ABSOLUTENOMADS
ADVENTURE TRAVEL & TOURS

# Buzkashi Madness and Persian New Year

Tajikistan Tour

## Overview

Tajikistan is a country known as the roof of the world, a nation mainly made up of soaring mountains, high passes, deep steep-sided valleys, snow-capped peaks and hidden glaciers. Once the domain of explores, adventurers and victorian era spies, now it's the perfect country for adventure travellers and those in search of a country not commonly visited.

Historically, Tajikistan has sat at one of the many crossroads on what was known as the silk road web. Home to ancient cultures, religions and people, the Achaemenids, Sogdians, Persians and the Tajiks have roamed amongst its beautiful lands following religions as diverse as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Invader and Invaded Tajikistan has seen its civilisation grow and collapse on more than one occasion. Its people have experienced famine, hardship, and civil war, yet they remain some of the friendliest, most hospitable souls you could meet in central Asia.

All of this can only be bettered when visiting friendly Tajikistan during its most important holiday Narvouz. Narouz (new day) festival, also known as Persian New Year, has its history intertwined with the regions historical roots Mithraism and Zoroastrianism. Today Narouz is a celebration of spring, new life and the coming year. Tajikistan celebrates Narouz, with many spending the first day of the holiday at home with family and friends. The rest of the week, people participate in or watch events such as wrestling dancing and the national sport of Buzkashi.

Buzkashi is an exceptional sight, one that you'll never forget at times extravagantly violent whilst strangely mesmerising. It's a photographer's dream and an adventure travellers fantasy, a chance to mingle with locals, and an opportunity to view a sport older than the country's it played in. you may say it's the central Asian version of Squid games.

So come and join us on this most fantastic tour to a country you probably have never heard of but you will never forget once you've visited. We begin in mountain-ringed beautiful Dushanbe travel throughout the holiday over mountain and river valley visit ancient Panjikent, historical Khujand. We stay in local hotels, guest houses and Soviet-era health spas. Let Absolute Nomad's show you the way on tour we know you will love.

# What's Included?

Included:

- All Listed Meals
- All Listed Accommodation
- Drivers and Vehicles
- Local Guide
- Western Tour Leader
- Entrance Fees
- National Park Entrance Fees

Not Included:

- Flights to/from Tajikistan
- Travel Insurance
- Snacks/Drinks/Extra Expenses
- Tips for Guides
- Tajik Visa - Advice/Support Available



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# Itinerary Overview

*Check out the brief overview of our **Buzkashi Madness & Persian New Year Tour** – or scroll down to see the in-depth run through of each day of the trip.*

| | |
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| **Day 1.** | Arrival in Dushanbe |
| **Day 2.** | Dushanbe City Tour |
| **Day 3.** | Exploring Tajikistan's Mountains |
| **Day 4.** | Buzkashi |
| **Day 5.** | The Soviet Mountain Spa |
| **Day 6.** | Discovering Tajikistan's Stunning North |
| **Day 7.** | Khujand City Tour |
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Day 1

## *Arrival in Dushanbe*

We'll meet at a designated spot in the heart of Dushanbe, the national capital, from where we'll begin our adventure!

Dushanbe is a relatively young capital. Prior to 1929, it was just a small market village. Dushanbe gained prominence under the USSR as a textile production hub, although under the rule of the **Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic**, the city was initially named **Stalinabad**. These days, Dushanbe takes on a post-Soviet elegance with its tree-lined streets and large parks, creating a cosy, homely urban environment.

This morning, we'll leave you to our own devices, enjoy some rest, or make some tentative steps out into the city itself, although be ready for action at midday! We'll enjoy a group lunch where your tour leader will brief you on the journey ahead before heading out into Tajikistan.

The afternoon sees us drive out of Dushanbe, our first stop, one of the most bizarre structures on our itinerary, a **giant melon-shaped tea house**. The president opened this huge two-story melon in 2015 to coincide with the nearby town of Hissar's 3000th anniversary. After a short tour of this oddity, we will continue to the **Ancient Hissar Fortress**.

Hissar Fortress is an enormous fort that dates back to the time of Cyrus the Great (600BC); it's said to have been captured over 21 times by hostile forces. Although much of the fort has been heavily restored, it houses a lovely museum offering an excellent introduction to this enchanting country.

As we return to Dushanbe, we will be sure to stop at a local school that still holds an impressive **statue of Lenin** on its grounds.

