



Itinerary

16 Day Essential Stans Tour

***IMPORTANT NOTE:** Any extra nights, optional tours or other amendments, will not be visible on this itinerary.

DAY 1: Arrive Dushanbe (Tajikistan)

Upon arriving at Dushanbe airport and completing all necessary procedures (border control, customs, luggage collection), transfer to your hotel. If your flight arrives in the early morning, please note that hotel check-in begins at 1 PM. Early check-in can be arranged for \$100 per room (subject to hotel availability), which includes airport transfers.

In the afternoon, gather in the lobby for a city tour. Dushanbe, named after the Persian word for Monday, was once a small market village where traders gathered every Monday to sell their goods. During the Soviet era, the city evolved into the most important production centre in Tajikistan, but the Shohmansur covered market still reflects Dushanbe's historical ties to local trade.

Visit the monument of Ismoili Somoni, Rudaki Park, and the highest flagpole in the world (certified by the Guinness Committee) in the city centre. Then, visit the Tajikistan State Museum, followed by the Mehrgon Bazaar and Victory Park, where you can enjoy a view of Dushanbe from the East hills.

MEALS: *Nil*

OVERNIGHT: *Hotel Atlas*

DAY 2: Dushanbe (Tajikistan)

In the morning, meet with your group for an excursion to Hissar Fortress, located 27 km west of Dushanbe. The Hissar Fortress houses the remains of the palace of Ibragimbek Khan, belonging to the Bukhara Emirate. Its thick walls once guarded a pool, garden, and palace, while the fortress itself overlooked a bustling market and caravanserai. Today, visitors can see a portion of the wall and the gate towers, which are representative of the 18th and 19th-century style. After exploring, drive back to Dushanbe.

After lunch (not included), visit the Tajikistan Antique Museum, which includes natural history exhibits, Tajik costumes, and a mock-up of a Tajik house. Highlights include the largest statue of the "Relaxing Buddha." The ethnographic section of the museum showcases traditional Tajik crafts, including ceramics, embroidered fabrics, woodcarving, and jewellery.

MEALS: *Breakfast*

OVERNIGHT: *Hotel Atlas*

DAY 3: Dushanbe ~ Penjikent (Tajikistan)

After breakfast, drive through the picturesque scenery of Varzob Valley and the Anzob Pass Tunnel to Lake Iskander Kul (Alexander the Great Lake), located in the heart of the Fan Mountains. Visit the 50-meter high waterfall, situated 2 km north of the lake, and Snake Lake. Continue the journey to Penjikent, one of the most ancient cities in Central Asia, with a history spanning 5,500 years.

Ancient Penjikent was one of the easternmost settlements of the Sogdiana Empire, an Iranian civilization that ruled extensive territories in Central Asia over a thousand years ago. Zoroastrianism was the predominant religion, and its holy books mention Sogdiana as the second-best land created by god. The city's name in Russian translates to "Five Villages."

In Penjikent, visit the Penjikent Excavations and the Museum of Archaeology in Old Penjikent, known as the 5th century "Pompeii" of Central Asia. This site includes former palaces and necropolises, which survived for three centuries until the Arab invasion in the 8th century. Rediscovered in 1933, the site features remains of the town centre and the frescoed foundations of wealthy merchants' houses. Two Zoroastrian temples highlight the old city's historical significance. An onsite museum explains the ruins' history and importance.

Additionally, visit the Rudaki Museum in the town centre, which houses artifacts from the Bronze Age to the Sogdian era, along with natural history exhibits from the region. The museum is named after Samanid court poet Abdullah Mohammed Rudaki, who was born in Penjikent, and includes exhibits on his life and works. Frescoes from the Old Penjikent archaeological site are a highlight of the museum.

TRAVEL DISTANCE: 240km

TRAVEL TIME: 4.5 Hours

MEALS: Breakfast

OVERNIGHT: Hotel Umarien

DAY 4: Penjikent ~ Samarkand (Uzbekistan)

After breakfast, transfer to the Tajik/Uzbek border at Jartepa.

