

Uzbekistan

Ўзбекистан

No country in Central Asia seems to have it so good, yet at the same time have it so bad, as Uzbekistan. The region's cradle of culture for more than two millennia, it is the proud home to a spellbinding arsenal of architecture and artefacts, all deeply infused with the raw, fascinating history of the country. But as students of that history know, it's also sprung a few bad apples over the years. Tyrants enamoured by the country's physical bounty have run the territory we now call Uzbekistan since time immemorial.

Concentrating on the good, if there was a Hall of Fame for Central Asian cities, Uzbekistan would own the top-three entries: Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva. The names practically epitomise the region, conjuring up images of knife-twirling dervishes, serpentine desert caravans and architecture that blends with the sand.

Seen in person, the Big Three do not disappoint (the occasional overzealous restorative effort notwithstanding). Alas, they sometimes overshadow the country's other attractions, which include dazzling bazaars, ancient desert fortresses and an impressive array of largely unsung natural attractions.

All of that is enough to eclipse the bad memories evoked by names such as Jenghiz Khan, Timur, Nasrullah Khan and Stalin. The country's long-serving current leader, Islam Karimov, is no saint either. Despite it all, the Uzbek people remain good-spirited and genuinely hospitable – yet another prime attraction in this oddly endearing country.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 447,400 sq km
- **Capital** Tashkent
- **Country Code** ☎ 998
- **Famous For** *Plov*, tasty pomegranates, Samarkand, Timur (Tamerlane), being Borat's neighbour
- **Languages** Uzbek, Russian, Tajik, Karakalpak
- **Money** Uzbek sum; US\$1 = 1238S; €1 = 1628S
- **Phrases** *Salom aleikum* (Hello); *Rakhmat* (Thank you)
- **Population** 25.2 million



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Samarkand** (p223) The breathtaking Registan leads a formidable cast of larger-than-life Timurid architectural gems.
- **Bukhara** (p236) Exquisitely preserved holy city boasting stunning 15th-century medressas, awesome B&Bs and fascinating history.
- **Quirky Cultural Gems** Carmen for a dollar at Tashkent's Alisher Navoi Opera & Ballet Theatre (p207) and Central Asia's greatest art collection in Nukus' Savitsky Museum (p259).
- **Khiva** (p252) The last independent khanate frozen in time amid the desert.
- **Crafty Uzbekistan** Silk in Margilon (p220), ceramics in Rishon (p221), *suzani* (silk and cotton coverlets) in Shakhrisabz (p232) and everything under the sun in Bukhara (p246).

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Start in Bukhara, either with a domestic flight from Tashkent or overland from Turkmenistan. Wander around Lyabi-Hauz, tour the Ark, and gape at the 47m Kalon Minaret and the stunning medressa ensembles. Pamper yourself in a bodacious B&B, then zip to Samarkand the next morning to explore the four pearls of Timurid-era architecture: the Registan, Bibi Khanym Mosque, Shah-i-Zinda and Guri Amir Mausoleum. On day three exit to Tajikistan, taking a detour on the way to Shakhrisabz or the Urgut bazaar (Sunday and Thursday only).
- **One week** Fly to Urgench from where it's a short shared-taxi ride to the 'museum city' of Khiva. Spend a day wandering around the walled old city, Ichon-Qala. The next day travel by shared taxi to Bukhara and Samarkand, giving each place an extra day. On your last day in Tashkent catch an opera and a museum or two.
- **Two weeks** Fly west to Nukus and spend a half-day appreciating Central Asia's greatest art collection in the Savitsky Museum. Head south to Khiva via the ancient ruined fortresses of Elliq Qala. Around Bukhara, take a time-out from architecture with a yurtstay near Lake Aidarkul. After three days covering Samarkand and vicinity, history buffs

HOW MUCH?

- Snickers bar US\$0.40
- 100km bus ride US\$1
- One-minute phone call to the US/UK US\$1.05/0.95
- Internet per hour US\$0.50-0.80
- Uzbek skull cap US\$2-4
- 1L of bottled water US\$0.40
- Domestic beer (bar) US\$0.75-1
- Domestic beer (store) US\$0.50
- Shashlyk US\$0.30-0.50
- 1L of petrol US\$0.50

should head south to the archaeological oasis of Termiz before flying back to Tashkent for some museum hopping, good food and a night or two on the town. Bazaar lovers should consider the Fergana Valley instead of Termiz.

- **One month** All the above sights can be seen in a month at a more relaxed pace. You can hit both Termiz and the Fergana Valley and devote more time to exploring Uzbekistan's natural wonders: including hiking, rafting or skiing in Ugam-Chatkal National Park, and camel trekking, hiking and community-based tourism near Lake Aidarkul and the Nurata Mountains.

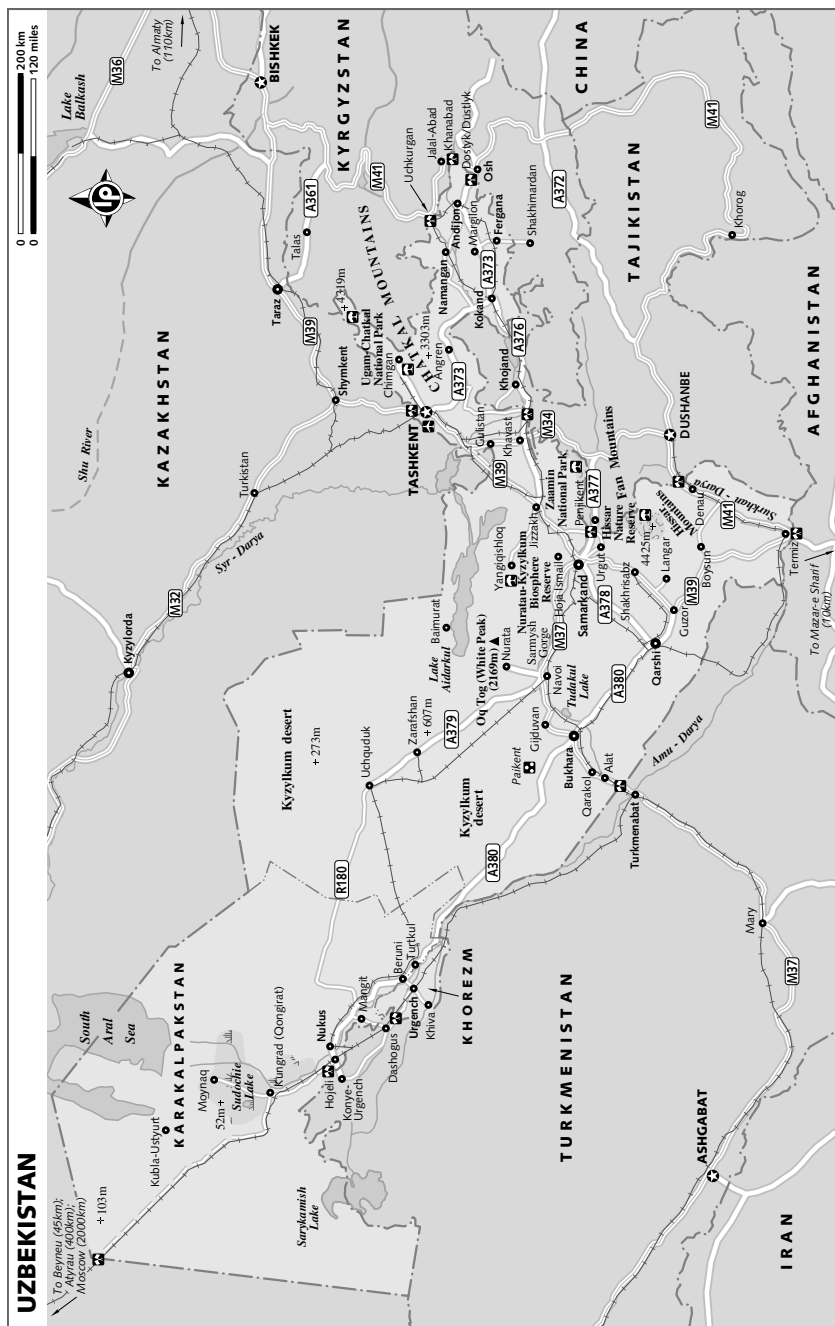
CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Large areas of Uzbekistan are desert. Summer is long, hot and dry; spring is mild and rainy; autumn has light frosts and rains; and winter, although short, is unstable with snow and temperatures below freezing.

From June to August average afternoon temperatures hit 32°C or higher. The average annual maximum temperature is 40°C in June. Most rain falls in March and April.

The summer furnace of 35°C days lasts 40 days from mid-July to the end of August. The worst of winter lasts 40 days from Christmas to the first week of February; see also the Climate Charts, p446.

In this chapter, the high season is spring (mid-March to the end of May) and autumn (September to the beginning of November). Summer is from June to August, and winter is from December to February.



TRAVELLING SAFELY IN UZBEKISTAN

As in many police states, the main danger is the overzealous police. Proceed with extreme caution in all border areas, which are heavily patrolled and generally off-limits to foreigners without special permits. Also note that much of the Uzbek–Tajik border, and parts of the Uzbek–Kyrgyz border, have been mined. Uzbekistan Airways has a generally clean track record, although a Termiz–Tashkent flight crashed in 2004, killing 37.

HISTORY

The land along the upper Amu-Darya, Syr-Darya and their tributaries has always been different from the rest of Central Asia – more settled than nomadic, with patterns of land use and communality that has changed little from the time of the Achaemenids (6th century BC) to present day. An attitude of permanence and proprietorship still sets the people of this region apart.

Ancient Empires

The region was part of some very old Persian states, including Bactria, Khorezm and Sogdiana. In the 4th century BC Alexander the Great entered Cyrus the Great's Achaemenid empire. He stopped near Marakanda (Samarkand) and then, having conquered the Sogdians in their homeland mountains, married Roxana, the daughter of a local chieftain (see p37).

Out of the northern steppes in the 6th century AD came the Western Turks – the western branch of the empire of the so-called Kök (Blue) Turks. They soon grew attached to life here and abandoned their wandering ways, eventually taking on a significant role in maintaining the existence of the Silk Road (see p53). The Arabs brought Islam and a written alphabet to Central Asia in the 8th century but found the region too big and restless to govern.

A return to the Persian fold came with the Samanid dynasty in the 9th and 10th centuries. Its capital, Bukhara, became the centre of an intellectual, religious and commercial renaissance. In the 11th century the Ghaznavids moved into the southern regions. For some time the Turkic Khorezmshahs dominated Central Asia from present-day

Konye-Urgench in Turkmenistan, but their reign was cut short and the region's elegant oases ravaged by Jenghiz Khan in the early 13th century.

Central Asia again became truly 'central' with the rise of Timur (also known as Tamerlane), the ruthless warrior and patron of the arts who fashioned a glittering Islamic capital at Samarkand.

The Uzbeks

Little is known of early Uzbek history. At the time the Golden Horde was founded, Shibaqan (Shayban), a grandson of Jenghiz Khan, inherited what is today northern Kazakhstan and adjacent parts of Russia. The greatest khan of these Mongol Shaybani tribes (and probably the one under whom they swapped paganism for Islam) was Özbek (Uzbek, ruled 1313–40). By the end of the 14th century these tribes had begun to name themselves after him.

The Uzbeks began to move southeast, mixing with sedentary Turkic tribes and adopting the Turkic language; they reached the Syr-Darya in the mid-15th century. Following an internal schism (which gave birth to the proto-Kazakhs; see p42), the Uzbeks rallied under Mohammed Shaybani and thundered down upon the remnants of Timur's empire. By the early 1500s, all of Transoxiana ('the land beyond the Oxus') from the Amu-Darya (Oxus River) to the Syr-Darya (Jaxartes River) belonged to the Uzbeks, as it has since.

The greatest (and last) of the Shaybanid khans, responsible for some of Bukhara's finest architecture, was Abdullah II, who ruled from 1538 until his death in 1598. After this, as the Silk Road fell into disuse, the empire unravelled under the Shaybanids' distant cousins, the Astrakhanids. By the start of the 19th century the entire region was dominated by three weak, feuding Uzbek city-states – Khiva, Bukhara and Kokand.

The Russians Arrive

In the early 18th century the khan of Khiva made an offer to Peter the Great of Russia (to become his vassal in return for help against marauding Turkmen and Kazakh tribes), stirring the first Russian interest in Central Asia. But by the time the Russians got around to marching on Khiva in 1717, the khan no longer wanted Russian protection, and after

a show of hospitality he had almost the entire 4000-strong force slaughtered.

The slave market in Bukhara and Khiva was an excuse for further Russian visits to free a few Russian settlers and travellers. In 1801 the insane Tsar Paul sent 22,000 Cossacks on a madcap mission to drive the British out of India, with orders to free the slaves en route. Fortunately for all but the slaves, the tsar was assassinated and the army recalled while struggling across the Kazakh steppes.

The next attempt, by Tsar Nicholas I in 1839, was really a bid to pre-empt expansion into Central Asia by Britain, which had just taken Afghanistan, although Khiva's Russian slaves were the pretext on which General Perovsky's 5200 men and 10,000 camels set out from Orenburg. In January 1840, a British officer, Captain James Abbott, arrived in Khiva (having travelled from Herat in Afghan disguise) offering to negotiate the slaves' release on the khan's behalf, thus nullifying the Russians' excuse for coming.

Unknown to the khan, the Russian force had already turned back, in the face of a devastating winter on the steppes. He agreed to send Abbott to the tsar with an offer to release the slaves in return for an end to Russian military expeditions against Khiva. Incredibly, Abbott made it to St Petersburg.

In search of news of Abbott, Lieutenant Richmond Shakespeare reached Khiva the following June and convinced the khan to unilaterally release all Russian slaves in Khiva and even give them an armed escort to the nearest Russian outpost, on the eastern Caspian Sea. Russian gratitude was doubtlessly mingled with fury over one of the Great Game's boldest propaganda coups.

When the Russians finally rallied 25 years later, the khanates' towns fell like dominoes – Tashkent in 1865 to General Mikhail Chernyayev, Samarkand and Bukhara in 1868, Khiva in 1873, and Kokand in 1875 to General Konstantin Kaufman.

Soviet Daze

Even into the 20th century, most Central Asians identified themselves ethnically as Turks or Persians. The connection between 'Uzbek' and 'Uzbekistan' is very much a Soviet matter. Following the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the infamous sacking of Kokand in 1918, the Bolsheviks proclaimed the Autonomous Soviet Socialist

Republic of Turkestan. Temporarily forced out by counter-revolutionary troops and *basmachi* (Muslim guerrilla fighters), they returned two years later and the Khiva and Bukhara khanates were forcibly replaced with 'People's Republics'.

Then in October 1924 the whole map was redrawn on ethnic grounds, and the Uzbeks suddenly had a 'homeland', an official identity and a literary language. The Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) changed shape and composition over the years as it suited Moscow, hiving off Tajikistan in 1929, acquiring Karakalpakstan from Russia in 1936, taking parts of the Hungry Steppe (the Russian nickname for the dry landscape between Tashkent and Jizzakh) from Kazakhstan in 1956 and 1963, then losing some in 1971.

For rural Uzbeks, the main impacts of Soviet rule were the forced and often bloody collectivisation of the republic's mainstay (agriculture) and the massive shift to cotton cultivation. The Uzbek intelligentsia and much of the republic's political leadership was decimated by Stalin's purges. This and the traditional Central Asian respect for authority meant that by the 1980s *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) would hardly trickle down here; few significant reforms took place.

Independence

Uzbekistan's first serious noncommunist popular movement, Birlik (Unity), was formed by Tashkent intellectuals in 1989 over issues that included Uzbek as an official language and the effects of the cotton monoculture. Despite popular support, it was barred from contesting the election in February 1990 for the Uzbek Supreme Soviet (legislature) by the Communist Party. The resulting communist-dominated body elected Islam Karimov, the first secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan (CPUz), to the new post of executive president.

Following the abortive coup in Moscow in August 1991, Karimov declared Uzbekistan independent. Soon afterward the CPUz reinvented itself as the People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan (PDP), inheriting all of its predecessor's property and control apparatus, most of its ideology, and of course its leader, Karimov.

In December 1991, Uzbekistan held its first direct presidential elections, which Karimov

won with 86% of the vote. His only rival was a poet named Mohammed Solih, running for the small, figurehead opposition party Erk (Will or Freedom), who got 12% and was soon driven into exile (where he remains to this day). The real opposition groups, Birlik and the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), and all other parties with a religious platform, had been forbidden to take part.

A new constitution unveiled in 1992 declared Uzbekistan 'a secular, democratic presidential republic'. Under Karimov, Uzbekistan would remain secular almost to a fault. But it would remain far from 'democratic'.

Onward to Andijon

The years after independence saw Karimov consolidate his grip on power. He remained firmly in charge of everything from municipal gardeners' salaries to gold production quotas – as he was, under a different title, even before independence. Dissent shrivelled thanks to control of the media, police harassment and imprisonment of activists. Through it all, the economy stagnated and the devastating cotton monoculture continued.

A new threat emerged in February 1999 when a series of devastating bomb attacks hit Tashkent. This led to a crackdown on radical Islamic fundamentalists – *wahabis* in the local parlance – that extended to a broad spectrum of opponents. Hundreds of alleged Islamic extremists were arrested on trumped-up charges. The IRP, with support in the Fergana Valley, was forced underground and Erk was declared illegal.

Karimov won a third consecutive term in January 2000, garnering 92% of the votes. Foreign observers deemed the election a farce and international condemnation was widespread. But the 9/11 attacks on the United States gave Karimov a reprieve. The Uzbek president opened up bases to the US and NATO for use in the war in Afghanistan, then sat back and watched the US aid money – US\$500 million in 2002 alone – start flowing in.

As an added bonus for Karimov, solidarity with the US in the 'War on Terror' effectively gave him a licence to ratchet up his brutal campaign against the *wahabis*. Once again Karimov used this licence to brand anyone he wanted to silence a 'terrorist'. Another rigged election in 2004, this one parliamentary, drew only modest international criticism.

Such was the situation on 13 May 2005 when events in the eastern city of Andijon rocked the country and instantly demolished Uzbekistan's cosy relationship with the United States. The Andijon Massacre, as it was later dubbed, was touched off when two dozen powerful local businessmen were jailed for being members of Akramiya, a local extremist Islamic movement. A group of their allies stormed the prison where they were being held, touching off a massive but largely peaceful demonstration in Andijon's main square. The authorities overreacted, and somewhere between 200 and 1000 civilians were killed by government troops in the ensuing melee.

International condemnation of Andijon was swift in coming. After Uzbekistan refused to allow an independent international investigation, the US withdrew most of its aid and the EU hit the country with sanctions. The post-9/11 thaw in Uzbekistan's relations with the West was over.

CURRENT EVENTS

Indignant in the face of Western criticism over Andijon, Karimov's response has been to kick most US-funded NGOs out of the country. The US Peace Corps and high-profile NGOs such as Freedom House, the Open Society Institute and Internews have all been forced to leave in the face of registration problems or similar technicalities.

Domestically, Karimov has used the Andijon events to launch what Human Rights Watch has called an 'unprecedented' crackdown against opposition political activists and independent journalists. Nor have international journalists been immune to the onslaught. The BBC, which had been among the last Western news organisations still operating in the country, was harassed out of Tashkent in October 2005. It remains next to impossible for a foreign journalist to get a visa into Uzbekistan.

Yet a thaw in relations with the West by late 2007 or 2008 is not out of the question. The EU extended its sanctions in late 2006 but there were strong signs that the sanctions would be lifted by late 2007. The US was at least starting to talk about a *rapprochement*. Just as tellingly, Tashkent's relations with Russia, which had not, coincidentally, improved in the wake of Andijon, were showing signs of becoming chillier.

UZBEK SURVIVAL TIPS

1. Private cars for intercity trips are much cheaper if hired at the shared-taxi stand for your destination, rather than through your hotel.
2. The winter low season is wonderful in Uzbekistan – cool, dry and you'll have the place to yourself.
3. Negotiate for everything, but especially at state-owned hotels – both fancy Tashkent versions and the grubby regional variety, all of which give steep discounts.
4. Always have your documents ready in the Uzbek metro, the one place you will almost always get stopped by police.

Karimov, for his part, seemed finally willing to make concessions of his own. In late 2006 he fired the governor of Andijon province – an admission, some say, that the government bore at least some responsibility for the events of May 2005. Also in late 2006, two Western NGOs successfully defended themselves in an Uzbek court against accusations of financial improprieties.

Will Karimov finally meet Western governments' main demand – an independent probe of Andijon? That remains to be seen. But neither Karimov nor the West, it appears, want their break-up to last for ever.

Meanwhile, Karimov's second term as president is scheduled to end in December 2007. While the constitution limits Uzbek presidents to two terms, few believe the president will allow himself to be disempowered by something as feeble as the constitution. In all likelihood, Karimov will extend his term through a rigged referendum or a constitutional amendment, and will remain in power indefinitely.

PEOPLE

Centuries of tradition as settled people left the Uzbeks in a better position than their nomadic neighbours to fend off Soviet attempts to modify their culture. Traditions of the Silk Road still linger as Uzbeks consider themselves good traders, hospitable hosts and tied to the land.

The focal point of society is still the network of urban (mahallas) districts, where neighbours attend one another's weddings,

celebrations and funerals. Advice on all matters is sought from an *aksakal* (revered elder, literally 'white beard'), whose authority is conferred by the community. In sinister, Soviet fashion, Karimov has usurped these structures by employing *aksakals* as district custodians and informants.

While Uzbek men toil to make ends meet, women struggle for equality. Considered second-class citizens in the workplace and in the home, women are not given the same rights as their Western counterparts, or even their Kyrgyz and Kazakh neighbours. Although the Soviets did much to bring women into the mainstream of society, no amount of propaganda could entirely defeat sexist attitudes. There are some signs of change – dress codes continue to liberalise, for example, but old habits die hard and women in conservative families are expected to be subservient to their husbands.

Domestic violence occurs in 40% of Uzbek homes, yet overall household control lies in the hands of the husband's mother. Abuse, however, rarely leads to divorce, and there are occasional reports of suicide by self-immolation, a cultural trait that dates back to pre-Islamic Zoroastrianism.

Population

Tashkent is Uzbekistan's biggest city and the Fergana Valley is home to Uzbekistan's largest concentration of people, a third of the population. Samarkand, the second city, is Tajik-speaking, as are many of the communities surrounding it, including Bukhara and Qarshi. The further west you travel the more sparsely populated the land becomes. Karakalpakstan, home to Kazakhs, Karakalpaks and Khorezmians, has seen its population dwindle as a result of the Aral Sea disaster (p77). Around 40% of Uzbeks live in cities, with the rest in rural farming towns and villages.

The national population growth rate has fallen since independence (although it's still high at 2.5% per year) with tens of thousands of Slavs emigrating each year and with the sudden disappearance of subsidies for large families. Over half the population is under 15 years of age. A number of minority groups make up a tiny portion of the population, most notably Koreans and Russians in Tashkent. There is still a miniscule Jewish population in Bukhara (p237) and an even smaller one in Samarkand.

RELIGION

Around 85% of Uzbeks claim to be Muslim (nearly all are the Hanafi Sunni variety), although only around 5% to 15% are practising. Around 5% of the population are Christian. The Fergana Valley maintains the greatest Islamic conservative base, with Bukhara ranking number two. In the wake of the 1999 bomb attacks in Tashkent, mosques are no longer permitted to broadcast the azan (call to prayer), and mullahs have been pressured to praise the government in their sermons. Attendance at mosques has fallen for fear of practising Muslims being observed and harassed by government agents.

Although Uzbeks are tolerant of other religions, Western Christian missionaries have failed to gain a foothold, many having been harassed out of the country.

ARTS

Traditional art, music and architecture – evolving over centuries – were placed in a neat little box for preservation following the Soviet creation of the Uzbek SSR. But somehow, in the years to follow, two major centres of progressive art were still allowed to develop: Igor Savitsky's collection of lost art from the 1930s, stashed away in Nukus (p258), and the life-stories told inside Tashkent's notorious Ilkhom Theatre (p207) both survived as puddles of liberalism in a sea of communist doctrine.

Nowadays, Uzbekistan's art, music, film and literary figures are divided into those that

are approved by the government and those that are not. Patriotic odes and art – those that glorify the young nation and its leadership – are welcomed and financed by the central budget.

The Amir Timur Museum in Tashkent is one of the best examples of state-supported art, with its mock Timurid dome and interior murals filled with scenes of epic nation building.

Local pop and rap stars also sing to Uzbekistan's greatness. Yulduz Usmanova, a parliamentarian from Margilon, resurected a scandal-filled career with ballads that urged dedication to the *yurtbashi* (national leader). Dado's classical Uzbek pop sounds vaguely Latin American. The ever-changing girl band Sitora is another one to look out for. Grizzled rockers Bolalar date back to the *perestroika*-era.

Many other forms of art, particularly those offering a philosophy and expression deeper than nationalism, aren't officially banned, but with scant means of private finance, their creators are left with little outlet for creativity.

The most notable 'dissident group' is the Fergana School, made up of a dozen or so artists and writers whose works were published in the early 1990s literary magazine *Zuizda Vastaka* (Star of the East). The government ordered the publication closed in 1994 and the Fergana School has since gone underground.

RECOMMENDED READING

Chasing the Sea: Lost Among the Ghosts of Empire in Central Asia, by Tom Bissell, is a sort of travelogue-cum-history lesson about Uzbekistan written by an ex-Peace Corps volunteer on an assignment to investigate the disappearing Aral Sea. It is quick-witted and insightful.

Journey to Khiva, by Philip Glazebrook, is a relentlessly downbeat review of Uzbekistan as it transitioned to independence in the early 1990s. Glazebrook mixes in the history of Uzbekistan as he travels through it, but is sorely disappointed at every turn, due largely to what he sees as cultural robbery by the Soviets. It serves as an interesting chronicle and reference point of Uzbek life in 1990.

Uzbekistan – the Golden Road to Samarkand, by Calum Macleod and Bradley Mayhew, is an elegant Odyssey guide that offers detailed historical and practical coverage of Uzbekistan's Silk Road cities, plus the main historical sites in the neighbouring republics, with literary excerpts and fine photography.

Murder in Samarkand, by Craig Murray, is a damning account of atrocities committed by the Karimov administration, penned by a maverick former British ambassador to Uzbekistan. Equally damning is Murray's account of his own government's efforts to discredit him in the context of the 'War on Terror'. At the time of research Michael Winterbottom was directing a movie based on the book.

ENVIRONMENT

Uzbekistan spans several ecosystems, and topographic and geographic shifts. Its eastern fringes tilt upwards in a knot of rugged mountains – Tashkent’s Chatkal and Pskem Mountains run into the western Tian Shan range, and Samarkand’s Zarafshon Mountains and a mass of ranges in the southeast flow into the Pamir Alay. This isolated, rocky and forested terrain makes up an important habitat for the bear, lynx, bustard, mountain goat and even the elusive snow leopard. Flowing down from these mountains are the life-giving rivers, the Amu-Darya and the Syr-Darya.

To the west of the well-watered mountains are vast plains of desert or steppe: the Ustyurt Plateau (p261) and the vast, barren Kyzylkum (Red Sands) desert. Despite its bleakness, this land is far from dead; the desert is home to the gazelle, various raptors and other critters you’d expect to find – monitors, scorpions and venomous snakes.

There are some 15 *zapovednik* (nature reserves) in Uzbekistan, the largest of which is the Hissar Reserve (750 sq km), located in the Kashkadarya region due east of Shakhrisabz. This remote region of pine and juniper forests includes the country’s largest glacier, Severtsov, and its highest peaks – 4425m Khojapiryokh and an unnamed 4643m peak east of that on the Tajik border.

Environmental Issues

Much, if not all, of this territory is threatened by Uzbekistan’s lacklustre environmental protection laws and the deterioration of its national park system, which does not have the funds to prevent illegal logging and poaching.

The faltering of the reserves, however, pales in comparison to the Aral Sea disaster (p77). In addition to the existing tragedy of the Aral, there’s the issue of notorious *Vozrozhdenia Ostrov* (Rebirth Island, or ‘Voz Island’), which the Soviets once used to test chemical weapons. In 2002 the island became a peninsula, sparking fears that contamination would migrate southward to the mainland. United States government contractors were brought in to destroy the toxic elements, and today the island is safe to visit.

FOOD & DRINK

Plov (p204), a Central Asian pilaf consisting of rice and fried vegetables, and *shashlyk* (meat roasted on skewers over hot coals) are

the national staples. Every region has its own variation of *non* bread, commonly known by its Russian name, *lepyoshka*; the raised rim of Kokand’s speciality makes it a particularly fine *shashlyk* plate. Samarkand’s *non* resembles a giant bagel without the hole.

Buglama kovoq (steamed pumpkin) is a light treat. *Moshkichiri* and *moshurda* are meat and mung bean gruels. *Dimlama* (also called *bosma*) is meat, potatoes, onions and vegetables braised slowly in a little fat and their own juices; the meatless version is *sabzavotli dimlama*. *Hunon* or *honum* is a noodle roll, usually with a meat and potato filling. Uzbeks are fond of *dulma* (stuffed cabbage and grape leaves, tomatoes, peppers and quinces).

Apricot pits are a local favourite; they’re cooked in ash and the shells are cracked by the vendor before they reach the market.

Besides green tea, nonalcoholic drinks include *katyk*, a thin yogurt that comes plain but can be sweetened if you have some sugar or jam handy. See the Central Asia Food & Drink chapter for more information (p82).

TASHKENT ТАШКЕНТ

📍 (3) 71 / pop 2.1 million / elev 478m

Gritty Tashkent, Central Asia’s hub, is an eccentric kind of place. In one part of the city Russian-speaking cabbies scream down broad Soviet-built avenues. Across town, old men wearing long, open-fronted *chapan* (quilted coats) cart nuts through a maze of mud-walled houses towards a crackling bazaar. In a third part of town hundreds gather amid steaming cauldrons for their daily repast of *plov*.

In the middle of it all roosts the president, his puppet Senate nearby in a freshly built hulk of white glory on *Mustaqillik maydoni* (Independence Sq). This is meant to be the new centre of the formerly centreless capital. The behaviour of the centre, of course, dictates the mood in the outskirts – a mood that actually seems pretty good considering you’re in a supposed police state.

Like most places that travellers use mainly to get somewhere else, Tashkent is no instant charmer. But peel under its skin and suddenly you’re thinking, hey, maybe it’s not all that bad. Many expats truly love living in Tashkent, and many visa-foraging travellers find themselves wishing they could stay a few more days.

TASHKENT MUST-SEES

Chorsu Bazaar Haggle till you drop in this vast goods emporium (p200).

History Museum of the People of Uzbekistan The great repository of Uzbek history (p201).

Central Asian Plov Centre Worlds’ best place to sample the Central Asian ambrosia (p204).

Khast Imom An ancient Quran lies hidden in Old Town’s alleys (p200).

Ilkhom Theatre Progressive theatre with English subtitles (p207).

And it’s not just Tashkent’s Jekyll-and-Hyde, Muslim-and-Soviet oddness that gets people’s attention. There’s a cosmopolitan populace enjoying real, live culture, a rapidly improving restaurant scene and the best nightlife in the Muslim world east of Beirut (or at least Baku). There’s also plenty of green space, a clutch of interesting museums and, within a 1½-hour drive, great hiking, rafting and skiing in remarkably accessible Ugam-Chatkal National Park.

HISTORY

Tashkent’s earliest incarnation might have been as the settlement of Ming-Uruk (Thousand Apricot Trees) in the 2nd or 1st century BC. By the time the Arabs took it in AD 751 it was a major caravan crossroads. It was given the name Tashkent (Tashkent, ‘City of Stone’ in Turkic) in about the 11th century.

The Khorezmshahs and Jenghiz Khan stubbed out Tashkent in the early 13th century, although it slowly recovered under the Mongols and then under Timur and grew more prosperous under the Shaybanids in the late 15th and 16th centuries.

The khan of Kokand annexed Tashkent in 1809. In 1865, as the Emir of Bukhara was preparing to snatch it away, the Russians under General Mikhail Grigorevich Chernyayev beat him to it, against the orders of the tsar and despite being outnumbered 15 to one. They found a proud town, enclosed by a 25km-long wall with 11 gates (of which not a trace remains today).

The newly installed Governor General Konstantin Kaufman was to gradually widen the imperial net around the other Central Asian khanates. Tashkent also became the tsarists’ (and later the Soviets’) main centre

for espionage in Asia, during the protracted imperial rivalry with Britain known as the Great Game (p45).

Tashkent became the capital of the Turkestan Autonomous SSR, declared in 1918. When this was further split, the capital of the new Uzbek Autonomous SSR became Samarkand. In 1930, this status was restored to Tashkent.

Physically, Tashkent was changed forever on 25 April 1966, when a massive earthquake levelled vast areas of the town and left 300,000 people homeless (see the Earthquake Memorial, p202). Soviet historians made much of the battalions of ‘fraternal peoples’ and eager urban planners who came from around the Soviet Union to help with reconstruction.

But when Moscow later announced it would give 20% of the newly built apartments to these (mainly Russian) volunteers and invite them to stay, local resentment boiled over in street brawls between Uzbeks and Russians in the so-called Pakhtakor Incident of May 1969.

Security in the city, particularly in the metro stations, has been high since February 1999 when six car bombs killed 16 and injured more than 120. The blasts were attributed by the government to Islamic extremists, but it will probably never be known who was responsible.

ORIENTATION

Before the 1966 earthquake, the Ankhor canal separated old (Uzbek) and new (Russian) Tashkent, the former a tangle of alleys around the **Chorsu Bazaar**, the latter with shady avenues radiating from what is now Amir Timur maydoni (Public sq). The city has since grown out of all proportions and sprawls over a vast plain. Covering it on foot requires long walks and it’s best to use public transport.

Uzbeks perhaps still consider Chorsu their ‘centre’. The Soviet centre was *Mustaqillik maydoni*, which has attained prominence anew thanks to its huge new Senate building. Amir Timur maydoni is a useful reference point, with Broadway (p200) leading off to the west.

Tashkent’s *vokzal* (train station) is 2.5km south of Amir Timur maydoni; the airport is 6km south of Amir Timur maydoni; and the public bus station is about 14km southwest of Amir Timur maydoni, at Sibir Rahimov metro.

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TO TASHKENT INTERNATIONAL MEDICAL CLINIC (2km); TASHKENT INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL (2.5km)

Maps

The State Committee for Land Resources, Geodesy and Cartography publishes the excellent *Tashkent City Plan* (1:32,000), available at Knizhny Mir (below) and other bookshops and hotels. The flip side has a detailed map of Tashkent's suburbs, including the Chimgan area. Most bookshops and hotels sell serviceable maps of Tashkent, Uzbekistan and most major provincial cities.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Other than slim paperbacks of Karimov's political philosophies, bookshops have little more than school textbooks in Russian or Uzbek. Some four-star hotels sell books about Uzbekistan; the best bookstand is probably at the InterContinental (Intercon; p204). You can browse old Russian books and find an English title or two in the street stalls that line the sidewalk just south of TsUM department store.

Knizhny Mir (Book World; Azimova 1; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) Has Tashkent's best map selection along with a smattering of English-language classics.

Cultural Centres

American Chamber of Commerce (☎ 140 08 77; Afrosiab 2)

British Council (☎ 140 06 60; www.britishcouncil.org/uzbekistan; Mirobod 11; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) Has a wealth of English-language books and videos; browse them for free or purchase a six-month membership (8000S) and check them out.

Goethe Institut (☎ 152 70 23; www.goethe.de/taschkent; Mirobod 11) Has full complement of German periodicals and organises German cultural exhibits.

Institut Francais D'Études Sur L'Asie Centrale (IFEAC; ☎ 139 47 03; www.ifeac.org; Rakatboshi 18A) Good collection of books in French.

Emergency

See also Medical Services (right).

Ambulance (☎ 03)

English-speaking doctor (☎ 185 60 93; ☎ 24hr)

Fire service (☎ 01)

Police (☎ 02)

Internet Access

Internet cafés in Tashkent are a dime a dozen but finding a decent connection can be a challenge. These all have fast connections, few or no gamers and/or keep late hours.

Central Telephone & Telegraph Office (Navoi 28; per hr 600S; ☎ 9am-6pm) Great connection and a plethora of other telecom services available.

Dawoo (Amir Timur 4; per hr 1000S; ☎ 8.30am-10pm) Very civilized, gamerless Korean-owned place with webcams and Skype.

Prime Time (Mirobod12; per hr 1000S; ☎ 24hr) Lightning fast connection and hot dogs sold in kiosk out front.

Skynet (Nr Usmon Nosir & Konstitutsiya; per hr 800S; ☎ 24hr) Convenient for the Orzu Hotel.

Stud.net.café (Yusuf Khos Khodjib 72; per hr 800S; ☎ 9am-11.30pm) Across from the Pedagogic University, it has quality equipment, Skype and a café downstairs teeming with student life.

Libraries

Mustaqillik Library (Tashkent English Library; Navoi 48, opposite Hotel Chorsu; ☎ noon-6pm Mon-Fri) A student-orientated library with English-language literature, textbooks and DVDs. Movies are shown twice daily and conversation hour starts at 4pm most days. Membership is 500S per visit or 24,000S per year. Its sponsor, US-based NGO Central Asian Free Exchange, was kicked out of Uzbekistan in 2006, so the library could use all the help it can get.

Media

The useful www.tashkent-events.info has events listings, information on various expatriate games and gatherings, and all the latest pub, club and grub news. The site's **newsletter** (www.tashkent-events.info/html/newsletter.html) is worth subscribing to if you're going to be in town for awhile.

Black market vendors hanging around behind TsUM often sell copies of the *New York Times*, *Economist*, *Der Spiegel* and any other publications distributed on Uzbekistan Airways.

Medical Services

In the case of a medical emergency contact your embassy, which can assist in evacuation. The **Tashkent International Medical Clinic** (TIMC; ☎ 191 01 42; Sarikulskaya 38) has state-of-the-art medical and dental facilities and is run by professional Western and Western-trained doctors, all of whom speak perfect English. In case of an emergency, call a **TIMC mobile phone** (☎ 185 60 93, 185 84 81). A short/long consultation from 8am to 5pm is US\$55/110. House calls and appointments after hours are possible for an additional fee. It's difficult to find so call for directions.

Local hospitals are a lot cheaper but are often less than sanitary. Hotel reception desks are helpful in directing visitors to local doctors.

Money

Exchange facilities are everywhere. Try the Markaziy, InterContinental, Poytaht and Tashkent Palace hotels for 24-hour service. Black market moneychangers (see p263) still work the bazaars and can also be found at TsUM and other points (ask any taxi driver).

The ATMs in town are often cashless, with the notable exception of those of **Asaka Bank** (Nukus 67), which issue unlimited wads of crisp US\$50 and US\$100 bills to MasterCard holders at – get this – 0% commission. Other Asaka ATMs are at the InterContinental and Grand Mir hotels. More prevalent but less reliable are the Visa-card ATMs located in most four-star hotels. When working, these dispense Uzbek sum.

ABN Amro (Nosirov 77) Charges 4% for cash advances against MasterCard, Maestro and Visa cards.

Alp Jamol Bank (Ataturk 21) Charges 4% to change travellers cheques and gives cash advances against Visa.

National Bank of Uzbekistan (NBU; Gulomova 95; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Charges a 2% fee for cashing travellers cheques, and gives cash advances against Visa (3.5%) and MasterCard (4%).

Post

The **main post office** (pochta bulimi; ☎ 133 42 02; Shakhrisabz 7; ☎ 8am-6pm) has unreliable general delivery.

