



KAZAKHSTAN & TURKMENISTAN ADVENTURE TOUR (2)

TOUR

May 4th - 21st 2022
18 nights

OVERVIEW

On our most adventurous 18-night adventure, we will start in Kazakhstan's new capital, Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana) and finish in the flashy city of Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.

In between these two fascinating cities, we will travel by road, rail, and air as we adventure and explore parts of Kazakhstan only a few have seen before. We will be heading to the industrial base of **Karaganda**, the infamous **Semipalatinsk** (in two words; Gulags and Nukes), and **Kurchatov** - the Los Alamos of the USSR, where the Red Bomb was developed and tested. Plus, we will even visit **'The Polygon'**; the vast nuclear testing range full of abandoned measuring platforms, bunkers, craters, buried machinery, and the scenic yet chilling 'Atomic Lake'.

We will make sure to visit the main sites during our time in Turkmenistan such as Ashgabat and the Darvaza Gas Crater (Gates of Hell) and take you off the beaten path to experience and understand Turkmenistan.

Meet local people, learn about their lives and history, their differences and commonalities.

Combining our 15-year expertise working in this region, contacts, and in-depth research, we've put together a tour that is like no other to offer you the best in Kazakhstan & Turkmenistan tourism.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Nur-Sultan - once the centre of the Virgin Lands campaign, now national capital
- Combine Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan for the ultimate adventure
- Nur-Sultan (Astana) | Ashgabat | Almaty
- Nuclear Polygon - USSR's testing range for atmospheric and underground nukes
- Darvaza Gas Crater - This Giant burning crater known as the 'Mouth of Hell'
- Kow Ata Underground Lake - Natural hot spring 80m under the ground
- Nisa Fortress - UNESCO listed archaeological site

Please note that the itinerary may differ slightly to what is below but your tour leader will do their best to ensure that as much is covered as possible and will also add in extras when there is time such as a visit to a local bar or a funfair. We will make the most of your time on the tour to guarantee the experience of a lifetime.



MAPS



ITINERARY

DAY 1	Arrival into Nur-Sultan
DAY 2	Nur-Sultan
DAY 3	Nur-Sultan & Train Ride
DAY 4	Arrival into Kurchatov
DAY 5	Atomic Lake
DAY 6	Semipalatinsk/Semey
DAY 7	Departure to Karaganda
DAY 8	Karaganda
DAY 9	Almaty
DAY 10	Flight from Almaty to Ashgabat
DAY 11	Ashgabat
DAY 12	Ashgabat
DAY 13	Darvaza Gas Crater & Bokhurdag
DAY 14	Free day in Ashgabat
DAY 15	Dashoguz & Konye-Urgench
DAY 16	Ashgabat & Kow Ata
DAY 17	Ashgabat & Kopet Dag Mountains
DAY 18	Departure Day

Sept 21st – WEDNESDAY (ARRIVAL DAY – NUR-SULTAN)

- **Flights to Nur-Sultan** (airport code NQZ) arrive from many international destinations - let us know which flight you will be on, and we will arrange your pick-up and transfer to the hotel. Arriving even earlier is, of course, fine and can be accommodated - this would give you time to settle in, fight jet-lag, etc
- Today we start the tour with a **group dinner** in a restaurant with a stunning view over the city, coordination and briefing session, before the adventure ahead!

Overnight: Nur-Sultan- Kazakhstan's shiny new Capital City!

Meals included: Dinner

Sept 22nd – THURSDAY (NUR-SULTAN)

- Nur-Sultan is a new city rightly famed for its unique approach to architecture; in that it piles together a wide range of different styles and

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forms with the end result being either a glimpse at the future of post-modern cities, or a horrifying un-curated mish-mash of clashing buildings.

