

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan Summer Tour July 16th - August 10th 2022 Mountains, Markets and Madrassahs



INTRODUCTION:

Mountains, markets and madrassahs, starting in Bishkek we're going to show you them all. We've got some of the most breath-taking mountains, valleys, lakes and gorges for you, as well as some of the most hectic, eye-opening, hair-raising market experiences, such as the animal market in Jalalabad, and the incredible ancient mosques and madrassahs of Samarqand, Bukhara and Khiva. We've carefully chosen the best examples of these, balancing fitting in as much as possible, whilst leaving enough time to properly appreciate where you are. And of course we've included some SAIGA specials that you'll only find on our tours, and are the reason you travel with us.

HIGHLIGHTS:

Take in the breathtaking views on the **Pamir Highway**

Go horseback riding along the shores of **Song Kol**

Go back in time in the Silk Road gems of **Samarqand, Bukhara and Khiva**

See the environmental disaster that is the **Aral Sea**

Excited? Come with SAIGA to Central Asia

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Tour Details:

DATES: July 16th - August 10th 2022

PRICE: \$3240 USD (twin share),
Single Supplement \$550 USD

START: Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

FINISH: Tashkent, Uzbekistan



INCLUSIONS:

- Accommodation in twin share at roughly 3 star hotels/guesthouses, breakfast included
- Where itinerary mentions yurt or homestay accommodation, single supplement and twin share may be affected
- Transport as per itinerary
- Entrance fees to most sites (as per itinerary)
- SAIGA guide and local guides

EXCLUSIONS:

- Visa fees if necessary
- Visa support if necessary
- Some activities, eg. treatments at sanatorium (as per itinerary)
- Meals other than breakfast
- Transport to and from the start and end of tour
- Personal expenses such as souvenirs or any optional activities
- PCR Tests and any other COVID related expenses

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Day 1	Bishkek
Day 2	Bishkek - Burana Tower - Petroglyphs - Cholpon Ata
Day 3	Cholpon Ata - Karakol - Jeti Ögüz Health Spa
Day 4	Jeti Ögüz - Valley of the Flowers - Kyzyl Suu
Day 5	Kyzyl Suu - Barskoon - Beltam Yurt Camp
Day 6	Beltam - Kochkor - Song Kol
Day 7	Song Kol - Kurtka - Moldo Ashoo Pass - Kazarman
Day 8	Kazarman - Jalalabad
Day 9	Jalalabad - Osh
Day 10	Osh - Sary Tash
Day 11	Tajikistan border crossing at Kyzyl Art - Murghab

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Day 12	Langar Valley - Lake Yashilkul - Langar
Day 13	Langar - Yamg - Ishkashim - Khorog
Day 14	Khorog - Kalaikhum
Day 15	Kalaikhum - Dushanbe
Day 16	Dushanbe - Khoja Obi Garm
Day 17	Cross border to Uzbekistan - Samarqand
Day 18	Samarqand
Day 19	Samarqand - Bukhara
Day 20	Bukhara - Khiva
Day 21	Khiva - Nukus
Day 22	Nukus - Aral Sea
Day 23	Aral Sea - Nukus - Tashkent
Day 24	Tashkent - Yangiabad
Day 25	Yangiabad - Parkent - Tashkent
Day 26	Tashkent - Turkistan

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Itinerary:

Day 1: Bishkek

- We'll spend our first day doing a walking tour of Bishkek, a quintessential Soviet city with an amazing mix of Stalinist and Brezhnev era architecture. The wide boulevards and Brutalist apartment blocks, in stark contrast to the snow-capped mountain backdrop.
- We'll start with the Frunze Museum, dedicated to Mikhail Frunze, whom the city of Bishkek used to be named after (and why the airport code is still FRU!).
- Making our way past Victory Square, the circus and Tsum, we'll visit the Lenin Statue and Ala Too Square, home to the National Museum of Kyrgyzstan and a large Kyrgyz flag. Although this flag isn't quite as famous as their world-record holding neighbours, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, it is still impressive and every hour, on the hour, there's a changing of the guards.
- We'll continue on to Osh Bazaar, passing the White House on the way, and we'll finish off the day learning about some of the weird and wonderful produce and delicacies you'll find in the market.
- For your first night in Kyrgyzstan, we'll try some local Kyrgyz food for dinner, and afterwards can go out and experience some of Bishkek's rapidly gentrifying nightlife, maybe at Save the Ales or some of the many other cool ever-emerging options.