DHL (☎ 120 66 00; Uzbekistan 2) has an office in Le Grande Plaza hotel. A cheaper option is **Bekk-TNT** (☎ 152 17-87; Oybek 20). All four-star hotels offer express mail services, usually using one of the above.

Registration

See p264 for information on registering with the Office of Visas & Registration (OVIR) in Tashkent.

Telephone

Central Telephone & Telegraph Office (☎ 144 65 35; Navoi 28; ☎ 8am-11pm).

Travel Agencies

Contrary to what the government would have you believe, it's easy to go it alone in Uzbekistan. Still, if you can afford them, travel agencies are useful for planning hassle-free excursions, prearranging domestic air tickets and securing qualified guides for outdoor activities such as trekking, rafting and heli-skiing. And unless you have friends in Uzbekistan they are essential for visa support.

Advantour (☎ 120 00 50; www.advantour.com, mnazarov@advantour.com; Katta Mirobod 116) The reliable outfit located in the Rovshan Hotel can customise tours for both groups and individuals. The personable and knowledgeable husband-and-wife owners speak perfect English. They were relocating at research time.

Arostr Tourism (☎ 137 17 64; www.arostrtour.com; arostr@mail.ru; Afrosiab 13-45) Operated by the attentive and personable Airat Yuldashev, Arostr is a good choice for individual travellers. Airat arranges obligation-free visas plus homestays and self-contained apartments in Tashkent.

Asia Travel (☎ 173 51 07; www.asia-travel.uz; Chilonzor 97) Has outgrown its usefulness for individual travellers, but maintains stranglehold on heli-skiing and certain other outdoor activities (see p101). Also sells topographical maps.

Elena Tour (☎ 132 02 99; www.elenatour.uz; trekking@elenatour.uz; Azimova 63, Apt No 1) Few people know the local mountains like agency head Boris Karpov, who also leads the twice-per-month excursions of the Tashkent Hiking Club (p202). It also runs the full gamut of standard tours. See also p101.

Stantours (www.stantours.com) Based in Kazakhstan, it is nonetheless the best source of advice on procuring Central Asian visas in Tashkent.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The *militia* (police) have become much less of a nuisance to travellers in recent years. Worried about Uzbekistan's international image, President Karimov has curbed the police habit of shaking down travellers for bribes, although this still occurs, particularly at metro stations. See Crooked Officials (p448) for tips on dealing with police.

Scams

Upon arrival at Tashkent International Airport, you might be approached at customs by a man offering to help you fill out your customs declaration form; although a friendly enough gesture, travellers have been asked for money (usually US\$5) for this unofficial service. Avoid this by asking for two customs forms in English and fill them out on your own. A similar annoyance occurs at the luggage carousel. Your bags might be taken off before they reach daylight and delivered on a cart by an attendant who will ask for a US\$5 tip.

SIGHTS

Modern Tashkent is a big, sprawling city that's best appreciated for its whole rather than its parts. If you're short on time, pick your spots and hone in on them by car. At

LIGHTS GO DOWN ON BROADWAY

For years Sayilgoh, otherwise known as Broadway, was the centre of tourist life in Tashkent. While the rows of Soviet kitsch vendors, souvenir hawkers and open-air arts and craft galleries were on the tacky side, it was nonetheless a great place to grab a beer, people watch, meet other travellers and kill time while waiting for visas to come through.

But that all changed abruptly in September 2006 after President Karimov took a stroll down Broadway. Not surprisingly, the haphazard nature of the street ran anathema to his vision of an orderly police state. A couple of days later several dozen *militia* (police) unceremoniously broke down the street stalls and evicted the vendors.

As of this writing, Broadway continues to languish in its new guise of world's most boring pedestrian avenue. It could yet make a comeback, but for now it remains yet another symbol of Karimov's heavy hand.

minimum check out Khast Imom, Chorsu Bazaar and a few museums. If you have a few more days cover as much as you can on foot – you'll catch random glimpses of city life that are often more rewarding than the sights themselves. Old Town makes for the best wandering.

Old Town

The Old Town (Uzbek: *eski shakhar*, Russian: *stary gorod*) starts beside Chorsu Bazaar and the Chorsu Hotel. A maze of narrow dirt streets is lined with low mud-brick houses and dotted with mosques and old medressas. These few handsome religious buildings date from the 15th and 16th centuries.

Taxi drivers get lost easily here. On foot, you could easily get lost too, but that's part of the fun. Wandering around you'll often be invited into someone's home, where you'll discover that the blank outer walls of traditional homes conceal cool, peaceful garden courtyards.

CHORSU BAZAAR & AROUND

Tashkent's most famous farmers market, topped by a giant green dome, is a delightful slice of city life spilling into the streets off Old Town's southern edge. If it grows and it's edible, it's here. There are acres of spices arranged in brightly coloured mountains; Volkswagen-sized sacks of grain; entire sheds dedicated to candy, dairy products and bread; interminable rows of freshly slaughtered livestock; and – of course – scores of the pomegranates, melons, persimmons, huge mutant tomatoes and whatever fruits are in season. Souvenir hunters will find *kurpacha* (colourful sitting mattresses), skull caps, *chapans* and knives here.

The grand 16th-century **Kulkedash medressa** (admission 1000S) sits beside Tashkent's principal **Juma (Friday) mosque** on a hill overlooking Chorsu Bazaar. The 15th-century mosque was once a place of execution for unfaithful wives. The mosque was a sheet-metal workshop and the medressa a storage space during Soviet times. Both were renovated in the mid-'90s, and on warm Friday mornings the plaza in front overflows with worshippers.

KHAST IMOM

The official religious centre of the republic is located 2km north of the Circus, on Zargaynar. Here you'll find the newly restored **Moyie Mubarek Library Museum** (☎ 160 03 02; Zargaynar 114; admission 1200S; ☎ 9am-4pm), which houses the 7th-century Osman Quran (Uthman Quran), said to be the world's oldest. This enormous deerskin tome was brought to Samarkand by Timur, then taken to Moscow by the Russians in 1868 before being returned to Tashkent by Lenin in 1924 as an act of goodwill towards Turkestan's Muslims. It is Tashkent's most impressive and important sight. The museum also contains 20,000 additional books and 3000 rare manuscripts. The library is next to the spartan **Telyashayakh Mosque**.

Across the street is the 16th-century **Barakhon Medressa**, which houses the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, whose grand mufti is roughly the Islamic equivalent of an archbishop. Northwest of here is the **Imam Ismail al-Bukhari Islamic Institute**, a two-year post-medressa academy with about 200 students. It was one of two medressas in Central Asia left open in Soviet times (the other was in Bukhara). Nearby is the little 16th-century **mausoleum of Abu Bakr Kaffal Shoshi**, an Islamic scholar of the Shaybanid period. Enter

through the back to view his large tomb and five smaller ones.

Yunus Khan Mausoleum

Across Navoi from the Navoi Literary Museum are three 15th-century mausoleums. The biggest, on the grounds of the Tashkent Islamic University, bears the name of Yunus Khan, grandfather of the Mughal emperor Babur. The mausoleum itself sits locked and idle, but you can check out its attractive Timurid-style *pishtak* (entrance portal). Access is from Abdulla Qodiri. Two smaller mausoleums are east of the university grounds, accessible via a small side street running north from Navoi – the pointy-roofed **Qaldirgochbiy** and the twin-domed **Shaykh Hovandi Tahir**. Next to the latter is a mosque with beautifully carved wooden doors and attractive tilework.

Museums & Galleries

The **History Museum of the People of Uzbekistan** (☎ 139 17 79; Sharaf Rashidova 30; admission 3000S, guided tour in English 2000S, ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a must-stop for anyone looking for a primer on the history of Turkestan from ancient times to the present. The 1st floor has ancient Zoroastrian and Buddhist artefacts, including a small Buddha from a Kushan temple excavated at Fayoz-Tepe near Termiz. On the 2nd floor English placards walk you through the Russian conquests of the khanates and emirates, and there are some foreboding newspaper clippings of revolts in Andijon and elsewhere being brutally suppressed by the Russians around the turn of the 20th century. The 3rd floor, naturally, is dedicated to Karimov. A placard contains what is surely one of Karimov's more ironic quotes. About the Soviet Union, he says: 'Socialist transformation lead to the creation of the totalitarian state, coercive nationalisation of the economy, elimination of political pluralism and greatly damaged national originality.'

The four floors of the **Fine Arts Museum of Uzbekistan** (☎ 136 74 36; Movarounnaxr 16; admission 3000S; ☎ 10am-5pm Wed-Sun, 10am-2pm Mon) walk you through 1500 years of art in Uzbekistan, from 7th-century Buddhist relics, to the art of pre-Russian Turkestan, to Soviet realism, to contemporary works. There are displays of east Asian and south Asian art and even a few c-19th century paintings of second-tier Russian and European artists hanging about. Nineteenth- and 20th-century Central Asian

masters are well represented, and there's an impressive section on Uzbek applied art – notably some brilliant old plaster carvings (*ghanch*) and the silk-on-cotton embroidered hangings called *suzani*.

The **Museum of Applied Arts** (☎ 153 39 43; Raktoboshi 15; admission 1200S, guide 2000S; ☎ 9am-6pm) occupies an exquisite house full of bright *ghanch* and carved wood. It was built in the 1930s, at the height of the Soviet period, but nonetheless serves as a good sneak preview of the older architectural lurking in Bukhara and Samarkand. The ceramic and textile displays here, with English descriptions, are a fine way to bone up the regional decorative styles of Uzbekistan, and there's a pricey gift shop to trap impulse buyers.

The richly decorated **Amir Timur Museum** (☎ 133 62 28; Amir Timur 1; admission 3000S; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is a must for aficionados of kitsch and cult-making. Murals show Timur commissioning public projects and praising his labourers, yet conspicuously overlooking his bloody, skull-stacking military campaigns.

The recently opened **Art Gallery of Uzbekistan** (☎ 133 56 74; Buyuk Turon 2; admission 400S, guided tour 2000S; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sat) rolls out rotating exhibits of Uzbekistan's top contemporary artists in its circular, Guggenheim-like interior.

Besides memorabilia of 15th-century poet Alisher Navoi and other Central Asian literati, the **Navoi Literary Museum** (☎ 144 12 68; Navoi 69; admission 3000S; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) has replica manuscripts, Persian calligraphy, and old miniatures that offer a glimpse of life in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Navoi Park

Downtown Tashkent's largest park, sprawling southward from Halqlar Dustligi metro, is a haven for joggers, Sunday strollers, and appreciators of Uzbek eccentricity. Soviet architects had a field day here, erecting a pod of spectacularly hideous concrete monstrosities, the most eye-catching of which is the **Peoples' Friendship Palace**, which appears like a moon-landing station from a 1950s film set. Looming inside is an enormous concert hall with 4200 seats.

Southeast of the Friendship Palace is the equally appalling **Wedding Palace**, a vulgar, crooked chunk of Khrushchev-era concrete. The tightly guarded building southwest of the Friendship Palace is the **Oliy Majlis** (parliament). It currently functions as a giant rubber stamp

in its infrequent sessions. Nearby is a vast promenade and a post-Soviet **monument to Alisher Navoi**, Uzbekistan's newly chosen cultural hero.

Continuing south you'll find some amusement park rides and a large manmade lake, which you can traverse in hired peddle boats in the warm months.

Other Sights

Tashkent's main streets radiate from **Amir Timur maydoni**, where a glowering bust of Marx has been replaced by a suitably patriotic **statue of Timur** on horseback. A glance under the statue reveals that the stallion has been divested of a certain reproductive appendage. Just who stole it is one of Tashkent's great mysteries. Fortunately the horse's formidable family jewels remain intact – for now.

Further west, good-luck pelicans guard the gates to the newly refurbished **Mustaqillik maydoni** (Independence Sq), where crowds gather to watch parades on Independence day and whenever else Karimov feels the need to stir up a bit of nationalistic spirit. The shiny white edifice on the west side of the square is the brand new **Senate** building. Its ample size and appearance suggest that it was built to outdo the United State's Senate building. The president's office and most ministries take up the southern portion around Gagarin maydoni. East of the square across Rashidova, the animal-festooned façade of the Tsarist-era **Romanov Palace** faces the Art Gallery of Uzbekistan, and is now closed to the public.

North of Mustaqillik maydoni is the **Crying Mother Monument**. Fronted by an eternal flame, it was constructed in 1999 to honour the 400,000 Uzbek soldiers who died in WWII. The niches along its two corridors house their names. Karimov has built a nearly identical monument near the centre of most major Uzbek cities. Hey, at least he's not building Turkmenbashi-style monuments to himself.

The New Soviet men and women who rebuilt Tashkent after the 1966 earthquake are remembered in stone at the **Earthquake Memorial**. Newlyweds flock here to have their photos taken on weekends.

The **TV Tower** (Amir Timur; admission 400S; ☎ 10am-9pm Tue-Sun), a 375m three-legged monster, the epitome of Soviet design, stands north of the InterContinental. The price of admission gets you up to the 100m viewing platform. You'll need your passport to buy a ticket. To go up

to the next level (about 220m) you'll have to grease the guard's palm – 2000S should do the trick. At 110m there's a revolving restaurant that serves a decidedly mediocre set Russian meal (3100S).

At the other end of town, Babur Park is home to the poignant **Seattle Peace Park**, a collection of small tiles designed by Tashkent- and Seattle-based schoolchildren in the 1980s. The tiles, many of which are cracked or missing, recall the Cold War era with messages such as 'You can't hug your child with nuclear arms', in Russian or English.

Near Mirobod Bazaar is one of Tashkent's four Orthodox churches, the **Assumption Cathedral** (Uspenskiy Sobor), which is bright blue with copper domes. A **German Protestant Church**, once used as a recital hall and now holding Lutheran services again, is on Azimova.

It's worth taking the metro to reach some of these sites, if only to visit some of the lavishly decorated stations. A must is the Kosmonavtlar station with its unearthly images of Amir Timur's astronomer grandson, Ulugbek, and Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, among others.

ACTIVITIES

Thanks to President Karimov's personal affinity for the game, tennis courts have sprung up across the country. You can rent equipment and play at one of the eight courts of the **Yunus Obad Sport Club** (☎ 134 77 60; Amir Timur; per hr 5000-7000S) in the shadow of the TV Tower. The club also boasts an ocean-sized Olympic **pool** (per hr 5000S). Another option for tennis, swimming and gym is **Sports Club NBU** (☎ 268 44 59/69; Oqqurgan 16; ☎ 6am-9pm), located about 600m east of Khamid Olimjon metro.

There are a couple of places to go bowling, including **Yulduz Bowling Alley** (☎ 132 20 02; Amir Timur 60; 3000S per game; ☎ 10am-midnight) and **Z Bowling** (☎ 132 17 84; Uzbekistan 8/1).

Runners and walkers can join the local branch of the **Hash House Harriers** as they cruise the streets of Tashkent every Sunday before re-pairing to the nearest watering hole. Hashers meet at the Hotel Uzbekistan (5pm summer, 4pm spring and fall, and 3pm winter). Call or email organiser **Charles Rudd** (☎ 139 13 02; rudd@interconcepts.com) to confirm times.

The **Tashkent Hiking Club** (tashkenthikingclub@yahoo.com) goes hiking around Chimgan every other Sunday and takes occasional weekend excursions further afield.

The Korean-designed **Tashkent Lakeside Golf Club** (☎ 195 09 912/3; tashgolf@dostlink.net; Bektemir District 1; 1 round US\$62) is at Lake Rokhat, on the southeast edge of the city.

Just north of the InterContinental, Uzbekistan's largest amusement park, **Tashkent Land** (Amir Timur; adult/child 5000/2500S; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun), has a handful of creaky Soviet rides. It's an amusing diversion, just don't expect Walt Disney World. More worthwhile in the warm months is the **Aqua Park** (Amir Timur; adult/child 3000/1500S; ☎ 9am-8pm May-Sep) just north of Tashkent Land.

TOURS

There aren't any organised city tours per se, but most fancier hotels and travel agencies can whip up a guide for no more than US\$5 per hour, or US\$30 per day.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Tashkent hosts the 14-day international music festival **II Khom 20** (Inspiration 20) annually in March or April. It features avant-garde and New Age music, and is held in the new Tashkent State Conservatory (p207). During even-numbered years Tashkent hosts a **film festival** in September featuring Asian, African and Latin American films.

SLEEPING

The foreign operators of several of Tashkent's fancier hotels pulled out of Uzbekistan in the wake of the 2005 Andijon incident, turning management over to the state. These hotels, including the Markazi (formerly the Sheraton) and Tashkent Palace (formerly Le Meridien), have gone downhill in terms of service and maintenance, but the flipside is that they have become fantastically cheap. Simply ask and you shall receive at least a 50% discount off the rack rate – not bad considering that their four-star facilities remain basically intact.

Alas, there's no such buyer's market at the budget end. The Tara Hotel, once Tashkent's main backpacker ghetto, no longer accepts foreigners. Homestays are technically illegal and thus operate in the shadows. You can try asking about them at the Makler (p204) or at any taxi stand.

Budget

Hotel Hadra (☎ 244 28 08; Ghafur Ghulom 53A; 2-bed dm 4000S) The darkest hole in all of Central Asia is a bit brighter thanks to an application of paint

to the walls of at least one room. But it's still pretty dark, and it still doubles as a decidedly low-class brothel. It's in an dank apartment block next to the Circus.

Komnata Otdikha (☎ 199 76 49; Vokzal; 3-bed dm 7000S, r/stc US\$20/25; ☎) It's a spectacular deal and, for now at least, it's brand new. The rooms are bright, white, clean and huge, and the dorm rooms ideal for three people. Its location inside the train station makes it a top draw, so get there early or try calling ahead if you know some Russian or Uzbek.

Gulnara Guesthouse (☎ 160 28 16; gulnara@globalnet.uz; Usmon Khojaev 40; per person US\$15; ☎) Cheap prices, filling breakfasts and an Old Town location make this friendly, family-run B&B a hit with backpackers. The rooms are nothing to write home about but the Soviet-style single beds are comfortable enough. It's hard to find; from Chorsu Bazaar head west on Beruni and take a right after 400m on the first real street, Usmon Khojaev (Azad). It's about 150m to the guesthouse on the left.

our pick B+B Ali Tour (☎ 153 71 62; ali_tour@tk.uz; Vokhidova 26/2; s/d/tr US\$15/30/39, 4-person apt US\$60; ☎) The Soviet charms of owner Alisher Khabibullaev and the convivial, slapdash nature of his guesthouse are just the tonic to ease you into the chaotic embrace of travel in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. English and French is spoken, and assistance with travel arrangements offered – along with plenty of free vodka and a free dinner or two if you stick around long enough.

Midrange

Sam Buh Hotel (☎ 120 88 26; Tsekhovaya 1; www.traveluz.com; s/d US\$25/30; ☎) Sam Buh's rooms trump those of the nearby Orzu Hotel in terms of space, although couples will have to make do with twin beds. It is a bit hard to find, so call for a pick-up.

Orzu Hotel (☎ 120 88 22; www.orzu-hotels.com; Ivleva 14; s/d US\$25/35; ☎) Friendly English-speaking service is the high-point here. The 36 rooms are small but smart and include satellite TV and a large buffet breakfast of crepes, eggs, cereal and juice. Request a room off the busy street.

our pick Poytaht (☎ 120 86 76; www.poytaht.uz; Movarounnakh 4; s/d US\$40/60; ☎) Of all the great deals to be had at the mid- to top end in Tashkent, the Poytaht is the best. It's no Intercon service-wise, but you won't be complaining about the comfy king-sized beds, tidy and

spacious Scandinavian-style rooms, sumptuous buffet breakfast and pond-sized swimming pool – all within a pomegranate throw of central Amir Timur maydoni. Try negotiating a further US\$5 to US\$10 discount.

Markaziy Hotel (☎ 138 30 00; markaziy.hotel@mail.ru; Amir Timur 15; s/d US\$70/90; 🏠 📺 📶 🚰) The Markaziy has suffered less than others from its transition from private to state ownership. Most of the glorious vestiges of its four-star past remain, including two pools, inviting king-sized beds with fine linens, smart art and, most importantly, rooms with space to swing a giraffe. Negotiate hard here. Prices listed are before discounts.

Also recommended:

Grand Orzu Hotel (☎ 120 88 77; www.orzu-hotels.com; 27 Tarobi; s/d US\$33/38; 🏠 📺 📶) Highlight is the pleasant poolside patio; pay the extra US\$10 extra for the huge suite.

Tashkent Palace (☎ 120 5800; www.tashkent-palace.com; Buyuk Turon 56; s/d US\$120/130; 🏠 📺 📶 🚰) Can't beat the location near Opera House. Negotiate hard. Prices listed are before discounts.

Top End

Dedeman Silk Road (☎ 120 37 00; Amir Timur 7/8; www.dedemanhotels.com; s/d US\$160/180; 🏠 📺 📶 🚰) This Turkish-run high-rise delivers spiffy business-standard rooms, free high-speed internet access and nearly flawless service in the centre of the city. In the wake of Tashkent's great hotel ownership shuffle, the Dedeman has emerged, along with the Intercon, as the favourite among foreign businessmen. Unlike the Intercon, staff are open to negotiations here – expect to pay about US\$90 for a double.

Hotel InterContinental (Intercon; ☎ 120 70 00; www.hotelintercontinental.com; tashkent@interconti.com; Amir Timur 107A; s/d US\$235/255/400; 🏠 📺 📶 🚰) Just north of the city centre, this is the city's best hotel, with unmatched service and a full range of business and leisure facilities: indoor swimming pool, business centre, a bookshop, boutiques, free wi-fi in the lobby and several excellent restaurants. The rooms lack character but have every amenity you could want.

Also recommended:

Grand Mir (☎ 140 20 00; www.grandmirhotel.com; Mirobod 2; s/d US\$120/160; 🏠 📺 📶) This Turkish-owned outfit is a behemoth, but a fine behemoth.

Radisson (☎ 120 49 00; www.radisson.com; Amir Timur 88; s/d US\$125/140; 🏠 📺 📶 🚰) Small discounts available at this cozy four-star stand-by.

Rental Accommodation

A short walk east down Musakhanov from Amir Timur maydoni is a bus depot where a dozen or so apartment brokers gather informally at a spot called **Makler** (house market; Khorezm). Weekly rental prices start at about US\$100 for a basic studio apartment, but hard negotiations should bring that down substantially. You'll need to visit in person to negotiate.

Arostr (p199) has two self-contained apartments for US\$25 in the city centre.

EATING

National, European, Middle Eastern and of course Russian cuisine are all well represented in Tashkent, although good Southeast Asian food is hard to come by. For lunch on Tuesday and Friday try the 4000S Indonesian smor-

gabsord served up from noon to 2pm at the Indonesian Embassy (p262).

Cafés, Chaikhanas & Fast Food

For cheap eats and cheap beer there are hundreds of street-side cafés, Korean noodle outfits and shashlyk stands to choose from; one cluster is on Mirobod, 500m south of the Uzbekistan Airways booking office. The many chaikhanas (teahouses) around Chorsu Bazaar are both cheap and colourful. Hygiene is variable; look for high turnover and service right off the fire.

Darkhan (Pushkin; kebabs 500-1000S, 0.5L beer 400S) Cheap and fast outdoor food court with big wooden tables shaded by trees. There are several stalls here serving *laghman* (noodles), *samsa* (samosas), kebabs, salads and some of the cheapest beer in town.

Mir Food Court (Ataturk 1; meals 1000-3000S) This is where well-heeled teenagers gather to preen in the city's best approximation of a Western fast-food court, with pasta, burgers, sandwiches and kebabs on offer. A coffee shop on the top floor of the mall serves a decent cup of coffee.

Café Sharshara (☎ 144 58 35; Bobojonova 10; mains 3000S) Chaikhana real estate comes no riper than the cansalide patch occupied by this popular Old Town stand-by. The sprawling patio is cooled by gentle mist from the rumbling manmade waterfall on premises, making it an almost perfect warm-weather spot for a shashlyk and a cold Shimkent (1500S). There's live evening entertainment in the warm months.

Il Perfecto (☎ 153 28 52; Mirobod 9A; mains 3000-5000S; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The impressive coffee menu and reliable free wi-fi access here are a godsend for guidebook writers and other laptop-addicted souls, but unconscionably they don't open until 11am. Also serves OK Italian food.

Home Restaurants

One place to taste true Uzbek cooking is in an Old Town home restaurant. These establishments have no signs or shop fronts – just tables in a courtyard, where you're served one or two simple dishes, plus tea or beer.

One such neighbourhood, called Chigatay, contains dozens of these establishments. Boys practically drag you off the street for the midday and evening (after 7pm) meals. From Tinchlik metro, walk to the closest traf-

fic signal on the main street, Beruni prospekti, and turn right into Akademik Sadikov. Most of the home restaurants are between five and 10 minutes, walk along (or just off) this street. Look to pay about 3000S per dish.

Restaurants

Ourpick Al Delfeen (☎ 133 19 85; Malyasova 3; appetizers 1500, mains 3000-5000S) There are simply not enough superlatives in the English language to describe the cuisine at this Syrian restaurant. Load up on appetizers such as *baba ganush* (eggplant purée), hummus, falafel, *samsa* and tabbouleh, all redolent with ancient spices and bathing in exotic oils. If you still have room, dive right into the equally scrumptious mains – try the *mosakan* (chicken cooked with sumac and olive oil). Once you're finished, lie back on your outdoor *tapchan* (bedlike sitting platform) and send wisps of heavenly *shisha* (hookah) smoke skyward whilst marvelling at your luck for finding such a place.

Sunduk (☎ 132 11 46; Azimova 63; mains 2500-4000S; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The designers of this diminutive eatery, kitted out like a French country kitchen, were just begging for it to be called 'cute'. We'll not only oblige them, but also point out that their European cuisine is excellent, as is the handwriting on their menus – on homemade paper, no less. Its 5000S business lunch is popular with the diplomatic set, many of whom work nearby.

Dervish (mains 2500-4500S) It's mud-walled dining at its best in this caravanserai-style restaurant known for its homemade wine and reasonable prices. Beautiful trinkets, Rish-ton ceramics, and *suzani* line the walls of the vaguely cave-like interior. There's a patio for claustrophobic types. The eclectic dishes ooze local flavours and have cheeky names such as 'Egyptian Nights', and 'Arabian Fairly Tales' (chicken fillet with honey, nuts and butter).

Efendi (☎ 133 15 02; Azimova 79A; kebabs 3000-4000S) There's a menu here but don't bother – just saunter inside and choose from among the hundreds of kebabs and mouth-watering Turkish salads on display in glass refrigerators. In no time you'll be back outside enjoying your booty on the pleasant if somewhat noisy – and nonalcoholic – streetside patio.

Manas Art Café (☎ 152 38 11; Miraliko; mains 3000-5000S; 🍷 lunch & dinner) To dine in a yurt without schlepping over the desert on a camel, head here. There's a large yurt tastefully done up in traditional style and a smaller 'modern

PLOV GLORIOUS PLOV

Few things excite the Uzbek palate like *plov*, that wonderful conglomeration of rice, vegetables and meat bits swimming in lamb fat and oil. This Central Asian staple has been elevated to the status of religion in Uzbekistan, the country with which it is most closely associated. Each province has its own style, which locals loudly and proudly proclaim is the best in Uzbekistan – and by default the world. That *plov* is an aphrodisiac goes without saying. Uzbeks joke that the word for 'foreplay' in Uzbek is '*plov*'. Men put the best cuts of meat in the *plov* on Thursday; not coincidentally, Thursday's when most Uzbek babies are conceived. Drinking the oil at the bottom of the *kazan* (large *plov* cauldron) is said to add particular spark to a man's libido.

To sample *plov* styles from various regions of the country – and drink the oil if you dare – head to the celebration of *plov* that is the **Central Asian Plov Centre** (Cnr Ergashev & Abdurashidov; meals 2000S; 🍷 lunch). Get there before noon for the best selection. Walk past the mob of people crowding around steaming *kazans* and take a seat inside, where a waitress will eventually come and serve you. Your group's order will arrive Uzbek-style on a single plate from which everybody will eat. The best day to come? Why Thursday, of course!

yurt' with *shisha* pipes and chill-out tunes. The Uzbek–Euro fusion food is excellent and priced right, but if you're planning on having 12 beers go elsewhere – the cheapest here is 4000S! Reservations recommended.

Caravan (☎ 255 62 96; Abdulla Qahhor 22; mains from 4000S; ☎ lunch & dinner) Tashkent's quintessential theme restaurant is tarted up like a made-for-Hollywood Uzbek home. Its Westernised Uzbek cuisine is tasty, but comes saddled with bill-inflating service and 'entertainment' charges. The attached store is filled with crafts from all over the country and is open late, making Caravan a great place for both a nibble and a last-minute gift-buying spree.

Bistro (☎ 152 11 12; Movarounnakh 33; mains 4000–8000S; ☎ lunch & dinner) This scrumptious Italian eatery serves up large portions of pasta, pizza and grilled meats along with bottles of Uzbek or Georgian wines. The Roquefort salad is to die for. It's in a candle-lit, courtyard setting, with live music. Next door are three sister restaurants – Omar Khayyam (Lebanese), Shintaco (Japanese) and La Casa (Mexican). The latter morphs into the Ché nightclub in the evening (opposite).

Han Kuk Kwan (☎ 152 33 22; Yusuf Khos Khodjib; mains 5000–7000S; ☎ lunch & dinner) Tashkent's large population of ethnic Koreans is what drives demand for all those Korean restaurants around town. Han Kuk Kwan is one of the nicer places, serving up platters full of small salads and main dishes such as *bi-bim-bab*, made with rice, egg and chopped meat. Large portions partially offset the high prices.

Tandoori (☎ 133 53 92; Chekhova 5; mains 6000–8000S; ☎ lunch & dinner) Formerly Taj, this long-time favourite continues to churn out Tashkent's best Indian food – including a plethora of veg options. It was never long on character, but that may change thanks to renovations being done at the time of research. If not, you can always escape to the rooftop dining area.

Self-Catering

Western-style supermarkets and minimarkets (p208) are now abundant but for fresh produce you are much better off at a farmers market (p208).

DRINKING

Ye Olde Chelsea Arms (Abdulla Qahhor 25; mains 5000–12,000S) It's grossly overpriced and the gaudy décor will hardly make real Londoners feel at home, but it fills up every night and outdraws

Tashkent's two Irish pubs. It's also the only place in Tashkent where you can recline in a streetside 'throne booth' and nibble on Welsh rabbit (12,000S).

Studio Café (Toi-Tepa 1, cnr Azimova; ☎ 11am–midnight) The nouveau riche Uzbek crowd and hip, Hollywood-themed interior belie that you can actually get a reasonably priced beer here – a pint of Shimkent costs 1500S. The streetside patio is sweet, while inside bartenders adeptly shake up a dizzying array of cocktails to the beat of crisp-sounding Russian and Western pop.

Tri Bochki (Three Barrels; Navoi 2; mains 3000–5000S, 0.3/0.5L beer 594/990S, evening entertainment charge 594S) Occupying a prime, shady nook right on Ankhor Canal, this brewpub-restaurant has some of the best – and best-priced – homebrew in town. The house recipe was supposedly invented by German monks in 1514. There's live jazz by night and an equally cacophonous chorus of birdsong by day. From the bridge near Turkeston Palace on Navoi walk 50m north, passing two other restaurants on the way.

Gasthaus (Fargona Yuli 7; 0.5L beer 1000–1500S) Spry waitresses in German country outfits serve up foaming litre steins of homemade brew to the strains of oompah music in this *biergarten* by a busy *autobahn*. The unfiltered brew is particularly endearing and goes well with the real Bavarian sausages (6000S). The summer patio is popular despite the street noise and the 20% service charge.

ENTERTAINMENT

Opera, theatre and ballet options are readily available, most catering to an older crowd with the exception of the Ilkhom Theatre. To get their groove on, Uzbeks gravitate to 'dance bars'. These quintessential Central Asian nightclubs are basically restaurants that morph into rollicking dance parties once dinner's over. Lengthy floor shows are *de rigueur* at such places, and the shenanigans can last until 2am or later. Regular nightclubs stay open until 4am but may close earlier on weekdays.

Cinemas

Panorama (☎ 144 51 60; Navoi 15; 1200S) Tashkent's biggest movie theatre, although films are dubbed into Russian.

Premier Cinema Hall (☎ 152 16 25; www.premier.uz; cnr Usmon Nosir & Mirobod) Occasionally shows movies in English on request.

Nightclubs

Ché (☎ 132 21 51; Movarounnakh 33; ☎) Mexican restaurant by day, Ché turns into a cosy, loungey club by night that plays good chillout music and draws an alternative crowd. It might be dead or it might be really, really happening.

Sky Club (☎ 120 66 00; Uzbekistan 2; cover 3000S, women admitted free except Sat) As other clubs have come and gone like so many Tashkent NGOs, Sky Club, on the 14th floor of Le Grande Plaza hotel, remains popular year-in, year-out. Its giant, flashing Twister board of a dance floor will either serve as a cheap thrill or make you want to jump out the window, depending on how much alcohol you've consumed.

SMI (☎ 152 57 53; Oybek 32) More bar than nightclub, this is where people gravitate after an evening of club hopping. The flow of so many inebriated people to one place can have a creative effect on the environment. As one British expat put it, 'SMI morphs into whatever you want it to be at six in the morning'. SMI is the Russian acronym for 'mass media', and the walls pay due homage to the honourable craft of the scribbler.

Diplomat-5 (Navoi) The place has a nutty, slutty streak that belies its serious name. One of the few clubs where you can still be making poor lifestyle decisions at 3am on a Tuesday night.

Check out Uzbeks in their element at two of the best dance bars in town, **Alis** (☎ 300 96 69; Mashkhadiy 21; admission weekends 2000S, weekdays free) and **Baccara** (☎ 137 63 58; cnr Amir Timur & Qayumova; admission weekends 2000S, weekdays free). Reserve a table ahead of time on weekends because you need a seat to get in.

Sport

Soccer matches are held at the **Pakhtakor (Cotton Picker stadium)**, in the central park between Uzbekistan and Navoi. Tickets (local matches 500S to 1500S, international matches 8000S) can be bought directly from the stadium box office.

Theatres & Concert Halls

Tashkent has a full cultural life, some of it, such as drama, of interest mainly to Uzbek and Russian speakers.

Alisher Navoi Opera & Ballet Theatre (☎ 133 90 81; Ataturk 28; admission 1500S; ☎) box office 10am–7pm show days, performances 6pm Mon–Fri, 5pm & noon matinees some weekends), where you can enjoy quality classical Western opera almost any night

(except during the months June to August) at Alisher Navoi, one of Central Asia's best cultural bargains and a highlight for all visitors to Tashkent. Shows change daily – in just a week you can see *Swan Lake*, *Carmen*, *Rigoletto* and the Uzbek opera *Timur the Great*. The interior harbours various regional artistic styles – a different one in each room – executed by the best artisans of the day, and under the direction of the architect of Lenin's tomb in Moscow. Japanese prisoner of wars constructed the building itself in 1947. For 3000S you can take a self-guided tour (book at the box office), but it's cheaper to see a show!

Ilkhom Theatre (☎ 142 2241; www.ilkhom.com; Pakhtakor 5; tickets 2500–5500S; ☎) box office 11am–6.30pm, shows 6.30pm Tue–Sun) Tashkent's other main cultural highlight is this progressive theatre, which stages productions in Russian but occasionally has English subtitles. Known for bucking trends, its productions often touch on gay themes and racial subjects, putting off some locals but thrilling Tashkent's expat community, many of whom are big supporters of the theatre. You'll see such oddities as Shakespeare plays entwined with Beatles music. The theatre also stages occasional jazz concerts as well as art exhibitions in its lobby.

Other theatres of interest:

Academic Russian Drama Theatre (☎ 133 81 65; Ataturk 24; 1000–3000S; ☎) shows 6.30pm Mon–Fri, 7pm Sat & Sun) Classical Western drama in Russian.

Muqimi Musical Theatre (☎ 395 36 55, Almazar 187; tickets 1500S; ☎) shows 6pm) Best bet for traditional Uzbek folk singing, dancing and operettas such as *Brothers, Matchmakers* and *Bridegroom's Contest*.

Peoples' Friendship Palace (☎ 395 92 51; Halqlar Dustligi maydoni) Big events are staged here, including pop concerts.

Tashkent State Conservatory (☎ 241 29 91; Abai 1) Chamber concerts, Uzbek and Western vocal and instrumental recitals in an impressive new edifice. Entrance is around the back.

Uzbek Milliy Akademik Drama Theatre (☎ 144 17 51; Navoi 34; tickets 2000S; ☎) shows 6.30pm) Uzbek and classical Western drama in Uzbek language.

SHOPPING Handicrafts & Art

Abulkasim Medressa (Navoi Park; ☎) 9am–6pm) Close to the Oliy Majlis in Navoi Park, this medressa has been turned into an artisans' school and workshop where local painters, lacquer workers and potters ply and teach their craft. It's a great place to buy the fruits of their labour,

plus souvenirs such as rugs, *suzani* and ceramics brought in from the regions. Up on the 2nd floor, Andijon native Madraimov Abdumalik Abduraimovich fashions fine traditional Uzbek musical instruments and can wax eloquent in English about the nuances of the *dutar* (two-stringed guitar), *tambur* (long-necked string instruments) and *rabab* (six-stringed mandolin).

Human House (☎ 361 38 38; www.humanhuman.net; Usmon Nosir 30/9; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) Thus shop not only has a good selection of carpets, skull caps, *suzani* and other textiles from various Uzbek provinces, but also doubles as one of Tashkent's most fashionable boutiques, featuring modern clothing infused with Uzbek styles and designs. It also stages quarterly fashion shows to exhibit the work of its hand-picked designers. Human House's Unesco-supported latest project, dubbed Human Made, is a silk-making and weaving school/factory on the outskirts of town. 'We are going to build our own generation of weavers to help revive the craft of textiles in Tashkent', says commercial director Dina Malkova. The factory will offer tours similar to those given by the Yodgorlik Silk Factory in Margilon (p220) and should be open by the time you read this.

Caravan (☎ 255 62 96; Abdulla Qahhor 22) A gallery, studio and café all rolled into one. The prices are competitive with shops across the country, so it makes a reasonable place to stock up on items you might have missed while travelling. The ceramics of Rustam Usmanov and other Rishton masters are sold here (p221).

Rakhimov Ceramics Studio (☎ 149 04 35; www.rakhimovceramic.org; Kukcha Darbaza 15; ☎ by appointment) As much museum as a ceramics shop (p232).

Most museums and top-end hotels have overpriced souvenir shops, including the Museum of Applied Arts (p201) and the Fine Arts Museum (see p201).

Open-Air Bazaars

Tezykovka (Tolarik 1; ☎ Sun) The local, vast 'flea market'. Also known as Yangiobod Market, this sombre sea of junk – 'anything from nails to nukes' as one resident put it – is located in the Khamza district, and reached by bus 30 from the Mustaqqilik metro. Keep a close watch on your purse or wallet in this or any bazaar.

In warm weather, a big goods bazaar sprawls by the **Ippodrom** (Halqlar Dustligi prospekti;

☎ Tue-Sun). The biggest day by far is on Sunday. The Ippodrom is 2km southwest from Sobir Rahimov metro.

FARMERS MARKETS

Tashkent has at least 16 open-air farmers markets or bazaars (Uzbek: *dekhqon bozori*, Russian: *rynok*). The following are the most interesting to visit:

Chorsu Bazaar See p200.

Mirobod Bazaar (Gospitalny) A fiesta of fruit bathing in the teal-green glow of its giant, octagonal flying saucer of a roof.

Oloy Bazaar (Alaysky; Amir Timur) This heavily policed market lacks the character of Chorsu, but will serve you well if your hotel is in the Amir Timur maydoni area.