- **Bayterek Tower** – now the icon of the city, this ornate monument has a viewing platform 97 metres above the ground (1997 is when Astana become the capital city) and is designed to evoke a folk tale about a bird laying an egg in a tree. Amazing views over the city from here
- **Palace of Peace and Reconciliation** – glass Pyramid from the eminent architect Norman Foster with the vague but noble aim of reconciling the world's faiths and ideologies and bringing an end to violence. Even if this goal remains elusive it is a stunning building and worth exploring!
- **Hazret Sultan Mosque** – the biggest in Kazakhstan (and second in the region only to the monstrous Gypjak Mosque in Turkmenistan). Classically Islamic in style and Kazakh in décor, this impressive building can house up to 5000 worshippers at once
- **Khan Shatyr Entertainment Centre** – perhaps the building that architecturally sums up modern Astana more than any other. Another Carbuncle/work-of-genius (delete as you prefer) from Norman Foster, this ingenious structure looking somewhat like a lop-sided tent maintains an even temperature year round and provides leisure facilities, shopping, entertainment in general
- **River Ishim** – we'll stroll the banks of this waterway in the centre of town, a good way to see a slice of local life and people enjoying their time. Remember that almost all of Astana's population are recent arrivals so a big mix of people from around the country and beyond can be met with here

Overnight: Nur-Sultan - Kazakhstan's shiny new Capital City!

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

Sept 23rd – FRIDAY (AKMOL & TRAIN RIDE)

- We take a drive out of the city to the nearby village of **Akmol**; home of the chilling **Museum of the Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland** – A sensitively-done spot telling the story of the loyal (going to such a place could often be avoided with a divorce and public denunciation) women sent here when their husbands were persecuted.
- We see a little more of this settlement on a walk around; church, mosque, and apartment buildings now occupying this former gulag site before stopping for an excellent home-cooked lunch with a local family and a supermarket visit for train snacks/drinks in Astana
- All aboard! We jump onto a **sleeper train** making its way through the night and across the country to the city of Kurchatov - home of the soviet atomic weapons program. Comfy beds and a clean restaurant await us as well as

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rolling steppe outside the windows for this 800km journey. We will have dinner delivered to us on the platform at Ekibastusz Station that evening

Overnight: Onboard the train - 4 beds in each room. Comfortable and clean

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Sept 24th – SATURDAY (KURCHATOV/NUCLEAR TEST EPICENTRE)

- We arrive very early in the morning in **Kurchatov** and head for an early check-in at a local hotel as well as breakfast and freshening up after the train ride. Then our atomic adventure begins! Kurchatov was founded in 1947 simply to make Soviet Nuclear weapons a reality. Under the control of the KGB Chief Lavrentiy Beria and scientist Igor Kurchatov this is where the arms race became a two-horse event.
- **Museum of the Semipalatinsk Test Site** - a detailed and deep explanation of what this place is, what happened here, and what effect their inventions can have. Some machines from that time are displayed here too. (note: this museum opens and closes at the whim of higher powers, so its opening cannot be 100% confirmed)
- We board our vehicle and take a drive, deep into a formerly off-limits (very off limits!) area; the **Semipalatinsk Polygon** - nuclear testing ground chosen due to its remoteness, lack of population, and because it seemed like a good spot to blow a few things up. We provide protective gear of course.
- We spend some time checking out more of the relics of this ground-breaking (literally) test before returning to the Kurchatov once more
- Next stop is **Chagan** - once a deeply secret **long-range bomber base**. Now a deeply abandoned former long-range bomber base. See the massive runways, the remaining ammunition hangars, and the collapsing main buildings of the base. Plus the garrison town nearby which housed the base staff from 1954 to 1994 and now stands completely stripped like a spooky post-apocalyptic warning. A bit of UrbEx here to finish the day

Workers' Guesthouse - A very local experience in this hostel, housed in a Soviet-era apartment building. Currently, also the only place open for visitors to Kurchatov. get a taste of life as the locals live it!

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Sept 25th – SUNDAY (ATOMIC LAKE/KURCHATOV)

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- We again go deep into the **Polygon**, this time we head for the sinister-sounding **Atomic Lake**
- We'll make a few stops on the way through but most significantly **Atomic Lake** – caused by a deep underground nuclear blast – this was in fact made deliberately and is known as the world's first and only use of industrial nuclear weapons. Find out what on earth they were thinking and also meet some fishermen looking for three-eyed fish in the 180m deep lake
- We'll have a **Roadside Picnic** (note to non-literature lovers, this is a joke – [read this book](#) and you will find some eerie similarities to this part of the trip) and continue to see some relics of the testing program. A local expert will also be with us to explain in detail, answer questions, etc
- We arrive back in Kurchatov where we'll have a **walking tour** of this semi-abandoned settlement dotted with monuments, fascinating buildings, and of course locals going about their lives
- A **free evening** to explore the town – there are cafes and bars, the locals are friendly and curious. It's walkable and hospitable (one shop even has town souvenirs). Get out there and enjoy it!

