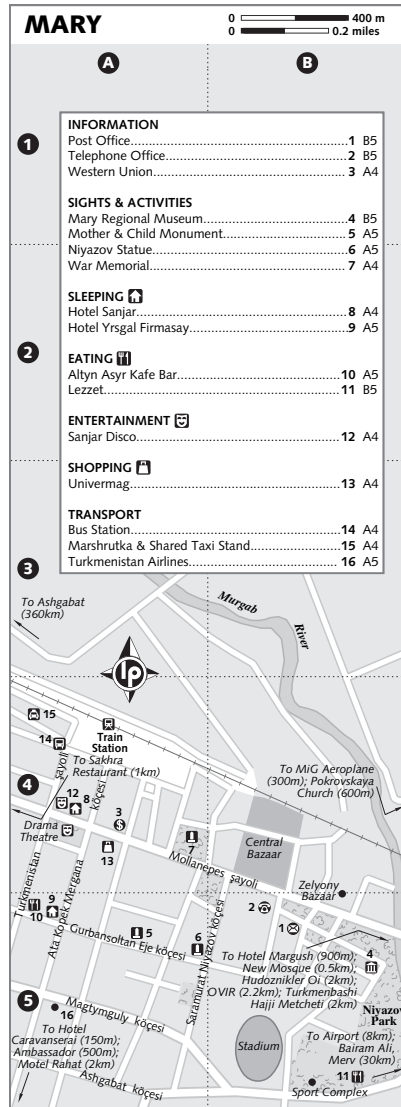
Apart from the excellent regional museum there is nothing to hold the traveller down, although it makes for a handy base to explore the ancient cities of Gonur and Merv. The city has accommodation for all budgets, good transport links and some of the best shashlyk joints in the country.

## Orientation & Information

The town's main thoroughfare is Mollanepes şayoli, where you'll find the seven-storey Hotel Sanjar and the nearby Univermag department store. Further down Mollanepes is the Zelyony (Green) Bazaar and the Murgab River. Crossing the river en route to Merv you'll see the enormous Turkmenbashi Hajji Metcheti mosque. The central post and telegraph office is 1km east of the Sanjar on Mollanepes, while the central telephone office is

50m northwest of the post office. The Hotel Yrsgal Firmasay has public internet access for US\$4 per hour.

**Yevgenia Golubeva** (☎ 3 14 85; evgeniogolubeva@yahoo.com) is an experienced, English-speaking tour guide, who used to be the deputy director of the Mary Museum. She can organise tours to nearby Merv and Gonur.



The **OVIR** (State Service for the Registration of Foreign Citizens; ☎ 4 50 40, 4 41 22; Turkmenbashi köçesi; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) handles registration.

## Sights

The highlight of the city is the **Mary Regional Museum** (admission US\$1, camera US\$5; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), a 100-year-old mansion built by a Russian brick baron. The well-appointed collection hauls together artefacts from Merv and Margush, plus an extensive ethnography section. Room 1 contains a large, poorly proportioned model of Merv. Room 2 features the Bronze Age cities of Gonur and Togolak 21. The skeleton of a Margiana priestess is a replica – a series of deaths and misfortunes among museum staff persuaded them to have the original returned to where it was found. The fine quality and design of household items from Margiana is striking and rivals the collection of the National Museum in Ashgabat.

Other displays include an exhibition of Turkmen carpets from the museum's huge collection; a display of Turkmen household items; everyday, wedding and ceremonial clothing; and a fully decorated yurt. One room contains pottery created during the Mongol occupation; the use of blue evokes the Mongol predilection towards the sky, considered a heavenly being called *tenger*.

The other main sight in Mary is **Pokrovskaya Church**, a handsome red-brick affair built in 1900. The church is surrounded by pleasant parkland and its interior is crammed with religious icons. Walk a few hundred metres west and you'll spot a **MiG aeroplane** on display, a more ominous legacy of Russian occupation. To get to the church and aeroplane, head east on Mollanepes şayoli, cross the bridge over Murgab River, take the first left over railroad tracks, after two streets you'll see the MiG on your right.

In the town centre there are several new **statues** of former President Niyazov; the seated statue on the corner of Saparmurat Niyazov köçesi and Gurbansoltan Eje köçesi bears a striking resemblance to US President Kennedy. Behind the statue is a mosaic of a Turkmen carpet.

You can get your shopping done at the enormous **Central Bazaar** (Mollanepes şayoli). This is great place to stock up on fresh fruit. There are more shops in the Univermag, down the street. If you'd like to meet some local artists

and buy their work, check out the **Hudoznikler Oi** (House of Artists; Turkmenbashi köçesi; ☎ 9am-6pm), a collection of artist studios. It is located 300m northwest of OVIR.

If you're still looking for something to do, you can walk around **Niyazov Park**, which contains some amusement rides, bumper cars and a handful of cafés. The park is a short walk east of the museum.

## Sleeping

**Hotel Rahat** (☎ 6 42 04; Serkhetabat köçesi; s/d US\$20/30; ☎) Despite the slightly out of the way location (2km from the town centre), the Rahat offers surprisingly nice budget digs. The spacious rooms are built around a courtyard of lemon trees and each comes with TV and a reasonably clean bathroom. The motel is built next to a truck stop on the road to the southern border and as such attracts plenty of Iranian truck drivers who can be found most nights in the bar downstairs. Thankfully it doesn't get too loud and the hotel section is safely separated from the bar.

**Hotel Sanjar** (☎ 7 10 76; Mollanepes şayoli 58; s/d US\$25/30; ☎) This Soviet-era Intourist hotel is your standard pile of neglected concrete. The rooms have never been renovated and the bathrooms are simply miserable. The only reason to stay here is the location, smack in the middle of the city, but given that you're unlikely to linger too long the Rahat is a much better choice.

**Hotel Caravanserai** (☎ 3 93 50, 3 34 60; Nisimi köçesi 25; s/d/tr US\$25/40/52) Pleasant and charming homestay with a local Turkmen family. The facilities are shared, but clean and have hot water, and there's a lovely garden.

**Hotel Yrsgal Firmasay** (☎ 7 21 27, 7 21 31; Ata Kopek Mergana köçesi 2; s/d US\$40/50; ☎) Occupying a great location in the city centre, this midrange option has small but tidy rooms that include TV and a decent bathroom. The friendly, English-speaking staff is a bonus.

**Hotel Margush** (☎ 3 23 28, 3 46 01, 3 49 40; Gowshuthat köçesi 20; s/d/st US\$50/70/150; ☎) Mary's only top-end accommodation is located near the Murgab River, 1km north of the town centre. The 30 rooms are built around a pleasant lobby, each room contains a TV, fridge and small desk. The prices do not include breakfast, which is an option for an additional US\$4.50. Other facilities, such as the sauna (US\$1.50), fitness centre (US\$1.20) and swimming pool (US\$2), are also extra.

## Eating & Drinking

**Allyn Asyr Kafe Bar** (cnr Turkmenistan şayoli & Gurbansoltan Eje köçesi; ☎ noon-11pm) Locals will tell you that this place serves the best shashlyk in the country; a debatable claim indeed but the grilled meats are admittedly tasty. The patio is a nice place to enjoy your meal.

**Lezzet** (☎ 3 57 67; Ashgabat köçesi; ☎ 9am-9pm) Adding a little variety to the local restaurant scene, Lezzet serves up tasty pizzas and Turkish meals, including doner kebabs topped with yogurt.

**Sakhra Restaurant** (☎ 5 61 77; Magtymguly köçesi 40; ☎ 11am-11pm) This appears to be a vodka shop when you enter, but has two dining rooms which serve good Turkmen and Russian dishes. Service is a little fussy if you sit in the formal dining room (the bar dining room around the back is much nicer).

## Entertainment

**Ambassador** (☎ 5 61 77; Podedby köçesi; admission US\$1; ☎ noon-3.30am) The flashiest bar in town has a small dance floor and even a bouncer at the door. It also seems to be the only strip club in the country, although the dance acts are infrequent and late at night (but still pretty racy for Mary).

Another option is the **Sanjar Disco** (Mollanepes şayoli; ☎ 7pm-1am), next to the eponymous hotel. It's extremely dark inside but entry is free.

## Getting There & Away

Mary is 3½ hours by car from Ashgabat and two hours from Turkmenabat. Marshrutki also run this route (US\$3, four hours and US\$2, 2½ hours respectively). There are a couple of bus departures to both cities, but these leave early in the morning. There are also one or two morning buses to Serkhetabat, on the Afghan border (p441). The rest of the day you can use shared taxis and marshrutki, which leave from a lot next to the bus station.

Mary's revamped **train station** (☎ 9 22 45) has night trains to Ashgabat (*kupe*, US\$1.50, eight hours). There's one night train to Turkmenabat (*kupe*, seven hours, US\$1.50) and one that runs the whole way to Dashogus (*kupe*, US\$2, 24 hours). There is no left-luggage facility, but the station does have an international phone office.

**Turkmenistan Airlines** (☎ 3 27 77; Magtymguly köçesi 11) has at least two flights per day to Ashgabat (US\$11). If time is short, you could even take the morning flight, visit Merv and return on

the same day to Ashgabat. The airport is 8km east of the city, on the road to Merv.