Samarkand, a historic town, is a crossroads and melting pot of the world's cultures. Founded in the 7th century B.C. as ancient Afrosiab, Samarkand saw its most significant development during the Timurid period from the 14th to the 15th centuries. Today, you will explore this fabled city, one of the most important sites on the Silk Road.

Visit Registan Square, the heart of Samarkand for many centuries. Here, you will see three beautiful madrasahs: the Ulug-Bek Madrasah, built in the 15th century; the Tilya-Kori Madrasah, built in the 17th century; and the Sher-Dor Madrasah, also built in the 17th century.

Next, visit the Gur Emir, the mausoleum of the Great Tamerlane, a masterpiece of Islamic architecture from the Medieval East.

TRAVEL DISTANCE: 60km

TRAVEL TIME: 1.5 Hours

MEALS: Breakfast

OVERNIGHT: Hotel Registon

DAY 5: Samarkand ~ Bukhara (Uzbekistan)

Today's itinerary begins with a visit to the Ulugbek Observatory, a renowned historical monument revered as one of the most remarkable observatories of the Middle Ages. Marvel at the ingenuity of this ancient astronomical marvel, a testament to the advanced knowledge and technological prowess of its time. Next on our agenda is the exploration of the Shohi-Zinda Necropolis, an extraordinary ancient architectural complex nestled on the south-eastern slope of Afrosiab Mountain. Delve into the intricate beauty of this ensemble, which boasts mausoleums and religious structures dating back to the 11th, 14th, and 19th centuries, offering a captivating glimpse into the region's rich cultural heritage.

Our journey continues with a visit to a silk paper workshop, where time-honoured traditional methods are employed to craft paper for Arabic manuscripts. Immerse yourself in the artistry and craftsmanship of this age-old craft, gaining insight into the meticulous process behind the production of this esteemed material.

Following our enlightening sightseeing tour, we proceed with our journey to Bukhara, where new adventures and discoveries await.

TRAVEL DISTANCE: 300km

TRAVEL TIME: 5 Hours

MEALS: *Breakfast*

OVERNIGHT: *Karavan Hote*

DAY 6: Bukhara (Uzbekistan)

Embark on a captivating sightseeing tour of Bukhara, an ancient Uzbek city steeped in history and heritage, renowned as a prominent stop along the Silk Road trade route. As a pivotal center for Islamic theology and culture during medieval times, Bukhara still boasts a wealth of well-preserved architectural wonders dating from the 9th to the 17th centuries.

Our journey commences at the main square of Old Bukhara, the Lyabi Hauz complex, adorned with the iconic monument of a man seated atop a donkey. Here, we delve into the rich tapestry of the Lyabi Hauz complex, exploring the Nadir Devanbegi Madrasah, Khanaka, and the Kukaldosh Madrasah. Venturing into the Jewish quarter, we uncover the historic Magoki Attor Mosque, a pre-Mongol monument and the first mosque in Uzbekistan.

Continuing our exploration, we traverse the Trading Domes, comprised of three ancient domed structures, and glimpse the Traditional Men's Bath from the 16th century, with access limited to the reception area. Our journey also encompasses visits to the Ulughbek Madrasah, Uzbekistan's oldest madrasah, and the opulent Abdulazizkhan Madrasah.

At the majestic Poi Kalan complex, we marvel at the pre-Mongol Minaret Kalan, the grand Kalan Mosque, and the Miri Arab Madrasah, a revered institution for male students. Our tour further unfolds with stops at the historic Ark Citadel, the serene Bolo Hauz Mosque, the sacred Chashmai Ayub Mausoleum, and the illustrious Samanid Mausoleum, a pre-Mongol masterpiece and the oldest mausoleum in Central Asia.

Amidst our exploration, we seize the unique opportunity to delve into the captivating world of Central Asian puppets and puppet theatre, immersing ourselves in the region's rich cultural traditions. Witness a captivating show by a master puppeteer and perhaps even encounter a puppet resembling yourself,

offering a whimsical touch to our unforgettable journey through Bukhara.

