Central Asia

Pre Tour Information

Welcome to Central Asia...

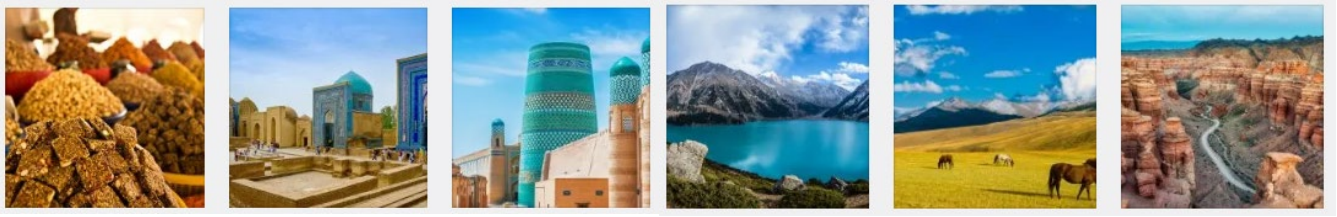
Welcome to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan – the five 'stans' of Central Asia. This is a region where vast distances, extreme landscapes and layered histories shape every part of your journey.

Picture the Karakum Desert stretching for hundreds of kilometres across Turkmenistan, where a burning gas crater has been alight for decades, and contrast this with Kyrgyzstan's high-altitude pastures, where lakes like Son-Kul sit above 3,000 metres, surrounded by open grasslands and seasonal nomadic camps. In Uzbekistan, Silk Road cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara reveal centuries-old madrassas covered in intricate blue tilework, while Kazakhstan's canyons and alpine lakes cut through rugged mountain terrain.

Central Asia has long been a crossroads of empires. Alexander the Great passed through these lands, the Silk Road carried goods and ideas between continents, and Soviet influence still shapes infrastructure, architecture and daily life. Today, you'll encounter a mix of Persian, Turkic and Russian cultural layers, often within the same city.

This is not a region of uniform travel. You'll move between remote deserts, long overland journeys, high mountain roads and developing infrastructure. Conditions vary widely, from dry heat in lowland areas to near-freezing temperatures at altitude, and access to services can be limited outside major cities.

What makes this journey remarkable is not just the landscapes, but the sense of stepping into places where traditions remain active, distances are vast, and the experience feels far removed from more travelled parts of the world.



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Emergency Contact Procedure Reminder and Information

Ensuring the safety and well-being of our guests is of paramount importance to us at Crooked Compass. We would like to take this opportunity to remind you about our emergency contact procedure and where to find your contact details, as well as provide guidance on what to do in different emergency situations.

Local Crooked Compass 24/7 Assistance Contact can be found on your detailed itinerary. This is the **first point** of contact for any concerns or queries whilst in destination for all types of assistance.

Emergency Services can be found here in this document.

Notify Crooked Compass (Non-Urgent)
For any non-urgent enquiries, please contact our office within Australian office hours (Mon – Fri, 9am – 5.30pm AEST) on +61 2 8089 1370 or via email info@crooked-compass.com

Consular Assistance: Please familiarise yourself with your local embassy's details before travel.

Managing Expectations

Central Asia rewards travellers who arrive curious rather than over-polished. Across Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, you'll find grand Silk Road cities, huge landscapes and very warm hospitality but also a few logistical wobbles that feel much easier when you know they're coming.

Here's a list of things to be aware of before you go:

Distances feel bigger
Journeys can look modest on a map, then turn into long days because mountain roads, desert stretches and border formalities slow everything down. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, especially, reward time and patience. Guides usually build in photo stops, tea breaks and the occasional "roadside leg stretch", which is code for embracing the scenery.

Borders take patience
Crossing between the Stans can be smooth one day and slow the next. Luggage checks, paperwork, walking between border posts and waiting for the whole group are all part of the rhythm. Keep medication, snacks, water and reading glasses in your day bag.

Toilets vary wildly
City hotels may be perfectly comfortable, then a highway stop reminds you very clearly that you are in Central Asia. Squat toilets, strong smells and limited paper still happen. Carry tissues, sanitiser and a small coin stash, and treat good facilities as a pleasant little victory.

Cash still matters
Cards work in many city hotels and restaurants, but cash remains useful for markets, toilets, tips, small cafés and rural stops. Uzbekistan travellers also note that Visa and Mastercard acceptance can vary, so having both is sensible. Your guide will usually point out reliable ATMs before remote sections.

Turkmenistan is different
Turkmenistan is the most controlled and administratively unusual of the five. Tourist travel generally involves a guide, fixed arrangements and less freedom to wander than in neighbouring countries. Expect the experience to feel fascinating, formal and occasionally surreal.

Ashgabat feels unreal
First-time visitors often find Ashgabat's white marble, wide boulevards and monumental scale striking, especially after Uzbekistan's old cities or Kyrgyzstan's mountain villages. Photography rules can be sensitive around government buildings, so follow your guide rather than your camera instinct. In Turkmenistan, the safest rule is: ask first, snap second.

The desert is basic
A night near Darvaza gas crater is memorable, but it is not a spa retreat with flames. Expect simple desert accommodation, temperature swings, basic washing facilities and power that may be limited. Pack a torch, warm layer and patience; the stars and the crater usually do the heavy lifting.

Hotels have quirks
Boutique does not always mean predictable. Hot water may take time, lifts may be temperamental, rooms may vary within the same hotel, and mountain guesthouses can be simple.

Food is hearty
Plov, bread, kebabs, soups, dumplings and salads appear often. Vegetarian choices exist, but may be repetitive outside big cities, and portions can be generous in a “please, have more” sort of way. Tell your guide about dietary needs early, then keep a few familiar snacks for long travel days.

English comes and goes
In major Uzbek cities and higher-end hotels, English is increasingly common; in rural Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and parts of Turkmenistan, it may be limited. This is where guides become cultural interpreters, not just translators. A smile, patience and a few local greetings go further than speaking louder in English.

Time is elastic
Punctuality exists, but traffic, road works, ceremonies, weather and group logistics can bend the schedule. A “short stop” may lengthen because someone is buying pomegranates, changing money or negotiating with a toilet door. On guided tours, this is normal rather than a failure of planning.

Weather surprises people
Central Asia is not one climate. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan can be fiercely hot, Kazakhstan can feel vast and exposed, and mountain areas in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can turn chilly quickly. Pack layers even in warmer months; the jumper you nearly leave behind may become your favourite travel companion.

Roads get bumpy
The Silk Road was not designed for suspension comfort. Remote routes to canyons, lakes, yurt camps and mountain valleys can be rough, dusty and slow. Sit near the front if you get motion sick, keep water handy, and avoid judging the day by the first pothole.

Wi-Fi is patchy
City hotels usually have connection, but speed and reliability drop in deserts, mountains and border areas. Turkmenistan can feel especially restricted online. Download documents, maps, entertainment and messaging backups before remote sections, then enjoy the rare pleasure of not being instantly reachable.

Hospitality is real
The warmth can catch people off guard: tea, bread, fruit, family photos, handshakes, curious questions and generous hosting. Modest dress, respectful photography and accepting at least a little of what is offered all help. You do not need to understand every word to feel welcomed.

Go gently
Central Asia is not always seamless, and that is part of why it stays with people. With a flexible mindset, a good guide and a willingness to laugh when the plan takes the scenic route, you’ll come home with the sort of stories that polished destinations rarely provide.

General Travel Information

Local Emergency

Turkmenistan

- Fire and rescue services: Call 01
- Medical emergencies: Call 03 or go to the hospital
- Police: Call 02 or go to the nearest police station

Uzbekistan

- Fire and rescue services: Call 101
- Medical emergencies: Call 103 or go to the hospital
- Police: Call 102 or go to the nearest police station

Kyrgyzstan

- Fire and rescue services: Call 101
- Medical emergencies: Call 103 or go to the hospital
- Police: Call 102 or go to the nearest police station

Kazakhstan

- National emergency number: 112
- Fire and rescue services: Call 101
- Medical emergencies: Call 103 or go to the hospital
- Police: Call 102 or go to the nearest police station

Tajikistan

- Fire and rescue services: Call 01 (or 101 in Tashkent)
- Medical emergencies: Call 03 or go to the hospital (or 103 in Tashkent)
- Police: Call 02 or go to the nearest police station (or (102 in Tashkent)
- Ministry of Emergency Situations - Rescue Services: call 050 (or 1050 in Tashkent)

Consular & Embassy Assistance

We strongly advise all travellers to take a proactive approach to their safety and well-being by familiarising themselves with the contact details and address of their local embassy within their destination before embarking on their journey. Knowing how to reach your embassy can provide invaluable support in case of emergencies, unexpected situations, or the need for consular assistance. This essential information ensures that you're well-prepared and equipped to navigate any challenges that might arise during your travels. Your embassy is your lifeline in a foreign land, offering guidance, assistance, and a sense of security while you explore new horizons.

Staying in Touch

Before departing your home country, check with your phone supplier to see if it is compatible with the mobile phone networks in the countries that you are travelling to, and how much it will cost to use it abroad. In some of the more rural reaches of Central Asia, cell phone coverage is not possible.

Phone & Internet

Staying connected across Central Asia varies dramatically by country. In major cities such as Tashkent, Bishkek, Almaty and Dushanbe, mobile data and hotel Wi-Fi are generally usable. In deserts, mountain regions, yurt camps and border areas, you should expect patchy service or no connection at all.

