ABSOLUTENOMADS
ADVENTURE TRAVEL & TOURS

5 Stans Tour

Day 1: Bishkek

Our adventure begins in the heart of Central Asia's mountainous heart – the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek.

All travelers will be met at the airport and taken straight to the group hotel where we'll meet for introductions and a pre-tour briefing.

After that, we'll head out for an adventure into the city for the afternoon. Our first stop will be the Osh Bazaar; a bustling market at the heart of the city which gives us a chance to rub shoulders with the locals and pick up bits and bobs from the market traders. From the market, we'll make our way to the Soviet-era National Philharmonic building – an austere, communist-era building. The hard edges of the concrete are softened somewhat by the bright flowers and magnificent bronze statue which graces the front of the building.

Next, we'll stop off at the Ala-too Square and the nearby State Historical Museum, followed by a walk through Oak Park and enjoy the local Open-air art gallery and the various sculptures contained within.

Finally, we'll head to Victory Square and the nearby State Department Store, ZUM. These state-run department stores are a main-stay across former communist states, home to everything from traditional souvenirs, to home appliances.

As the day draws to a close, we'll head back to the hotel. This evening, we'll prepare for the epic adventure ahead of us as we relax before our departure from Bishkek in the morning.

Accommodation: Hotel Dostuk

Included Meals: Lunch

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Day 2: Burana Tower & Drive to Chon Kemin

This morning it's up and out as we depart the nation's capital and make our way out into the countryside. As we leave town, we'll make a quick stop at the local livestock market; not a visit for the faint-hearted, but a chance to see local people buying and selling sheep, cattle, and all manner of livestock.

We'll continue on our adventure to the Burana Tower, an 11th-century construction that marks the site of the once create city of Balasagun, once a major stopover along the Silk Road. The city is nowhere to be seen today, with the tower being the only remaining building at the site – even the tower used to be taller than it is today!

After marvelling at the ancient tower, we'll continue our journey on to a small local village where we'll have the chance to enjoy some traditional horse sports which remain popular across Central Asia to this day. We'll spend the afternoon enjoying some of these horse games, including a Kyrgyz version of 'tag' except on horses and with grown men rather than primary school children – the sport is known by many names across Central Asia, but here in Kyrgyzstan it's Kok Boru.

Finally, we'll arrive in Chon Kemin, our rest stop for this evening. Chon Kemin is set deep in a valley, surrounded by beautiful flora and fauna, as well as pine forests which coat the higher slopes above us. Here, we'll rest for the night before carrying on our journey tomorrow towards Issyk Kul Lake.

Accommodation: Local Guesthouse

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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Day 3: Explore Issyk Kul Lake

This morning we'll depart our cosy guesthouse, heading out deeper into in the Kyrgyz countryside. Our first stop will be Konorchek Canyon – a vast, stunning example of Kyrgyzstan's stunning natural landscape; a chance to take in the rural scenery before diving back into tradition and culture.

We'll stop at the town of Balykchy for a hearty lunch and a visit to the local Lenin statue, an example of the legacy of the Soviet Union still present across the region.

With our stomachs filled, we'll leave the town to visit a local eagle hunter, another great example of Kyrgyz culture in action, and a chance to try out traditional Kyrgyz nomadic archery, and see the traditional hunting dogs still used by the family.

As the day draws to a close, we'll make our way towards the grand Issyk Kul Lake, the most famous lake in Kyrgyzstan which was once home to many holiday villas for Soviet officials who would travel down to the region from Moscow to enjoy their holidays.

Our accommodation for tonight will be a traditional yurt camp, situated right on the lake's shore. Here, we'll enjoy a free evening of relaxing, swimming (for those who wish) and generally decompressing on the shores of the stunning lake, hidden deep amidst the mountains of Kyrgyzstan.

Accommodation: Yurt Camp

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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Day 4 – Skazka Canyon & Karakol City

Continuing our adventure, we'll depart Issyk Kul Lake and make a stop at a nearby cooperative carpet factory, home to local carpet makers practicing their craft as they have done for hundreds of years.

We'll continue on from the carpet factory to pay a visit to the nearby Skazka Canyon, known locally as 'Fairytale Canyon. This natural wonder is a mixture of intriguing rock formations made of red sandstone which, from a distance, looks almost like flames rising up from the valley floor and towering into the sky.