## MERV

In its heyday it was known as Marv-i-shah-jahan, 'Merv – Queen of the World', and it stood alongside Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo as one of the great centres of Islam. A major centre of religious study and a lynchpin on the Silk Road, its importance to the commerce and sophistication of Central Asia cannot be underestimated. Today, almost nothing of the metropolis remains.

Before the sons of Jenghiz Khan laid waste to the great city and slaughtered its population, Merv had been a melting pot of religious faiths and ethnic groups. Its buildings of fired brick towered over the green oasis, and included palaces, mosques, caravanserais and thousands of private homes.

The scattered ruins left today include fortified walls, brick foundations and gazillions of shards of pottery. It became a Unesco World Heritage site in 1999 and is deservedly considered the most impressive historical site in the country. Merv can easily be visited on a

day trip from Mary but it's essential to have your own transport, and preferably a guide to make sense of it all.

## History

Merv was known as Margiana or Margush in Alexander the Great's time. Under the Persian Sassanians, it was considered religiously liberal, with significant populations of Christians, Buddhists and Zoroastrians cohabiting peacefully. As a centre of power, culture and civilisation, Merv reached its greatest heights during the peak of the Silk Route in the 11th and 12th centuries, when the Seljuq Turks made it their capital. Legendary Merv may even have been the inspiration for the tales of Scheherazade's *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Merv suffered a number of attacks over the course of its history, but instead of being rebuilt on top of the older ruins, Merv slowly spread west. In total, five cities were constructed next to each other, largely because of the shifting rivers. The oldest section was the Erk Kala and in later centuries most people lived in the vast walled city called Sultan Kala.

All of this was completely eradicated in 1221 under the onslaught of the Mongols. In 1218 Jenghiz Khan demanded a substantial tithe of grain from Merv, along with the pick of the city's most beautiful young women. The unwise Seljuq response was to slay the tax collectors. In retribution Tolui, the most brutal of Jenghiz Khan's sons, arrived three years later at the head of an army, accepted the peaceful surrender of the terrified citizens, and then proceeded to butcher every last one of the city's inhabitants, an estimated 300,000 people.

Merv made a small comeback in the 15th century and was soon at the centre of a territorial dispute between the rulers of Bukhara, Khiva and Persia. Persian influence eventually won out when a noble named Bairam Ali rebuilt the dam, which allowed the irrigated region to prosper and encouraged free trade. The Emir of Bukhara struck back with military force, captured the city, and utterly destroyed it in 1795.

Russia annexed Merv in 1884 and the Turkmen settlement became known as Bairam Ali. Russians monitored events from Mary, their newly built town 30km to the west.

## Sights

Coming from Mary you pass through the town of Bairam Ali, and turn left on a road heading north from the Central Bazaar. After 4km a sign points right towards the Merv complex. On the road towards ancient Merv is a small ticket office for the **Merv complex** (admission US\$0.80, camera US\$1.20, video US\$2; ☒ 7am–dusk) and the **Margush Archaeological Museum** (admission free; ☒ 7am–dusk) which houses a tiny collection of artefacts and old photos.

### MOHAMMED IBN ZEID

From the ticket office, continue east and take your first left (north) to an early-Islamic monument, the 12th-century **Mausoleum of Mohammed ibn Zeid**. The small, unostentatious earthen-brick building, which was heavily restored early in the 20th century, benefits greatly from an attractive setting in a hollow that is ringed by spindly saxaul trees. Like the other Sufi shrines (Gozli-Ata and Kubra), this shrine is also an important site for Sufi pilgrims.

There's confusion as to who's actually buried under the black marble cenotaph in the centre of the cool, dark shrine. It's definitely not Ibn Zeid, a prominent Shiite teacher who

died four centuries before this tomb was built and is known to be buried elsewhere.

### EARLIEST REMAINS

The oldest of the five Merv cities is **Erk Kala**, an Achaemenid city thought to date from the 6th century BC. Led by Alexander the Great, the Macedonians conquered it and renamed it Alexandria Margiana. Under Parthian control (250BC to AD226) Zoroastrianism was the state religion but Erk Kala was also home to Nestorian Christians, Jews and Buddhists.

Today Erk Kala is a big earthen doughnut about 600m across. There are deep trenches that have been dug into the ramparts by Soviet archaeologists. The ramparts are 50m high, and offer a bird's-eye view of the surrounding savannah-like landscape. On the ramparts it's easy to see small hills that were once towers.

From this vantage point you can see that Erk Kala forms part of the northern section of another fortress – **Giaur Kala**, constructed during the 3rd century BC by the Sassanians. The fortress walls are still solid, with three gaps where gates once were. The city was built on a Hellenistic grid pattern; near the crossroads in the middle of the site are the ruins of a 7th-century mosque. At the eastern end of the mosque is an 8m-deep water cistern that's been dug into the ground.

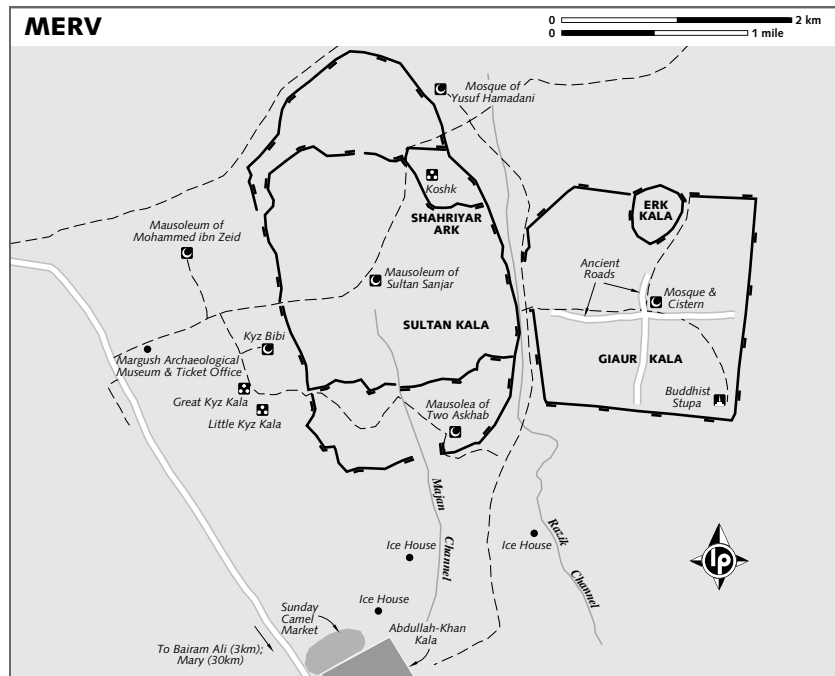
In the southeastern corner of Giaur Kala a distinct mound marks the site of a Buddhist stupa and monastery, which was still functioning in the early Islamic era. The head of a Buddha statue was found here making Merv the furthest western point to which Buddhism spread at its height.

### SULTAN KALA

The best remaining testimony to Seljuq power at Merv is the 38m-high **Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar**, located in what was the centre of Sultan Kala. The building has been recently restored with Turkish aid and rises dramatically in the open plain.

Sanjar, grandson of Alp-Arslan, died in 1157, reputedly of a broken heart when, after escaping from captivity in Khiva, he came home to find that Jenghiz Khan's soldiers had laid waste to his beloved Merv.

The mausoleum is a simple cube with a barrel-mounted dome on top. Originally it had a magnificent turquoise-tiled outer dome, said to be visible from a day's ride away, but that is long gone. Interior decoration is sparse,



though restoration has brought back the blue-and-red frieze in the upper gallery. Inside is Sanjar's simple stone 'tomb', although fearing grave robbers he was actually buried elsewhere in an unknown location! The name of the architect, Mohammed Ibn Aziz of Serakhs, is etched into the upper part of the east wall. According to lore, the sultan had his architect executed to prevent him from designing a building to rival this one.

The **Shahriyar Ark** (or Citadel of Sultan Kala) is one of the more interesting parts of Merv. Still visible are its walls, a well-preserved *koshk* (fort) with corrugated walls, and the odd grazing camel.

North of the Shahriyar Ark, outside the city walls, lies the **Mosque of Yusuf Hamadani**, built around the tomb of a 12th-century dervish. The complex has been largely rebuilt in the last 10 years and turned into an important pilgrimage site; it is not open to non-Muslims.

Archaeologists have been excavating a number of sites around Sultan Kala, revealing the foundations of homes. If you have an experienced guide they should know the location of recent digs.

## KYZ KALA

These two crumbling 7th-century *koshks* outside the walls of Merv are interesting for their 'petrified stockade' walls, as writer Colin Thubron describes them, composed of 'vast clay logs up-ended side by side'. They were constructed by the Sassanians in the 7th century and were still in use by Seljuq sultans, 600 years later, as function rooms. These are some of the most symbolic and important structures in western Merv archaeology and they have no analogies anywhere else.

## MAUSOLEUMS OF TWO ASKHAB

One of the most important pilgrimage sites in Turkmenistan are the mausoleums built for two Islamic *ashkab* (companions of the prophet), Al-Hakim ibn Amr al-Jafari and Buraida ibn al-Huseib al-Islami. The two squat buildings sit in front of reconstructed Timurid *iwans* (*aiwans*, portals) that honour the prophets. In front of the mausoleums is a still-functioning water cistern.

