

Marco Polo in Central Asia Tour

Duration: 18 days

You will visit: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan.

Web version of the tour

<https://www.orexca.com/central-asia/tours/marco-polo-central-asia-tour.htm>

Tour Itinerary:

Day 1: Urgench – Khiva

Arrive at Urgench International Airport in the morning. Upon arrival, meet your driver and transfer to Khiva (35 km), one of the best-preserved Silk Road cities in Central Asia and a living open-air museum. Khiva flourished as a major trading centre during the era of Marco Polo, when caravans linked China, Persia, and Europe along the Silk Road. Check in to your hotel at noon.

Meet your local guide and begin a guided walking tour of Ichan-Kala, Khiva's inner walled city and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Highlights of the tour include:

- Ota Darvoza Gate, the main entrance to Ichan-Kala, which once controlled caravan traffic along the Silk Road
- Kalta Minor Minaret, an unfinished yet iconic monument originally intended to become the tallest minaret in Central Asia
- Kunya-Ark Fortress, the former residence and political centre of the khans of Khiva
- Muhammad Amin-Khan Madrasah and Muhammad Rahim-Khan Madrasah, notable examples of Islamic educational architecture from the late medieval period
- Juma Mosque, famous for its 212 carved wooden columns, some of which date back more than a thousand years
- Tash-Hauli Palace (Stone Courtyard Palace), the khan's 19th-century residence reflecting the lifestyle of Central Asian rulers
- Islam Khodja Minaret and Madrasah, the tallest minaret in Khiva, commissioned by the vizier of the last khan
- Pahlavan Mahmud Necropolis, Khiva's spiritual heart and an important pilgrimage site linked to the city's patron saint

After the tour, return to your hotel. Overnight in Khiva.

Meals: none.

Day 2: Khiva – border – Kunya-Urgench – Dashoguz

In the morning, drive to the Turkmenistan border point of Shavat-Dashoguz (60 km, 1 hour), following one of the most legendary sections of the Silk Road - the very route once travelled by Marco Polo during his journey across Central Asia. After completing customs and passport control on both sides, proceed to the exit of the border control area, where your guide or driver will be waiting with a personalised sign.

Meet your Turkmenistan guide and continue to Kunya-Urgench (100 km, 1 hour 30 minutes), one of the most important cities of the Silk Road and a place described by Marco Polo as a flourishing centre of trade, culture, and spirituality. Visit the impressive mausoleums of Turabek Khanum, Sultan Tekesh, and Sultan II-Arslan, discover the iconic Kutlug-Timur Minaret, once a key landmark for Silk Road caravans, and explore Kyrk Molla Hill, a sacred site closely linked to the region's spiritual history.

In the afternoon, drive to Dashoguz. Upon arrival, transfer to the hotel. Overnight in Dashoguz.

Meals: breakfast

Day 3: Dashoguz – Ashgabat

In the morning, transfer to the airport for your flight to Ashgabat (50 minutes). Upon arrival in Ashgabat, transfer to your hotel and check in at noon. Ashgabat is the capital of Turkmenistan and one of the most impressive and elegant cities in Central Asia. This region once lay along the legendary Silk Road.

Meet your guide and driver at the hotel and begin your sightseeing tour, which includes:

- Old Nisa, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the former capital of the Parthian Empire, founded in the 3rd century BC and remaining in power for nearly 500 years.
- Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque, the largest mosque in Central Asia. Also known as the Spiritual Mosque or Gypjak Mosque, it includes a mausoleum containing the tombs of former president Turkmenbashi and his immediate family members.
- Arch of Neutrality, a 95-metre-high tower topped with a gold statue of former president Saparmurat Niyazov (Turkmenbashi) that rotates to face the sun. A funicular ride takes you to the top, where you can visit a small museum and enjoy panoramic views of the city.
- Independence Park, featuring the yurt-shaped Independence Monument, which houses the Museum of National Values. The complex is surrounded by elaborate fountains, 27 statues of key historical figures of Turkmenistan, and a golden sculpture of Niyazov.
- National Museum of History, displaying more than half a million items from across the country, including rare artefacts from ancient times through the Middle Ages.
- Gulistan Bazaar (also known as the Russian Bazaar), one of the oldest markets in the city, offering a lively yet orderly atmosphere for buying snacks and interacting with local shoppers.