As our journey continues towards Karakol City, we'll stop at a few small villages along the way, boasting modest Soviet monuments, including an incredible stone carving of Yuri Gagarin.

As we near the city, we'll stop at the vast Seven Bulls Rock – a huge rocky outcrop made of vibrant red sandstone, contrasting with the bright green pine trees standing at its base. This area is yet another example of the incredible beauty of Kyrgyzstan, and why the Issyk Kul region is so famed as a holiday destination.

The city of Karakol sits at the northern tip of Issyk Kul Lake and is the country's fourth largest city. Our first stop will be the oddly charming Dungan Mosque, famous for being built without a single nail back in 1904 as a place for muslims from China to worship in the country, something which is noticeable in its design, a distinctly Chinese-style of architecture.Nearby sits the local orthodox church, built at the end of the 1860 entirely from wood, it's a marvel that the building continues to stand today, but it does!

Finally, we'll drive to our local guesthouse near the village of Tepke.

Accommodation: Local Guesthouse

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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Day 5 – Goodbye Kyrgyzstan, Hello Kazakhstan

Today, we'll make our final journey in Kyrgyzstan as we leave our guesthouse and make a beeline for the border with neighbouring Kazakhstan. Our journey will take us to the eastern edge of the Tien Shen mountain range where we'll make our border crossing, and head down into the steppe of southern Kazakhstan.

Before reaching our destination, Almaty, we'll stop at the Charyn Canyon. Similar to the canyon in Kyrgyzstan, this rocky valley is filled with unusual and mesmerizing rock formations. We'll spend the afternoon here, enjoying the scenery, and the cool water of the river which runs through the bottom of the canyon.

After we've had a pleasant packed lunch, we'll finally make our way to the world famous city of Almaty.

Once the capital of Kazakhstan, it now serves as the largest city, and hub of culture in the country. A major stop on the ancient silk road, people of all different nationalities and ethnicities have been mixing and mingling in Almaty for centuries, something which continues to this day.

The Soviet planning of the city will become evident as we drive through wide open boulevards lined with trees, and low-rise Soviet-style apartment blocks lining the smaller backroads. Almaty is a city of contrasts, with the modern Soviet city making way for the traditional, ancient aspects of the city, all whist being nestled in the foothills of the surrounding mountains.

Accommodation: Hotel Kazakhstan

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

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Day 6 – Almaty

This morning, we'll wake up in the beautiful city of Almaty. Nestled against the precipitous Tian Shan Mountain range and dotted with parks, theatres, boulevards, and much more.

We'll begin our walking tour of the city with a trip to 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.

Following on from the park, we'll visit the 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 if 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!)

Our next stop will be 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. We'll visit some local coffee shops, and visit the site for the former GUM department store in the heart of the city, and enjoy some lunch in downtown Almaty.

Following on from our relaxing city centre, we'll board the Almaty Metro one of only two subway systems in the whole of Central Asia (the other being Tashkent). This system opened in 2012 and strikes a balance between Moscow opulence and modern efficiency.

Finally, those who wish can take a trip on 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 wrap the day up with a free evening to explore the city. For those who prefer to stay in the hotel, you're welcome to eat at the restaurant, otherwise you're free to roam the streets to find some delicious local cuisine for dinner.

Accommodation: Hotel Kazakhstan

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

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Day 7 – From Almaty to Dushanbe

This morning, we'll bid farewell to Kazakhstan as we board the flight that will take us from Almaty to Dushabe, the capital of Tajikistan. The flight is only around 2 hours, and we'll fly over the majestic Pamir mountain range which blankets this part of Central Asia.

Upon arrival in Dushanbe, we'll meet our local guides and head into the city. Dushanbe is a relatively young capital, being little more than a small town at the beginning of the 20th century. As a result, the influence of city planning by the ruling Soviet Union is stark in this city. Wide open boulevards, tree-lined streets, and a relaxed atmosphere make Dushanbe one of the greatest cities in the region for the weary traveller.