Overnight: Mayak Hotel

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch (picnic)

Sept 26th – MONDAY (SEMIPALATINSK/SEMEY)

- Back to Kurchatov Railway Station for a 2-hour ride in comfort across the steppe to the nearby city of **Semipalatinsk**
- Semipalatinsk is the former name of this city; correctly it is now referred to as **Semey**, we explore with a city tour of this little-visited settlement.
- Once upon a time Semipalatinsk was a wealthy trading city, situated between China and Russia, and acted as a gateway to the Central Asian territories added to the Russian Empire in the 19th Century. We will explore mainly on foot and see buildings from various eras, statues and monuments, mosaics and a little-known part of history. All explained to us as we make our way around this unexpectedly-charming place. Sites we visit include...
- Lenin Alley – a common sight in Kazakhstan's smaller cities; a collection of Lenins in a lovely park setting. The central piece is particularly impressive
- **Victory Park** – with statues, tank monument, and a hang-out place for locals
- **Dostoyevsky Museum** – the titan of Russian Literature, was exiled out here in Semipalatinsk and this museum explains the importance of his works. *Pro-tip: read Crime and Punishment before your visit.*
- After lunch, we liberate you for **free time** – a couple of recommendations include;
- **Fine Arts Museum** – not just the best collection in Kazakhstan but also a display of abnormal anatomy, something quirky and troubling (especially with our trip to the nuclear test site coming up)

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- **Stronger Than Death Monument** - in the Tatar section of town (itself an attraction we will explore some more) - shows the resilience of those who live and have lived in this remote part of the world.
- We plan a special addition to the local experience on this tour too, see for yourself on the trip!

Overnight: Semey Hotel - very Soviet-style place with an aesthetic unlike what you may be used to! All the charm of the late-USSR but with free wifi! You'll love it!

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

Sept 27th - TUESDAY (TO KARAGANDA)

- We rise early and drive a mere 250km east to **Ust-Kamenogorsk**. Our destination is simply the airport where we board a **local flight** to take us over the test-sites, abandoned gulags, coal mines, fields, and miles of endless undulating grasses that make up eastern Kazakhstan. Our final destination today is the city of **Karaganda**. We will find time before the flight for a quick walk in a local park with an excellent collection of Lenin Statues and Soviet-era tanks
- An introductory **walking tour of the city centre** - focusing on the architecture, history, and local culture of this city (all of which is varied and fascinating), we'll visit the central park as well and see and mix with locals spending leisure time here
- **Karaganda** is a large city but with a very walkable centre - the Russian/Soviet influence here is strong and our guide (a local to this place) will tell us all about the city, you'll find it fascinating for sure! He can also recommend good spots for dinner/evening socialising/etc

Overnight: Chaika Hotel - amazing brutalist Soviet monstrosity. Real time-warp stuff. One part of the hotel was built specifically for the visit of [Valentina Tereshkova](#), the first woman in space. The rooms are comfy and modern, the building itself is timeless!

Meals included: Lunch

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Sept 28th – WEDNESDAY (KARAGANDA)

- We drive an hour out to the museum of **KarLag**, the local gulag system – a dark part of history indeed told through the rooms of this former **NKVD HQ**. State' enemies', departed nationalities (a vast number of whom were dumped in central Asia due to Stalin's paranoia about enemies within – the largest numbers being Germans from the west and Koreans from the east. Their stories are told here in this chilling memorial to the all-too-recent evils
- The village around this museum is made up largely of former Gulag barracks, admin buildings, and medical centres, we will take a look around and also visit the depressing cemetery for children who died in this cruel system
- The nearby town of **Shahntinsk** hosts us for lunch and some views of local industries; coal mining primarily, but also steel production and agriculture
- In the afternoon we offer the choice between free time to further explore Karaganda city or a trip to a former execution ground (what a choice, we know!) marked by tasteful and meaningful memorials to the various nationalities whose people were among the unfortunate souls to perish here
- In the evening we will board the modern Spanish-made overnight train for a trip to the south of Kazakhstan, and the largest of the nation's cities - Almaty, 1000km away through the night

