
GEEO ITINERARY

HEART OF THE SILK ROAD – Summer

Day 1: Bishkek Arrive at any time.

Arrive at any time. Our program will begin tonight in Bishkek, and we typically have a group meeting at the hotel around 6 p.m. Upon arrival at the hotel, please check the notice board for information about the group meeting. During the group meeting, the leader will outline the trip itinerary and answer any questions you might have. If you arrive early enough, consider visiting the State Historical Museum to learn more about Kyrgyzstan. This marble-faced cube building, built-in 1984 when Kyrgyzstan was part of the Soviet Union, retains many aspects of its original purpose as a state-of-the-art Lenin Museum.

Day 2: Bishkek/Chong-Kemin (B, D) Morning city tour of Bishkek before departing for Chong-Kemin. Stop at the Burana Tower before arriving at the community guest house. Explore the village and then eat a home-cooked traditional dinner.

We start the day with a tour of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital and largest city. Bishkek is an interesting example of a czarist planned city: it is built in a grid with wide boulevards flanked by irrigation canals and large trees, buildings with marble façades, and Soviet apartment complexes. The city was founded in 1825 as the Khokand fortress of "Pishpek" as a means of controlling local caravan routes and enabling the collection of tributes from Kyrgyz tribes. The name is thought to derive from a Kyrgyz word for a churn used to make fermented mare's milk ("kumis"), the Kyrgyz national drink, although not all sources agree on this. Roughly 80 km from the capital city of Bishkek, we stop to see one of Kyrgyzstan's oldest sights, the Burana Tower. The Tower is a large minaret and, along with some grave markers and the remnants of a castle and mausoleums, is all that remains of the 9th-century city of Balasagun. Learn more about the ancient structure (rare in a nomadic culture) before continuing along the scenic valley towards Chong-Kemin. We continue exploring the Kyrgyz countryside today with a visit to the scenic valley of Chong-Kemin. Formed over millennia by the Chong Kemin River, the valley provides some of the most stunning scenery on our trip. Enjoy an overnight in some local village houses in Ching-Kemin. Community-Based Tourism helps villagers turn their houses into homestays. Savor home-cooked food and make the most of the time to wander the village. Approximate travel time: 1.5 to 2 hrs by private vehicle.

Day 3: Chong-Kemin/Song Kul (B, L, D) Optional morning hike. Continue on to Song Kul and spend the night in a traditional yurt. Opt to spend the day hiking or go for a horseback ride.

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Day 4: Song Köl/Bokonbayevo (B, D) Travel to Kochkor and stop at a Kyrgyz felt-making workshop. After lunch drive to Bokonbayevo Village and spend the night at a homestay, indulging in a traditional local meal.

After breakfast, we depart for Kochkor and stop at a Kyrgyz felt-making workshop. Learn about the importance of felt-making to the Kyrgyz culture and local artisans. Learn to craft with locals during an intimate workshop. We then head to Bokonbayevo village and experience a traditional Kyrgyz meal. Spend the night at a local homestay situated near the Issyk Kul lake. Surrounded by mountains and often used as a base for hiking excursions, this village offers a glimpse into local Kyrgyz life. You will have a chance to swim in Issyk Kul this afternoon or the next morning. Approximate travel time: 5.5 hrs by private vehicle.

Day 5: Bokonbayevo/Jety-Oguz (B, L) Visit Ak-Orgo yurt Workshop Center.

Continue to Jety-Oguz Gorge and overnight in a traditional yurt.

Take a morning departure to Barskoon Village for a visit to Ak-Orgo Workshop Center. Observe how traditional yurts are built and learn about the importance of this Kyrgyz craft. Continue to the gorgeous rolling green hills and forested mountains of the Jety-Oguz Gorge where you can go for another hike or horseback ride. We overnight in a traditional yurt. Approximate travel time: 2 hrs by private vehicle.

Day 6: Jety-Oguz/Karakol (B) Leave Jeti-Oguz and transfer to Karakol. Visit the Prejevalskiy Museum and a walking tour of the city followed by free time to explore.

Say goodbye to the beautiful valley of Jeti-Oguz and continue to Karakol, Kyrgyzstan's 4th largest city, located on the scenic Lake Issyk-Kul. Today, we visit a fascinating museum dedicated to the Russian explorer Nikolai Przhevalsky. The museum offers insight into his life and travels and displays some of the flora and fauna species endemic to the area. We then have a walking tour of Karakol. See the Russian Holy Trinity Orthodox Church and pagoda-style Dungan Mosque, built by Chinese Muslims in the early 20th Century. Afterward, you will have free time to explore on your own. Approximate travel time: 1 hr by private vehicle.