MEALS: *Breakfast*

OVERNIGHT: *Karavan Hotel*

DAY 7: Bukhara ~ Tashkent (Uzbekistan)

Early morning train to Tashkent.

Tashkent is one of the five largest cities in Central Asia. Amidst its tall modern buildings, you'll find historical structures and ancient mosques, while modern shopping centres alternate with traditional oriental bazaars and markets. It's worth noting that many old buildings were restored after a powerful earthquake in 1966, which partially destroyed them, significantly altering the city's appearance.

Continue to New Town: The Independence Square (Mustaqilliq Maidoni) is the country's main square, home to the administrative offices of the Cabinet and the Senate. Resembling a large park, it is surrounded by impressive public buildings and filled with trees, flower beds, and water fountains. At the centre of the square is the bronze globe, symbolizing Uzbekistan's independence, with a symbolic image of the Republic of Uzbekistan on it. A monument of the Sorrowful Mother and the eternal flame commemorate soldiers who gave their lives for peace and the mothers they left behind. It is traditional for newlyweds to visit the square on their wedding day.

Next, visit the Navoi Theatre Square, home to the State Academic Grand Theatre in Tashkent. Situated in the heart of the city, the building was designed by Soviet architect Alexei Schusev, who also designed Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square. The theatre is decorated with the works of Uzbekistan's artists, with interiors featuring extensive carvings, and each hall is adorned according to the traditions of a specific Uzbek city. The theatre, a national pride, features not only plays by Uzbek composers but also world-renowned classical operas and ballets. The fountain jets in front of the theatre are coloured and dance to classical music.

The Museum of Applied Arts is located in the former home of Imperial Russian diplomat Alexander Polovtsev. This grand mansion, decorated in traditional Uzbek style, houses a superb collection of applied arts—no one in Central Asia does it better than the Uzbeks. Polovtsev, an avid collector of handicrafts, has his personal possessions still forming the heart of the collection.

Enjoy a free afternoon to explore the city at your own pace.

MEALS: *Breakfast*

OVERNIGHT: *Hotel Novza Palace*

DAY 8: Tashkent (Uzbekistan)

This captivating city seamlessly blends modern elegance with its enduring oriental essence, reflecting the multifaceted charm found in numerous global capitals. Embark on a journey of discovery through Uzbekistan's capital, where ancient squares and buildings harmoniously coexist with the contemporary facets of this 2,000-year-old metropolis.

Commence your exploration in the heart of the Old Town, where Tashkent, not only serving as the capital but also boasting a rich heritage as one of Central Asia's ancient gems, awaits. Dating back to the 15th and 16th centuries, the Old City enchants with its array of architectural marvels, each street and edifice

steeped in its own captivating narrative.

Among the treasures of the Old City lies the Khast Imam complex, featuring the majestic Friday Jami mosque as its centrepiece, alongside the exquisite Barak Khan Madrasah, the resplendent Tillya Sheikh Mosque, and the understated yet poignant Kaffal Shashi Mausoleum, crafted from humble brickwork. Opposite this architectural ensemble stands the Library of Spiritual Administration, safeguarding one of Islam's most revered relics—the 17th-century Koran of caliph Osman.

Adjacent to the mosque, the Kukeldash Madrasah, the largest among Tashkent's seventeen madrasahs, stands as a bastion of Quranic education. Nearby, the Juma mosque of Khoja Ahrar Vali, the city's principal Friday mosque, beckons worshippers and visitors alike.

Venture further into the vibrant tapestry of Tashkent's cultural fabric, where the bustling Chorsu market reigns as a quintessential emblem of city life. Beneath its towering green dome, a kaleidoscope of sights, sounds, and aromas awaits, with sprawling aisles adorned with vibrant mounds of spices, sacks brimming with grains, and warehouses brimming with confections. Here, amidst the bustle, souvenir seekers can indulge in a treasure trove of traditional wares, from colourful kurpacha and intricately adorned skullcaps to the timeless allure of chapans, ceramics, and knives.

