

Central Asia Directory

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PRACTICALITIES

- **Video Systems** Central Asia has the same video system as Russia, ie Secam, which is incompatible with Australia, most of Europe (apart from France and Greece) and the US.
- **Electricity** The entire former USSR is the same – nominal 220V at 50 cycles, using European two-pin plugs (round pins, with no earth connection) everywhere. Adaptors are available in department stores.
- **Newspapers and Magazines** *Steppe Magazine* (www.steppemagazine.com) is a glossy new twice-yearly magazine concentrating on Central Asia. It's for sale in Central Asia and the UK or by subscription. *Discovery Central Asia* (www.silkpress.com) is an interesting quarterly tourism magazine published in Uzbekistan. The *Times of Central Asia* (www.timesca-europe.com) is a subscription-only online newspaper covering the region.
- **Weights & Measures** Central Asia is metric. When you buy produce in markets make sure you know whether the price is per piece (*shtuk*) or by the kilo.

For country-specific information, refer to the individual country directories in each country chapter.

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation alternatives are springing up all over Central Asia, so thankfully the smoky Soviet-era leftovers need only be used as a last resort. Private places are almost always the best places to stay.

Options are uneven across the region. The excellent homestays of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and the B&Bs of Uzbekistan offer the best alternatives to the Soviet-era fossils, but budget travellers will still find the latter a regular companion in Kazakhstan. Turkmenistan's visa regulations allow few alternatives

to the state-run hotels. Central and northern Tajikistan are largely stuck in the Soviet era, though much of the Pamirs now has an informal network of homes and yurts that offer a fascinating and intimate look at the way local people live.

You can even sleep in a (admittedly run-down) medressa in Khiva (p257), a caravan-serai in Bukhara (p244) or an astronomical observatory outside Almaty (p133).

B&Bs

These are small private guesthouses, as opposed to homestays, though the distinction can be a fine one. The best are to be found in the Uzbek cities of Bukhara, Khiva and Samarkand. Rates tend to be around US\$15 to US\$25 per person and include breakfast.

BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

Meals are extra but can normally be provided for around US\$5 each.

Camping

In the wilds there's normally no problem with you camping, though there is always an inherent security risk with this. If you are obviously on someone's land then you should try to ensure that you have permission. Staying anywhere near habitation will result in an immediate audience. Popular trekking routes have established camping areas, frequented by Soviet alpinists during the Soviet era. You can normally camp at a *turbaza* (former Soviet holiday camp) or yurt camp for a minimal fee.

Homestays

These are happily on the rise. For a bed of duvets on the floor and some type of breakfast you'll probably pay between US\$6 (in rural Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) to US\$15 per person (in Uzbekistan and cities) per night. Travel in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular has been revolutionised by the homestay networks of the Murgab Ecotourism Association (META; p388), Community-Based Tourism (CBT; p277) and Shepherd's Life organisations (also on p277). Kazakhstan also has some homestays at between US\$15 and US\$30 per person with all meals.

Do not expect hotel-style comforts; rural toilets, for example, are likely to be squat-ers in the garden. Yurtstays often do not have any kind of toilet at all. Don't expect anything exotic either – you may well end up in a block of flats, in front of a television all evening. Levels of privacy vary. You might get access to a kitchen, especially if you are in a flat.

Potential hosts may accost you as you alight at a station or enter a tourist hotel; older people, generally women, tend to be the best to

deal with. Sympathetic hotel reception staff may put you in touch with private homes in some cities. Many local private travel agencies can set you up with someone, though prices may be double local rates.

Friends you meet on the road may invite you home and ask nothing for it, but remember that most ordinary people have very limited resources so offer to pay anything from US\$5 (rural Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) to US\$10 in larger towns (add on around US\$5 for dinner and breakfast in rural areas). In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in particular, staying with someone who hasn't gone through official channels with the Office of Visas & Registration (OVIR; in Russian *Otdel Vis i Registratsii*) could put them at risk, especially if your own papers aren't in order.

Hotels

Though some are better than others, you almost never get what you pay for in Soviet-era tourist hotels, largely because tourists don't pay the same rates as locals. Many were in better shape before 1991, when the subsidies dried up. Doorknobs may come off in your hand; windows may not open or close. Electricity is usually dicey with dim or missing light bulbs. Toilets that leak but don't flush give bathrooms a permanent aroma and some bathrooms have long-term cockroach colonies. All beds are single, with pillows the size of suitcases. Guests themselves are essentially viewed as a dispensable inconvenience, ranking somewhere below room cleaners in the hotel pecking order.

