

# Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan Extended Tour July 24th - August 19th 2022



## **INTRODUCTION:**

What do Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have in common? They were all part of the Soviet Union, they're all landlocked, they all celebrate Nawruz, they all love plov, they all border Kyrgyzstan, and they all like to throw dead goats around whilst riding on horseback. And they're all part of this awesome tour!

Starting in Osh, we'll start with the Pamir Highway, a spectacular drive through some of the most rural places in the world, before entering back into modern civilisation when arriving in Dushanbe. From there we'll cross into Uzbekistan where we'll show you some incredible ancient sites, the devastating Aral Sea, some funky local culture and some bizarre SAIGA specials. In Kazakhstan you'll see some of the least known Soviet relics that exist, the hip former capital of Almaty, the tragic and confronting Polygon test site and the largest chimney in the world, before finishing up in the custom-built capital of Nur Sultan, formerly known as Astana, formerly known as Akmola, formerly known as Tselinograd.....

## *HIGHLIGHTS:*

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

Soviet urban exploration: Abandoned factories in **Kyrgyzstan** to Mining towns in **Kazakhstan**

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 19th 2022

**PRICE:** \$3995 USD (twin share),  
Single Supplement \$750 USD

**START:** Osh, Kyrgyzstan

**FINISH:** Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan



### 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	Osh
Day 2	Osh - Sary Tash
Day 3	Tajikistan border crossing at Kyzyl Art - Murghab
Day 4	Langar Valley - Lake Yashilkul - Langar
Day 5	Langar - Yamg - Ishkashim - Khorog
Day 6	Khorog - Kalaikhum
Day 7	Kalaikhum - Dushanbe
Day 8	Dushanbe - Khoja Obi Garm
Day 9	Cross border to Uzbekistan - Samarqand
Day 10	Samarqand
Day 11	Samarqand - Bukhara

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Day 12	Bukhara - Khiva
Day 13	Khiva - Nukus
Day 14	Nukus - Aral Sea
Day 15	Aral Sea - Nukus - Tashkent
Day 16	Tashkent - Yangiabad
Day 17	Yangiabad - Parkent - Tashkent
Day 18	Tashkent - Turkistan
Day 19	Turkistan - Kentau - Achisay - Zhanatas
Day 20	Zhanatas - Bayzhansay - Taraz
Day 21	Taraz - Almaty
Day 22	Almaty
Day 23	Almaty - Semey
Day 24	Semey - Atomic Lake - Kurchatov
Day 25	Kurchatov - Polygon nuclear test site - Ekibastuz
Day 26	Ekibastuz - Nur-Sultan
Day 27	Nur-Sultan - ALZHIR - End of Tour

## Day 1: Osh

- Meeting 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.

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## Day 2: 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 3: 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 4: 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.



## Day 5: 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 6: 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 7: 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 8: 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 9: 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 10: 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 11: 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 12: 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 13: 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 14: 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 15: 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 16: 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 no one 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 17: 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 18: Tashkent - Turkistan

- Saying goodbye to Tashkent and to Uzbekistan, we'll cross the nearby Kazakhstan border and head to Shymkent where we'll stop for lunch.
- Drive to Otrar, an ancient, abandoned town on the Silk Road, that existed from as early as the 5th century B.C. right up until the 18th century A.D and is now a well-preserved archaeological site.
- Next stop is the ruins of Sauran, a large city surrounded by walls, which for a time was the capital of Ak Orda and the largest city in Kazakhstan. The city was a major player on the Silk Road, having strong diplomatic relations with world powers, but like Otrar, Sauran saw its decline alongside the Silk Road itself.
- In Turkistan, we'll find the mausoleum of Khawaja Ahmed, which was instructed to be built by Amir Timur in 1389 but was never finished as building was stopped upon Timur's death.



