



**Once Forbidden Lands of  
Central Asia & Iran  
2018**



photo: Ann Schneider



# Once Forbidden Lands of Central Asia & Iran

From Tashkent to Tehran via Turkmenistan

**Two departures in 2018 – Premier Series – 20 Days**

**April 23–May 12 • October 8–27**

*From earliest recorded history, these lands have exchanged rulers, architecture, spiritual beliefs, science, education and culture. The glorious Persian architecture of Iran, influenced and enhanced by the techniques of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia, appears in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Walk through Samarkand's Registan and Isfahan's Imam Square, admiring the rhythmic arches and the swelling domes covered in gorgeous glazed tiles. Observe the old men playing backgammon in Bukhara's Lyabi-Hauz Plaza, or sipping saffron tea in a cafe near Isfahan's Zayandeh River, and get a sense of the timeless connection between these once forbidden lands. Experience the boundless hospitality of the Uzbek, Turkmen and Iranian people, who often welcome a visitor like a long-lost friend.*



## Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Monday	Arrive Tashkent, Uzbekistan
Day 2, Tuesday	Tashkent • Samarkand
Day 3, Wednesday	Samarkand
Day 4, Thursday	Samarkand • Gijduvan • Bukhara
Day 5, Friday	Bukhara
Day 6, Saturday	Bukhara • Khiva
Day 7, Sunday	Khiva
Day 8, Monday	Khiva • Dashoguz, Turkmenistan • fly to Ashgabat
Day 9, Tuesday	Ashgabat
Day 10, Wednesday	Ashgabat • Mashad, Iran
Day 11, Thursday	Mashad • fly to Tehran
Day 12, Friday	Tehran • fly to Yazd
Day 13, Saturday	Yazd
Day 14, Sunday	Yazd • Shiraz
Day 15, Monday	Shiraz
Day 16, Tuesday	Shiraz • Persepolis • Isfahan
Day 17, Wednesday	Isfahan
Day 18, Thursday	Isfahan
Day 19, Friday	Isfahan • Kashan • Tehran
Day 20, Saturday	Depart Tehran





## MIR Signature Experiences

- Visit with a sixth generation ceramics master in Tashkent.
- Applaud the unsurpassed majesty of the Registan and learn about the architectural wonders of fabled Samarkand.
- Converse with your hostess at a convivial meal in the home of a local family in Uzbekistan.
- Experience the timeless character of Bukhara's Old Town with its winding streets, colorful markets, and *chaikhanas* (tea houses).
- View plush hand-loomed carpets in Ashgabat's Carpet Museum.
- Join devout Muslims as they approach one of the holiest sites in the Islamic world, the Shrine of Imam Reza in remote Mashad.
- Stand in the shadow of the colossal marble pillars of Persepolis, erected more than 2,500 years ago.
- Marvel at the stunning architecture at Imam Square in Isfahan.

## Trip Highlights

Tashkent	Capital of Uzbekistan, Independence Square, Navoi Theater, Kukeldash Madrassah, Kaffal-Shashi Mausoleum, ceramic master's studio
Samarkand	"Crossroad of Cultures" (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Registan, Ulug Bek Observatory, Gur-Emir Mausoleum, Shah-i-Zinda, Bibi Khanum Mosque
Bukhara	"Historic Center of Bukhara" (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Lyabi-Hauz Plaza, Kukeldash Madrassah, Kalon Mosque and Minaret, Ark Citadel, Zindan Prison, Ismael Samani Mausoleum, Emir's Palace of Moon and Stars, Museum of National Crafts, performance and dinner at local <i>madrassah</i>
Khiva	Ichon Qala (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Kyzyl Kum Desert, Amu Darya River, Tash-Hauli Palace, Dzhuma Mosque, Kunya Ark, ancient well of Kheivak
Ashgabat	Capital of Turkmenistan, National Museum of Turkmen Carpets, Akhal-Teke horse farm
Nisa	Parthian Kingdom of Nisa (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Kopet Dag Mountains
Mashad	Imam Reza Shrine (exterior)
Tehran	Reza Abbasi Museum, Carpet Museum, Archaeology Museum
Yazd	Fire Temple, Dowlat Abad Gardens (UNESCO World Heritage Site), <i>badgirs</i>
Shiraz	"City of Roses and Nightingales," Tomb of Hafez, Tomb of Saadi, Narenjestan Garden, Nasir-ol-Molk Mosque, local bazaar
Persepolis	Ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid kings, (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Nagsh-e Rostam, burial sites of Darius the Great, Xerxes and Artaxerxes, Kabe-Zardosht fire temple and sanctuary, Sassanian rock-reliefs
Isfahan	Imam Square (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Ali-Qapu Palace, Sheikh Lotfollah and Imam mosques, bridges of Shahrestan, Khaju and Si-o-se Pol, Armenian Quarter, Vank Cathedral, Friday Mosque (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Ali Minaret, Jewish Quarter, Royal Qeisarieh
Kashan	Bagh-e Fin Garden (UNESCO World Heritage Site), Tappeh Sialk





## Daily Itinerary

**Important note:** Please see the notes later in this document under “Pre-tour Information” for details on hotel check-in time at the beginning of the program, and the best arrival times in Tashkent.