FLOOR-LADIES

On every floor of a Soviet hotel a *dezurnaya* (floor-lady; *dezurnaya* is Russian for 'woman on duty') is in charge of handing out keys, getting hot water for washing, or *kipitok* (boiled water) for hot drinks, sometimes for a small fee. Even the most god-awful hotel can be redeemed by a big-hearted floor-lady who can find someone to do your laundry, find a light bulb or stash your bags while you're off on an excursion. Others can be a bit eccentric (one floor-lady in a hotel in Bishkek insisted on wiping the room clean with several old pairs of women's panties).

LATE-NIGHT TELEPHONE CALLS

Those late-night calls to your room aren't wrong numbers. All hotels with significant numbers of foreigners attract prostitutes, especially, it seems, in Kazakhstan (or was that just us?). Women guests rarely seem to get unexpected calls but several men have received calls from someone who knew their name, so somebody at the front desk knows what's going on. All you can do is work out how to temporarily disable your telephone and don't answer the door.

Uzbekistan leads the way in stylish private hotels, which are popping up all over the place. There are also a limited number of party or government guesthouses, *dachas* (holiday bungalows) and spas, which are now open to all. Most cities now have a choice of several modern and comfortable private hotels catering to local *biznesmen*, where nouveau riche is the dominant style.

If you're staying at a budget hotel that doesn't have hot water, ask about the local *banya* (public bath), which will.

Most hotels take your passport and visa for anywhere from half an hour to your entire stay, to do the required registration paperwork and to keep you from leaving without paying. Don't forget them when you leave – no-one is likely to remind you.

Budget-hotel room rates range from a few dollars in the countryside to around US\$20 in the cities. We do not mention all of a hotel's price options in our reviews; even the worst hotels often have a few *lux* (deluxe) or *pol-lux* (semideluxe) suites for about twice the price of a basic room, sometimes with a bathtub and hot water.

Mid-range hotels and B&Bs will have air-con, satellite TV and a decent breakfast and range from US\$30 to US\$60 per night.

Top-end places in major cities are often foreign-managed and offer good restaurants and bars, a health club of sorts and travel services. You may get a better room rate by booking through a local travel agent, though most hotels offer their own discounts.

Yurtstays

It's easy to arrange a yurtstay in central Kyrgyzstan and the eastern Pamirs region of Tajikistan. Yurts range from comfortable

tourist camps with beds, electricity and a nearby toilet, to the real McCoy owned by shepherds who are happy to take in the occasional foreigner for the night. The CBT and Shepherd's Life organisations in Kyrgyzstan (see p277) and Murgab Ecotourism Association (META; see p388) in Tajikistan offer yurtstays in the mountain pastures of the Tian Shan and Pamirs. Don't expect a great deal of privacy and or much in the way of toilet facilities, but it's a fantastic way to get a taste of life on the high pastures. For upmarket yurtstays try Ecotour in Kyrgyzstan (see p282).

There are also yurts at Lepsinsk, near Taldy-Korghan, Aksu-Zhabaghy in Kazakhstan, and at a yurt camp in the Kyzylkum desert near Ayaz-Qala, Uzbekistan (see p251).

BUSINESS HOURS

In general most government offices and banks are open from 9am to 5pm Mon to Friday, with an hour or two off for lunch, and possibly 9am to noon on Saturday. All offices and some shops are closed on Sundays. Exchange offices keep longer hours, including weekends. Post and telephone offices are sometimes open on weekends.

Museum hours change frequently, as do their days off, though Monday is the most common day of rest. Some just seem to close without reason and a few stay that way for years.

Public places in the former Soviet republics often display their business days visually, as a stack of seven horizontal bars with the top one representing Monday; blue means open, red means closed.

Restaurants are generally open for lunch and dinner. Many restaurants outside the capitals close quite early (around 9pm). In rural areas it is often worth telling a restaurant that you would like to eat there a couple of hours beforehand, to give them some time to prepare and to ensure that they are open.