Turkmenistan is the major exception. Mobile phones don't work at all in Turkmenistan unless you have a local SIM. Even then, coverage is generally reliable in major cities like Ashgabat, but once you head into rural or desert areas, it becomes patchy or non-existent. The main mobile provider is Altyn Asyr (TM Cell), which operates under government control. Foreign SIM cards, roaming, and eSIMs do not work in Turkmenistan. Prepaid SIMs with data are available, but internet speeds are extremely slow and many websites are blocked. Internet usage is heavily restricted by the government, and popular sites like social media platforms may be blocked. Internet access is heavily restricted, slow and monitored. Many international websites, social media platforms, messaging apps and independent news sites may be blocked, and VPN access is also actively restricted. Do not assume that WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Google services, news sites or your usual apps will work reliably while you are there.

Note that tools used to circumvent censorship, including VPNs and proxy servers, are actively targeted and blocked. Your internet usage may be monitored, and inspecting of personal devices for prohibited applications or content can happen from time to time. Exercise caution when accessing potentially sensitive or restricted content online.

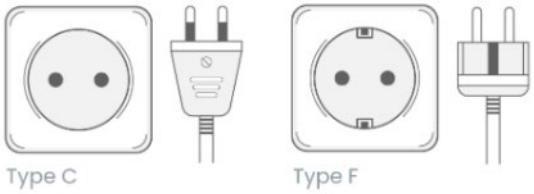
The most practical approach is to download everything you need before entering Turkmenistan, including offline maps, hotel details, flight information, visa documents, travel insurance, emergency contacts and translation tools. Let family or friends know that you may be difficult to contact until you reach Uzbekistan.

In Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, **local SIM cards** are usually a better option than roaming. They are generally affordable and available in major cities, but passport registration is normally required. **eSIMs** can be useful, especially for Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but coverage can be weaker outside cities and they may not work well in remote valleys, desert roads or mountain areas.

You should expect no meaningful connection at places such as Darvaza Gas Crater, Son-Kul Lake, parts of the Kolsai and Kaindy Lake region, Seven Lakes, and some long road sections. Electricity may also be limited at yurt camps, so carry a power bank.

Before leaving each major city, download offline maps, save key documents to your phone, screenshot hotel addresses in both English and local script where possible, and complete any urgent messages, banking or email. Connectivity on this journey is not something to rely on continuously; it is something to manage carefully around cities and remote travel days.

Electrical Voltage & Plug Adaptors



Electricity across Central Asia is generally 220–240V, 50Hz, with **Type C** and **Type F** (European two-round pin plugs) used throughout all five countries. A standard European adapter will work across the entire trip.

Where this becomes important is reliability and access, which varies significantly depending on location:

Turkmenistan (Ashgabat & Darvaza)
In Ashgabat, electricity is stable in hotels. However, at the Darvaza Gas Crater yurt camp, power is extremely limited. Expect solar or generator-based electricity only, with minimal charging opportunities and no power overnight. Bring a fully charged power bank.

Uzbekistan (Bukhara, Khiva, Tashkent, Samarkand)
Electricity is reliable in hotels and cities. Occasional short outages can occur, but these are usually brief. Charging is straightforward throughout this section of the trip.

Kyrgyzstan (Son-Kul, Issyk-Kul, Karakol)
Son-Kul yurt camp (3,000m+): Electricity is limited to certain hours only and often switched off overnight. Heating relies on stoves, not electric systems. Nights are cold, and you cannot rely on charging devices.
Other yurt camps and rural stays: Power is generally available but can be inconsistent.

Kazakhstan (Saty, Almaty)
In Almaty, electricity is stable and reliable. In Saty and near Kolsai/Kaindy Lakes, supply is generally available but can be inconsistent due to the remote location. Power outages are uncommon but possible.

Tajikistan (Dushanbe & Penjikent)
In Dushanbe, electricity is reliable. In smaller towns like Penjikent, power supply is generally stable but can be less consistent, with occasional outages.

What this means for you

- Bring at least one high-capacity power bank (essential for desert and mountain stays)
- Charge devices fully whenever you are in major cities or hotels
- Do not rely on charging opportunities in yurt camps or remote areas
- Consider a multi-port adapter if travelling with multiple devices
- A headlamp or small torch is useful for camps where lighting is limited

If your device plug doesn’t match, bring a universal adaptor with a built-in voltage converter. These are easy to find at airports or electronics shops. If you forget, most hotel front desks can lend or sell one.

Facts & Figures

Geography & Location

Central Asia sits between Russia to the north, China to the east, and Iran and Afghanistan to the south. The region is made up of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, and is defined by extreme landscapes. You'll cross the Karakum and Kyzylkum deserts, travel along vast open steppe, and move into high mountain systems such as the Tien Shan and Pamir ranges, where elevations regularly exceed 3,000 metres. These landscapes directly affect travel, with long overland distances, remote roads, and high-altitude conditions.

Population & Cities

Kazakhstan is the most populous of the five with around 20 million people, followed by Uzbekistan with approximately 37 million. Turkmenistan has around 6 million, Kyrgyzstan about 7 million, and Tajikistan roughly 10 million. Major cities include Ashgabat, Tashkent, Samarkand, Bishkek, Almaty and Dushanbe, which act as key transport and cultural centres. Outside these cities, populations are more dispersed, with many rural and semi-nomadic communities.

Government & Economy

Turkmenistan is a highly centralised presidential state with a controlled economy largely driven by gas exports. Uzbekistan operates as a presidential republic with an economy based on agriculture, mining and growing tourism. Kyrgyzstan is a parliamentary republic with a more open political system and relies on agriculture, mining and remittances. Kazakhstan is a presidential republic with the region's largest economy, driven by oil, gas and minerals. Tajikistan is also a presidential republic, with an economy based on agriculture, hydropower and remittances from overseas workers.

Time Zone

Central Asia spans multiple time zones. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan operate on UTC+5, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (Almaty region) on UTC+6, and Tajikistan on UTC+5. None of these countries observe daylight saving time. When travelling across borders, you will need to adjust your clock accordingly.

Religion

Islam is the dominant religion across the region, primarily Sunni, particularly in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Turkmenistan also has a Muslim majority, though religious practice is more controlled. There are also Russian Orthodox Christian minorities, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, along with smaller communities of other faiths.

National Holidays

Navruz (held around 21 March) is the most widely celebrated festival across all five countries, marking the Persian New Year and the arrival of spring with public celebrations, markets and family gatherings. Independence Days are also significant: Turkmenistan (27 September), Uzbekistan (1 September), Kyrgyzstan (31 August), Kazakhstan (16 December), and Tajikistan (9 September). During these periods, cities can be busier, with parades, closures and increased domestic travel. Religious holidays such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are observed across the region, with some businesses closed and services reduced.

Language

Russian is widely used across all five countries, particularly for communication between different ethnic groups and in tourism. Turkmen, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Tajik are the official languages of their respective countries, with Tajik being closely related to Persian. English is spoken in hotels and by guides, but is limited outside major cities, so communication can become more challenging in rural areas.

English	Uzbek	Kyrgyz	Russian
Hello	Assalomu alaykum (ah-sah-LOH-moo ah-LIE-koom)	Salam (sah-LAHM)	Zdravstvuyte (ZDRAST-vooy-tyeh)
Thank you	Rahmat (RAH-mat)	Rahmat (RAH-mat)	Spasibo (spah-SEE-bah)
Yes	Ha (ha)	Ooba (OH-bah)	Da (da)
No	Yo'q (yok)	Jok (jok)	Net (nyet)
Please	Iltimos (il-tee-MOSS)	Suranyç (soo-rah-NICH)	Pozhaluysta (pah-zhah-LOO-stah)
Excuse me / Sorry	Kechirasiz (keh-chee-RAH-seez)	Keciresiz (keh-chee-REH-seez)	Izvinite (eez-vee-NEE-tyeh)
How are you?	Qalaysiz? (kah-lie-SEEZ)	Kandaysyz? (kan-DIE-siz)	Kak dela? (kahk dee-LAH)
I don't understand	Tushunmadim (too-shoon-MAH-dim)	Tushunboydum (too-shoon-BOY-doom)	Ya ne ponimayu (ya nye po-nee-MAH-yu)
Where is...?	... qayerda? (kai-YER-da)	... kayda? (KAI-da)	Gde...? (gdye)
How much is this?	Bu qancha? (boo KAN-cha)	Bul kancha? (bool KAN-cha)	Skolko eto stoit? (SKOL-ka EH-ta STO-it)

Health & Safety

Medical Supplies

This is one adventure where you don't want to forget your medications; it may be hard to get them in the remote reaches of Central Asia.

- Pack medications in your carry-on bag to avoid loss and to have them handy. Ensure any liquids or gels are less than 100ml.
- Keep medicines in their original, labelled containers for a quicker security screen at the airport and a better experience if you get stopped by customs while overseas.
- Bring copies of your prescriptions, written using the generic drug name rather than a brand name, to be prepared for any unforeseen loss of your medications.
- Carry a letter from your doctor explaining the medications you are using and that they are for personal use.
- Consider bringing a filled prescription antibiotic for gastrointestinal illness, electrolytes and motion sickness medicine if you are susceptible.

Crooked Compass highly recommends that you travel with your first aid kit.

Please refer to a travel vaccination specialist for the most up-to-date advice about vaccinations for your destination(s). We encourage you to check with your healthcare provider and take their advice based on your current state of health.

Please follow the link to check the TravelVax website:
👉 TravelVax (https://www.travelvax.com.au/)

Medical Care

Medical care across Central Asia varies significantly by location. In major cities such as Tashkent, Almaty and Dushanbe, you will find private clinics and hospitals with reasonable standards and some English-speaking staff. However, in Turkmenistan, medical facilities are more limited and tightly controlled, and in rural areas across all five countries, facilities are basic with limited equipment.