After the tour, transfer back to the hotel. Overnight in Ashgabat.

Meals: breakfast

Day 4: Ashgabat – Merv – Mary

After breakfast, depart Ashgabat and drive to Mary (370 km, 4-5 hours), following ancient caravan routes that once linked Persia, Central Asia, and China during the time of Marco Polo in the 13th century. En route, stop to visit the ruins of Anau Mosque, an important medieval pilgrimage site, and explore the remains of Abiverd, once a thriving Silk Road city known for trade, craftsmanship, and scholarship.

In the afternoon, continue to Ancient Merv, one of the key hubs of international commerce along the Silk Road. Recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Merv reached its peak between the 11th and 13th centuries, when travellers, merchants, and envoys passed through its gates on journeys between East and West. Explore the vast archaeological park, including:

- The Regional History Museum, introducing Merv's multi-layered past
- The monumental Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar (12th century), a masterpiece of Seljuk architecture
- Erk Gala and Gyaur Gala, the earliest fortified settlements
- The impressive Great and Small Gyz Gala palace-fortresses
- Keshk fortresses and other caravan-era structures reflecting Merv's former prosperity

After the visit, drive to Mary and transfer to your hotel. Overnight in Mary.

Meals: breakfast

Day 5: Mary – border – Bukhara

After breakfast, check out from the hotel and depart Mary, continuing your journey along the historic Silk Road towards Bukhara, one of Central Asia's most important medieval cities. Travel to the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan border crossing (270 km, 4-5 hours). Upon arrival, complete border formalities at both the Turkmen and Uzbek checkpoints. After crossing into Uzbekistan, meet your local driver and continue to Bukhara.

Arrive in Bukhara, a legendary Silk Road city and UNESCO World Heritage Site, renowned for its well-preserved medieval architecture and its role as a major centre of trade, religion, and scholarship during the 13th century. The remainder of the day is at leisure, allowing time to relax or enjoy a first independent walk through the historic old town. Overnight in Bukhara.

Meals: breakfast

Day 6: Bukhara

- Lyabi-Hauz Ensemble, centred around the largest artificial reservoir of medieval Bukhara (14th-17th centuries). The ensemble includes some of the city's most significant madrasahs: Khanaka Madrasah, Kukeldash Madrasah, and Nadir Divan Beghi Madrasah (all 16th century);
- Magoki-Attori Mosque, the oldest mosque in Bukhara, dating back to the 12th century;
- Trade Domes, where you can experience the same marketplaces in which silk, spices, and ceramics were traded during the time of Marco Polo;
- Poi Kalyan Ensemble (12th-16th centuries), comprising the Kalyan Minaret, Kalyan Mosque, Amir-Alimkhan Madrasah, and Miri-Arab Madrasah;
- Ulugbek Madrasah (15th century) and Abdulazizkhan Madrasah (17th century), remarkably well-preserved examples of Islamic educational architecture;
- Ark Fortress, the ancient centre of Bukharan statehood and today home to a small museum;
- Bolo-Khauz Complex, featuring an elaborately decorated 18th-century mosque, a minaret, and reservoirs that once supplied water to the entire city;

- Samanids Mausoleum (9th-10th centuries), considered the oldest surviving brick building in Central Asia.

After the tour, enjoy free time. Overnight in Bukhara.

Meals: breakfast

Day 7: Bukhara – Samarkand

After breakfast at the hotel, enjoy free time in Bukhara, one of the most important Silk Road cities visited by merchants and envoys during the era of Marco Polo in the 13th century. Bukhara's role as a centre of trade, learning, and diplomacy made it a key stop on the transcontinental routes linking East and West.