CHILDREN

Children can be a great icebreaker and a good avenue for cultural exchange, but travelling in Central Asia is difficult even for the healthy adult. Long bus and taxi rides over winding mountain passes are a sure route to motion sickness. Central Asian food is difficult to digest no matter what your age,

and extreme temperatures – blistering hot in the city, freezing in the mountains – lead to many an uncomfortable moment. Islamic architecture and ruined Karakhanid cities may well leave your children comatose with boredom. A few places of added interest to children in summer include the amusement and aqua parks in Tashkent (p203 and Almaty (p119).

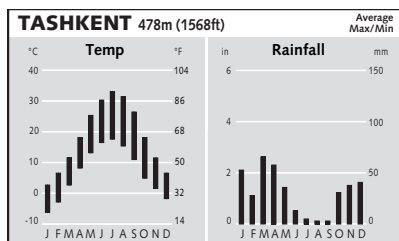
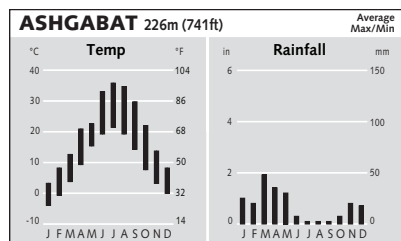
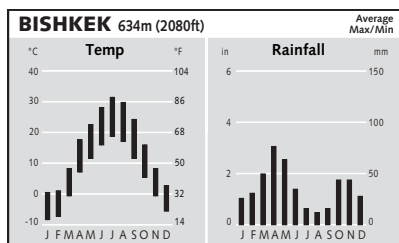
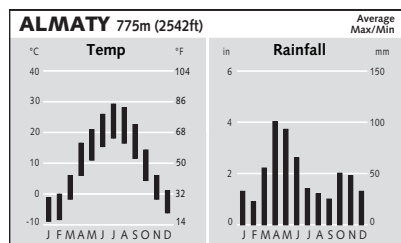
If you are bringing very young children into Central Asia, nappies are available at department stores, but bring bottles and medicines. Forget about car seats, high chairs, cribs or anything geared for children, though you'll always find a spare lap and helpful hands when boarding buses. It's possible to make a cot out of the duvets supplied in most homestays. *Lux* hotel rooms normally come with an extra connecting room, which can be ideal for children.

For more advice on travelling with children, pick up Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children*.

We're Riding on a Caravan: An Adventure on the Silk Road by Laurie Krebs is a children's picture book aimed at four to eight year olds that describes a trader's life on the Chinese section of the Silk Road.

Stories From the Silk Road by Cherry Gilchrist is story book aimed at a similar age group.

CLIMATE CHARTS



CUSTOMS

Barring the occasional greedy official at a remote posting, few Western tourists have major customs problems in Central Asia. When they do, it's usually over the export of 'cultural artefacts'.

Declaring money on entry to a former Soviet republic is an awkward matter – total honesty reveals how much cash you're carrying to possibly dishonest officials, while fudging can create problems later. In general you are better off declaring everything (cash and travellers cheques) to the dollar. On arrival in Tashkent and Almaty officials may want you to pull out and display everything you've declared. Count up your money privately before you arrive. You won't have a problem unless you are trying to leave with more money than you arrived with (and if you work out how to do that, please let us know).

There are no significant limits on items brought into Central Asia for personal use, except on guns and drugs. Heading out, the main prohibitions are 'antiques' and local currency. Every country's regulations prohibit the export of endangered animals and plants, though few officials would recognise an endangered species if it bit them.

You may well be asked for the customs declaration you filled out when you first entered the country, so save all official-looking documents.

Exporting Antiques

From the former Soviet republics, you cannot export antiques or anything of 'historical or cultural value' – including art, furnishings, manuscripts, musical instruments, coins, clothing and jewellery – without an export licence and payment of a stiff export duty.

Get a receipt for anything of value that you buy, showing where you got it and how much you paid. If your purchase looks like it has historical value, you should also have a letter saying that it has no such value or that you have permission to take it out anyway. Get this from the vendor, from the Ministry of Culture in the capital, or from a curator at one of the state art museums with enough clout to do it. Without it, your goodies could be seized on departure, possibly even on departure from another CIS state.

In Uzbekistan any book or artwork made before 1945 is considered antique. In Turkmenistan 'cultural artefacts' seems to embrace almost all handicrafts and traditional-style clothing, no matter how mundane, cheap or new.