Supermarkets

The biggest supermarket in downtown Tashkent is on the ground floor of **Turkuaz Hypermart** (formerly GUM; Akhunbabaev Sq; ☎ 9am-8.30pm), at the west end of Navoi across the street from the mothballed Hotel Chorsu. This is also probably your best bet for Western brand-name clothing and travel accessories such as money belts and rucksacks.

Around Broadway, you can get Western-brand food and toiletries at the large and modern **Mir supermarket** (Ataturk 1; ☎ 9am-9pm). The best choice along busy Amir Timur is **Ardu** (Amir Timur 3; ☎ 9am-8pm). **Korzinka.uz supermarket** (Azimova; ☎ 8am-10pm) is smaller; there is another branch on Yunus Rajabiy, south of Kosmonavtlar metro. **Ozbeqim supermarket** (Afrosiab 41; ☎ 8.30am-9pm) is near Oybek metro. All have imported Western foods, though the selection tends to vary from week to week.

Silk

They don't have the atmosphere of the bazaars, but for the best prices and a surprisingly good selection of silk by the metre, try the big department stores (*univermag*) – **TsUM** (cnr Uzbekistan, near Sharaf Rashidova) in the centre and Turkuaz Hypermart (see above).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Domestic flights leave from the domestic terminal, about 150m from the international terminal, 6km south of the centre.

From Tashkent, Uzbekistan Airways flies to Andijon (one way US\$31, 1½ hours, five weekly), Bukhara (US\$36, 1½ hours, at least daily except Saturday), Fergana (US\$30, one

hour, daily except Sunday), Nukus (US\$51, 1½ hours, twice daily), Termez (US\$40, 1½ hours, three daily), Samarkand (US\$22, one hour, five weekly) and Urgench (US\$55, one hour, three daily).

Most of the above routes are serviced by a mix of Boeings and Russian planes such as Tupolevs and Yaks. If you are leery of the latter, pick up a timetable at the Uzbekistan Airways office to see what is flying where.

AIRLINE OFFICES

British Airways pulled out of Uzbekistan in early 2007 on the heels of exits by Air France and KLM. These airlines might return if Uzbek-EU relations improve. The airlines listed below can still be found in Tashkent.

Aeroflot (☎ 220 05 55 Abdulla Qodiri 1A; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat) Daily flights to Moscow (US\$425 return).

AK Kyrgyzstan (formerly Altyr Air; ☎ 152 16 45; Mirobod 27) Daily to Bishkek (one way US\$140).

Asiana Airlines (☎ 40 09 01; Afrosiab 16) Office was relocating at the time of research. Round-trip to Seoul for US\$1000.

Iran Air (☎ 133 81 63; Azimova 1) Flies to Tehran (one way/return US\$346/543) on Monday.

Lufthansa (☎ 137 60 65; tasgulh@dlh.de; Hotel InterContinental, Amir Timur 107A) Services most major world cities via Uzbekistan Airways planes to Frankfurt; final destination cannot be Frankfurt.

Transaero (☎ 139 99 35; Halqlar Dustligi 6A) Moscow (one way US\$256) three times a week.

Turkish Airlines (☎ 136 79 89; Navoi 11A) Istanbul (one way/return US\$423/510) four times a week.

BUYING TICKETS

Outbound tickets are best bought at the **Uzbekistan Airways booking office** (☎ 066, 140 02 00; www.uzairways.com; Usmon Nosir 9; ☎ 8am-7pm). An information desk in the centre of the book-

ing office will direct you towards an English-speaking agent. There is a money exchange office in the same building. Most private travel agencies can book international flights only. You can buy last-minute tickets on domestic flights from a little booth inside the domestic terminal. For more tips, see p266.

Bus & Shared Taxi

Private buses, marshrutkas and shared taxis to Samarkand, Bukhara and Urgench leave from a lot on Halqlar Dustligi kochahsi, about 7km southwest of Navoi Park near Sobir Rahimov metro. The main lot for buses and other vehicles to Termez and Qarshi is in the huge private bus yard behind the Ippodrom Bazaar, 3km beyond Sobir Rahimov metro on Halqlar Dustligi. Tashkent's **public bus station** (Halqlar Dustligi), across the street from Sobir Rahimov metro, serves mainly regions around Tashkent and is of little use to travellers.

There are two main departure points for shared taxis and marshrutkas to the Fergana Valley: the parking lot of the train station; and Qoyloq Bazaar, about 10 minutes east of Tashkent on the Fergana Hwy. The former is harder to get to but you'll be rewarded with cheaper shared taxis.

For Chingan you'll find shared taxis around Buyuk Ipak Yoli metro (per seat 5000S, 1½ hours). For information on getting to the Tajikistan and Kazakhstan borders, see p266.

There aren't any schedules, but there are dozens of vehicles heading to all of the above destinations throughout the day. There are fewer vehicles to distant Urgench. As long as you don't arrive too late, you'll have no problem finding a ride and should be on your way within an hour. For more land travel hints, see p268.

Sample routes and fares for shared taxis, marshrutkas and buses are below.

BUS, SHARED TAXI & MARSHRUTKA TIMETABLE

Destination	Shared taxi (cost/duration)	Marshrutka (cost/duration)	Bus (cost/duration)
Andijon	12,000S/5hr	8000S/7hr	–
Bukhara	20,000S/7hr	11,000S/8hr	7000S/11 hr
Fergana	12,000S/4hr	7000S/5½hr	–
Kokand	12,000S/3hr	6000S/4hr	–
Samarkand	9000S/3½hr	6000S/4½ hr	3500S/6hr
Termez	25,000S/9½hr	12,000S/14 hr	–
Urgench/Khiva	35,000S/14hr	–	12,000S/20 hr

Train

The most comfortable if not the most flexible way to travel westward from Tashkent is via train out of Tashkent's newly renovated **train station** (vokzal; ☎ 005), next to the Tashkent metro.

There are new 'high-speed' trains with airplane-style seating running to both Samarqand (2nd class/1st class 6500/12,000S, four hours, five times per week at 7am) and Bukhara (2nd class/1st class 11,000/15,000S, eight hours, daily at 8.10am). The Bukhara train, known as the 'Sharq', stops in Samarkand.

Slower but cheaper Soviet-style passenger night trains still trundle to those and other cities. The following prices are for *platskartnyy* (hard sleeper) carriages: Bukhara (11,000S, 12½ hours, daily), Kungrad (via Nukus; 20,000S, 22 hours, twice weekly), Qarshi (14,000S, nine hours, odd days), Samarqand (7500S, six hours, twice daily), and Urgench (17,000S, 20 hours, twice weekly).

Public transport serving the train station includes tram 8 (from Chorsu via Navoi kuchasi), tram 9 (via Usmon Nosir; Shota Rustaveli), bus 60 (from Amir Timur kuchasi) and bus 3 (via Nukus kuchasi). Look for the 'vokzal' sign.

BUYING TICKETS

The main ticket booth is in a separate building around the back and to the right as you face the main lobby of the train station. But foreigners often get directed to a special ticket booth to the left as you enter the lobby. To buy

tickets from the 'locals' booth you first must register with the Office of Visas & Registration (OVIR) in an office toward the back of the main lobby.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Buses are the cheapest way to/from the airport. Coming from the airport, they're also an alternative to the greedy, sometimes crooked, taxi drivers. Unfortunately they stop running at 10.30pm despite the fact that many flights arrive in the middle of the night.

Bus 67 travels up Usmon Nosir to the centre of town, and continues up Amir Timur to the Intercon, a 35-minute journey. Marshrutka 62 follows the same route. Bus 77 goes up Babur to/from Halqlar Dustligi maydoni. Bus 11 runs to/from the Hotel Chorsu via Navoi and Amir Timur maydoni.

The 7km, 20-minute taxi ride to/from the Hotel Uzbekistan should cost no more than 2000S, but an unofficial airport cartel won't accept less than about US\$10 from foreigners for the trip from the airport. They might even tack on a 'luggage fee' equal to double the agreed fare once you reach your destination.

To avoid this, simply walk three minutes out to the main road to hail a cab, or take a bus to the centre and flag down a cheaper taxi there.

If you do end up taking an airport taxi, just make sure to agree on a firm price beforehand.

TAXI TIPS

Every car is a potential taxi in Tashkent, but essentially there are two forms: licensed cabs and 'independent' cabs. The former have little roof-mounted 'taxi' signs. The latter are just average cars driven by average dudes.

Independent taxis generally leave it up to you to pick the price, which is fine. As long as you don't insult them with your offer, they almost always accept it. Give 500S for short trips (less than 2km), 1000S for midrange, 1500S for cross-town, and 2000S to the city's outskirts (ie Ippodrom Bazaar). If they complain, hand over another 200S and shut the door. (Of course these prices could go up slightly in the event of inflation or a petrol price spike.)

Licensed cabs – especially those waiting outside bars and hotels – are a different beast. Do not go anywhere in a licensed cab without agreeing to a price first. Use the same rate guidelines as above, but be ready to pay slightly more – these are professionals after all (professionals who will demand quadruple the going rate if you don't agree on a price up front).

If you don't care for nickel-and-dime haggling and just want to book a damn taxi, you'll pay only slightly higher rates by dialling ☎ 062, ☎ 144 88 11 or ☎ 139 99 99.

Cab drivers tend not to know street names, so use landmarks – big hotels and metro stations work best – to direct your driver to your destination.

Car

Any hotel or travel agency can arrange a comfortable private car and driver from about 8000S per hour and up. You'll pay much less – 4000S to 6000S per hour, depending on your negotiating skills – on the street (see opposite for more tips). Murad Tashpulatov speaks good English, knows the streets and charges reasonable rates. Email him at mtashpulatov@rambler.ru.

Public Transport

Buses, trolleybuses and trams cost 160S to 200S, payable on board to the conductor or driver. Most of them are marked in Latinised Uzbek and given a number (older buses are still marked in Cyrillic).

The destination of public buses, trams, trolleybuses and marshrutkas is written clearly in the window. One useful bus is the 91, which goes between Chorsu Bazaar and Hotel InterContinental via Navoi. Another is bus 67, which travels from the airport to the Intercon via Usmon Nosir, Shakhrisabz and Amir Timur. Your hotel can always help direct you to where you want to go via public transport.

Metro

Tashkent's **metro** (per trip 140S; ☎ 5am-midnight) is the easiest way to get around. During the day you'll never wait more than five minutes for a train, and the stations are clean and safe. You'll need to buy a token (*zhyton*) for each trip. The metro was designed as a nuclear

shelter and taking photos inside is strictly forbidden – a pity given their often times striking design.

Despite the use of Uzbek for signs and announcements, the system is easy to use, and well enough signposted that you hardly need a map. If you listen as the train doors are about to close, you'll hear the name of the next station at the end of the announcement: '*Ekhtiyot buling, eshiklar yopiladi; keyingi bekat...*' ('Be careful, the doors are closing; the next station is...').

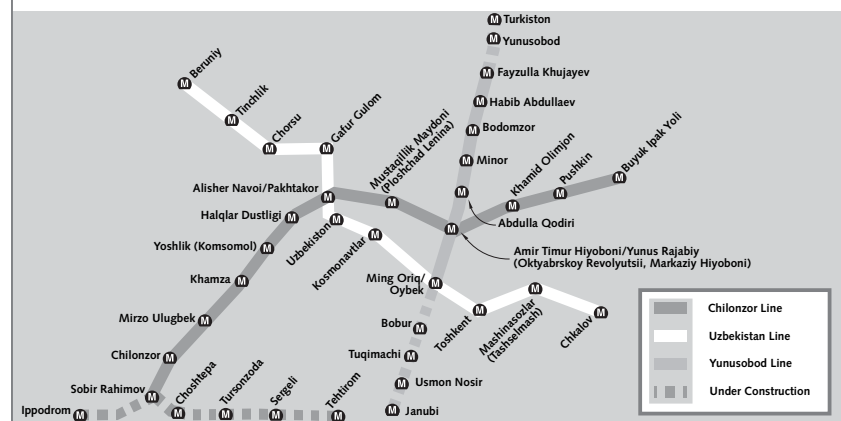
AROUND TASHKENT Chimgan & Around

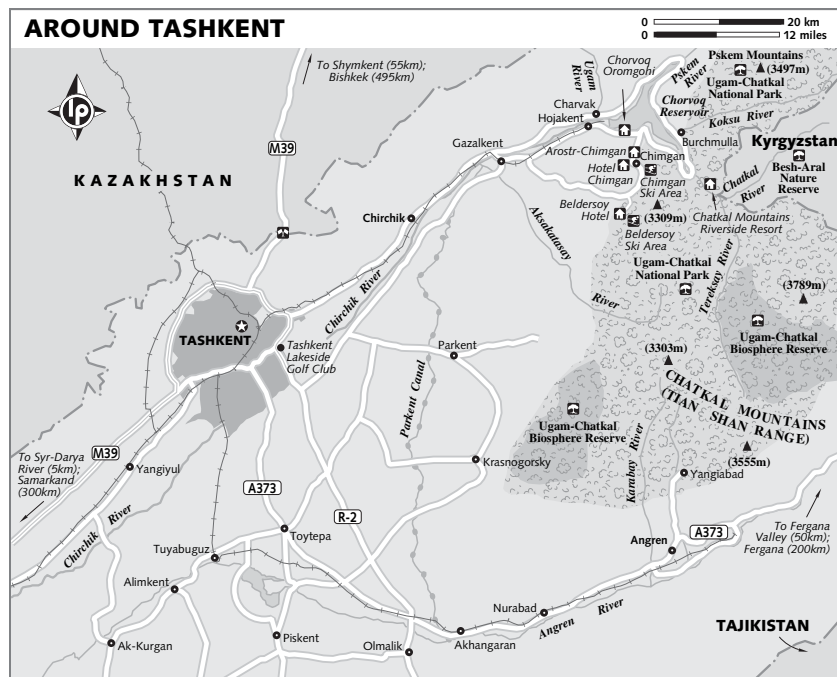
Just over an hour northeast of Tashkent by car lies **Ugam-Chatkal National Park**, an outdoor haven loaded with hiking and adventure-sport opportunities as well as more relaxing pursuits. The mountains here are not quite as extreme or scenic as the higher peaks around Almaty and Bishkek, but certain activities – rafting, kayaking and heli-skiing come to mind – are more accessible and at least as challenging.

This entire area is known locally as Chimgan, a reference to both its biggest town and its central peak (3309m). For an overview of outdoor activities here, see p213.

You don't have to be an X-gamer to enjoy Chimgan. A major sanatoria centre in Soviet times, today it has hatched a few modern resorts and retreats to complement the usual diet of decrepit yet still-functioning concrete Soviet hulks. And the Chorvoq Reservoir offers

TASHKENT METRO





more mellow outdoor pursuits such as fishing, swimming and canoeing – ask about these at the Chorvoq Oromgohi hotel.

SLEEPING

Hotel Chimgan (☎ 27-153 49 86; Chimgan; s/d/lux US\$10/20/30) Well, here's your chance to experience one of those (barely) still-standing Soviet relics. The doubles consist of one dark, damp, threadbare room; the *lux* (luxury room) consists of two dark, damp, threadbare rooms. Price includes three square meals per day, ping-pong and billiards.

Chorvoq Oromgohi (☎ 71-714 48 81; Poselok Bokachul; s/d from US\$40/52) This huge pyramid on the shore of the Chorvoq Reservoir will certainly catch your eye, for better or for worse. Standard rooms are pretty basic fare; you're paying for the balconies with mountain or lake views. Gym and full spa facilities on premises.

Arostr-Chimgan (☎ 97-443 75 75; Chimgan; d US\$50, 6-person cabin US\$100) The proprietor calls this 'mountain camping', but we think he means 'mountain cabins'. The six-person cabins have simple bedrooms and cosy common areas

with fireplaces and satellite TV. The place to ride out a blizzard with good company and a few handles of vodka.

Beldersoy Hotel (☎ 90-176 38 26, in Tashkent 71-132 17 90; r US\$110, 4-person cottage from US\$140; ☎ ☎) The balconies with views of the valley are the highlight of this upscale lodge, which also has 16 cottages scattered around the grounds. Facilities include a tennis court, spa, heated pool and of course its own ski area (opposite). It's 5km south of Chimgan.

Chatkal Mountains Riverside Resort (☎ 71-132 11 66, 119 35 95; www.chatkal.narod.ru; 4-/6-bed cottage from US\$130/180) We were there too late in the season to check it out, but expats were about the atmosphere and range of activities, including horse riding, on offer at this somewhat remote resort on the banks of the Chatkal River. To book contact Elena Tour (p199).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Shared taxis to Chimgan town gather in Tashkent around Buyuk Ipak Yoli metro (5000S, 1½ hours). Your driver will drop you off at your destination for a small additional fee.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES IN THE CHIMGAN AREA

Ugam-Chatkal National Park and the Chimgan area are developing a growing reputation for adventure sports. This national park covers the mountainous area east and southeast of the Kyrgyzstan border, from the city of Angren in the south all the way up to the Pskem Mountains in the fingerlike, glacier-infested wedge of land jutting into Kyrgyzstan northeast of Chimgan town. The Pskem top out at 4319m but are off-limits because of their location in a sensitive border zone. Should the situation change, this will become prime virgin trekking territory.

Trekking

For now, all of the national park's accessible terrain lies in the Chatkal Mountains, which stretch into Kyrgyzstan. Lacking the stratospheric height of the big Kyrgyz and Tajik peaks, the appeal of the Chatkals is their accessibility. Escaping civilization involves walking just a short way out of Chimgan town or the Beldersoy ski area.

The best long hike here is the six- to eight-day trek from Chimgan town to Angren (can also be done in reverse). It takes you past Chimgan mountain and on through the Chatkal State Biosphere Reserve, staying well east of the nettlesome Kyrgyzstan border. Another day hike is the six- to eight-hour return trip from Beldersoy Hotel to some ancient petroglyphs near Chimgan mountain.

The problem with independently setting out on these or any other hikes in the Chatkals is that the routes are not marked and good topographical maps are about as common as Caspian Tigers (which died out from these parts in the 1970s). You might check to see if Asia Travel (p199) is selling any old Soviet topographical maps. Barring that, you're left with your compass and the stars. Unless you are skilled in backcountry navigation you should hire a local guide. The best is Boris of Elena Tour (p199), although he doesn't speak much English.

Before entering the park you're supposed to get a permit from the national park office in Gazalkent, but you can probably get by without one for short day hikes. Keep in mind that many of the trails around here lead into Kyrgyzstan, which creates a whole new set of complications. Simply put, there is plenty of grey area about what you need and what you don't need, and about where you can go and where you can't go – so hire a guide skilled at navigating red tape as well the backcountry.

Rafting & Kayaking

The raging gazpacho of the Pskem, Ugam and Chatkal Rivers offer prime white water for experienced kayakers and rafters, although the season for each is fairly short.

The Chatkal is difficult to access but its Class-V rapids, which originate in Kyrgyzstan, are said to be absolutely world class. The rafting season is September to October. One- to two-day trips are possible on the Ugam River (best in June–July), but most of its length is in Kazakhstan so you'll need a Kazakh visa as well as special permits from both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Or you can just run the last 10km in Uzbekistan. You'll need a Kyrgyz visa and similar permissions to run the Chatkal. The experts-only Pskem is exclusively in Uzbekistan but is off-limits for now.

Asia Raft (Map pp196-7; ☎ in Tashkent 71-360 09 18; http://asiaraft.net/firms.com/eng; Mavlono Rieziy 77) swears it can secure the necessary permits to make these trips happen. If not, it offers alternative rafting trips throughout Uzbekistan and Central Asia, most of them lasting several days.

Elena Tour runs a rafting trip for less extreme sorts south of Tashkent on the Syr-Darya, starting near Bekobod on the Tajikistan border. More of a drifting trip than a rafting trip, you can sign up for one to three days.

Skiing & Heli-skiing

The Beldersoy and Chimgan areas encompass both the best and the worst of Soviet-style ski resorts. The best: limited grooming, some unexpectedly steep terrain, rock bottom prices and plenty of hot wine and shashlyk. The worst: crummy lifts, limited total acreage and no snow-making to speak of.

While the resorts are not worth a special trip to Uzbekistan, the helicopter skiing most definitely is. While the Chatkals aren't huge, they are blanketed in some of the driest, fluffiest powder you'll find anywhere. And the winter weather is relatively stable, lessening the chances of getting grounded for days on end. But the best part is the price – US\$355 per day for about 6000 vertical metres. That's a little more than half of what you'll pay in North America. Book heli-skiing through Asia Travel (most other agencies go through them).

FERGANA VALLEY

ФЕРГАНСКАЯ ДОЛИНА

The first thought many visitors have on arrival in the Fergana Valley is, 'Where's the valley?' From this broad (22,000 sq km), flat bowl, the surrounding mountain ranges (Tian Shan to the north and the Pamir Alay to the south) seem to stand back at enormous distances – when you can see them, that is. More often these spectacular peaks are shrouded in a layer of smog, produced by what is both Uzbekistan's most populous and its most industrial region.

It's also the country's fruit and cotton basket. Drained by the upper Syr-Darya, the Fergana Valley is one big oasis, with some of the finest soil and climate in Central Asia. Already by the 2nd century BC the Greeks, Persians and Chinese found a prosperous kingdom based on farming, with some 70 towns and villages. The Russians were quick to realise the valley's fecundity, and Soviet rulers enslaved it to an obsessive raw-cotton monoculture that still exists today.

The valley's eight million people are thoroughly Uzbek – 90% overall and higher in the smaller towns. Despite this, on the whole its towns are architecturally uninspiring. But the province has always wielded a large share of Uzbekistan's political, economic and religious influence. Fergana was at the centre of numerous revolts against the tsar and later the Bolsheviks. In the 1990s the valley gave birth to Islamic extremism in Central Asia. President Karimov's brutal crackdown on alleged extremists eventually came to a head in the form of the Andijon Massacre in 2005 (p191).

The post-Andijon crackdown has increased the police presence in the valley, but it's not something that's likely to affect most tourists as long as they keep a low profile. The valley's people remain the most hospitable and friendly in the country. Other attractions are exceptional crafts, several kaleidoscopic bazaars and the proximity of the mountains, most of which lie in Kyrgyzstan.

Dangers & Annoyances

Standards of dress are a potential source of misunderstanding in the valley. Except per-

haps in the centre of Russified Fergana town, too much tourist flesh will be frowned upon, so dress modestly (ie no shorts or tight-fitting clothes). Women travellers have reported being harassed when walking alone in cities such as Andijon, especially at night.

Security is tight in the valley compared with other parts of the country and police road blocks are common. The police are friendly enough, just keep your passport at the ready and be agreeable when being questioned.

Getting There & Around

There is no public bus service between Tashkent and the Fergana Valley – only chartered buses are allowed on the scenic, winding road through the mountains, which is best negotiated by shared taxi as opposed to wobbly looking Daewoo Damas marshrutkas. See the individual city entries for specific details on land and air transport to/from Tashkent.

The few slow trains that lumber between Tashkent and the Fergana Valley go through Tajikistan. Do not board these without a Tajik transit visa and a double-entry Uzbek visa. Details on these trains, which are generally more trouble than they are worth, are not included in this chapter.

Travel within the valley is almost always by shared taxi or marshrutka, and rarely by bus.

KOKAND КОКАНД

☎ (3) 73 / pop 200,000

As the valley's first significant town on the road from Tashkent, Kokand is a gateway to the region and stopping point for many travellers. With an architecturally interesting palace and several medressas and mosques, it makes for a worthwhile half-day visit before heading in or out of the region.

This was the capital of the Kokand khanate in the 18th and 19th centuries and the valley's true 'hotbed' in those days – second only to Bukhara as a religious centre in Central Asia, with at least 35 medressas and hundreds of mosques. But if you walk the streets today, you will find only a polite, subdued Uzbek town, its old centre hedged by colonial avenues, bearing little resemblance to Bukhara.

Nationalists fed up with empty revolutionary promises met here in January 1918 and declared a rival administration, the 'Muslim Provincial Government of Autonomous Turkestan' led by Mustafa Chokayev. Jenghiz Khan would have admired the response

by the Tashkent Soviet, who immediately had the town sacked, most of its holy buildings desecrated or destroyed and 14,000 Kokandis slaughtered. What little physical evidence of Kokand's former stature was either left to decay, or mummified as 'architectural monuments'. A handful of these wonders have been brought back to life as working mosques and medressas.

Orientation

The Khan's Palace stands in the central Muqimi Park. Most restaurants and shops of interest are on or just off the 1km stretch of Istiqlol running east–west between Muqimi Park and Abdulla Nabiev maydoni. The mosque-sprinkled old-town lanes squeezed between Khamza, Akbar Islamov and Furqat make for good wandering.

Information

Asaka Bank (Istoqlol) Exchanges money and advances cash on MasterCard.

Internet Centre (Istanbul 8; per hr 900S; ☎ 7am–11pm) Also offers phone calls abroad for 1000S per minute.

Internet Club (Navoi 1; per megabyte 200S, ☎ 8am–midnight)

OVIR (☎ 553 68 78; cnr Turkiston & Istiqlol; ☎ 2–4pm Tue & 9am–noon Sat)

Post & telephone office (Potelyakhov House, cnr Istiqlol & Istanbul; ☎ 7am–7pm Mon–Fri, 7am–5.30pm Sat & Sun)

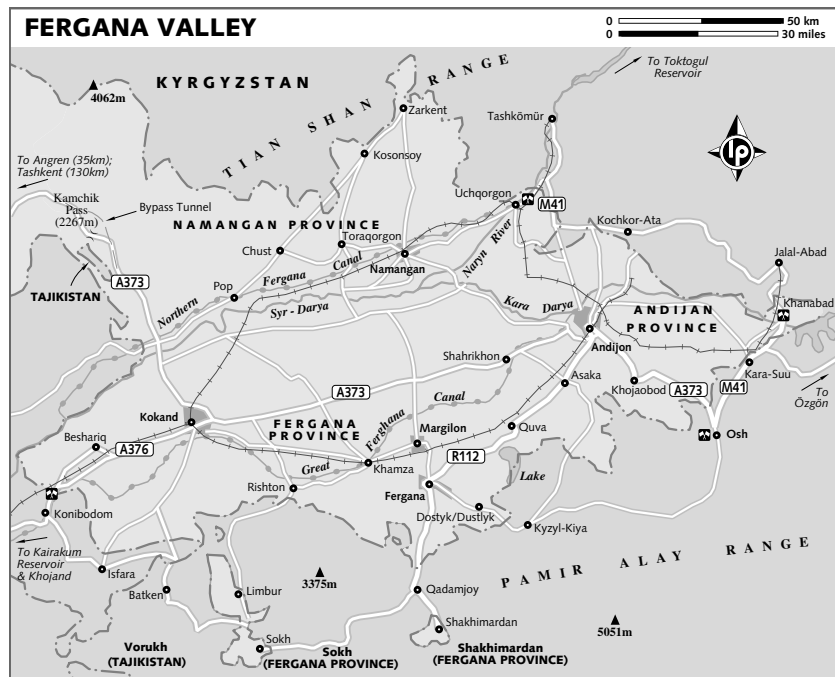
Uzbektourism (☎ 552 38 92; Kamal-Kazi Medressa, Khamza 83; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Sat) Offers English-speaking guided tours of all Kokand and other Fergana Valley sights.

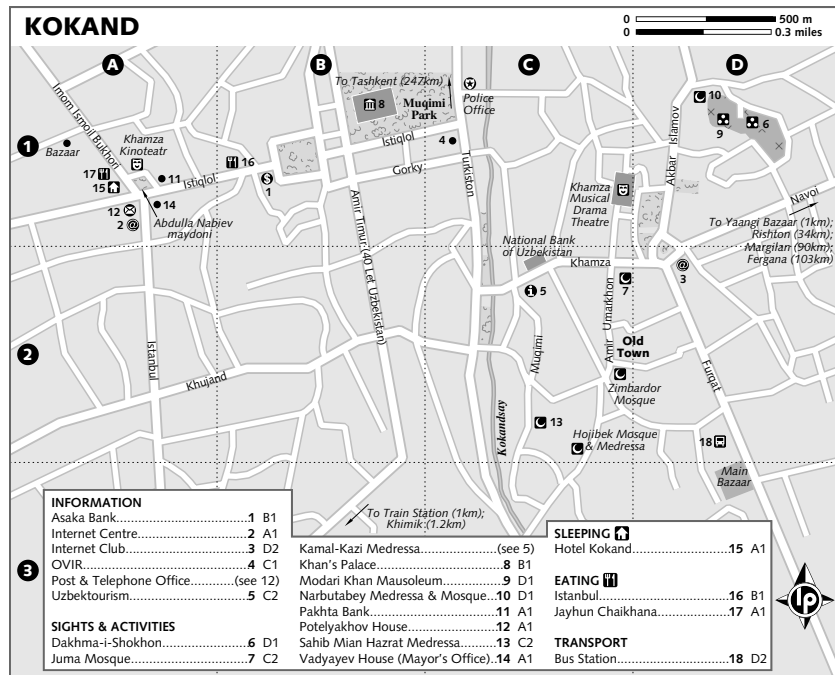
Sights

KHAN'S PALACE

The Khan's Palace (☎ 553 60 46, <http://museum.dinosoft.uz>; Istiqlol 2; admission 1200S, guided tour 3000S; ☎ 9am–5pm), with seven courtyards and 114 rooms, was completed in 1873 – just three years before the tsar's troops arrived, blew up its fortifications and abolished Khudoyar Khan's job. He fled – not from the Russians but from his own subjects. Indeed he fled to the Russians at Orenburg and a comfortable exile (he was later killed by bandits as he returned through Afghanistan from a pilgrimage to Mecca).

Roughly half of the palace used to be taken up by the now-demolished harem, where Khudoyar's 43 concubines would wait to be chosen as wife for the night – Islam allows





only four wives so the khan kept a mullah at hand for a quick marriage ceremony (the marriage set up to last just one night).

Six courtyards remain and their 27 rooms collectively house the Kokand Regional Studies Museum, with displays of varying degrees of interest. The princes' courtyard, occupied by the khan's sons when they moved out of the harem in early adolescence, now houses a folk museum and Soviet-style souvenir shop where you can buy old coins and other communist trinkets. There's an art museum in the khan's bedroom, while the throne room near the entrance features a model of the palace in its heyday. In the guest room, now a history museum, you'll find fascinating photos of the khan's army in front of the unfinished palace in 1871.

Guided tours are given by the museum's English-speaking director, who is also a good source of information on the region.

NARBUTABEY MEDRESSA

The Bolsheviks closed the 1799 Narbutabay Medressa but it's now open again and currently has about 20 students. To win wartime

support from Muslim subjects, Stalin had the adjacent **mosque** reopened. When you step inside this complex you will be surrounded by an eager mob of young students, who are more than happy to give you a free tour of the premises and the neighbouring graveyard. Both men and women are welcome.

The **graveyard**, accessible from the medressa courtyard or from the street, has several prominent mausoleums associated with another khan, Umar. Inside the graveyard, to the right, is the bright sky-blue cupola of the un-restored **Modari Khan Mausoleum**, built in 1825 for the khan's mother. To the left is the 1830s **Dakhma-i-Shokhon** (Grave of Kings), the tomb of the Umar Khan and other family members, with an elegant wooden portal carved with Quranic verses and/or Umar's poetry.

Nasrullah Khan, the emir of Bukhara, is said to have kidnapped Umar's wife, an independent-minded poetess named Nodira, and demanded that she marry him. When she refused, Nasrullah had her beheaded, along with her children and her brothers-in-law. Originally buried behind Modari Khan, she was adopted by the Soviets as a model

Uzbek woman and moved to a prominent place beneath a white **stone tablet**, beyond Dakhma-i-Shokhon.

RUSSIAN BUILDINGS

Around Abdulla Nabiev maydoni (named for a prominent Kokand Bolshevik) is a knot of sturdy brick buildings, built by the Russians in turn-of-the-20th-century 'mixed style', with sculptured façades and copper cupolas. They include the former headquarters of the German-Turkestan Bank (now the **Pakhta Bank**), **Potelyakhov House** (1907; now the main post and telegraph office) and **Vadyayev House** (1911; now the mayor's office).

SAHIB MIAN HAZRAT MEDRESSA

From the Uzbektourism office on Khamza, walk five minutes down Muqimi to the truncated remnants of the large 19th-century Sahib Mian Hazrat Medressa, where the great Uzbek poet and 'democrat' Mohammedamin Muqimi (1850–1903) lived and studied for the last 33 years of his life. There is a small **museum** (admission 500S) in Muqimi's old room, which contains a few of his personal belongings, plus Arabic calligraphy by Muqimi himself.

JUMA MOSQUE

Kokand's most impressive mosque, built in the early 19th century, is centred on a 22m minaret and includes a huge, colourful *aiwan* (arched portico) supported by 98 red-wood columns brought from India. Ten more columns are in the mosque itself. The entire complex has reverted to its former Soviet guise as a **museum** (Khamza 5; admission 1200S; ☎ 9am–5pm), with one room housing a collection of *suzani* and ceramics from the region. Admission includes a free tour in Russian.

Sleeping & Eating

A fancy new hotel was scheduled to open east of town near Yaangi Bazaar sometime in 2007. Until that happens, you may be better off continuing on to Fergana. Backpackers, on the other hand, might want to avoid more expensive Fergana and roost at bargain-basement Hotel Kokand.

Hotel Kokand (☎ 533 64 03; Imom Ismoil Bukhori 1; s/d 4000/8000S) This central, Soviet-style hotel has electricity, running water and a friendly staff. We wouldn't call it clean, but the beds are OK and at least the rooms don't reek as bad as some hotels of this ilk.

Khimik (☎ 553 46 86; Akhmad Yesavi; s/d 8000/10,000) Located near the train station, this hotel is a virtual clone of Hotel Kokand, only with slightly cleaner rooms, much cleaner bathrooms and a much worse location.

Istanbul (Istiqlol 16; ☎ 6am–10pm) This quasi-fast-food eatery is the only option in town after about 7pm. Its sausage-and-egg breakfast is a godsend for those staying at the Hotel Kokand.

Jayhun Chaikhana (Imom Ismoil Bukhori; shashlyk 500S) This popular chaikhana next to the Hotel Kokand tends to close early along with the small bazaar nearby, but during daylight hours it's the best option in town.

Vegetarians and self-caterers can go to the main bazaar by the bus station, or a small one near the hotel.

Getting There & Around

All transport options leave from the bus station by the main bazaar on Furqat. Marshrutkas and shared taxis leave every 15 minutes throughout the day to Rishton (marshrutka/taxi per person 800/3000S, 45 minutes), Fergana (1200/4000S, 1½ hours) and other points in the valley. Cheaper, slower buses leave every 45 minutes to Fergana and Andijon (1300S, three hours). There are plenty of shared taxis to Tashkent (12,000S, three hours).

There are two daily trains to Andijon (1200S, five hours, 5am and 2pm) from the **train station** (Amir Timur 40).

Useful public transport options include marshrutka 2 or 4 from the main bazaar to the Hotel Kokand area, or number 15, 28 or 40 north from the bazaar to the Juma Mosque.

FERGANA ФЕРГАНА

☎ (3) 73 / pop 216,000

Tree-lined avenues and pastel-plastered tsarist buildings give Fergana the feel of a mini-Tashkent. Throw in the best services and accommodation in the region, plus a central location, and you have the most obvious base from which to explore the rest of the valley.

Fergana is the valley's least ancient and least Uzbek city. It began in 1877 as Novy Margelan (New Margilon), a colonial annexe to nearby Margilon. It was briefly known as Skobelov, named after the city's first military governor, and then assumed Fergana in the 1920s. It's a nice enough place to hang out, and somewhat cosmopolitan with its relatively high proportion of Russian and Korean citizens.

Orientation

The streets radiate out from what's left of the old tsarist fort, 10m of mud-brick wall within an army compound (off-limits to visitors) behind the city and provincial administration buildings. The centre of the city is around the Hotel Ziyorat, within walking distance of central Al-Farghoni Park and the bazaar. The airport is 6km south of town.

Information

The Asia Hotel has a 24-hour currency exchange.

Asaka Bank (cnr Navoi & Kuvasoy) You can get cash out on your MasterCard here.

Infinity Internet Café (Navoi 18-23; per megabyte 150S; ☎ 9am-10pm) Convenient for Hotel Asia and Valentina's Guesthouse.

National Bank of Uzbekistan (Al-Farghoni 35) Cash-advance office for Visa cardholders is on the 3rd floor (commission 4%). Also changes travellers cheques.

OVIR (Ahunbabayev 35)

Post office (Mustaqillik 35; ☎ 8am-6pm)

Simus (Marifat 45; per hr 800S; ☎ 8am-8pm) Internet café near the taxi stand.

Uzbektourism (☎ 224 77 40; Hotel Ziyorat; guides per day US\$20 plus transport; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Helpful staffer Nargiza speaks English and can arrange multilingual tours to just about anything worth seeing in the Fergana Valley. If it's closed try the hotel concierge.

Sights

Fergana's most appealing attraction is the **bazaar**, filled with good-natured Uzbek traders, leavened with Korean and Russian vendors selling homemade specialities. It sprawls over several blocks north of the centre, posing a considerable obstacle to the flow of traffic.

The **Regional Museum of Fergana** (☎ 224 31 91; Usman Khojayev 26; admission 1000S; ☎ 9am-5pm Wed-Sun, 9am-1pm Mon) is sparse. Visitors can inspect satellite photos showing where all that cotton grows and some items on the valley's ancient Buddhist and shamanist sites. Other displays include a Stone Age diorama with some excessively hairy Cro-Magnons, and a few photos of pre-Soviet life.

Sleeping

Hotel Ziyorat (☎ 224 77 42; Dekhon 2A; s/d US\$12/20) By the standard of barely renovated Soviet hotels,

this one ranks right up there with the best of 'em (ie once you get past the filthy, 1960s-era flooring and peeling wallpaper, it starts to run out of glaring flaws). Satellite TV and minibars are why the supposedly non-negotiable prices are a bit high.

Valentina's Guesthouse (☎ 224 89 05, 8-590 272 4072; daniel26@yahoo.com; r per person US\$15; ☎) Hidden in an ugly apartment block between Qosimov, Al-Farghoni and Qomus is this deluxe homestay, with four big rooms kitted out with DVD players, minibars and king-sized beds. The apartment block, topped by a huge antenna, sticks out like a sore thumb; take the left-hand entrance. Valentina speaks Russian.

Golden Valley Homestay (☎ 223 21 00, 562 13 49; lola_2004@simus.uz; Shakirovoy 10; r per person US\$15; ☎) This one's a bit out of the way, but gets props from travellers. Call for a pick-up and negotiate hard. You can also stay in Golden Valley's *dacha* (holiday bungalow) outside the city.

777 Club Hotel (☎ 224 37 77; www.hotel777.uz; Pushkin 7A; s/d US\$25/40; ☎) A hotel with a built-in chicken-and-egg conundrum: What came first, the phone number or the name? The receptionist didn't have an answer to that one, but she cheerfully showed us tasteful rooms scattered about the most attractive hotel grounds in the Fergana Valley. With a few bungalows and a festive poolside bar, it's as close as you're liable to come to Club Med in double-land-locked Uzbekistan.

Asia Hotel (☎ 224 52 21; http://asiahotels.marcopolo.uz; Navoi 26; s/d/lux US\$22/28/40; ☎) This smart hotel associated with überpowerful Marco Polo travel agency caters mainly to tour groups. Facing competition from the likes of 777, it's furiously adding swanked-out rooms and facilities like a new indoor pool and business centre. Beds here are rock hard. Complain vigorously about the US\$3 pool fee.

