

# 5 Underrated Destinations in Central Asia

On the crossroads of East and West, the Silk Road region holds hidden gems.

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Horses roam in front of [Kyrgyzstan's](#) Tash Rabat, an ancient monastery converted into a Silk Road inn.

Despite their rich cultures and diverse landscapes, the countries of Central [Asia](#) are often stereotypically grouped together as the “stans,” or overlooked and ignored altogether.

But the region is home to countless sites justly famous for their natural beauty, unique histories, and long-held traditions. Here are five spots that deserve a place on your Central Asian itinerary.

## Almaty, Kazakhstan



Built in 1972, the high-altitude Medeu Ice Rink has trained many champion skaters—though visitors of all skill levels can rent skates and enter for the equivalent of a few American dollars.

On any trip to Central Asia, you'll likely find yourself in [Almaty, Kazakhstan](#), a major hub for regional flights. Visitors can take advantage of the city's museums—or strap on a pair of ice skates for a visit to [Medeu](#), a high-altitude, outdoor ice rink outside Almaty. The rink is reminiscent of a winter wonderland: frosted evergreens, snow-covered mountains, blue skies, and Russian pop music complete the scene as people glide on the glistening ice.

**Getting there:** Kazakh visas usually aren't required for visits of fewer than 30 days (check visa requirements [here](#)). Visitors can reach Medeu by bus or taxi from Almaty; tickets to the rink vary in price, but adults (24 and up) can enter for 1,800 Tenge (\$4.73 USD) and rent skates for 1,000 Tenge (\$2.63 USD).

## **Tash Rabat, Kyrgyzstan**

Tucked in the mountains of Naryn Province, the 600-year-old stone buildings of [Tash Rabat](#) remain well-preserved despite the region's harsh winters. Said to have once been a monastery, Tash Rabat was later converted to a caravanserai, or inn, on the Silk Road. The

official caretakers, who live nearby, will unlock the gate to allow visitors to roam through the corridors and rooms.

After exploring, consider staying overnight at one of the nearby yurt camps. Before bed, be sure to look up: high elevation makes the starry night extra spectacular.

**Getting there:** Tourist [visas](#) are usually free for trips less than 60 days. Reach Tash Rabat from Bishkek by hiring a [private driver](#) through a tour company for \$300-400 USD or, for more adventurous travelers, by catching a bus or shared taxi from Bishkek's bus station to Naryn. Expect to pay about \$2 USD to enter Tash Rabat, plus around \$12 for a night at a yurt camp. It's best to know some Russian or Kyrgyz to negotiate prices in Som, the Kyrgyz currency.

## **Pamir Highway, Tajikistan**



Long, busy roads have crossed the Pamir Plateau for centuries, from the Silk Road to modern highways. The Pamir Highway is a must-do road trip through Tajikistan.

The Pamir Highway (M14) is the long stretch of road that runs between Osh, [Kyrgyzstan](#), and Dushanbe, [Tajikistan](#). Set aside about a week for the journey to make time for scenic stops and spontaneous detours by striking moonscapes, glistening lakes, wandering yaks,

and the imposingly large, snow-capped Hindu Kush mountains. Pack a bag and grab a few friends to see the diversity of Tajikistan on the road trip of a lifetime.

**Getting there:** Tourist visa fees to Tajikistan vary (check [here](#) for requirements). While some people choose to bike the Pamir Highway, most choose to [hire a driver](#), which costs about \$1,000 - \$2,000 USD. Regardless of vehicle, consider traveling from Dushanbe towards Osh: The reverse increases chances of experiencing altitude sickness.

## Gonur Tepe, Turkmenistan



The ancient fortress town of Gonur Tepe, about 30 miles outside the city of Mary in western Turkmenistan, is still being excavated and restored.

Visitors who can handle the notoriously strict visa rules will find [Turkmenistan](#) is worth the effort. Typical itineraries include the [Darwaza Gas Crater](#), [Ashgabat](#), [Merv](#), and [Mary](#), but visitors should also consider adding [Gonur Tepe](#), an ancient desert city and current archaeological site. Though partially reconstructed, most of it remains a maze of crumbling, clay walls and old rooms travelers are

free to explore. Shards of broken pottery litter the pathways, and some believe that remnants of [ancient Zoroastrian](#) fire pits, used for fire worship, dot the outskirts of the ruins.

**Getting there:** Visas to Turkmenistan aren't easy (or cheap) to obtain. Tourist visas require being accompanied by a guide on a purchased package (though it's possible to adjust your itinerary with the guide). Transit visas—more frequently denied—must prove the necessity of traveling through the country to another destination.

## **Bukhara, Uzbekistan**



The entrance to Kalon Mosque overlooks a plaza in Bukhara, one of Central Asia's holiest cities, also popular with visitors for its covered bazaars.

Considered one of Central Asia's holiest cities, Bukhara's urban landscape juxtaposes past and present.

Its well-preserved ancient minarets, mausoleums, and madrasas provide a spectacular display of mosaics and architecture for visitors eager to learn more about the region's pre-[Russian](#) culture.

Restoration efforts have not included embellishments, preserving the buildings' authentic beauty.

Finish off with a walk through Bukhara's covered bazaars: the city's famous for its hand-painted puppets and unique [bird scissors](#), which are hand-forged and shaped like storks.

**Getting there:** Depending on your citizenship and type of [visa](#), [fees vary](#); but once in [Uzbekistan](#), traveling is easy. To get to Bukhara, take a [train](#) from Samarkand or Tashkent.

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