To export a carpet from Turkmenistan you'll need to get the carpet certified (for a fee) at Ashgabat's Carpet Museum or buy it from one of the state carpet shops. See p435. for more on this.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Travel in Central Asia is a delight for those who are ready for it, but a potential nightmare for the unprepared. Don't expect anything to go smoothly, starting with the visa chase before you even go. Crime is minimal by Western urban standards, but it is slowly on the rise and visitors are tempting, high-profile targets. Local and regional transport can be unpredictable, uncomfortable and occasionally unsafe. Central Asian officials and police generally create more problems than they solve. For emergency phone numbers see the Quick Reference page on the inside front cover of this book. See boxes at the front of each country chapter for specific dangers to that country.

If you have an emergency or have your passport stolen you must immediately contact nearest embassy (which might be in a neighbouring republic if you are in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan or Turkmenistan). It will help if you have a photocopy of your passport to verify who you are. It's a good idea to register with

GOVERNMENT TRAVEL ADVICE

The following government websites offer travel advisories and information on current hot spots.

Australian Department of Foreign Affairs (☎ 1300 139281; www.smartraveller.gov.au) Register online at www.orao.dfat.gov.au.

British Foreign Office (☎ 0845-850 2829; www.fco.gov.uk/travel)

Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs (☎ 1-800-267 6788; www.voyage.gc.ca)

US State Department (☎ 1-888-407 4747; http://travel.state.gov) Register online at https://travelregistration.state.gov.

your embassy upon arrival in Central Asia and to carry the telephone numbers of your embassies in the region.

This section, all about the headaches, is not meant to put you off. Rather, it is intended to prepare you for the worst. Here's hoping you don't run into any of these problems.

Alcohol

Whether it's being poured down your throat by a zealous host, or driving others into states of pathological melancholy, brotherly love, anger or violence, alcohol can give you a headache in more ways than one. This is especially true in economically depressed areas, where violence hovers just below the surface and young men may grow abruptly violent, seemingly at random. The Islamic injunction against alcohol has had little obvious impact in ex-Soviet Central Asia.

Crime

You can cut down on the potential for crime by following these tips:

- Be especially alert in crowded situations such as bazaars and bus station ticket scrums, where pockets and purses may be easily picked.
- Avoid parks at night, even if it means going a long way out of your way.
- Take officially licensed taxis in preference to private ones. At night don't get into any taxi with more than one person in it. See p473.
- Travellers who rent a flat are warned to be sure the doors and windows are secure, and never to open the door – day or night – to anyone they do not clearly know.

If you're the victim of a crime, contact the *militia* (police), though you may get no help from them at all. Get a report from them if you hope to claim on insurance for anything that was stolen, and contact your closest embassy for a report in English. If your passport is stolen, the police should also provide a letter to OVIR, which is essential for replacing your visa. See p452 for some tips on how to minimise the danger of theft of credit cards or travellers cheques.

Crooked Officials

The number of corrupt officials on the take has decreased dramatically since the 1st edition of this book and most travellers make their way through Central Asia without a single run-in with the local *militia*. The strongest police presence is in Uzbekistan (particularly in the Tashkent Metro), followed by Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, where there are police checkpoints at most municipal and provincial borders. It's a near certainty that you'll meet a gendarme or two in bus and train stations in Uzbekistan, though most only want to see your papers and know where you're going. Uzbek police are particularly inquisitive in Termez and the Fergana Valley.

If for whatever reason you didn't get an entry stamp when crossing a border, you may find yourself vulnerable to officials on the take. Keep as many hotel and bus receipts as you can that prove your movements.

If you are approached by the police, there are several rules of thumb to bear in mind:

- Your best bet is to be polite, firm and jovial. A forthright, friendly manner – starting right out with an *asalam aleykum* (peace be with you) and a handshake for whomever is in charge – may help to defuse a potential shakedown, whether you are male or female.
- If someone refers to a 'regulation', ask to see it in writing. If you are dealing with lower-level officers, ask to see their *nachalnik* (superior).
- Ask to see a policeman's ID and, if possible, get a written copy of the ID number. Do not hand over your passport unless you see this ID. Even better, only hand over a photocopy of your passport; claim that your passport is at your hotel or embassy.
- Try to avoid being taken somewhere out of the public eye, eg into an office or into

the shadows; it should be just as easy to talk right where you are. The objective of most detentions of Westerners is simply to extort money, and by means of intimidation rather than violence. If your money is buried deeply, and you're prepared to pull out a paperback and wait them out, even if it means missing the next bus or train, most inquisitors will eventually give up.