Eating & Drinking

Café Döner (Marifat 45; mains 1000-1500S) If you confuse this fast-food eatery with Döner Kebab next door, don't despair: it has virtually identical menus of kebabs, pizzas and mushy doner burgers.

our pick **Bravo** (Khojand 12; meals 2000-3000S) Nowhere is Fergana's liberal bent more evident than in this bohemian little café. The cosy interior, shabby-chic to the core, is plastered with the products of local artists and awash with the strains of live jazz. There's no menu,

just ask what's available and pick. In the warm months the action moves outside to the patio, redolent of shashlyk. Expect a fair share of artists, musicians and drunks enjoying life until well into the evening. The next morning they'll be back for espresso. Hell, this place would be hip in Paris.

Hollywood Night Club (Kambarov; entry 1000S) This cavernous club, behind the department store, tolerates vodka-shooting Ferganans and their late-night antics.

There are also several decent restaurants along the canal across the street from the Ziyorat Hotel. Self-caterers will enjoy the bazaar area, where there are several Uzbek chaikhans, including **Chimyan** (cnr Rakhimov & Khamza; laghman 1000S). Shashlyk stands occupy Al-Farghoni Park in the warm months; a cluster of them are across the street from TsUM department store.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Uzbekistan Airways (Fergana Airport; ☎ 8am-5pm) has flights to/from Tashkent (one way small/big plane US\$30/21, one hour, daily except Sunday). Two of the six weekly flights are on the bigger plane.

BUS & SHARED TAXI

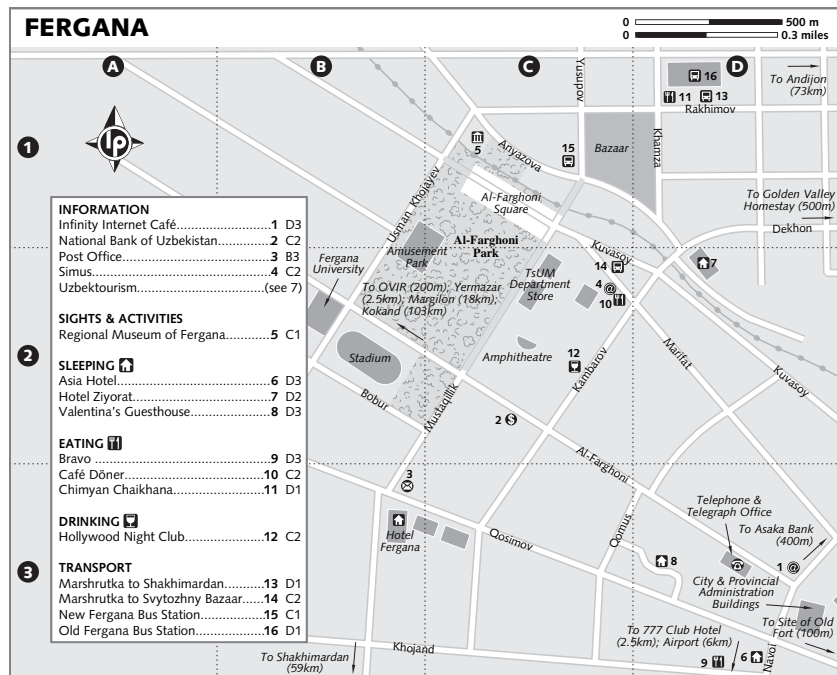
Shared taxis, marshrutkas and a few buses depart to Andijon throughout the day from the old Fergana bus station, north of the bazaar (marshrutka/taxi per seat 1200/3000S, one hour; bus 700S, two hours). This is also the spot to find rides to Margilon (marshrutka/taxi per seat 200/500S, 20 minutes) and Shakhimardan (see p221).

The main transport hub for westbound traffic is the Yermazar long-distance bus station, 3km northwest of the centre on the road to Margilon. Here you'll find shared taxis to Tashkent (13,000S, four hours) and shared taxis and marshrutkas to Kokand (marshrutka/taxi per seat 1200/4000S, 1½ hours) and Namanagan (1500/5000S, 1¾ hours).

For Rishton (marshrutka/shared taxi per seat 800/3000S, 45 minutes), use the new Fergana bus station on the western edge of the bazaar.

Getting Around

The airport is a 25-minute trip on marshrutka 6 or bus 21 to/from the Svytozhny Bazaar stop across from Halq Bank in the centre of town. Going to the airport you can flag down



SILK PRODUCTION IN UZBEKISTAN

Although silk-thread production and clothmaking have been largely automated, the raising of silkworms is still almost entirely a 'cottage industry', with most worms raised in individual farmers' homes, as they have been since perhaps the 4th century AD.

Out of its stock from previous years' husbandry, the Uzbekistan government distributes an average of 20g of young silkworm grubs to any farmer willing to 'raise' them in late April and early May. Each farmer prepares special rooms with large bedding boxes. The worms' diet consists of chopped up mulberry leaves culled from trees along lowland roads and canals. The farmers use the leftover branches as fuel, and the stripped mulberry trees regrow their branches the following year.

The initial 20g of grubs takes up about a square metre of space and consumes about 3kg of leaves a day. At the end of just a month, each of those originally microscopic creatures has grown to the size of a little finger, and together they occupy two or three rooms and devour some 300kg of leaves each day! Then abruptly they stop eating altogether and spend a week or so rolling themselves up into a cocoon of silk fibres. The farmers sell the cocoons back to government silk factories – typically 80kg to 120kg of cocoons at about US\$1 to US\$2 per kilogram.

Some worms, called 'seed-worms', are set aside and allowed to hatch as moths, which will lay eggs and produce the next generation of grubs. The rest are killed inside their cocoons by steaming (otherwise they would break out and ruin the silk filaments), and each cocoon is boiled and carefully unwound. A typical tiny cocoon yields about 1200m of filament! Twelve or 13 filaments are twisted together to make industrial thread, which is used to make clothing.

Uzbekistan produces about 20,000 metric tonnes of cocoons a year, making it the third-largest silk producer in the world. The centre of the industry is in Margilon.

either in front of Hotel Asia, but check with the driver to make sure he's going all the way to the *aeroporto*.

Marshrutka 14 is useful for getting from the Svytozhny Bazaar stop to Yermazar bus station.

AROUND FERGANA

Margilon Маргилан

☎ (3) 73 / pop 145,000

If you've been travelling along the Silk Road seeking answers to where in fact this highly touted fabric comes from, Margilon, and its Yodgorlik Silk Factory, should be your ground zero.

Although there is little to show for it, Margilon has been around for a long time, probably since the 1st century BC. For centuries its merchant clans, key players in Central Asia's commerce and silk trade, were said to be a law unto themselves; even in the closing decades of Soviet rule, this was the heart of Uzbekistan's black-market economy.

SIGHTS

Margilon has two truly worthwhile attractions: its Sunday bazaar and the **Yodgorlik (Souvenir) Silk Factory** (☎ 233 88 24; silk@mail.ru; Imam Zakhriddin; ☞ 8am-5pm). There's a wonderful (and free) tour here where you'll witness

traditional methods of silk production (unlike those used at the city's increasingly moribund mass-production factories). The entire process is on display, from steaming and unraveling the cocoons to the weaving of the dazzling *khanatlas* (hand-woven silk patterned on one side) fabrics for which Margilon is famous. Amazingly, it's almost all done sans electricity, just as it was 1500 years ago. After the tour (available in English, French, Russian or German), you can buy silk by the metre: US\$4 for *khanatlas*, US\$8 for *adras* (half-cotton, half-silk) and US\$10 for *shoyi* (pure silk). There is also premade clothing, carpets and embroidered items for sale.

A much less sanitized experience is Margilon's fantastic Sunday **Kuntepa Bazaar**, 5km west of the centre. It's a time capsule full of weathered Uzbek men in traditional clothing exchanging solemn greetings and gossiping over endless pots of tea, with hardly a Russian or a tourist in sight. Margilon's conservative streak, extreme even by Fergana Valley standards, is on full display here, with Uzbek matrons dressed almost exclusively in the locally produced *khanatlas* dresses and head scarves and men in skull caps and *chapan*. On Sunday mornings it's difficult to move among the throngs of people. Some travellers say it's the most interesting bazaar in the country.

Kuntepa Bazaar also happens on Thursdays; other days it's pretty dead. When it's not happening you might check out Margilon's large central farmers market, which was undergoing full reconstruction in early 2007.

Half a kilometre east of the farmers market is the reconstructed **Khonakhah Mosque**, a Juma (Friday) mosque that gets packed with thousands of worshippers every Friday. On other days the mosque's courtyard is one of the city's more peaceful places. Foreign visitors are welcome to enter and check out an unrestored section of the mosque's prayer room dating to the 15th century. It was hidden behind a bakery in Soviet times and spared destruction. It's on the right when you enter the courtyard.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

See p215 for transport from Fergana. Marshrutkas and taxis drop you off near the town's main intersection, kitty-corner from the central bazaar.

Rishton Риштан

☎ (3) 73

This town just north of the Kyrgyzstan border is famous for the ubiquitous cobalt and green pottery fashioned from its fine clay. About

90% of the ceramics you see in souvenir stores across Uzbekistan originates here – most of it handmade.

Some 1000 potters make a living from the legendary local loam, which is so pure that it requires no additives (besides water) before being chucked on the wheel. Among the most accomplished masters of the Rishton school is **Rustam Usmanov** (☎ 453 73 45, 452 15 85; Ar-Roshidony 230; ☞ by appointment), erstwhile art director of the defunct local collectivised ceramics factory. Of Tatar stock, Usmanov now has a workshop in his home on the main road through town and offers tours, lunch and vodka shots to travellers who call ahead (as many tour groups do).

Usmanov says that Rishton potters are facing a potential crisis, as the purest clay is becoming scarce. Usmanov's taking no chances: a week before we visited he had bought 120 tonnes. Enough to last five or six years, we wondered? 'Enough to last 20 years', he said.

Usmanov has a small museum on premises and is a leading member of an independent potters' association dedicated to preserving traditional techniques. You can visit other masters as well and buy beautiful platters, jugs and vases fresh out of the oven. **Alisher Nazirov**

SHAKHIMARDAN, THAT WHACKY ENCLAVE

One of the odder results of Stalin's diabolical gerrymandering around the Fergana Valley is the existence of an archipelago of tiny 'islands' of one republic entirely surrounded by another. One of these is the Uzbek enclave of Shakhimardan, 55km south of Fergana (another, equally scenic but off-limits to foreigners because it's home to a major dam, is Sokh, 50km south of Kokand).

Shakhimardan's main appeal for visitors is that it's nestled in a 1500m-high alpine valley, a fine place to clear your lungs and take an easy look at the Pamir Alay mountains in surrounding Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan has been trying to reclaim Shakhimardan for years, but as of this writing it remained stubbornly in Uzbek hands, making it nearly impossible for foreigners to visit legally. While locals shuttle freely over the border crossings between Fergana and Shakhimardan, this path is off-limits to foreigners – even to foreigners with multiple-entry Kyrgyz and Uzbek visas. The only legal way to get to Shakhimardan is thus to cross the border near Osh and proceed to Shakhimardan from there. For that you'll need multiple-entry Kyrgyz and Uzbek visas.

Touts at the old Fergana bus station say that they can sneak foreigners across the border in marshrutkas. The asking price starts at 17,000S for the 1¼-hour trip. As this can cause big-time headaches if you encounter a border guard in a bad mood, we cannot recommend it.

If you manage to enter Shakhimardan legally, there is a legendary trek amid glaciers and 5000m peaks to **Daroot-Korgon** in southwestern Kyrgyzstan. However, given the tenuous border situation, this trek is better launched from hard-to-reach Khaidakan, Kyrgyzstan, nearby.

With any luck the situation will change and Shakhimardan, which also offers up some good day hiking in sight of Ak-Suu peak (5359m), will once again become a trekking hotbed. The main attraction is the half-day hike and cable-car ride from town to the icy lake of **Kuli Kulon**, nestled in the Pamir Alays at 1740m. Check with Elena Tour in Tashkent (p199) for updates on the situation.

(☎ 452 33 43; Ferganskaya 152) is another master who gives tours.

Of course there is so much affordable Rish-ton in Uzbekistan that you needn't trek all the way here to buy it, but it's interesting to see where it all came from.

Rish-ton is best visited as a stop on the way to Fergana from Kokand (or vice-versa). It's about a 45-minute shared taxi or marshrutka ride from either (marshrutka/taxi per seat 800/3000S).

ANDIJON АНДИЖАН

☎ (3) 74 / pop 350,000

Andijon – the Fergana Valley's largest city and its spiritual mecca – will forever be linked with the bloodshed of 13 May 2005 (p191). The very word 'Andijon' is a hot potato in Uzbekistan; just mentioning it is enough to stop any conversation in its tracks.

That's a shame because both culturally and linguistically Andijon is probably the country's purest Uzbek city, and the best place to observe Uzbeks in their element. Architecturally there's not much to see here – an earthquake in 1902 took care of that. Rather, its Andijon's bazaars and chaikhans, brimming with colour and life, that make a trip out here worthwhile. Andijonians are warm and friendly by nature, and whatever concerns they have about their paranoid government appear not to have negatively affected their demeanour.

Most travellers who pass through Andijon are on their way to or from Kyrgyzstan and don't linger long because of security concerns. Make no mistake: the local police are on their guard here and do routinely stop foreigners. Have your papers in order and take the normal precautions, but don't let all the hype that Andijon is 'dangerous' prevent you from coming.

Orientation & Information

Museums, medressa, bank, shops and the post office are clustered in the old town around central Kolkhozny Bazaar (farmers market). The neighbouring bus and train stations are 3km to the south. Roughly in between is Babur Sq, where the violence took place in 2005.

Change money on the black market at Kolkhozny Bazaar.

Sights

Andijon's Sunday **Jahon Bazaar** is the biggest bazaar on the Uzbek side of the Fergana Valley. On Sunday and Thursday it is teeming

with people, most of whom are involved in the shuttle trade with Kyrgyzstan. From Kolkhozny Bazaar, it's 4km northeast on marshrutka 6, 10 or any saying Жаҳон базар.

Jahon Bazaar is rather quiet on other days, but bazaar lovers will find no shortage of markets here. **Kolkhozny Bazaar** spills into the streets of the old town, making it a fine place for people-watching. **Yaangi Bazaar** is another big market located just south of the bus station.

Across from Kolkhozny Bazaar on Oltinkul is the handsome 19th-century **Juma Mosque & Medressa** (admission 1200S; ☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun), said to be the only building to survive the 1902 earthquake. It reopened as a working medressa in the 1990s but was turned into a museum of local ethnography after a police crackdown on suspected Islamic militants. The museum has a quirky souvenir shop loaded with Soviet trinkets. Next door is a dusty **regional museum** (admission 500S; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), with the usual historical exhibits and stuffed animals.

The marginally more interesting **Babur Literary Museum** (☎ 9am-4pm Tue-Sun) occupies the site of the royal apartments where Babur lived and studied as a boy within Ark-Ichy, the town's long-gone citadel. It's on a small lane west of Kolkhozny Bazaar.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Andijon (Fitrat 241; s/d US\$12/24, with shared bathroom US\$4/8) This no-frills hotel across from Babur Sq sports small but clean rooms, basic bathrooms and impossibly small TVs. There are a couple of very nice, renovated *lux* rooms (US\$50). The chaikhana behind the hotel is the best place to eat in town.

There are two fairly decrepit old Intourist cinderblocks right next to each other in a huge park 2km south of the bus station. **Sport Hotel** (☎ 226 10 78; Mashrab 21; s/d US\$18/35) is perhaps a slight step up from **Oltyn Vody** (☎ 226 79 90; Mashrab 19; s/d US\$12/24).

Chaikhans abound near the bazaars and just about everywhere else. For nonchaikhana fare try **Golden Chicken Restaurant** (Fitrat; meals 2000S), 200m west of Hotel Andijon, with quick Uzbek, Turkish and Western meals.

Getting There & Around

Uzbekistan Airways (☎ 224 42 23; airport) has five weekly flights to/from Tashkent (one way US\$31, 1½ hours). The airport is about 3km southwest of Yaangi Bazaar.

All vehicular transport roosts near the bus station. There are plenty of rides to Fergana (marshrutka/shared taxi per seat 1200/3000S, 1½ hour; bus 700S, two hours) and Tashkent (shared taxi per seat 14,000S, five hours).

Two daily trains trundle to Kokand (1200S, four hours).

Marshrutka 33 races around a fixed route as if taxi driving was a freestyle sport. It travels from Juma Medressa, past Babur Sq, Yaangi Bazaar and Hotel Oltyn Vody before coming within 1km of the airport. To get closer to the airport, transfer to marshrutka 4 at Oltyn Vody.

For information on transport to Kyrgyzstan, see p267.

CENTRAL UZBEKISTAN

SAMARKAND САМАРКАНД

☎ (3) 66 / pop 405,000 / elev 710m

We travel not for trafficking alone,
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned.

For lust of knowing what should not
be known

We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

These final lines of James Elroy Flecker's 1913 poem *The Golden Journey to Samarkand* evoke the romance of Uzbekistan's most glorious city. No name is so evocative of the Silk Road as Samarkand. For most people it has the mythical resonance of Atlantis, fixed in the Western popular imagination by poets and playwrights of bygone eras, few of whom saw the city in the flesh.

From the air your eye locks onto the domes and minarets, and on the ground the sublime, larger-than-life monuments of Timur, the technicolour bazaar and the city's long, rich history, indeed work some kind of magic. Surrounding these islands of majesty, modern Samarkand sprawls across acres of Soviet-built buildings, parks and broad avenues used by buzzing Daewoo taxis.

You can visit most of Samarkand's high-profile attractions in two or three days. If you're short on time, at least see the Registan, Guri Amir, Bibi-Khanym Mosque and Shah-i-Zinda.

Note that the people of Samarkand, Bukhara and southeastern Uzbekistan don't speak

Uzbek but an Uzbek-laced Tajik (Farsi). Some members of the ethnic Tajik minority wish Stalin had made the area part of Tajikistan, but the issue is complicated by ethnic Uzbek city folk who speak Tajik.

History

Samarkand (Marakanda to the Greeks), one of Central Asia's oldest settlements, was probably founded in the 5th century BC. It was already the cosmopolitan, walled capital of the Sogdian empire when it was taken in 329 BC by Alexander the Great, who said, 'Everything I have heard about Marakanda is true, except that it's more beautiful than I ever imagined.'

A key Silk Road city, it sat on the crossroads leading to China, India and Persia, bringing in trade and artisans. From the 6th to the 13th century it grew into a city more populous than it is today, changing hands every couple of centuries – Western Turks, Arabs, Persian Samanids, Karakhanids, Seljuq Turks, Mongolian Karakitay and Khorezmshah have all ruled here – before being obliterated by Jenghiz Khan in 1220.

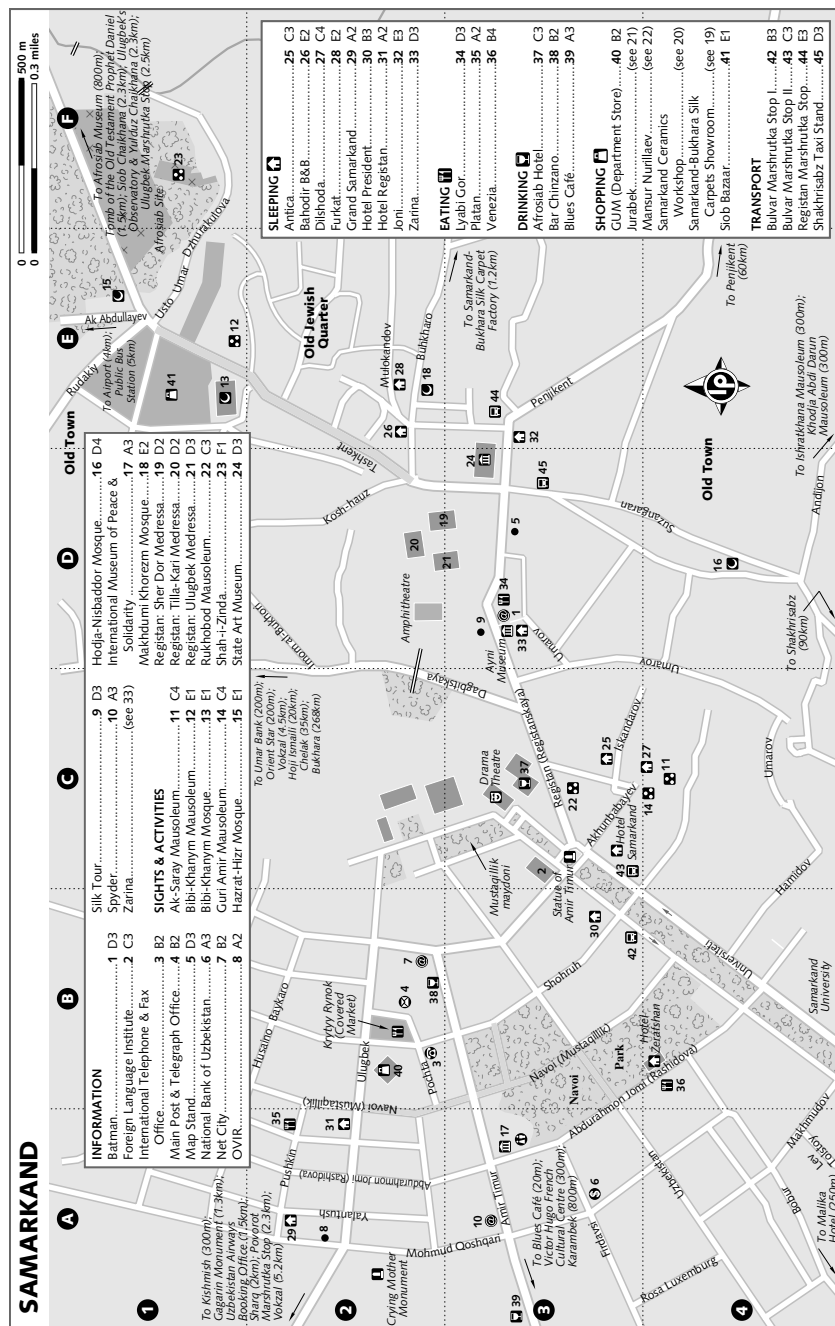
This might have been the end of the story, but in 1370 Timur decided to make Samarkand his capital, and over the next 35 years forged a new, almost-mythical city – Central Asia's economic and cultural epicentre. His grandson Ulugbek ruled until 1449 and made it an intellectual centre as well.

When the Uzbek Shaybanids came in the 16th century and moved their capital to Bukhara, Samarkand went into decline. For several decades in the 18th century, after a series of earthquakes, it was essentially uninhabited. The emir of Bukhara forcibly repopulated the town towards the end of the century, but it was only truly resuscitated by the Russians, who forced its surrender in May 1868 and linked it to the Russian empire by the Trans-Caspian railway 20 years later.

Samarkand was declared capital of the new Uzbek SSR in 1924, but lost the honour to Tashkent six years later.

Orientation

A map of Samarkand's centre shows the city's Russian-Asian schizophrenia. Eastward are the tangled alleys of the old town, whose axis is pedestrian Tashkent kochasi. Across town, shady 19th-century Russian avenues radiate westward from Mustaqillik maydoni,



the administrative centre of the modern city and province.

Most sights are within a couple of kilometres west and north of the Registan. The newer downtown area is also centred around a pedestrian thoroughfare, Navoi. A useful tourist landmark, roughly betwixt the city's two halves, is mothballed Hotel Samarkand on the parklike boulevard called Universiteti.

MAPS

A detailed, accurate 2004 map called *Guide of Samarkand* (scale 1:13,000) includes a full list of sights and facilities. Buy it at the small map stand opposite the Registan for 2000S.

Information

CULTURAL CENTRES

Victor Hugo French Cultural Centre (☎ 233 66 27; dilallia@yahoo.fr; Baraka 26; ☎ 2-6pm) French papers and magazines, plus 24 French TV channels. Manager Dila has great travel tips and may be able to arrange a home-stay in a pinch.

INTERNET ACCESS

Batman (Registan 3; per hr 600S; ☎ 8am-10pm) Snail-speed café near Registan.

Net City (Akhubnababayev 68; per hr 500S; ☎ 8am-midnight) Fast connection (usually), Skype, webcams, and range of computing services.

Spyder (Amir Timur 44; per hr 600S; ☎ 8am-midnight) Net City's only serious competition, with even better computers.

MONEY

The exchange offices at the Hotel Afrosiab and Hotel President work until early evening.

National Bank of Uzbekistan (Firdavsi 7; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat) Cashes travellers cheques and charges Visa card holders 4% for cash advances.

POST & COMMUNICATIONS

International telephone & fax office (Pochta 9; ☎ 8am-8pm) Standard Uztelekom rates here (p264).

Main post & telegraph office (Pochta 5)

REGISTRATION

OVIR (☎ 233 69 34; cnr Mohmud Qo'shqari & Ulugbek) Look for large metal gate.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Local travel agencies can organise cars, guides and the standard camel trekking and yurtstays (p262). Of these, Silk Tours is the most experienced. Ask about the annual *kupkari* (Tajik:

buzkashi) match, a traditional pololike game played with a headless sheep/goat/calf carcass, around Navruz (Navrus; 21 March).

Orient Star (☎ 235 93 67; www.tour-orient.com; Dagbitskaya 33) Large agency claims to be the authority on trekking in the Zerafshan and Hissar Mountains, and in Tajikistan.

Silk Tour (☎ 233 17 35; www.silktour.uz; sogda@intal.uz; Registan 38) Also known as Sogda Tour, it has refreshing ideas for touring the region. Saad from the Tashkent office is an authority on just about everything Uzbek.

Zarina (esprit@rol.uz) The French-speaking manager of this hotel p229 also runs a travel agency that can arrange the standard yurtstays and camel trekking, plus an overnight trek into the Amankutan gorge in the Zerafshan Mountains.

Sights

You can enter the courtyards of some of the main sights outside working hours for free or by 'tipping' the guard on duty; the Registan and Bibi-Khanym are spectacular in the early morning light; Guri Amir is sublime by night.

THE REGISTAN

This ensemble of majestic, tilting medressas – a near-overload of majolica, azure mosaics and vast, well-proportioned spaces – is the centrepiece of the city, and one of the most awesome single sights in Central Asia. The **Registan** (cnr Registan & Tashkent; admission 3700S; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar), which translates to 'Sandy Place' in Tajik, was medieval Samarkand's commercial centre and the plaza was probably a wall-to-wall bazaar.

The three grand edifices here are among the world's oldest preserved medressas, anything older having been destroyed by Jenghiz Khan. They have taken their knocks over the years courtesy of the frequent earthquakes that buffet the region; that they are still standing is a testament to the incredible craftsmanship of their builders. One look at the already crumbling blue dome of the recently rebuilt Bibi-Khanym Mosque nearby demonstrates clearly the inferiority of modern methods. The Soviets, to their credit, worked feverishly to protect and restore these beleaguered treasures, but they also took some questionable liberties, such as the capricious addition of a blue outer dome to the Tilla-Kari Medressa.

Ulugbek Medressa on the west side is the original medressa, finished in 1420 under Ulugbek

(who is said to have taught mathematics here; other subjects included theology, astronomy and philosophy). Beneath the little corner domes were lecture halls, and at the rear a large mosque. About 100 students lived in the two storeys of dormitory cells here.

The other buildings are rough imitations by the Shaybanid Emir Yalangtush. The entrance portal of the **Sher Dor (Lion) Medressa**, opposite Ulugbek's and finished in 1636, is decorated with roaring felines that look like tigers but are meant to be lions, flouting Islamic prohibitions against the depiction of live animals. It took 17 years to build but still hasn't held up as well as the Ulugbek Medressa, built in just three years.

In between is the **Tilla-Kari (Gold-Covered) Medressa**, completed in 1660, with a pleasant, gardenlike courtyard. The highlight here is the mosque, intricately decorated with gold to symbolize Samarkand's wealth at the time it was built. The mosque's delicate ceiling, oozing gold leaf, is flat but its tapered design makes it look domed from the inside.

Many of the medressas' former dormitory rooms are now art and souvenir shops. In the high season a variety of traditional shows are put on for tourists in the Sher Dor courtyard, including mock Uzbek weddings and *kurash*, a form of Uzbek wrestling. There are also tacky evening sound-and-light shows put on for tour groups in the square, which can usually be watched for free from afar.

For optimal views, police guards eagerly offer to escort visitors to the top of a minaret for 3000S. Don't pay more than 2000S.

BIBI-KHANYM MOSQUE

The enormous congregational **Bibi-Khanym Mosque** (Tashkent kochasi; admission 2400S; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar), northeast of the Registan, was finished shortly before Timur's death and must have been the jewel of his empire. Once one of the Islamic world's biggest mosques (the main gate alone was 35m high), it pushed construction techniques to the limit. Slowly crumbling over the years, it finally collapsed in an earthquake in 1897.

Legend says that Bibi-Khanym, Timur's Chinese wife, ordered the mosque built as a surprise while he was away. The architect fell madly in love with her and refused to finish the job unless he could give her a kiss. The smooch left a mark and Timur, on seeing it, executed the architect and decreed that

women should henceforth wear veils so as not to tempt other men.

Recent restoration, though shoddy in places (notice the tiles falling off the cupolas), has reinstated the main gateway and several domes. The interior courtyard contains an enormous marble Quran stand that lends some scale to the place. Local lore has it that any woman who crawls under the stand will have lots of children.

Across Tashkent kochasi is Bibi-Khanym's own compact 14th-century **mausoleum** (admission 1200S; ☎ 8am-6pm).

SHAH-I-ZINDA

Its shiny restoration in 2005 has been called an abomination by some, but this **avenue of mausoleums** (admission 2400S; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar) remains Samarkand's most moving sight. The name, which means 'Tomb of the Living King', refers to its original, innermost and holiest shrine – a complex of cool, quiet rooms around what is probably the grave of Qusam ibn-Abbas, a cousin of the Prophet Mohammed who is said to have brought Islam to this area in the 7th century.

A shrine to Qusam existed here on the edge of Afrosiab long before the Mongols ransacked it in the 13th century. Shah-i-Zinda began to assume its current form in the 14th century as Timur and later Ulugbek buried their family and favourites near the Living King.

These tombs featured the finest unrenovated glazed tilework in Central Asia until they were controversially restored as part of the Karimov administration's drive to 'beautify' Uzbekistan's architectural monuments. While still stunning, the tombs have undeniably lost some of their power.

The most beautiful tomb remains the Shadi Mulk Aka Mausoleum (1372), resting place of one of Timur's wives, second on the left after the entry stairs. The exquisite tilework here was of such exceptional quality that it merited little restoration.

Shah-i-Zinda is an important place of pilgrimage, so enter with respect and dress conservatively.

GURI AMIR MAUSOLEUM & AROUND

Timur, two sons and two grandsons, including Ulugbek, lie beneath the surprisingly modest **Guri Amir Mausoleum** (Akhumbabayev; admission 2400S; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar) and its trademark fluted azure dome.

Timur had built a simple crypt for himself at Shakhrisabz, and had this one built in 1404 for his grandson and proposed heir, Mohammed Sultan, who had died the previous year. But the story goes that when Timur died unexpectedly of pneumonia in Kazakhstan (in the course of planning an expedition against the Chinese) in the winter of 1405, the passes back to Shakhrisabz were snowed in and he was interred here instead.

As with other Muslim mausoleums, the stones are just markers; the actual crypts are in a chamber beneath. In the centre is Timur's stone, once a single block of dark-green jade. In 1740 the warlord Nadir Shah carried it off to Persia, where it was accidentally broken in two – from which time Nadir Shah is said to have had a run of very bad luck, including the near-death of his son. At the urging of his religious advisers he returned the stone to Samarkand, and of course his son recovered.

The plain marble marker to the left of Timur's is that of Ulugbek, and to the right is that of Mersaid Baraka, one of Timur's teachers. In front lies Mohammed Sultan. The stones behind Timur's mark the graves of his sons Shah Rukh (the father of Ulugbek) and Miran Shah. Behind these lies Sheikh Seyid Umar, the most revered of Timur's teachers, said to be a descendant of the Prophet Mohammad. Timur ordered Guri Amir built around Umar's tomb.

The Soviet anthropologist Mikhail Gerasimov opened the crypts in 1941 and, among other things, confirmed that Timur was tall (1.7m) and lame in the right leg and right arm (from injuries suffered when he was 25) – and that Ulugbek died from being beheaded. According to every tour guide's favourite anecdote, he found on Timur's grave an inscription to the effect that 'whoever opens this will be defeated by an enemy more fearsome than I'. The next day, 22 June, Hitler attacked the Soviet Union.

Outside the mausoleum you'll find the remains of what stood here before Guri Amir was built: a 14th-century complex consisting of a *khanaka* (Uzbek: *hanako*; a Sufi contemplation hall and hostel for wandering mendicants), mosque and mausoleum.

Down a lane behind the Guri Amir is the derelict little **Ak-Saray Mausoleum** (1470), with some unrestored, barely visible interior frescoes and majolica tilework inside. It's usually

locked but there may be a guy hanging around to open up – for a fee, of course.

Between Guri Amir and the main road is **Rukhobod Mausoleum**, dated 1380 and possibly the city's oldest surviving monument. It now serves as a souvenir and craft shop.

ANCIENT SAMARKAND (AFROSIAB)

At a 2.2-sq-km site called Afrosiab, northeast of the bazaar, are excavations of Marakanda (early Samarkand) more or less abandoned to the elements. The **Afrosiab Museum** (☎ 235 53 36; Tashkent kochasi; admission 2300S; ☎ 9am-6pm) leads the visitor through the 11 layers of civilisation that is Afrosiab. From the museum, walk 1km north to the current excavation site where you may find weather-beaten archaeologists picking coins out of the dust.

The restored **Tomb of the Old Testament Prophet Daniel** (admission 1200S; ☎ 8am-6pm) is 400m northeast of the museum, on the banks of the Siob River (turn left off Tashkent kochasi just before the bridge). The building is a long, low structure topped with five domes, containing an 18m sarcophagus – legend has it that Daniel's body grows by half an inch a year and thus the sarcophagus has to be enlarged. His remains, which date to at least the 5th century BC, were brought here for good luck by Timur from Susa, Iran (suspiciously, an alleged tomb of Daniel can also be found in Susa).

Continuing north you'll encounter the remains of **Ulugbek's Observatory**, one of the great archaeological finds of the 20th century. Ulugbek was probably more famous as an astronomer than as a ruler. His 30m astrolab, designed to observe star positions, was part of a three-storey observatory he built in the 1420s. All that remains is the instrument's curved track, unearthed in 1908. The small on-site **museum** (admission 2400; ☎ 9am-6pm) has some miniatures depicting Ulugbek and a few old ceramics and other artefacts unearthed in Afrosiab.

The best way to reach Afrosiab is on foot. Cross the intersection north of Bibi-Khanym and follow pedestrian Tashkent kochasi for about 1km to the Afrosiab Museum; Ulugbek's observatory is 1.5km beyond that. If it's too hot to walk, marshrutka 17 from the Registan takes an 8km detour via the bazaar and Samarkand's northern suburbs; marshrutka 45 follows the same roundabout route from Hotel Samarkand. At the time of writing the city was building a new road east of Shah-i-Zinda that should make driving to Afrosiab easier.

STATE ART MUSEUM

Samarkand's largest museum (☎ 235 37 80; nr Registan & Tashkent; admission 24005; 🕒 9am–6pm) walks you through the history of art in the region, starting with archaeological finds from Afrosiab and the Timurid era. The highlight is probably the decorative and applied arts exhibits upstairs, which include an impressive collection of old carpets – including some splendid 200-year-old Afghan and Persian specimens – prayer rugs, nuptial sheets and *suzani*. Downstairs are some photos of Samarkand 100 years ago and a quirky collection of Qurans that includes one of the world's largest (1m by 1.5m).

NAVOI KOCHASI & PARK

Samarkand's Russified downtown area tends to escape tourists' radar, which is unfortunate because it's quite un-Sovietised and charming. Gussied-up locals stroll along Navoi (formerly Leninskaya), a sight that would have Lenin rolling in his coffin.

The quirky **International Museum of Peace & Solidarity** (☎ 223 17 53; <http://peace.museum.com>; 🕒 by appointment only) used to occupy a building in central **Navoi Park**, but the building was demolished in 2006 to pave the way for park renovations. The museum should have a new home by the time you read this. Curator Anatoly Ionesov has a remarkable collection of disarmament and environmental memorabilia and has collected thousands of signatures, including some very famous ones, in the name of peace.

OTHER SIGHTS

Across the intersection from the bazaar, the **Hazrat-Hizr Mosque** (Tashkent kochasi; admission 12005, minaret 10005; 🕒 8am–6pm) occupies a hill on the fringes of Afrosiab. The 8th-century mosque that once stood here was burnt to the ground by Jenghiz Khan in the 13th century and was not rebuilt until 1854. In the 1990s it was lovingly restored by a wealthy Bukharan and today is Samarkand's most beautiful mosque, with a fine domed interior and views of Bibi-Khanym, Shah-i-Zinda and Afrosiab from the minaret. The ribbed *avnan* ceiling drips colour.

If you prefer your ruins really ruined, it's worth the slog out to the Tomb Raider-style, 15th-century **Ishratkhana Mausoleum** (Sadriiddin Ayniy). With a preponderance of pigeons and an eerie crypt in the basement, this is the place to film your horror movie. Across the street is the **Khodja Abdi Darun Mausoleum** (Sadriiddin Ayniy),

which shares a tranquil, shady courtyard with a mosque and a *hauz* (artificial stone pool). To get here take marshrutka 22 or 32.

South of the Registan on Suzangaran is the fine **Hodja-Nisbaddor Mosque**, a small 19th-century summer mosque with an open porch, tall carved columns and brightly restored ceiling. Another recently restored gem is the **Makhdumi Khorezm Mosque** (Bukhor), 100m east of the Registan. If it's locked ask the caretaker to let you in for a glimpse at the lush ceiling tilework.

Out by the Uzbekistan Airways office, the **Gagarin Monument** (nr Gagarin & Ulugbek) will thrill lovers of Soviet iconography. It looks like it was plucked out of a giant cereal box.

Tours

For guides, go through your hotel or a travel agency. Recommended guides are listed below.

Denis Vukolov (☎ 270 73 28; scootter@rambler.ru speaks English) Caters to budget travellers.

Farruh Bahronov (☎ 241 01 02 speaks English and French.) Also runs a shop at the Registan's Ulugbek Medressa.

Fruza Fazilova (☎ 260 14 25 speaks German.)

Natalya Tyan (☎ 222 58 42 speaks French.)

Svetlana Li (☎ 222 74 64; svetlana5de@yahoo.de speaks German.)

The going rate for trained guides is US\$5 per hour. Students often cost less, and can be found through Dila at the Victor Hugo Centre (p225), or try the **Foreign Language Institute** (☎ 233 61 74; Akhunbabayev93).

Festivals & Events

Most of the action during Samarkand's **Navruz Festival** (see p263) takes place at the Registan and in Navoi Park. The city is also home to the **Sharq Taronalari** (Melodies of the East) international music festival, held every other year (next in 2007 and 2009) in August at Registan Sq. Every 18 October is **Samarkand Day**, with various cultural events and exhibitions.

Sleeping

You'll find little reason to stray from Samarkand's B&Bs, which aren't quite up to Bukhara's lofty standards but are far preferable to the tour group-laden hotels.

BUDGET

Cheap private homestay options are limited. Email the Victor Hugo Centre before you arrive and see if its staff have any ideas.