For this itinerary, you will spend time in remote desert (Darvaza) and high-altitude mountain regions (Son-Kul, Kolsai, Seven Lakes) where medical access is extremely limited or non-existent. In these areas, evacuation to a major city may be required for anything beyond minor issues.

Comprehensive travel insurance with medical evacuation cover is essential for all five countries. You should carry any personal medication with you, along with a basic medical kit, as pharmacies outside major cities may have limited supply.

Water Safety

Tap water across Central Asia is not reliably safe for travellers, so you should use sealed bottled or properly filtered water at all times. Even in major cities such as Tashkent, Bishkek and Almaty, where water may be treated and used by locals, it is still not recommended for visitors.

- Use sealed bottled water at all times, including in cities
- Avoid ice unless you are certain it is made from safe water
- Use bottled water for brushing your teeth if you have a sensitive stomach
- Avoid swallowing water when showering in rural areas
- Carry a reusable bottle with purification tablets or a filter if preferred

Even in places where water is technically treated, consistency is not guaranteed. Bottled water is the safest and most reliable option throughout this journey.

Food Safety

Food throughout this journey is generally safe, particularly as your itinerary uses trusted restaurants, established hotels and experienced local hosts, and serious food issues are uncommon on well-run tours like this. We recommend you prioritise freshly cooked, hot meals, be selective with raw salads and uncooked garnishes especially outside major cities, approach unpasteurised dairy and local drinks such as kymyz with caution if you have a sensitive stomach. Get advice from your guide with regard to street food.

Dietary Considerations

Special dietary requests are required to be notified to us at the time of booking. Although we will use reasonable endeavours to accommodate requests, we cannot guarantee requests will be met by suppliers. It is your responsibility to check that meals and beverages do not contain any allergens.

Food across Central Asia is heavily based on meat, bread, dairy and rice, so dietary needs require planning, particularly outside major cities. Below is what to expect for common requirements:

Vegetarian diets are manageable but limited. You'll find options such as bread (non), rice, salads, vegetable stews and soups, particularly in Uzbekistan. However, many dishes are cooked with meat broth or animal fat, even if no visible meat is present. In rural areas and yurt camps, alternatives may be basic and repetitive.

Vegan diets are difficult to maintain consistently. Dairy (yoghurt, cream, butter) and eggs are widely used, often without being clearly identified. In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, dairy is central to the diet, including fermented products such as kymyz (mare's milk). Vegan options become very limited outside cities.

Gluten-Free can be challenging. Bread (non) is served at almost every meal, and cross-contamination is common. Many dishes are safe in theory (grilled meats, rice, vegetables), but preparation surfaces and utensils are shared. Clear communication is essential.

Dairy-Free / Lactose Intolerance. Dairy is widely used across the region, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Expect yoghurt-based sauces, cream, butter and fermented drinks. Dairy-free can be managed in cities, but becomes difficult in rural and nomadic settings, where alternatives are limited.

Nut Allergies require caution but are generally manageable. Nuts are not a dominant ingredient in most main dishes, but they do appear in desserts, sweets and some salads. Cross-contamination risk exists in kitchens, particularly in smaller establishments.

Severe Allergies (e.g. anaphylaxis)
If you have a severe allergy, you need to take extra precautions. Awareness of allergies can be limited outside major cities, and communication may be challenging. Emergency medical care is also limited in remote areas.

What this means for you

- Carry a translated dietary/allergy card in Russian (most widely understood)
- Inform your guide in advance so they can assist with meals
- Bring snacks or specialty foods, especially for long drives and remote stays
- Be prepared for simpler or repetitive meals in places like Son-Kul, Darvaza and rural Tajikistan
- If you have a severe allergy, carry appropriate medication (e.g. EpiPen) at all times

Altitude Sickness

If on your travels, you ascend altitudes higher than 2000m, you may feel some effects of altitude. Even if you've been to high elevations previously, you could have a different reaction each time. For most people, the symptoms are mild and will pass in a day or so.

You should take it easy, avoid smoking and alcohol, and drink plenty of fluids. Some people take altitude sickness medication, starting when they arrive or one day before. Don't take sleeping medications, as they suppress respiration. The most common symptoms are lightheadedness, shortness of breath, headache, nausea, sleeplessness, and loss of appetite. If these are bothersome, you should start taking medication. Even though you may experience a decreased appetite, force yourself to eat soups and some basic foods.

If these 'normal' altitude symptoms become unmanageable, you must inform your Trip Leader. Please let the leader know if you experience any of the following: serious difficulty breathing, mental confusion, a severe and unremitting headache, continued difficulty breathing after a period of rest, or poor physical coordination.

TIP: Even if your risk is medium to low, it may be worthwhile to bring a medication with you so that you have it on hand for immediate use if needed. No one wants to buy medication they don't need, but on the other hand, no one wants to interrupt their trip for a doctor's visit.

Altitude in Central Asia
Travelling through Central Asia involves visiting several high-altitude locations where you may feel the effects of reduced oxygen, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and parts of Tajikistan.

The most significant exposure is at Son-Kul Lake (3,016 metres). Other elevated areas include the Kolsai Lakes (up to ~2,250 metres) in Kazakhstan and the Seven Lakes region in Tajikistan (up to ~2,400 metres).

There is typically some gradual increase in elevation in the days prior, with time spent in places such as Bishkek (~800 metres), followed by excursions into higher areas like Ala-Archa National Park (up to ~2,000–2,500 metres), and stays in towns such as Kochkor (~1,800 metres). This provides partial acclimatisation.

Safety & Security

Reasonable Precautions

- Travellers are advised to exercise good sense, take some reasonable precautions and avoid irresponsible behaviour like carrying too much cash and displaying valuables like cameras, phones and expensive jewellery, particularly in crowded bazaars
- Always exercise caution
- Do not take unnecessary valuables with you
- A money belt or something similar, worn close to your body, is the best way to carry passports, airline tickets and money
- DO NOT leave any valuables in ANY hotel room, please use SAFETY DEPOSIT BOXES - items are left at the individual's risk
- Pickpockets operate everywhere, particularly in tourist areas and crowded markets. You must always exercise care
- Be aware that anything left unsupervised may be liable to theft
- During long travel days, border crossings and stops, always keep your belongings within sight or physically with you

Travel Advisories

Please use the link below to check the Smart Traveller website and register your travel:

👉 Smart Traveller (http://smartraveller.gov.au)

LGBTQIA+

All travellers face risks overseas. Risks can be higher for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTIA+) people in some destinations. It's your responsibility to get the facts first and take steps to reduce your risks.

Attitudes across Central Asia are generally conservative, and legal and social acceptance varies by country. Public displays of affection are uncommon for all couples, and discretion is advised, particularly in rural areas, small towns and more traditional communities. In cities such as Almaty and Tashkent, attitudes may be more relaxed, but it is still not a visibly open environment.

👉 Advice for LGBTQIA+ travellers (https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/before-you-go/who-you-are/LGBTQIA)

Drug & Alcohol Policy

Under no circumstances are illegal drugs permitted at any point during your trip. Drug laws across all five countries are strict, and penalties can be severe, including imprisonment.

Alcohol is widely available in countries such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and is commonly consumed. However, in Turkmenistan and more conservative or remote areas, availability may be limited and attitudes more reserved.

Always consume alcohol respectfully and follow your guide's advice, particularly in rural communities and traditional settings, where expectations may differ.

Entry Requirements

Crooked Compass does not provide visa or health advice. The information in this section is for general guidance only.

Please ensure you check and comply with visa requirements for the country you are visiting. For the most accurate and up-to-date information, contact your nearest embassy or consulate. If you need assistance, we recommend using a specialist visa agency such as CIBT Visas.

Visas

If applicable, you must obtain the appropriate visas before embarking on your trip. Country entry regulations can change daily; your travel agent can provide you with visa information. Please consult your relevant embassy for all details, such as opening hours or costs. Certain visas cannot be obtained on arrival, and during the peak months, it may take longer than normal to get them. Please allow extra time to do this. Crooked Compass encourages the use of a visa specialist service such as CIBT Visas to ensure you have the correct and up-to-date information surrounding visa requirements for your destination(s). Visa and other entry and exit conditions (such as currency, customs and quarantine regulations) can change at short notice.

EACH CLIENT IS SOLELY RESPONSIBLE FOR OBTAINING ALL NECESSARY VISAS BEFORE JOINING A TOUR. Crooked Compass does not accept responsibility for changes in regulations or requirements for visas. The information provided is given in good faith.

Insurance

Travel insurance is compulsory for all Crooked Compass itineraries. You must be covered for personal accident, medical expenses, cancellation, curtailment, repatriation, and more. In remote areas, your policy must include helicopter evacuation in case of emergency.

Be aware that many adventure activities — such as trekking, white-water rafting, or bungee jumping — are often excluded from standard insurance policies. If you plan to join such activities, please check your coverage or purchase additional protection. We also recommend keeping a photocopy of your insurance documents separate from the original while travelling.

Global Rescue

Have you considered evacuation coverage? Crooked Compass partners with Global Rescue, a world leader in medical and security evacuation and advisory services. Unlike most standard travel insurance, Global Rescue offers field rescue from the point of injury or illness, anywhere in the world.

👉 Global Rescue

Passports

- Must be in good condition
- Must be valid for at least 6 months after your scheduled return
- Must have 4 blank pages
- By law, you must carry your passport at all times

We recommend you carry colour photocopies of key documents, including the photo page of your passport, plus any applicable visas, air itinerary, credit cards, and an alternative form of ID. Add emergency phone numbers like your credit card company and the number for your travel insurance plan. Store copies separately from the originals.