At noon, check out from the hotel and transfer to the railway station for your train journey to Samarkand (280 km), following the historic Silk Road corridor once used by caravans transporting silk, spices, and other precious goods. Upon arrival in Samarkand, the legendary city later known as the capital of Tamerlane's empire, meet your driver and transfer to the hotel. Samarkand is one of Central Asia's most celebrated UNESCO World Heritage Sites, reflecting layers of history from the ancient Silk Road through the medieval period. Overnight in Samarkand.

Meals: breakfast

Day 8: Samarkand

After breakfast at the hotel, begin a private tour of Samarkand with your local guide, visiting the following sites:

- Visit to the excavation site and museum of the ancient city of Afrasiab;
- Shakhi-Zinda, a burial complex dating from the 9th to the 14th centuries. Walk along the blue-domed avenue and explore more than 20 small mausoleums lining the broad passageway;
- Gur Emir, the imposing mausoleum of Tamerlane and Mirzo Ulugbek;
- Siab Bazaar, a multi-level market where you can shop for souvenirs and sample local sweets, fruits, and Samarkand's famous bread;
- Registan Square, the commercial heart of Samarkand for centuries and today its most iconic landmark. The square is framed by three madrasahs: Ulugbek Madrasah (15th century), Sher-Dor Madrasah (17th century), and Tilla-Kori Madrasah (17th century).

After the tour, transfer back to the hotel. Overnight in Samarkand.

Meals: breakfast

Day 9: Samarkand – border – Penjikent

After breakfast, enjoy some free time. Later, transfer to the Uzbekistan-Tajikistan border crossing at Jartepa (50 km, 1 hour). Upon arrival, complete customs and passport formalities at both checkpoints. Continue to Penjikent via Sarazm, a UNESCO World Heritage Site - places that once formed part of the legendary Silk Road and were visited by Marco Polo during his travels across Central Asia.

Upon arrival in Penjikent, check in at the hotel. Free time. Overnight at the hotel.

Meals: breakfast

Day 10: Penjikent – Iskanderkul Lake

In the morning, your driver and guide will pick you up from your hotel in Penjikent to begin a full-day tour of the city. The programme includes:

- Republican Museum of History (Rudaki Museum), featuring eight exhibition halls dedicated to archaeology, nature, history, culture, traditional lifestyle, Tajik customs, and the life of Rudaki, the founder of Tajik-Persian classical literature;
- Central Mosque and Olim Dodkhoh Madrasah (17th century, with renovations over the past two centuries), originally dating back to the Middle Ages and rebuilt in modern times, now serving as the city's main mosque and a popular gathering place for local residents;
- Penjikent Bazaar, a lively market located at the junction of the city's main roads, offering everyday goods and a wide range of Tajik souvenirs;
- Ancient Penjikent (5th century BC), a complex maze of walls and passages decorated with remarkable murals. The site includes house foundations, Zoroastrian fire temples, a cemetery, and reconstructed living spaces.

After the city tour, drive to Iskanderkul Lake (160 km, approximately 3 hours), one of Tajikistan's most scenic natural landmarks. Upon arrival, check in to your guesthouse and relax. Overnight at Iskanderkul Lake.

Meals: breakfast, dinner

Day 11: Iskanderkul Lake – Dushanbe

After breakfast, enjoy a free morning to relax at the legendary Iskanderkul Lake, with time to walk around, take photographs, dip your feet in the water, or simply rest along its calm shores. A short hike leads to the 36-metre-high Fann Niagara Waterfall, where an observation deck offers unobstructed views of the cascading water.

In the afternoon, transfer to Dushanbe (140 km, approximately 3 hours) via the M34 Highway and the Anzob Pass, one of the best locations for clear views of the Fann Mountains. Upon arrival in Dushanbe, check in at the hotel. Overnight in Dushanbe.

Meals: breakfast, lunch

Day 12: Dushanbe

After breakfast, meet your guide and driver at the hotel reception for a private city tour of Dushanbe, combined with an excursion to the Hissar Historical and Cultural Reserve (25 km). This area lies along ancient Silk Road routes that once linked Transoxiana with the mountain regions of Central Asia and were well known to merchants and travellers, including during the era of Marco Polo.