MEALS: *Breakfast*

OVERNIGHT: *Hotel Novza Palace*

DAY 9: Tashkent ~ Fergana (Uzbekistan)

This morning, we set our course for Fergana. Nestled amidst the Tien Shan Mountain Range and nourished by the tributaries of the Syr Darya River, the Fergana Valley stands as Central Asia's verdant heartland. Its fertile embrace has nurtured civilizations since antiquity, with its legacy tracing back to Alexander the Great, who established a city at the valley's southwestern gateway in 329 BC.

Centuries later, traders from China traversed these ancient pathways, pioneering what would become known as the Silk Road during the 1st century BC. Thus, the valley blossomed into a vibrant oasis, its irrigated fields yielding an abundance of grains, fruits, silk, cotton, nuts, and vegetables, while sustaining a rich tapestry of livestock, including horses, cattle, sheep, and camels.

The echoes of history resonate in the valley, where the influence of Buddhism, carried from China, predates the arrival of Islam in the 8th century AD. Subsequently, the Kokand Khanate held sway over the land during the 18th and 19th centuries until Imperial Russia's annexation at the century's close.

In the 20th century, the Soviet Union reshaped the valley's landscape, devoting it to cotton monoculture. Yet, this singular focus drained its fertility and water resources, eroding its once-diverse agricultural tapestry.

A visit to Rishtan unveils the apex of Uzbek ceramic artistry. Nestled within the Fergana Valley, Rishtan stands as a beacon of this ancient craft, its roots tracing back a millennium. Here, artisans harness locally abundant red clay and mineral-rich pigments to create their masterpieces.

Rishtan's ceramics are renowned for their intricate floral and geometric motifs, painted in vivid hues of blue and green against a creamy white canvas. Amidst the city's picturesque streets, where melons thrive in wild abandon and fruit trees dot the landscape, the tradition of pottery-making endures, passed down through generations with unwavering dedication.

TRAVEL DISTANCE: 315km

TRAVEL TIME: 5 Hours

MEALS: Breakfast

OVERNIGHT: Hotel Asia

DAY 10: Fergana ~ Osh (Kyrgyzstan)

Today, our journey takes us across the border separating Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Our first stop is Osh, the venerable ancient city renowned as the oldest settlement in Kyrgyzstan, with a history spanning over 3000 years. Dominated by the imposing presence of Solomon's Throne, Osh stands as a testament to its rich heritage.

Nestled at the convergence of ancient trading routes, Osh became a pivotal point along the famed Silk Road. Evidence of its antiquity abounds, with rock drawings and inscriptions adorning the northern slope of the four-headed Suleiman Mountain, a unique historical and architectural marvel designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The heartbeat of Osh resonates within its Jayma Bazaar, a bustling marketplace steeped in tradition for over two millennia. Here, amidst the vibrant chaos, visitors are enveloped in a sensory experience, as merchants hawk colourful Kyrgyz textiles, kalpaks, fermented dairy products, aromatic spices, and succulent dried fruits.

The sacred Suleiman's Throne, also known as Suleiman's Mount, towers majestically as a symbol of spiritual significance. Legend has it that the prophet Solomon once prayed upon this colossal limestone and quartz mound, possibly even finding his eternal rest here. Dubbed "Kichik-Mecca" (Little Mecca), it remains a revered Islamic pilgrimage site, drawing devotees from across the globe to ascend its slopes and reach Babur's House, a sanctuary for meditation.

Nestled within the mountain's base lies the Historical Cultural Museum, offering insight into the region's diverse religious and cultural tapestry. Exhibits showcase artifacts spanning various epochs, from ancient weaponry to intricate pottery and traditional handicrafts.

