



## **EIGHT REASONS TO GO TO UZBEKISTAN**

With easier access and a dearth of tourists, there's never been a better time to explore this central Asian country

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Sandwiched between and landlocked by a bunch of other 'Stans (including Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan), [Uzbekistan](#) and much of this part of Central Asia has been overlooked for years – but the country is home to an incredible number of photogenic mosques, mausoleums and madrasas in every shade of blue.

Its centuries-long history under Persian rule and as a key stop on the Silk Road left a rich cultural and architectural legacy, made all the more fascinating by the country's time as an enclave of the Soviet Union.

Uzbekistan is opening up to tourists, with three flights a week from London Heathrow and an easier visa process – it formally involved letters of introduction, interviews and exorbitant costs. Here's why you should visit this relatively unknown destination now.

### **Samarkand's mausoleums inspired the Taj Mahal**

Persian rulers were building Uzbekistan's 14th-century mausoleums – such as Gur-e-Amir, devoted to the leader Amir Timur – in eye-popping cobalts, cyans and sapphires before they even conceived of building India's now famous counterparts.



“Amir Timur was the founder of the Indian Mughal empire, and he conquered Delhi – so the Gur-e-Amir mausoleum in Samarkand is a prototype of the Taj Mahal,” says Aijan Lasser, from Kalpak Travel, which operates tours in the country.

Some of its walls date back to the 14th century, but most of it has been painstakingly reconstructed after earthquake damage. Inside, the walls shine with gold leaf and signature shades of blue, making oscillating circular patterns. There's Sagrada Familia canopy-esque coving under arches above and off-white marble with geometric black marble patterns below, while the original 200kg gold chandelier has long been looted by invaders.

## **There are patterned tiles to rival Lisbon**

Beautiful, detailed ceramic tiles are everywhere in Uzbekistan. Mosaic squares and geometric or floral majolica patterns in shades of blue from cobalt to cyan line the walls of many of the country's great monuments.

Some of the best are in the Shah-i Zinda necropolis in the northeastern part of Samarkand. It began with one religious monument more than 1,000 years ago

and over the centuries developed into a series of palatial tombs for royalty and nobles, plus a shrine to medieval Islamic art at its finest.

## **There are hardly any tourists**

There's nothing like getting a decent shot of a monument with no one else in it. On our visit, we were lucky enough to find the most famous historical site in Samarkand, Registan Square, practically empty.



Also from Timur's dynasty, Registan Square was the heart of the medieval city and its commercial centre – all bulbous turquoise domes and striking mosaics. In its heyday, it would have been filled with bazaars, selling all the textiles and fabrics you'd expect of a Silk Road hub.

Having been restored by the Soviets, Registan is utterly photogenic and arguably one of Central Asia's most impressive sights.

## **The watermelons are sweeter**

Fresh fruit and veg are staples here – visit towards the end of summer, when they're being harvested. The country's known for its super-sweet, fresh

watermelons, and achichuk salad, consisting of thin, long-sliced tomato, red onion and cucumber. This is served with plov, the national dish – rice cooked in a huge pot and tarted up with veg, quail eggs and slices of meat (beef, lamb or horse). It's best eaten canteen-style, where you'll pay about \$2 (£1.50) for a big, heaped plate, with beer usually costing around \$1.

Hearty meat grills are big here too, alongside tear-and-share bread and samsa, a teardrop-shaped street food that's a cross between a samosa and a Cornish pasty, filled with anything from beef to lamb to potato. The best bit? You won't find any chain restaurants or coffee shops.

## **Its subway rivals St Petersburg's**

The seventh metro system to be built in the USSR, Tashkent's subway is one of the most ornate in the world. Each station takes inspiration from its name, and as such they are vastly different, ranging from chandelier-lit spaces with baroque flourishes to traditional Islamic designs or stark, post-Soviet, post-modern mashups.



At Independence Square, gold, cylindrical art deco-style light fittings are works of art in themselves. Taking photos underground is banned, but it's still entirely worth the ticket price for a look even if you're not going anywhere in particular.

## **The Soviet-style architecture in Tashkent**

Much of Tashkent was damaged by an earthquake in the 1960s and rebuilt while under Russian rule, so it's a mix of stark Soviet buildings, classical Russian architecture and restored, photogenic blue-tiled 12th-century mosques.

Imperial Russian architects planned Amir Timur Square and its surroundings in the 1870s – it's all big boulevards and stark, flat surfaces. It's now flanked by the blocky, geometric concrete and oh so Soviet Hotel Uzbekistan, a “10-star” property that was hugely popular with visitors in its 1970s heyday.

For more Russian architecture head to Independence Square (previously Lenin Square until 1991), with its clear lines and big white-marble columns supporting a huge silver globe and three dancing storks (the national animal). Look closely for incorporated elements of Islamic tile design here too.



## **For the vodka**

The Uzbeks quaff vodka like the Russians – straight up, with a straight face. “Vodka is the most important legacy of the Soviet Union in all ex-Soviet states,” says Anna Martusevich, who left her hometown in Siberia to help launch the Hyatt in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent – currently the country’s leading hotel.

“Don’t have vodka with juice, that’s not good for you. Instead have it neat, ice cold from the freezer with a hot snack.” Na Zdorovie!

## **To see epic starry skies in the desert**

Head out of the cities and you’ll find massive sandy expanses and mountainous landscapes. From our reclining benches round the fire in the Aidar Yurt Camp in the Nurata Mountains – and with the help of a stargazing app – we made out the Northern Cross plus all the usual suspects, such as the Plough and Orion. Saturn and Jupiter were highly visible, too.

You’ll also find clean, lakeside beaches nearby, petroglyphs from fortress ruins dating back to Alexander the Great’s time, plus opportunities for a camel ride.

## **Travel essentials**

[Kalpak Travel](#)’s eight-day Classic Uzbekistan tour includes the highlights of Tashkent, Samarkand, Khiva and Bukhara. Regular scheduled departures take place in spring and autumn, and itineraries for independent travellers are also available. From €1,390 (£1,216) per person, full-board, including all accommodation, internal transfers, tour guides and entry to all activities in the itinerary. Excludes international flights.