Money Matters

Local Currency

Across this journey, you will move through five different currencies, none of which are easily exchanged outside their own country. This means you need to actively manage how much you carry at each stage of the trip.

The most restrictive currency is the Turkmenistani manat, which is tightly controlled and very difficult to exchange outside Turkmenistan. You should only obtain what you need while in Ashgabat and use most of it before leaving. Your guide will advise where to exchange, as rates and locations can change.

In Uzbekistan, the som is easy to use within the country but has limited value once you leave. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are more flexible, with more stable currencies and more consistent access to ATMs and exchange services. Tajikistan's somoni is again largely local, and you should plan to use it before departure.

Because your itinerary includes multiple land borders and remote regions, the most practical approach is:

- Exchange or withdraw in major cities before moving on
- Avoid carrying large leftover amounts into the next country
- Keep smaller denominations for daily use, especially outside cities

It is also advisable to carry some USD cash as a backup. USD is the most widely accepted foreign currency across Central Asia and can be useful for exchanging money or in situations where local banking services are limited, particularly in remote areas.

Notes should be in good condition and relatively new, as older or damaged bills are often not accepted or may receive a lower exchange rate. It is helpful to carry a mix of denominations, including smaller notes.

USD is not typically used for day-to-day purchases, so you will still need local currency for regular spending.

Border crossings are not places to manage money. Facilities are basic, and you should not expect ATMs, exchange counters, or reliable services. In some cases, you may also need small cash payments immediately after crossing (for example, short transfers or local transport), so having the correct currency or small USD notes is useful.

Turkmenistan
Currency: Turkmenistani manat
Currency code: TMT
Currency symbol: m
Currency subunit: 1 manat = 100 tenge
Banknotes: 1, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200, 500 manat
Coins: 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50 tenge
Note: This is a restricted currency and cannot be exchanged outside Turkmenistan.

Uzbekistan
Currency: Uzbekistani som
Currency code: UZS
Currency symbol: so'm
Currency subunit: 1 som = 100 tiyin
Banknotes: 1,000 to 200,000 som
Coins: Rarely used in practice
Note: High-value notes are common, so you may carry large bundles of cash.

Kazakhstan
Currency: Kazakhstani tenge
Currency code: KZT
Currency symbol: ₸
Currency subunit: 1 tenge = 100 tiyn
Banknotes: 200 to 20,000 tenge
Coins: 1 to 100 tenge
Note: The most developed banking and payment system in the region.

Kyrgyzstan
Currency: Kyrgyzstani som
Currency code: KGS
Currency symbol: сом
Currency subunit: 1 som = 100 tyiyn
Banknotes: 20 to 5,000 som
Coins: 1, 3, 5, 10 som
Note: A stable currency, widely used locally with consistent denominations.

Tajikistan
Currency: Tajikistani somoni
Currency code: TJS
Currency symbol: SM
Currency subunit: 1 somoni = 100 diram
Banknotes: 1 to 500 somoni
Coins: 1 to 50 diram
Note: Primarily used within the country, with limited exchange options outside major cities.

Payment Methods

How you pay will vary significantly across Central Asia, and you should expect a mix of card and cash use depending on where you are.

In major cities such as Tashkent, Almaty, Bishkek and Dushanbe, ATMs are generally available and cards are accepted in hotels, larger restaurants and some shops. Kazakhstan, particularly Almaty, has the most widespread and reliable card usage, including contactless payments.

However, outside of major cities and tourist centres, cash becomes essential. In smaller towns, rural areas and remote regions, card facilities are often unavailable or unreliable, and ATMs may be limited or out of service.

Turkmenistan is the most restrictive in terms of payment systems. Card use is very limited, foreign cards may not work reliably, and cash is required for most transactions. Outside major urban areas, payment facilities are extremely limited.

Uzbekistan has seen steady improvements in card acceptance, but many everyday transactions, including markets, small eateries and local transport, are still cash-based.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan both rely heavily on cash outside their capital cities, particularly in rural and mountainous regions where there may be no access to banking services at all.

A practical rule across the region: if you are leaving a capital city or major town, assume you will need enough cash for the next few days.

Notifying Card Providers: Many credit card companies and banks have fraud alert departments that will freeze your card if they see suspicious charges, such as charges or withdrawals from another country. To avoid an accidental security block, it is a good idea to notify your credit card company and/or bank that you will be using your cards abroad.

Tipping Culture

Tipping across Central Asia is modest and not deeply ingrained in daily life, but it is customary and widely expected within the tourism industry.

In restaurants, rounding up the bill or leaving a small amount is sufficient. In higher-end restaurants in cities such as Tashkent or Almaty, around 5–10% is appreciated if a service charge is not already included. Outside major cities, tipping is less common.

For drivers and guides, tipping is customary.

A note about tipping your guide and driver:
We realise tipping can be a sensitive subject. While tips are widely accepted, they remain at your discretion. Guests often ask for guidance, so as a general reference, USD10 per day for your tour guide and USD3–5 per day for your driver is appropriate (paid in local currency). For trekking or hiking, allowing around USD5–10 per day for porters is a helpful guide.

In small group tours, tipping is generally given per group rather than per person. For private travellers or very small groups, the full suggested amount applies, as your guide and driver are working exclusively with you.

As group size increases, guests often contribute individually, with the total amount adjusted to remain reasonable rather than increasing in direct proportion to the number of travellers. As a general guide:

- 1–3 people: USD10 per day for your guide and USD3–5 per day for your driver (total)
- 4–6 people: USD10–20 per day for your guide and USD5–10 per day for your driver (total)
- 7–12 people: USD20–30 per day for your guide and USD10–15 per day for your driver (total)

These amounts are typically pooled and given as a single tip, reflecting the level of service rather than the number of people.

Everyday Expenses

If your tour covers accommodation, guides, activities, and breakfasts, you'll primarily need spending money for extras such as lunches, dinners, drinks, small souvenirs, and tips. It's best to carry small bills, as many purchases are made in cash, particularly outside major cities. Always keep some small bills on hand for spontaneous purchases or tipping.

Spending across this itinerary varies quite a bit depending on where you are.

- Turkmenistan is one of the more expensive and controlled environments, with fewer options and higher prices, particularly in Ashgabat.
- Uzbekistan offers strong value, especially for food and local experiences.
- Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are generally the most affordable, particularly in rural areas where spending opportunities are limited.
- Kazakhstan, especially Almaty, is the most expensive of the five.

On many days, particularly in places like Son-Kul or remote yurt camps, your meals are included and there is little or nothing to spend money on. On other days, especially in cities, spending can increase quickly.

Typical daily out-of-pocket (based on your itinerary):

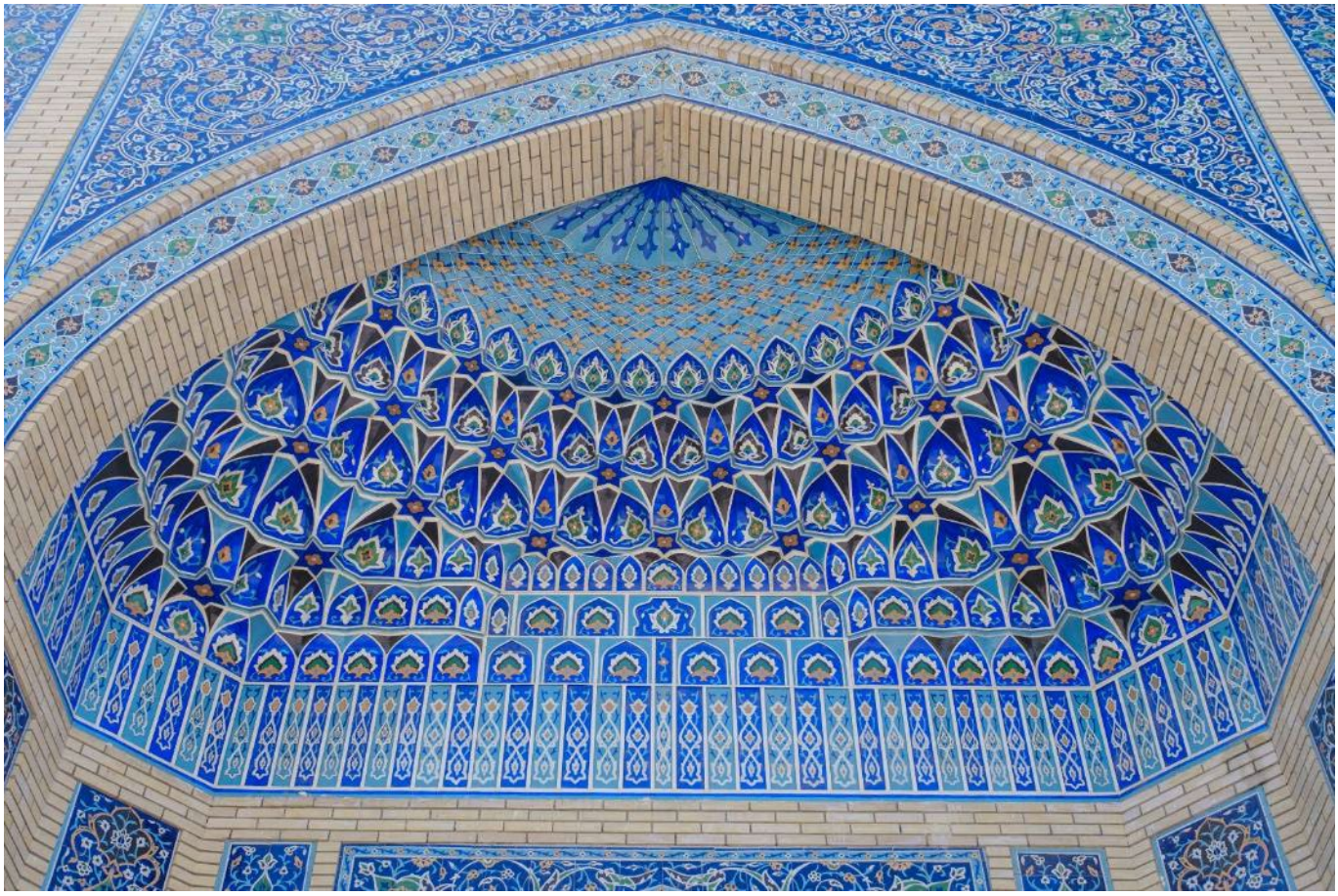
- Turkmenistan: USD 50–90 per day
- Uzbekistan: USD 25–70 per day
- Kyrgyzstan: USD 20–50 per day
- Kazakhstan: USD 50–100 per day
- Tajikistan: USD 20–50 per day

A simple local meal may cost around USD 3–10, while a mid-range restaurant meal in cities such as Tashkent or Almaty may range from USD 15–30. Coffee is usually USD 2–5, and bottled water is inexpensive across all countries.