- If you are taken to a police station, insist on calling the duty officer at your embassy or consulate. If your country has no diplomatic representative in the country you're in, call the embassy of a friendly country – for example the UK if you're from Australia or New Zealand.
- Make it harder for police on the take by speaking only in your own language.
- If officers show signs of force or violence, and provided they are not drunk, do not be afraid to make a scene – dishonest cops will dislike such exposure.
- Never sign anything, especially if it's in a language you don't understand. You have the right not to sign anything without consular assistance.
- Recent antinarcotics laws give the police powers to search passengers at bus and train stations. If you are searched, never let the police put their hands in your pockets – take everything out yourself and turn your pockets inside out.
- If police officers want to see your money (to check for counterfeit bills) try to take it out only in front of the highest-ranking officer. If any is taken insist on a written receipt for the sum. If you do have to pay a fine, insist that you do so at a bank and get a receipt for the full amount.

DOCUMENTS

Besides your passport and visa, there are a number of other documents you may need to keep track of:

- Currency exchange and hard currency purchase receipts – you may need to show these when you sell back local money in a bank.
- Vouchers – if you prepaid accommodation, excursions or transport, these are the only proof that you did so.
- Hotel registration chits – in Uzbekistan you may need to show these little bits of paper (showing when you stayed at each hotel) to OVIR officials.

- Letters of invitation and any supporting documents/receipts for visa and permit support

It's wise to have at least one photocopy of your passport (front and visa pages), a copy of your OVIR registration, your travel insurance policy and your airline tickets on your person and another set of copies with a fellow traveller. It's also a good idea to leave a photocopy of your passport, travel insurance and airline ticket with someone you can contact at home.

Student and youth cards are of little use, though they can be helpful as a decoy if someone wants to keep your passport.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Listings of embassies and consulates can be found in the directories of each country chapter.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

There is little obvious gay/lesbian community in Central Asia, though there are a couple of gay bars in Almaty. It's not unusual to see young women showing affection towards each other, nor is it uncommon to see men holding hands. However, this is a reflection of Asian culture rather than homosexuality.

In Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and in Tajikistan, gay male sex is illegal, but lesbian sex does not seem to be illegal (it is seldom spoken about). Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have lifted the Soviet-era ban on homosexuality. However, whether you're straight or gay, it's best to avoid public displays of affection.

The website www.gay.kz/eng/ has some information on gay life in Kazakhstan.

HOLIDAYS Public Holidays

See the Holidays section of the relevant country Directory for details of each country's public holidays.

The following Islamic holidays are generally observed in Central Asia. Dates are fixed by the Islamic lunar calendar, which is shorter than the Western solar calendar, beginning 10 to 11 days earlier in each solar year. Religious officials have the formal authority to declare the beginning of each lunar month based on sightings of the moon's first crescent. Future holy days can be estimated, but are in doubt by a few days until the start of that month, so dates given here are only approximate. The holidays normally run from sunset to the next sunset.

Ramadan and Eid al-Azha are observed with little fanfare in most of Central Asia (where you shouldn't have major problems finding food during the daytime) but are becoming more popular.

Eid al-Fitr 13 October (2007), 2 October (2008), 21 September (2009), 10 September (2010) Also called Hayit in Uzbekistan and Orozo Ait in Kyrgyzstan. This involves two or three days of celebrations at the end of Ramadan, with family visits, gifts, banquets and donations to the poor.

Eid al-Azha 20 December (2007), 9 December (2008), 28 November (2009), 17 November (2010) Also called Qurban, Korban, Qurban Hayit or Qurban Ait in Central Asia. This is the Feast of Sacrifice, and is celebrated over several days. Those who can afford it buy and slaughter an animal, sharing the meat with relatives and with the poor. This is also the season for haj (pilgrimage to Mecca).

Moulid an-Nabi 31 March (2007), 20 March (2008), 9 March (2009), 26 February (2010) The birthday of the Prophet Mohammed. A minor celebration in Central Asia, though you might notice mosques are a little fuller.

TOP CELEBRATIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA

- Independence Day in any ex-Soviet capital, but particularly in Tashkent (the only day of the year even the police don't demand bribes).
- Navrus (p450), the region's biggest festival, with celebrations ranging from wild games of *buz-kashi* (a polo-like game played with a goat's carcass) outside Dushanbe, to lame funfairs.
- Summer horseback wrestling and other nomadic games organised by CBT on the *jailoos* (summer pastures) of Song-Köl (p318) and Sarala-Saz (p318), or Sunday horse races (March to May) in Ashgabat's hippodrome (p415).
- The At Chabysh horse festival (www.atchabysh.com) in early November at Barskoön in Kyrgyzstan (p310).
- Eagle hunting competitions (hunting with eagles) at the August Birds of Prey Festival, on the south side of Lake Issyk-Köl in Kyrgyzstan (p312).