## ICE HOUSES

South of Sultan Kala and Giaur Kala are three ice houses built during the Timurid era. The giant freezers, made from brick and covered

by a conical-shaped roof, were used to keep meat and other foods frozen during the summer. The ice house closest to Giaur Kala is perhaps the best-preserved structure. They now sit in a fairly neglected state, but are worth a quick look.

## Getting There & Away

The only way to see the site without an exhausting walk is by car. From Mary expect to pay US\$7.50 for a car and driver for four hours (the minimum amount of time needed to see the main monuments). Buses go between Mary and Bairam Ali every half hour or so; the journey takes about 45 minutes. Guided tours are available from any travel agency and this is the way most people see Merv. Yevgenia Golubeva in Mary (see p423) includes Merv on her tour of the area.

## GONUR

Long before Merv raised its first tower, Bronze Age villages were assembling along the Murgab River in what is called the Margiana Oasis. The greatest of these ancient settlements, currently being excavated around **Gonur Depe** (Gonur Hill; admission US\$1, camera US\$1.20), has stunned the archaeological world for its vast area and complex layout.

The discoveries were first made in 1972 by Russian-Greek archaeologist Viktor Sarianidi, who still works at the site, continually uncovering new findings. Sarianidi considers Gonur to be one of the great civilisations of the ancient world and while this claim may be disputed, it certainly is a fascinating site. What is certain, however, is that Gonur is one of the oldest fire-worshipping civilisations, parallel to the Bactrian cultures in neighbouring Afghanistan. The first agricultural settlements appeared in the area around 7000 BC and developed a strong agriculture. It is believed the city was slowly abandoned during the Bronze Age as the Murgab River changed course, depriving the city of water. The current excavations have been dated back to 3000 BC.

Sarianidi believes that Gonur was the birthplace of the first monotheistic religion, Zoroastrianism, being at some point the home of the religion's founder, Zoroaster. The adjacent sites have revealed four fire temples, as well as evidence of a cult based around a drug potion prepared from poppy, hemp and ephedra plants. This potent brew is almost certainly the *haoma* (soma elixir) used by the magi

whom Zoroaster began preaching against in Zoroastrian texts.

The excavations are ongoing and during your visit you may have a chance to speak with the archaeologists and inspect the most-recent findings. There is also significant effort being put into conservation, although the work being done (sealing the ruins with mud bricks) is covering up some of the most photogenic portions of the city. The Royal Palace and necropolis are the most fascinating sites to visit.

## Getting There & Away

Gonur is a two-hour drive from Mary and you'll need at least two hours there. A 4WD is required and the final 20km of road is little more than a rough track in the dirt. You can organise a trip through any travel agency or call Yevgenia Golubeva in Mary (see p423). Expect to pay US\$40 to hire a driver, and a further US\$30 for an indepth guided tour. There is nowhere in the area to buy food or water, so pack a lunch before setting off.

## TAGTABAZAR

The peaceful town of Tagtabazar lies 215km south of Mary on the road to Afghanistan. On the fringe of the former Russian Empire, it was here that the tsar locked horns with British-backed Afghanistan in one of the salvos of the Great Game (see p45). A brief battle near the town (then called Pandjeh) left over 800 Afghans dead and Russia hanging onto victory by a thread. The battle ultimately forced Afghanistan and Russia into negotiations that delineated a border.

If you happen to be passing through Tagtabazar en route to Afghanistan, it's worth stopping to see the extraordinary **Ekedeshik cave complex** (admission US\$2, tour US\$1, camera US\$3; ☎ 9am-5pm), located in the hills north of town. The main cavern is reached through a metal gate where a caretaker sells you a ticket. From here the cave stretches back 32m and includes 44 rooms on two levels. One room, containing a vaulted ceiling and a carved doorway, may have been used by a chief or priest. The curator will show you a staircase to more caverns below, but this section is off-limits.

The caves are sometimes locked, so before you go there inquire about the key-holder at the local governor's office. The caves are 3km north of town and accessible by private car or taxi.

## TURKMENABAT

☎ 422 / pop 203,000

Lying on the banks of the mighty Amu-Darya, between the Karakum desert and the fertile plains of Uzbekistan, Turkmenabat sits at a crossroads of cultures. On its streets you'll hear as much Uzbek as Turkmen and will likely be enjoying Uzbek produce, driven across the border a few kilometres to the north. Having only recently received a name change, most residents still refer to the town as Charjou, a title bequeathed during Russian occupation. Local history is in fact much older – the Silk Road city of Amul prospered here until its destruction by the Mongols in 1221.

Today Turkmenabat is the second-largest city in the country, but retains an anachronistic air with most of its commerce based on cross-border trade. There are few attractions to hold you down, but the city does have a reasonable collection of hotels and restaurants, making a logical stopover on the long journeys to Kugitang Nature Reserve, Mary or Dashogus.

## Sights

The **Lebab Regional Museum** (☎ 6 20 93; Shaidakov köçesi 35; admission US\$0.20; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) is a unique brick structure with a rectangular tower and two brick minarets. It was originally built as a Shia mosque in the early 20th century but was turned into a museum by the Soviets in the 1960s. Downstairs, an ethnography section includes a fully furnished yurt, a diorama of a silversmith workshop and a requisite room of stuffed animals. The 2nd floor is given over to locally produced agricultural products and a *Ruhnama* display.

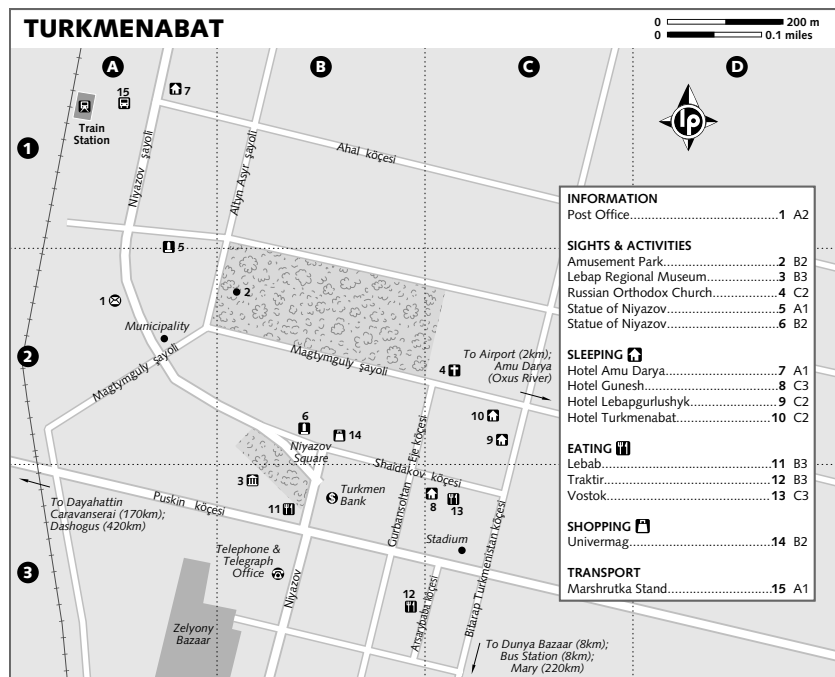
A couple of blocks northeast of the museum is the **Russian Orthodox Church** (Magtymguly sayoli), built to honour St Nicolas Maker of Miracles. Built in the late 19th century, the church is painted canary yellow and decorated on the interior with a rich collection of icons.

Turkmenabat has a couple of bustling bazaars. The most convenient is **Zelyony (Green) Bazaar**, near the telephone office. A better choice if you are looking for carpets is the **Dunya Bazaar**, 8km south of downtown.

## Sleeping

At the time of writing the Hotel Amu Darya, opposite the train station, was undergoing renovation. Once a popular budget hotel, the Amu Darya should emerge solidly in the mid-range category.





**Hotel Gunesh** (☎ 2 13 88; Shaidakov köçesi 36; per person US\$6) Run-down and badly neglected, this downtown hotel has peeling walls and brusque staff. Rooms come with a sink but the communal toilets are down the hall.

**Hotel Lebapgurlushyk** (☎ 444 20, 441 04; Magtymguly şayoly 51A; per person US\$6.50) This unpronounceable hotel is an old Soviet-era place, but friendly and decently looked after. The rooms are large apartments with a living room, a couple of bedrooms, a kitchen and collections of unmatched furniture. The hotel has hot water but the air-con fails to keep the large rooms cool in summer. It is located behind the Hotel Turkmenabat.

**Hotel Turkmenabat** (☎ 6 02 26; Magtymguly şayoly; s/d US\$45/90; 🚽) Although a little overpriced, the Turkmenabat offers the only rooms in town that approach the top-end category. Each of the 45 rooms has high ceilings and comfy beds, but the TV is tiny. There is a pleasant lobby and a bar, but unfortunately no restaurant.

### Eating

**Vostok** (☎ 4 94 18; Shaidakov köçesi 34; dishes US\$1; 🕒 9am-11pm) This basic eatery and bar, next to the Hotel Gunesh, attracts midday barflies

for beer and tasty *samsa*. It also serves pizza, shashlyk and salads.

**Traktir** (☎ 6 14 38; Arsyrybaba köçesi 14; meals US\$2; 🕒 11am-11pm) Although thousands of miles from the sea, the Traktir manages to recreate a maritime theme, with fishing nets, ropes and ship steering wheels tacked to the walls. The vast menu includes plenty of meat dishes; portions are big and the cuts rather fatty. The service is painfully slow but the menu forewarns you by giving the preparation time for each dish.