## Day 19: Turkistan – Kentau – Achisay – Zhanatas

- Make sure you wear some comfortable shoes and get ready for some nostalgia, as we explore several semi-abandoned old industrial towns. Kentau, Achisay and Zhanatas are old Soviet monogorods (mining towns), but with the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of centralised planning, the towns have bowed to market forces and largely depopulated.
- Best of all for us, there are still plenty of Soviet murals, awesome public art, old Palaces of Culture and the usual 1950s Khrushchevka apartment blocks. Exploring these towns will be like entering a time machine, and any lovers of Soviet nostalgia, or those partial to a bit of urbex, will be in heaven.
- On the road between Ashysai and Zhanatas, we'll stop by an old caravanserai by itself in the middle of the Kazakh steppe.
- We'll spend the night in Zhanatas, a town which has probably had very few if any foreign travellers.

## Day 20: Zhanatas - Bayzhansay - Taraz

- Today we'll take the abandoned Soviet feel to the next level, stopping in Bayzhansay, a completely abandoned Soviet town. There is now no one living here and the town can be extremely eerie. It is this type of town that encapsulates the demise of the Soviet Union and its economic model.
- In the afternoon we'll head to Taraz where you'll have the rest of the day to explore. Taraz is over 2000 years old, but is also a modern city and one of the fastest growing in Kazakhstan.
- There are several easily accessible things to do in Taraz including the Aisha-Bibi Mausoleum, the Kali-Yunus bathhouse, and Abdykadyr Mosque just to name a few. Others might wish to just stroll in the local park, or otherwise relax at a local café or chaykhana (tea house).

## Day 21: Taraz - Almaty

- It's a 500km drive from Taraz to Almaty, so we'll need to make sure we've got some good trivia questions and stories to tell. We'll stop on the way for a few rests and lunch, before we arrive in the largest city in Kazakhstan, and until 1997, its capital. As is becoming increasingly common in Kazakhstan, Almaty was formerly known as Alma-Ata and before that Verny.
- We'll check into our hotel for the next two nights, then head out for Almaty's number one attraction and a great friend of SAIGA – the Almaty Walking Tour. This one will take in such famous sites as the Green Bazaar, the Arbat and Panfilov Park, named after the 28 Panfilov Guardsmen from Almaty, who died during the Battle of Moscow in 1941, which is right next to Zenkov Cathedral. A Russian Orthodox Church, its claim to fame is being the largest wooden structure in the world constructed with only joins, and no nails.
- If you like to have a night out of any type, whether it's fine dining, a cosy bar, a noisy pub or even the ballet, Almaty is the city you're going to want to do it in.



## Day 22: Almaty

- Today we'll drive to a few of the destinations not within walking distance.
- We'll pass Old Square and Republic Square, the two places where the Kazakh Parliament used to take place before moving to Astana in 1997. These are also where we recently saw fatal riots in January 2022, along with the images of the destroyed city hall and presidential residence.
- We'll show you Medeo, the highest ice-skating rink in the world, and then on to Big Almaty Lake.
- Driving out to the suburbs of Almaty, we'll make a stop that isn't on other tour itineraries, and in fact most people in Almaty aren't even aware of this gem of Soviet history. Hidden in amongst medium density housing, there's a park which is now home to all the unwanted Soviet statues that were moved from their original places throughout the city and dumped unceremoniously here. Our favourite is the giant Lenin which used to be in Old Square, removed from his plinth and just standing flat on the ground with no sign or plaque to be seen.
- Back in the city centre, we'll take a ride on the Almaty metro. One of only two metros in Central Asia (the other being in Tashkent), it has just nine stations, so is largely useless to most people. However, like many metros in the former Soviet world, the stations themselves are ornately decorated, sparkling clean, and well worth a look at.

## Day 23: Almaty - Semey

- We head north today, and while it would be great to go overland, the distance we'll be covering would take a couple of days, so instead we'll catch a flight to the city of Semey.
- Semey is definitely not on the normal tourist trail. Some will know it by its Russian name - Semipalatinsk. Semey is the epitome of Soviet Kazakhstan and was formerly one of the main cities in the north of the country, although it's now overshadowed by nearby Astana (Nur-Sultan). Semey is also said to have a much stronger Russian character compared with most of Kazakhstan, owing to the closeness to the Russian border and the large scientific community.
- We'll take a look around town admiring the mosaics and public art as well as the famous Lenin Alley and 'Stronger than Death' anti-nuclear monument.