Day 2: Bishkek - Burana Tower - Petroglyphs - Cholpon Ata

- Our first stop will be in the town of Tokmok, a stereotypical Soviet town and home of the former air force training base. To honour the town's past, there's a MiG-23 mounted as a memorial.
- Our next stop will be at Burana Tower, which was once the minaret of a mosque in Balassagyn city, and you can climb to the top of it for some great views over the nearby landscape.
- Next up is a real local treat - a game of Kok Boru, which is played on horseback, and the aim is to get a newly decapitated goat into the other team's goal. They'll also demonstrate other horseback sports such as shirtless wrestling.
- If you're game you can even have a go yourself, whether it's just seeing if you can pick up the dead goat (not as easy as they make it look!), or getting on a horse and actually trying to play.
- We'll stop for a home-cooked lunch in a local family home before continuing on to Cholpon Ata, on the northern side of the lake.
- Check in to the hotel and for the rest of the day we'll just chill like we're locals on a summer holiday - swim in the lake or a swimming pool, sit around and drink or eat, chat with whoever you stumble across, play games with some locals, go for a walk, or simply relax and soak in the atmosphere.

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Day 3: Cholpon Ata - Karakol - Jeti Ögüz Health Spa

- We'll visit the famous 4,000 year old petroglyphs. It's a very strange and unique view, huge boulders dotted over the side of the otherwise barren and sparse hillside, and the lake visible in the distance.
- On the way back to the main road, we'll drive down the old runway which was part of the Cholpon Ata airport that no longer exists. Back in the heyday, all sorts of dignitaries and celebrities flew into the resort town (including Yuri Gagarin who was a regular here), but it went out of use in 2003.
- Continuing around the lake, today we'll visit Karakol, at the very eastern point of Issyk Kol, stopping on the way into town at the museum of N.M.Prjevalskii, a renowned Russian explorer of the 1800s.
- A small town with a big reputation, Karakol has a couple of pretty cool things to see, including the Dungan Mosque, unexpectedly shaped like a Chinese pagoda, and the Russian Orthodox Church.
- We'll stop for lunch and have traditional Dungan food before heading on to a SAIGA favourite - the Jeti Ögüz Health Spa, a Soviet sanatorium which is very tired and dated (as you'd expect a Soviet health spa to be!) but still functioning. You'll have a chance to explore the grounds and buildings, get a massage, see all the weird treatments available and generally take a step back in time. Depending on who we find, we might be able to get radon baths, electric shock therapy, pulsating circulation treatment as well as mud baths, acupuncture and who knows what else!
- For anyone who loves the weird and wonderful, this creepy night will be right up your alley!

Day 4: Jeti Ögüz Health Spa - Valley of the Flowers - Jeti Ögüz Gorge - Kyzyl Suu Meteorology Station

- After breakfast, we say goodbye to the sanatorium and the babushkas we've no doubt made friends with and head along the south shore of Issyk Kol. You'll have already realised how huge the lake is, but now you'll start appreciating how different the two sides of it are. To the north the land is much flatter and more like farmland, the mountains very close to the shore. In the south though, it's all canyons, gorges and waterfalls. It's much more rugged, yet the mountains are much further away.
- Today you'll get to see some of Kyrgyzstan's natural beauty, with stops at Kök-Zhaik, which means "Valley of Flowers", and Jeti Ögüz, which translates directly into English as "Seven Bulls" Gorge.
- After lunch we'll switch vehicles from our minibus into a huge Soviet 4x4 bus to take us up the river to our overnight destination - a mountain hut at Kyzyl Suu. The drive in this vehicle is another SAIGA favourite, bouncing around in the huge all-terrain vehicle, winding our way up a rocky dried riverbed, and the hair-raising moment when we cross a fast-flowing river. Then we'll arrive at our home for the night, which has literally made people cry because of the untouched beauty.
- We'll be staying in the mountain hut of the family who lives here and looks after the nearby Soviet Meteorology Station and the Institute of Glaciers Foundation. Once we've settled in they'll take us for a little tour around the two setups. It's fascinating seeing the old Soviet ways of measuring everything, compared to the high-tech modern ways of measuring the same things.
- After dinner we'll no doubt have a bonfire and just relax, taking it all in.