Day 7: Karakol/Saty Village (B, D) Cross into Kazakhstan. Continue driving until arriving in Saty Village. Take a bumpy drive in an old Russian van followed by a short hike to Kaindy Lake. Spend the night in a guest house sampling traditional Kazakh meals.

Cross the border into Kazakhstan embarking for Saty Village. Then get into an old Russian van and take a bumpy drive (1.5 hour round trip) into Kolsay Lake National park. We take a short hike (1 hour round trip, downhill then back uphill) to Kaindy Lake and soak in the bright hues and marvel at the eerie sight of submerged trees. Tonight, stay at a local guest house and indulge in a traditional Kazakh meal. Approximate travel time: 4.5 hrs by private vehicle. Optional 1.5 hr roundtrip Russian van. Note: If you suffer from motion sickness, you may want to skip the rough Russian van ride and as a result miss the hike to Kaindy lake or instead load up on Dramamine. The village is a lovely place to walk around if you skip the Kaindy Lake excursion.

Day 8: Saty Village/Almaty (B) Depart for Almaty, stopping along the way at Charyn Canyon. Take an orientation walk. Have a free afternoon to explore Almaty.

Depart for Almaty early this morning, stopping along the way to marvel at Charyn Canyon. Boasting stunning shades of red, orange and brown, the Charyn Canyon is a natural wonder comparable in beauty to the Grand Canyon. Take in the stunning views before continuing on to the former Kazakh capital, Almaty. We will have an orientation walk in Almaty, highlighting sights like the historical center, Zenkov Cathedral and the Monument of Independence. Use any free time remaining to continue exploring this modern city. Opt to climb Green Hill for panoramic views, visit the local markets, or sip coffee in one of the plentiful cafes. Approximate travel time: 6.5 hrs by private vehicle.

Day 9: Almaty/Dushanbe (B) In the morning, transfer to Almaty airport and board a flight to Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Enjoy an evening in the city.

This morning we will fly to Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Dushanbe is the capital and largest city of Tajikistan and is situated at the confluence of two rivers, Varzob and Kofarnihon, and surrounded by mountains. Dushanbe means "Monday" in the Tajik language. It was so named because it grew from a village that originally had a popular market on Mondays. Until 1929, the city was known in Russian as Dyushambe and, from 1929 to 1961, as Stalinabad. As of 2014, Dushanbe had a population of 778,500. Enjoy a free evening in the city. Approximate travel time: 1.5 hrs by plane.

Day 10: Dushanbe/Kūli Iskandarkūl (B, D) Visit sights in Dushanbe. Drive through valleys and mountains in stunningly beautiful Iskandarkūl. Meet locals and explore this gorgeous landscape in the Fann Mountains. Stay at a CBT homestay.

In the morning, you are free to visit some sights around Dushanbe, including museums, monuments, and the main mosque. After lunch, we drive through the valleys and mountains of the area for an overnight in local homes in the stunningly beautiful Kūli Iskandarkūl region. We will meet local residents of the village of Sarytag and explore the gorgeous surrounding landscape of the Fann Mountains. On the way in if we have time, we'll go for a hike (45 minutes round trip) to view Fann Niagara, an impressive waterfall. Tonight we stay at a community guesthouse. The rooms are multi-share, but they do have running water and electricity. The views are unbelievable. Approximate travel time: 6 hrs by private vehicle. Note: Today the road can be pretty bumpy. We recommend taking Dramamine or sitting at the front of the bus if you suffer from motion sickness.

Day 11: Kūli Iskandarkūl (B, L, D) Spend a full day exploring. Opt to hike in the mountains. After a picnic lunch, return to Sarytag village.

Today is a full day of free exploration. You might choose to join a hike through the valley (1.5 hrs round trip) to visit a tiny summer settlement used by herders. The very basic homes are all made of fieldstones. This is a great opportunity to meet locals and see how they live. We'll then come back to Sarytag to have an included lunch out at our guesthouse. The rest of the day is free for you to roam the village or the surrounding countryside.

Day 12: Kūli Iskandarkūl/Khūjand (B) Continue to Istaravshan. Visit a fortress and an ancient settlement. Soak in the view of the city. Enjoy an optional lunch in a local chaikhana (teahouse). Drive to Khujand. Explore the city in the afternoon.