Atop Suleiman's Throne stands Babur's House, a humble stone shelter where the 14th-century Muslim leader Babur embarked on a forty-day meditation retreat at the tender age of fourteen. Surrounded by breathtaking vistas of snow-capped peaks, it serves as a tranquil haven for reflection amid the pilgrims who converge here annually.

Adding to Osh's cultural richness is the Silk Road Museum, a repository of the city's vibrant history and its interactions with the surrounding natural landscape. Exhibits delve into the sociological nuances of Osh throughout the ages, alongside displays celebrating traditional Kyrgyz handicrafts and equestrian traditions.

Together, these sites form a mosaic of Osh's storied past, earning it recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2009.

TRAVEL DISTANCE: 140km

TRAVEL TIME: 2 Hours

MEALS: *Breakfast*

OVERNIGHT: *Hotel Sunrise*

DAY 11: Osh ~ Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan)

Embarking on a morning flight, we head towards Bishkek, the bustling capital and largest city of Kyrgyzstan. Nestled at the foothills of the majestic Kyrgyz Ala-Tau mountain range, Bishkek captivates with its blend of natural beauty and urban vibrancy.

Distinguished by its verdant parks and grand marble-clad edifices juxtaposed with Soviet-era apartment complexes and privately constructed residences, Bishkek exudes a unique charm. The city's layout follows a grid pattern, with verdant tree-lined streets intersected by narrow irrigation channels, nurturing a plethora of greenery that offers respite during scorching summers. Renowned as the greenest city in Central Asia, Bishkek boasts an impressive ratio of trees per capita, enhancing its allure.

Our sightseeing excursion encompasses the vibrant Osh Bazaar, where the aroma of blossoms fills the air, offering a sensory feast of colours and fragrances. Delving into the city's rich heritage, we explore the Historical Museum and the Museum of Applied Arts, unravelling the tapestry of Kyrgyz culture and craftsmanship.

At the heart of the city lies Ala-Too Square, the nation's principal square, serving as a focal point for state ceremonies and festivities. Adorned with monuments, an open-air art gallery, and the iconic Oak Park, the square is bordered by stately government buildings and theatres, embodying the spirit of Bishkek's civic pride and cultural richness.

MEALS: *Breakfast*

OVERNIGHT: *Hotel B Hotel*

DAY 12: Bishkek ~ Karakol (Kyrgyzstan)

We embark on a transfer to Karakol, continuing our journey along the northern shore of the majestic Issyk-Kul Lake. Along the way, we make a stop in Cholpon-Ata to explore its remarkable attractions. Our first destination is the petroglyphs, an expansive open-air gallery of rock carvings often referred to as a Stone Garden. Encompassing a vast area of 42 hectares, this site is adorned with prehistoric monumental structures such as stone circles, tombs, remnants of a boundary stone wall, and balbals (stone markers). The petroglyphs themselves, dating from the 2nd millennium BC through the Middle Ages to the 6th century AD, offer a fascinating glimpse into ancient civilizations.

Additionally, we visit the Cholpon-Ata Museum of History, which houses a diverse collection of national embroidery and artifacts. Immerse yourself in the rich cultural heritage of the region as you explore the exhibits showcasing intricate embroidery techniques passed down through generations.

MEALS: *Breakfast*

OVERNIGHT: *Karagat Hotel*

DAY 13: Karakol (Kyrgyzstan)

Immerse yourself in the nostalgic ambiance of Karakol town, where time seems to stand still, transporting you back a century to the days of Tsarist Russia. Founded in 1869, the town exudes an old-world charm, characterized by its architecture reminiscent of the Tsarist era.

During our exploration, we visit the Russian Orthodox Church, a magnificent edifice dating back to 1896, showcasing exquisite architectural details that harken back to a bygone era. Additionally, we marvel at the Chinese pagoda-styled mosque, a testament to the town's multicultural heritage, constructed in 1899.

In the afternoon, we embark on a memorable hike through the breathtaking Jety-Oguz gorge, renowned for its natural splendour. Here, iconic landmarks such as the "7 Bulls" and the "Broken Heart" rocks captivate visitors with their striking formations. Adventurers can partake in horseback riding or opt for a leisurely hike, offering panoramic vistas of the surrounding mountains.