- Hissar Fortress (15th century), a monumental stronghold whose imposing gates once marked the residence of a Bukharan emir, highlighting the strategic importance of this Silk Road crossroads;
- Kukhna Madrasah (17th century), a former centre of Islamic learning that functioned until the early 20th century and today houses a small historical museum;
- Khinstin Caravanserai (19th century), a rare brick-built caravanserai complex with an attached mosque and madrasah, evoking the age of caravan travel and long-distance trade.

Return to Dushanbe to continue the city tour:

- National Museum of Tajikistan, displaying more than 40,000 exhibits that illustrate the region's ancient and medieval history, including a remarkable 12-metre-long reclining Buddha discovered on Tajik territory;
- Haji Yaqub Mosque (19th century), one of the city's notable architectural landmarks;
- Rudaki Park, an elegant green space dedicated to the great Persian poet Rudaki, reflecting the cultural legacy of the Silk Road;
- Gurminj Museum of Musical Instruments, preserving the musical traditions of the Tajik and Pamiri peoples through instruments, performances, and exhibitions;
- Statue of Ismail Somoni, a 25-metre monument honouring the founder of the Tajik state and a powerful symbol of national identity.

After the tour, return to your hotel. Overnight in Dushanbe.

Meals: breakfast

Day 13: Dushanbe – Istaravshan – Khujand

Depart Dushanbe in the morning and drive to Khujand (300 km, approximately 5 hours) via Istaravshan. The route passes through the Anzob Pass, which rises to 3,400 metres above sea level, and continues through a mountain tunnel stretching for 5 kilometres.

Arrive in Istaravshan and enjoy lunch at a local teahouse before beginning a city tour of the town's most popular sites: Istaravshan Bazaar; the Hazrat Shah Architectural Complex (18th-19th centuries); and Mug Teppe, a renovated fortress perched on a hilltop that marks the site of one of the oldest settlements in Istaravshan and offers fine views over the city.

After the visit, continue driving to Khujand. Upon arrival, check in to your hotel and enjoy free time in the evening. Overnight in Khujand.

Meals: breakfast, lunch

Day 14: Khujand – border – Tashkent

In the morning, begin your city tour of Khujand, one of the oldest cities in Central Asia. The tour includes:

- Khujand Fortress, first built in the 5th century BC, rebuilt during the Middle Ages, and reconstructed again in modern times. It was once considered one of the most impregnable fortresses in Central Asia;
- Historical Museum of Sughd, housed within the Khujand Fortress, presenting the region's history through vivid displays, including accounts of Alexander the Great's campaigns and rare artefacts from the territory of historical Sughd;
- Mausoleum of Sheikh Muslihiddin Khujandi (12th century), an impressive two-storey structure dedicated to Sheikh Muslihiddin, a 12th-century ruler and poet. The mausoleum forms part of a memorial complex that also includes a mosque, a 20-metre-high minaret, and several smaller mausoleums;

- Panjshanbe Bazaar (Thursday Bazaar), a lively and colourful oriental market often considered the best in Tajikistan, where you can sample fresh fruit and observe daily life among shoppers from Khujand and nearby villages;
- Somoni Park, a pleasant public space and popular meeting point for local residents, featuring a prominent statue of Ismoil Somoni, fountains, and colourful mosaics depicting the city's history.

After the tour, transfer to the Oybek border crossing (70 km, approximately 1 hour). After crossing the border, meet your driver on the Uzbekistan side and continue to Tashkent (100 km, approximately 1 hour 30 minutes). Transfer to the hotel. Overnight in Tashkent.

Meals: breakfast

Day 15: Tashkent – Kokand – Rishtan – Fergana

Take the morning train from Tashkent to Kokand (240 km, approximately 4 hours). Upon arrival, your guide and driver will meet you at the station to begin a city tour of Kokand, once the capital of the Kokand Khanate. The tour includes:

- An excursion to the Palace of Khudoyar-Khan (19th century), the residence of the last and most powerful khan, featuring nearly twenty rooms, a small museum, and an impressive throne room with an ornate ceiling;
- Jami Mosque (19th century), with a portico supported by 98 painted, gold-engraved wooden columns and a minaret that visitors can climb for panoramic views of Kokand;
- Norbutabiy Madrasah (late 18th century), notable for its elegant exterior and architectural style unique to the region. The complex includes a mosque, a verandah, and classrooms where students continue to study today.

