Flames & Fortresses: Turkmenistan May Tour

Turkmenistan

Overview

Join us on this incredible adventure as we delve into the ancient history, and surprising modernity of Central Asia's least visited country; Turkmenistan.

Nestled in the heart of Central Asia, this desert republic is little known to outsiders, but for those who do know about it, it's a must-visit country for the intrepid adventurer. Once home to great silk road civilizations, and today the land of grand marble cities and flaming gas craters, Turkmenistan is filled with incredible highlights, and wonderful people.

Our adventure will start and end in the nation's capital, Ashgabat. Known colloquially as the marble city, Ashgabat is built almost entirely out of marble, creating the impression of a gleaming oasis amidst the deserts which dominate the rest of the country. We'll spend our time visiting the many wonderous monuments and mixing with local people throughout the city's many bazaars and markets.

From here, we'll strike out around the country, visiting the city of Mary, gateway to the nearby UNESCO-protected ruins of Ancient Merv – once home to the merchants and traders travelling along the famed Silk Road between the orient and the European states.

We'll also pay a visit to the famous Darvaza Gas Crater, known to many as the 'Gateway to Hell'. This great burning hole in the desert will serve as our overnight stop, giving us a chance to soak in the beautiful atmosphere of this eternal flame before we finally return to Ashgabat to end our adventure.

Itinerary Overview

*Check out the brief overview of our **Flames & Fortresses Tour** – or scroll down to see the in-depth run through of each day of the trip.*

Day 1.	Arrival in Ashgabat
Day 2.	Exploring Turkmenistan's Mosques & Fortresses
Day 3.	Discover Mary
Day 4.	Explore Ancient Merv
Day 5.	The Flaming Darvaza Gas Crater
Day 6.	Return to Ashgabat
Day 7.	Departure Day

Day 1

Arrival in Ashgabat

Whatever your time of arrival, we'll meet you at the airport and transfer you to the group hotel in the heart of downtown Ashgabat.

In the afternoon, we'll regroup for our pre-tour briefing and a tour around the "Pearl of Central Asia," capital of Turkmenistan, Ashgabat. Heading out into the hustle and bustle of the capital, we'll explore the Park of Independence, including a visit to the mighty Independence Monument, one of the largest and most extravagant monuments in the country.

Continuing on, we'll visit Neutrality Square, built by order of Saparmurat Niyazov, the President of Turkmenistan in 1998. We'll also continue our adventure through the old Soviet part of Ashgabat, which includes a statue of Lenin, the bas-relief 'Face of War' by Ernst Neizvestny depicted on the facade of the State Archives building, as well as some buildings adorned with Soviet mosaics in the old part of the city.

Switching gears, we'll visit the Ertogrul Gazy Mosque, named after Ertogrul Gazy, father of the founder of the Ottoman Empire.

Finally, we'll visit to the Fortress of Old Nisa, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the first capital of the great Parthian Empire.

As the day draws to a close, we'll head back to the hotel to get some rest before continuing our adventure tomorrow!

Accommodation: *Sport Hotel, Ashgabat*

Included Meals: *Breakfast*

Day 2

Exploring Turkmenistan's Mosques & Fortresses

This morning we're up and out early to continue our adventure in the nation's capital.

After a hearty breakfast, we're up and out into Ashgabat, our first stop, the Altyn Asyr Bazaar, formerly the Tolkuchka Bazaar. Located on the outskirts of Ashgabat, it's the largest market in the country and one of the largest in Central Asia. Relocated to its current location in 2011, Altyn Asyr is a massive affair selling everything from household goods, clothes, Turkmen carpets, camels and much more!

Afterwards, we'll head to Geok Depe to visit one of the nation's beautiful mosques; built within the Tekke stronghold, which was the site of the biggest battle for the Russian domination in Central Asia in the late 19th Century.

We'll follow this with a visit to the private Arkadash stud farm, home of the famous Akhal-Tekke horse. The greyhound of the horse world, the Akhal-Teke horse is one of the oldest existing horse breeds on earth.

Having finished photo session with the horses, we'll continue to Ashgabat. En-route, we'll visit the Spirituality Mosque, also known locally as the Turkmenbashy Mosque, built in 2002-2004 on the initiative of Turkmenbashy and named after him. It is the biggest mosque in Turkmenistan and the family mausoleum of the first President.

Finishing up our sightseeing, we'll head back to the group hotel for a night of rest and relaxation before heading out of Ashgabat tomorrow morning to follow our adventure!

Accommodation: *Sport Hotel, Ashgabat*

Included Meals: *Breakfast*

Day 3

Discover Mary

This morning we'll check out of our Ashgabat hotel and head to the airport for our morning flight to the nearby city of Mary.

Once we land in Mary airport, we'll begin our 3 hour drive northeast to Margush/Gonor-Depe. This off-road drive takes us to where the first agricultural settlements sprung up around 5,000 years ago. The perfect natural conditions of fertile soil, abundant water, and the perfect climate meant this area was ideal for growing crops.

Gonor-Depe was the largest Bronze Age settlement in Central Asia and a symbolic heartland for the Turkmen people.

We'll enjoy a picnic lunch as we explore the archaeological site and learn about the legacy of the region. Along with Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and China, this region was one of the five primary centres of world civilization, a hub for trade, culture, and international relations.

Returning to Mary, we'll head to our hotel for the evening in preparation for continued historical adventures tomorrow!

Accommodation: *Hotel in Mary*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Lunch*

Day 4

Explore Ancient Merv

This morning, after breakfast, we'll strike out east of Mary towards Bayarm-Ali – the modern suburb of what used to be the glorious city of Ancient Merv. A UNESCO World Heritage Site and another of Central Asia's many incredible archaeological and cultural centres.

Merv once played a key role, as with many towns and cities across the region, as a staging post along the internationally famed Silk Road. For over 2000 years, Merv provided respite to weary travellers, traders, and merchants making their way between the far east and Europe.

Today, we'll have the chance to visit all different parts of this, so-called 'Wandering City'. The area can be roughly divided into various constituent parts; the ancient settlements of Erk Kala and Gyaur Kala are the oldest parts of Merv, whilst Sultan Kala, home to ancient suburbs is a medieval development. Latterly, the areas of Adbulla-Khan Kalla and Baryamali-Khan Kala appeared over time.

We'll visit the remains of the splendid 12th Century Mausoleums of Sultan Sanjar & Muhammed Ibn-Zeyd, representing exquisite Seljuk period brickwork and architectural décor.

Finally, we'll return to Mary for a short break before making the long drive back to the capital, Ashgabat.

Accommodation: *Sport Hotel, Ashgabat*

Included Meals: *Breakfast*

Day 5

The Flaming 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 at Darvaza*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Dinner*

Day 6

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 now our adventure is at an end!

Accommodation: *Sport Hotel, Ashgabat*

Included Meals: *Breakfast, Dinner*

Day 7

Departure Day

Today our adventure in Turkmenistan comes to an end.

We hope you'll leave the country with a head full of memories, and a phone filled with photos!

No matter your departure time, we'll transfer you to the airport.

END OF TOUR

Included Meals: *Breakfast*