Ramadan 13 September (2007), 2 September (2008), 22 August (2009), 11 August (2010) Also known as Ramazan, the month of sunrise-to-sunset fasting. Dates mark the beginning of Ramadan.

If you are crossing an international border it may be useful to know that Russian national holidays fall on 1 January, 7 January, 8 March, 1 May, 9 May, 12 June and 7 November. If heading to China don't cross the border on the Chinese national holidays of 1 January, 8 March, 1 July, 1 August, spring festival (some time in February) and the weeks following the major holidays of 1 May and 1 October.

NAVRUS

By far the biggest Central Asian holiday is the spring festival of Navrus ('New Days' – Nauрыз in Kazakh, Novruz in Turkmen, Nooruz in Kyrgyz). Navrus is an adaptation of pre-Islamic vernal equinox or renewal celebrations, celebrated approximately on the spring equinox, though now normally fixed on 21 March (22 March in Kazakhstan).

In Soviet times this was a private affair, even banned for a time. In 1989, in one of several attempts to deflect growing nationalism, Navrus was adopted by the then Soviet Central Asian republics as an official two-day festival, with traditional games, music and drama festivals, street art and colourful fairs, plus partying and visiting of family and friends. Families traditionally pay off debts before the start of the holiday.

INSURANCE

Central Asia is an unpredictable place so insurance is a good idea. A minimum of US\$1 million medical cover and a 'medevac' clause or policy covering the costs of being flown to another country for treatment is essential, as few reliable emergency services are available in the CIS. See p475 for more information on health insurance.

Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities', which can include skiing, motorcycling, even trekking or horse riding. If these are on your agenda, ask about an amendment to permit some of them (at a higher premium).

Few medical services in Central Asia will accept your foreign insurance documents for payment; you'll have to pay on the spot and claim later. Get receipts for everything and save all the paperwork. Some policies ask you

to call back (reverse charges) to a centre in your home country where an immediate assessment of your problem is made.

Insurance policies can normally be extended on the road by a simple phone call, though make sure you do this before it expires or you may have to buy a new policy, often at a higher premium.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is widely available throughout the region; just look for a roomful of teenagers playing games such as *Counterstrike*. The only place where you can't get reliable internet access is Turkmenistan.

LEGAL MATTERS

It's unlikely that you will ever actually be arrested, unless there are supportable charges against you. If you are arrested, authorities in the former Soviet states are obliged to inform your embassy (*pasolstvah* in Russian) immediately and allow you to communicate with a consular official without delay. Always keep the contact details of your embassy on your person (see the Directory of the relevant country chapter for a list of these). Most embassies will provide a list of recommended lawyers.

Visitors are subject to the laws of the country they're visiting. All Central Asian republics carry the death sentence for drug-related offences, though Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan currently have a moratorium on the death penalty.

MAPS

Buy your general maps of Central Asia before you leave home. For a search of the available maps try www.stanfords.co.uk.

Central Asia (Gizimap, 1999) is a good 1:750,000 general elevation map of the Central Asian republics (plus Kashgar), though it excludes northern Kazakhstan and western Turkmenistan. It usefully marks many trekking routes.

Central Asia – The Cultural Travel Map along the Silk Road (Elephantini) is a similar (but not quite as good) 1:1.5 million Italian map, which concentrates on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Nelles' 1:750,000 *Central Asia* map is also good.

Reliable locally produced city and regional maps can be found in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but are hard to find elsewhere. The

DOLLARS & SOMS

Prices in this book are sometimes given in US dollars, when that is the most reliable price denominator or if that's the currency you'll be quoted on the ground, although you normally actually pay in local currency. Prices quoted in the Turkmenistan chapter are in US dollars worked out at the black market rate.

You may need cash in US dollars when paying for visas, registration and some services with a private travel agency, though many of those now accept credit cards. Although officially you cannot spend foreign currency anywhere in Uzbekistan, private hotels and homestays normally accept US dollars and often give you change in local currency at the market rate. Most other homestays and drivers expect payment in local money.