**Accommodation:** *Hotel Vatan*

**Included Meals:** *Lunch, Dinner*

*For more information about the accommodation on this tour, check out the 'Accommodation' Tab on the Tour Page.*

Day 2

## *Dushanbe City Tour*

After a filling breakfast, our day begins as we head into the city for our tour of **Dushanbe**; on foot and by bus, we'll catch many of the city's highlights and a few more quirky sights.

The beautiful **Victory Park** is our first stop. Located on the hills above Dushanbe, the park was built in 1975 to commemorate the Soviet victory in the **Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945**; this Soviet-built monument offers excellent views of Dushanbe.

As we continue our day, we'll be sure to crisscross and walk along sections of **Rudaki & Somoni Avenues,** not just two of Dushanbe's main streets but also home to beautiful Soviet-era tree-lined boulevards and many of the city's more picturesque buildings. From Somoni Avenue, we'll reach the imposing 13-metre tall **Ismaili Somoni Monument;** a fantastic statue of the ancient king stands on the former site of Lenin. It is said that Somoni's crown contains 10 kilograms of Tajik gold. Behind the Ismaili Somoni Monument stands one of Dushanbe's most impressive buildings, the 9 storey 45,000 square-metre **National Library of Tajikistan**.

**The National Library of Tajikistan** looks out across the beautiful **Rudaki Park,** named after the Persian poet Rudaki who penned over a million poems and whose statue stands proudly at the centre of this leafy sanctuary. We'll make our way across the park to visit two of the city's newer attractions; first, the **Dushanbe Flagpole,** a 165-metre giant that used to be the world's tallest until recently. Our next stop, the **Tajikistan National Museum,** which gives us the chance to learn a little more about the history of Tajikistan and its importance in the region.

After a delicious lunch, it's on with the tour. Our first visit is **Kokhi Navruz (The World's Largest Tea House),** a massive, opulently designed building that houses a leisure centre and numerous restaurants, shopping areas, and even a cinema. Visits are by appointment only, and you may need to wait, but it's worth it. The fantastic on-site guides will show you around the core meeting halls used for hosting foreign dignitaries.

Before resting for the day we will make one more stop at the **Mehrgon Market Building,** where many of Dushanbe's residents do their shopping, a modern option that replaced the once-thriving green bazaar.

**Accommodation:** *Hotel Vatan*

**Included Meals:** *Breakfast and Lunch*

Day 3

## *Exploring Tajikistan's Mountains*

This morning we're up and out after a hearty breakfast as we bid farewell to the tasty cafes and coffee shops of beautiful Dushanbe and exchange them for stunning mountains.

As we pass through the city's outskirts, there's plenty to see from **Dachas (Mansions) of Tajikistan's rich and famous** to the narrowing cliffs of the **Varzob Valley**. We'll eventually turn into the beautiful **Takob Valley**, home to remote villages and abandoned Soviet-era mines. As the canyon narrows, we arrive at our destination, the village of **Takob**.

Takob village is home to many families living in this rugged mountainous region. We will explore a little of the village before stopping for lunch at one of the resident family homes. A local lunch is a perfect way to experience genuine Tajik hospitality. A spread of bread, sweets, snacks and fresh fruits is all just a starter before receiving our main meal.

After lunch, you are free to roam, **take a stroll in the mountains** behind our host's homestead or sit back, relax, and ask the family a few questions about their life here.

After our mountain excursion, we'll head back to Dushanbe, where you'll have the rest of the day free. You may wish to join your tour leader for a little more exploration of the city, looking at some of the shops and local living areas or alternatively explore alone, searching for possible extra **Narouz** events such as wrestling, dancing or singing.

**Accommodation:** *Hotel Vatan*

**Included Meals:** *Breakfast, Lunch*

Day 4

## *Buzkashi*

We can't tell you what time, when or where as we will only know where the best Buzkashi is being held the day before the event. We will try our best to find the biggest and best.

We will likely leave the hotel early and drive out to either a stadium or a large valley to catch the spectacle that is **Buzkashi.**

**Buzkashi** is translated literally as '*goat pulling'*, and as the name suggests, there is undoubtedly a goat involved, although there is a lot more besides. Imagine a spectacle similar to polo which involves a few hundred players on horseback; there are no teams though, it is an individual sport and instead of a ball the constants wrestle to grab the carcass of a dead goat and run it through an earthen goal. The riders in Buzkashi are allowed to push, pull and ride horses into each other. Whatever the weather, the event will take place – whether kicking up dust on a scorching day, or trampling through mud and rain.