Our first stop will be Victory Park: Built in 1975 commemorating the Victory in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945, this Soviet built monument offers great views of the city. From here, we'll head to Rudaki & Somoni Avenues: the two main streets in Dushanbe formally known as Lenin Street and Petoskey Street. These grand avenues were renamed in the early 1990s after the poet Rudaki and the ancient king Ismail Somoni. Lined with a mixture of past Soviet architecture and modern Tajik grand buildings.

We'll take our time meandering through the streets of Dushanbe, making sure to stop at Rudaki Park, a beautifully laid out park with a grand statue of the poet Rudaki, located opposite the brilliant national library building, and the Ismaili Somoni Monument: This amazing 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.

As the afternoon approaches, we'll head to the Mehrgon Market Building. As with many of the cities old market places are now closed in Dushanbe's drive for modernization we visit one of the new areas where local people travel to buy fruit and vegetables as well as other necessities.

The National Museum of Antiquities is next on our list of must-see sites; this museum gives us a more in-depth look at the complicated history of Tajikistan and the surrounding countries, followed by a visit to the Botanical Gardens; popular for wedding groups as well as housing a vast range of Central Asian flora.

For a bit of end-of-day relaxation, we'll visit the Dushanbe Tea House. This was once the largest tea house in the world, but it has now been remodelled as an entertainment facility for local people. It has recently been renovated and holds a small cinema, bowling alleys and even various shops. We can still visit to view the amazingly intricate work carried out in its construction.

Accommodation: Hotel Tajikistan

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

ABSOLUTENOMADS
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Day 8 – The Soviet Sanitorium

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

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Day 9 - Panjikent

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.

On our way, we'll make a few intriguing stops. A visit to the infamous 'Tunnel of Death', past the burning cliffs which have been emanating smoke for longer than anyone can remember, and a visit to the local cognac factory.

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 5th-century Sogdian construction to the settlements decline and abandonment at the hands of the invading Arabs in the 8th century (now a UNESCO listed site).

We'll also make a stop at a small statue of Lenin in a local park, outside a former Soviet ministerial building. A strange addition to this interesting little city.

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.

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

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Day 10 – Into Uzbekistan

Today, we'll load up our trusty vehicles and make our way towards the Uzbek border. Our destination for today, the ancient city of Samarkand. After passing through the border formalities, we'll enter our fourth country on this adventure. Uzbekistan is home to some of the most incredible ancient cities in the region, and our first stop is one of the jewels in the crown.

Perhaps there is no city associated more with the ancient Silk Road than Samarkand, the muse of poets and playwrights throughout history, Samarkand has an aura like no other. Today, the city is split into the ancient and the modern, with the ancient districts still reminiscent of the days of merchants and traders, and the new part, a much more Soviet, functional affair.

Our first stop will be Registan Square. The Registan is an ensemble of majestic and stunningly beautiful madrassahs, the most incredible example of Islamic architecture. The plaza would once have been dominated with a great bazaar, allowing local people to go about their business . Meanwhile, the surrounding madrassahs allows scholars to work and create a centre for Islamic scholars across Central Asia. Today, the Registan is the number one, must-see sight in the country, an unmissable experience!

We will also make a stop at the mausoleum of Tamerlane, known as the Gur Emir, a national icon in Uzbekistan.

Accommodation: Ideal Hotel

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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Day 11 – Samarkand & The Capital

Our day will begin with a visit to a necropolis which graces the northern part of the city, Shah-i-Zinda. A fabulous example of traditional Islamic architecture in the region, comprising of numerous buildings, towers and beautiful domed rooves. The turquoise mosaic tiling contrasts against the arid sandy backdrop of Samarkand's desert surroundings.

We'll also visit the Bibi-Khanym Mosque, once the largest in Central Asia, before breaking away from the ancient history to explore the local market, known as the Siab Baazar.

Whether you're searching for textiles and fabrics, exquisite and intriguing foodstuffs, or just looking for an opportunity to rub shoulders with Samarkand's locals – Siab Baazar is the place to visit. The market is a great place to pick up souvenirs, clothes, snacks, and all manner of things, but it's also an oddly peaceful and fun place to spend some time. Wander the aisles, chat with shoppers and market vendors, and experience life as it's truly lived in this city.

After lunch, we'll bid farewell to Samarkand as we head to the train station to catch a high-speed train from the city and head north. This journey will take around 3 hours to our destination, Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Since it's near destruction during an earthquake in 1966, the city has been redeveloped, initially by the Soviet Union, leaving an obvious trace of the USSR in its city planning.