### Day One, Monday

#### Arrive Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Arriving in Tashkent, check in to the hotel to rest and refresh before a **welcome dinner** tonight at a local restaurant.

Meals: D – Lotte City Hotel Tashkent or similar

### Day Two, Tuesday

#### Tashkent • Samarkand

Touring begins this morning after breakfast. Although it doesn't look it today, Tashkent is one of the oldest cities in Uzbekistan. Rock paintings in the Chatkal Mountains about 50 miles away show that humans have been here since perhaps 2000 BC. In the 2nd century BC, the town was known as Ming Uryuk. A major caravan crossroads, it was taken by the Arabs in 751 and by Genghis Khan in the 13th century. Tamerlane feasted here in the 14th century and the Shaibanid khans in the 15th and 16th. The Russian Empire arrived in 1865, and Uzbekistan was not an autonomous country again until 1991.



Tashkent lost much of its architectural history in a huge earthquake in 1966, and although it is an old city, most of it has been built since then. Today, the city is a jumble of wide tree-lined boulevards, oversized 20th century Soviet buildings and reconstructed traces of the old city with mud-walled houses, narrow winding lanes, mosques and *madrasahs* (Islamic religious schools).

A tour of Tashkent begins with a stop at Chorsu Plaza across from the Kukeldash

Madrasah. Here, **Chorsu (“Four Ways” or “Crossroads”) Bazaar** spills out of the tiled dome that shades its merchants from the sun. Open every day, the bazaar is at its most exhilarating on weekends when traders and shoppers come in from outlying areas to buy and sell anything from spices and produce to woodwork and embroidery.

Kulbobo Kukeldash, builder of the 16th century **Kukeldash Madrasah**, was the foster brother of Khan Abdullah. Located on a hill above Chorsu Plaza, the Kukeldash Madrasah is one of the largest 16th century *madrasahs* remaining in Central Asia. Constructed of baked brick with only one facade decorated in majolica and glazed bricks, the *madrasah* was part of an ensemble that marked the center of the Old Town and included the newly restored Jummi Mosque.



16th and 17th century *madrasahs* that make up three of the four edges of the ensemble.

In a clearing in a tree-filled park, a small plaza is marked with a single building, the **Ismael Samani Mausoleum**. It is the 10th century resting place of Ismael Samani, founder of the Persian Samanid Dynasty, and was buried under centuries of sand and not discovered until the 20th century. Though small, it is detailed in a fashion not seen in many other Bukharan monuments. More than 16 styles of brickwork adorn the face of this cubic memorial, and their elaborate pleats and layering are still fresh today. From inside, the transition from square walls to circular roof, created using bricks of identical size and shape, testifies to the engineering know-how of the designers. Walk three times around the mausoleum to have a wish come true.

The **Ark Citadel** is the original fortress of Bukhara and likely dates back 2,000 years or more. The current structure has been built and rebuilt on the same site throughout its history, and has preserved something of the form, purpose and function of the first Ark. Like the medieval castle complexes of Europe, the Ark served the emirs of Bukhara as a residence, audience hall, and protection from neighboring enemies, as well as for more mundane purposes, such as a trade center and a police station.

Lunch today is at the **private home of a local family**, and may include the quintessential “Bukhara style” *plov*, a savory rice dish that is a favorite in Uzbekistan.

Visit the nearby **Kukeldash Madrasah**, the largest of Central Asia’s Koran schools, which dates back to 1417. Stroll through the capmaker and spice bazaars and past street-level mosques and *madrasahs*, before moving on to the **Kalon Mosque and Minaret**, the second largest mosque in Central Asia, after the Bibi Khanum in Samarkand. The 12th century Kalon assembly, including the Kalon Mosque and Minaret, and the Mir-i-Arab Madrasah, surrounds an open plaza that teems with merchants and local vendors. The minaret towers over the dusty square, looking down from a height of more than 150 feet, and casting its shadow between the mosque and the *madrasah*. The minaret can be seen from all over the Old Town, as it is easily the tallest structure in the old part of Bukhara. When seen up close the detailed brickwork becomes apparent; fourteen distinct bands of brickwork circle the tower at intervals, and at the top of the minaret resolve into a traditional stalactite formation.