**Lebab** (☎ 6 35 21; Puşkin köçesi; meals US\$2; 🕒 9am-11pm) Popular local restaurant with bright yellow walls, paintings of Turkmen scenes and a general cheerfulness. The food is mainly Russian, with a wide selection of fish dishes and beers.

### Getting There & Away

There are around four flights a day between Turkmenabat and the capital (US\$12, one hour). The airport is 2km east of the Hotel Turkmenabat. The **train station** (☎ 6 47 19), in the centre of town, has two daily trains to Ashgabat (US\$2.50, 16 hours), Mary (US\$1,

seven hours) and Turkmenbashi (US\$2.50, 23 hours). Outside the station you can catch marshrutki to Mary (US\$2), Ashgabat (US\$4) and other destinations. A ride to the Uzbek border will cost US\$1 per seat, but you may need to bargain hard as starting prices can be much higher. There is another, more formal bus station 9km south of the centre of town, near Dunya Bazaar, but the transportation links from the lot outside the train station are just as good.

### DAYAHATTIN CARAVANSERAI

This Silk Road caravanserai stands on the ancient route between Amul of Khorezm and dates to around the 12th century (give or take a couple hundred years). Although abandoned around 500 years ago, most of the building stands intact, although in a fairly ruinous state. Pick your way through the enormous arched gateway into a central courtyard, surrounded by a vaulted arcade and small cells. Climbing up on the walls you can make out a second earthen wall that surrounded the compound. The caravanserai is around 170km northwest of Turkmenabat. It's located near a checkpoint and your guide will need to get permission to visit the site.

### KUGITANG NATURE RESERVE

Kugitang is the most impressive and pristine of Turkmenistan's nature reserves. Set up in 1986 to protect the Kugitang mountain range and its unique ecosystem, and in particular the rare markhor mountain goat (whose name comes from the Persian meaning 'almost impassable mountains'). Its extent includes the

country's highest peak, Airybaba (3137m), several huge canyons, rich forests, mountain streams, caves and the unique **Dinosaur Plateau** (see the boxed text, below). Close to the plateau, outside the village of Hojapil, is the **Kyrk Gyz (Forty Girl) Cave**. The cave, located in a spectacular canyon, contains an unmarked tomb. On the ceiling of the cave you can see bits of mud from which dangle strips of cloth; according to local tradition, a wish is granted if the pilgrim can fling the mud pie and cloth to the ceiling and make it stick.

Visiting one of the **Karlyuk Caves** is also an incredible experience. The limestone caves are considered the most extensive network of caves in Central Asia. They have been known since ancient times, having been mentioned in Greek texts, but the Soviets were the first to fully explore and exploit the caves; it was during their rule that the onyx was harvested from the caves. The caves are also home to the blind cave loach, a sightless fish.

As the caves have not been readied for the tourist masses, only the Kapkytan Cave is accessible for visitors. Walking deep into the caves with one of the park rangers is both spooky and exciting, with some astonishing stalactites and stalagmites. Some of these natural wonders have been named by locals according to their form, including Medusa, a maiden and others of more phallic nature.

You'll need to organise a trip here through a travel agent who can get you a permit to visit and provide a driver. Accommodation is usually in a homestay with rangers or at a newly built hotel. Expect to pay US\$40 per person per night for full board. It's possible

### TURKMENOSAURUS REX

Looking like someone took a giant stamp of a footprint and pounded it into the ground, the dinosaur footprints of Kugitang Nature Reserve seem almost too perfect to be real. But the tracks are indeed legit, and were left here by ambling dinosaurs some 155 million years ago.

According to local legend, the prints were left by elephants used by the armies of Alexander the Great. Scientists, however, will tell you that the prints were left during the Jurassic period by a species called *Megalosaurus*.

The location of the tracks is a plateau that is presumed to be the bottom of a shallow lake that dried up, leaving the dinosaur prints baking in the sun, after which a volcanic eruption sealed them in lava. There are more than 400 prints visible on a steep incline of limestone, the largest of which has a diameter of 80cm. Around Kugitang, more than 2500 prints have been found.

The giant dinosaurs were apparently joined by smaller dino creatures that left imprints resembling a human foot. In 1995 a Russian newspaper stirred up controversy when it reported that the prints were in fact human. Creationists have since lost no opportunity in taking advantage of the unlikely theory.

to fly from Ashgabat to Gaurdak (Magdanly) via Turkmenabat (US\$13), far preferable than doing the arduous journey across the desert. Otherwise it's a five- to six-hour drive from Turkmenabat.

## NORTHERN TURKMENISTAN

Stalin's *modus operandi* in Central Asia sought the division of its people, thus resulting in the split of the Khorezm oasis – the northern bit with Khiva going to Uzbekistan and the southern portion, with Konye-Urgench, going to Turkmenistan. It remains this way today, with the Amu-Darya river wriggling its way in and out of the Uzbek and Turkmen borders. As part of historic Khorezm, the Turkmen portion still contains a sizable Uzbek minority and retains a culture apart from the rest of the country. Sadly, the region has not escaped the Aral Sea disaster and suffers from air, soil and water pollution. It's also the poorest part of the country, with little commerce apart from the smuggling of subsidised petrol to Uzbekistan. Still, it's worth visiting the area to explore some unique historical sights, especially if you are travelling to or from Uzbekistan.

### KONYE-URGENCH

☎ 347 / pop 15,000

The modern town of Konye-Urgench (from Persian 'Old Urgench') is a rural backwater with empty plazas, wandering livestock and back roads that end in agricultural fields. Yet centuries ago, this was the centre of the Islamic world, not the end of it.

The ancient state of Khorezm, located on a northerly Silk Road branch that leads to the Caspian Sea and Russia, was an important oasis of civilisation in the Central Asian deserts for thousands of years.

Khorezm fell to the all-conquering Seljuq Turks, but rose in the 12th century, under a Seljuq dynasty known as the Khorezmshahs, to shape its own far-reaching empire. With its mosques, medressa, libraries and flourishing bazaars, Gurganj became a centre of the Muslim world, until Khorezmshah Mohammed II moved his capital to Samarkand after capturing that city in 1210.

Jenghiz Khan arrived in 1221, seeking revenge for the murder of his envoys in Otrar

as ordered by Mohammed II. Old Urgench withstood the siege for six months, and even after the Mongols broke through the city walls the residents fought them in the streets. The Mongols, unused to cities, burnt the houses but the residents still fought from the ruins. In the end, the Mongols diverted the waters of the Amu-Darya and flooded the city, drowning its defenders.

The Mongol generals went in pursuit of Mohammed II who eluded them for 1221 until he finally died of exhaustion in 1221 on an island in the Caspian Sea. The tombs of his father, Tekesh, and grandfather, Il-Arslan, survive and are two of Old Urgench's monuments.

In the following period of peace, Khorezm was ruled as part of the Golden Horde, the huge, wealthy, westernmost of the khanates into which Jenghiz Khan's empire was divided after his death. Rebuilt, Urgench was again Khorezm's capital, and grew into what was probably one of Central Asia's most important trading cities – big, beautiful, crowded and with a new generation of monumental buildings.

Then came Timur. Considering Khorezm to be a rival to Samarkand, he comprehensively finished off old Urgench in 1388. The city was partly rebuilt in the 16th century, but it was abandoned when the Amu-Darya changed its course (modern Konye-Urgench dates from the construction of a new canal in the 19th century).

Today, most of Old Urgench lies underground, but there is enough urban tissue to get an idea of its former glories. Its uniqueness was acknowledged in 2005 when Unesco named it a World Heritage site. The modern town is somewhat short on tourist facilities and most travellers overnight in Dashguz.

### Sights

#### NEJAMEDDIN KUBRA MAUSOLEUM & AROUND

The sacred Nejameddin Kubra Mausoleum is the most important of a small cluster of sights near the middle of the town and is the holiest part of Konye-Urgench. The simple **Konye-Urgench Museum** (☎ 2 15 71; admission US\$1; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-4pm Wed-Mon) is housed in the early-20th-century Dash Mosque, just before the main mausoleum complex. It includes some ancient Arabic texts and a few interestingly labelled artefacts from Old Urgench (eg 'blue polished eight-cornered thing'). Note the Christian

symbols carved onto some of the stone pieces. Off the medressa courtyard are several rooms containing ethnographic displays of Turkmen culture, including a pottery workshop and carpet looms.

To one side of the mosque is the **Matkerim-Ishan Mausoleum**, which is also early 20th century.

The path past here leads to the **Nejameddin Kubra Mausoleum** on the left, and the **Sultan Ali Mausoleum** facing it across a shady little courtyard. Nejameddin Kubra (1145–1221) was a famous Khorezm Muslim teacher and poet, who founded the Sufic Kubra order, with followers throughout the Islamic world. His tomb is believed to have healing properties and you may find pilgrims praying here. The building has three domes and a tiled portal that appears on the brink of forward collapse. The tombs inside – one for his body and one for his head (which were kindly separated by the Mongols) are quite extraordinarily colourful with floral-pattern tiles.

### SOUTHERN MONUMENTS

The city's most striking **monuments** (admission US\$1, camera US\$0.70; ☎ 8am-6pm) are dotted like a constellation across an empty expanse straddling the Ashgabat road, 1km south of the main town.