Buzkashi is an exceptional sight, one that you'll never forget. At times extravagantly violent whilst strangely mesmerising. It's a photographer's dream and an adventure traveller's fantasy, a chance to mingle with locals, and an opportunity to view a sport older than the country it's played in.

We'll be sure to watch until the last goat is pulled, the final goal scored, and the last prize is given. Aside from the Buzkashi, spectators can expect food stalls selling central Asian treats and snacks as well as everything needed for a Buzkashi participant, which can make for an odd yet interesting souvenir.

**Accommodation:** *Hotel Vatan*

**Included Meals:** *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 5

## *The Soviet Mountain Spa*

With a later start than usual, we will drive through the mountains until we reach our destination; the **Khoja Obi Garm Spa**. A vast sanatorium built into the side of a mountain above natural hot springs – like a James Bond villain's lair meets the hotel from The Shining! An authentic relic of the USSR days.

Today we'll depart our hotel a little later, allowing you the chance to repack and prepare for the following day's journey as today we leave Dushanbe and make our way into the mountains.

Our destination is the mammoth, brutalist Soviet health spa that is **Khoja Obi Garm Health Spa.** This ageing Soviet marvel sits perched against the mountains like a Bond villain's mountain fortress. The building is an impressive display of brutalist style architecture looking out of place against the stunning mountain backdrop.

Construction began on **Khoja Obi Garm** in 1935 inspired by Lenin's decree that more attention should be paid to workers' health within the Soviet Union. From 1922, two weeks holiday were given to workers during this time. Often, they would visit one of the many spa resorts being constructed across the Soviet Union. Construction of **Khoja Obi Garm** would continue right up until the collapse of the Union in 1991!

The spa will not fail to impress, its gargantuan size from the outside fills the mountain slopes; however, inside, its rooms and facilities have begun to decay.

We'll spend the afternoon with the feeling that we've travelled back to the 1960s whilst attendants poke, prod and recommend varying scary-sounding treatments. We'll be able to wander around this ageing building where time appears to have stood still.

If plunging in into radioactive water, steam baths, and massages are not for you, then you're free to head out and about photographing this behemoth from the outside or view the surrounding stunning snow-capped mountains which cage this ageing monster.

**Accommodation:** *Khoja Obi Garm Health Spa*

**Included Meals:** *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 6

## *Discovering Tajikistan's Stunning North*

Today is one of those days where it's mainly about the journey as we travel over high passes, look out over snow-capped peaks, pass through dangerous tunnels and drive down and up twisting mountain roads.

This morning, we'll bid farewell to our eagle's nest and head up, onwards and to the north over the **Hissar Mountains** through the **Tunnel of Death**! Officially named the **Anzob Tunnel**, The Tunnel of death is a gruesome nickname given to the tunnel in around 2006 after it was opened incomplete, prone to flooding and filling with fumes; the 5,040 Metre long tunnel was responsible for the deaths of several motorists before its completion. Still not the most reassuring tunnel; to drive through with minimal lighting, poor ventilation and unseen potholes, but we will survive the journey and have another story to tell.

Once through, we're heading towards **Iskander Kul – Alexander Lake**, an azure blue pool trapped amongst the stunning peaks of the **Fann Mountains;** we will be sure to stop for pictures and a short hike before having a roadside lunch.

Once we've had lunch, we'll follow the narrow mountain passes into the wide-open fertile **Fergana Valley** once a serious ancient crossroads of cross-continental trade, home to some of the Silk Road's greatest cities. We will arrive late evening to our destination and home for the next two nights **Khujand.**

**Accommodation:** *Bahoriston Hotel*

**Included Meals:** *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 7

## *Khujand City Tour*

Today has more of a leisurely feel to it as there is no need to check out of our hotel; after breakfast, we'll head out into the city of **Khujand** to learn more about this ancient settlement.

You may never have heard of **Khujand,** but it is one of the oldest cities in Central Asia, founded by Cyrus the Great and invaded by Alexander the Great. Many years later, the city was renamed **Leninabad** after another controversial leader! These days, Khujand, with its former name restored, sits in the north of Tajikistan and remains one of its most important cities.

For our first stop, the true heart of the city **Panjshanbe Market,** one of the largest in Central Asia. We will show you around the various sections of this local delight, sampling local food, interacting with local residents and picking up a few bargains.