Amidst this picturesque landscape, we have the opportunity to visit a traditional yurt, where we can savour a cup of Kyrgyz national beverage, Kumis—a unique fermented mare's milk, while immersing ourselves in the warmth of Kyrgyz hospitality.

MEALS: *Breakfast*

OVERNIGHT: *Karagat Hotel*

DAY 14: Karakol ~ Charyn Canyon ~ Almaty (Kazakhstan)

En route to Almaty, we encounter the breathtaking Charyn Canyon, often hailed as the younger sibling of the Grand Canyon. Carved over time by the meandering Charyn River, this natural wonder boasts a dramatic landscape that leaves visitors in awe.

Known colloquially as the Valley of Castles, the canyon showcases a striking contrast of vibrant red hues against the rugged rock formations, evoking images of ancient fortresses. Its otherworldly beauty is heightened by the interplay of light and shadow, making it a mesmerizing sight both by day and under the canopy of a star-lit sky.

After immersing ourselves in the splendour of Charyn Canyon, we continue our journey towards Almaty, carrying with us memories of this awe-inspiring marvel of nature.

TRAVEL DISTANCE: *430km*

TRAVEL TIME: *7 Hours*

MEALS: *Breakfast*

OVERNIGHT: *Hotel Kazzhol*

DAY 15: Almaty (Kazakhstan)

Nestled amidst the verdant surroundings with the majestic Zailiysky Alatau as its backdrop, Almaty has long been celebrated as one of the most charming Russian legacies in Central Asia. Today, the city's affluent denizens revel in a lifestyle replete with luxurious suburban abodes, sleek SUVs, opulent shopping havens, trendy coffee joints, upscale eateries, pulsating nightclubs, and modern ski resorts, ensuring an existence brimming with indulgence.

Following a delectable breakfast, embark on a scenic drive to the mountains, offering a panoramic vista of Almaty's stunning natural environs. Our first stop is the awe-inspiring Medeo Gorge, home to the world's largest high-mountain skating rink and a colossal dam that shields the city from the ravages of tumultuous mudflows originating in the western Tien Shan peaks. Continuing our ascent, we arrive at Shymbulak, affectionately known as Chimbulak, a renowned ski resort nestled at an elevation of 2230 meters above sea level. Blessed with a mild climate, abundant sunshine, and snow-capped peaks throughout winter, Shymbulak boasts breathtaking vistas of mountain ranges. A thrilling chair car ride transports guests to the summit, offering a bird's-eye view of the majestic landscape.

Our exploration of Almaty commences with a city tour, unveiling the rich tapestry of its history and evolution as the southern capital of Kazakhstan. Marvel at iconic landmarks such as the Presidential Palace, Republic Square, Monument of Independence, Astana Square, Abai Square, and the Palace of the Republic. Delve into the city's heritage at Panfilov Park, home to the illustrious Zenkov Cathedral, a remarkable wooden structure hailed as one of the world's unique architectural marvels. Pay homage to the fallen heroes at the Memorial of Glory and Eternal Flame, commemorating those who sacrificed their lives for the country's freedom and independence.

After a sumptuous lunch, indulge in an immersive shopping experience at the Green Bazaar, where a vibrant tapestry of colours, scents, and flavours await. Immerse yourself in the bustling ambiance as you peruse an array of local delights and souvenirs, completing your Almaty adventure on a delightful note.

MEALS: *Breakfast*

OVERNIGHT: *Hotel Kazzhol*

DAY 16: End of Tour

Following a satisfying breakfast, we bid farewell to the hotel and embark on a transfer to Almaty International Airport in the morning. As our journey draws to a close, we extend our heartfelt gratitude for joining us on this unforgettable adventure through Central Asia. Thank you for allowing us to unlock the doors to "The Lost World" together.

MEALS: *Breakfast*