Following the communist theme, our accommodation tonight will be the Hotel Uzbekistan – once the premiere hotel in the country for visiting dignitaries, government officials, and the rare foreign tourist.

Accommodation: Hotel Uzbekistan

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

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Day 12– Tashkent

This morning we'll step out into the bustling city of Tashkent. Our day begins with a visit to Amir Timur Square at the heart of this vibrant capital. One of the main squares in Tashkent, Amir Timur is graced with a magnificent statue of Tamerlane, a medieval conquerer, on horseback. Although Amir Timur is not the largest square in the city, the tree-lined pavements, and bright green grass make it perfect for an evening stroll amidst the locals of Tashkent.

From here, we will spend some time in the beautifully domed chorus Bazaar, a great place to observe local life or buy those last-minute bargains, and another chance to chat with locals from the city, as well as support local independent business in Tashkent.

No visit to Tashkent would be complete without first a ride on the Tashkent Metro built in the former USSR; it opened in 1977. The metro network consists of three lines which crisscross beneath the streets of the city. This incredibly ornate metro system was opened in 1977 and has only grown in beauty since then. Not only is it an incredible tourist attraction in its own right, but you can use it to get between Tashkent's other incredible above-ground sites! Tashkent metro is one of only two subway systems currently operating in Central Asia (the other one being the Almaty Metro).

Our last stop for the day will be the Fine Arts Museum of Uzbekistan. There are, of course, hundreds of museums across the Uzbek capital worth poking your head in, however our favourite must be the State Fine Arts Museum, home to thousands of artefacts from across Russia and Europe. This Soviet-era museum holds many of the treasures confiscated from the Grand Duke Romanov, who himself likely stole them from St Petersburg. In addition, artwork from across Russia and the Soviet Union are displayed throughout this museum.

Finally, we'll return to our Soviet hotel – from here, we'll have a free evening. You'll be able to wander the streets, find and try unsual delicacies, and meet local Tashkenters.

Accommodation: Hotel Uzbekistan

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

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Day 13 – Tashkent's Solar Furnace

Today, we'll take a trip outside of the city to the Institute of Solar Physics, a huge series of mirrors used to heat up a large furnace. The institute will open just for us, and run a test of the system to demonstrated the immense power of this Soviet-era megaproject.

Situated 45km outside the city, we'll pass through some of Uzbekistan's northern countryside, a far cry from the dry desert-like environment which dominates the rest of the country. Upon arrival, we'll witness the effect of these huge parabolic mirrors, heating the furnace to over 3000*C. We'll also learn about the potential that exists for clean energy from this system, since the energy produced is completely clean, and could be put to work in the future for clean energy.

After our close call with the heat of the sun, we'll head back into Tashkent for our final evening in the capital before returning back into the heart of the country tomorrow.

Accommodation: Hotel Uzbekistan

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

ABSOLUTENOMADS
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Day 14 – Bukhara: The Pearl of Central Asia

After breakfast, we'll head back to Tashkent's magnificent railway station where we'll board the high speed train back towards the desert. Today, our destination is Bukhara, another ancient city that was once the heart of empires in the region.

After a 4 and a half our train journey, we'll arrive at Bukhara train station and begin our adventure through the bustling streets of Bukhara. The city of Bukhara, along with nearby Samarkand, served as the heart of the Persian world for centuries under numerous empires, and continues today as Uzbekistan's seventh largest city, and one of its most popular attractions for foreign travellers, owing to its rich history as a Persian capital, and an outpost on the renowned Silk Road. The modern city is home to dozens of architectural sites, uncovering the legacy of Persia, and the many mosques, minarets, and madrassahs it left behind. Many of these sites are visitable, and make for a wonderful experience for any adventurer looking for a glimpse back into this city's majestic past.

This afternoon we begin our exploration with a visit to the fantastic Ark of Bukhara. The Ark of Bukhara citadel has stood defending the city from the 5th century until its final stand against the red army in 1920. We make a short walk from the Ark to the Bolo - Hauz Mosque famed for its elegant wooden carvings, Built-in 1712, it served as a Friday mosque during the time of the emir of Bukhara and is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

A short drive will take us to the –Ismail Samani Mausoleum. Built-in the 9th century, this mausoleum is an example of the excellent artistry of architects at this time. The tomb is the final resting-place of Ismail Samani, founder of the Samanid dynasty and the last true Persian king of the region.