Continue touring with a visit to the Summer Palace of the last emir and a stop at its **Museum of National Crafts**. A short distance outside of the city, the emir's **Palace of Moon and Stars** was built at the turn of the century after the Russians took control of Bukhara. The palace itself is something of a showpiece, as it was designed to keep the emir in luxury, but removed from the city, in isolation and political impotence. The main palace is a mixture of local materials, regional influences, and Russian style. Western furniture abounds, but design choices reflect traditional Uzbek decorations.

This evening enjoy a costume show in the teahouse of a local *madrassah*, with a special dinner following the show.

Meals: B, L, D – *Sasha and Son Bed & Breakfast or similar*

## Day Six, Saturday

### Bukhara • Khiva



Following an early breakfast, depart Bukhara for the fabled city of Khiva. **Please be aware** that this is a long full-day drive. The route today passes across long stretches of the Kyzyl Kum, or Red Sands Desert. This is the same route ridden by loaded Silk Road camel caravans and once plagued by brigands ready to plunder their riches. Today travelers can see dunes, *saxaul* bushes and the distant mountains. Make a stop en route to view the **Amu Darya River**, which loosely parallels the Uzbek-Turkmen border. Accommodations are in a small hotel located near the historic old town. Arrive by evening and enjoy dinner and overnight here.

Meals: B, L, D – *Asia Khiva Hotel or similar*

## Day Seven, Sunday

### Khiva

Legend says that the ancient **Silk Road oasis of Khiva** was founded at the place where Shem, son of Noah, discovered water in the desert, and that the city got its name from Shem's joyful shout, "Hey va!" at the discovery. Today the living city is part museum town, part re-creation of life hundreds of years ago. Archaeologists have found traces of human habitation

around Khiva dating from the 5th century BC. It was for hundreds of years a stop on the old Silk Road and a fortress town, but it was not until the 16th century that Khiva became the capital of the Khorezm Khanate. The khanate ruled the surrounding area for over 300 years, and was a well-known slave-trading center. Today, Khiva evokes a remote and exotic feel with its compact old walled city full of minarets, a khan's fort, cobbled alleys, mosques, and tombs.





Spend the day exploring Khiva on foot. The tour includes the monuments of the **UNESCO-listed Old Town**, or Ichon Qala, including the **Tash-Hauli Palace**, built in the 19th century for the reigning khan and his four wives; the **Dzhuma Mosque** with its interior forest of carved wooden pillars; the **Kunya Ark**, the original residence of the khans, partially destroyed in the Persian invasion of the 18th century; and the **ancient well of Kheivak**, which made settlement here feasible.

Dinner this evening will be at the hotel or a local restaurant, before overnight at the hotel.  
Meals: B, L, D – *Asia Khiva Hotel or similar*

### *Day Eight, Monday*

#### **Khiva • Dashoguz, Turkmenistan • fly to Ashgabat**

Depart today from Khiva by coach, and cross the border into Turkmenistan. The drive to the border takes a little over an hour. Customs formalities can be time consuming; afterwards, drive to the city of Dashoguz to do some light touring and enjoy lunch at a local restaurant.



Later this afternoon, transfer to the airport for a flight to Ashgabat. In spite of its location on a trade route, Ashgabat never achieved the status and influence of other Silk Road cities like Khiva or Bukhara. Originally known as Konjikala, the city was destroyed by Mongols in the 13th century. In 1881, the Russians built a fortress on the site as a buffer against English-dominated Persia, and by the early 20th century Ashgabat was a prosperous and flourishing city. In 1948 a massive earthquake leveled Ashgabat, killing over two-thirds of the population. Recently Ashgabat has seen a boom in new construction, which has had a major impact on the look of the city. Modern marble and gold monuments have sprung up all over town. In fact, in 2013, the Guinness Book of World Records

awarded Ashgabat the record for the highest density of white marble buildings in the world.

Following the hour-long flight over the Black Sands Desert, arrive in Ashgabat and transfer to the hotel for dinner and overnight.

Meals: B, L, D – *Oguzkent Hotel or similar*

### *Day Nine, Tuesday*

#### **Ashgabat**

Following breakfast at the hotel, venture outside the city to visit a horse-breeding farm devoted to the renowned **Akhal-Teke horse**, arguably the oldest cultured horse breed in the world. The owner accompanies you on the tour to talk about the workings of the farm and about the breed. These elegant horses have long, slender necks, small heads, long legs and narrow chests. They are said to have lent their



genes to both the Arabian horse and the American Quarter Horse.