You'll also make frequent small purchases at roadside stops, markets and villages, often in cash and in small amounts.

Money Requested on Tour

Whilst every precaution is taken to ensure all services as per your itinerary are prepaid before your arrival, in areas where tourism is still being developed, you may, on occasion, be asked for additional funds for incidentals such as fuel and water. Under no circumstances are you to part with cash to any crew or local person claiming to work for Crooked Compass. Should you be requested to provide such funds, please contact the emergency contact number immediately for support. Crooked Compass is unable to take responsibility without prior authorisation from head office for monies handed over to the crew or local persons.



Getting There

Most travellers enter Central Asia through a major city such as Ashgabat, Tashkent, Almaty or Bishkek, depending on the route. Arrival experiences vary noticeably between countries.

In Turkmenistan, arrival formalities are more controlled and can take longer, with stricter document checks and occasional additional procedures. In contrast, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have more streamlined processes, with faster immigration and more modern airport facilities. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan sit somewhere in between, with smaller airports and simpler infrastructure.

Departure airports across the region are generally smaller than major international hubs. Check-in and security are straightforward but can be slower due to limited counters, so arriving around 3 hours before international flights is recommended.

Border Crossings

Travelling through the “Five Stans” typically involves multiple land border crossings, and these are often one of the more unpredictable parts of the journey.

Expect:

- Manual processes rather than automated systems
- Variable waiting times, from 30 minutes to several hours
- Basic infrastructure, with limited shelter or seating
- No reliable access to food, water, or currency exchange

In some cases, you will need to exit one country, walk across a neutral zone carrying your luggage, and enter the next country on foot. Distances are usually short, but surfaces can be uneven, and conditions may be hot, dusty, or exposed.

Border opening hours can also vary, particularly in countries like Turkmenistan, where crossings may close for scheduled breaks or without much notice.

- Keep documents easily accessible
- Carry water and essentials with you
- Avoid tight onward connections on crossing days

Internal Flights & Luggage Allowance

Due to the size of Central Asia and the long distances between key regions, internal and regional flights are a practical part of travel, particularly when moving between countries or avoiding multi-day overland journeys.

While many flights run as scheduled, delays and last-minute changes can occur due to weather, operational issues or airport constraints. Your tour leader will keep you informed if there are any changes, but flexibility is important when travelling in this region.

Airports are generally small and functional, with simple boarding processes and limited facilities compared to major international hubs.

Baggage allowances vary slightly between airlines, but as a general guide:

- Checked baggage: typically 20–23kg
- Carry-on: usually 7–10kg

Limits are usually enforced, and excess baggage fees can be high, so it's worth keeping your luggage within these ranges. It's also a good idea to check your specific airline's allowance before departure, as policies can change.

Climate

Central Asia's climate is shaped by its inland position, large distances, and sharp changes in elevation. As you move through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, you will pass through dry deserts, open steppe and high mountain terrain, often within a relatively short timeframe.

In Turkmenistan and western Uzbekistan, conditions are arid, with very little rainfall and wide temperature swings between day and night. In hotter periods, temperatures can exceed 40°C, particularly in exposed desert areas where there is little shade or shelter. Nights can cool quickly, especially outside peak summer.

In Uzbekistan's cities, including Bukhara and Samarkand, the climate remains dry and continental. Temperatures can be high during warmer months, particularly in mid-summer, while evenings are generally more comfortable outside peak heat periods. Shade is limited in open historical sites, so exposure to sun and heat is a consistent factor.

In Kyrgyzstan and eastern Kazakhstan, the landscape shifts to alpine terrain, where elevation has a direct impact on conditions. At locations such as Son-Kul Lake (over 3,000m), temperatures are significantly lower than in the lowlands. Even when daytime conditions feel mild, nights can drop close to 0°C, with strong winds and rapidly changing weather.

In Tajikistan, particularly around the Fann Mountains and Seven Lakes, you will encounter similar high-altitude conditions. The air is cooler and drier, the sun is more intense, and temperature differences between day and night are noticeable.

Across the region, rainfall is generally low in desert and lowland areas, but when it does occur, it can be brief and intense, especially in mountainous regions. Dust, wind and dry air are common in desert environments, while fog, cloud and reduced visibility can affect travel at higher elevations.

Seasonality

Central Asia experiences four distinct seasons, with a continental climate that brings significant variation between regions, altitudes and times of day.

Spring

From March to May, temperatures begin to rise, with cities typically ranging from 10–25°C as the season progresses. Conditions are generally pleasant, though rainfall increases, particularly in foothills and mountain regions. Roads can become muddy in rural areas, and rivers may run higher due to snowmelt. Higher elevations remain cool, and some mountain passes may still have lingering snow or remain closed early in the season.

Summer

From June to August, summer brings the most extreme contrasts. In desert and lowland areas such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, temperatures commonly reach 35–45°C, with dry air and intense sun exposure. Shade is limited, and heat can feel constant during the day.

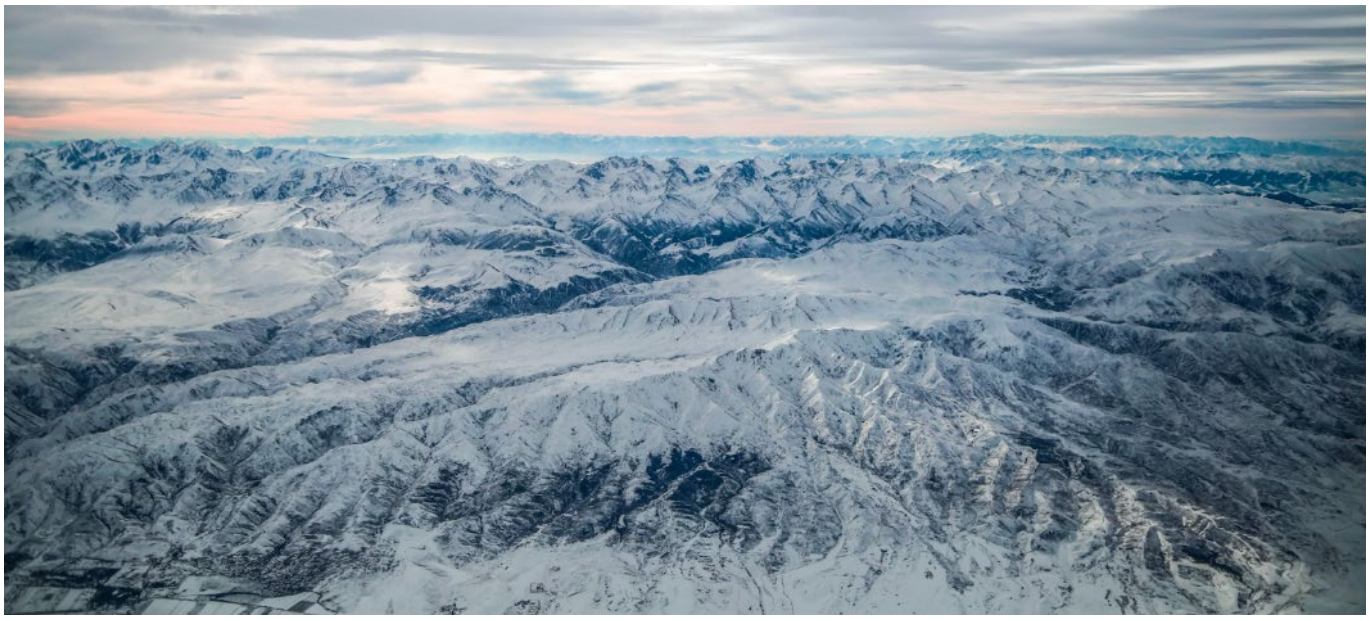
In contrast, mountain regions in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan remain much cooler, generally between 10–25°C depending on altitude. At higher elevations, temperatures can drop close to 0°C overnight. Sudden storms, strong winds and rapid weather changes are common in the mountains.

Autumn

From September to November, temperatures gradually ease across the region. Early autumn is often warm and stable, while by November conditions are noticeably cooler, typically ranging from 5–20°C. Skies are generally clear, and rainfall is lower. Mountain areas cool quickly, especially at night, and early snowfall is possible at higher elevations later in the season.