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Day 5: Kyzyl Suu - Barskoon - Beltam Yurt Camp

- Beginning our descent back down the mountains, stop and have a dip at a small natural hot spring, right on the edge of the glacial river, before leaving the mountains and getting back to Issyk Kol.
- Stop at the town of Barskoon to see the monument to Yuri Gagarin, carved into a huge rock.
- Next we'll visit Aalam Ordo. Building was started in 2009, and it was supposed to be a large centre of knowledge, culture and spirituality, but was never completed. Now it lies abandoned and half finished, but the ornate high wall catches everybody's eye as they drive past.
- Arriving at Beltam Yurt Camp, we'll get our yurts and make ourselves at home, taking in our surrounds at the edge of Issyk Kol, the second largest saline lake in the world (based on volume, actually it's only fifth biggest based on surface area!). Heard of glamping? Well this is glurting, with each yurt decked out like a hotel room, with power outlets, lights, and real mattresses.
- Take a walk to the nearby abandoned Soviet campground. We've made friends with the local security guard, so we'll be able to explore the dorms, industrial kitchens, shower block, theatre, and whatever else you can find. A keen urban explorer can easily spend hours here.
- We'll have a home-cooked meal inside a huge yurt, and spend the rest of the evening relaxing.

Day 6: Beltam - Kochkor - Song Kol

- Just 100m from our yurt camp, we'll have the opportunity to visit a fascinating old Soviet heavy water factory. Opened in 1955, needless to say, the experiment was a disaster from the beginning. Enduring almost 30 years of issues and failures though, Manufacturing Workshop Number 7 wasn't closed until 1982. Now it lies abandoned as a relic of one of the USSR's many failed projects.
- Begin the four-hour drive to Song Kol, stopping in the town of Kochkor where we'll visit the market, take a short walk through the streets, and have lunch in a local family's home.
- After the epic drive, we'll arrive at Song Kol. Set high in the mountains, the lake itself is in the middle of a fertile plateau, dotted with horses, sheep and yurts. Tonight's yurt is a bit more authentic than at Beltam, but still very comfortable. Even though it's summer and we'll have been hot down in Bishkek and Issyk Kol, we'll now be very glad to have stoves on in each yurt for warmth.
- Depending on how early we arrive, you'll have the opportunity to go horse riding, or just take a walk around the area or if you're really brave, a dip in the lake. Either way it'll be a relaxing and peaceful evening under the stars.
- Dinner will be in the main yurt at our camp, cooked by the family we're staying with.

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Day 7: Song Kol - Kurtka - Moldo Ashoo Pass - Kazarman

- After breakfast, leave for Kazarman Village via Moldo Ashoo Mountain Pass. This is a breathtaking drive, with loads of photo stops. There isn't much to do on this drive, but the views of mountains and valleys, with cute villages dotted across the hillsides, will be plenty to keep you enthralled.
- We'll stop for lunch in the village of Kurtka, before continuing on to Kazarman.
- You'll have some time to explore Kazarman, known as a "tough mining town", and definitely rough around the edges, formerly a gold mining town. With decreased employment opportunities a lot of the young people have left for the bigger cities, and we'll get to see the sadder side to economic change in Kyrgyzstan and a part of the country a bit down on its luck.

Day 8: Kazarman - Jalalabad

- Continuing our drive through the mountains, we'll arrive in Jalalabad in the afternoon, and go to the Mineral Spa. Located in the hills just outside the city centre, the Jalalabad Sanatorium is another great example of some funky Soviet architecture. We can have a drink of the healing mineral water, freshly out of the ground, whilst taking in the brilliant views over the town.
- Returning to the town, we'll visit Madumar Ata Chaikhana, the most famous chaykhana in Jalalabad. Chaikhana, translating to tea house, and are common all over Central Asia. The building itself is worth a stop at, a huge gleaming hall, the outside walls covered in pictures of teapots.