Next visit the **UNESCO site** of the ancient **Parthian Kingdom of Nisa**. The beautiful Kopet Dag Mountains rise up around Nisa, a site 15 miles outside of Ashgabat that was once a major center of the ancient Parthian Kingdom. More than 2,000 years ago the Parthian Empire spread out from Nisa and took its place among such kingdoms as the Achaemenid under Cyrus the Great and the Macedonian under Alexander the Great. Though Nisa was ruled by a succession of dynasties, it remained an important center of the ancient world until the 13th century, when the Mongols sacked it. Today archaeological work continues at Nisa.



After a farewell-to-Turkmenistan lunch and performance this afternoon, visit Ashgabat's excellent **National Museum of Turkmen Carpets**. Time permitting, also visit the huge \$100-million-dollar Kipchak Mosque. Located in former Turkmen President Niyazov's hometown of Kipchak, the mosque was inaugurated in 2004. The mosque is big enough to hold 10,000 people, and its 164-foot golden dome had to be lowered in place by helicopter. Verses from Niyazov's own spiritual book, the *Ruhnama*, are etched on the walls alongside Koranic verses. Niyazov was buried here in the family mausoleum that he built, along with the mosque, with government funds.

The evening is free for to rest, relax and pack. Dinner is independent.  
Meals: B, L – *Oguzkent Hotel or similar*

### *Day Ten, Wednesday* **Ashgabat • drive to Mashad**

Drive the short distance to the Iranian border for border formalities, and continue to the eastern Iranian city of Mashad. Arrival will be this evening after a full day on the road.

**Mashad** began as a small village called Sanabad. In 817 the eighth grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, Imam Reza, died here suddenly on a journey. Word spread that he had been poisoned, and pilgrims began arriving at his burial site, renaming the city Mashad, meaning "Place of Martyrdom." The Imam's tomb has been destroyed and rebuilt several times, and is now one of the holiest Shi'ite shrines in Iran, visited by 12 million Shi'ite Muslims a year.

Meals: B, D – *Homa Hotel or similar*

### *Day Eleven, Thursday* **Mashad • fly to Tehran**

Visit the areas of the **Imam Reza shrine** that are permitted to non-Muslims, the tomb and museum of Nadir Shah and the **Khajeh Rabi Mausoleum**. Located just outside the center of town, the tomb of Khajeh Rabi, who was either a companion to the prophet Muhammad himself or to Imam Reza, or to both, is decorated with the fine calligraphy of Al Reza Abbasi, Persia's most famous calligrapher. The cemetery that surrounds the mausoleum is filled with more recent history – people who perished in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.



This evening, catch a flight to Tehran, transferring to the hotel for check-in on arrival.  
Meals: B, L, D – *Laleh Hotel, Espinas Hotel or similar*



### *Day Twelve, Friday* **Tehran • fly to Yazd**

This morning after an early breakfast, get started on a full day of touring in the capital. After the Mongols destroyed the Silk Road city of Rey, **Tehran** rose in its place as the region's most important trading center. By 1789 Tehran had become the capital of Persia under the Qajar ruler, Agha Mohammed Khan. While the city grew in prominence, it remained basically unchanged until the massive modernization efforts of the 1920s. Since then, Tehran has grown in population from less than 300,000 to a metropolis of more than eight million. Modern Tehran is full of shops, museums, mosques, minarets, restaurants, teahouses and a sprawling

bazaar.

A city tour of Tehran includes a sampling of Tehran's best museums. Showcasing objects from Iran's distant past through to 19th century calligraphy, the **Reza Abbasi Museum** gives a broad overview of the development of decorative and applied arts throughout Iran's long and storied history. Highlights include the metal and gold objects from the Sassanid Dynasty (about 650AD) and many paintings by the museum's namesake, Reza Abbasi, a 17th century painter of the Isfahan School famous for his miniature portraits.

Iran's **Archaeological Collection of the National Museum** displays Persian antiquities, art and artifacts from Iran's long past. French architect and archaeologist Andre Godard designed the museum's main building in the early 20th century, and was for many years director of the Archaeology Department as well. Tools thought to have been made by Neanderthal people, figures from the Achaemenid Empire, bronzes, carvings, prehistoric pottery and artifacts from Susa, Persepolis and other ancient sites can be seen here.

The re-opened **National Islamic Museum of Iran**, next door to the Archaeological collection, features Islamic art and sacred relics from the 8th century to the present. The collection includes calligraphy, textiles, carvings and coins, and a series of temporary exhibits on the ground floor.

Further touring in Tehran is heavily dependent on flight times from Tehran to Yazd.

Time permitting, visit the **Carpet Museum**, with a wonderful collection of handloomed Persian carpets, kilims and designs dating from the 17th century and beyond. Designed by the last Queen of Iran, the

