

Ancient Cities of Turkmenistan Tour

Duration: 6 days

You will visit: Ashgabat, Merv, Kunya Urgench, Darvaza Gas Crater.

Tour Itinerary:

Day 1: Ashgabat – arrival

Arrive in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan. A driver will meet you at the airport to bring you to your hotel, where check-in begins at noon. Free time to relax at the hotel and enjoy its amenities.

Overnight in Ashgabat hotel.

Day 2: Ashgabat

Tour Ashgabat with your private local guide and driver. Meet at the hotel for sightseeing in Ashgabat to the following sites:

- Old Nisa, a spectacular archaeological site just 15 km from the city. Nisa was the capital of the Parthian Empire, founded in the 3rd century BC and remaining in power for nearly 500 years. Today it's listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- Turkmenbashi Ruhk Mosque, the largest mosque in Central Asia. Also referred to as the Spiritual Mosque and the Gypjak Mosque, it includes a mausoleum with the tombs of former president Turkmenbashi and his immediate family members.
- Arch of Neutrality, a 95-meter-high tower topped with a gold statue of former president Saparmurat Niyazov (Turkmenbashi) that rotates to face the sun. Ride to the top in a funicular to tour a small museum and enjoy a panoramic view of the city.
- Independence Park, including the yurt-shaped Independence Monument housing the Museum of National Values. The museum is surrounded by lavish fountains, 27 statues of Turkmenistan's key historical figures and a golden sculpture of Niyazov himself.
- Statue of Lenin, unique in that it stands on a large base ornately decorated in traditional Turkmen ornamentation.
- National Museum of History, displaying over half a million items from every region of the country, including rare and priceless artifacts from ancient times through the Middle Ages.
- Gulistan Bazaar (also known as the Russian Bazaar), one of the oldest markets in the city, a clean yet lively place to buy snacks and mingle with local shoppers.

Today's excursion also includes a trip to the Akhalteke horse stables, (app. 1 hour from Ashgabat), where you'll learn about the care and training of these pure-bred Turkmen horses, known for their incredible speed, agility and sleek beauty.

Overnight in Ashgabat hotel.

Tour duration: 5-6 hours

Day 3: Ashgabat – Mary – Merv – Ashgabat

Take an early morning flight from Ashgabat to Mary (370 km, 40 min).

Upon arrival your guide and driver will meet you for your drive to Merv (40 km, 40 min), an ancient trade center on the Great Silk Road. Your guided sightseeing tour of Merv will include:

- Sultan Sanjar Mausoleum (12th century) – considered by many to be the most majestic architectural monument of Merv, this mausoleum amazes with its thick walls, symmetrical proportions and domed top that displays amazing architectural craftsmanship for its day.
- Greater Kyz Kala and Lesser Kyz Kala (8th-9th centuries) - These unique fortified homes are built of mud brick, with no known archeological equivalents.
- Askhab Mausoleums (9th-12th centuries) - Built for two of the prophet Muhammad's earliest disciples, the Askhab Mausoleums are one of Turkmenistan's most important pilgrimage sites today.
- Erk Kala (6th century BC), the seat of ancient Merv and its oldest settlement, whose remaining walls are nearly 30 meters high. Climb the walls for a great view of the surrounding area.
- Gyaur Kala (3rd century BC) - Merv's second oldest settlement, famous for its thick, 2-km long walls.
- Beni Makhan Mosque and cistern (7th- 9th centuries) - Also called the Juma Mosque, it's located in the center of ancient Gyaur Kala, along with an intact cistern that still functions today.
- Muhammad Ibn Zeid Mausoleum (12th century) - A popular Sufi shrine and one of the city's finest structures due to its simple architecture and Arabic inscriptions chiseled into its walls.

After completing the sightseeing tour of Old Merv, return to Mary to visit the Mary History Museum. Housed in a marble hall, the museum has six main exhibition rooms holding artifacts from ancient and modern history.