**Turabeg Khanym Complex**, opposite the ticket office, is still the subject of some debate. Locals and some scholars consider this a mausoleum, though no-one is too sure who is buried here. Some archaeologists contend that it was a throne room built in the 12th century (it appears to have a heating system, which would not have been used in a mausoleum). Whatever its function, this is one of Central Asia's most perfect buildings. Its geometric patterns are in effect a giant calendar signifying humanity's insignificance in the march of time. There are 365 sections on the sparkling mosaic underside of the dome, representing the days of the year; 24 pointed arches immediately beneath the dome representing the hours of the day; 12 bigger arches below representing the months the year; and four big windows representing the weeks of the month. The cupola is unique in early Islamic architecture and has its equal only in Shiraz, Iran.

Crossing the road to the side of the minaret, the path through a modern cemetery and the 19th-century **Sayid Ahmed Mausoleum** leads to the **Gutlug Timur Minaret**, built in the 1320s. It's

the only surviving part of Old Urgench's main mosque. Decorated with bands of brick and a few turquoise tiles, at 59m it's one of the highest minarets in Central Asia – though not as tall as it once was, and leaning noticeably. It's interesting to note that there is no entrance to the minaret – it was linked to the adjacent mosque by a bridge 7m above the ground. Since that mosque was destroyed, the only way into the minaret is by ladder. There are 144 steps to the top, although you can't climb it now.

Further along the track is the **Sultan Tekesh Mausoleum**. Tekesh was the 12th-century Khorezmshah who made Khorezm great with conquests as far south as Khorasan (present-day northern Iran and northern Afghanistan). It is believed that he built this mausoleum for himself, along with a big medressa and library (which did not survive) on the same spot. However, some scholars theorise that the building had earlier existed as a Zoroastrian temple. After his death in 1200 he was apparently buried here, although there is no tomb. There are recent excavations of several early Islamic graves near the entrance to the building.

Nearby is the mound of graves called the **Kyrk Molla** (Forty Mullahs Hill), a sacred place where Konye-Urgench's inhabitants held their last stand against the Mongols. Here you'll see young women rolling down the hill in a fertility rite – one of Konye-Urgench's more curious attractions.

Continue along the track to the **Il-Arslan Mausoleum**, Konye-Urgench's oldest standing monument. The conical dome, with a curious zigzag brick pattern, is the first of its kind and was exported to Samarkand by Timur. Il-Arslan, who died in 1172, was Tekesh's father. The building is small but well worth a close look. The conical dome with 12 faces is unique, and the collapsing floral terracotta moulding on the façade is also unusual. Further south lies the base of the **Mamun II Minaret**, which was built in 1011, reduced to a stump by the Mongols, rebuilt in the 14th century and finally toppled by an earthquake in 1895. At last you'll arrive at the so-called **portal of an unknown building**. The structure may have been either the gate to a caravanserai or a palace.

### Sleeping

**Chapayev Guesthouse** (per person US\$2.50) This old farmhouse is basic but friendly and comfortable, and has a kitchen for self-caterers. It's also

a great opportunity to meet a local family and you may be invited to tour the farm. Located on the road between the town and the border post with Uzbekistan, this place is only recommended if you have your own transport. The guesthouse has no phone. It is located 3km north of town, but it has no sign. If you are on a tour your guide should know the location.

**Gürgenç Hotel** (☎ 2 24 65; Dashogus köçesi; bed US\$6) The only hotel in town appears to have been last renovated during the Mongol invasion. The old lady only speaks Turkmen, but seems used to backpackers. There's no running water, the floorboards seem to be growing vegetation and the finishing touch is bathrooms nailed shut. The outside pit toilets are less than luxurious.

### Eating

**BedeV Café** (☎ 2 10 44; Azadi köçesi; dishes US\$3; ☎ 7am-9pm) While absolutely ordinary, this is probably the best place in town to grab a meal. It specialises in *samsa* and fresh *gatik* (yogurt). If you need to stock up on groceries, try the small shop next to this café.

### Getting There & Away

The town's bus station is a disorganised car park, a short distance from the Gürgenç Hotel and a taxi ride from the town centre, where taxis, marshrutki and buses meet and pick up passengers.

Frequent buses and marshrutki go to Ashgabat (US\$4, 10 to 12 hours) and to Dashogus (US\$0.50, two hours). Taxis leave for Ashgabat (seat/whole car US\$6/US\$24) and Dashogus (seat/whole car US\$0.75/US\$3.50) at all times of day.

A taxi to the border with Uzbekistan (20km away) should cost US\$1 and can be picked up anywhere.

### Getting Around

The main sights of Konye-Urgench are spread out so it's best to use a car. There is no public transport as such, but you can flag down a taxi on the main roads or by the market. The trip to the southern monuments and back, with waiting time, is US\$2.

## DASHOGUS

☎ 322 / pop 160,000

A Soviet model-town, Dashogus consists of an enormous boulevard lined with concrete buildings separated by vast acres of empti-

ness. Although there is little to attract the visitor, it does serve as a key transit point for travellers heading to or from Uzbekistan. Its most interesting features include the unusual **dinosaur sculptures** in the town centre and the excellent **Bai Bazaar**, a colourful market where you can buy pretty much anything.

### Sleeping

Given the dire state of accommodation in Konye-Urgench, most travellers prefer to overnight in Dashogus, two hours (94km) away by bus or train.

**Hotel Dashogus** (☎ 5 37 85; Turkmenbashi şayoli 5; s/d US\$8/16; ☎) The requisite Soviet dinosaur still chugs along, accommodating budget travellers in rickety old rooms. The decrepit air is slightly relieved by nice balconies and friendly management. There is a bar and a small restaurant serving tasty bowls of *chuchvara* (*pelmeny* or *borek*, dumplings and broth).

**Hotel Uzboy** (☎ 2 60 15; Turkmenbashi şayoli 19/1; s/d/semi-lux US\$30/50/75; ☎) Dashogus' newest hotel is a vast white-tile construction on the western side of town. Rooms are cramped, the carpets are worn down and beds are placed oddly on the floor. The best part of the place is the welcoming lobby, with its couches, bar and carpet shop. Breakfast is included in the price. If you've got money to burn, take the apartment, which sports a lounge, dining room and private sauna.

**Hotel Diyarbekir** (☎ 5 90 37; Turkmenbashi şayoli; s/d US\$40/80; ☎) This Turkish-owned venture has 40 spacious rooms with TV and balcony. Other amenities include a sauna and restaurant. Despite its recent construction there is already plenty of wear, including dirty carpets, cracked mirrors and peeling walls. It's located opposite 'The Palace Named After Gurbansultan Eje', a cultural centre of sorts on the main drag.

### Eating

**Kafé Marat** (☎ 5 06 00; Turkmenbashi şayoli 15; dishes US\$1; ☎ 10am-11pm) Decorated with faux torches, red curtains and Christmas lights year round, this festive restaurant is a lively downtown institution. The occasional live band adds to the atmosphere. The shashlyk isn't particularly good, but it makes some decent European dishes, pizza, pasta and *chuchvara*.

**Şatugi** (☎ 5 97 42; Al Khorezmi köçesi 6; ☎ 8am-11pm) Yellow curtains and flowery wallpaper abound in this ostentatious restaurant usually

reserved for tour groups and weddings. The borsch and beef steak are good options here, as is the spaghetti. Find it on the edge of a park behind the Hotel Diyarbekir.

### Getting There & Away

The Dashogus airport is 14km south of the city. Flights from Ashgabat to Dashogus (US\$11, five daily) last about 50 minutes, although demand far outstrips supply and you'd be hard-pressed to get a ticket. Turkmenistan Airlines also flies to Turkmenbashi (US\$11, four weekly). You will only be able to board in Ashgabat if you have the required permits to visit the Dashogus region.

The bus station is near the Bai Bazaar, in the north of the city. Buses regularly go from here to Konye-Urgench (US\$0.50, two hours) and Ashgabat (US\$3.50 to US\$5, 12 to 18 hours depending on the type of bus). Buses for Turkmenabat are less regular (US\$3, 10 hours).

The **train station** (☎ 4 68 75) is on Woksals köçesi, about 600m east of Gurbansoltan köçesi. One train per day goes from here to Konye-Urgench (US\$0.50, two hours) and Ashgabat (US\$2.25, 24 hours). The rail line to Ashgabat was built on sand without foundation, forcing trains to crawl at agonisingly slow speeds. There is a rail line to Turkmenabat but a lack of demand has suspended services.

## TURKMENISTAN DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Hotels throughout the country are generally dilapidated, and from the Soviet era, although bigger cities now boast foreign-managed three- and four-star ventures. Turkmen citizens can stay at a hotel at the local rate, which is usually 10 or 20 times lower than the price that foreigners are charged. So while you may have to pay for the lodging of your guide, this shouldn't cost more than a few dollars. Expect to pay for any extra services – breakfast is not usually included in the room rate and you'll be charged to use the gym or the pool.

There are only a handful of homestays and B&Bs in the country; the government has been reluctant to develop this industry and has recently shut down some fledgling

### PRACTICALITIES

- The main daily newspapers are *Turkmenistan* and the Russian-language *Neitralny Turkmenistan* (Neutral Turkmenistan). All papers are designed to glorify the president, as is obvious from the pictures on the front pages. There is no independent or privately owned press.
- The three state TV channels show scenes of Turkmen culture and nature. Satellite TV is widely available.

operations. Note that it's illegal for tourists to sleep in a private home if a licensed hotel exists in the same city; some travellers have gotten in trouble for staying with a family or unlicensed guesthouse. This law does not apply for travellers on a transit visa.