Tonight we will sample some traditional food at the residence of a local family.

Accommodation: Sukhrob Barzu Hotel

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

ABSOLUTENOMADS
ADVENTURE TRAVEL & TOURS

Day 15 – Explore Bukhara

Today we'll enjoy another day in the picturesque surroundings of Bukhara, exploring the ancient legacy of this stunning city. Our first stop of the day will be the magnificent Kalyan Minaret.

Built in 1127, the Kalyan Minaret is all that survives of a once grandiose Djuma Mosque, designed for crowds of people to worship at once. Today, the site has been rebuilt around the footprint of this great tower, now at the centre of a courtyard surrounded by galleries and stunning architecture. It's from here that the ancient call to prayer would have blasted across the city, and many locals would have descended on the site. It was, in fact, built twice – evidence suggests the soft ground led it to collapse after being nearly completed the first time – however, after almost a millennium, it shouldn't fall down again!

Next, we'll make our way to Khoja-Gaukushon; a great ensemble at the heart of the city, home to mosque, madrassah, and minaret. The area once served as a kind of plaza for local people to meet, trade, set up market stalls, and (rather oddly) slaughter animals – hence the name 'Gaukushon' which means 'Slaughter of Bulls'. Later, a large minaret, mosque, and madrassah were built on the site, adding to the great patchwork of beautiful buildings littered across the skyline of Bukhara.

Finally, we'll wrap up with the Mausoleum of Naqshbandi and the summer residence of the last Emir of Bukhara which sits a few kilometres outside the city itself. The mausoleum is a place of pilgrimage for many Sufis and a place of incredible beauty, whilst the summer palace is known as 'the place where the moon meets the stars.

Finally, we'll return to the city for a free evening to explore, discover and marvel at this ancient city. For those who wish, we'll have an optional visit to the Jewish quarter where we'll visit two local synagogues, a Jewish cemetery and a former Jewish household.

The optional visit to the Jewish Quarter will cost 30 USD p/p

Accommodation: Sukhrob Barzu Hotel

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

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Day 16 – Discover Turkmenistan

This morning, we'll depart Bukhara and make our way south towards the river that marks the border between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. We'll make our crossing into our fifth and final country, Turkmenistan. However, our adventure is far from over.

We'll head down to Turkmenabat, the border city on the Turkmen side of the river, before continuing our adventure south to Ancient Merv.

Merv was once one of the most important cities in the world at certain times of its history. This ancient site is now 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. Animals, travellers and archaeologists now roam the existing building, ruins, etc. All contribute to a sense of the dynamism of the ancient silk road.

Finally, we'll make our way to the nearby city of Mary where we'll bed down for the night and prepare for the Turkmen adventure which lies ahead!

Accommodation: Mary Hotel

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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Day 17 – Ashgabat: The Marble City

Departing Mary, we'll board a flight from this relatively small city to the nation's capital. A city coated entirely in white marble.

Arriving in Ashgabat, our first stop is Independence Park and Independence Monument, constructed to celebrate the independence of Turkmenistan on the 27th October 1991. As well as the memorial, the park is home to an impressive array of statues of characters from Turkmen history.

From Independence to Neutrality we go! Our next visit is the Monument of Neutrality built in 1998; a gold statue of Turkmenbashi tops this impressive structure.

For today's lunch, we'll visit a local restaurant, which will give us a tutorial and the opportunity to bake some local Turkmen pies. If it's not for you, don't worry; you'll be able to relax while your meal is cooked for you.

We hope you're not too tired of statues just yet as we have a few more to go – next up, the Earthquake Monument and Museum. A grim reminder of the terrible earthquake that struck Ashgabat in 1948, killing 110,00 people and levelling the city. Both are tastefully presented and very educational. On our way back to the hotel, we will pass a few of Ashgabat's more unusual buildings, The Ministry of Gas is shaped like a giant cigarette lighter, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is shaped like a globe, and our personal favourite, The Ashgabat Dental Hospital is shaped like a massive tooth!