From the **Panjshanbe Market,** we cross the central square and visit the exquisite **Sheikh Muslihiddin Mausoleum and Mosque**. The local Imam will allow us into the sixteenth-century prayer hall not only to learn a little about Islam in Central Asia but to wonder at the fine interior.

From Mosque to fortress, we go as we make the short trip across town to the **Khujand Fortress**, Once a silk Road fortification now heavily restored but home to the rather impressive **Khujand History Museum**.

After a most delicious lunch, we start with a visit to the cities former namesake Lenin. **The Lenin Statue (The Largest in Central Asia)** used to occupy a more prominent position but has now been relegated to a quiet riverside park**.** There is also a monument within the park erected to honour those Tajiks who travelled, and gave their lives and health, to help in the clean up of the notorious Chernobyl disaster in the late 1980s.

Following a brief visit to another **Ismail Somani Monument** (in Lenin's former space), we'll head out of the city for our final stop of the day at the **Arbob Cultural Palace.** This magnificent building was once the headquarters of a Soviet collective farm. Built during the 1950s, the **Arbob Cultural Palace** is a recreation of the **St. Petersburg Winter Palace**, not just local curiosity but also the site where the Tajik Soviet officially declared independence from the Soviet Union, and the design of the national flag was chosen.

**Accommodation:** *Bahoriston Hotel*

**Included Meals:** *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 8

## *From Khujand to Panjikent*

It's an early start today as we have a lot to visit and a long way to travel. Once we have left **Khujand City**, our first port of call is a giant **Lenin Statue** built onto the wall of a **Soviet Dam**.

Once we say *Goodbye, Lenin* (not for long), we'll retrace some of our former route back over the mountains to join the **Zeravshan River.**

Our destination is the ancient city of **Panjikent**. The drive there is a worthy mention as we pass small Soviet-era villages, busy rural markets and farms dotted by blossoming apricot trees.

Tracing the **Zeravshan**, we'll drive through deep mountain gorges with cliffs that tower above us lined with waving sediment, a testament to the regions rich geological value. Eventually, the steep valley sides open out to the lush **Zarafshan Valley**, a welcome sight as this means Panjikent is close, along with a well-deserved lunch.

Once we have eaten and checked into our hotel, we will continue our exploration of the city, journeying to **ancient Panjikent** on the fringes of the town. Walking around the foundations of ancient houses, Bazaars, temples and citadels, we will learn from our excellent local guide about the area's history, from the 5$^{th}$-century **Sogdian** construction to the settlements decline and abandonment at the hands of the invading Arabs in the 8$^{th}$ century (now a UNESCO listed site).

Before we retire to our local guesthouse, we will head to a real showcase of a family home for our evening meal and some local entertainment.

**Accommodation:** *Sugd Hotel*

**Included Meals:** *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 9

## *Scenic Return to Dushanbe*

Following our local breakfast, it's on the road again as we drive to the bronze age settlement of **Sarazm.** This is another regional **UNESCO** listed site was believed to have been founded in the 4th millennium BC. We walk around the heavily protected area learning about the rich finds and discoveries made within the covered pits.

From the 4th millennium, BC, we're brought back to the present as we journey back to **Panjikent** and visit its colourful local bazaar**. Panjakent central market** is an absolute delight to wander around and soak up the local atmosphere, helped by the smell of freshly cooked Tajik bread.

Once we bid farewell to **Panjikent**, we're back on the road, although not far as we're off the wagon to visit an old **Soviet Cognac Factory**; at the factory, we will have the opportunity to sample the produce, buy a few gifts and explore the semi-abandoned site. Once done, we will board our bus and continue the journey across the mountains to Tajikistan's welcoming capital, **Dushanbe**.

Mid-afternoon sees us back in Dushanbe, where you're free to enjoy your time in this beautiful city, grab some last-minute gifts, enjoy a pleasant coffee or two or explore some more of the city; the choice is yours.

This evening we will meet for our final group meal, where we will say goodbye to our incredible team and each other, although for those with enough energy, we could share a drink or two in a nearby bar.

**Accommodation:** *Hotel Vatan*

**Included Meals:** *Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner*

Day 10

***Departure Day***

The trip ends after breakfast at our hotel.

**END OF TOUR**

*Extensions are possible – please speak to your Tour Manager to discuss options.*

**Included Meals:** *Breakfast*