Winter

From December to February, winter brings cold conditions across all five countries. In cities, temperatures can range from around -5°C to 5°C in milder areas, and -5°C to -15°C in colder regions such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Mountain regions can drop well below -15°C. Snowfall is common in higher elevations, and some roads or passes may become difficult or inaccessible. Desert areas remain dry but can still experience freezing temperatures, particularly at night.



Travel and Terrain

Travelling through Central Asia means covering large distances across desert plains, steppe, and high mountain terrain, where road conditions and infrastructure change noticeably from one country to the next. Distances that look manageable on a map often take much longer in reality due to terrain, road quality and border formalities.

In Turkmenistan, travel is largely across flat desert landscapes. Roads around major cities are well maintained, but once you move into the Karakum Desert, surfaces become rougher and more uneven. Long stretches of driving involve open, exposed terrain with little infrastructure. Access to remote sites may require leaving the main road and continuing over sandy or unsealed tracks, followed by short walks across loose ground.

In Uzbekistan, road conditions are generally better, with long paved highways connecting major cities such as Bukhara, Khiva and Samarkand. However, these journeys are often long and monotonous, crossing dry desert and steppe with limited stops. Outside cities, surfaces can vary, and roadside facilities are basic. Walking within historic cities involves uneven stone paths, steps and extended time on foot, often in exposed conditions with little shade.

Moving into Kyrgyzstan, the terrain shifts dramatically. Travel becomes slower and more physically demanding as roads climb into mountain regions with steep gradients, tight bends and unsealed sections. Access to high-altitude areas such as alpine lakes requires 4WD vehicles, with rough, rocky tracks and river crossings in some areas. At elevations above 3,000 metres, such as Son-Kul, the thinner air, cold temperatures and wind add a physical element to the journey. Even short walks can feel more demanding, and weather conditions can change quickly.

In Kazakhstan, road conditions improve again on main routes, particularly near larger cities. However, reaching natural sites such as alpine lakes and canyons often involves leaving sealed roads and continuing on uneven tracks using off-road vehicles. These sections can be slow, dusty and bumpy, with limited facilities along the way.

In Tajikistan, travel is again shaped by mountainous terrain. Roads between towns are often narrow, winding and variable in condition, with sections of rough gravel, potholes and occasional washouts. Progress can be slow, particularly in remote valleys and near the Fann Mountains. Journeys that appear short can take several hours due to terrain and road quality.

Across all five countries, you should expect:

- Long travel days, often 6–10 hours or more
- Variable road quality, from smooth highways to rough, unsealed tracks
- Limited roadside infrastructure, especially outside major towns
- Frequent stops and slower speeds in rural and mountain areas

Overtaking on narrow roads, limited signage, and livestock on roads are all common, particularly outside cities.

From a physical perspective, your journey may include:

- Extended time sitting in vehicles on uneven roads
- Walking on uneven, dusty or rocky surfaces
- Exposure to heat in desert areas and cold at altitude
- Occasional short climbs, steps or hikes at sites and in mountain regions

Travel through Central Asia is not difficult in a technical sense, but it is inconsistent and at times physically tiring. Comfort levels will vary from day to day, and flexibility is important, particularly when dealing with road conditions, weather or delays.

Please note that while we have given guidelines in our itinerary, getting from one place to another can take longer than expected. A short drive on the map might turn into a slow crawl due to congestion, road conditions, road closures or random delays. Roads that were operating at the time of printing your documentation may no longer be accessible at the time of travel, and a one-hour journey may turn into a four-hour expedition. Travel times vary not just because of distance but also because of road conditions and traffic behaviour.

Suggested Packing Items

Travelling through Central Asia means dealing with extremes: hot, dry desert conditions, cold nights at altitude, long drives on rough roads, and remote stays with limited facilities. Layering is essential, as you may go from 40°C desert heat to near-freezing mountain nights within the same trip.

Choose clothing that is lightweight, breathable and quick-drying. If you plan to hand-wash items, fabrics that dry overnight are ideal. Merino wool works particularly well, as it regulates temperature, dries quickly and resists odour – useful when laundry access is limited.

Dress is practical and casual, but should remain modest, particularly in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where covering shoulders and knees is expected at religious sites. You'll also encounter dusty environments, strong sun exposure, and wind, so protective clothing makes a noticeable difference to comfort.

You may spend extended time in vehicles and on uneven terrain, as well as in remote areas such as desert camps and high-altitude yurts, where power, heating and water can be limited. Packing with these conditions in mind will make the trip much more comfortable.

Travel Documents & Money:

☐ Passport (with photocopies)
☐ Letter of Invitation (Turkmenistan)
☐ Printed copy of your itinerary
☐ Travel insurance (with photocopies)
☐ Airline tickets (e-ticket number)
☐ Cash in AUD & US dollars (small denominations for backup use)
☐ Credit Card & ATM Card (See Money Matters section)
☐ Money belt or secure travel pouch

Luggage & Bags:

☐ 1 soft-sided bag (medium size approx. 80–100 litres) – for group tours
☐ Daypack (10–20 litres) – for daily essentials like water, camera, and snacks
☐ Small overnight bag (useful for yurt stays where main luggage may not be easily accessible)

Clothing & Footwear:

☐ Quick-dry clothing
☐ Lightweight long-sleeved shirts and pants
☐ Warm layers for altitude
☐ Thermal base layer (for cold nights at Son-Kul and mountain regions)
☐ Comfortable walking or hiking shoes
☐ Socks (moisture-wicking recommended)
☐ Wide-brim sun hat or visor
☐ Light rain jacket or windbreaker
☐ Sunglasses
☐ Modest clothing for religious sites (covering shoulders and knees)

Optional

- ☐ Lightweight scarf or buff (useful for dust, sun and visiting mosques)
- ☐ Light cotton or wool sweater
- ☐ Swimsuit & cover-up (for hot springs or lakes where applicable)
- ☐ Comfortable sandals or flip-flops

Health & Personal Care:

- ☐ Prescription medications
- ☐ Sunscreen & lip balm (high SPF - sun is strong at altitude)
- ☐ Insect repellent
- ☐ Reusable water bottle with filter
- ☐ Personal first-aid kit
- ☐ Daily essentials (toiletries)
- ☐ Hand sanitiser & antibacterial wipes
- ☐ Motion sickness tablets (useful for winding mountain roads)

Optional

- ☐ Pocket-size tissues (toilets in remote areas may not supply paper)
- ☐ Wet wipes (useful where water is limited)
- ☐ Anti-itch cream or hydrocortisone
- ☐ Biodegradable soap and shampoo
- ☐ Ear plugs (yurt camps, shared spaces, early starts)

Tech & Gear:

- ☐ Charger for devices & power bank
- ☐ Plug adaptors (Type C/F commonly used)
- ☐ Offline maps or downloaded navigation apps
- ☐ Portable battery pack (for remote areas with limited electricity)

Optional

- ☐ Translation app (Russian is widely used; English is limited outside cities)
- ☐ Camera
- ☐ Small flashlight or headlamp (useful in camps and low-lit areas)
- ☐ Spare eyeglasses/contact lenses
- ☐ Dry bags or waterproof stuff sacks (for dust protection)
- ☐ Travel towel

Travel Extras (optional)

- ☐ Small notebook & pen
- ☐ Snacks or energy bars (long drives and limited stops)
- ☐ Small padlocks
- ☐ Binoculars (useful in open landscapes and mountain regions)
- ☐ Sewing kit & hand-wash soap
- ☐ Lightweight reusable shopping bag

Footwear: You'll be walking on uneven surfaces including sand, gravel, rocky trails and cobbled streets, often after long drives. Sturdy walking shoes or light hiking boots with good grip are strongly recommended. It's also helpful to bring a pair of slip-on shoes or sandals, particularly for use in guesthouses, yurt camps, and accommodation where you may be asked to remove your shoes before entering.

Baggage Whilst on Tour

Our baggage allowance policy stipulates that each traveller is allowed to bring no more than 20kg of luggage per person. To ensure smooth logistics and efficient use of space in our vehicles, we recommend opting for a soft-sided bag, as it offers greater flexibility when packing the vehicles. This is particularly important for group tours and larger private groups. It's important to note that some of the accommodations you may be staying in might not have lifts or porterage services available. Being able to manage your luggage is crucial.

Culture & Etiquette

Central Asia is shaped by movement, control, and exchange. For centuries, people, goods, and ideas moved along the Silk Road, linking China, the Middle East, and Europe. At the same time, vast open landscapes supported nomadic life, where mobility, self-sufficiency, and strong community ties were essential. More recently, Soviet rule-imposed structure, language, and infrastructure that still influence daily life today.

These layers are still visible, but each country expresses them differently.

In Uzbekistan, culture is grounded in its historic trading cities. Places like Samarkand and Bukhara developed as fixed centres of religion, scholarship, and commerce, which is reflected in more formal social structures, intricate architecture, and long-established craft traditions.

In Kyrgyzstan, daily life is still closely tied to the land. Seasonal movement, livestock herding, and yurt living remain part of modern life, particularly in high-altitude regions. This creates a culture that feels more informal, adaptable, and closely connected to nature.

In Kazakhstan, the scale of the steppe and the legacy of Soviet planning shape a more modern, urban-facing identity. Cities are structured and outward-looking, while traditional customs still sit alongside contemporary life.

In Turkmenistan, daily life is shaped by strong state control. Public spaces, behaviour, and even access to information are more regulated, which creates a more formal and controlled social environment.

Across all four countries, hospitality is not performative, it is expected. Guests are treated with genuine care, and respect, particularly towards elders, is built into everyday interactions.