Once we have returned to the hotel, you are free to continue exploring Ashgabat or enjoy some well-deserved rest.

Accommodation: Sport Hotel

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

ABSOLUTENOMADS
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Day 18 – Darvaza Gas Crater

This morning there is a bit of free time for relaxing or shopping for supplies, which may be useful as later today we're off into the desert.

Our first stop is the small desert village of Bokhurdag. It is here that we stop to sample the local cuisine and learn a little more about living outside the bright lights of Turkmenistan's flamboyant capital.

Once our journey resumes, we'll continue stopping as we travel to see other examples of the desert's mining history, visiting two other craters (one filled with water, the other with mud) a perfect pretext for the great Darvaza Gas Crater.

The incredible Darvaza Gas Crater, continuously burning since 1971, was created when Soviet engineers were drilling what they thought were vast oil fields. No oil was found, and the fields turned out to be rich in gas, evident when the drilling rig at Darvaza hit a void and collapsed in on itself. Sometime later it's believed that the escaping gas was set alight to prevent methane from polluting a nearby village. Here we are all these years later, and the gas crater has now become one of the world's most unusual tourist attractions.

We'll arrive during daylight hours to observe the transition from light to dark as the night sky becomes illuminated by the flickering blaze of the crater.

Camping next to this burning void, we will enjoy a delicious Turkmen BBQ prepared by our local crew.

Accommodation: Camping

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

ABSOLUTENOMADS
ADVENTURE TRAVEL & TOURS

Day 19 – Return to Ashgabat

Today we'll pack up and head back to Ashgabat.

After lunch, before heading back towards the capital, we will make a stop at the village of Erbent. Erbent is similar to most of the surrounding desert settlements, however, it is here that the Monument to the Basmachi Revolution is located. The Basmachi revolutionary monument is built here as this area was a Basmachi stronghold during the 1920s. The Basmachi were an Islamic group fighting the occupying Soviet forces.

Upon arrival back in the capital city, the rest of the day is yours to enjoy. You're welcome to spend this free day however you please – exploring, shopping, or even just resting before the adventure continues tomorrow!

Accommodation: Sport Hotel

Included Meals: Breakfast

ABSOLUTENOMADS
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Day 20 – Final Day in Ashgabat

Our final day on tour begins with a relaxed walking tour of the city, a chance to unwind and catch a few of the things we didn't get to during our last day in this odd marble city.

We'll start with a walk through the Tekke Bazaar – a 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 the market selling a selection of second-hand books. If you're lucky, you may pick up a copy of the Ruhnama the book written by Saparmurat Niyazov, the Turkmenistan president. Niyazov famously said, "a person that reads Ruhnama three times becomes smart, and after it, he will go straight to heaven".

Next up, we'll visit 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.

Following this, another market! The Russian Bazaar is 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 which is a good place to buy cotton goods (tracksuits, towels, bedsheets, etc. all made from local cotton, and all very cheap).

We'll stop by the local Lenin statue, best described as a small Lenin on a giant plinth decorated in central Asian tile work, followed by a visit to the Pushkin Monument. This small bust erected to Russia's most famous poet Pushkin is easily visited only 5 minutes from Lenin, and nearby our next stop; Pervyy park - this is one of Ashgabat's oldest parks founded in 1890 named officer park, Lenin park, first park and independence park.

Finally, we'll visit Ashgabat Train station - originally built in 1888 the first railway station was destroyed in the earthquake of 1948 along with much of the city. A new station was built shortly after in 1950 although this was remodelled 2009 taking on its now grand form crowned by the eight-pointed star (Rub El Hizb).

As our walking tour draws to a close, you'll have the rest of the day free to enjoy. This is our last day on our epic 3-week adventure, so perhaps explore the city some more, pick up souvenirs, try new foods, or just relax for the afternoon.

We'll end the day with a group meal, a chance to say farewell and to reminisce about our adventures together.

Accommodation: Sport Hotel

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

ABSOLUTENOMADS
ADVENTURE TRAVEL & TOURS

Day 21 – Departure Day

Airport transfers are available to all travelers from our group hotel to Ashgabat International Airport, no matter your time of arrival.

For independent extensions, contact your tour leader.

Included Meals: Breakfast

END OF TOUR