Turkmenistan's wide open spaces make for good camping and there is nothing to stop you from pulling off the road and pitching a tent in the desert. Some of the best places for camping include Yangykala Canyon (p420) and the Darvaza Gas Crater (p418).

### ACTIVITIES

Horse-lovers from around the world flock to Turkmenistan to ride the unique Akhal-Teke thoroughbreds. Many travel agencies offer specialist horse-trekking tours with these beautiful creatures. For more information on riding these horses in Ashgabat, see p411.

Turkmenistan has wonderful potential for walking, although this pastime is still viewed with suspicion by the authorities. However, if you have permission to visit one of the nature reserves, hiking is usually no problem whatsoever. Some of the best places to explore are the Kugitang Nature Reserve (p431) and the mountains around Nokhur (p418).

### CUSTOMS

In Turkmenistan official regulations state that you need permission to export any carpet over 6 sq metres, though trying to export a smaller one without an export licence is also likely to be problematic. In all cases it's best to take your carpet to the Carpet Museum in Ashgabat (p410), where there is a bureau that will value and tax your purchase, and provide an export licence. This can take up to a few days. There are several fees to pay.

One to certify that the carpet is not antique, and this usually costs US\$10 to US\$30, and a second export fee that costs around US\$50 per sq metre. When you buy a carpet at a state shop these fees should be included in the price, but definitely ask before forking over your money. Those in a hurry are best advised to buy from one of the many government shops in Ashgabat, where all carpets come complete with an export licence. Despite being more expensive than purchases made at Tolkuchka Bazaar, this still works out as very good value.

Antiques are difficult to impossible to export. If you are transiting through the country carrying antiques bought in Iran, Uzbekistan or elsewhere, make sure to list those items on your customs form when you enter the country. Anything that looks remotely old, used or scrubby could be considered an antique.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Health-wise it's best to be a cautious eater in Turkmenistan, which means avoiding salads and other cold foods – typhoid is not uncommon. Avoid drinking tap water, which contains traces of metal that can cause long-term health problems. Bring along Imodium for stomach bugs.

The biggest annoyance you'll experience is the officialdom, which mainly manifests itself in roadblocks every 50km to 100km, pointless document checks, army posts and registration each time you enter a new *welayat* (province). These usually take just a few minutes and your guide will probably do all the work. Take care when photographing public buildings, especially in Ashgabat. Local police take this very seriously and you may have your documents checked even if simply strolling near the Presidential Palace with a camera in your hand. There are no 'no photo' signs anywhere, so you'll need to ask the nearest policeman if it's OK to take a picture.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Turkmen Embassies in Central Asia

Turkmenistan has embassies or consulates in Uzbekistan (p262), Tajikistan (p392) and Kazakhstan (p178).

### Turkmen Embassies & Consulates

Note that there is no Turkmen embassy in Baku (Azerbaijan) or Tbilisi (Georgia), but there is one in Yerevan (Armenia).

**Afghanistan** (☎ 020 2300541; House 280, Lane 3, St 13, Wazir Akbar Khan, Kabul); (☎ 040 223534; Welayat St, Herat); (☎ 050 5023; Darwaza-ye, Tashkurgan, Mazar-e Sharif)

**Armenia** (☎ 22 10 19; fax 22 21 72; 19 Kievvana, Yerevan)

**Belgium** (☎ 6481874, 6481929; fax 6481906; 106 Ave Franklin Roosevelt, Brussels)

**China** (☎ 65326975/67; fax 65326976; San Li Tun Diplomatic Office Bldg 1-15-2, 100600, Beijing)

**France** (☎ 0147550536; fax 0147550568; 13 rue Picot, 75016, Paris)

**Germany** (☎ 30 30102451/2; fax 30 30102453; Langobardenalle 14, D-14052, Berlin)

**India** (☎ 6118054; fax 11 6118332; C-17 Malcha Marg Chanakyapuri, New Delhi)

**Iran** (☎ 51 99940, 47660; fax 51 47660; Kucheye Konsulgari 34, Mashhad); (☎ 21 2542178, 2548686; fax 2540432; 39 Pardaran Ave, Golestan-5 St, Tehran)

**Pakistan** (☎ 2278699, 2214913; fax 278799; Nazim-ud-Din Rd, 22-a, F-7/1, Islamabad)

**Russia** (☎ 095 2916591, 2916636; fax 095 2910935; Filipovskiy pereulok 22, 121019, Moscow)

**Turkey** (☎ 312 4416122/3/4; fax 312 4417125; Koza sokak 28, Chanakaya 06700, Ankara); (☎ 212 6620221/2/3; fax 212 6620224; Gazi Evrenos Jadesi Baharistan sokak 13 Eshilkoy, Istanbul)

**UK** (☎ 020 7255 1071; fax 020 7323 9184; 14-17 Wells St, W1 3FP, London)

**Ukraine** (☎ 293449, 2286870; fax 2293034; Pushkin 6, Kiev)

**USA** (☎ 202 588 1500; fax 202 5880697; www.turkmenistanembassy.org; 2207 Massachusetts Ave, NW 20008, Washington DC)

**Uzbekistan** (☎ 71 120 52 78; fax 71 120 52 81; One Katta Mirabat 10, Tashkent)

### Embassies & Consulates in Turkmenistan

All the following legations are in Ashgabat (see Map pp406–7). The British embassy looks after the interests of Commonwealth nationals in Turkmenistan.

**Afghanistan** (☎ 48 07 57; Garahsyzlyk köçesi, Berzengi; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri)

**Armenia** (☎ 35 44 18, 39 55 42; Ingenernaya köçesi 37; ☎ 10am–12.30pm Mon–Fri)

**Azerbaijan** (☎ 36 46 08; fax 36 46 10; www.azembassy.ashg.com; 2062 köçesi 44; ☎ 9am–1pm & 2–6pm Mon–Fri)

**China** (☎ 48 81 05; fax 48 18 13; Kuvvat Hotel, Berzengi; ☎ 3–6pm Tue & Fri)

**France** (☎ 36 35 50, 36 34 68; 3rd fl, Ak Altyn Hotel; ☎ 9am–1pm & 3–5pm Mon–Fri)

**Georgia** (☎ 33 08 28; fax 33 02 48; Azadi köçesi 139a; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri)

**Germany** (☎ 36 35 15/17–20; fax 36 35 22; 1st fl, Ak Altyn Hotel; ☎ 9am–noon Mon–Fri)

**Iran** (☎ 34 14 52; fax 35 05 65; Tehran köçesi 3; ☎ 8.30am–12.30pm Mon–Fri)

**Kazakhstan** (☎ 48 04 69, 48 04 72; fax 48 04 74 Garahsyzlyk şayoli 11, 13, Berzengi; ☎ 9am–noon & 5–6pm Tue, Thu & Fri)

**Kyrgyzstan** (☎ 39 20 64; Görogly köçesi 14; ☎ 10am–noon & 4–6pm Mon–Fri)

**Netherlands** (☎ 34 67 00; fax 34 42 52; Tehran köçesi 17; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri)

**Pakistan** (☎ 48 21 28/9; fax 39 76 40; Garahsyzlyk köçesi 4/1, Berzengi; ☎ 9am–noon Mon–Fri)

**Russia** (☎ 35 39 57, 35 70 41; fax 39 84 66; Turkmenbashi şayoli 11; ☎ 9am–1pm & 3–6pm Mon–Fri)

**Tajikistan** (☎ 48 01 63; embdt@online.tm; Garahsyzlyk köçesi 4/2, Berzengi; ☎ 9am–1pm & 3–5pm Mon–Fri)

**UK** (☎ 36 34 62/3/4; www.britishembassy.gov.uk/turkmenistan; 3rd fl, Ak Altyn Hotel; ☎ 9am–5.30pm Mon–Fri)

**USA** (☎ 35 00 45, 39 87 64; http://turkmenistan.us embassy.gov; 1984 köçesi 9; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri)

**Uzbekistan** (☎ 33 10 62; fax 34 23 37; Görogly köçesi 50A; ☎ 10am–1pm Mon, Wed & Fri)

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality is illegal in Turkmenistan. There are no gay or lesbian bars in Ashgabat, but gay men sometimes meet in the park in front of the Lenin statue. Lesbianism remains an entirely alien concept in Turkmenistan.

## HOLIDAYS

Travel to Turkmenistan is restricted around the Independence Day celebrations, with letters of invitation usually issued only until mid-October and then again from November, and around Niyazov's birthday celebrations in mid-February. Transit travellers are unlikely to be affected by this. Note that most of the following holidays are on Sunday, which won't affect your travel plans much as most services will be closed anyway.