Etiquette

Entering Homes, Yurts & Guesthouses
When you're invited into a home or a yurt, the first thing to know is that you'll need to take your shoes off. It's expected every time, not just in formal settings. Your host will guide you on where to sit. Guests are usually seated in the place of honour, often further from the door. In traditional settings, you'll notice a small step or threshold at the entrance. Step over it rather than on it.

At the Table
Meals are generous and continuous. Plates are filled, refilled, and then something else appears. If you keep eating everything, more will keep coming. If you're full, it's fine to leave a small amount on your plate. Bread is treated with quiet respect. You'll see it placed carefully on the table; make you sure don't turn it upside down or treat it casually. Tea is a constant. It's often poured in small amounts and topped up regularly. It's less about the drink and more about the gesture. You might be offered parts of the meal that are unfamiliar, such as fatty cuts or traditional dishes. You're not expected to eat everything but acknowledging it and trying a small amount is appreciated.

Toasts & Alcohol
In some settings, especially in Kazakhstan, you'll notice regular toasts. These are usually short and sincere. You don't need to drink every time. A sip is enough, or even just raising your glass and acknowledging the moment.

Body Language & Everyday Behaviour
If you're sitting on the floor or a low platform, be aware of where your feet are pointing. Avoid directing them towards people. When handing something over use your right hand or both hands rather than your left hand alone. Public affection is low-key. Holding hands is fine, but anything more tends to draw attention, particularly outside major cities.

Children & Family Interactions
Children are generally included in daily life rather than separated from it. You will often see them present during meals, in guesthouses, and around family spaces. It is fine to smile or acknowledge children, but avoid overly familiar behaviour such as touching, picking them up, or taking photos without permission from a parent. In more traditional settings, this can be seen as intrusive.

Religious Sites
You'll visit mosques and religious complexes regularly, particularly in Uzbekistan. Dress modestly, which means shoulders and knees covered. For women, carrying a light scarf is useful, as you may be asked to cover your head in some places. If someone is praying, give them space. Avoid walking directly in front of them or interrupting. Keep your voice low and movements unhurried; these are active places, not just historical sites.

Historic Buildings & Cultural Sites
Many historic sites you visit are not preserved in a "museum-style" way. They are often integrated into daily life or still hold religious or cultural importance. Avoid climbing on structures, leaning on walls, or touching decorative elements such as tiles, carvings, or painted surfaces. In places like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, much of what you see is original and fragile. At mausoleums and tombs, behaviour should remain respectful. Avoid sitting on steps or ledges near burial areas, and keep movement calm and unhurried. In some locations, you may be asked to remove your shoes or cover your head before entering. Your guide will advise when this applies.

Markets & Paying for Things
When buying something at a market, hand money directly to the vendor rather than placing it down and stepping away. Bargaining can happen, but it's usually relaxed and good-natured. A bit of back-and-forth is fine, pushing too hard isn't.

Public Behaviour & Authority
In countries like Turkmenistan and, to a lesser extent, Uzbekistan, behaviour around authority is more formal. Avoid joking about politics, government, or leadership, even casually. If approached by police or officials, remain calm, polite, and defer to your guide. Do not take photos or use your phone in these situations.

You are often required to carry your passport, particularly in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Hotels may also register your stay and provide registration slips. Keep documents accessible but secure, and avoid handing them over unless necessary.

Queuing & Personal Space
Queues are not always orderly in markets, stations, or border crossings. People may stand closer than you are used to or move ahead without formal lines. This is normal and not considered rude locally. Staying calm and patient is more effective than trying to enforce order.

Unusual Customs

Across Central Asia, you will come across small behaviours that are not always explained but are clearly understood by locals. Being aware of them can help you move through interactions more comfortably.

In Uzbekistan, and sometimes elsewhere in the region, you may notice people placing their hand over their heart when greeting or thanking someone. This is a quiet sign of respect and sincerity, often used instead of words.

Bread carries cultural meaning across Central Asia. It is traditionally broken by hand and shared, rather than cut with a knife. If bread is dropped, you may occasionally see it treated with care, such as being picked up, touched to the forehead or lips, and placed somewhere elevated rather than discarded.

In Kyrgyzstan, the structure inside a yurt follows a traditional order. The space directly opposite the entrance is reserved for honoured guests, while other areas may be associated with different roles. Even if this is not formally explained, your host will guide you, and it is worth following their lead.

You may also notice that when pouring tea, particularly in Uzbekistan, cups are often only filled partway. This reflects attentiveness, as it allows the host to keep refilling your cup.

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, horse culture remains an important part of identity and daily life. You may see horses treated with a level of familiarity and respect that reflects this long-standing connection.

In Turkmenistan, daily life can feel more structured and controlled. You may notice very clean, orderly streets with limited visible street activity, particularly in Ashgabat. This reflects the way the country is organised rather than a lack of activity.

Across all countries, you may experience a style of hospitality where offers are repeated more than once. A single refusal may not always be taken as a final answer, so responses are often softened or repeated gently

Dressing Respectfully

What you wear across Central Asia depends heavily on where you are. Cities are relatively relaxed, but expectations shift quickly once you move into religious sites, rural areas, and more conservative environments.

In Uzbekistan, modest dress is important, particularly in historic cities like Bukhara and Samarkand where you will visit mosques, madrassas, and mausoleums throughout the day. Shoulders and knees should be covered when entering religious sites. For women, carrying a light scarf is useful as some locations may ask for head covering, though this is not always strictly enforced.

In Kyrgyzstan, dress is more practical than formal, especially in mountain regions. At places like Son-Kul, you are at over 3,000 metres, where temperatures drop quickly, wind is constant, and conditions can shift within hours. Warm layers, closed shoes, and wind protection are essential, regardless of season. In villages, modest clothing is still preferred, even if not strictly enforced.

In Kazakhstan, cities like Almaty are modern and outward-looking, and you can dress much as you would in a European city. However, when visiting rural areas or small towns such as Saty, more conservative clothing is appropriate to avoid standing out.

In Turkmenistan, dress is noticeably more conservative, particularly in public spaces. Clothing should be neat and modest, with shoulders and knees covered. Women should avoid tight or revealing clothing, as this attracts attention more quickly here than elsewhere on the itinerary.

Footwear matters more than you might expect. You will regularly move between outdoor terrain, religious sites, and homes or yurts where shoes are removed. Slip-on shoes or footwear that is easy to take off and put back on will make this much easier.

Across the region, dressing neatly and modestly is less about strict rules and more about blending in. It reduces unwanted attention and makes interactions smoother, particularly in smaller communities.

Please use your discretion and be sensitive to cultural differences in the countries you visit, in particular, visits to religious buildings and when taking photographs. Your tour leader will advise you of any specific customs to observe.

Photography

In Turkmenistan especially, photography is something to be careful with. There are restrictions around government buildings, police, airports, and infrastructure, and these aren't always clearly marked. When in doubt, don't take the photo or check with your guide who will let you know what's appropriate.

Elsewhere, it's generally fine to take photos, but it's always worth asking before photographing people, particularly in markets or rural areas.

Please remember, we are guests in the countries through which we travel and may sometimes inadvertently cause offence by taking photographs or videos without first asking permission. It is forbidden by law to take photos or videos at borders, as they are considered active military zones. We encourage you to take photos of the busy lives of the locals; however, please ensure you are respectful of local requests and guidelines surrounding photography and videography.

For more information, see *Photography Ethics: How to Respectfully Capture Indigenous Cultures*

Do's & Don'ts

- ✓ Do accept tea when it's offered, even if you only take a sip
- ✓ Do greet the eldest person first in group settings
- ✓ Do use both hands, or your right hand, when giving or receiving something
- ✓ Do pause before eating if others are waiting or a host is speaking
- ✓ Do take your shoes off when entering homes or yurts

- × Don't interrupt or speak over your host, particularly during meals
- × Don't whistle indoors, as it is associated with bad luck in some areas
- × Don't place money, phones, or personal items on the dining table during meals
- × Don't show impatience if plans shift or timing changes, as flexibility is expected
- × Don't expect direct refusals, as people may answer indirectly to avoid causing offence
- × Don't rush interactions — things move at a different pace here

Daily Life & Essentials

Accommodation

Accommodation across Central Asia varies sharply depending on location, and you are likely to stay in a variety of different standards throughout your stay in Central Asia.

In cities like Ashgabat, Tashkent, Almaty, and Dushanbe, hotels are modern because these centres benefited from Soviet-era planning and ongoing investment. Infrastructure such as plumbing, power, and road access is reliable, which allows hotels to operate at a higher standard.

In Uzbekistan's historic cities, many hotels are converted from older buildings such as madrassas or traditional homes. These were not originally designed as hotels, which is why room layouts can feel inconsistent, sound carries easily, and modern systems like air conditioning or plumbing are sometimes retrofitted rather than purpose-built.

In Kyrgyzstan and rural Kazakhstan, accommodation reflects smaller populations and lower levels of development. There is less demand and less infrastructure, so properties are simpler, often family-run, and focused on function rather than uniform comfort. Service can feel less structured because it is not driven by large-scale tourism systems.

At Son-Kul Lake (over 3,000 metres), you will stay in a yurt camp. This is a remote, high-altitude environment. There is no running water system, electricity is limited to certain hours, and heating is via coal or wood stoves. Nights are cold, often close to freezing, even in summer. Toilets are shared, and hot water is manually managed rather than on demand .

In Turkmenistan's Darvaza desert camp, conditions are even more basic. Expect shared toilets, no hot showers, limited water, and no connectivity. Wind, sand, and insects are part of the environment. This is a functional overnight stay to access a remote site, not a comfort-focused experience .