Day 9: Jalalabad - Osh

- We didn't choose these days by accident - today is Saturday so that we can get the epic and unique experience of visiting Jalalabad's animal market. From early in the morning, the marketplace comes to life with incredible numbers of cows, sheep, goats and horses, all being bought and sold in what seem to be some kind of theatrical code between farmers and traders.
- Arriving in Osh in the afternoon, we'll take a city tour of the 3,000 year old town. Although in some ways it'll feel like we've re-entered civilisation after a few days in the Kyrgyz countryside, Osh feels a lot different to Bishkek. There's a bit of a rugged, wild west sort of feel, that's quite charming.
- We'll visit the sacred Sulaiman Too Mountain, the main attraction in Osh. We'll walk to the top of the rocky outcrop, no doubt meeting lots of local pilgrims happy to have a chat on the way.
- Not only is the scraggy hill a site in itself, but it's also home to Sulaiman Too Museum, one of those famous crazy Soviet buildings that appear on all the lists of weird Soviet structures.
- Next we'll go to the Osh bazaar, one of Central Asia's largest open-air markets. This is a great opportunity to find some cool souvenirs - hats, coats, rugs, fabrics, ornaments, loads of the cool stuff you've been admiring on locals and in their houses over the past few days.



Day 10: Osh - Sary Tash

- Today we'll drive to Sary Tash. In itself it's not much of a destination, but as the start of the Pamir Highway, it's a great place to spend a relaxing afternoon and evening before we start the next part of this epic drive.

Day 11: Tajikistan border crossing at Kyzyl Art - Murghab

- Drive to Murgab through the Ak Baytal Pass. At over 4,600m high, this is the highest section of road in the former Soviet Union.
- We'll stop near Karakul Lake for picturesque views of Lenin Peak. At 7,134m, Lenin Peak is partly in Tajikistan and partly in Kyrgyzstan, and is the second highest mountain in each country. The highest in Tajikistan is Somoni Peak, which was previously called Peak Stalina. Lenin Peak is the easiest to climb mountain over 7,000m, with the most ascends per year, for a mountain of that size.
- Arrive in Murghab, a small city in the Alichur Valley. Surrounded by high snow-covered mountains, this area is inhabited by Kyrgyz and Pamir Tajik people. From here you'll get great views of the high summit of Muztagh Ata Peak, which is 7,546m, but actually in China.
- Take a walk to explore the city and its traditional market. We'll stop for a picture at the Lenin statue of course. A large number of the shops here are constructed using shipping containers giving the local market a very colourful unique feeling.
- Overnight in homestay in Murghab.

Day 12: Langar Valley - Lake Yashilkul - Langar

- We'll keep driving along the next section of the Pamir Highway, on a section of road that was completed in 1931. We'll stop at Yashilkul and Bulung Kul, two more spectacular lakes, then we make our way through the Khargush Pass.
- This part of the Pamirs was made famous by the Chevy Chase and Dan Akroyd film Spies Like Us.
- We won't actually be in the Wakhan Corridor, but as we drive along the River Panj, we'll be just across the river from it, the Hindu Kush to the south and the Pamirs to the north.
- After a pretty exciting day of driving and sight-seeing, we'll arrive in Langar and spend the night there.

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Day 13: Langar - Yamg - Ishkashim - Khorog

- Our first stop will be in Vrang, where we'll see the caves dug by the Buddhists who used to live here.
- Then we'll stop in Yamg village to see the tomb and reconstructed house museum of Sufi mystic Mubarak Kadam, along with the stone that was used as a solar calendar 700 years ago.
- We'll check out Kah-Kakha Fortress and Abrashim Fortress, before arriving in Ishkashim, and continuing on towards Khorog.
- In the afternoon, before we arrive in Khorog, we'll stop at the Garam Chashma hot springs to relax after another day driving the Pamir. There are also cafes here for those who would rather relax with a beverage and bite to eat.
- Arriving in Khorog you'll have a chance to explore the city yourself. Although it was once of strategic importance to the Soviet Union, this is now a really poor area of Tajikistan.

Day 14: Khorog - Kalaikhum

- Today we'll drive to Kalaikhum, a cute little town of 1,600 people, nestled into the valley. From here you can easily see across the river Panj into Afghanistan.
- I'm sure it's not just us that finds something really strange and exhilarating about looking across a border. It's just a few metres, you could throw a rock there, and yet it's like a whole different world. Especially when the other country is one that is so special and unique.