After the tour, continue by road to Rishtan (45 km, approximately 50 minutes), renowned for producing some of the finest pottery in Central Asia. Visit the home of a well-known ceramic master and take part in a workshop, where traditional techniques passed down through generations are demonstrated.

Following the workshop, continue to the city of Fergana (50 km, approximately 50 minutes). Upon arrival, check in at the hotel. Overnight in Fergana.

Meals: breakfast

Day 16: Fergana – Margilan – Tashkent

In the morning, if your visit falls on a Thursday or Sunday, visit Kumtepa Bazaar, the largest market in the Fergana Valley.

Afterwards, drive to Margilan (15 km, approximately 20 minutes), the silk capital of Uzbekistan. Spend the afternoon at two of the city's most educational sites:

- Said Akhmad-Khoja Madrasah (19th century), home to skilled craftsmen working beneath richly painted ceilings. Walk through the individual rooms to admire high-quality carpets and silk products, or purchase handmade souvenirs directly from the artisans;
- A walk through the Margilan Artisan Centre – Gold Silk;

- Yodgorlik Silk Factory and Workshop, where you can observe the entire silk production process and purchase scarves, clothing, and other items made in the famous ikat and khan-atlas patterns.

After the visit, drive back to Tashkent via the Kamchik Mountain Pass (320 km, 4-5 hours). Rising to 2,267 metres above sea level, the pass offers sweeping panoramic views. Arrive in Tashkent, check in at the hotel, and enjoy the evening at leisure. Overnight in Tashkent.

Meals: breakfast

Day 17: Tashkent

After breakfast, meet your guide and driver at the hotel to begin your Tashkent city tour. Your private tour includes:

- An excursion to the Old City, including the Khazret-Imam Architectural Complex, a centre of Islamic scholarship known for its ancient manuscripts (15th-16th centuries);
- A visit to Chorsu Bazaar, offering a wide selection of traditional Uzbek ceramics, jewellery, handbags, garments, and other goods, evoking the atmosphere of a historic Silk Road market;
- A ride on the Tashkent Metro, an immaculate underground system, with each station decorated in coloured mosaics and ceramics reflecting a distinct theme;
- A tour of the Uzbekistan History Museum, a four-storey museum housing more than a quarter of a million exhibits dedicated to the archaeology and history of Central Asia;
- A drive through Amir Timur Square and Independence Square;
- A visit to the Applied Arts Museum, an extensive collection of Uzbekistan's finest handicrafts displayed in an ornately decorated villa, showcasing the craftsmanship once admired by Marco Polo.

After the tour, return to your hotel. Overnight in Tashkent.

Meals: breakfast

Day 18: Tashkent

Transfer to the airport for departure. End of the tour following in the footsteps of Marco Polo across Central Asia.

Meals: breakfast

Inclusions:

- Accommodation in double or twin rooms (hotels: 16 nights; guesthouse: 1 night);
- Airport and railway station transfers, including pick-ups and drop-offs;
- Transportation according to the tour programme, including transfers between cities and border crossings;
- Economy-class train tickets for the Bukhara–Samarkand and Tashkent–Kokand routes;
- Economy-class flight ticket for the Dashoguz–Ashgabat sector;
- Entrance fees to sights listed in the itinerary;

- Meals: 17 breakfasts, 2 lunches, and 1 dinner;
- Letter of Invitation for a Turkmen visa;
- Tour escort guide services in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan;
- Local guides in Uzbekistan cities: Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, and Fergana.

Exclusions:

- Personal expenses and tips;
- Meals not indicated in the programme;
- Hotel charges for additional services;
- Personal travel insurance;
- International flight tickets before and after the tour;
- All visas and e-visas for Central Asian countries;
- Any other charges and services not listed under "Inclusions".

For detailed information and booking, please follow the link:

<https://www.orexca.com/central-asia/tours/marco-polo-central-asia-tour.htm>