Across the region, power outages can occur, Wi-Fi can be slow or unavailable, and service may not always be consistent. Flexibility is important, particularly outside major cities.

Accommodation Standards in Turkmenistan

Accommodation standards across Turkmenistan often reflect the country's wider infrastructure and tourism model. Many hotels were built to appear grand and monumental, but ongoing maintenance, service training, and operational consistency don't always match the scale of the buildings. You'll often find impressive marble lobbies and large rooms, yet very basic breakfast service, limited amenities, inconsistent housekeeping, and weak or lobby-only Wi-Fi.

Tourism in Turkmenistan is tightly controlled and relatively low-volume compared to neighbouring countries, so there isn't strong competition driving upgrades or customer-service refinement. In regional cities, hotels may effectively be the "only viable option," which reduces incentive to modernise or improve standards. Supply chains are also limited, even simple items like bottled water, fresh fruit at breakfast, or reliable toiletries are not always routinely stocked.

Connectivity is a nationwide issue rather than a hotel-specific one. Internet access across the country is heavily restricted and slow, and this affects even higher-end properties. Similarly, staffing can appear formal or distant at first, often due to language barriers and a different service culture rather than unwillingness to help.

Cuisine

Food across Central Asia is shaped by climate, movement, and practicality. Much of the region is made up of steppe, desert, and high-altitude pasture, where fresh produce is seasonal and transport between regions has historically been limited. As a result, diets developed around what could be grown locally, preserved, or carried during travel.

In Uzbekistan, cuisine is more varied because cities like Samarkand and Bukhara were major Silk Road hubs. Trade brought spices, techniques, and ingredients from across Asia and the Middle East. This is why meals feel more structured and diverse here, with dishes like plov, fresh salads, bread, and slow-cooked meats forming the core of most meals.

In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, food reflects a nomadic past. Livestock was central to survival, so meals are built around meat, dairy, and bread, with fewer vegetables, especially in remote or high-altitude areas. This is why meals are simple, repetitive, and filling rather than varied .

In Tajikistan, cuisine sits somewhere between the two. You will find similar dishes to Uzbekistan, but often simpler and more home-style, particularly outside cities.

In Turkmenistan, food can feel more limited. Supply chains are tighter, and meals are often fixed rather than ordered, based on what is available at the time .

Across the region, a few patterns are consistent:

- Meals are generous and designed to be filling
- Bread is served at almost every meal
- Meat plays a central role
- Menus, particularly outside cities, are often fixed rather than flexible

You may notice repetition over time. This is normal and reflects both availability and tradition rather than a lack of variety. Meal timing can also shift depending on the day. Long drives, early flights, and border crossings mean meals are sometimes delayed or replaced with simple options such as breakfast boxes or roadside stops.

Food here is less about variety and more about sustenance, hospitality, and tradition, shaped by the realities of the landscape you are travelling through.

We’ve carefully chosen the restaurants and local food outlets for your group meals and consider these establishments safe to eat at; however, be very careful with food sold from vendors on the street, and with uncooked fruit and other foods. Fruit that you peel yourself is usually safe - avoid lettuce and other unpeeled produce.

Shops & Souvenirs

In many places, markets are still practical spaces for daily life rather than curated shopping experiences, and what you find depends heavily on local production, season, and access.

In Uzbekistan, shopping is at its most developed. Cities like Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent have long histories as trading hubs, and this is still visible in their bazaars and craft centres. You will find ceramics, textiles, embroidered suzani, carpets, and metalwork, often produced using traditional methods. Many items are handmade, which is why quality and finish can vary from piece to piece.

In Kyrgyzstan, souvenirs are closely tied to nomadic culture. Felt products, rugs, and yurt components are common, often made in small workshops or village settings. Production is local and not standardised, so items may feel more rustic. In Kazakhstan, shopping is more limited outside cities. In places like Almaty, you will find modern shopping centres alongside local markets, but in rural areas, options are minimal and focused on basic goods rather than souvenirs.

In Turkmenistan, shopping is the most restricted. Independent retail is limited, and access to goods can be inconsistent. Souvenirs are fewer, and opportunities to browse are more controlled than in other countries .

A few practical things to be aware of:

- Cash is essential across much of the region. Outside major cities, card payments are unreliable or not accepted. Small denominations are useful, as change is not always available.

- Prices are not always displayed, particularly in markets. Bargaining can happen, especially in Uzbekistan, but it is usually subtle and respectful rather than aggressive.

- Opening hours can be inconsistent. Shops may close unexpectedly, particularly in smaller towns or during quieter parts of the day.

- In Turkmenistan, currency rules are strict and can change. Local currency cannot be exchanged once you leave the country, so timing your exchange matters. Your guide will advise on this .

Any items you choose to purchase during your Crooked Compass tour are your responsibility. This includes ensuring they meet all local fumigation, quarantine and customs regulations, and that they are safely transported. If you wish to insure your purchases against loss or damage, please arrange this independently.

Crooked Compass does not transport or insure purchased items on behalf of travellers and cannot be held liable for any issues related to delivery or customs clearance.

If you plan to send items internationally, use a reputable courier service that offers insurance and tracking. Do not leave purchases with guides or local contacts for posting, as this increases the risk of loss or complications.

Toilets & Bathrooms

Using bathrooms across Central Asia varies depending on location, and the main difference you will notice is not just quality, but type and setup.

In major cities and most hotels, you will find Western-style toilets with flushing systems, sinks, and hot showers. These are generally reliable, though bathrooms can be compact and showers are not always separated, so water on the floor is common.

Outside cities, the picture becomes more mixed. In smaller towns, roadside stops, and local venues, you may encounter a combination of:

- Western-style toilets that are functional but basic
- Squat toilets, particularly in older buildings or roadside facilities
- Very simple toilets in remote areas, sometimes located outside and with minimal plumbing

Squat toilets are not the norm everywhere, but they do appear often enough that it is worth being prepared. They usually consist of a ceramic or metal base set into the floor, with foot placements on either side. There is no seat, and flushing may be via a bucket of water rather than a button.

On long travel days, especially across desert or mountainous terrain, roadside stops can be very basic or unavailable (bush wees). Planning ahead before departure is important.

A few practical points:

- Toilet paper is not always provided, so carry your own
- Soap and handwashing facilities can be limited
- You may be asked not to flush toilet paper due to sensitive plumbing
- Carry hand sanitiser for use between stops

Recommendations

Viewing

- **Meeting with Remarkable Men (Fiction/Philosophical Drama)**
  Filmed partly in Uzbekistan, this visually rich film follows a spiritual journey across Central Asia, offering a strong sense of place, landscape, and traditional life.

- **The Silk Road (Documentary, BBC - 2016)**
  A clear and engaging series that traces the historic trade routes through Central Asia, helping you understand the cities you will visit and their role in connecting cultures.

- **Long Way Round (Documentary Series)**
  While broader in scope, the Central Asia segments give a realistic look at road conditions, border crossings, and remote travel across the region.

- **Shadow of the Silk Road (Documentary, You Tube)**
  Follows a modern journey along the ancient trade routes, with strong coverage of Uzbekistan and surrounding regions, blending history with present-day life.

- **Nomad: The Warrior (Fiction, Kazakhstan)**
  A historical epic set on the Kazakh steppe, giving insight into nomadic culture, tribal identity, and the scale of the landscape.

Reading

- **The Silk Roads by Peter Frankopan (Non-fiction)**
  A broad but accessible history that places Central Asia at the centre of global trade, culture, and political power.

- **A Carpet Ride to Khiva by Christopher Aslan Alexander (Memoir)**
  A personal and practical account of living and working in Uzbekistan's craft communities, offering insight into daily life and traditions.

- **The Great Game by Peter Hopkirk (Non-fiction/History)**
  Explores the 19th-century rivalry between Britain and Russia across Central Asia, adding context to borders, politics, and regional dynamics.

- **The Lost Heart of Asia by Colin Thubron (Travel Writing)**
  A detailed journey through the region in the post-Soviet era, capturing landscapes, cultures, and the lingering Soviet influence.

- **Central Asia: A Traveller's Companion by Kathleen Hopkirk (Non-fiction/Overview)**
  A practical and readable introduction to the region's history, culture, and geography, useful for grounding your journey.

Final Word

Central Asia is a journey defined by distance, contrast, and a constant shift in environment. You will cross borders on foot, travel long stretches of empty road, and stay in places where comfort is shaped more by location than design. Along the way, you will sit down to meals that are simple but generous, share tea in homes and yurts, and experience a form of hospitality that is direct and unfiltered. What stays with you is not just the scale of the landscapes or the history of the cities, but the way people live within them, adapting to conditions that are often harsh, remote, and deeply tied to tradition.

At Crooked Compass, we believe in taking you beyond the ordinary, uncovering the stories, landscapes, and traditions that many travellers miss.

We'd love to hear about your experience! If you enjoyed your journey, please consider leaving a Google review to help fellow travellers discover what makes Central Asia and Crooked Compass special. You can share your thoughts here:
👉 Review us here

We also encourage you to share your photos and stories with us on social media so we can follow along on your adventure!

Facebook: @Crookedcompasstravel #FollowADifferentPath #crookedcompass
X: @CrookedCompass #FollowADifferentPath #crookedcompass
Instagram: @crooked_compass #FollowADifferentPath #crookedcompass

Responsible Tourism

We believe strongly in low-impact or rather positive-impact tourism. Broadly speaking, this means that we aim to minimise the negative aspects of tourism on the local cultures and environments that we visit and highlight the positive aspects. Please visit our website for further details and suggestions on how you can be a responsible traveller.
👉 Responsible Tourism (https://www.crooked-compass.com/responsible-tourism/)