Bahodir B&B (☎ 220 30 93; Mulokandov 132; dm from US\$6, s/d US\$10/16) Bahodir's hammerlock on the backpacker constituency speaks volumes about the power of low prices. OK, so it does have tasty vegetarian dinners (US\$1) and a friendly communal atmosphere. But it also has barely functional plumbing, 'towels' that began their careers as dishrags 30 years ago and mattresses that would be no saggier had they spent the previous five years in an elephant pen. If you can't sleep, read the notebook filled with backpacker advice and war stories.

Hotel Registan (☎ 233 55 90; Ulugbek 36; s/d US\$7/10) We hardly recommend this musty Soviet relic in the new part of town, but if everything else is full it's not *that* bad and it certainly won't break the bank.

our pick Antica (☎ 235 20 92; Iskandarov 58; antica2006@rambler.ru; s/d with shared bathroom from US\$10/20, s/d/tr from US\$20/30/45; 🕒) This boutique B&B is the only place in Samarkand where you can really capture the vibe of living in a traditional home. The rooms vary in design but all are generously furnished with antique carpets, *suzani* and trinkets; those in the 19th-century annex have hand-carved walnut-wood doors and mosquelike ribbed, brightly painted ceilings. The main house, with two towering, vaulted windows, is set around a lush garden courtyard shaded by pomegranate, persimmon and fig trees. Dinners (US\$7) are hearty and at least one family member can wax philosophical in English, German, French or Spanish.

Furkat (☎ 235 62 99; hotelfurkat@mail.ru; Mulokandov 105; s with shared bathroom US\$10, s/d US\$20/30; 🕒) Samarkand's original B&B still gives the competition much to imitate, including richly decorated rooms, carved wood doors and flexible pricing. Its three floors may be out of place in old town, but you can't argue with the result: splendid views of the Registan and the snow-capped Fan Mountains. Staff bolt the front door shut annoyingly early here; night owls should consider Furkat's two annexes.

Joni (☎ 235 69 41; hotel_joni@yahoo.com; Penjikent 9; s/d US\$18/36) There's a variety of rooms on offer at this well-located B&B. Ten of them are set around a courtyard with an odd, stringed sculpture as its centrepiece. Check out a few rooms and test the beds – some sag to the coils.

MIDRANGE

Dilshoda (☎ 235 03 87; www.dilshoda.by.ru; Ak Saray 150; s/d US\$20/30; 🕒) Set in the shadow of Guri Amir, this B&B serves up warm if basic rooms

with nice carpets, narrow beds and small bathrooms. The chipper host family serves up mouthwatering three-course dinners (US\$4) upon request. Discounts are not beyond the realm of possibility if you're staying a while.

Zarina (☎ 235 07 61; www.hotel-zarina.com; Umarov 4; s/d from US\$20/35; 🕒) Located on an alley behind the Ayni Museum, this B&B has a alluring courtyard with three *tapchan* and a small pool. Alas, the smallest regular rooms do not quite match the standard of the courtyard and are a bit overpriced. More spacious deluxe doubles with satellite TV cost US\$45.

Malika (☎ 233 01 97; www.malika-samarkand.com; s/d US\$35/45; 🕒) The Malika chain's signature hotel doesn't disappoint, with 26 spacious, tastefully understated rooms, fine food and a few traditional touches thrown in. Its mix of style and service makes it far and away the best true hotel in Samarkand, although its location is somewhat tragic.

TOP END

Grand Samarkand (☎ 233 28 80; Yalantush 38; grand-samarkand@mail.ru; s/d US\$50/70; 🕒) This midsized offering is ugly on the outside but swanky on the inside, with extra-wide twin beds, fancy TVs and new everything. It was just getting its wings at the time of research, but you can expect a nice range of amenities.

Hotel President (☎ 233 24 75; www.uzhotelpresident.com; Shohruh 53; s/d/ste US\$105/165/300; 🕒) Beyond the luxurious, airplane hangar-like lobby, this new high-rise doesn't show much creativity. The rooms have the expected bells and whistles and those facing east have views of the Registan.

Eating

Contrary to popular belief there are plenty of good eateries in Samarkand. Most are in the newer Russian part of town, far removed from the touristy Registan area.

CHAIKHANAS & HOME RESTAURANTS

Lyabi Gor (Registan 6; mains 1000–20005) One of the most popular chaikhana in the country because of its prime location opposite the Registan, it pleases the tourist masses with generous helpings of *manty* (steamed dumplings), *laghman*, *shorpa* (meat and vegetable soup), *shashlyk* and cheap beer. Get there early or it may run out of *shashlyk* or close.

Yulduz Chaikhana (Tashkent kochasi; mains 1000–20005) Another popular chaikhana, this one

is near the Ulugbek Observatory. The menu is the same as at Lyabi Gor or any other chaikhana.

Siob (mains 1000-2000S; ☎ lunch & dinner May-Sep) This dreamy chaikhana lays out *tapchan* on the banks of the babbling Siab (Siob) River. Turn right off Tashkent kochasi down a dirt road near the river and follow for 1km.

You can wash *plov* down with vodka at one of several decent home restaurants behind the Ulugbek Observatory. Ask to be pointed in the right direction. There's another strip of home restaurants in the old town between the bazaar and Imom al-Bukhori. These tend to work sporadically so ask around.

RESTAURANTS

Karambek (☎ 221 27 56; Gagarina 194; mains 1500-2500S) This traditional restaurant trounces touristy Oasis restaurant in Navoi Park. The national- and Russian-influenced cuisine is surprisingly good, and can be enjoyed in a variety of settings, from private country hut to airy street-side patio.

Platan (☎ 233 80 49; Pushkin 2; mains 2000-3000S; ☎ lunch & dinner) The main dining facility – a sort of tropical-style, thatched-roof yurt – counts as one of Samarkand's stranger structures. The menu, which includes Arabian-, Thai- and Egyptian-style meat dishes, is no less charismatic, but all dishes are cooked-to-order and tasty.

Kishmish (☎ 231 03 82; Baraka 7; mains 2000-3000S) Another traditional-style place, this one has outdoor seating for 200 people. It was in the middle of a management change when we visited, but word is that new management will maintain the elaborate nightly floor shows that are its main draw.

At the time of research a promising Italian restaurant called **Venezia** (Abdurahmon) was getting set to open its doors across from the Hotel Zerafshan.

Drinking & Entertainment

Bar Chinzano (Amir Timur 10; ☎ 9am-midnight) This smoky bar draws a friendly, Russian-speaking crowd of regulars and is one of the few options in town for late-night eats – try the pizza.

Blues Café (Amir Timur 66; ☎ noon-11.30pm) Dizzy, Louie, BB and company adorn the walls and set the bluesy vibe at this snug cocktail lounge. The nightly live jazz usually takes the form of Eddie the solo piano player, but occasionally a larger ensemble materializes. The creative

snack menu includes *khachapuri* (cheese-filled Georgian *samsa*).

Sharq (Ulugbek 91; admission women/men Fri & Sat 1500/2500S, Sun-Thu free; ☎ 9pm-2am) The Registan area shuts down around 9pm, but there's action downtown if you look hard enough. This is a pool bar weeknights but turns into a pretty good club on weekends, albeit one catering mainly to a younger set.

Your only late-night options are the two nightclubs at the **Afrosiab Hotel** (☎ 231 11 95; Registan 2) which are usually moribund but have their occasional moments at weekends.

Shopping

There are souvenir shops and craft workshops of varying quality at all the big sights, in particular at the Rukhobod Mausoleum and the Registan. At the Registan look out for the **Samarkand Ceramics Workshop** (Tilla-Kari Medressa), one of the few places still practising the Samarkand school of ceramicmaking. **Jurabek** (Ulugbek Medressa) sells beautiful old textiles. Samarkand-Bukhara Silk Carpets (see p232) also has a Registan-based **showroom** (Sher Dor Medressa). Accomplished miniaturist Mansur Nurillaev is at the Rukhobod Mausoleum.

Around and behind Bibi-Khanym, the frenetic, colourful main farmers market, called **Siob Bazaar**, is great for vegetarians and photographers, and may reward silk and souvenir hunters as well. You can also find silk at **GUM** (Ulugbek), but silk buffs are better off going to Urgat (p232).

Getting There & Away

AIR

Uzbekistan Airways (☎ booking office 334 10 89; Gagarin 84) flies except Friday for US\$36. To get to the airport take any marshrutka to the Povorot (Поворот) stop and get out at Gagarin. Tickets for all domestic flights must be bought here.

LAND

Tashkent is four hours away by car across a flat, dry landscape that tsarist Russians nicknamed the Hungry Steppe, now a monotonous stretch of factories and cotton fields. The main departure point to Tashkent for private buses and shared taxis is the Ulugbek marshrutka stop, about 300m east of the observatory (bus/shared taxi per seat 3500/9000S, six/3½ hours). Marshrutkas to/

from Tashkent congregate at the train station (5000S).

Shared taxis to Termiz (per seat 16,000S, five hours) gather at 'Grebnoy Kanal' on the city's outskirts about 10km east of the Ulugbek stop. Infrequent Tashkent–Termiz buses pass by Grebnoy Kanal, but don't count on them having seats. One early morning bus departs to Termiz (4500S, 8½ hours) from the dying public bus station, 500m past the airport turnoff.

Buses to Bukhara via Navoi depart from opposite the Ulugbek stop on Tashkent kochasi (3500S, five hours). They run all night, but more frequently (at least two per hour) up until 7pm. Some go on to Urgench (7500S, 13 hours). You'll find a few shared taxis to Bukhara (per seat 11,000S, three hours) around this bus stop, but the main departure point is the Povorot marshrutka stop about 1km west of the Gagarin Monument on Ulugbek kochasi.

For Shakhrisabz, shared taxis congregate on Suzangaran, about 100m south of the 'Registan' marshrutka stop (per seat 2500S, 1½ hours). Most go only as far as Kitab, where you pick up a marshrutka for the last 10km. For Penjikent, see p267.

Train

The speedy *Registan* train, with airplane-style seating, departs five times a week to Tashkent at 5pm (2nd class/1st class 6500/12,000S, four hours). The equally priced and equally speedy Bukhara–Tashkent express *Sharq* train rolls through Samarkand daily at 11am. There are also two slower regular passenger trains daily to Tashkent (*platskartny* 7500S, six hours); one originates in Bukhara.

For Bukhara you can pick up the *Sharq* heading west at about 1.10pm (2nd class/1st class 5700/9200S, 3½ hours). The daily Tashkent–Bukhara passenger train rumbles through Samarkand at 1.45am (*platskartny* 7500S, six hours). The cheapest option to Bukhara is the daily 'suburban' train (1200S, six hours). There is also a daily suburban train to Qarshi (850S, four hours).

The trains from Tashkent to Urgench and to Kungrad via Nukus go via Samarkand (see p210).

The **train station** (☎ 229 15 32; Rudakiy) is 5km northwest of Navoi Park. Take any marshrutka that says 'Вокзал', such as 73 or 17 from the Registan.

Getting Around TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Marshrutka 73 goes from the airport to the Registan area, while 20 goes to the Bulvar (Бульвар) stop near the mothballed Hotel Samarkand. Walk 500m out to main road for more options, such as 53 to the Registan. A taxi from the airport to the Registan will cost about 4000S, or walk out to the main road and pay 1500S.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Marshrutkas (200S to 300S) and the city's few remaining buses (150S) run from about 6am until 8pm or 9pm. To get between the Registan area and Navoi in the heart of the downtown area use Marshrutka 3, 21, 22 or 41 and get off at the GUM (ГУМ) stop. Plenty of buses go from the Registan to the Bulvar stop, which is also close to downtown. Marshrutkas from the Hotel Samarkand to the Siob Bazaar say 'Сиёб базар', but remind the driver to drop you off or he may bypass it.

AROUND SAMARKAND Hoja Ismail

In Hoja Ismail, a village 20km north of Samarkand, is one of Islam's holier spots, the modest **Mausoleum of Ismail al-Bukhari** (admission 2000S, guided tour in English 1000S; ☎ 7am-8pm). Al-Bukhari (AD 810–887) was one of the greatest Muslim scholars of the *Hadith* – the collected acts and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed. His work is regarded by Sunni Muslims as second only to the Quran as a source of religious law. Following his refusal to give special tutoring to Bukhara's governor and his children, he was forced into exile here.

This peaceful place of pilgrimage contains a mosque, a small museum and two courtyards, the main one containing Ismail al-Bukhari's gorgeous tomb, made of yellow marble and inlaid with majolica. It's surrounded by an *avivan*, under which an imam usually sits, chanting prayers. The *avivan*'s brightly painted ceiling uncharacteristically lacks red – supposedly on the orders of President Karimov, who wanted to avoid communist associations.

It's essential to dress conservatively here, respect the calm and reverent atmosphere, and ask before you take photos.

Hoja Ismail village is 4km off the road to Chelek. Marshrutkas from Samarkand leave from outside Umar Bank on Dagbitskaya in Samarkand (500S, 30 minutes). Marshrutka

SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE SHOPPING

Besides being blessed with former Soviet Central Asia's most splendid architecture, Uzbekistan boasts the region's richest textile industry – as evidenced by the sometimes baffling array of fabrics spilling out of tourist attractions from Tashkent to Khiva.

If you're the sort who can't tell the difference between an 18th-century Nuratinsky *suzani* (silk and cotton coverlets) or some farmer's dirty old handkerchief, the least you can do is buy responsibly. Uzbekistan is hardly known for being small-business friendly, but across the country a growing number of individual artisans and merchants have set up small-scale, tourist-focused enterprises that are turning profits while also contributing to the cultural and economic revival of local communities.

A pioneer of 'socially responsible' shopping is **Yulduz Mamadiyoro** (☎ 529 39 67; yulduz1967@mail.ru), who runs a weaving project in Shakhrisabz that employs more than 100 local women. Hand-weaving is an ancient tradition in Shakhrisabz, and according to Yulduz every woman in the city knows how to stitch in the local style. However, they have traditionally lacked capital for raw materials and lacked markets for their products.

Yulduz' idea was simple – she would supply her women with raw materials on credit and promise to buy their finished *suzani*, handbags, clothing and other products. 'This is so they don't have to waste time selling at the bazaar', she explains. 'Instead, they get money immediately to feed their families.'

With seed money from foreign friends and international donors, Yulduz launched the project with 10 women in 2005. Within three months she was employing 60 women, within a year 150. 'If it were possible, I'd work with all the women in Shakhrisabz', she says.

But to make that a reality she'll need more money. Yulduz no longer stitches herself. Instead, much of her efforts go towards marketing and 'studying European tastes' to make sure her products, which mix traditional and modern styles, will be in demand.

Unfortunately, Yulduz has had problems finding a reliable retail outlet in Uzbekistan. Most items are custom ordered or sold at semimonthly expositions in Tashkent. Yulduz hopes to have

11 passes the Umar Bank taxi stand from the Hotel Samakand.

Urgut

This town makes a popular day trip from Samarkand because of its vast **Sunday Bazaar**, one of the best places to buy silk and old textiles in the country. Some readers report being disappointed by this market, but that may be because they showed up on the wrong day! This market is only happening on Sunday, and to a lesser extent on Thursday. Arrive at the crack of dawn for best results. Serious collectors will be mainly interested in the section devoted to textiles and jewellery, but the entire bazaar is fantastic. To get here take a marshrutka from the Registan stop (1000S, 45 minutes).

Zerafshan & Hissar Mountains

If you have a few days to explore, the road south to Termiz offers up some scenic, rarely explored detours, most notably to the paradisiacal mountain retreat of Langar and its famous mausoleum on a hill.

Several Samarkand travel agencies (p225) lead one- to three-day hikes in the Zerafshan Mountains between Samarkand and Shakhrisabz. South of Shakhrisabz, the Hissar Nature Reserve is home to Uzbekistan's highest peaks (about 4500m) and offers some of Central Asia's least-explored trekking routes.

Keep in mind that both the Hissar and Zerafshan Mountains are in sensitive border zones. Before planning a trek here, first check to ensure that the region is open; at the time of research it was. Trekking in the Hissars requires a special permit and you should proceed only with an experienced guide. Talk to Orient Star travel agency in Samarkand about obtaining permits and trekking in the Hissars.

SHAKHRISABZ ШАХРИСАБЗ

☎ (3) 75 / pop 75,000

Shakhrisabz is a small, un-Russified town south of Samarkand, across the hills in the Kashka-Darya province. The town is a pleasant Uzbek backwater and seems to be nothing special – until you start bumping into the ruins dotted around its backstreets, and the

a showroom up and running by 2007 next to Ak-Saray in Shakhrisabz (below). Until then you'll find a few bags and articles of clothing on sale at Human House (p208) in Tashkent.

In nearby Samarkand, 400 more women – plus a few men – are gainfully employed at **Samarkand-Bukhara Silk Carpet Factory** (Map p224; ☎ 231 07 26; Hojom 12; www.silkcarpets.net; ☎ by appointment). Let's be frank: Uzbekistan is not the place to buy carpets in Central Asia, and almost anything of quality comes from Turkmenistan. But the owners here, besides being Turkmen, use only natural dyes to churn out hand-woven silk carpets of truly exceptional quality.

Just as important in a country where child-labour runs rampant and most private companies offer only three-month contracts to avoid paying benefits, the factory works according to strict Western employment standards.

'Our people work eight hours a day, five days a week, 11 months a year with a month off at full pay', says owner Abdullahad Badghisi, whose family has been making carpets for six generations in Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. He adds that all workers must take a break every half-hour, 'because happy employees make beautiful carpets'.

The factory's magnificent carpets, which exhibit a range of Turkmen, Caucasian, Afghan and other styles, are proof of that theory. In business here since 1992, the factory is now a well-worn stop on the tour-bus trail. Abdullahad walks visitors through a tour of all stages of the silk- and carpet-making process, from unwinding the silk cocoons to washing the finished carpets.

These carpets can take months to make and are consequently expensive – expect to pay upwards of US\$1200 for a 6-sq-metre silk carpet. But, as Abdullahad notes, 'A good carpet is an investment'.

Other socially responsible shopping options in Uzbekistan are Human House, the 'Unesco' carpet workshops in Bukhara and Khiva, and Tashkent-based **Rakhimov Ceramics Studio** (p208). The latter has started a small potters' workshop to revive several ancient schools of ceramics making. This is a great place for serious ceramics aficionados to witness some fine pieces of pottery and learn about Uzbekistan's myriad ceramic styles. Among the five students here are two Shakhrisabz brothers who, it is hoped, will resuscitate the waning Shakhrisabz school that their grandfather once practised.

megalomaniac ghosts of a wholly different place materialise. This is Timur's hometown, and once upon a time it probably put Samarkand itself in the shade. It's worth a visit just to check out the great man's roots.

Timur was born on 9 April 1336 into the Barlas clan of local aristocrats, at the village of Hoja Ilghar, 13km to the south. Ancient even then, Shakhrisabz (called Kesh at the time) was a kind of family seat. As he rose to power, Timur gave it its present name (Tajik for 'Green Town') and turned it into an extended family monument. Most of its current attractions were built here by Timur (including a tomb intended for himself) or his grandson Ulugbek.

You can easily see all of Shakhrisabz as a day trip from Samarkand. There are a couple of sleeping options for those who want to linger and absorb the city's easy-going provincial vibe.

Orientation

Almost everything of interest in Shakhrisabz happens along a 2km stretch of the town's main road, Ipak Yoli (Uzbek for 'Silk Road').

The long-distance bus station is south of town, about 5km beyond the Kok-Gumbaz Mosque.

Information

Internet Café (Ipak Yoli; internet per hr 600S, international calls per min 850S; ☎ 7am-6pm) Internet, fax and phone.

National Bank of Uzbekistan (Firdavsi)

Uzbektourism (Ipak Yoli 26; 3-hr city tour US\$15) The Orient Star hotel hosts the local Uzbektourism office, which can promptly summon English, German and French-speaking guides for city tours.

Sights

AK-SARAY PALACE

Just north of the centre, **Timur's summer palace** (White Palace; admission free, access to staircase 1000S; ☎ 9am-6pm) has as much grandeur per square centimetre as anything in Samarkand. There's actually nothing left of it except bits of the gigantic, 40m-high *pishtak*, covered with gorgeous, unrestored filigree-like mosaics. This crumbling relic blending seamlessly with everyday life will thrill critics of the

country's over-sanitized restoration efforts elsewhere.

Ak-Saray was probably Timur's most ambitious project, 24 years in the making, following a successful campaign in Khorezm and the 'import' of many of its finest artisans. It's well worth climbing the 116 steps to the top of the *pishtak* to truly appreciate its height. It's stag-

gering to try to imagine what the rest of the palace was like, in size and glory. In what was the palace centre stands a new **statue of Amir Timur**. It's not uncommon to see 15 weddings at a time posing here for photos at weekends, creating quite a mob scene.

KOK-GUMBAZ MOSQUE & DORUT TILYO VAT

This large **Friday mosque** (Ipak Yoli; admission 2400S; ☎ 8.30am-6pm) was completed by Ulugbek in 1437 in honour of his father Shah Rukh (who was Timur's son). The name, appropriately, means 'blue dome'. It has been in an almost constant state of renovation for years. The palm trees painted on the interior walls are calling cards of its original Indian and Iranian designers.

Behind Kok-Gumbaz was the original burial complex of Timur's forebears. On the left as you enter the complex is the **Mausoleum of Sheikh Shamseddin Kulyal**, spiritual tutor to Timur and his father, Amir Taragay (who might also be buried here). The mausoleum was completed by Timur in 1374.

On the right is the **Gumbazi Seyidan** (Dome of the Seyyids), which Ulugbek finished in 1438 as a mausoleum for his own descendants (although it's not clear whether any are buried in it).

KHAZRATI-IMAM COMPLEX

A walkway leads east from Kok-Gumbaz to a few melancholy remnants of a 3500-sq-metre mausoleum complex called Dorus-siadat or Dorussaodat (Seat of Power and Might), which Timur finished in 1392 and which may have overshadowed even the Ak-Saray Palace. The main survivor is the tall, crumbling **Tomb of Jehangir**, Timur's eldest and favourite son, who died at 22. It's also the resting place for another son, Umar Sheikh (Timur's other sons are with him at Guri Amir in Samarkand).

In an alley behind the mausoleum (and within the perimeter of the long-gone Dorus-siadat) is a bunker with a wooden door leading to an underground room, the **Crypt of Timur**. The room, plain except for Quranic quotations on the arches, is nearly filled by a single stone casket. On the casket are biographical inscriptions about Timur, from which it was inferred (when the room was discovered in 1963) that this crypt was intended for him. Inside are two unidentified corpses.

AMIR TIMUR MUSEUM

Housed inside the renovated Chubin Medressa is this simple **museum** (Ipak Yoli; admission 2000S; ☎ 9am-5pm). Its highlight is a model depicting Timur's entire kingdom, from Egypt to Kashgar. Beyond the boundaries of the kingdom, a yellow line illustrates his 'protectorates', including Kiev and Moscow. If that doesn't interest you, the museum is probably not worth the price of admission, although there are some old Buddhist and Zoroastrian artefacts here that predate Timur by many centuries. The museum was planning to add an art gallery.

Sleeping & Eating

Sleeping options are limited. If all else fails, ask about a homestay from the staff of the Aquarium café.

Shakhrisabz Tours & Travel (☎ 522 05 82; Ipak Yoli; r per person 10,000S) There are a few rooms here but they are positively unique – basically open spaces with mosque-style patchwork carpeting, two basic beds and not much else. Staff will throw a couple *kurpacha* on the floor to accommodate bigger groups. *The place to go local*. Staff can also take you hiking in the Zerafshan or Hissar Mountains.

Orient Star (☎ 522 06 38; www.tour-orient.com; Ipak Yoli 26; s/d US\$25/44; ☎) This is about the only deal in town and it's often occupied by tour groups, so book ahead in the high season. The Orient Star chain had just taken it over from the government when we visited and was planning an ambitious expansion and renovation of the simple but serviceable rooms.

Aquarium (☎ 522 39 72; Ipak Yoli 22) This bustling café has a good view of Ak-Saray and serves up the usual shashlyk, *laghman* and vodka shots.

Kulolik Chaikhana (Ipak Yoli; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This former mosque houses a massive *tapchan* under its octagonal roof. It's the most popular place in town – usually a sign that it's the best.

In the bazaar you'll find vendors hawking *samsa*, shashlyk, yummy soups and the usual mountains of delicious fruit.

Getting There & Around

Shakhrisabz is about 90km from Samarkand, over the 1788m Takhtakaracha (Amankutan) Pass. The pass is intermittently closed by snow from January to March, forcing a three-hour detour around the mountains.

For details on getting here from Samarkand, see p230.

Buses and shared taxis to a handful of other destinations leave from the long-distance bus station, south of town. To Tashkent's Ippodrom station there are about six daily buses (4000S, eight hours) and regular shared taxis (per seat 12000S, five hours). To get to Bukhara take a shared taxi to Qarshi (per seat 2000S, 1½ hours) and change there.

NURATA

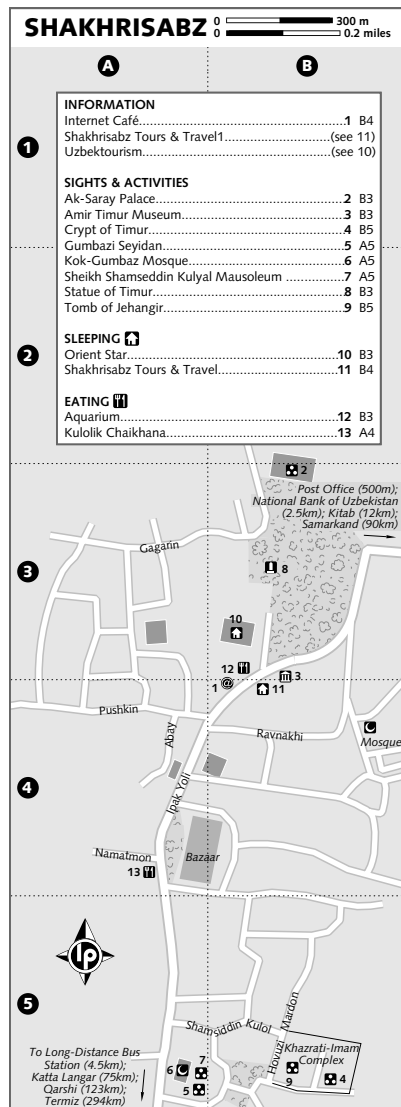
☎ 436 / pop 40,000

To the north of the featureless Samarkand-Bukhara 'Royal Rd', the Tian Shan Mountains produce one final blip on the map before fading unceremoniously into desertified insignificance. The Nurata Mountains top out at just over 2000m, but are rapidly becoming, along with manmade Lake Aidarkul further north, the centre of Uzbekistan's growing ecotourism movement. Most tour agencies launch trips into this area from Samarkand, Bukhara or even Tashkent, but individual travellers on a budget are advised to take public transport to Nurata and start their explorations there.

Modest Nurata is most famous for its old, circle-patterned *suzani*, which can sell for thousands of dollars at international auctions, but it also has a few quirky tourist attractions, most notably an old **fortress of Alexander the Great**. You can make like Alexander – go ahead, even throw on your suit of armour – and clamber all over the fortress, which looms over the town like a giant sandcastle. Behind the fortress, a path leads 4km to the **Zukarnay Petroglyphs**, which date to the Bronze Age. Ask the curator at the museum (see p236) how to find the trail. If it's too hot to walk, there are sometimes guys with motorcycles hanging out near the museum who will whisk you out there for a couple of thousand sum. (If you miss these, there are many more petroglyphs at Sarmysh Gorge, accessible by car 40km northeast of Navoi.)

More experienced trekkers can get a ride 10km east and launch an assault on camel-humped **Oq Tog** (White Peak; 2169m). Plan on at least a full day if you want to go the whole way.

Beneath Alexander's fortress you'll encounter the anomaly of several hundred trout occupying a pool and well next to a 10th-century mosque and caravanserai. This is the



GOING LOCAL IN THE NURATA MOUNTAINS

South of Lake Aidarkul, there is great hiking and bird-watching in the mountains of the **Nuratau-Kyzylkum Biosphere Reserve** (www.nuratau.com), which is also the site of an exciting new **community based tourism project** – the only one of its kind in Uzbekistan. As of this writing three families had converted their homes into rustic guesthouses under this UN Development Programme-sponsored ‘cultural tourism’ project. Expect that number to climb. The families offer hiking, horse riding, traditional cooking lessons and the opportunity to breathe in mountain air and sleep on *tapchan* (tea beds) under the stars.

This is a great opportunity to interact with the local ethnic Tajiks in their element – and a great way to ward off architecture burnout if you’ve seen one too many medressas. For booking information and details on getting there, contact Elena Tours (p199) or the project **field office** (☎ 72-452 17 68/7, Russian only) in Yangiqishloq, a small town 80km west of Jizzakh and 160km east of Nurata. Yangiqishloq makes a good jumping-off point for both the reserve and the guesthouses.

Chashma Spring, formed, it is said, where the Prophet Mohammed’s son-in-law Hazrat Ali drove his staff into the ground. These ‘holy’ fish live off the mineral-laden waters of the spring and canals that feed it. Also on the grounds here is a small **museum** (admission 500S; ☎ 9am-5pm) with some old ceramics and other trinkets. The curator is Nurata’s best source of regional information, although he does not speak English.

Spend the night in Nurata only if you’re desperate. The appalling but cheap **Hotel Bahkri** (s/d with shared bathroom 1300/2500S), 500m from Chashma Spring on the road to the centre, is the only gig in town. Water and electricity are sporadic. Eating options are limited to what you can buy at the small market near the Navoi taxi stand. Navoi has better lodging options, such as the **Yoshlik Hotel** (☎ 436-224 40 21; Halqlar Dustligi 138; s/d US\$17/34; 🍽️).

LAKE AIDARKUL

After briefly taking in Nurata’s sights, you’ll want to hightail it to this manmade lake formed from the diverted waters of the Syr-Darya in 1969. On the west and north banks of the lake, there are four or five yurt camps, most of which offer fishing and, more intriguingly, **camel trekking**.

The best-known and easiest to access is the **Yangikazgan Yurt Camp** (☎ in Navoi 436-661 43 59; murat2005@bk.ru; yurt per person US\$25-30) about 75km north of Nurata. You won’t be roughing it: there are eight comfortable camel-hair yurts here and you’ll be fed well. Showing up unannounced may work, but you’re best off calling ahead to reserve (ask for Murat). Other yurt camps include one in Baimurat and another

in Saphoz Nurata. The best time for camel trekking is from March to May when the spring rains turn the floor of the Kyzylkum desert green. Most camel treks are just a few hours, although Yangikazgan Yurt Camp can organise multiple-day treks. Prices for multiple-day treks are negotiable and depend on the amount of people in your group.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to Nurata, take a shared taxi (per seat 3000S, one hour) or bus (1000S) from Bukhara to Navoi, from where shared taxis go to Nurata (2000S, one hour). In Nurata it’s easy to hire an ordinary taxi at the Navoi taxi stand to Lake Aidarkul. Negotiations start at 15,000S for Yangikazgan (70km), and 25,000S for Baimurat (110km) and Saphoz Nurata (100km).

BUKHARA БУХАРА

☎ (3) 65 / pop 255,000

Central Asia’s holiest city, Bukhara has buildings spanning a thousand years of history, and a thoroughly lived-in old centre that probably hasn’t changed much in two centuries. It is one of the best places in Central Asia for a glimpse of pre-Russian Turkestan.

Most of the centre is an architectural preserve, full of medressas, a massive royal fortress and the remnants of a once-vast market complex. The government has pumped a lot of money into restoration, even redigging several *hauz* filled in by the Soviets. Although the centre has become a bit too clean and quiet (‘Ye Olde Bukhara’ as one traveller put it), the 21st century has still been kept more or less at bay, and the city’s accommodation options go from strength to strength.

Until a century ago Bukhara was watered by a network of canals and some 200 stone pools where people gathered and gossiped, drank and washed. As the water wasn’t changed often, Bukhara was famous for plagues; the average 19th-century Bukharan is said to have died by the age of 32. The Bolsheviks modernised the system and drained the pools.

You’ll need at least two days to look around. Try to allow time to lose yourself in the old town; it’s easy to overdose on the 140-odd protected buildings and miss the whole for its many parts.

History

It was as capital of the Samanid state in the 9th and 10th centuries that Bukhara – Bukhoro-i-sharif (Noble Bukhara), the ‘Pillar of Islam’ – blossomed as Central Asia’s religious and cultural heart, and simultaneously brightened with the Persian love of the arts. Among those nurtured here were the philosopher-scientist Ibn Sina and the poets Firdausi and Rudaki – figures with stature in the Persian Islamic world that, for example, Newton or Shakespeare enjoyed in the West.

After two centuries under the smaller Karakhanid and Karakitay dynasties, Bukhara succumbed in 1220 to Jenghiz Khan, and in 1370 fell under the shadow of Timur’s Samarkand.

A second lease on life came in the 16th century when the Uzbek Shaybanids made it the capital of what came to be known as the Bukhara khanate. The centre of Shaybanid Bukhara was a vast marketplace with dozens of specialist bazaars and caravanserais, more than 100 medressas (with 10,000 students) and more than 300 mosques.

Under the Astrakhanid dynasty, the Silk Road’s decline slowly pushed Bukhara out of

the mainstream. Then in 1753 Mohammed Rahim, the local deputy of a Persian ruler, proclaimed himself emir, founding the Mangit dynasty that was to rule until the Bolsheviks came.

Several depraved rulers filled Rahim’s shoes; the worst was probably Nasrullah Khan (also called ‘the Butcher’ behind his back), who ascended the throne in 1826 by killing off his brothers and 28 other relatives. He made himself a household name in Victorian England after he executed two British officers (see p242).

In 1868, Russian troops under General Kaufman occupied Samarkand (which at the time was within Emir Muzaffar Khan’s domains). Soon afterward Bukhara surrendered, and was made a protectorate of the tsar, with the emirs still nominally in charge.

In 1918 a party of emissaries arrived from Tashkent (by then under Bolshevik control) to persuade Emir Alim Khan to surrender peacefully. The wily despot stalled long enough to allow his agents to stir up an anti-Russian mob that slaughtered nearly the whole delegation, and the emir’s own army sent a larger Russian detachment packing, back towards Tashkent.

But the humiliated Bolsheviks had their revenge. Following an orchestrated ‘uprising’ in Charjou (now Turkmenabat) by local revolutionaries calling themselves the Young Bukharans, and an equally premeditated request for help, Red Army troops from Khiva and Tashkent under General Mikhail Frunze stormed the Ark (citadel) and captured Bukhara.

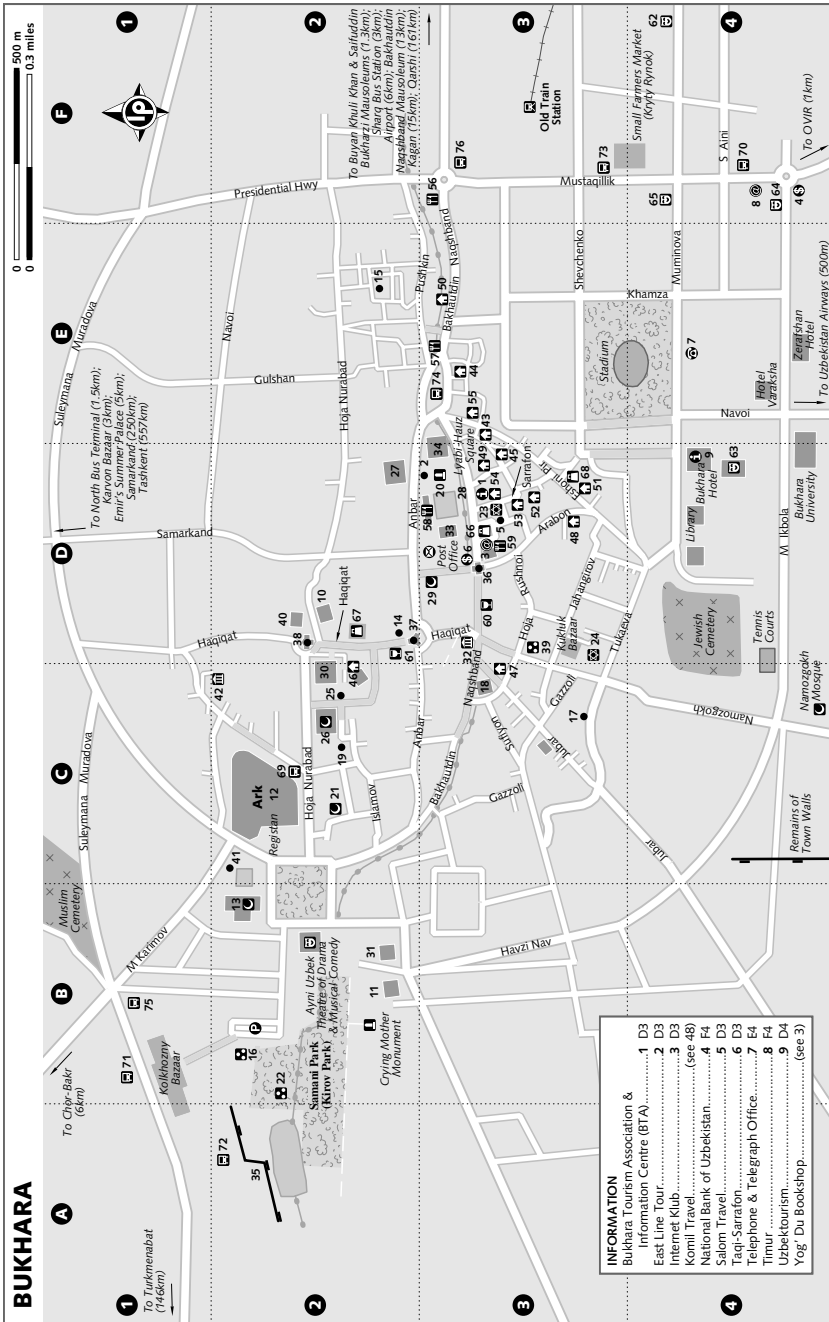
Bukhara won a short ‘independence’ as the Bukhara People’s Republic, but after showing rather too much interest in Pan-Turkism it

BUKHARA’S JEWS

South of Lyabi-Hauz is what’s left of the old town’s unique **Jewish Quarter**. There have been Jews in Bukhara since perhaps the 12th or 13th century, evolving into a unique culture with its own language – Bukhori, which is related to Persian but uses the Hebrew alphabet. Bukhara’s Jews still speak it as do about 10,000 Bukhara Jews who now live elsewhere (mainly Israel).

They managed to become major players in Bukharan commerce in spite of deep-rooted, institutionalised discrimination. Jews made up 7% of Bukhara’s population at the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse, but today only about 800 remain.

The Jewish community centre and **synagogue** (☎ 365-224 23 80; Sarrafon 20), is roughly across from Salom Inn, holds regular services and also sponsors a functioning Jewish school just around the corner. A century ago there were at least seven synagogues here, reduced after 1920 to two. The second synagogue is located 300m south of Kukluk Bazaar.