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## Day 24: Semey - Atomic Lake - Kurchatov

- This is when we finally see the nuclear sites themselves. Our first stop is the famous atomic lake. This lake was made by an explosion 25 times greater than Hiroshima. While it might look like the lake was an interesting consequence of the testing, it was in fact an intentional side effect, as the experiments were designed for earth-moving purposes to artificially create lakes, harbours and canals. Unbelievably, locals fish in the lake, despite warnings by authorities that it is hazardous.
- In the afternoon we'll check on the Chagan abandoned airbase. During the Cold War this was home to one of the Soviet Union's main air force bases for the deployment of long-range bombers carrying nuclear weapons. The location is interesting as it's on the Chinese border. Part of the reason for its location was the rising tensions due to the Sino-Soviet split.
- We'll then head to the town of Kurchatov, a formerly closed city, named after Igor Kurchatov, the founder of the Soviet nuclear programme, where the headquarters of the nuclear testing was based. Most of the town is derelict now as there is no employment to sustain the town's population, providing an opportunity to explore the old Soviet apartment blocks.
- The accommodation tonight will also be a very Soviet experience.

## Day 25: Kurchatov - Polygon Nuclear Test Site - Ekibastuz

- Before leaving Kurchatov, we'll visit the Museum of the Semipalatinsk Test Site, which not just anyone can visit - they require a permit organised in advance, but don't worry, that's what we're here for. This small museum gives you an idea of the history and effects of the nuclear testing done here.
- We'll then continue on to more of the nuclear test site - known as the Polygon. 456 Nuclear tests were conducted here, and the effects can be witnessed first-hand with the destroyed surroundings and large craters caused by the explosions.
- We'll explore the bunkers used by those performing the tests and the epicentres of the explosions.
- Leaving the test site behind, we'll make a stop in Aksu, before continuing to Ekibastuz for the night.



## Day 26: Ekibastuz - Nur-Sultan

- Ekibastuz is a large industrial town in north-eastern Kazakhstan. Home of the world's tallest chimney (at 419.7m tall), the most powerful power lines, and Bogatyr – the largest open-cast coal mine. How's that for some world records?!
- Ekibastuz isn't just an industrial back water, it also has a political history as it was a place of political exile for dissidents such as Alexandr Solzhenitzyn.
- We'll arrive in the capital of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan, mid-afternoon, with plenty of time to do a driving tour of this very spread out, but ridiculously impressive city.
- Built in 1997, Nur-Sultan resembles in many ways other cities such as Ashgabat, or to a lesser extent Baku. Clearly built from nothing at the snap of a finger, several of the world's most iconic architects were given carte blanche and tasked with the epic job of designing an incredibly unique city.
- We'll start the city tour with a visit to Bayterek. Sometimes referred to as the "Chupa Chup" because it looks like one, Bayterek has become a symbol of Astana. From the viewing platform, which is 97 meters high, symbolising the year of the city becoming capital, you can get spectacular views over the new city.
- Next we'll visit the Palace of Independence, the shopping and entertainment centre "Khan Shatyr", probably Nur-Sultan's most famous building. The building is in the shape of a giant, slightly lop-sided tent, and it's got everything inside that you might want. Restaurants, luxury shops, and even an aquapark which has sand imported from the Maldives.
- What's in a name? Although currently known as Nur-Sultan (after the first President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev), the city was known as Astana until 2019. Before 1997 it was Tselinograd, and before that it was Akmolinsk in Russian.

## Day 27: Nur-Sultan - ALZHIR - End of Tour

- Our final day sees us taking a short trip out of the city to ALZHIR – the Camp of Wives of Traitors to the Motherland. In the middle of the Kazakh steppe, you'll find this camp where the family of dissidents and so-called traitors were sent. Today it's now a memorial and museum where we'll learn about this dark part of the country's history.
- We'll arrive back in Astana with some free time in the afternoon before we have our farewell dinner in a local Kazakh restaurant.
- Transfers to the airport according to your flight times.
- If you would like to spend longer in Astana, let us know and we can help you make your plans.