Overnight: On the train. Comfy beds in small, but modern and spotless rooms

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

Sept 29th – THURSDAY (ALMATY)

- We arrive in the morning in the cultural capital (and actual former capital) or Kazakhstan. The beautiful city of Almaty. Nestled against the precipitous Tian Shan Mountain range and dotted with parks, theatres, boulevards, and much more, this is a modern multi-cultural city wrongfully ignored too little-known
- **Almaty Metro** – one of only two subway systems in the whole of Central Asia (the other is the Moscow knock-off in Tashkent) this system opened in 2012 and strikes a balance between Moscow opulence and modern efficiency
- **Green Bazaar & Rakhat Chocolate Factory** – these neighbouring sites are local institutions. You can smell the sweetness from the latter all across this part of the city. Banter and barter with sellers in the market, pick up the apples that Almaty is known for as well as all manner of other delicious local delicacies. Get your sweet tooth into action with the terrific and very affordable selection at the chocolate factory (ideal for gifts too!)

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- **Panfilovets Park** – Almaty's main place of leisure. Very pleasant and marked with stunning and evocative monuments to the Kazakh soldiers who fell while fighting to defend Moscow from the Nazi invasion. **Zenkov Cathedral** is also located in this park.
- **Arbat Street** – every good former USSR town has one; a pedestrian area ideal for promenading, window shopping, café culture, public art sales, and so on. This one is very modern and it lined with some great examples of brutalist apartment buildings
- **Kok-Tebe** – a cable car ride up to a mountain overlooking the city. Amazing views, a statue of the Beatles, A Ferris Wheel and toboggan ride, small zoo, bars, and entertainment in general. Simply put this is the city's best spot and a very popular area for local families, youths, and everyone really. We'll have a final lunch of the tour here in an excellent restaurant with a panoramic view of the city and mountains. A fitting relaxing end to an intense, mind-blowing week!

Overnight: Hotel Kazakhstan – a towering monstrosity offering great views over the city as well as faded-luxury. An iconic structure in an iconic city; ideal for finishing off our Kazakhstan adventure

Meals included: Lunch

Sept 30th – FRIDAY (FROM ALMATY TO ASHGABAT)

This morning you have the chance to relax or explore a little further why not venture out for a coffee on one of the leafy Almaty streets. As this afternoon it's off to the tremendous marbled boulevards of Ashgabat.

Early afternoon we take our flight from Almaty/ Kazakhstan to Ashgabat/ Turkmenistan entering Ashgabat through its multi-billion dollar marble-clad eagle-shaped airport. The kind of airport any country in the middle east would be proud of. Once we have exchanged our letters of invitation for visas were of to the hotel with our local guide.

Overnight: Hotel Ak Altyn, Ashgabat - A comfortable hotel that has escaped the marble-isation of the main city centre. Situated around 15 minutes walk from the main area it has easy access to the local regions of the city such as the Teke Bazar and good restaurant options.

Meals included: Breakfast

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Oct 1st – SATURDAY (ASHGABAT)

This morning there is time to relax and soak up your surrounding before this afternoons orientation walk around the city visiting.