After breakfast, we drive to the city of Istaravshan, one of the oldest cities in Tajikistan at over 2,500 years old. We stop by Ura-Tube, an ancient settlement, and Mug Teppe, the ruins of a fortress stormed by Alexander the Great in 329 BCE and the Arabs in 772 AD. You will have the opportunity to enjoy an optional lunch in a local chaikhana (teahouse). After lunch, we continue to Khūjand, Tajikistan's second-largest city. Khūjand was the site of Cyropolis, which was established by the Persian King Cyrus the Great. Later, Alexander the Great would build the furthest settlement in Greek civilization nearby in 329 BCE. Khūjand would later become an important stop along the Silk Road. In the afternoon, explore the city, including visiting the museum and a mausoleum. Approximate travel time: 3.5 hrs by private vehicle.

Day 13: Khūjand/Tashkent (B) Visit the Khūjand market. Drive to Uzbekistan and its capital city of Tashkent. Enjoy a short walk in the evening before an optional dinner.

We start the day with a visit to Panjshanbe Bozor in Khūjand. It's the largest market in Tajikistan and a great example of a typical Central Asian market. Enjoy browsing what's for sale and opt to sample a few of the local delicacies. Back in the vehicle, we continue on to the border with Uzbekistan. With 30 million people it is the most populous of the four countries on our itinerary. Uzbekistan is now a Republic with an elected government, though its elections are notoriously fraudulent. The most notable example is their former president Islam Karimov, who was in power from when he was first elected in 1991 until he died in 2016. We begin our exploration of Uzbekistan in Tashkent, the capital. A bustling city of 3 million, Tashkent is a green city located in an oasis along the small Chirchik River, near the Tien Shan Mountains. Various settlements have existed on the site since antiquity. It has been called "Tashkent" since around the 10th century when the city was part of the Kara-Khanid Khanate. This name, Turkic in origin, means "City of Stone." The city was sacked by Genghis Khan in 1219 and re-founded under Amir Temūr in the late 1300s. It was considered the richest city in Central Asia when it came under Russian rule in 1865.

The capital was moved here in 1922 from Samarkand. Very little from Tashkent's history remains: most of the city was destroyed in a massive earthquake in 1966. Volunteers came from around the Soviet Union to help rebuild afterward, and many of them chose to stay due to the warm climate and easy access to food from nearby farms. It is still very common to see bilingual signs in Tashkent, written in both Uzbek and Russian. Enjoy a short orientation walk in the evening before an optional dinner. Approximate travel time: 3 hrs by private vehicle.

Day 14: Tashkent (B) Enjoy a free day to explore.

Today, we enjoy a free day to explore Tashkent, a city with an interesting mix of mosques, mud houses, and Soviet architecture deep in the middle of Eurasia. (You will also have some more free time in Tashkent at the end of the trip.)

Day 15: Tashkent/Samarkand (B) Travel on to Samarkand. Take an orientation walk and opt to visit the Amir Timur Mausoleum.

This morning, we drive to Samarkand, the second-largest city in Uzbekistan, with a population of just over one half million. Samarkand is known for its position on the Silk Road. (Extending 4,000 miles [6,437 km], the Silk Road gets its name from the lucrative Chinese silk trade which was carried out along its length and began during the Han Dynasty [206 BC – 220 AD].) One of the oldest cities in the world, Samarkand remains one of the most attractive in Central Asia despite a turbulent history of war and earthquakes. The city blossomed under Amir Timur (known in the West as "Tamerlane"), a tyrannical 14th-century ruler. A lover of art, Timur was responsible for the colorful domes and exquisite minarets that now form the city's evocative skyline. While Samarkand fell into disrepair during its Soviet days, restoration is slowly progressing. Approximate travel time: 6 hrs by private vehicle.

Day 16: Samarkand (B) Take a city tour/visit to the Registan. Free time to visit the Guri Amir Mausoleum, Tomb of the Prophet Daniel, and the Registan minarets. Enjoy some free time.