**1 January** New Year

**12 January** Remembrance Day (Battle of Geok-Depe)

**19 February** Flag Day (President's Birthday)

**March (first Sunday)** Dog Day

**11 March** Women's Day

**21 March** Navrus (spring festival); date varies

**April (first Sunday)** Drop of Water is a Grain of Gold Day

**27 April** Horse Day

**9 May** Victory Day

**18 May** Day of Revival & Unity

**19 May** Holiday of Poetry of Magtymguly

**25 May/last Sunday in May** Carpet Day

**21 June** Election of First President

**14 July** Turkmenbashi Holiday

**August (second Sunday)** Melon Holiday

**6 October** Remembrance Day (1948 Earthquake)

**27–28 October** Independence Day

**November (first Saturday)** Health Day

**17 November** Student Youth Day

**November (last Sunday)** Harvest Festival

**30 November** Bread Day

**7 December** Good Neighbourliness Day

**12 December** Neutrality Day

## INTERNET ACCESS

There's only one internet service provider in Turkmenistan: www.online.tm. The internet is almost unknown outside Ashgabat and even there access remains for the privileged few. Bear in mind that out-going emails may be monitored depending on the server you are using. The government also attempts to restrict some websites but there are loopholes (eg www.yahoo.com can be difficult, so try www.yahoo.co.uk and/or other yahoo servers).

## INTERNET RESOURCES

While most commentary on Turkmenistan has some sort of agenda, there are several interesting websites about the place.

**www.chaihana.com** For general information and archived articles.

**www.eurasianet.org/resource/turkmenistan/index.shtml** Another very strong news archive website.

**www.gundogar.org** The opposition website is invaluable for news and politics.

**www.stantours.com** For planning your trip.

**www.turkmenistaninfo.ru** News site with an English-language tab.

**www.turkmenistan.gov.tm** Turkmenistan's government sanctioned news and information page. It pops up in Russian but there is an English link.

**www.turkmens.com** A huge collection of Turkmenistan-related websites about culture, music, politics and history.

## MONEY

The currency in Turkmenistan is the manat (M). It's set at a fixed government exchange rate, but traded for far less on the black market. Notes come in denominations of 10,000, 5000 and 1000, with 1000 and 500 manat coins. The rate of exchange on the black market at the time of research was around 24,000M per US dollar. Check the rate daily however, as it does fluctuate. The following table gives an indication of official exchange rates.

Country	Unit	Manat
Australia	A\$1	4088
Canada	C\$1	4521
China	Y1	664
euro zone	€1	6858
Iran	100 rials	56
Japan	¥1	44
Kazakhstan	1T	42
Kyrgyzstan	1 som	134
New Zealand	NZ\$1	3587
Pakistan	Rs 1	85
Russia	R1	197
UK	UK£1	10,169
USA	US\$1	5200
Uzbekistan	10 sum	41.77

The black market is easy and accessible to foreigners, and the only place you'll get a realistic exchange rate. Official bureaux de change and hotel exchange counters are best avoided, as they will exchange at the official rate, giving you 75% less for your money.

While it may seem a little dodgy to exchange money on the black market, everyone does it without fear of the police, in broad daylight no less. No one exchanges money at the official rate (except to buy airline tickets) so no exchange certificates are ever checked.

- Trade a round amount, for quick mental calculations.
- Fold it up in a pocket, to avoid fumbling in an open purse or wallet.
- Tell them what you have, but don't pull it out; some claim they want to check it for counterfeit, and may substitute smaller notes.

Cash advances on credit cards are only available in Ashgabat (p408) and ATMs are non-existent. Outside Ashgabat emergency money can be wired through Western Union only. Credit cards are accepted by luxury hotels in Ashgabat, but by few other places; you'd be ill-advised to rely on them. Travellers cheques are not accepted anywhere so don't bother bringing any. It's best to bring US dollars in all sorts of denominations. Ones, fives and tens will prove handy when paying for just about anything; they are especially helpful around borders when you may need just a little cash for a taxi or a customs fees.

The only time you'll ever need to show an exchange receipt is for buying plane tickets. If you are not flying don't bother with the

official rate and don't worry about collecting exchange receipts.

Finally, don't change too much money because if you have extra manat at the end of your trip you'll get a poor rate if you try to change back to dollars. Any rate, however, is better than what you'll get once you cross the border – it's hard to get rid of manat in neighbouring countries.

## POST

Like every other form of communication in Turkmenistan, all post is monitored and you can expect your postcards (if you can find any) to be scrutinised by government agents before being allowed through. Sending a postcard anywhere in the world costs US\$0.10 and a 20g letter costs around US\$0.20. A 3kg package costs around US\$3.20.

## REGISTRATION

Anyone entering Turkmenistan on a tourist or business visa must be registered within three working days with State Service for the Registration of Foreign Citizens (aka OVIR) via the local bureau of the state tourism company. The tour company that invited you will undoubtedly organise this. Make sure to bring three passport photos and your entry card. You may also need a letter from your hotel proving that you are staying there. Transit visas do not need to be registered.

## TELEPHONE & FAX

Phone calls from hotels or anywhere else for foreigners are likely to be may be listened in on, so keep conversations discreet. Fax provides one of the most secure means of communication. You can call internationally, nationally and send faxes from most big towns at the telegraph station, often referred to as *glavny telegraf*.

The major mobile phone provider is MTS. Pre-pay SIM cards are available from their offices, although visitors on a tourist visa may have a hard time getting one. Black market SIM cards may be available for US\$100.

## TRAVEL PERMITS

Permits are needed to visit the border regions of Turkmenistan. Given that the centre of the country is largely uninhabited desert and the population lies on the periphery, you need permits for some of the most interesting areas. The cities of Ashgabat, Mary, Merv, Turkm-

nabat and Balkanabat are not restricted, but anywhere outside these areas should be listed on your visa, thus giving you permission to go there. Travellers on transit visas can usually transit the border zones along the relevant main road, if they correspond to the country they are supposed to exit to.

Nature reserves are likewise restricted to the public unless you have a special permit. If you think you might want to visit one, you'll need to put in a request to your travel agent well in advance, see p405.

The following areas are termed 'class one' border zones and entry without documentation is definitely not possible:

**Western Turkmenistan** Bekdash, Turkmenbashi, Hazar, Dekhistan, Yangykala, Gyzyletrek, Garrygala, Nokhur and surrounding villages.

**Northern Turkmenistan** Entire Dashogus region including Konye-Urgench, Dargan-Ata, Gazachak.

**Eastern Turkmenistan** Farab, Atamurat (Kerki) plus adjoining areas, Kugitang Nature Reserve, Tagtabazar, Serkhetabat.

## VISAS

All foreigners require a visa to enter Turkmenistan and transit visas are the only visas issued without a letter of invitation (LOI). Prices for visas vary enormously from embassy to embassy. As a general rule, plan on getting a visa at least six weeks ahead of entry to Turkmenistan, as the process (even for transit visas) is lengthy. Another good overall tip is to work through a Turkmen travel agent you trust. On entry every visa holder will need to pay an additional US\$10 fee for an entry card that will list your exit point in Turkmenistan.

## Transit visas

The only visa that allows unaccompanied travel for tourists is the transit visa. Relatively easy to come by, they are normally valid for three days, although sometimes for five days and in extremely rare cases, seven and even 10 days. Turkmen embassies in Europe (opposed to Central Asia or Iran) are more likely to grant longer visas. Transit visas can be obtained at any Turkmen consulate, although if you apply without an LOI, the application will need to be forwarded to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ashgabat, meaning a processing time of around 10 to 14 days.

No transit visa is extendable, save in the case of serious illness. The penalty for over-

staying a transit visa is US\$200, and you may be taken back to Ashgabat and deported on the next available flight at your expense.

Your route will normally not be indicated on the visa, but your entry and exit point (unchangeable) will be, and you will therefore run into trouble going anywhere not obviously between the two points (eg Nokhur or Kugitang). Transit visas are usually not valid if you are dealing with a Kazakh routing, a double-entry Uzbekistan visa or even an air ticket out of Ashgabat. Turkmen embassies regularly refuse transit visa applications, so don't count on getting one.

Note that the five day transit visa is not enough time to cycle across the country, (ie from Turkmenbashi to the Farab border point), as you're likely to lose one day at Turkmenbashi (the boat may be delayed).

## Tourist visas

Tourist visas are a mixed blessing in Turkmenistan. While they allow the visitor to spend a decent amount of time in the country (up to three weeks as a rule), they require accompaniment by an accredited tour guide, who will meet you at the border and remain with you throughout your trip. This obviously has cost implications, as you will have to pay your guide a daily rate (usually between US\$30 and US\$50), as well as sometimes pay for their meals and hotels. The latter cost is very small however, as Turkmen citizens pay a local rate, usually equivalent to US\$1 or US\$2 per night. Travel agents are key to getting you through checkpoints, but they will allow you to roam Ashgabat and the immediate environs unaccompanied. Most tour companies insist on travelling in private transport with the guide. But a few allow you to ride public transport with the guide, which drops the prices.

You can only get a tourist visa by going through a travel agency. Only travel agencies with a licence from the Turkmen government can issue LOIs. Many unaccredited agencies still offer LOI services, however, simply by going through an accredited agency themselves. The LOI will be issued with a list of all towns and regions you are planning to visit. In turn, these are the places that will be listed on your visa, and so therefore it's essential to decide what you want to see before applying. The LOI is approved by the State Service for the Registration of Foreign Citizens, which will decide whether

or not you are an undesirable. The LOI can be processed in as little as 10 days, but usually takes three or four weeks. It is not unusual for it to be rejected for no apparent reason.