- Tekke Bazaar - Walk through this real, local slice of life, a true local market very popular amongst local people for shopping. On weekends there are also local booksellers in the park opposite selling a selection of second-hand books. If you're lucky, you may be able to pick up a copy of the Ruhnama the book written by Saparmurat Niyazov, the president of Turkmenistan. Niyazov famously said, "a person that reads Ruhnama three times becomes smart, and after it, he will go straight to heaven".
- Inspiration park - A public park at the centre of Ashgabat this narrow parkland is lined with sculptures of Persian poets, scholars and great thinkers all surrounding an artificial river and impressive water fountains.
- Russian Bazaar - located in the very centre of town, this covered bazaar is where you can buy almost everything you may need in daily life; fruit & nuts, cables & chargers, sweets, kimchi, baked goods, souvenirs, and so on. Nearby is also the Alty Asyr Shopping centre, an excellent place to buy cotton goods (tracksuits, towels, bedsheets, etc. all made from local cotton, and all very cheap).
- Lenin statue - Best described as a small Lenin on a giant plinth decorated in central Asian tile work.
- Pushkin Monument - this small bust erected to Russia's most famous poet Pushkin is easily visited only 5 minutes from Lenin.
- Pervyy park - this is one of Ashgabat's oldest parks founded in 1890 named officer park, Lenin park, first park and independence park.
- Ashgate Train station - initially built-in 1888 the first railway station was destroyed in the earthquake of 1948 and much of the city. a new station was built shortly after in 1950. However, this was remodelled in 2009, taking on its now grand form crowned by the eight-pointed star (Rub El Hizb).

We return to the hotel after this mini-adventure to meet the new tour members at dinner.

Overnight: Hotel Ak Altyn, Ashgabat

Meals included: Breakfast, Dinner

Oct 2nd – SUNDAY (ASHGABAT)

- Tolkuchka Bazaar - The nation's largest market, built outside the city and home to various sections selling household goods, clothes, the famous Turkmen carpets, camels & other animals, and much more!
- Ashgabat Hippodrome - Sunday is a day at the races, with the sacred Ahal-Teke horses in full display.
- Afternoon city tour including Independence Park and Monument, Arch of Neutrality topped by the gold statue of Turkmenbashi, Ahal-Teke Horse Monument, Earthquake Monument and Museum.

Free evening for a night out in the city.

Overnight: Hotel Ak Altyn, Ashgabat

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

Oct 3rd – MONDAY (DARVAZA GAS CRATER & BOKHURDAG)

Desert adventure! We head off in a fleet of 4x4s into the deep desert today.

- Bokhurdag semi-nomadic village for a look at what desert life is like today and lunch at a local family home.
- Onwards to the bizarre mud and water craters, scenes of accidents that opened sinkholes in the desert.
- Finally, we arrive at the stunning and unforgettable Darvaza Gas Crater, in the centre of the country and the scene of a 40-year-old industrial accident that ended with a giant flaming pit burning to this day. A hypnotic sight and one of the strangest and most spectacular things you can see!
- We camp tonight besides the crater; it is best seen at night, dinner cooked on the spot.

Free evening for a night out in the city.

Overnight: Camping at Darvaza Gas Crater - Tents, sleeping bags and roll mats provided. We will also provide tents based on your rooming options. This affords us the best opportunity to view the fantastic gas crater from before sunset to sunrise.

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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Oct 4th – TUESDAY (ASHGABAT)

- We return to Ashgabat, driving through the morning with a stop at a monument to the Soviet defeat (or suppression) of the Basmachi Rebellion, guerillas who resisted first Russian Imperial and then Soviet rule in Central Asia.
- Once back in the capital the rest of the day is yours to do with as you please; explore, relax, shop, take a side-trip (drivers are available for hire), we and our local guides can advise on the spot—free evening for a night out in the city.

Overnight: Hotel Ak Altyn, Ashgabat

Meals included: Breakfast

Oct 5th – WEDNESDAY (NISA FORTRESS & UNDERGROUND LAKE)

- Nisa Fortress - a UNESCO site and former capital of the mighty Parthian state in ancient times.
- Ahal-Teke horses are considered heavenly and sacred beasts in Turkmenistan, and this stud farm visit will show you why. Have a ride on one of the horses if you like.
- We then drive on to the bizarre Kow-Ata underground lake. A Sulphur-heated lake 100m deep underground. Take a swim, explore the cave, and then have lunch at a shashlik restaurant on the spot.
- We will drive in our 4x4 fleet on to the remote city of Balkanabat; this sleepy town is easily explored on foot in a couple of hours of free time before dinner and overnight in a hotel shaped like a giant yurt.

Overnight: Hotel Niebitchi, Balkanabat - Yurt-shaped curiosity in the town centre, well-situated for wandering around and exploring.