INFORMATION	
Bukhara Tourism Association & Information Centre (87A)	1 D3
East Line Tour	2 D3
Internet Klub	3 D3
Komil Travel	(see 48)
National Bank of Uzbekistan	4 F4
Salom Travel	5 D3
Taqi-Sarrafon	6 D3
Telephone & Telegraph Office	7 E4
Timur	8 F4
Uzbektourism	9 D4
Yog' Du Bookshop	(see 3)

10 D2	Mir-i-Arab Medressa	30 C2	Lyabi House Hotel
11 B2	Modan Khan Medressa	31 B2	Mehlar Ambar
12 C2	Museum of Art	32 D3	Minzifa B&B
13 B2	Nadir Divanbegi Khanaka	33 D3	Mubinnisa's Bukhara House
14 D2	Nadir Divanbegi Medressa	34 D3	Nasrudin Navruz
15 D2	Old Town Walls	35 A2	Salom Inn
16 B2	Taqi-Sarrafon Bazaar	36 D3	Sasha & Son B&B
17 C2	Taqi-Telpak Furushon Bazaar	37 D2	
18 C2	Taqi-Zangaron Bazaar	38 D2	
19 C2	Turki Zangori Medressa	39 D3	
20 C2	Ulugbek Medressa	40 C2	
21 C2	Water Tower	41 C2	
22 B2		42 C2	
23 D3	SLEEPING	43 E3	DRINKING
24 C2	Alkhar Hotel	44 E3	Nightay Camansera'i wine tasting
25 C2	Jewish Community Centre & Synagogue	45 D3	Silk Road Spices
26 C2	Kalon Minaret	46 C3	
27 D3	Kalon Mosque	47 C3	ENTERTAINMENT
28 D3	Kukeldash Medressa	48 D3	Bukhara Palace
29 D3	Lyabi-Hauz Square		
30 C2	Mir-i-Arab Medressa		
31 B2	Modan Khan Medressa		
32 D3	Museum of Art		
33 D3	Nadir Divanbegi Khanaka		
34 D3	Nadir Divanbegi Medressa		
35 A2	Old Town Walls		
36 D3	Taqi-Sarrafon Bazaar		
37 D2	Taqi-Telpak Furushon Bazaar		
38 D2	Taqi-Zangaron Bazaar		
39 D3	Turki Zangori Medressa		
40 C2	Ulugbek Medressa		
41 C2	Water Tower		
42 C2			
43 E3	SLEEPING		
44 E3	Alkhar Hotel		
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46 C3	Kalon Minaret		
47 C3	Kalon Mosque		
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	Ulugbek Medressa		
	Water Tower		
	SLEEPING		
	Alkhar Hotel		
	Jewish Community Centre & Synagogue		
	Kalon Minaret		
	Kalon Mosque		
	Kukeldash Medressa		
	Lyabi-Hauz Square		
	Mir-i-Arab Medressa		
	Modan Khan Medressa		
	Museum of Art		
	Nadir Divanbegi Khanaka		
	Nadir Divanbegi Medressa		
	Old Town Walls		
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TOURIST INFORMATION

Bukhara Tourism Association & Information Centre

The best and only genuine tourist office in the country, this German-funded NGO was abruptly shut down by the state in early 2007. While the fate of the Bukhara Tourism Association (www.dreambukhara.org) remained up in the air at press time, travel magazine Discovery Central Asia was getting ready to reopen the excellent Tourism Information Centre, which will double as a bookshop. The Centre's new address was undetermined when we went to press.

Uzbektourism (☎ 223 12 36; bukhtour@bcc.com.uz; Bukhara Hotel, Muminova 8) Useful mainly for its stable of multilingual guides (per hour US\$5).

TRAVEL AGENCIES

East Line Tour (☎ 224 22 69; www.eastlinetour.com; Mekhtar Ambar 91) In a town that's perfect for exploring on bike, this is the only agency that rents them (per day US\$5). Also runs full gamut of tours, but specialises in bird-watching tours around Tudakul Lake and further afield.

Komil Travel (p244)

Salom Travel (☎ 224 41 48, 224 37 33; www.salomtravel.com; Sarrafon 9) Owner Raisa Gareyeva was one of the first private travel agents and is one of the best. Among Salom's unique excursions: endangered Persian gazelles north of Karaul Bazar; swimming in Tudakul Lake; and the excavated remains of the pre-Islamic era city of Paikent, 60km northwest of Bukhara.

Sights & Activities

LYABI-HAUZ

Lyabi-Hauz, a plaza built around a pool in 1620 (the name is Tajik for 'around the pool'), is the most peaceful and interesting spot in town – shaded by mulberry trees as old as the pool. The old tea-sipping, chessboard-clutching Uzbek men who once inhabited this corner of town have been moved on by local entrepreneurs bent on cashing in on the tourist trade. Still, the plaza maintains its old-world style and has managed to fend off the glitz to which Samarkand's Registan has succumbed.

On the east side is a statue of **Hoja Nasruddin**, a semimythical 'wise fool' who appears in Sufi teaching-tales around the world.

Further east, the **Nadir Divanbegi Medressa** was built as a caravanserai, but the khan thought it was a medressa and it became one in 1622. On the west side of the square, and built at the same time, is the **Nadir Divanbegi Khanaka**. Both are named for Abdul Aziz Khan's treasury minister, who financed them in the 17th century.

North across the street, the **Kukeldash Medressa**, built by Abdullah II, was at the time the biggest Islamic school in Central Asia.

COVERED BAZAARS

From Shaybanid times, the area west and north from Lyabi-Hauz was a vast warren of market lanes, arcades and crossroad minibazaars whose multidomed roofs were designed to draw in cool air. Three remaining domed bazaars, heavily renovated in Soviet times, were among dozens of specialised bazaars in the town – Taqi-Sarrafon (moneychangers), Taqi-Telpak Furushon (cap makers) and Taqi-Zargaron (jewellers). They remain only loosely faithful to those designations today.

Taqi-Sarrafon & Taqi-Telpak Furushon Area

Between these two covered bazaars, in what was the old herb-and-spice bazaar, is Central Asia's oldest surviving mosque, the **Maghoki-Attar** (pit of the herbalists), a lovely mishmash of 9th-century façade and 16th-century reconstruction. This is probably also the town's holiest spot: under it in the 1930s archaeologists found bits of a 5th-century Zoroastrian temple ruined by the Arabs and an earlier Buddhist temple. Until the 16th century, Bukhara's Jews are said to have used the mosque in the evenings as a synagogue.

Only the top of the mosque was visible when the digging began; the present plaza surrounding it is the 12th-century level of the town. A section of the excavations has been left deliberately exposed inside. Also here is a **museum** (☎ 224 15 91; admission 12005; ☎ 9am-6pm) exhibiting beautiful Bukhara carpets and prayer mats.

Taqi-Zargaron Area

A few steps east of the Taqi-Zargaron Bazaar, on the north side of Hoja Nurabad, is Central Asia's oldest medressa, and a model for many others – the unrestored, blue-tiled **Ulugbek Medressa** (1417), one of three built by Ulugbek (the others are at Gijduvan, 45km away on the road to Samarkand, and in Samarkand's Registan complex). Today it's occupied by pigeons and a small **museum** (admission 5005; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) with some great old photos, including one of the Kalon Minaret looking the worse for wear after the Soviets bombed it in the 1920s. Peeking into the cool, abandoned student rooms here is a real treat.

By contrast, the student rooms across the way at the 16th-century **Abdul Aziz Khan Medressa** are occupied, rather typically, by souvenir shops. This is another unrestored gem, built by its namesake to outdo the Ulugbek Medressa in size and splendour. The highlight is the prayer room, now a **museum of wood carvings** (admission 12005; ☎ 9am-5pm), with spectacular original *ghanch*-work. It is said that Abdul Aziz had the image of his face covertly embedded in the prayer room's mihrab (Mecca-facing niche) to get around the Sunni Muslim prohibition against depicting living beings (Abdul Aziz Khan was a Shiite). Also flouting that prohibition was the stork who used to live in the nest on the tower to the left of the medressa's *pishtak*. The only other medressa in town that depicts living beings is the Nadir Divanbegi Medressa.

KALON MINARET & AROUND

When it was built by the Karakhanid ruler Arslan Khan in 1127, the **Kalon Minaret** (admission 30005) was probably the tallest building in Central Asia – *kalon* means 'great' in Tajik. It's an incredible piece of work, 47m tall with 10m-deep foundations (including reeds stacked underneath in an early form of earthquake-proofing), which in 850 years has never needed any but cosmetic repairs. Jenghiz Khan was so dumbfounded by it that he ordered it spared.

Its 14 ornamental bands, all different, include the first use of the glazed blue tiles that were to saturate Central Asia under Timur. Up and down the south and east sides are faintly lighter patches, marking the restoration of damage caused by Frunze's artillery in 1920. Its 105 inner stairs are accessible from the Kalon Mosque.

A legend says that Arslan Khan killed an imam after a quarrel. That night in a dream the imam told him, 'You have killed me; now oblige me by laying my head on a spot where nobody can tread', and the tower was built over his grave.

At the foot of the minaret, on the site of an earlier mosque destroyed by Jenghiz Khan, is the 16th-century congregational **Kalon Mosque** (admission 10005), big enough for 10,000 people. Used in Soviet times as a warehouse, it was reopened as a place of worship in 1991.

Opposite the mosque, its luminous blue domes in sharp contrast to the surrounding brown, is the working **Mir-i-Arab Medressa**. Es-

pecially at sunset, it's among Uzbekistan's most striking medressas, but tourists can only go as far as the foyer. From there you may peer through a grated door into the courtyard, where you might see students playing ping-pong.

The medressa is named for a 16th-century Naqshbandi sheikh from Yemen who had a strong influence on the Shaybanid ruler Ubaidullah Khan and financed the original complex. Both khan and sheikh are buried beneath the northern dome.

THE ARK & AROUND

The **Ark** (☎ 224 13 49; Registan Sq; admission 24005, guide 36005; ☎ 9am-6pm), a royal town-within-a-town, is Bukhara's oldest structure, occupied from the 5th century right up until 1920, when it was bombed by the Red Army. It's about 80% ruins inside now, except for some remaining royal quarters, now housing several **museums**.

At the top of the entrance ramp is the 17th-century **Juma (Friday) Mosque**. Turn right into a corridor with courtyards off both sides. First on the left are the former living quarters of the emir's *kushbegi* (prime minister), now housing an exhibit on archaeological finds around Bukhara.

Second on the left is the oldest surviving part of the Ark, the vast **Reception & Coronation Court**, whose roof fell in during the 1920 bombardment. The last coronation to take place here was Alim Khan's in 1910. The submerged chamber on the right wall was the treasury, and behind this room was the harem.

To the right of the corridor were the open-air royal stables and the *noghorahona* (a room for drums and musical instruments used during public spectacles). Now there are shops and a natural-history exhibit.

Around the Salamhona (Protocol Court) at the end of the corridor are what remain of the royal apartments. These apparently fell into such disrepair that the last two emirs preferred full-time residence at the summer palace (see p247). Now there are several museums here, the most interesting of which covers Bukhara's history from the Shaybanids to the tsars. Displays include items imported to Bukhara, including an enormous *samovar* (urn used for heating water) made in Tula, Russia. Another room contains the emir's throne. Enhanced colour photographs, donated by the now-departed Dutch Embassy in Tashkent, add a spark of life to the otherwise musty exhibits.

STODDART & CONOLLY

On 24 June 1842 Colonel Charles Stoddart and Captain Arthur Conolly were marched out from a dungeon cell before a huge crowd in front of the Ark, the emir's fortified citadel, made to dig their own graves and, to the sound of drums and reed pipes from atop the fortress walls, were beheaded.

Colonel Stoddart had arrived three years earlier on a mission to reassure Emir Nasrullah Khan about Britain's invasion of Afghanistan. But his superiors, underestimating the emir's vanity and megalomania, had sent him with no gifts, and with a letter not from Queen Victoria (whom Nasrullah regarded as an equal sovereign), but from the governor-general of India. To compound matters Stoddart violated local protocol by riding, rather than walking, up to the Ark. The piqued Nasrullah had him thrown into jail, where he was to spend much of his time at the bottom of the so-called 'bug pit', in the company of assorted rodents and scaly creatures.

Captain Conolly arrived in 1841 to try to secure Stoddart's release. But the emir, believing him to be part of a British plot with the khans of Khiva and Kokand, tossed Conolly in jail too. After the disastrous British retreat from Kabul, the emir, convinced that Britain was a second-rate power and having received no reply to an earlier letter to Queen Victoria, had both men executed.

Despite public outrage back in England, the British government chose to let the matter drop. Furious friends and relatives raised enough money to send their own emissary, an oddball clergyman named Joseph Wolff, to Bukhara to verify the news. According to Peter Hopkirk in *The Great Game*, Wolff himself only escaped death because the emir thought him hilarious, dressed up in his full clerical regalia.

Outside, in front of the fortress, is medieval Bukhara's main square, the **Registan**, a favourite venue for executions, including those of the British officers Stoddart and Conolly (above).

Behind the Ark is **Zindon** (☎ 224 95 02; admission 1200S; 🕒 9am-4.30pm), the jail, now a museum. Cheerful attractions include a torture chamber and several dungeons, including the gruesome 'bug pit' where Stoddart and Conolly languished in a dark chamber filled with lice, scorpions and other vermin.

Beside a pool opposite the Ark's gate is the **Bolo-Hauz Mosque**, the emirs' official place of worship, built in 1718. Beside it is a now-disused 33m **water tower**, built by the Russians in 1927. If you are going to climb this (as the author did), you best not be afraid of heights (as the author is) or rickety-looking Soviet structures. The views of the Ark and beyond are worth the 1000S demanded by the local shepherd or whoever else is around.

ISMAIL SAMANI MAUSOLEUM & AROUND

This **mausoleum** in Samani Park, completed in 905, is the town's oldest Muslim monument and probably its sturdiest architecturally. Built for Ismail Samani (the Samanid dynasty's founder), his father and grandson, its intricate baked-terracotta brickwork – which gradually changes 'personality' through the day as the shadows shift – disguises walls

almost 2m thick, helping it survive without restoration (except of the spiked dome) for 11 centuries.

Behind the park is one of the few remaining, eroded sections (a total of 2km out of an original 12km) of the Shaybanid **town walls**; another big section is about 500m west of the Namozgokh Mosque.

Nearby is the peculiar **Chashma Ayub 'mausoleum'** (admission 500S; 🕒 9am-4.30pm), built from the 12th to 16th centuries over a spring. The name means 'Spring of Job'; legend says Job struck his staff on the ground here and a spring appeared. Inside you can drink from the spring. It is now, sadly, overshadowed by a glistening new glass-walled memorial to Imam Ismail al-Bukhari next door.

FAIZULLAH KHOJAEV HOUSE

The **Faizullah Khojaev House** (Tukaeva; ☎ 224 41 88; admission 2000S, Russian-/English-speaking guide 800/12,000S; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) was once home to one of Bukhara's many infamous personalities, the man who plotted with the Bolsheviks to dump Emir Alim Khan. Faizullah Khojaev was rewarded with the presidency of the Bukhara People's Republic, chairmanship of the Council of People's Commissioners of the Uzbek SSR, and finally liquidation by Stalin.

The house was built in 1891 by his father, Ubaidullah, a wealthy merchant. Faizullah

Khojaev lived here until 1925, when the Soviets converted it into a school. Slow restoration of the elegant frescoes, *ghanch*, latticework and Bukhara-style ceiling beams (carved, unpainted elm) has been going on for years; the newly restored bedroom opened to the public in 2007. Call ahead to book an English guide. Tours include a small fashion show.

OTHER SIGHTS

Deep in the old town is the tiny, decrepit **Turki Jandi mausoleum** (Namozgokh) favoured for getting one's prayers answered. It's the resting place of a holy man known as Turki Jandi, his two sons, several grandsons and numerous other relations. Its importance is signalled by the hundreds of other graves around it – allegedly in stacks 30m deep! It's under slow, devoted restoration and was closed when we visited.

Photogenic little **Char Minar**, in a maze of alleys between Pushkin and Hoja Nurabad, bears more relation to Indian styles than to anything Bukharan. This was the gatehouse of a long-gone medressa built in 1807. The name means 'Four Minarets' in Tajik, although they aren't strictly minarets but simply decorative towers. Unesco restored one collapsed tower and fixed another in 1998.

West of Taqi-Sarrafon is the interesting 16th-century **Gaukushan Medressa** with chipped majolica on its unrestored façade. Across the canal is a little brother of the Kalon Minaret. Nearby, the **Museum of Art** (☎ 224 58 53; admission 600S; 🕒 9am-4.30pm Thu-Tue) has mostly 20th-century paintings by Bukharan artists, some of which can be purchased in a gallery on the ground floor. It's in the former headquarters of the Russian Central Asian Bank (1912).

Across from the Ark on Hoja Nurabad, the interior of the 16th-century **Hoja Zayniddin Mosque** has some of the best very old, original mosaic and *ghanch*-work you're going to see anywhere.

Southeast of Samani Park are two massive medressas, one named for the great Shaybanid ruler **Abdulla Khan**, and one for his mother called **Modari Khan** (mother of the khan). The latter is locked, the former contains yet more crafts shops.

Two kilometres east of the centre on Bakhaudtin Naqshband, the mammary-like twin domes of the **Saifuddin Bukharzi Mausoleum** tower over the delicate little **Buyan Khuli Khan Mausoleum**. With sheep grazing in the foreground and a massive cooking-oil factory

looming in the background, this spot might as well be a metaphor for Central Asia. Taxi drivers know this place as 'Rayon Fatobod Bogi'. The architectural highlight here is the 14th-century majolica on the smaller mausoleum, resting place of a Mongol khan. The larger mausoleum was built over the grave of Saifuddin Bukharzi (1190-1261), poet founder of an influential Sufi order.

Activities

Readers rave about Bukhara's famed *ham-momi* (baths), most notably the **Borzi Kord** (Taqi-Telpak Furushon; admission 3000S, massage 7000S; 🕒 6am-7pm Wed-Mon). It's technically a men's bathhouse, but groups of tourists can reserve it after hours for mixed use.

Hammom Kunjak (Ibdov 4; admission 3000S, massage 5000S; 🕒 7am-6pm) Is the women's bathhouse behind Kalon Minaret.

Tours

Guides can be booked directly or through the Tourist Information Centre or Uzbek-tourism. Our recommendations include the following.

Aka Ilkhom (☎ 224 49 65) From Emir Travel; German.

Gulya Khamidova (☎ 223 01 24) English.

Nellia (☎ 224 41 48) From Salom Travel; French.

Noila Kazidzanova (☎ 228 20 12) English.

Zinnat Ashurova (☎ 522 20 37) English.

Maksuma, a guide at the Ark (p241), is an archaeological specialist who can recommend excursions to excavations and petroglyphs in the desert north of Bukhara.

Festivals

The four-day **Silk & Spices Festival** in early May is a celebration of local folk art as well as silk and spices, with lots of music and dancing in the streets.

Sleeping

Bukhara's wonderful, largely traditional-style B&Bs set the standard for accommodation in Central Asia. Unfortunately, cheap accommodation is becoming scarce as budget places upgrade to accommodate tour groups.

BUDGET

Mubinjon's Bukhara House (☎ 224 20 05; Sarrafon 4; r US\$5-15 per person) Bukhara's pioneer B&B is housed in a home dating from 1766. Traditional *kurpacha* are spread on the floor and

the bathrooms are basic but the legendary Mubinjon – a true Bukharan eccentric – can direct you to traditional baths. Mubinjon doesn't speak much English but makes himself understood. Other than the mosquitoes, which are unbearable in summer, it's backpacker bliss. The house is about 100m south of Salom Inn; look for the Olympic symbols painted on the garage door.

Nasruddin Navruz (☎ 224 34 57; umka_83@mail.ru; Babahanova 37; s/d/tr US\$15/20/30; 🏠) This simple but effective guesthouse has 10 rooms set around a courtyard. The beds don't look like much but they are comfortable and there's enough space in most rooms for a few spare pieces of furniture. Negotiable prices makes this attractive for the backpacker set.

Locals, including **Madina Tordieva** (☎ 224 61 62, 718 61 63), hang out around Lyabi-Hauz and sometimes the North Bus Station offering homestays for US\$5 to US\$10.

MIDRANGE

Mehtar Ambar (☎ 224 41 68; www.mehtarambar.ws; Bakhautdin Naqshband 91; s/d/tr US\$20/40/50; 🏠) If you're looking for something a little different from all those old classic Bukhara homes, consider this even older caravanserai. Rooms are a bit small but it is, after all, it's a caravanserai. The 2nd-floor rooms are spiffier and better equipped, with minibar and TV. Low season is negotiating season.

Salom Inn (☎ 224 41 48, www.salomtravel.com; Sarrafon 3; r US\$25-40; 🏠) This long-running establishment has small but classy wood-furnished rooms with traditional interior decorations, including antiques and colourful wall hangings. It's run by the highly regarded Salom Travel (p.240), which has an office around the corner.

K Komil Hotel (☎ 223 87 80; www.komiltravel.com; Barakiyon 40; s/d/tr US\$25/40/45; 🏠) This friendly B&B has stunning *ghanch*-work and a young, laid-back proprietor who speaks good English and runs an adventure-oriented travel agency. Komil recently opened an annexe with modern rooms to complement pre-existing digs in an authentic 19th-century rich person's home. Good vegetarian food is an added bonus.

Hovli Poyon B&B (☎ 224 18 65; hovli-poyon@mail.ru; Usmon Hodjaev 13; s/d/tr/q US\$25/40/45/60; 🏠) Few Bukhara B&Bs are more memorable than this one, set in a 19th-century house dripping with both character and history. It was a gift for Emir Ahad Khan, and the grand *avivan* and huge courtyard festooned with fruit trees are

certainly emir-worthy. If it were not a hotel it could easily be a museum. The rooms, of various sizes, are simple with traditional touches but need new beds.

Amelia Boutique Hotel (☎ 224 12 63; www.hotelamelia.com; Bozor Hoja 1; s/d US\$30/40; 🏠) All hairs are in place at this cosy, casual boutique. Pine-wood furniture gives it a foresty feel, but traditional elements such as niched walls and a 19th-century *avivan* bring you back to Bukhara. The mud-walled suite downstairs is a pearl.

our pick Akhbar House (☎ 224 21 12; akhbarhouse-antiques@yahoo.com; Eshoni Pir 22; s/d US\$30/50; 🏠) Yet another 19th-century beauty, this one could also be a museum, especially considering the quality of owner Akhbar's collection of *suzani* and other antiques. The interior of the dining room, restored but not repainted, is just right. Dinners, if pre-ordered, are cooked in a mud oven in the middle of the courtyard; guests are encouraged to don old-style Uzbek outfits for their repast. The rooms, naturally, are exquisitely adorned. It's hard to find – walk 50m past Sasha & Son B&B, turn right, and it's the mud-walled building on your left.

Emir B&B (☎ 224 49 65; www.emirtravel.com; Husainov 17; s/d/tr US\$30/50/65; 🏠) This place consists of two buildings set around twin courtyards in the heart of the old Jewish Quarter, run by the friendly and knowledgeable Milla, who also runs a travel agency. One has traditional-style rooms filled with *ghanch* and trinket-laden niches, the other is all modern and shiny. All rooms are spacious and a couple are massive. Request a room with a TV if you can't survive without the BBC.

Sasha & Son B&B (☎ 224 49 66; www.sacholga.narod.ru; Eshoni Pir 3; s/d US\$35/50; 🏠) Behind a beautifully carved wooden front door is a maze connecting several small edifices with large, tastefully restored rooms done up in classic Bukhara style. Comfortable sitting tables with colourful cushions dot the courtyards. All rooms have satellite TV and modern bathrooms with fine tilework. The staff is more professional than friendly here.

Minzifa (☎ 224 56 28; www.minzifa.com; Eshoni Pir 63; s/d US\$35/50; 🏠) The ubiquitous local style is faithfully on display here, although the style is toned down a bit by softer than usual colour schemes. A true boutique, it has some of the friendliest service in town, ultracomfy oversized twin beds and eight uniquely decorated rooms. It also has a cosy house bar, a 180-year-old front door and even a small 'gym'.

Hotel Zaragon (☎ 224 58 21; zaragon@mail.ru; Haqiqat 3; s/d US\$35/50; 🏠) Its location amid Bukhara's holiest architectural monuments won't make preservationists happy, but it's hard to ignore such prime views of Kalon Minaret and Mir-i-Arab's sparkling domes. Rooms lack character but some are so big you can hardly see the TV across the room. Even if you don't stay here, consider a drink in the shadow of the minaret on its 2nd-floor porch.

Lyabi House Hotel (☎ 224 24 84; www.lyabihouse.com; Husainov 7; s/d US\$40/60; 🏠) No place in town better combines authentic old-Bukhara design with modern amenities and professional service. Highlights are the stunning rooms and a dignified *avivan* with carved wooden columns where breakfast is served. If money's no object, look no further. Request a room away from the noisy reception area.

Eating

Many visitors go no further than Lyabi-Hauz for sustenance, but if you tire of chaikhana fare, Bukhara has a growing number of alternatives.

Lyabi-Hauz (Lyabi-Hauz; mains 1200S) Dining alfresco around the venerable pool with grey-beards, local families and plenty of other tourists is the quintessential Bukhara experience. There are two chaikhans here, both serving *shashlyk*, *plov*, *kovurma laghman* (with meat and tomato sauce) and cold *azia* beer.

Kochevnik (Bakhautdin Naqshband; mains 2000-3000S) This Korean eatery is ideally situated near Lyabi-Hauz and complements its Asian fare with Russian food. Lest you be sceptical about its authenticity, it's co-owned by an ethnic Korean.

Bella Italia (☎ 224 33 46; Bakhautdin Naqshband; mains 3000-5000S) It's not the world's best Italian food, but nor is it the worst and by this point in your trip you're undoubtedly ready for some pasta.

Minzifa (☎ 224 61 75; set meals US\$7) This cosy eatery with rooftop seating is a welcome addition to Bukhara's dining scene, serving up excellent European food in the heart of the touristy Jewish Quarter. Advanced booking required.

There's another good chaikhana in the park across the street from the Ark. Both Alyans and El Dorado double as restaurants and have OK food (right).

For self-caterers there are farmers markets, including Kolkhozny Bazaar and the Sunday and Thursday Kukluk Bazaar, buried deep in the Jewish Quarter.

Drinking

Silk Road Spices (Halim Ibodov 5; unlimited tea & sweets 2500S) This boutique teahouse offers a delightful diversion from all that sightseeing. It has exactly six spicy varieties of tea and coffee, served with rich local sweets such as halvan and *qandalat*.

Nughay Caravanserai wine tasting (Bakhautdin Naqshband 78; per 8 large samples 4000S; 🕒 11am-9pm) Djamal Akhbarov has an informal wine shop and tasting room in this 18th-century caravanserai. The local wines are surprisingly good, in particular the Cabernets.

Entertainment

Bukhara's old town is eerily silent by night, which is part of its charm, but there are several early-evening entertainment options.

Puppet performance (admission US\$5; 🕒 6pm & 7pm late Mar-May & Sep-early Nov, by appointment Jun-Aug) Held at a theatre on the western end of Lyabi-Hauz, this is the consensus reader favourite entertainment option. The three-part amateur performance, with a traditional wedding ceremony as the usual theme, is held in Tajik, Uzbek and English.

Folklore & fashion show (admission US\$5, optional dinner 5000S; 🕒 6.30pm Apr-May & Sep-Oct, 7.30pm Jun-Aug, by appointment Nov-Mar) Across Lyabi-Hauz in the Nadir Divanbegi Medressa, this is a nightly show with traditional musical performances and dancing. Do not book this through Uzbek-tourism or you may be forced to buy the dinner at a premium; book at the gate or through the Tourist Information Centre instead.

Both of the above shows are staged mainly for the tour-bus crowd but individuals can piggyback. Shows are often cancelled if there are no tour groups in town.

For anything rowdier than puppets you must head southeast of the centre into the newer part of town.

Oscar (Muminova; 🕒 8pm-2am) This small club draws a young, very local crowd. Foreigners are welcome but will most definitely be exotic.

Bukhara Palace Hotel (☎ 223 00 24; Navoi 8; 🕒 till 3am) The basement nightclub here gets going on weekends.

As in much of the country, locals tend to gravitate towards 'dance bars', basically restaurants that devolve into bacchanalian dance parties after dinner, often with floor shows. Two to sample are **Alyans** (Muminova 33) and **El Dorado** (M Ikbola).

Shopping

With many tourist sights overflowing with vendors, it's not hard to find a souvenir in Bukhara. They are, of course, of varying quality.

For carpets, you couldn't ask for a better shopping atmosphere than at the silk-weaving and carpet centre in the late 16th-century **Tim Abdulla Khan** (Haqiqat; ☎ 9am-6pm), near Taqi-Telpaq Furushon Bazaar (a *tim* was a general market). Vendors are not pushy and will openly inform you on what's handmade and what's machine-made. You can watch silk-carpet weavers in action here, as well as the **Unesco Carpet Weaving Shop** (☎ 223 66 13; Eshoni Pir 57; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat). It no longer has anything to do with Unesco (which helped them launch in 2001), but uniquely produces only Bukhara designs. Call ahead to book a tour in English.

At the **Bukhara Artisan Development Centre** (Bakhautdin Naqshband) you can watch artisans at work on a variety of handicrafts including silk-embroidered tapestries, miniature paintings, jewellery boxes and chess sets.

Serious *suzani* and textile collectors should head to Akhbar House (p244) for a glimpse of owner Akhbar's fantastic collection. Much of it isn't for sale but he may be willing to part with gems from his personal collection for the right price.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Uzbekistan Airways (☎ 233 50 60; Navoi 15), about 1km southeast of the town centre, has flights from Bukhara to Tashkent (US\$36, 1½ hours, at least daily except Saturday).

LAND

All vehicular transport to Tashkent and Samarkand leaves from the North Bus Station, about 3km north of the centre. Here you'll find plenty of private buses (Samarkand 3500S, five hours; Tashkent 7000S, 11 hours) and shared Nexias (Samarkand per seat 11,000S, three hours; Tashkent 20,000S, seven hours), plus a few marshrutkas. There are plenty of departures and everything leaves when full. Shared taxis to Navoi also depart from here (per seat 2500S, 45 minutes), or take a slower bus for 800S.

About 1.5km north of here is Karvon Bazaar, departure point for Urgench/Khiva. Shared taxis congregate in a lot on the less-

crowded south end of the market. The going rate is 20,000S per seat for Urgench (4½ hours). Drivers demand up to 5000S extra for Khiva; you're better off transferring in Urgench. A few marshrutkas allegedly head to Urgench from this lot before noon (12,000S). For buses to Urgench (5000S, eight hours), you have to wait out on the main road in front of the taxi stand and flag buses originating in Tashkent, which come through sporadically.

To get to the North Bus Station or Karvon Bazaar take public bus 2 or 21, or marshrutka 67 or 73, from the train station stop (site of the old train station, 2km east of the Lyabi-Hauz marshrutka stop).

The 'Sharq' bus station east of the centre has no useful buses. However, shared taxis depart from across the street to Qarshi (per seat 6000S, 1½ hours), Shakhrisabz (12,000S, four hours), Termiz (20,000S, six hours) and Denau on the Tajik border (25,000S, six hours).

See p268 for information on getting to Turkmenabat.

Train

The *Sharq* high-speed train zips from Kagan to Tashkent every morning at 7.20am (2nd class/1st class 11,000/15,000S, 7½ hours) via Samarkand (5700/9200S, 3½ hours). Unless you have a desire to watch Russian action movies and videos on a blaring TV, opt for 2nd class, where the nuisance is limited to blaring Russian pop.

A slower passenger train rumbles to Tashkent nightly at 6.40pm (*platskartny* 11,000S, 12½ hours). It also goes through Samarkand (*platskartny* 7500S, six hours). A final option to Samarkand is the daily 'suburban' train (1200S, six hours). The trains from Tashkent to Nukus, Kungrad and Urgench go via Navoi, not Bukhara (p210). Lastly, there's a daily suburban train to Qarshi (850S, 3½ hours).

A thrice weekly overnight Kagan-Urgench train (12 hours) was due to launch in the second half of 2007.

To get to Kagan take marshrutka 68 from the Lyabi-Hauz stop (300S, 25 minutes). There is an **Air & Rail Ticketing Office** (☎ 224 64 86; Naqshband) right across from Lyabi-Hauz.

Getting Around TO/FROM AIRPORT

The airport is 6km east of town. Figure on 1500S for a 10-minute taxi trip between the centre and the airport. Marshrutka 100 or bus

10 to/from the train station, Kryty Rynok or Gorgaz stops takes 15 to 20 minutes.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT & TAXI

From the Lyabi-Hauz stop, marshrutka 52 goes to the new part of town via Mustaqillik, while both 52 and 68 get you to the useful train station stop, where you can pick up transport going just about anywhere. Useful destinations are Kolkhozny Bazaar (Колхозный базар), the Ark stop (Арк) and Karvon Bazaar (Карвон базар).

You should be able to get anywhere in town in a taxi for less than 1500S, as long as you avoid the cheats who hang out at the Lyabi-Hauz stop. From the centre a one-way taxi should cost about 3000S to Bakhautdin Naqshband Mausoleum and Kagan; less to Emir's Palace and Chor-Bakr.

AROUND BUKHARA Emir's Summer Palace

For a look at the kitsch lifestyle of the last emir, Alim Khan, go out to his summer palace, Sitorai Mohi Hosa (Star-and-Moon Garden), now a **museum** (admission 3600S, guide 3600S; ☎ 9am-5pm Wed-Mon, 9am-2.30pm Tue), 6km north of Bukhara.

The three-building compound was a joint effort for Alim Khan by Russian architects (outside) and local artisans (inside), and no punches were pulled in showing off both the finest and the gaudiest aspects of both styles. A 50-watt Russian generator provided the first electricity the emirate had ever seen. In front of the harem is a pool where the women frolicked, overlooked by a wooden pavilion from which – says every tour guide – the emir tossed an apple to his chosen bedmate.

To get here take bus 7 or 21 or marshrutka 70 from the train station stop. The palace is at the end of the line.

Bakhautdin Naqshband Mausoleum

East of Bukhara in the village of Kasri Orion is one of Sufism's more important **shrines** (admission free; ☎ 8am-7pm), the birthplace and the tomb of Bakhautdin (or Bakha ud-Din) Naqshband (1318-89), the founder of the most influential of many ancient Sufi orders in Central Asia, and Bukhara's unofficial 'patron saint'. For more on Sufism, see p65.

The huge main dome of the complex covers a 16th-century *khanaka*, now a Juma (Friday) mosque. In front of it is a precariously lean-

ing minaret. Two more mosques surround Bakhautdin's tomb in the courtyard to the left. The lovingly restored *avnan* here is one of the country's most beautiful. The tomb itself is a simple 2m-high block, protected by a horse-mane talisman hanging from a post. Tradition says that it is auspicious to complete three anticlockwise circumambulations of the tomb.

Back in the main courtyard you'll spot more locals walking anticlockwise around a petrified tree. Legend has it that this tree sprouted where Bakhautdin stuck his staff, upon returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca. He then added drops of holy water from Mecca to a nearby well. Faucets near the minaret continue to supply this well's allegedly holy water to pilgrims, who splash their faces with it and bring it home by the jug-full for good luck. The legend of the well may hold water, but there's a problem with the tree story – it's only 350 years old!

Marshrutkas 125 and 60 go straight to the compound from the train station and Ark stops in Bukhara (300S, 25 minutes).

Chor-Bakr

This 16th-century **necropolis** (admission 1000S, ☎ 8.30am-8pm) or 'town' of mausoleums 6km west of Bukhara, is yet another sight that has fallen victim to overambitious restoration.

It was built in Shaybanid times near the graves of Abu-Bakr, devoted friend of the Prophet Mohammed and later first caliph, and his family. A large Juma mosque on the left and a former *khanaka* on the right dominate the complex, much of which lay hauntingly in ruin before the recent restoration made it look like so many other neat-and-tidy sights in Uzbekistan.

From the stop on the east side of Kolkhozny Bazaar, just off M Karimov, take marshrutka 107 labelled 'Чорбакр' (300S, 10 minutes).

TERMIZ ТЕРМЕЗ

☎ (3) 76 / pop 120,000 / elev 380m

Modern-day Termiz bears few traces of its colourful cosmopolitan history. However, set in attractive landscapes on the fringes of town are some ancient monuments and sites attesting to more glorious times.

Termiz today has an edgy, Wild West border-town feel. The expat crowd is a mix of aid workers, archaeologists, oil prospectors and German soldiers from the Luftwaffe base at

FEAR & LOATHING IN TERMIZ *Greg Bloom*

Officially, registration laws in Termiz are no different than in any other Uzbek city. You need a registration docket from your hotel, but separate special permits are no longer required.

Apparently somebody forgot to tell that to the police in Termiz, where this author spent two hours in a white interrogation room at OVIR exchanging courtesies with three plainclothes cops. What was I doing in Termiz? How long was I here? Why had I been to Russia? And Cambodia, China, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, the Philippines, Ukraine? Was I a journalist?

Being a journalist in Uzbekistan, of course, means instant expulsion. No, I was just a humble tourist.

Shockingly, they didn't search my belongings. Had they done so they would have discovered two pads filled with a month's worth of notes – instant proof that I was lying. Instead they just checked my photos, mostly of tourist sights.

They let me go eventually, but why had they grabbed me? They had insisted that I was required to have a special permit, but I knew this to be untrue. It's certainly possible that I was a suspected journalist. It's also possible that my hotel, the Osiyo, was not registered to take foreigners, and that somebody had blown the whistle on me for staying there.

Whatever the reason, there are lessons to be learned from my Termiz experience. First of all, Termiz has some of the most paranoid and most unpredictable police in Uzbekistan. While you don't technically need a permit, you are subject to their whims. If they say you need a permit, well then you need a permit. To minimize problems, stay in a registered hotel and don't be a journalist.

Another lesson is that it's always a good idea for solo tourists to keep a low profile in sensitive areas such as Termiz and the Fergana Valley.

Termiz airport. A steady flow of contraband from Afghanistan crosses the Amu-Darya here on its way to Europe. Throw in Uzbekistan's most paranoid cops (see above) and you have all the makings of a spy novel.

Orientation & Information

The main road is Al-Termizi, with the train station at its northern end. The clock tower on the corner of Al-Termizi and Navoi marks the central axis of town. The bus station is 2km west of this. Most hotels and the archaeological museum are south of here.

Asaka Bank (Navoi 45) Currency exchange and cash advance for MasterCard holders.

Internet Café (Al-Termizi; per hr 600S; ☎ 8am-1am) Located across from the clock tower.

Sights

The **Termiz Archaeological Museum** (☎ 227 58 29; http://archaeomuseum.freenet.uz; Al-Hakim Termizi 29; admission 2000S; ☎ 9am-6pm), 1km south of the train station, is reason enough to visit Termiz. Unveiled in 2001, the museum is a treasure trove of artefacts collected from the many ravaged civilisations that pepper the Surkhandarya province of which Termiz is the main city. 'Surkhandarya is the only region in Central Asia where you'll find archaeo-

logical sites from all the major eras of Central Asian history', the museum curator truthfully proclaims. 'The museum was opened by our president, Islam Karimov. Look, there's his photo!'

Whatever, the museum makes a great first stop to determine what sites you might want to visit, thanks to an excellent model of Surkhandarya which depicts the most important sights. Serious archaeological buffs will want to spend a few days in the region, heading up to the mountainous, cave-strewn area around Boysun, where Neanderthal bones, petroglyphs and a wealth of Stone Age relics have been discovered.

There are several sights around Termiz that can be visited in a half-day. You should hire a car to see them all or it could take a half-week. Figure on paying a driver 3000S to 4000S per hour. The main sights lurk north-west of the city on the road to Qarshi. Driving out here you'll notice various piles of rubble in the cotton fields of what used to be Termiz (and is now known as Old Termiz). These are Buddhist ruins, levelled by Jenghiz Khan along with the rest of Old Termiz in 1220.