Transfer to the airport upon completion of the tour. Return to Ashgabat on the evening flight. Overnight in Ashgabat.

Tour duration: approximately 5 hours

Day 4: Ashgabat – Kunya Urgench – Darvaza Gas Crater

Take an early morning flight to Dashoguz (570 km, 50 min). Upon arrival to Dashouguz your driver and guide will meet you at the airport to begin your drive to Kunya-Urgench, the ancient capital of the Khorezm Empire (120 km, 1 hr 30 min). Your tour will include:

- Visit to the Tyurabek-Khanym Mausoleum (14th century), burial site of a Mongolian princess, and the Sayid Ahmed Mausoleum (14th century), tomb of a leader of the Golden Horde.
- Discovery of the Kutlug Timur Minaret (11th-13th centuries), which at 62 meters is the tallest minaret in Central Asia.
- Travel to the 12th-century Sultan Tekesh Mausoleum of Khorezmshakh.

- Exploration of Kyrk Molla Hill (Forty Mullahs Hill), a fortress covering three hectares that includes the famous Mamun Library (8th-9th centuries) and an ancient cemetery believed to hold present-day healing powers.
- Walk through Fakhreddin Razi Mausoleum (a.k.a. mausoleum of Arslan II, 13th century), one of the oldest, most unique structures in all of Central Asia.
- Drive to the Mausoleum of Najmaddin Kubra (12th century), the founder of the Sufi order Kubrawiya, and a favorite pilgrimage site for visiting Muslims.
- Walk through the Sultan Ali Mausoleum (16th century), a half-completed structure intended for a powerful Turkmen ruler but left unfinished due to ongoing war.

Drive to the Darvaza Gas Crater, located in the middle of the Karakum desert (270 km, 4 hrs), including an 8 km drive across sand dunes. The fire crater is about 80 m in diameter and 30 m deep, and staring into this 'Door to Hell' with your own eyes is an experience like no other. Set up camp and enjoy a delicious meal cooked over the fire as you lounge near the burning crater. Overnight in tents or a yurt.

Day 5: Darvaza Gas Crater – Ashgabat

Wake up early to see the sunrise and enjoy a camp-style breakfast before continuing your journey. Before leaving the desert, you'll stop to visit a nearby mud crater with a low, bubbling liquid at the bottom and a water crater filled with glossy turquoise water.

On your return drive to Ashgabat (275 km, 4 hrs), you'll visit the Erbent Nomadic Village, one of the few nomadic villages still existing in the desert, to learn about the traditional Turkmen lifestyle.

Continue your drive to Ashgabat through the desert sands, with stops along the way to take photos of sand dunes and camels.

Arrive in Ashgabat. Free time in the evening. Overnight at the hotel.

Day 6: Ashgabat

Check out from the hotel by noon and transfer to the airport for departure to your next destination. End of the Ancient Cities of Turkmenistan Tour.

Inclusions:

- Accommodation based on double/twin room in a hotel, with breakfast (4 nights);
- Accommodation in a yurt or a tent at Darvaza, shared room, with dinner and breakfast (1 night);
- Utensils and necessary equipment for camping at Darvaza (sleeping bags, sleeping mats, pillows, dining table, chairs);
- Transportation – all transfers and pick and drop airports (1-2 people in sedan, 3-8 in minivan, 4WD on days 4-5);
- Private, local English-speaking escort guide;
- Entrance fees to the sights as per itinerary;
- Economy class flight tickets from Ashgabat-Mary-Ashgabat and Ashgabat-Dashoguz (flight times subject to change based upon availability);
- Visa support letter for Turkmenistan tourist visa;
- 1L bottle of water per person per day.

Exclusions:

- Consular fees for Turkmenistan tourist visa and migration tax;
- International flight tickets before and after the tour;
- Tips are not included (driver, guide, porter);
- Hotel charges for additional services;
- Full board (lunches and dinners);
- Travel insurance;
- All other charges and services not mentioned under "Inclusions".