This morning, we take a tour of the city, including a visit to the Registan, Samarkand's most famous monument complex. It is a public square surrounded by three historic madrassas or schools (all now souvenir and craft shops). Sons of wealthy families from all over Central Asia attended the madrassas, and their training could last 10 to 20 years. Registan means "place of sand," a reference to the square itself, which traditionally was a marketplace. Now it's a stage used for musical performances during the summer. Following the tour, you are free to check out the Guri Amir Mausoleum, Tomb of the Prophet Daniel, and the Registan minarets on your own. We recommend visiting the Gur-e Amir, the tomb of Amir Timur. Timur lived between 1336-1405 and was the founder of the Timurid dynasty. He was the grandfather of Ulugh Beg and great-great-great-grandfather of Babur Beg, who went on to found the Mughal Empire that ruled South Asia for four centuries. During his lifetime, Timur was one of the most powerful rulers in the Muslim world and his armies were feared throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe. The mausoleum was actually built for Timur's grandson and heir apparent, Muhammad Sultan, who died before him. Timur had requested to be buried in his hometown of Shahrisabz, about 50 km away. He died during the very cold and snowy winter of 1406 and because the roads were not passable, he was buried here instead. An unfinished mausoleum still exists in Shahrisabz. Use some free time to wander the bazaar or visit more sights such as the amazing Shaki Zinda Necropolis complex.

Day 17: Samarkand/Aydar Kūl Camp (B, D) Travel out into the desert to visit the Nurota Shrine and remains of the Alexander the Great fortress. Spend an evening in a yurt. Opt to ride a camel. Enjoy a free Kazakh singing show around a campfire.

Today we drive to Nurota where we visit the remains of a military fortress of Alexander the Great and Holy Chashma (Spring) of Nurota. Also known as Naruta or Nur, as it was once called, Nurota was founded by Alexander the Great in 327 BCE. We visit the ruins of Alexander's military fortress and the Chasma Spring, which today is a popular pilgrimage destination. It is believed to have been discovered

by a local farmer who had a vision of Imam Ali, the fourth khalifa and the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, striking a rock and causing water to flow. The waters of the spring are believed to have healing powers. Proceed to the nearby Aydar Kūl Camp, which is located in the picturesque Nurota Mountains, for a chance to stay in traditional felt yurts and experience the way of life in the remote reaches of Uzbekistan. You may choose to ride a camel in the afternoon. That night enjoy a free Kazakh singing show while sitting around a campfire. Approximate travel time: 4 hrs by private vehicle.

Day 18: Aydar Kūl Camp/Bukhara (B) Travel to Bukhara. Opt to visit the old city bazaars, have dinner with a local family, or visit a traditional hammam (bathhouse).

Today, we drive across the desert to the ancient city of Bukhara, one of the most famous destinations on the Ancient Silk Road and Uzbekistan's third-largest city (at around 300,000 people). During the 9th and 10th centuries, Bukhara was the intellectual center of the Islamic world with numerous mosques and madrassas. The old city has been restored, and there are a number of shopping districts with cafés and markets. People come from all over Bukhara to stroll in the evening and eat around the Lyab-i Hauz, a delightful pool of water surrounded by ancient mulberry trees and a commercial center for the modern city. Bukhara was also once home to a large community of Jews, most of whom emigrated to Israel and the west after the breakup of the Soviet Union. A small number, however, remained, as do a handful of synagogues, one of which is located just down a small alley from Lyab-i Hauz. Approximate travel time: 4 hrs by private vehicle.

Day 19: Bukhara (B) Take a half-day guided walk around the beautifully restored mosques, madrassas, and covered markets that make up the Old City.

This morning, we have an included city tour with a local guide to visit the Samanid Mausoleum, the Ark Citadel, and the Minaret Kalyan complex. Walk around beautifully restored mosques, madrassas, and covered markets that make up the Old City. The center of Bukhara's old city is the Bukhara Ark with its impressive walls. "Ark" is a word from old Persian meaning "fortress." The Ark was the citadel, where the rulers and military lived, and was even more fortified than the rest of the city. The throne room contains an interesting innovation: once a month, the Amir received people from the community who were allowed to criticize his rule. A wall was built just inside the entrance to the throne room so that people could speak their mind and leave without being identified (or punished) by the Amir and his courtiers for saying something that they didn't like. The Ark fell out of use after it was aerially bombed by Russian forces in 1920. When Bukhara was seized by the Bolsheviks, the Amir fled into exile, and the area became part of the Tatarstan Soviet Socialist Republic. Following the Ark, we visit the impressive Kalyan Minaret, a part of the Po-i-Kalyan mosque complex. The madrassa, located across a square from the mosque, is still in use today. We finish the tour exploring the artisan shops and wandering the narrow, twisting streets and alleyways of the Old City. A center for pottery, cloth, and Turkmen carpets, the old city is centered around Lyab-i Hauz, where you can sit at café tables and let the evening drift by. There is also the option to take in a local puppet show held in an old caravanserai or indulge in a Turkish bath. Some other optional activities include: **Hammam (Bathhouse) Visit** There are a few hammam choices in the city that are often gender-specific. Depending on the day of the week and when you want to go, your tour leader can advise you on some options. **Magok-i Attari Mosque** Dating from the 9th century, the Magok-i Attar Mosque in Bukhara is the oldest surviving mosque in Central Asia. According to legend, the mosque survived the Mongols by being buried by locals in the sand. Indeed, only the top of the mosque was visible when the digging began in the 1930s. It also boasts an illustrious history of sacredness: remains of a Zoroastrian temple and a Buddhist temple have been found beneath it, and Jews once used it in the evenings. It was once used for Jewish, Muslim, and Christian services, demonstrating the diversity and open-mindedness of this intriguing city. Today, the Magok-i Attari Mosque (Museum of Carpets) offers information about the art of carpet making and some fine examples to boot. **Jewish Area and Synagogue Visit** Bukhara has a fascinating Jewish history, with Bukharan Jews speaking a Turkic-Persian dialect with a Hebrew script. The city once was home to 40,000 Jews and now has a community of about 25-30 families. The synagogue is well worth a visit and houses a Torah that is roughly 1,000 years old.