Day 15: Kalaikhum - Dushanbe

- Today we will arrive in Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital city. We'll take a tour of the city centre, including Rudaki Street, the Somoni Monument and Central Park, where you can gawk at the huge flagpole which was the largest in the world from 2011 to 2014.
- We'll visit the largest teahouse in the world, where you can either just enjoy a locally made tea, or have something to eat in this iconic building.

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Day 16: Dushanbe - Khoja Obi Garm

- Leaving Dushanbe, we're going to spend the afternoon and evening at an amazing building which really encapsulates what we're all about. Khoja Obi Garm is a Brutalist behemoth Soviet-era sanatorium that is still in operation. The drive there is like the opening scene from the film *The Shining*. It's run by the Tajikistan Trade Union organisation to provide workers with rest and relaxation. The treatments are a little unorthodox as they include radon baths, electric shock therapy, pulsating circulation treatment as well as mud baths and acupuncture (treatments not included in tour price). It's an absolute dream for any lovers of weird Soviet stuff.

Day 17: Cross border to Uzbekistan - Samarqand

- Leave early in the morning to drive to Samarqand. Farewelling Tajikistan, we'll cross at the Panjakent border, and arrive in Samarqand in the early afternoon.
- Once known as the Pearl of the Muslim World, Samarqand is a city synonymous with the Silk Road. Full of towering minarets, shimmering domes and home to a splendid technicolour bazaar, it is the oldest continuously inhabited city in Central Asia.
- We'll start our time in Samarqand with a visit to the famous and spectacular Registan Square which is flanked by three beautifully decorated, sparkling blue mosaic madrassas. Once the city's commercial centre, Registan Square is modern Samarqand's centre piece.
- Optional wine tasting at the Khovrenko Winery, a small local wine factory with adjoining museum.

Day 18: Samarqand

- Today we will explore the main sites of Samarqand. Having already visited the Registan the day before, we'll start today's tour with a walk through the centre of town.
- Having died in September 2016, Islam Karimov, the First President of Uzbekistan, now has his mausoleum on the newly renamed Islam Karimov Street.
- Winding through the narrow streets of the old city, we'll stop at a particularly unique synagogue. Totally unrecognisable from the outside, it looks like any of the typical houses on either side, but inside is a bizarre and unique mixture of Uzbek and Jewish décor.
- We'll also pay visits to Bibi Khanum Mosque, Siyab Bazaar, and the grave of St. Daniel which is said to grow a foot in length every ten years.
- Visit Romanenko House, a place that is difficult to describe. This small suburban house has been transformed into a completely unique textile workshop where thirty men and women redesign ancient Central Asian clothing into colourful, modern designs.



Day 19: Samarqand - Bukhara

- Catch the train to Bukhara in the morning, and then we'll take a walking tour of the old town, including Lyabi Hauz Square, Bolo-Hauz Mosque, and the elegant blue-tiled Ulughbek Madrassa.
- On your way in and out of town you won't be able to miss a huge structure that looks like a giant ark. Known as the Ancient Ark Fortress, this was the Palace of Bukhara's Emirs, and parts of it are still open for us to visit.
- In the evening we'll sit by the lake, chilling out and taking it all in over a cold drink and a chat.

Day 20: Bukhara - Khiva

- You might like to get up for a sunrise view over Bukhara. With minarets a-plenty, there are loads of great viewing points, and the sunrise can be quite spectacular over the old city.
- After breakfast, we'll leave for Khiva, stopping for lunch at a roadside restaurant along the way.
- Arriving in Khiva in the afternoon, you might like to start exploring yourself. It's a very compact old town, so you can easily walk around and get a really good feel for the place.

Day 21: Khiva - Nukus

- In the morning we'll take a walking tour of Khiva, before driving to Nukus, the capital of the Republic of Karakalpakstan.
- In the afternoon we'll visit the Museum of Savitskiy. The Karakalpakstan State Museum of Art hosts the world's second largest collection of Russian avant garde art (after the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg). Savitskiy himself went to great lengths to save prohibited pieces of art during the Soviet Union, and amazingly you can see some of them now in this museum.