Today archaeologists are busy trying to reverse some of the damage at **Fayoz-Tepe**, a 3rd-century AD Buddhist monastery com-

plex 9km west of the bus station. Discovered only in 1968, in recent years it's been restored and partially rebuilt with support from Unesco. The modern-looking teapot dome protects the monastery's original stupa, visible through a glass window. Looking southwest from here, the remains of **Kara-Tepe**, a Buddhist cave monastery, are visible on the banks of the Amu-Darya. Like the river, the monastery is off-limits because it's right on the Afghan border, although tour groups sometimes visit with the help of well-connected travel agencies.

Closer to town is a slightly younger but still quite sacred edifice, the **Mausoleum of Al-Hakim al-Termizi**. Its namesake was a 9th-century Sufi philosopher, known locally as Al-Hakim, the city's patron saint. In a triumph for preservationists, the interior's cheap plaster *ghanch*-work, spuriously installed as part of the government's general monument 'beautification' drive, is being gradually removed to expose the original 15th-century brick. The mausoleum gets packed to the gills on Wednesday when the faithful are served lunch. The Amu-Darya is once again in sight here; photographing it is forbidden so be discreet.

Termiz' other main sites are clustered northeast of town off the airport road. The restored Timurid-style **Sultan Saodat Ensemble** of mausoleums probably won't impress you if you've been to Samarkand. Buried here are members of the dynasty that ruled Termiz from the 11th to 15th centuries, the Sayyids. About 5km closer to town is a real ruin, the mud-walled **Kyr Kyz** (Forty Girls) fortress. Legend has it that 40 young women lived here in the 11th century after their nobleman-husband was slain, successfully fighting off sex-crazed nomads before eventually succumbing to their own ambition to avenge their husband's murder.

Tours

Gulya (☎ 222 71 25; gul_1992@rambler.ru) is a very friendly guide who works part time at the archaeological museum. **Alisher Choriev** (☎ 222 88 14, 227 53 24) is another capable English-speaking guide.

Sleeping & Eating

Entire wings of some hotels are booked out indefinitely by German soldiers, including the Dostlyk Hotel and the recently renovated

Surkhon Hotel. That leaves the following as the best options:

Osiyo (☎ 222 89 09; r per person 4500S) This is your bargain-basement choice, although as we found out there is some question as to whether they can accept foreigners (see opposite). It's a steal at these prices though, with spacious rooms and comfortable linens, although the leaky windows could create mosquito problems in the summer. It's a five-minute walk from Hotel Meridien.

Hotel Tennis Court (☎ 222 79 33; Al-Termizi 29B; s/d US\$6/10) It was closed for renovations when we visited but is a budget-traveller favourite. It's opposite the archaeological museum.

Hotel Meridien (☎ 227 26 74; Al-Termizi 23; s/d US\$6/80; ☎) This newly opened high-rise has huge rooms in pastel colours and a decent restaurant that's open to all well into the evening. The cigarette-puffing receptionist is indicative of service that is a tad informal for a 'four-star' hotel, but it certainly leads the pack as far as facilities and amenities go.

Boysun (Dostlyk Park, Fifth Rayon; mains 1000-2000S) Reputed to have some of the best Surkhandarya food in town, as well as a cheap, greasy breakfast of sausages and eggs that's useful if you're staying at the nearby Osiyo or Tennis Court hotels.

Jasmin (Navoi, Fifth Rayon; 1000-2000S) A vintage local eatery, this is the place to sample *chopancha*, a Surkhandarya meat-and-potatoes dish. It's on the outskirts of town about 1.5km beyond the Hotel Meridien.

On Friday and Saturday nights the Surkhon Disco Bar attracts stein-banging German soldiers and working girls after their euros.

Getting There & Around

Uzbekistan Airways (☎ 229 79 29; Gagarin 36) has three flights a day to/from Tashkent (US\$40, 1½ hours). The airport is 15km north of town. Take marshrutka 11 from Yubileny Bazaar.

Shared taxi is the way to go to/from Samarkand (per seat 16,000S, five hours) and Bukhara (20,000S, six hours). There's also a daily bus to Samarkand (4500S, 8½ hours). For Bukhara, you may have to transfer in Qarshi. There are a couple of evening buses to Tashkent (12,000S, 14 hours) via Samarkand or take a shared taxi (25,000S, 9½ hours).

All of the above leave from the bus station, reachable via marshrutka 6 from Yubileny Bazaar.

Do not board the Tashkent–Termiz or Samarkand–Termiz trains unless you have a Turkmen transit visa and a double-entry Uzbek visa. New lines to Termiz from Kitab and Guzar will open in late 2007 at the earliest.

For information on getting to Tajikistan see p267.

KHOREZM XOPE3M

URGENCH УРГЕНЧ

☎ (3) 62 / pop 140,000

Urgench, the capital of Khorezm province, is a standard-issue Soviet grid of broad streets and empty squares, 450km northwest of Bukhara across the Kyzylkum desert. When the Amu-Darya changed course in the 16th century, the people of Konye-Urgench (then called Urgench), 150km downriver in present-day Turkmenistan, were left without water and started a new town here. Today travellers use Urgench mainly as a transport hub for Khiva, 35km southwest. It's also a good launch point for the 'Golden Ring' of ancient fortresses in southern Karakalpakstan.

Orientation

The town's axis is Al-Khorezmi, with the clock tower at its intersection with Al-Beruni marking the centre of things. The train station is 600m south of the centre down Al-Khorezmi, the airport is 3km north, and most hotels and the main bazaar are near the clock tower.

Information

Bahadir & Bakhtiyar Rakhimov (☎ Bahadir 352 41 06, 512 12 41, Bakhtiyar 517 51 33) English-speaking father-and-son driving tandem offer all-day excursions to the *qalas* (fortresses; US\$50 per carload), and Moynaq (US\$100).

Delia Madrashimova (☎ 226 88 34; per day US\$30) Good English-speaking guide is your best bet for excursions to the *qalas* or Khiva if you're staying in Urgench.

Internet Café (cnr Al-Khorezmi & Al-Beruni; per hr 1200S; ☎ 9am–11pm)

Post, telephone & telegraph office (Clock tower, cnr Al-Khorezmi & Al-Beruni)

Uzbekistan Airways (☎ 226 88 60; Al-Khorezmi 1; ☎ 8am–6pm) There's a currency-exchange kiosk here.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Urgench (☎ 226 20 22; Al-Khorezmi & Pakhlavan Mahmud; s/d US\$20/40) This formerly notori-

ous hotel has been renovated and now displays perfectly acceptable, clean Soviet-style rooms.

Khorezm Palace (☎ 224 99 99; www.khorezmpalace.uz; Al-Beruni 2; s/d/ste US\$80/110/300; ☎ ☎ ☎) If you can't get a minute without your creature comforts, you may wish to consider staying here and day-tripping to Khiva. It's certainly the flashiest place west of Bukhara, with all the amenities you would expect at these prices.

Chaikhana Urgench (Al-Khorezmi 35/1; mains 100–1500S) Located right next to the Hotel Urgench, this café serving a variety of shashlyk, *laghman* and *plov* is the best deal in town.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Uzbekistan Airways (left) has two or three flights daily to Tashkent (one way US\$55).

LAND

Shared taxi is the favoured way across the Kyzylkum desert to Bukhara and beyond. Regular shared taxis and a few morning marshrutkas leave from a stand near the bus station (marshrutka/taxi per seat 12,000/20,000S, 4½ hours). Less frequent are shared taxis to Tashkent (per seat 35,000S, 12 hours), but you can always transfer in Bukhara – also the preferred method for getting to Samarkand.

The **bus station** (☎ 227 57 25; Al-Khorezmi), just north of the train station, has an afternoon bus to Bukhara (5000S, eight hours), an evening bus to Samarkand (7500S, 13 hours) and a morning bus to Tashkent (12,000S, 19 hours) via Bukhara and Samarkand. There are usually a few private buses heading east as well. There are a few buses per day to Nukus (2500S, 2½ hours), as well as shared taxis that are more frequent in the morning (per seat 8000S, 1½ hours). If nothing's going to Nukus, go to Beruni and change there.

Shared taxis and marshrutkas to Khiva leave from a lot just south of the bazaar (marshrutka/taxi per seat 500/800S).

For instructions on getting to Dashogus, Turkmenistan, see p268.

Train

From the **train station** (Al-Khorezmi), there's a twice-weekly passenger train to Tashkent (*platskartnyy* 17,000S, 20 hours) via Zarafshan, Navoi and Samarkand. This train no longer goes through Turkmenistan.

Getting Around

Marshrutka 3 runs along Al-Khorezmi between the train station and the airport, stopping near the hotels, bazaar and bus station en route.

AROUND URGENCH

Ancient Khorezm

The Amu-Darya delta, stretching from southeast of Urgench to the Aral Sea, has been inhabited for millennia and was an important oasis long before Urgench or even Khiva were important. The historical name of the delta area, which includes parts of modern-day northern Turkmenistan, was Khorezm (see also p432).

The ruins of many Khorezmian towns and forts, some well over 2000 years old, still stand east and north of Urgench in southern Karakalpakstan. With help from Unesco, local tourism officials recently dubbed this area of Khorezm the 'Golden Ring of Ancient Khorezm' and put out a snazzy brochure designed to lure more Khiva-bound tourists to the *qalas*. The area's traditional name is Elik Qala (Fifty Fortresses).

For fans of old castles in the sand, this is an area not to be missed. Outdoor and nature

enthusiasts will also find plenty to do here, from scrambling among the *qala* ruins, to camel trekking near Ayaz-Qala, to hiking in Badai Tugai Nature Reserve. The Unesco brochure is well worth picking up if you're considering an excursion here; look for it in the Bukhara or Khiva tourist information centres.

Place names in this section are given in Karakalpak, the official language of the region in which they lie.

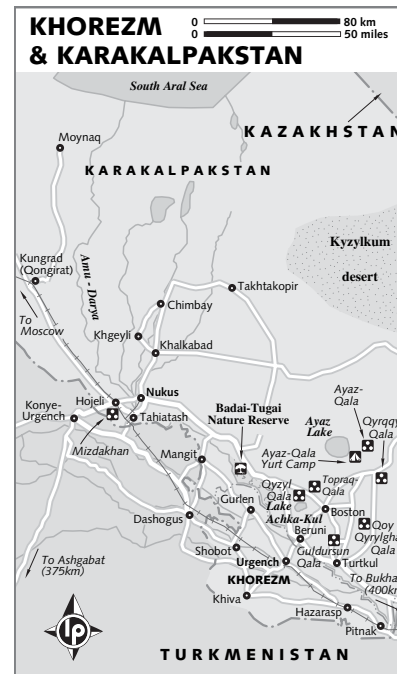
ELLIQ-QALA

There are about 20 forts that you can explore here today, and who knows how many that have yet to be discovered (the 'Fifty Fortresses' moniker is an approximation). Archaeologists are active in this area; in 2006 an Australian team digging near Lake Achka-Kul discovered a large town thought to date from the 4th-century BC. That and newer discoveries might be accessible by the time you read this.

The most well-known *qala* is impressive, mud-walled **Ayaz-Qala**, which is actually a complex of three forts about 25km north of Boston. Its heyday was the 6th and 7th centuries. In its shadow is **Ayaz-Qala Yurt Camp** (☎ 361-350 59 09, 361-532 43 61; ayazqala_tur@mail.ru; per person US\$30), with several yurts big enough to hold five to eight people. One of the main attractions out here is **camel trekking** (per hr/day US\$5/30). You can also go swimming or fishing in nearby Ayaz *qol* (lake), desert hiking or just relax. A good chef and a solar panel generator installed by Unesco ensures that you won't really be roughing it out here. Call ahead to reserve yurts and camels, and to discuss transport options.

The oldest, most unique, and most difficult-to-pronounce fort is circular **Qoy Qyrylgan Qala**, which archaeologists believe doubled as a pagan temple and an observatory complex. It was in use as early as the 4th century BC. Drivers will be reluctant to take you here via the poor road from Beruni; instead, drive south towards Turtkul and turn north on a paved road towards the mammoth **Guldursun Qala**, built as early as the 1st century but in use until the Middle Ages. Qoy Qyrylgan Qala is 18km west of Guldursun Qala.

Two other not-to-be-missed *qalas* are **Toprak Qala** and **Oqzyl Qala**, on opposite sides of the road about 10km west of Boston. The former is a temple complex of the rulers of the Khorezm borders in the 3rd and 4th centuries.



Near the latter you'll see students working the cotton fields in the autumn.

BADAI-TUGAI NATURE RESERVE

This **reserve** (admission per person US\$7) is a strip of *tugai* forest on the east bank of the Amu-Darya, around 60km north of Urgench. In the 1960s and '70s the Soviet cotton-growing schemes cleared out most forest area, and this is one of the few areas preserved. *Tugai* is a very dense, junglike forest of trees, shrubs and prickly salt-resistant plants and creepers, unique to Central Asia's desert river valleys. Only about a fifth of the Amu-Darya's and Syr-Darya's *tugai* has survived. Fauna includes Karakal desert cats, jackals, wild boar, foxes and badgers, although you are unlikely to see any animals besides Bukhara deer hanging out in the resident breeding station.

Getting There & Away

The only way to explore Elik Qala is with private transport. See p250 for a recommended guide and driver. If they aren't available, try your luck with taxi drivers in Urgench. Make absolutely sure they know this area, arm yourself with the Unesco brochure (which has a map of the area) and negotiate hard. Look to pay about US\$50 for an all-day excursion to visit unlimited forts and, if you desire, the Badai-Tugai Nature Reserve. The best strategy is to visit Guldursun Qala first and go anti-clockwise, but few drivers will do this unless you insist on it!

KHIVA ХИВА

☎ (3) 62 / pop 50,000

Khiva's name, redolent of slave caravans, barbaric cruelty and terrible journeys across deserts and steppes infested with wild tribesmen, struck fear into all but the boldest 19th-century hearts. Nowadays it's a mere 35km southwest of Urgench, past cotton bushes and fruit trees.

The historic heart of Khiva (Uzbek: Xiva), unlike that of other Central Asian cities, is preserved in its entirety – but so well preserved that the life has almost been squeezed out of it. As a result of a Soviet conservation programme in the 1970s and '80s, it's now a squeaky-clean official 'city-museum'. Even among its densely packed mosques, tombs, palaces, alleys and at least 16 medressas, you need imagination to get a sense of its mystique, bustle and squalor.

A few of the historic buildings in Ichon-Qala are functioning mosques or shrines, but most are museums. You can see it all in a day trip from Urgench, but you'll take it in better by staying longer. Khiva is at its best by night when the moonlit silhouettes of the tilting columns and medressas, viewed from twisting alleyways, work their magic.

History

Agriculture and human settlement go back four, perhaps six, millennia in Khorezm, the large, fertile Amu-Darya river delta isolated in the midst of broad deserts. So Khiva, on the southern fringe of the delta, may be very old but its exact age is not known. Legend has that it was founded when Shem, son of Noah, discovered a well here; his people called it Kheivak, from which the name Khiva is said to be derived.

Khiva certainly existed by the 8th century as a minor fort and trading post on a side branch of the Silk Road, but while Khorezm prospered on and off from the 10th to the 14th centuries, its capital was at Old Urgench (present-day Konye-Urgench in Turkmenistan), and Khiva remained a bit player. See p251 for more on Ancient Khorezm.

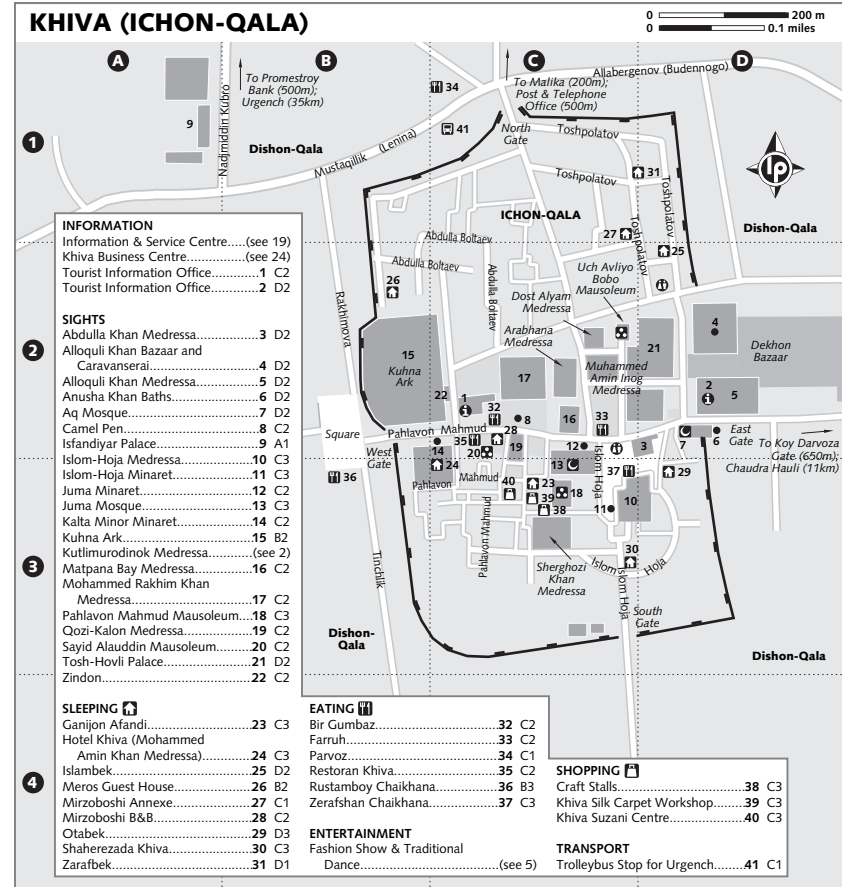
THE KHANATE

It wasn't until well after Konye-Urgench had been finished off by Timur that Khiva's time came. When the Uzbek Shaybanids moved into the decaying Timurid empire in the early 16th century, one branch founded a state in Khorezm and made Khiva their capital in 1592.

The town ran a busy slave market that was to shape the destiny of the khanate, as the Khiva state was known, for more than three centuries. Most slaves were brought by Turkmen tribesmen from the Karakum desert or Kazakh tribes of the steppes, who raided those unlucky enough to live or travel nearby. To keep both of these tribes away from its own door, Khiva eventually resorted to an alliance with the Turkmen against the Kazakhs, granting them land and money in return.

RUSSIAN INTEREST AWAKENS

Khiva had earlier offered to submit to Peter the Great of Russia in return for help against marauding tribes. In a belated response, a force of about 4000, led by Prince Alexander Bekovich, arrived in Khiva in 1717.



Unfortunately, the khan had by that time lost interest in being a vassal of the tsar. He came out to meet them, suggesting they disperse to outlying villages where they could be more comfortably accommodated. This done, the Khivans annihilated the invaders, leaving just a handful to make their way back with the news. The khan sent Bekovich's head to his Central Asian rival, the Emir of Bukhara, and kept the rest of him on display.

In 1740, Khiva was wrecked by a less glib invader, Nadir Shah of Persia, and Khorezm became for a while a northern outpost of the Persian empire. By the end of the 18th century it was rebuilt and began taking a small share in the growing trade between Russia and the Bukhara and Kokand khanates. Its slave

market, the biggest in Central Asia, continued unabated, augmented by Russians captured as they pushed their borders southwards and eastwards.

See p189 for details on Khiva's role in the Great Game.

RUSSIAN CONQUEST

When the Russians finally sent a properly organised expedition against Khiva, it was no contest. In 1873 General Konstantin Kaufman's 13,000-strong forces advanced on Khiva from the north, west and east. After some initial guerrilla resistance, mainly by Yomud Turkmen tribesmen, Mohammed Rakhim II Khan surrendered unconditionally. Kaufman then indulged in a massacre of the Yomud. The

khan became a vassal of the tsar and his silver throne was packed off to Russia.

The enfeebled khanate of Khiva struggled on until 1920 when the Bolshevik general Mikhail Frunze installed the Khorezm People's Republic in its place. This, like the similar republic in Bukhara, was theoretically independent of the USSR. But its leaders swung away from socialism towards Pan-Turkism, and in 1924 their republic was absorbed into the new Uzbek SSR.

Orientation

There's not much reason to stray too far from the compact and user-friendly Ichon-Qala (inner-walled city). Most sights are around its main axis, Pahlavon Mahmud, running between the West and East Gates. Walking through Ichon-Qala's North Gate brings you into the new town, where banking and postal facilities are located.

Information

Information & Service Centre (Qozi-Kalon Medressa, Pahlavon Mahmud; per hr 1500S; ☎ 9am-6pm) The only reliable public internet access point in the Ichon-Qala.

Khiva Business Centre (Hotel Khiva, Pahlavon Mahmud 1) Best bet for changing money in the Ichon-Qala, although hours are sporadic at best.

Promestroy Bank (☎ 357 31 81; Feruz 87) The only option in town for cash advances on credit cards (Visa only, 1% commission). It's 250m west of the Sayut Hotel.

Post & telephone office (Amir Timur 23) Located 650m north of the North Gate.

Tourist information office Alloquli Khan Medressa (☎ 375 24 55; ☎ 9am-7pm); Kuhna Ark (bcxor@bc.com.uz; ☎ 9am-7pm); Quasi-independent tourist centre has its main branch in front of the Kuhna Ark, and another branch at Alloquli Khan Medressa manned by a Japanese consultant. It arranges guides (US\$5 per hour) and sell maps and information booklets. When the consultant leaves town, opening hours miraculously shrink.

Sights

ICHON-QALA GATES & WALLS

The main entrance to the **Ichon-Qala** (2-day admission 7200S, camera 5000S, video 7000S; ☎ ticket booth & sights 9am-6pm) is the twin-turreted brick West Gate (Ota-Darvoza, literally 'Father Gate'), a 1970s reconstruction – the original was wrecked in 1920. The two-day ticket gives you access to all the sights and museums in the Ichon-Qala besides the Islom-Hoja Minaret, the Pahlavon Mahmud Mausoleum and the Akshaikh Baba Complex in Kuhna Ark.

Despite what the guards at the West Gate say, you are free to walk around the Ichon-Qala without a ticket, you just won't have access to any sights. If you get hassled, simply walk to one of the other gates and enter there. The North, East and South Gates are known as, respectively, the Buhoro-Darvoza (Bukhara Gate), Polvon-Darvoza (Strongman's Gate) and Tosh-Darvoza (Stone Gate).

One highlight for which you do not need a ticket is the **walk** along the northwestern section of the wall, best at sunrise or sunset. The stairs are at the North Gate. The 2.5km-long mud walls date from the 18th century, rebuilt after being destroyed by the Persians.

KUHNA ARK

To your left after you enter the West Gate stands the Kuhna Ark – the Khiva rulers' own fortress and residence, first built in the 12th century by one Oq Shihbobo, then expanded by the khans in the 17th century. The khans' harem, mint, stables, arsenal, barracks, mosque and jail were all here.

The squat protuberance by the entrance, on the east side of the building, is the **Zindon** (Khans' Jail), with a display of chains, manacles and weapons, and pictures of people being chucked off minarets, stuffed into sacks full of wild cats etc.

Inside the Ark, the first passage to the right takes you into the 19th-century **Summer Mosque**, open-air and beautiful with superb blue-and-white plant-motif tiling and a red, orange and gold roof. Beside it is the old **mint**, now a museum that exhibits things such as money printed on silk.

Straight ahead from the Ark entrance is the restored **throne room**, where khans dispensed judgement (if not justice). The circular area on the ground was for the royal yurt, which the no-longer-nomadic khans still liked to use.

To the right of the throne room, a door in the wall leads to a flight of steps up to the **Oq Shihbobo bastion**, the original part of the Kuhna Ark, set right against the Ichon-Qala's massive west wall. At the top is an open-air pavilion with good views over the Ark and Ichon-Qala.

MOHAMMED RAKHIM KHAN MEDRESSA

East of the Kuhna Ark, across an open space that was once a busy palace square (and place of execution), the 19th-century Mohammed Rakhim Khan Medressa is named after the

khan who surrendered to Russia in 1873 (although he had, at least, kept Khiva independent a few years longer than Bukhara). A hotchpotch of a museum within is partly dedicated to this khan, who was also a poet under the pen name Feruz.

Khiva's token camel, Katya, waits for tourists to ride or pose with her outside the medressa's south wall.

KALTA MINOR MINARET

Just south of the Kuhna Ark stands the fat, turquoise-tiled **Kalta Minor Minaret**. This unfinished minaret was begun in 1851 by Mohammed Amin Khan, who according to legend wanted to build a minaret so high he could see all the way to Bukhara. Had it been completed it surely would have been the world's tallest building, but the Khan dropped dead in 1855 and it was never finished.

East of the minaret, beside the medressa housing Restoran Khiva, is the small, plain **Sayid Alauddin Mausoleum**, dating to 1310 when Khiva was under the Golden Horde of the Mongol empire. You might find people praying in front of the 19th-century tiled sarcophagus. To the east is a **Music Museum** in the 1905 **Qozi-Kalon Medressa**.

JUMA MOSQUE & AROUND

East of the Music Museum, the large Juma Mosque is interesting for the 218 wooden columns supporting its roof – a concept thought to be derived from ancient Arabian mosques. The few finely decorated columns are from the original 10th-century mosque, though the present building dates from the 18th century. From inside, you can climb the 81 very dark steps of the 47m **Juma Minaret** (1000S).

Opposite the Juma Mosque is the 1905 **Matpana Bay Medressa**, containing a museum devoted to nature, history, religion and the medressa itself. East of the Juma Mosque, the 1855 **Abdulla Khan Medressa** holds a tiny nature museum. The little **Aq Mosque** dates from 1657, the same year as the **Anusha Khan Baths** (Anushahon Hammomi; admission 3000S) and is located by the entrance to the long tunnel of the East Gate.

ALLOQULI KHAN MEDRESSA, BAZAAR & CARAVANSERAI

The street leading north opposite the Aq Mosque contains some of Khiva's most interesting buildings, most of them created by

Alloquli Khan – known as the 'builder khan' – in the 1830s and '40s. First come the tall **Alloquli Khan Medressa** (1835) and the earlier **Kutlimurodinok Medressa** (1809), facing each other across the street, with matching tiled façades.

North of the Alloquli Khan Medressa are the **Alloquli Khan Bazaar & Caravanserai**. The entrance to both is through tall wooden gates beside the medressa. The bazaar is a domed market arcade, still catering to traders, which opens onto Khiva's modern **Dekhon Bazaar** at its east end.

TOSH-HOVLI PALACE

This palace, which means 'Stone House', contains Khiva's most sumptuous interior decoration, including ceramic tiles, carved stone and wood, and *ghanch*. Built by Alloquli Khan between 1832 and 1841 as a more splendid alternative to the Kuhna Ark, it's said to have more than 150 rooms off nine courtyards, with high ceilings designed to catch any breeze. Alloquli was a man in a hurry – the Tosh-Hovli's first architect was executed for failing to complete the job in two years.

ISLOM-HOJA MEDRESSA

From the East Gate, where the slave market was held, go back to the Abdulla Khan Medressa and take the lane to the south beside it to the Islom-Hoja Medressa and minaret – Khiva's newest Islamic monuments, both built in 1910. The **minaret**, with bands of turquoise and red tiling, looks rather like an uncommonly lovely lighthouse. At 57m tall, it's Uzbekistan's highest. A host of vendors, street cleaners or random scallywags will try to collect money from you for the privilege of climbing the 118 steps to the top; you'll probably end up paying one of them 500S to 1000S.

The medressa holds Khiva's best museum, exhibiting Khorezm handicrafts through the ages – fine woodcarving; metalwork; jewellery; Uzbek and Turkmen carpets; stone carved with Arabic script (which was in use in Khorezm from the 8th to the 20th centuries); and large pots called *hum* for storing food underground.

Islom Hoja himself was an early-20th-century grand vizier and a liberal (by Khivan standards): he founded a European-style school, brought long-distance telegraph

to the city, and built a hospital. For his popularity, the khan and clergy had him assassinated.

PAHLAVON MAHMUD MAUSOLEUM

This revered **mausoleum** (Islom Hoja; admission 500S), with its lovely courtyard and stately tilework, is one of the town's most beautiful spots. Pahlavon Mahmud was a poet, philosopher and legendary wrestler who became Khiva's patron saint. His 1326 tomb was rebuilt in the 19th century and then requisitioned in 1913 by the khan of the day as the family mausoleum.

The beautiful Persian-style chamber under the turquoise dome at the north end of the courtyard holds the tomb of Khan Mohammed Rakhim II who ruled from 1865 to 1910. Leave your shoes at the entrance. Pahlavon Mahmud's tomb, to the left of the first chamber, has some of Khiva's loveliest tiling on the sarcophagus and the walls. Pilgrims press coins and notes through the grille that shields the tomb. Tombs of other khans stand unmarked east and west of the main building, outside the courtyard.

DISHON-QALA

The Dishon-Qala was old Khiva's outer town, yet another creation of the 'builder khan' Alloqli, and surrounded by its own 6km wall. Most of it is buried beneath the modern town now, but part of the Dishon-Qala's wall remains, 300m south of the South Gate.

The **Isfandiyar Palace** (Mustaqillik; admission 1000S; ☎ 9am-6pm) on Mustaqillik was built between 1906 and 1912, and like the emir's Summer Palace in Bukhara displays some fascinatingly overdone decorations in a messy collision of East and West. The rooms are largely bare, allowing one to fully appreciate the gold-embroidered ceilings and lavish touches such as 4m-high mirrors and a 50kg chandelier. The harem, in case you're wondering, was behind the huge wall to the west of the palace. It's undergoing renovation and may open some day.

Beyond Dishon-Qala, surrounded by a low mud wall 11km east of central Khiva you'll find **Chaudra Hauli**, the summer residence of a 19th-century Khivan nobleman. You can climb up the slender four-storey tower for views of the surrounding flatness and then enjoy a drink at the little café nearby.

Tours

Our recommended guides are listed below.

Amon (☎ 225 42 45, 719 42 45) French.

Elena Alayarova (☎ 229 46 22, 517 78 32) German.

Khojamuratova Gulimkhan (☎ 375 95 96, 513 40 76) English.

Marina Alayarova (☎ 226 53 06; marina_alayarova@yahoo.com) German & English.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Otabek (☎ 375 61 77; Islom Hoja 68; r with shared bathroom per person US\$7) Backpackers will have few complaints at this small family-run B&B. The two triples and one quad have cosy beds and warm carpeting, and perky daughter Barno speaks good English. You can self-cater and store your stuff in the owners' fridge, or pay US\$3 for dinner – often *plov* and salad. Owners were planning to expand the place by 2008.

Meros Guest House (☎ 375 76 42; Abdulla Boltaev 57; s/d US\$10/20) The six simple rooms here are a steal considering they all have private bathrooms. There aren't many amenities, but what's here – nice twin beds with bedside tables – is beyond what you'd expect for this price.

Islambek (☎ 375 30 23; www.islambekhotel.nm.ru; Toshpolatov 60; s/d US\$15/20; ☎ ☑) The 20 bright rooms here are a bit overdone but represent an indisputably good value, with nice linens and enough space and furniture for an afternoon tea session in your room. Then again you're probably better off taking tea on the roof, where the view's much better.

Also recommended:

Ganijon Afandi (☎ 211 40 69; Pahlavon Mahmud; dm US\$6-7) Was repeatedly closed when we visited but gets good reports from readers.

Zafarbek (☎ 375 71 85; zafar22@intal.uz; Toshpolatov 28; s/d US\$15/30 ☎ ☑) Not thrilling but the pink rooms get the job done.

Mirzoboshi (☎ 375 27 53; mirzoboshi@inbox.ru; Pahlavon Mahmud 1; 2-bed & 4-bed dm US\$10) Is a mud- and brick-walled B&B located right in the heart of the Ichon-Qala across from Katya the camel's lair; the entrance is around the back. You essentially move in with the family by occupying one of the two dorm rooms. Budget travellers are welcome to roll out a mattress and sleeping bag on the floor of the *avivan* over the courtyard, which has a magical view of the Juma Minaret. For more privacy opt for their clean new **annexe** (☎ 375 91 88; Toshpolatov 24; s/d from US\$15/30; ☎ ☑).

MIDRANGE

Our pick Shaherezada Khiva (☎ 375 95 65; www.khiva-shaherezada.com; Islom Hoja 35; s/d US\$25/40; ☎ ☑) Finally, a classy, midrange B&B that truly distinguishes itself from the unimaginative Khivan pack. With beautiful wooden beds and furniture, *tapchan* dining in a remarkable dining room, and large rooms strewn with beautiful carpets and porcelain, the Shaherezada would stand out in B&B-rich Bukhara. The kicker is that every exquisite piece of wood here – including the truly memorable front door – was hand-carved in the workshop of the owner. Where do the superlatives end? Not with this review, we assure you.

Hotel Khiva (☎ 375 49 45; Pahlavon Mahmud 1; per person US\$26; ☎ ☑) This state-run oddity, which is in fact the 19th-century Mohammed Amin Khan Medressa, is begging for a private owner to take it over and tap its immense potential. OK, so the cramped rooms, former *hujra* (study cells), are supposed to be part of the fun. Less fun are the saggy beds and the complete lack of amenities. Expect poor or no service.

Malika (☎ 375 26 65; www.malika-khiva.com; Kadriyakovov 19A; s/d US\$35/50) This is Khiva's best true hotel, located just a three-minute walk north of the North Gate. The rooms, set around an interior courtyard, are clean and include twin beds that can be shoved together. It also runs a yurt camp on a lake 20km from Khiva for the same price.

Eating

The choices are limited, frankly. The chaikhans in the Ichon-Qala are OK but gouge you a bit on food and especially beer. Leave the Ichon-Qala and prices suddenly halve.

ICHON-QALA

Zerafshan Chaikhana (Islom Hoja; mains 1500S) This chaikhana in the old stone Tolib Maksum Medressa is blessed with superb atmosphere and a half-decent *plov*.

Bir Gumbaz (Pahlavon Mahmud; mains 2000S) A diminutive chaikhana, it's known for tasty soups and its artist's view of Kalta Minor.

Farruh (Pahlavon Mahmud; mains 2000S) It's expensive for a chaikhana but you're paying for the atmosphere, which consists of colourfully decorated yurts.

Restoran Khiva (Pahlavon Mahmud; meals US\$7-8) Located next to the Hotel Khiva in the spacious Matniyaz Divanbeg Medressa, this is probably

the pick of the bunch. But it's not cheap and it's often booked out to tour groups.

DISHON-QALA

Parvoz (Mustaqillik 5; chicken shashlyk 1000S) It's well-worth escaping the hallowed walls of the Ichon-Qala to attend this upscale chaikhana overlooking a *hauz*. It serves filling meals of *manty*, shashlyk, soup and other staples, along with Azia beer at half the price you'll pay inside the North Gate, a few metres away.

Rustamboy Chaikhana (A Kariy; mains 1000S) Exit the West Gate, cross the street and you'll bump into a *hauz* flanked by this large chaikhana, serving national dishes.

Entertainment

Fashion & traditional dance show (admission to both shows without/dinner 7000/10,000S, to 1 show 5000S; ☎ dusk) This show takes place in the Alloqli Khan Medressa nightly in the high season, by request at other times. Book tickets through the tourist information office or at the gate, and be sure to ask for a discount, which is often granted to tourists.

Shopping

Khiva Silk Carpet Workshop (☎ 375 72 64; www.khiva.info/khivasilk; Pahlavon Mahmud; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Apprentice carpet makers hand-weave silk rugs patterned after Khiva-style majolica tiles, doors and miniature paintings. At this workshop there's lots of natural-dyed silk hanging around and you can watch women work the looms. Unesco sponsored its launch in 2001 and it's now operating on its own. Ask the personable English-speaking manager Jalol for a tour. There is a second workshop in the Kutlimurodinok Medressa, where there are other handicraft workshops as well.

Khiva Suzani Centre (Islom Hoja) The British Council and Operation Mercy helped this centre get its wings in 2004. The now-independent centre churns out wonderful hand-made silk and *adras* creations.

Other souvenir and craft shops are wedged into many Ichon-Qala attractions. The main drag for craft stalls is the narrow alley that runs west from Islom-Hoja Minaret.

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to travel between Urgench and Khiva is by marshrutka or shared taxi from the stand by the trolleybus stop, just outside the North Gate (marshrutka/taxi per

seat 500/800S, 45 minutes). Keep off the interminable trolleybus (250S, two hours), which terminates inconveniently short of Urgench.

A couple of late-morning to early-afternoon private buses per day depart when full to Tashkent (13,000S, 19 hours) via Samarkand and Bukhara from the Koy-Darvoza Gate, east of the city. If you are heading east your best bet is to go to Urgench and pick up a shared taxi there (see p250).

KARAKALPAKSTAN

If you're attracted to desolation, you'll love the Republic of Karakalpakstan. The Karakalpak, who today number only about 400,000 of the republic's 1.2 million population (it's also home to about 400,000 Uzbeks and 300,000 Kazakhs), are a formerly nomadic and fishing people, first recorded in the 16th century. Today they are struggling to recapture a national identity after being collectivised or urbanised in Soviet times. Karakalpak, the official language of the republic, is Turkic, close to Kazakh and less so to Uzbek.

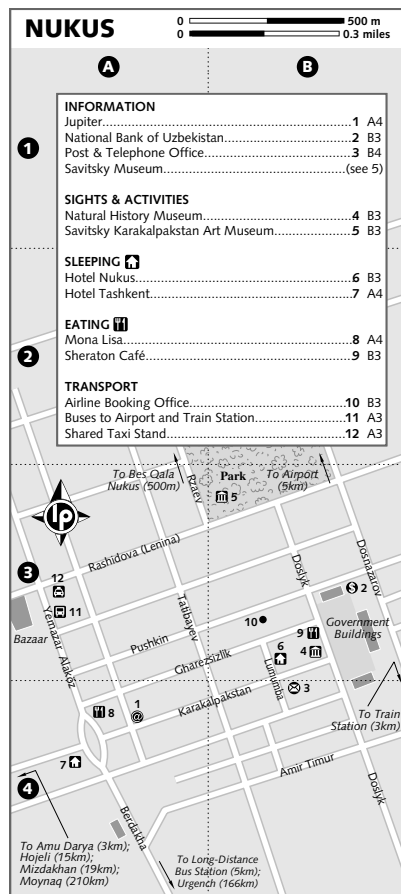
Karakalpakstan was probably at its most prosperous in the 1960s and '70s when the fruits of expanded irrigation from the Amu-Darya were being felt. But today the destruction of the Aral Sea has rendered Karakalpakstan one of Uzbekistan's most depressed regions. The capital, Nukus, gains Tashkent subsidies to keep itself a model city for the region, but a drive into outlying areas reveals a region of dying towns and blighted landscapes.

In a cruel irony, Karakalpak have been forced to embrace the devil in the sense that cotton – the very crop that devastated the Aral Sea in the first place – is now one of the region's main industries. The government practice of sending children into the cotton fields is alive and well here, as any autumn jaunt into the Karakalpak countryside will prove.

NUKUS HYKYC

☎ (3) 61 / pop 230,000

The isolated Karakalpak capital lies 166km northwest of Urgench, well beyond the reach of most tourist buses. Nukus (Karakalpak: Nökis), a quiet city of tree-lined avenues and nondescript Soviet architecture, is the gateway to the fast-disappearing Aral Sea and home to



a remarkable art museum that for some travellers is worth the hardship of getting here.

Orientation

The main central streets (Karakalpak: *köshesi*) are Karakalpakstan and Ghahresizlik, both ending east at a square surrounded by government buildings. The airport is 6km north of the centre on Dosnazarov, the train station about 3km from the centre at Dosnazarov's south end and the long-distance bus station is 6km south of the centre on Berdakha.