Day 20: Bukhara/Khiva (B) Travel through the Kyzyl Kum Desert to Khiva. Take a walking tour.

Enjoy a full day's travel through the Kyzyl Kum desert to reach UNESCO-listed Khiva. In the 17th century, the town of Khiva hosted the most famous slave market on the Silk Road. It is estimated that about 1 million Persians and an unknown number of Russian people were transported to Khiva to be sold. In the 19th century, Khiva was the center of the mighty Khiva Khanate. Today, it's one of the best-preserved ancient cities in the region. You can clearly see the Itchan Qala, the walled inner town of Khiva. The outer town is Dichan Qala. Inside the walled town are many monuments including the Djuma mosque, madrassas, and mausoleum. The city is restored as a living museum with cafes, tea houses, craftsman workshops, and shops. At night, the streets are lit with colored spotlights while families stroll through the narrow alleys and children play football (soccer), sometimes enlisting tourists in their matches. Get to know the place on a late afternoon walking tour. Approximate travel time: 8 hrs by private vehicle.

Day 21: Khiva (B) Enjoy a guided tour of the city with free time to experience the local life. Opt to browse the shops, wander the lanes, examine handmade silk rugs, or sit in a café.

Explore the old town, which is still surrounded by city walls, bargain with locals in the market, and see the town from the top of the Friday Mosque's minaret. Don't forget to have a look at the amazing tiles in the yards of Tash Khauli Khan's Palace. Experience the sand-colored brick structures populating the inner walls of the Ichon-Qala, wander through the madrassas, clamber up minarets, and explore the dark dungeons Khiva was infamous for back in the 10th century. We have a guided tour of the city, followed by free time to experience the amazing local life - browse the shops, wander the lanes, examine handmade silk rugs, sit in a cafe drinking tea, or enjoy a cold beer in this ancient historical town.

Day 22: Khiva/Tashkent Fly to Tashkent. Enjoy a city tour or explore on your own. Optional visits to a history museum, fine arts museum, mosques, or bazaars.

Fly to Tashkent. Our group will have a city tour. The first visit will be the Khast Imam Complex, which is one of the few "old" sites remaining in the city. The highlight of the complex is the Samarkand Kufic Qur'an, housed in a special building in the complex. The Kufic Qur'an was originally housed in Samarkand and, at the order of Vladimir Lenin in 1923, was brought to Tashkent. It is believed to be one of the two remaining copies of the original seven copies of the Qur'an written at the order of the third khalifa 'Uthman (Osman in Turkish) in 651 AD. This was the first time that the verses were compiled into a written volume, 19 years after the Prophet Muhammad's death. According to tradition, seven copies were made and disseminated to the kingdoms that had accepted Islam by that time. The other original volume is housed at Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. If time permits we will then visit the Chorsu Bazaar to do some end of the trip shopping. Approximate travel time: 1-3 hrs by plane

Day 23: Tashkent (B) Depart Tashkent at any time.

Depart Tashkent at any time. Want more adventure? Book two or more GEE0 trips in the same year and receive a discount! GEE0 will give you 10% off of the lesser value program(s) (up to 3 programs). If you don't see a program that interests you that pairs with this trip, but still would like to extend your time abroad, let us know. We will work with you to find a non-teacher trip from our tour operator's much larger catalog. Even better, if you are an educator we can still offer you a discounted price on the trip you choose!