Day 22: Aral Sea

- Departure from Nukus first thing in the morning to drive towards the Aral Sea. Stopping at some Silk Road ruins and a canyon on the way, we'll drive up on to the Usturt Plateau.
- Picnic lunch at a ruined Soviet gulag, near the edge of one of the small parts of the remaining sea.
- Arriving at the main part of the sea, if you're game, you can go for a swim. There used to be 10mg of salt per litre in the sea, but now with 160g (yes, grams, not miligrams, so 16,000 times more!) it's not far off the Dead Sea (180g/l), and now you can easily float on top of the water. That's if you can bring yourself to get to the water, past all the oil and grime that's collected at the side of the sea.
- We'll spend the night in a yurt camp near the shore, from where you can watch the sun set over the rapidly disappearing sea.

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Day 23: Aral Sea - Nukus - Tashkent

- You can wake up early to see the sun rise over the water, otherwise it's breakfast then on to Moynak village, which used to be a thriving coastal town, but is now a disheveled and quiet desert town, most famous now for the ship cemetery.
- Ships lay abandoned on the old seabed as the sea receded. A lot of them were removed and destroyed, supposedly so the metal could be recycled, but a dozen or so of them were saved and are now in Moynak.
- Back in Nukus in the early evening to fly to Tashkent.
- There will have been various points during the trip where you've felt like you've returned to civilisation to different extents - arriving in Osh after Song Kol and Jalalabad, then Dushanbe after the Pamirs, Samarqand after Khoja Obigarm, but Tashkent really is the big smoke, and it will be quite exciting to get there.

Day 24: Tashkent - Yangiabad

- Our first stop in Tashkent will be the famous Chorsu Bazaar, with its iconic blue dome that's now home to meat, dairy and dried fruits. Exploring the stalls you'll learn about traditional bread-making methods, local remedies for everything including of course virility issues, and how Uzbek babies are taught to go to the toilet.
- Take a walk from Independence Square, formerly Lenin Square, through the park and past the statue of Amir Timur. Stop and browse in a small market in the park, full of old Soviet trinkets and sit under a shady pagoda for a cold drink or ice cream.
- Leaving Tashkent again, we'll drive into the mountains to visit the town of Yangiabad. A closed town during the Soviet Union, not even appearing on maps, it was built as a mining town where exiles were sent. Once home to about 10,000 people, the population is now a little over 300, and noone pays them much attention. We'll spend the afternoon wandering the streets, peeking into abandoned buildings and listening to stories from locals.
- We'll spend the night at a nearby Soviet "resort". If it's hot you can go for a swim in the river, or if you just want to relax, we might be able to find the massage lady.

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Day 25: Yangiabad - Parkent - Tashkent

- Heading back towards Tashkent, we'll drive to Parkent, where we've been granted permission to visit a spectacular example of Soviet technology and architecture – the solar furnace. Still functioning, though never really having managed to fulfil its purpose, it's not open to the public.
- Return to Tashkent just in time for lunch. You'll probably have tried plov by now, but there's no better place to have it than at the Plov Centre. This gigantic hall, decorated as if for a wedding in the 1980s, is set up for large numbers of people to eat plov in. Prepared just outside by an army of Uzbeks, it is some pretty good plov, but more than that, it is an exceptionally unique experience.
- Go to Tashkent TV Tower for fabulous views of the city.
- Visit Tashkent Land, Central Asia's answer to Disneyland. With its faded welcome sign, crumbling gift shop and creaky rides, this is another step back in time. Most tourists don't make it to this gem of Soviet infrastructure, but we just can't resist it. If you're really game you can try out the “Boomerang” rollercoaster, or if you'd like something a bit more relaxing you can take a ride on the “African tour”, a boat trip through the jungleland.
- Next we'll visit the Museum of Railway Techniques'. This outdoor museum is full of all sorts of old locomotives, and they don't mind us climbing all over them. We can even take a little train ride around the train museum. You don't have to be a train lover to enjoy this charming museum.

Day 26: Tashkent - End of Tour

- Today we finish our tour of Uzbekistan.
- We'll organise a transfer to the airport for you.
- Uzbekistan is really the heart of Central Asia and is a great spring board to the other 'Stans. Please let us know if you want to continue your Central Asian adventure.