Once the LOI is issued (usually faxed or emailed to you by your travel agent), you can take it to any Turkmen embassy to get your visa. The original LOI is not needed, although it may be at consulates in Mashhad (Iran) and Herat (Afghanistan); see p436. The issuing of the visa itself is purely a bureaucratic formality, once the LOI has been issued. Normal processing time is three working days, but most Turkmen embassies offer a one-day express service for a surcharge. When you apply for the visa, you will be asked for exact dates of entry and exit, which will be put on the visa. While you may leave before the exit date, you cannot enter earlier or leave any later.

Armed with an LOI there is also the possibility of getting a visa on arrival at Ashgabat airport, Turkmenbashi and Farab by prior arrangement with your travel agent. In the case of Turkmenbashi and Farab the agent needs to arrange for the consul to be present. In any case the original LOI must be taken to the relevant border and the visa will be issued for a maximum of 10 days.

On arrival in Turkmenistan, you must be met by your guide (*geed*) who will bring you a small green travel document, the Entry Travel Pass. Without this document you will be denied entry to Turkmenistan. You should only exit the country at the point indicated on the travel permit, although if you alter your route there is the possibility of changing this in Ashgabat. To do this you will have to speak to your travel agent or guide and they can see what they can do. It is often possible to extend tourist visas in Ashgabat, again, only with the assistance of your travel agent.

### Visas for Onward Travel

The following countries have embassies and consulates in Turkmenistan that can provide information and visas for travel to them. For contact details, see p436

**Afghanistan** Can issue one-month visas for US\$60, three-month visas for US\$90. You need to show a letter from your employer.

**Armenia** Can issue a tourist visa in five days for US\$57. It would be cheaper and faster to get a visa at the border.

**Azerbaijan** Issues tourist visas (US\$40) and transit visas (US\$20) in one week. They don't seem to mind making people wait so patience is required.

**China** Issues tourist visas in 15 days for US\$50. The amount of time means this is not an option for most tourists.

**Georgia** Visas available for US\$30. US citizens won't need one.

**Iran** Very friendly and helpful embassy – usually no problem to get transit visas within a week.

**Uzbekistan** Can issue a visa in 10 days, which is often not enough time for travellers on a short visit in Turkmenistan. LOI required for most Western nationals.

## TRANSPORT IN TURKMENISTAN

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

For information on getting to/from Central Asia see the Transport in Central Asia chapter (p461).

### Entering Turkmenistan

On entering the country, it's likely that your bags will be searched, although backpacks are rarely emptied – they prefer to use an X-ray machine. The numerous documents to be filled out are time consuming; pay close attention to the green Entry Travel Pass and the immigration card. There is also a customs declaration – list anything valuable you have with you and make sure it is stamped and that you keep a copy. On exit you'll need to fill out a second one, but be ready to show the original as well. Upon exiting some travellers have been asked to show the pictures on their digital camera – this is not the time to be caught with a flash card full of bridges, airports, government buildings and military bases.

### Air

The only international airport in Turkmenistan is **Saparmurat Turkmenbashi Airport** (☎ 37 84 11) in Ashgabat. For the contact details of

### ENTRY & DEPARTURE TAX

For entry into Turkmenistan there is a US\$10 fee per person. Bring cash in US dollars for this. There is an international departure tax of US\$25, which is only included in the price of Turkmenistan Airlines tickets. If flying with any other airline, this is payable in cash at the airport. There is no domestic departure tax, nor by land or sea.

airlines that fly in and out of Turkmenistan, see p415.

### Land

Visitors with visas can enter Turkmenistan from all bordering countries, although the borders with Uzbekistan and Iran are the most frequently used. There are no international train or bus services to or from Turkmenistan at the present time. You should reckon on one to two hours for crossing the border at any point in the country (although three hours is not unheard of). All land borders are open from 9am to 6pm daily.

### BORDER CROSSINGS

#### To/From Afghanistan

Serkhetabat (formerly known as Gushgi) is the border town with Afghanistan. Crossing here is now a fairly hassle-free prospect, although be prepared to be thoroughly searched by both Turkmen and Afghan border guards. If you arrive late it's OK to overnight with a local family as there are no hotels in town.

The border post is 3km south of Serkhetabat town. Leaving Turkmenistan, there's a 1.5km walk to the first Afghan village of Torghundi and it's a two-hour taxi journey onwards to Herat. If you are coming to Turkmenistan, you'll need to catch a ride from Herat (US\$20 in a shared vehicle) to Torghundi. Here you need to pay an US\$11 customs fee at a bank in town (2km south of the border), or you might be able to pay an extra US\$4 to the border guard to do this for you.

The Saparmurat border crossing near Kerki is used by UN staff, but was not recommended for independent travellers at the time of writing.

#### To/From Iran

The simplest exit point is Gaudan/Bajgiran, due south of Ashgabat and a corridor between the Kopet Dag into Iran. From Ashgabat, take a taxi (US\$10 to US\$15) for the 20km ride to Yablonovka checkpoint. Here you'll have your passport checked, after which you take a marshrutka shuttle to the border. Once through, it's a taxi (US\$2.50) across some 20km of no-man's-land to Bajgiran where you can get buses or taxis (US\$20, 4 hours) to Mashhad.

There are also borders with Iran at Saraghs (there is a Mashhad–Saraghs train, but no

international trains into Turkmenistan) and Guduroloom (which is reachable by car or taxi only).

#### To/From Kazakhstan

From Turkmenbashi there is a good road to Karabogas (formerly Bekdash), with spectacular views of the Caspian Sea and the Karabogas Basin. En route you cross a bridge that spans the 5km long channel which connects the Caspian Sea and the inland gulf. The distance between the bridge and Karabogas town is around 60km.

Karabogas is a nearly abandoned Soviet industrial city, filled with vacant apartment blocks gutted for anything usable. The city is surrounded by surreal-looking salt lakes; the remnants of a once profitable sodium sulphate business gone belly up. From here is a 40-minute drive to the border on a rough dirt track.

Marshrutki (US\$40 per car) go from Turkmenbashi to the Kazakh border and continue to Zhanaozen (Novy Uzen), where there is further transport to Aktau. Delays at the border can occur when caravans of traders appear together. Rather than wait for all the taxis to get through, it might be faster to get a lift to the border, walk across and then look for another ride on the Kazakh side. You should be able to get a ride from the Kazakh border to Zhanaozen (US\$50, two hours), with a little patience.

#### To/From Uzbekistan

There are three crossings from Uzbekistan. Each crossing requires a walk of about 10 to 20 minutes across no-man's-land. Shared taxis are sometimes available to shuttle travellers across; the cost of which ranges from US\$0.50 to US\$1. Whether they are operating or not when you visit is a matter of luck.

The Farab crossing is closest to Bukhara (Uzbekistan) and Turkmenabat (Turkmenistan). The 45-km taxi ride to Farab from Turkmenabat should cost US\$4 to US\$6 for a taxi (or US\$0.50 for a seat in a shared taxi). From the border, take a taxi (US\$8) to Bukhara, or hire a taxi as far as Uzbek Olot (or Qarakul), where you can change to a shared taxi.

The Dashogus crossing is best if you are headed for Khiva or Urgench. A taxi from Dashogus to the Uzbek border is not more than US\$1. From the border to Khiva expect to pay around US\$10.

Less used is the Khojeli crossing, a 10-minute taxi ride (US\$1) from Konye-Urgench. Once across the border it's a half-hour drive to Nukus in Karakalpakstan. A taxi from Konye-Urgench to the border is around US\$1. From the border, take public transport to Khojeli (US\$1) or a taxi all the way to Nukus (US\$7). For more Uzbek border info, see p268.

### Sea

You can enter Turkmenistan by boat from Azerbaijan. See p468 for details.

## GETTING AROUND

### Air

Turkmenistan Airlines serves most main cities with a fleet of new Boeing 717s. As the main hub, all flights go in and out of Ashgabat, with the exception of a four times weekly flight between Dashogus and Turkmenbashi. For locals, ticket prices are absurdly cheap, around US\$1 to US\$2 to fly anywhere. These prices also apply to Peace Corps volunteers, diplomats and anyone else with local residency. Tourists and non-residents, however, must pay for tickets using the official rate of 5200M = US\$1 (you'll have to show a bank receipt showing you changed money at the official rate).

Because seats are in high demand and sell out weeks in advance, you'll probably have

to buy a ticket from a travel agent anyway. Agents will hold onto tickets until the last minute, knowing some foreigners will have no choice but to pay the inflated prices.

### Car & Motorcycle

Driving through Turkmenistan is perfectly possible, but expensive and full of hassles. A carnet is not needed, although you'll need to pay the following: US\$30 transit fee; US\$50 obligatory third-party liability insurance; US\$2 bank fee; US\$5 documentation fee; and US\$10 for disinfection of your vehicle. Significantly, there's also a road tax calculated by the kilometre for your route through the country. Usually this totals around US\$75 for cars and up to US\$250 for larger vehicles. This effectively raises the cost of petrol (gas) from US\$0.02 at the pumps to around US\$1.50 in reality.

Driving in Turkmenistan is a veritable freestyle sport, with drivers weaving indiscriminately through traffic and drag racing off green lights – you can do nothing but adapt. The drivers of Mary are notoriously bad – even Ashgabat drivers avoid cars with Mary tags. One last warning: fines can be imposed if you enter a city with a dirty car; make sure your vehicle is spotless after hauling it across the desert.

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