Please note that you can expect prices to jump (or fall) every year; rates in this book, especially for transport, are therefore an indication more of relative than absolute values.

occasional Soviet-era city map, full of errors, languishes on the back shelf of some bookshops. Especially in Uzbekistan, where Soviet-era street names were jettisoned en masse, any map older than about 1994 will drive you crazy.

In Ashgabat's top-end hotels you can buy good Turkish-made maps of Ashgabat, Balkanabat, Dashogus, Mary and Turkmenbashi. A good map of Dushanbe is published in that city.

MONEY

The 'stans banking systems have improved greatly in the last few years, with credit card transactions, wire transfers (particularly Western Union) and regulated foreign exchange available in most towns. In the countryside there are few facilities, so change enough cash to get you back to a main city.

If you plan to travel extensively in the region it's worth bringing a flexible combination of cash in US dollars or Euros, a few US-dollar or Euro travellers cheques and a credit card or two, to cover every eventuality.

ATMs

Bishkek, Osh, Tashkent, Dushanbe and most cities in Kazakhstan have ATMs (*bankomats*) that accept Western credit cards, but these are not all that reliable and the last thing you need is to watch your card get eaten alive by an Uzbek ATM. Some ATMs charge a service fee of around 2%.

Black Market

The existence of licensed moneychangers in every town has done away with the black market in all republics except Turkmenistan (see p437).

Cash

Cash in US dollars is by far the easiest to exchange, followed by euros. Take a mixture of denominations – larger notes (US\$100, US\$50) are the most readily accepted and get a better rate, but a cache of small ones (US\$10, US\$5) is handy for when you're at borders, stuck with a lousy exchange rate or need to pay for services in US dollars. Cash is particularly useful in Turkmenistan, due to the black market (see p437).

Make sure notes are in good condition – no worn or torn bills – and that they are dated post-1994. Bills issued before 1990 are generally not accepted – if they are, the rate is often 30% less the normal US dollar rate. The newest US notes have an embedded thread running through them. In 2004 a new type of plastic-feeling US bill was introduced, though old bills remain legal tender.

Taxi drivers and market-sellers often fob off their own ragged foreign notes on tourists as change, so of course you should refuse to accept old notes too. At the time of research US\$100 gave you a pile of Turkmen manat or Uzbek sum as thick as an airport paperback.

Credit Cards

It's an excellent idea to bring a credit card as an emergency backup, though you shouldn't rely on it completely to finance your trip as there are still only a limited number of places where it can be used. Kazakhstan is the most useful place in Central Asia to have a credit card.

Major credit cards can be used for payment at top-end hotels and restaurants, central airline offices, major travel agencies and a few shops throughout the region. Visa is

the most widely recognised brand, but others (American Express, JCB, MasterCard) are accepted in most places, as are the Cirrus and Maestro systems.

Cash advances against a Visa card and MasterCard are possible in the major capitals for commissions of 1% to 3%. You will need your PIN to access the ATMs but not for a cash advance. Asking for the 'terminal' (the hand-held machine that processes the card transaction) indicates that you want a cash advance. Always get a receipt, in case you are asked for proof of changing money at customs or if there is any discrepancy when you get home.

Remember that by using credit cards in Turkmenistan you fail to make use of the black market (see p437).

International Transfers

Bank-to-bank wire (telegraphic) transfers are possible through major banks in all capitals. Commissions of 1% to 4% are typical, and service takes one to five days. Western Union (www.westernunion.com) has partners in banks and post offices everywhere and remains the easiest way to send money.

Moneychangers

Dealing with licensed moneychangers is the easiest way to change money in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. They are readily found in small kiosks on nearly every block, and most will give a receipt if you ask them; rates may vary by 1% to 2% at most. Licensed changers are completely legal. Moneychangers are marked by signs such as ОБМЕН ВАЛЮТЫ (*obmen valyuty*; currency exchange) and ОБМЕННЫЙ ПУНКТ (*obmennyy punkt*; exchange point).

Nearly all tourist hotels have branch/bank-exchange desks where you can at least swap cash in US dollars for local money.

Swapping between currencies can be a pain, with most former Soviet republics uninterested in the others' money (an exception is Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan). In border areas you may need to deal with several currencies simultaneously; when trekking in the Khond region it's necessary to carry a mixture of Tajik somani, Uzbek sum, US dollars and Kyrgyz som.