Information

Bes Qala Nukus (☎ 224 51 69; www.kr.uz/besqala, bqtravel2006@rambler.ru; U Yusupov 16) This new travel agency, run by the helpful Tazabay Uteuliev, is your best

bet for trips to the Ustyurt Plateau and the Aral Sea, and also visits Moynaq and the *qalas*.

Jupiter (Karakalpakstan; per hr 400S; ☎ 8am-11pm) Internet. Located next to Tsentr Bank.

National Bank of Uzbekistan (Ghahresizlik 52) Cash advances for Visa and American Express cardholders (3% to 4%).

Post & telephone office (Karakalpakstan 7; ☎ 7am-7pm)

Savitsky Museum (☎ 222 88 83; Rzaev 127) Not only is this the best art museum in Central Asia, but it's also effectively one of the best tourist information centres. The multilingual staff here knows the region well and can arrange tours to Midakhan, Moynaq and the Elliq Qala region. The museum also can arrange homestays.

Sights

SAVITSKY KARAKALPAKSTAN ART MUSEUM

The **Savitsky Museum** (☎ 222 25 56; www.museum.setglobal.net; Rzaev 127; admission 7000S, guide 3000S, photos 18,000S; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) opened in 2002 in a new, marble-fronted building on the north part of town, and houses one of the most remarkable art collections in the former Soviet Union. The museum owns some 90,000 pieces of art, only a fraction of which are actually on display. About half of them were brought here in Soviet times by renegade artist and ethnographer Igor Savitsky. Many of the early-20th-century Russian paintings, which did not conform to Soviet Realism, were banned by Moscow, but found protection in these isolated backwaters.

The museum rotates its huge collection every few months, so you could visit many times and continue to see new works. The 2nd floor contains ethnographic exhibits and the 3rd floor is reserved for the 'lost art'. The museum gift shop sells books on the museum as well as locally made handicrafts.

If you crave more – or if don't have the time or money to see the main collection – the Savitsky Museum has an **extension** (admission 2000S, guide 2000S; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) on the 2nd floor of the History Museum (see below). Same idea here – the paintings rotate so you never quite know what you're going to see, but you'll rarely be disappointed.

NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

This **museum** (Karakalpakstan; admission US\$2, guide US\$1; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri & 10am-4pm Sat) is minor league compared to the Savitsky, but still con-

tains a strong exhibition of fauna and flora of the Karakalpakstan region. The very last Turan (Caspian) tiger, killed in 1972, stands stuffed and mounted in a corner. Traditional jewellery, costumes, musical instruments, yurt decorations and local archaeological finds are also on display.

Festivals & Events

The annual **Pakhta-Bairam** festival takes place on the first Sunday after Karakalpakstan meets its cotton-picking quota, usually in late November or early December. Competitions are held in traditional sports such as wrestling, ram-fighting and cock-fighting. You might also witness those sports on **Navruz** (21 March) or on Day of Memory & Honour (9 May; formerly Victory Day).

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Nukus (☎ 222 88 38; Lumumba 4; s/d from US\$10/20; ☎) Conveniently located in the heart of town, this old hotel has been spruced up. The renovated 1st-floor rooms, at US\$20 per person, are reserved for 'tourists'. The cheaper upstairs rooms with cable TV are a better value. Breakfast is included. The manager, Zerafshon, is a great source of regional transport tips.

Hotel Tashkent (☎ 224 18 28; Berdakha 59; per person US\$15) This decrepit high-rise at the western end of Karakalpakstan offers spacious, if run-down, rooms that are poor value at the asking price, but you can probably bargain them down. Most rooms have balconies – ask for a room with a 'view' of Nukus.

Sheraton Café (☎ 222 87 81; Ghahresizlik 53; mains 2000-3000S) It may not live up to its international hotel namesake, but the Sheraton still serves up an exciting array of European dishes with Russian and Uzbek influences. It has a lively evening atmosphere that can get clouded with smoke and full of warring, bloodshot Karakalpakhs unable to hold their liquor.

Mona Lisa (☎ 224 0632; Ghahresizlik 107; mains 3000-5000S) This Georgian home restaurant was popular with NGO staff when there were still NGOs in Uzbekistan. Now it resorts to overcharging tourists. Insist on ordering from the Russian menu, where the prices are half those on the English menu.

The Savitsky Museum has a café serving sandwiches and salads. There is also a handful of good, cheap cafés between the Hotel Tashkent and the central bazaar, 500m north along Yernazar Alaköz.

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are Uzbekistan Airways flights twice daily to/from Tashkent (US\$51, 1½ hours). Book tickets at the airport or the **airline booking office** (☎ 222 79 95; Pushkin 43; 🕒 9am-5pm).

LAND

Shared taxis depart for Urgench from the long-distance bus station (6km south of town) and from opposite the bazaar (per seat 8000S, 1½ hours). All go via Beruni in southern Karakalpakstan. There are also several buses per day to Urgench from the bus station (2500S, 2¼ hours). For information on getting to Moynaq, see opposite. For the Turkmen border, see p268.

For buses to Tashkent, your best bet is the private-bus lot in front of the Hotel Nukus. There are two buses to Tashkent per day from there (12,000S, 20 hours), plus one bus to Samarkand (10,000S, 15 hours). Additional buses to Tashkent leave from the long-distance bus station. All go via Bukhara. There are also several weekend buses to Almaty from the Hotel Nukus lot (US\$50, two days).

Train

A twice-weekly train from Kungrad (100km northwest of Nukus) to Tashkent comes through Nukus (*platskartny* 20,000S, 22 hours), with stops in Urgench, Navoi and Samarkand on the way. There is also a Monday train to Almaty (two days).

Getting Around

Bus 3 runs between the airport and the bazaar. For the bus station and train station, take marshrutka 20 from opposite the bazaar. A taxi from the airport, train or bus station to the centre is under 2000S.

AROUND NUKUS

Mizdakhhan

On a hill near Hojeli, 19km west of Nukus are the remains of ancient Mizdakhhan, once the second-largest city in Khorezm. Inhabited from the 4th century BC until the 14th century AD, Mizdakhhan remained a sacred place even after Timur destroyed it; tombs and mosques continued to be built here right up to the 20th century.

Today the main attraction is a hill littered with those mosques and mausoleums, some ruined, some intact. The most impressive is

the restored **Mausoleum of Mazlum Khan Slu**, dating from the 12th to 14th centuries. On the neighbouring hill towards Konye-Urgench are the remains of a 4th- to 3rd-century BC fortress called Gyaur-Qala, which is worth checking out if you missed the forts of Elliq-Qala (p251) to the south.

To get here from Nukus, take a shared taxi from the bazaar (per seat 1000S, 20 minutes), or go to the stadium bus stop (marshrutka 19 goes there) and hop on a marshrutka to Hojeli (300S, 30 minutes). From Hojeli, take the road to Konye-Urgench (Turkmenistan). About 2km along you'll pass a honey-coloured cemetery on your left; another 2km further is Mizdakhhan – look for the turquoise dome on the hilltop. The entrance is 500m past the main gate. An ordinary taxi to/from Nukus is 3500S each way.

МОЙНАҚ МУЙНАҚ

☎ (3) 61 / pop 8000

Moynaq, 210km north of Nukus, encapsulates more visibly than anywhere the absurd tragedy of the Aral Sea. Once one of the sea's two major fishing ports, it now stands more than 150km from the water. What remains of Moynaq's fishing fleet lies rusting on the sand, beside depressions marking the town's last futile efforts in the early 1980s to keep channels open to the shore.

Moynaq used to be on an isthmus connecting the Ush Say (Tiger's Tail) peninsula to the shore. You can appreciate this on the approach to the town, where the road is raised above the surrounding land. The former shore is about 3km north.

Moynaq's shrinking populace suffers the full force of the Aral Sea disaster, with hotter summers, colder winters, debilitating sand-salt-dust storms, and a gamut of health problems (see p77). Not surprisingly, the mostly Kazakh residents are deserting the town.

Sights

Poignant reminders of Moynaq's tragedy are everywhere: the sign at the entrance to the town has a fish on it; a fishing boat stands as a kind of monument on a makeshift pedestal near Government House. The local museum in the city hall has some interesting photos of the area prospering before the disaster.

The **beached ships** are hard to find and you may need to ask around. They are a five-minute walk south of the Oybek Hotel, across

VISITING THE ARAL SEA

Catching a glimpse of the notorious Aral Sea's new southern shoreline holds no small amount of appeal for adventurous travellers. It's possible, but the least rigorous route is not from Moynaq! It's easier and more scenic to drive northwest along navigable dirt tracks from Kungrad via bird-laden Sudochie Lake, to the desert backwater of Kubla Ustyurt. From there, head north along the tawny, treeless moonscape of the Ustyurt Plateau to the Aral's extreme southwestern shore, about 40km north of Kubla Ustyurt.

Your reward will be superb, cliff-top views of the desertified former seabed and the thin blue line of the Aral's new shoreline in the distance. A few kilometres east, rough tracks lead down from the plateau and on to the new shoreline, where you can swim and camp. This descent is tricky to find so your driver best know what he's doing. You can return the way you came or, from the top of the descent, loop southeast along the Ustyurt Plateau to Moynaq.

It's also possible to do this loop in reverse, starting from Moynaq. But most drivers in Moynaq – including, we have heard, some guys who make the trip on Russian Ural motorcycles – will try to take you due north to the southern shoreline of the sea's eastern half. This route involves a tough, 185km slog along the Aral's former seabed just to reach the first traces of murky, shallow water. And the seabed is impassable if it rains.

No matter how you go, it's essential that your driver have a 4WD vehicle and intimate knowledge of the tracks heading north from Moynaq and Kungrad. Of course you are much less likely to get lost if you hire a travel agency, such as Bes Qala Nukus (p258).

the main road and beyond the collection of homes. To see more ships, take a right turn up the road that is 250m before the hotel. Before you reach the war memorial, peer out over the former sea and you'll spot some ships about 1km away, across the grassy steppe.

If you can't make it out to Moynaq to see the ships yourself, the satellite images on **Google Earth** (www.earth.google.com) are almost as eerie.

From the **war memorial**, which once had great views of the Aral Sea, you can spot a lake southeast of town, created in an attempt to restore the formerly mild local climate. It didn't quite work, but it's at least given the locals a source of recreation.

Sleeping

Oybek (☎ 222 18 68; r with shared bathroom 6000S) There's no electricity, no running water, and it looks like a giant poo volcano erupted in the shared bathroom. But the champagne brunch is just divine. Not really. Fortunately they keep the large rooms much cleaner than the bathroom. Ask for directions because it has no address and no sign.

Readers recommend **Aitjanov Sagitjan** (☎ 351 72 12; aitsagit@rambler.ru; Amir Timur 2; per person US\$25) for homestays. He is based in Nukus so contact him a few days in advance to make arrangements.

Eating can be a problem. See what the Hotel Oybek can whip up, or try to finagle an invite

into a local's home. It's not a bad idea to bring some snacks along.

Getting There & Away

The bus station is at the south end of the long main street. Two decrepit and over-crowded buses run daily between Moynaq and Nukus (2000S, 3¾ hours). They depart Nukus from the long-distance bus station at 9am and 3pm, passing by the Hotel Tashkent about 10 minutes later. The return buses from Moynaq are also at 9am and 3pm. You can also take an even more crowded bus to Kungrad (Qongirat) and change there.

It's swifter to take a shared taxi to Kungrad from opposite the bazaar in Nukus, and transfer in Kungrad to another shared taxi. This will cost 8000S to 10,000S in total and save you two hours of driving time.

A day trip from Nukus in an ordinary taxi costs about US\$60, US\$100 from Urgench.

UZBEKISTAN DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

All accommodation rates are for rooms with private bathroom unless otherwise stated. The B&B scene in Uzbekistan has taken off more than in any other Central Asian republic. The best are in Bukhara where European consultants have been called in to promote

STREET NAME CHANGES

In trying to erase the Soviet period, streets everywhere were given new, suitably Uzbek names shortly after independence (the exceptions were streets named after revered Russian writers and cosmonauts, such as Chekhov, Pushkin, Tolstoy and of course Gagarin). A decade-and-a-half later all the maps have been changed, but the new names still haven't really stuck, at least in big cities such as Tashkent and Samarkand.

We use the new street names throughout this chapter, but where relevant we have included the old names next to the new names on maps. If your taxi driver doesn't know the new street name, try the old name.

the expansion and improvement of B&Bs. Uzbekistan's first community-based tourism programme opened in the Nuratinsky Mountains in 2006 (p236). Yurtstays are possible too (below).

Another organisation that advertises community-based tourism programs across Uzbekistan on its website is Orexca.com.

ACTIVITIES

Camel trekking, usually combined with a yurt-stay, is the most intriguing activity, though most trips are relatively short jaunts around one of the yurt camps in Lake Aidarkul (p236) or Ayaz-Qala (p251). There are nomads lurking in that there desert, and they can be found. Whether they'll invite you in for a homestay is another matter, but you might ask. Talk to East Line Tours in Bukhara for ideas (p240). It is also the authority on **bird-watching** (www.birdwatching-uzbekistan.com), of which Uzbekistan is meant to offer the best in Central Asia.

Other popular outdoor activities are **trekking**, **rafting** and **skiing**, all remarkably accessible from Tashkent (see p91 and p213).

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Uzbek Embassies in Central Asia

Uzbekistan has embassies in Kazakhstan (p178), Kyrgyzstan (p345), Tajikistan (p392) and Turkmenistan (p436). A complete list of Uzbek missions abroad is on the website of the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.mfa.uz).

Uzbek Embassies & Consulates

Afghanistan (☎ 93-20-230 01 24; Kabul, Vazir Akbar Khan, 13th St, 3rd Row, House 14)

Azerbaijan (☎ 99-412-97 25 49; fax 97 25 48; 1st Hwy, 9th Alley 437, Batamdart, 370021, Baku)

China (☎ 86-10-6532 6304/5; fax 6532 6304; Beijing 100600, Sanlitun, Beixiao qie 11)

France (☎ 331-5330 0353; fax 5330 0354; 22 rue d'Aguesseau, 75008, Paris)

Germany (☎ 49-30-394 09 80; www.uzbekistan.de; Perleberger Strasse 62, Berlin 10559) Consulate in Frankfurt.

Malaysia (☎ 603-42-53 24 06; N. 2, Jalan 12, Taman Tun Abdul Razak, 68000 Ampang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia)

Pakistan (☎ 92-51-226 47 46; fax 226 17 37; House 2, 21st St, F8/3, Kohistan Rd, Islamabad) Consulate in Karachi.

Russia (☎ 7-095-230 00 76; fax 238 8 18; Pogorelskiy pereulok 12, Moscow, 109017)

Turkey (☎ 90-312-441 38 71; fax 442 70 58; Sancak mahallesi 211, Sokak 3, 06550 Yildiz-Cankaya, Ankara) Consulate in Istanbul.

UK (☎ 44-020-7229 7679; www.uzbekembassy.org; consular section, 41 Holland Park W11 3RP, London; ☎ 10am-1pm Mon, Wed & Fri)

USA (☎ 1-202-887 5300; www.uzbekistan.org; consular section, 1746 Massachusetts Ave NW, Washington DC 20036; ☎ 10am-noon Mon-Fri) Consulate-General in New York.

Embassies & Consulates in Uzbekistan

The following are all located in Tashkent (☎ 371 or 71; see Map pp196-7). Hours of operation listed below are for visa applications only. For information on visas for onward travel see p265.

Afghanistan (☎ 134 84 32; Murtazayev 6/84; ☎ 9am-2pm Mon-Fri)

Azerbaijan (☎ 173 94 65; Halqar Dustligi 25)

China (☎ 133 80 88, consul 133 47 18; Gulomova 79; ☎ 9am-noon Mon, Wed & Fri)

France (☎ main 133 53 84, citizens' services 133 0583; Akhunbabayev 25)

Georgia (☎ 162 62 43; Mukhitdinova 6)

Germany (☎ 120 84 40; www.tashkent.diplo.de; Rashidova 15)

India (☎ 140 09 83; www.indembassy.uz; Kara-Bulak 15-16; ☎ 9.30am-noon Mon-Fri)

Indonesia (☎ 132 02 36; Gulomova 73)

Iran (☎ 68 69 68; Parkent 20; ☎ 9am-noon Mon-Thu)

Israel (☎ 120 58 08; www.tashkent.mfa.gov.il; Abdulla Qahhor 4)

Italy (☎ 152 11 19; Yusuf Khos Khodjib 40)

Japan (☎ 120 80 60; 1-28 Azimova)

Kazakhstan (☎ 152 15 54; kazembassy.kaz.uz; Chekhov 23; ☎ 9am-noon Mon-Fri)

Kyrgyzstan (☎ 133 89 41; krembas@globalnet.uz; Samatova 30; ☎ 9-11.30am & 3-4pm Mon-Fri)

Pakistan (☎ 398 21 73; www.geocities.com/pakembtash; Abdur Rakhmonov [Sofiyaskaya] 15; ☎ applications Tue 10-11am, pickup Wed 11am) Take trolleybus 2 from Chorsu Market.

Russia (☎ 120 35 19; Nukus 83; ☎ 9.30am-1pm Mon, Wed & Fri)

Tajikistan (☎ 54 99 66; Abdulla Qahhor katta VI 61; ☎ 10am-noon Mon-Fri)

Turkey (☎ 113 03 00; Gulomova 87)

Turkmenistan (☎ 120 52 78; Katta Mirobod 10; ☎ 11am-1pm Mon-Fri)

UK (☎ 120 78 52; www.britishembassy.gov/uzbekistan; Gulomova 67)

USA (☎ 120 54 50; www.usembassy.uz; Moyqorqon katta V 3) Bus 95 goes near its new location north of the TV Tower.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

There are colourful celebrations throughout the country during the vernal equinox festival of **Navruz**; (celebrated on 21 March). Festivities typically involve parades, fairs, music, dancing in the streets, plenty of food and in some places a rogue game of *kupkari*. Samarkand has a good one (p228), but the most famous is probably the Unesco-supported festival in Boysun, between Termiz and Samarkand (not covered in this book).

HOLIDAYS

January 1 New Year's Day.

March 8 International Women's Day.

March 21 Navruz.

May 9 Day of Memory and Honour (formerly Victory Day).

September 1 Independence Day.

October 1 Teachers' Day.

December 8 Constitution Day.

For information on Islamic holidays observed in Central Asia, see p449.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are found in most places travellers go, although access is annoyingly slow outside a handful of spots in Tashkent. A recent government initiative brought free wi-fi access to about a dozen restaurants in Tashkent. Wi-fi is rare outside of Tashkent.

INTERNET RESOURCES

For tourist information the best sites are those of travel agencies **Advantour** (www.advantour.com), p199 and **Silk/Sogda Tour** (www.silktour.uz), p225. Another good site with lots of travel articles is www.sairamtour.com. For news, see below.

MEDIA

No level of independent media exists in Uzbekistan, where all newspaper, TV and radio coverage is government sanctioned before going public. Anything independent dealing with Uzbekistan is online and offshore.

The government blocks politically sensitive Uzbek-language websites, but you can access most English-language sites, regardless of political bent, from within the country. You should be able to access all of the following except neweurasia from Uzbek internet cafés.

http://uzbekistan.neweurasia.net Excellent blog discussing hot topics of the day, with extensive links to other useful sites.

www.crisisgroup.org Analysis and lengthy reports on the latest Uzbek political developments.

www.enews.fergana.ru Watchdog website that focuses primarily on politics.

www.eurasianet.org/resource/uzbekistan Volume of articles plummeted after site sponsor Open Society Institute was kicked out of Uzbekistan.

www.rferl.org Probably the best source of objective hard news on Uzbekistan.

MONEY

Few currencies burn a hole in your pocket like the Uzbek sum. The highest Uzbek note (1000S) is worth only about US\$0.80. One US\$100 bill turns into a satchel full of ragged bills, usually tied together with a rubber band.

Reform policies have brought the black market and bank rates to similar levels, so there is no longer any desperate need to change on the black market, although this may be the quickest (or only) way of getting sum for US dollars, especially in the provinces. You can usually find black-market money swappers working the bazaars. If you have to go this route, be wary of corrupt police, who may demand 'fines'.

Credit cards are accepted at an increasing number of midrange and top-end hotels. A select few ATMs can be found in Tashkent (p199).

In the provinces, MasterCard users should look for Asaka Bank for cash advances, while Visa and Amex holders will usually (but not always) be able to get cash advanced at **National Bank of Uzbekistan** (NBU; full branch list at <http://eng.nbu.com/branches>). The NBU is also usually the best bet for cashing travellers cheques. Be sure to list your travellers cheques on your customs declaration form or you won't be able to cash them.

The US dollar is king in Uzbekistan; bring plenty. Euros and pounds warrant poorer

rates and are more difficult to exchange outside of Tashkent. At the time of research, the exchange rates were as follows:

Country	Unit	=	Sum
Afghanistan	1Afg	=	24.76
Australia	A\$1	=	967
euro zone	€1	=	1629
Kazakhstan	1T	=	9.67
Kyrgyzstan	1som	=	31.93
Tajikistan	1TJS	=	360.93
Turkmenistan	100M	=	28.81
UK	UK£1	=	2412
USA	US\$1	=	1238

Hotels, guides and other businesses catering to tourists often list prices in US dollars, but (in theory) it is illegal to pay for goods and services in anything besides Uzbek sum. This book follows local convention in listing most prices besides hotels in Uzbek sum.

POST

An airmail postcard costs 350S, a 20g airmail letter costs 450S and a 1kg package costs 7810S. The postal service is not renowned for speed or reliability in delivering letters or parcels; send your friends two postcards and hope they will receive at least one. International couriers are listed under Post in the Tashkent section (p199).

REGISTRATION

Checking into a hotel means automatic registration. Make sure you get a registration slip (staff sometimes need reminding) as these are often asked for when departing the country.

If you spend a night in a private home you are supposed to be registered with the local Office of Visas & Registration (OVIR), but as this can create more problems than it solves for you and your hosts, it's probably best not to. Instead, ask the next hotel you stay at to fill in those missing days on your docket. Keep in mind that there are fines – or more likely bribes – to be paid if you get caught unregistered.

For more questions or details, contact your embassy or the Tashkent central **OVIR office** (☎ 132 65 70; Uzbekistan 49A).

TELEPHONE

Mobile phone operators issue local SIM cards free-of-charge with the purchase of minimum US\$5 prepaid cards. Contrary to popular be-

lief it is legitimate for foreigners to buy these. The main office of **Coscom** (Map p196-7; ☎ 120 72 65; www.coscom.uz; Vokhidova 38, Tashkent; ☎ 8am-7pm) has English-speaking staff that will change your phone settings to English. Domestic calls with mobile operators Coscom, Beeline or MTS cost US\$0.04 to US\$0.05 per minute. International text messages only cost about US\$0.03 per message.

Uzbekistan's antiquated telephone system is creaky but functional. Per-minute calls from the central telephone offices in Tashkent and most other major cities are: to the UK 1150S, to the USA 1250S and to Australia 1750S. Post offices and various stores and kiosks sell a range of cards good for discounted long-distance calls out of Uzbekistan. Most internet cafés listed in this book (at least those in the big cities) offer Skype.

A better option is to buy a Verizon/MCI prepaid calling card, which can be used outside Uzbekistan as well. A 100-unit card costs US\$30 and is good for about 73 minutes to the USA or Europe (US\$0.41 per minute). A better-value 600-unit card is also available. They are distributed by InterConcepts Incorporated – contact **Charles Rudd** (☎ 139 13 02; ruddcl@interconcepts.com).

Within Uzbekistan, dialling local is easy – just dial the seven-digit number or, if that fails, the last six or five digits of the number.

Dialling another city is harder. From mobile phones, dial the full Uzbek country and city (or mobile phone) code (☎ +998-XX) followed by a *seven-digit* number (if the number you're dialling lists only six digits, simply add a ☎ 2); if that doesn't work dial ☎ 8 instead of ☎ +998; if that still doesn't work try dialling the number with no code – you may unknowingly be within the limits of the city you are dialling.

From landlines, dial ☎ 83 followed by the regional code. If that doesn't work, drop the ☎ 3, which may have been phased out by the time you read this.

Calling Uzbek mobile phones is trickier and depends on the carrier. The code for Unitel is

INCOMING AREA CODES

When calling from outside Uzbekistan dial ☎ +998, the area code marked in the individual sections (without the ☎ 3), and the seven-digit number.

☎ 90, for MTS ☎ 98 and for Coscom ☎ 93. To dial, for instance, a Coscom phone from outside Uzbekistan or from another mobile carrier, you'd dial ☎ +998-93-XXX XXXX; to dial it from a landline within Uzbekistan you'd dial ☎ 8-593-XXX XXXX; and to dial it locally or from another Coscom phone you'd just dial ☎ XXX XXXX.

To call out of Uzbekistan dial ☎ 8, wait for a tone, then dial ☎ 10.

TRAVEL PERMITS

Border permits are required for all mountain areas near the Tajik and Kyrgyz borders, including most of Ugam-Chatkal National Park (p213), the Zarafshan and Hissar Mountains (p232), and Zaamin National Park (not covered in this book). Secure these with the help of a travel agency before setting out.

VISAS

Uzbek visa rules change frequently and depend entirely on the state of the country's relations with the US and EU. At the time of writing, citizens of the following countries were technically exempt from letters of invitation (LOIs): Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Malaysia, Spain, Switzerland and the UK. Everybody else needs LOIs, as do citizens of the above countries who are applying for visas outside their country of citizenship. No matter what your citizenship, it will always be much easier and quicker to obtain an Uzbek visa with an LOI. See the website of the travel agency **Advantour** (www.advantour.com) for updated LOI requirements.

Any Uzbek travel agency can arrange LOI support, but most demand that you also purchase a minimum level of services – usually hotel bookings for at least three nights. A few agencies provide LOI support for a fee with no strings attached, including Arostr and Stantours (p199). Allow two weeks for LOI processing or pay double for four- to five-day processing.

The standard tourist visa is a 30-day, single-entry visa. They cost a flat US\$100 for US citizens, slightly less for most other nationalities. Multiple entry costs an additional US\$10 per entry. Tourist visas lasting more than 30 days are almost impossible to obtain. Three-day transit visas cost US\$30 and require a visa for an onward country (eg Tajikistan).

Visa processing time depends upon the embassy. London, Dushanbe, Bishkek and

Almaty can issue on-the-spot visas with an LOI. It may be possible to pick up your visa upon arrival at Tashkent International Airport if there is no Uzbek embassy in your country of residence, but you'll need full visa support for this from a travel agent.

Visa Extensions

A one-week visa extension costing about US\$75 is available from the Ministry of Foreign affairs booth at Tashkent International Airport. Travel agents will be reluctant to perform this service so go there on your own. Longer extensions are time-consuming, expensive and involve much red tape. Many frustrated travellers give up and go to neighbouring Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan and buy a new visa. If you insist on trying, seek support from a Tashkent-based travel agency.

Visas for Onward Travel

For contact details of embassies and consulates in Tashkent, see p262. Contact David at Stantours (p199) for updated information and honest advice. If you can avoid purchasing LOI support, Stantours will tell you.

Afghanistan A 30-day visa costing US\$40 is issued on the spot.

Azerbaijan A 30-day visa costing US\$40 is issued in maximum three days. No rush service available. An LOI is technically needed but it's possible to get one without.

China A 60-day visa costs US\$30 for five-day processing time, double that for same-day processing. An LOI helps here.

Georgia No visas required for US, EU, Canadian or Japanese citizens staying 90 days or fewer. A 90-day visa for Australians, Kiwis and South Africans costs about US\$40.

India A six-month multiple-entry visa costs US\$60 for US citizens, US\$40 for UK, EU, Australian citizens; seven-day minimum processing time.

Iran This embassy can be difficult but travellers report recent service improvements. First you must apply for an authorisation through an Iranian agent such as www.iranianvisa.com. From Uzbekistan this costs \$US39/72 for regular/rush service. When this finally arrives (check to make sure it has), you can apply for a 30-day tourist visa (valid for three months), which costs \$US45 for seven- to 10-day processing, or \$US72 for three- to seven-day processing. Women must have hair covered in application photos.

Kazakhstan A 30-day visa (US\$35) takes two days to process. An LOI is needed for multiple entry or for visas longer than 30 days.

Kyrgyzstan A 30-day visa costs US\$40 for same-day processing. No LOI needed for US, Commonwealth, and most EU citizens.

Pakistan A 30- or 60-day visa costs about US\$72 for EU citizens, US\$120 for Americans and US\$42 for Australians. An LOI is recommended but not mandatory. Two-day processing. **Russia** Present original travel voucher and booking confirmation to apply for a 30-day tourist visa. Prices for 10-day processing are about US\$70 for US citizens and about US\$30 to US\$50 for EU and Australian citizens. Pay \$25 extra for five-day processing and US\$85 extra for same-day rush. Be prepared for long queues.

Tajikistan If at all possible get your Tajik visa elsewhere because this embassy is a nightmare. One-week/two-week/one-month visa costs US\$30/40/50. Allow 12 days to process or pay double for a rush, which takes two to five days. All nationalities require an LOI. Surly staff will direct you towards their favoured travel agent – do not listen to them! **Turkmenistan** Five-day transit visas issued without LOI for US\$46; allow 10 days to process. Arrive two hours early to put your name on a waiting list. You can keep your passport during processing, but when you pick up the visa you must show a visa for an onward country (eg Azerbaijan). Tourist visas require difficult-to-obtain LOIs and cost US\$45 to US\$90, with one- to three-day processing (see p439). You'll also need to present a complete itinerary.

VOLUNTEERING

The expulsion of most Western NGOs in 2005–2006 put a damper on volunteering opportunities in Uzbekistan. That said, the few do-good groups that remain in Uzbekistan will always have a need for self-starters with language skills. Mike Humphrey (scout_pmh@yahoo.com) works with the local branch of Sisters of Mother Teresa, and may have ideas for travellers who are serious about helping the poor or local schools.

The volunteer situation is bound to change depending on the state of Uzbekistan's relations with the West. A good person to contact for the latest news on the comings and goings of charities and volunteer groups is Kevin Glass (director@tashschool.org), director of the **Tashkent International School** (Map pp196-7; ☎ 37-191 96 67; www.tashschool.org; Sarikulskaya 38).

TRANSPORT IN UZBEKISTAN

GETTING THERE & AWAY Entering Uzbekistan

As long as your papers are in order, entering Uzbekistan should be no sweat. You will be asked to fill out two identical customs declarations forms, one to turn in and one

to keep (which will be handed in upon departure). The customs form is necessary for changing travellers cheques and will smooth your departure, so don't lose it. Be sure to declare every cent of every type of money you bring in; travellers have reported being hassled for the most minor discrepancies, especially at land border crossings. See Scams in the Tashkent section (p199) for airport concerns.

Air

If arriving by air, your grand entrance into Uzbekistan will most likely occur at **Tashkent International Airport** (☎ 37-40 28 01, VIP 37-54 86 48). A few flights from Russia arrive in regional hubs such as Samarkand, Bukhara and Urgench.

The numerous *aviakassa* (private ticket kiosks) scattered around major cities can help book international tickets on Uzbekistan Airways and other airlines. For a full list of airlines flying to/from Uzbekistan, see p209.

Uzbekistan Airways has convenient booking offices in Tashkent (p208) and all regional hubs. A second international booking office in Tashkent is located on the ground floor of the international terminal.

Sample fares on Uzbekistan Airways to/from Tashkent at the time of research were (one way/return) Almaty US\$185/330; Ashgabat US\$170/279; Astana US\$230/396; Baku US\$324/375; Bangkok US\$540/622; Bishkek US\$145/259; Delhi US\$345/460; Frankfurt US\$560/755; London US\$560/780; Moscow US\$270/429; Paris US\$560/760. It's not a bad idea to reconfirm international tickets with Uzbekistan Airways a week or two before your departure in high season.

There is no departure tax for domestic or international flights from Uzbekistan.

Land

BORDER CROSSINGS To/From Afghanistan

The Friendship Bridge linking Termiz with northern Afghanistan was finally opened to tourist traffic in 2005. While Afghan officials seem happy with this arrangement, the Uzbeks frequently close their side of the border for security or other concerns. Contact OVIR (p199) or a reliable travel agency in Tashkent before attempting this border crossing, which may require – and in any case will be easier with – official (written) permission from the Uzbek government.

To get to the border from Termiz, take marshrutka 21 from Yubileny Bazaar (200S, 20 minutes). The bridge is 10km south of town. From the Afghan side you're looking at about a US\$10 taxi ride to Mazar-e-Sharif.

To/From Kazakhstan

Despite their very long common border there are just two main places to cross. The more common is the Chernyaevka crossing between Tashkent and Shymkent. By all accounts this is a chaotic, unpredictable border; some travellers report breezing through, others report waits of up to six hours. If it looks bad it may be worth paying a US\$10 to US\$15 fast-track fee to one of the 'facilitators' hanging about on both sides of the border. There are reports of corruption on both sides, but especially on the Kazakh side.

It's a 6000S cab ride to the border from central Tashkent, or you can take a cheaper shared taxi or marshrutka from Yunusabadsky Bazaar. You'll have to walk the final 200m through a series of check posts. The border is open 7am to 9pm (Tashkent time). On the Kazakh side, pick up a shared taxi or marshrutka to Turkistan or Shymkent (US\$4). There is also a Tuesday Tashkent–Almaty train (55,000S, 25 hours) that originates in Nukus.

The other crossing is by train or road between Karakalpakstan and Beyneu in western Kazakhstan. For full details on this crossing and more information on crossing into Uzbekistan from Kazakhstan, see p184. Uzbek customs is in Kungrad, a good 225km southeast of the border crossing. The daily trains from Kungrad to Beyneu leave at 7.40am (10 hours).

To/From Kyrgyzstan

The only border crossings into Kyrgyzstan that are open to foreigners are at Uchkurgan (northeast of Namangan); Dustlyk (Dostyk), between Andijon and Osh; and Khanabad (between Andijon and Jalal-Abad). These crossings are generally hassle-free, although they have become more strict since the Andijon incident in May 2005. Shared taxis and minibuses are plentiful on the Kyrgyz side of any crossing you take. Most travellers use the Osh crossing. Take a marshrutka from Andijon to Dustlyk (see p222), walk across the border and pick up public transport on the other side for the short trip to Osh.

Thrice-daily Tashkent–Bishkek buses (US\$8, 12 hours) pass through a long section

of Kazakhstan and you will need a transit visa. You must catch this bus on the Kazakh side of the Chernyaevka border crossing north of Tashkent. For more information see 'To/From Kazakhstan', left.

To/From Russia

From Moscow, a thrice-weekly train departs at 7.35pm, arriving in Tashkent about 66 hours later (hard sleeper/soft sleeper US\$130/200). The return train leaves Tashkent at 11.35pm.

There are also daily trains between Tashkent and southern Russia (Saratov or Ufa) that go via Kazakhstan.

To/From Tajikistan

Most travellers making a beeline from Tashkent to Dushanbe drive to Khojand via the pain-free Oybek border crossing and then take a Tajik domestic flight. To get to this border from Tashkent take a marshrutka or shared taxi from Qoylok Bazaar to Bekobod and get off at Oybek (marshrutka/taxi per seat 2500/5000S, 1½ hours), about 35km shy of Bekobod, near Chanak village. The border post is visible from the road. Once across the border take a taxi to Khojand (US\$10) or a taxi to nearby Bostan (5TJS) and then a minibus to Khojand. An ordinary taxi between Tashkent and Oybek costs about US\$30.

The other main border crossings are Samarkand–Penjikent and Denau–Tursanzade. Marshrutkas to the Penjikent border depart regularly from the Registan stop in Samarkand (1500S, 45 minutes). Walk across the border and pick up a shared or ordinary taxi (per seat US\$2) for the 22km ride to Penjikent. You may have to remind the Tajik border guards to stamp your passport.

Denau is a two-hour drive from Termiz, a five-hour drive from Samarkand, or a six-hour drive from Bukhara, with regular shared taxis making the trip from each city. Shared taxis from Samarkand (per seat 20,000S) and Bukhara (25,000S) do not go through Termiz. From Termiz, there are regular marshrutkas to Denau (departing from Yubileny Bazaar) and a morning train to the border town of Sariosiyo (5000S, four hours). In Tajikistan, a taxi from Tursanzade to Dushanbe takes 45 minutes and costs US\$10.

For info on getting to Khojand via Konibodom, see p396.

To/From Turkmenistan

The three main border points are reached from Bukhara, Khiva/Urgench and Nukus. You have to pay US\$12 to enter Turkmenistan (US\$10 entrance fee, US\$2 bank charge) and you need dollars for this. Each crossing requires a potentially sweltering walk of 10 to 20 minutes across no-man's-land.

From Bukhara, regular shared taxis (per seat 2000S, 40 minutes) and marshrutkas (1000S) make the trip from the Kolkhozny Bazaar to Olot (or Qarakol), about 7km short of the border, from where you'll have to hire your own car for about 2000S. A shared taxi from there to Turkmenabat should cost you around US\$0.50 for the 40-minute drive. Readers report that this border crossing closes for lunch between 1pm and 2pm.

From Khiva or Urgench it costs about 15,000S to hire a car to the border, from where it's a short, US\$1 taxi ride to Dashogus. Alternatively, you can take a cheaper shared taxi or marshrutka to Shovot and catch a taxi there for about 3000S. In Khiva, shared taxis to Shovot leave from a stand about 100m east of the East Gate; in Urgench they leave from the bazaar.

From Nukus it's about a 10,000S, 30km ride to the Konye-Urgench border crossing. Alternatively, take public transport to Hojeli (see p260) and take a shared taxi from Hojeli to the border (per seat 1000S). Once you've walked across the border you can pick up a shared taxi to Konye-Urgench (US\$0.75).

For information on exiting Turkmenistan, see p396).

GETTING AROUND**Air**

Most routes along the tourist trail are well-served by domestic flights to/from Tashkent, if not to each other (see p208). If you book fewer than three days in advance, Uzbekistan Airways will usually say the plane is full. In that case, paying a 'finder's fee' (to the ticket agent or touts on the street) of US\$5 to US\$20 should free up a blocked seat. Buying a ticket for a later date and flying stand-by often works too.

Bus & Marshrutka

Clapped-out state buses are fast disappearing from Uzbek roads, undercut by a boom in private buses that do not keep schedules and leave when full. They are newer and more comfortable, but can be slow as drivers and touts are preoccupied with over-selling seats and transporting cargo and contraband.

Marshrutkas take the form of 11- to 14-seat vans, or seven-seat Daewoo Damas minivans. For simplicity's sake, we do not distinguish between the two types in this chapter.

Car

Driving your own car is possible, provided you have insurance from your home country and a valid international driving licence. Be prepared for the same kind of hassles you'll experience anywhere in the former Soviet Union: lots of random stops and traffic cops fishing for bribes. There are no car-rental agencies. In Uzbekistan, motorists drive on the right and seat belts are not at all required.

Shared & Ordinary Taxi

Shared taxis save tons of time but are of course more costly than buses. They ply all the main intercity routes and also congregate at most border points. They leave when full from set locations – usually from near bus stations – and run all day and often through the night. Prices fluctuate throughout the day/week/month/year, increasing towards the evening, on weekends and on holidays. See p472 for more shared-taxi tips. Ordinary taxis give you the freedom to stop and explore but obviously cost more money.

Trains

Trains are perhaps the most comfortable and safest, if hardly the fastest, method of intercity transport. That said, the new 'high-speed' commuter trains between Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara, with airplane-style seating, are not much slower than a shared taxi and a *lot* more comfortable. Book them a couple days in advance, as they are popular.

Other long-haul trains are of the deliberate but comfortable Soviet variety, with *plat-skartny* (hard sleeper), *kupeyny* (soft sleeper) and sometimes dirt-cheap *obshy* (general) compartments available.

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