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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Oct 6th – THURSDAY (YANGYKALA CANYON & TURKMENBASHI)

- We drive to the stunning Yangykala Canyon, known as the ‘Turkmen Grand Canyon’ little-known but a gorgeous area with shifting colours in the rocks, amazing formations, and some wonderful photos to be taken.
- Through the afternoon we make our way across the country, stopping at scenic areas, pilgrimage sites and so on until we reach our destination; the Caspian sea city of Turkmenbashi and the bizarre ‘touristic zone’ of Awaza. This place has to be seen to be believed, and we will have a look around the hotel-covered peninsular before checking in for a relaxing evening at the coast.

Overnight: Serdar Hotel. A comfortable beachside option. You can also upgrade to the Yelken Yacht Club, the finest establishment in Awaza. Contact us for more details!

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Oct 7th – FRIDAY (AWAZA to ASHGABAT)

- A free morning to relax at the coastal resort, try swimming (although the Caspian is a cold sea) or some watersports, wandering around, or even sleeping in!
- Late morning we will take a boat ride down a canal stretching the length of the Awaza area, see the different architectural styles of the buildings here, all of which have sprung up in the last few years.
- We will drive to Turkmenbashi city for lunch, the oldest city in the country and one settled by Russians during their invasion from across the sea during the late Great Game.
- A city tour of Turkmenbashi – the local bazaar, railway station, Oil Workers’ Square, various monuments, and even a cemetery for Japanese POW’s who were brought here to labour after their capture at the end of WWII, and never got home again.
- Flight back to Ashgabat for the final dinner of the tour, time for goodbyes and the last night out, if you’ve got the energy!

Overnight: Hotel Ak Altyn, Ashgabat.

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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Oct 8th – SATURDAY (DEPARTURE DAY or EXTENSION DAY 1)

- Departure day – airport transfers provided for everyone regardless of the time of flight or where you are going

OR

- **Extension Day 1: Mary & Margush**
- Flight from Ashgabat to Mary, in the centre of the country and the nearest city to the ancient silk road metropolis of Merv
- Visit Gonur-Deppe (Margush); another ancient city in this area, with some lovely extent architectural features
- Back to Mary City and explore this modern town, mix with the locals, go to parks, bars, etc as you like, a sleepy area with welcoming and friendly locals
- Meals: Breakfast

Meals included: Breakfast

Oct 9th – SUNDAY (EXTENSION DAY 2)

- Excursion to ancient Merv, probably the most important city in the world at certain times of its history and a place where you will learn a great deal about the history of Central Asia, the rise and fall of dynasties and cities, the silk road, and human civilisation in this part of the world in general. This vast area is roamed by animals, explorers, extant buildings, ruins, etc. All contributing to a sense of the dynamism of the ancient silk road.
- In the afternoon you fly back to Ashgabat for a final rest/night out before departure. Hotel not included.

Please let us know if you wish to book an extra night in Ashgabat. The flight should return to the capital at around 8 PM - 9 PM.

Overnight: Hotel Ak Altyn, Ashgabat

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TOUR PACKAGE

INCLUDED

- English-speaking local guides
- Western Tour Leader
- Meals (where indicated)
- Accommodation
- One International flight (Almaty to Ashgabat)
- Internal flights (x2)
- Internal trains (x2)
- All included sightseeing
- All taxes & entrance fees to areas where special permits are required
- Airport transfers
- An amazing time!

NOT INCLUDED

- Tips for the local guides and driver (approx 10-15 USD per day)
- Incidentals, extra drinks, etc
- Optional single supplement (USD 30 per night in Kazakhstan, USD 50 per night in Turkmenistan)
- Kazakhstan visa fee (where appropriate). Some nationalities will not require a visa for Kazakhstan. Please check in advance.
- Turkmenistan: All visitors will need a visa USD 80 to USD 140 depending on nationality, we will do the work required.
- International flights to Kazakhstan and from Ashgabat not included
- Extra nights accommodation.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

- Please note that when on tour your day-to-day itinerary may differ to what is advertised above. Your tour leader will ensure, however, that everything available at the time is covered, and replacement options are provided where needed. We will also add in extras when there is time (such as a visit to a local bar or amusement park).
- After the tour, we will send out a list of all participants' emails so you can keep in touch, swap photos etc. If you do not wish to be on this list, then please let us know.

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