Try to avoid large notes in local currency (except to pay your hotel bills), since few people can spare much change.

EXCHANGE RECEIPTS

Whenever you change money, ask for a receipt (*kvitantsiya* or *spravka* in Russian) showing your name, the date, the amounts in both currencies, the exchange rate and an official signature. Not everyone will give you one, but if you need to resell local currency through the banks (in Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan) you may need enough receipts to cover what you want to resell. You will not need a receipt to sell local currency into US dollars with moneychangers in other countries. Customs officials may want to see exchange receipts at crossings to non-CIS countries but it's unlikely.

At the time of research you had to sell Uzbek *sum* back at a main city office of the National Bank – not at the airport or the hotels, or the border. The easiest thing, of course, is to spend it up before you leave, change it to neighbouring currencies on the black market or swap it with travellers going the other way.

Travellers Cheques

Travellers cheques can now be cashed in all the major Central Asian capitals, except Dushanbe. American Express and Thomas Cook are the most widely recognised types. Only Visa travellers cheques can be changed in Turkmenistan. US-dollar travellers cheques are the best currency to bring. Commissions run between 1% and 3%. It is possible to get your money in dollars instead of local currency, though the commission rate may be a little different.

Travellers cheques can also make good decoy money if pressed for a bribe, as most people don't know what to do with them. If visiting Uzbekistan you need to list your travellers cheques on your customs declaration form or you won't be able to cash them.

Security

Thankfully, credit cards and travellers cheques are becoming more common in Central Asia, but you may still end up carrying large wads of cash.

Petty crime is a growing problem in all the former Soviet republics. Don't leave money in any form lying around your hotel room. Carry it securely zipped in one or more money belts or shoulder wallets buried deep in your clothing, with only what you'll immediately need (or would be willing to hand over to a

thief or to an official on the take) accessible in an exterior pocket, wallet or purse.

When paying for anything substantial (eg a hotel bill or an expensive souvenir) or changing money on the street at an exchange kiosk, count out the money beforehand, out of public sight; don't go fumbling in your money belt in full view. There are tales of thieves targeting people coming out of banks with fat cash advances, so keep your eyes open.

Be careful when paying by credit card that you see how many slips are being made from your card, that you destroy all carbon copies, and that as few people as possible get hold of your card number and expiry date.

Make sure you note the numbers of your cards and travellers cheques, and the telephone numbers to call if they are lost or stolen – and keep all numbers separate from the cards and cheques.

Tippling & Bargaining

Tippling is not common anywhere in Central Asia, though most cafés and restaurants in the capital cities add a 10% service charge to the bill, or expect you to round the total up.

Bribery, on the other hand, clearly can work in Central Asia but try to avoid it where possible – it feeds the already-widespread notion that travellers all just love throwing their money around, and makes it harder for future travellers. In fact a combination of smiles (even if over gritted teeth) and patient persistence can very often work better.

Shops have fixed prices but in markets (food, art or souvenirs) bargaining is usually expected. Press your luck further in places like art and craft markets, which are heavily patronised by tourists, and when negotiating transport hire. In Kyrgyzstan bargaining is usually reserved only for taxi drivers. In the markets asking prices tend to be in a sane proportion to the expected outcome. Sellers will be genuinely surprised if you reply to their '5000' with '1000'; they're more likely expecting 3500, 4000 or 4500 in the end.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO Film & Equipment

Most department stores have Kodak franchise outlets that sell 35mm print film, but slide film is unheard of so it's wise to bring your own (more than you think you'll need – Central Asia is a photographer's dream). It's safest to get film developed at home,

though most of the above franchises can develop print film for prices in line with their film prices.

Memory cards for digital cameras are quite prevalent in Central Asia these days. Most internet cafés can burn your photos onto a CD, as long as the burner works.

There are no significant customs limits on camera equipment and film for personal use. Declare video cameras on customs forms and carry by hand through customs, but don't leave the tape in it as it may be confiscated.

Photographing & Videoing People

Most Central Asians are happy to have their picture taken, though you should always ask first. A lifetime with the KGB has made many older people uneasy about having their picture taken. Many people are also touchy about you photographing embarrassing subjects like drunks or run-down housing. You may find people sensitive about you photographing women, especially in rural areas. Women photographers may get away with it if they've established some rapport.

The Russian for 'may I take a photograph?' is *fotografirovat mozhno?* (fa-ta-gruh-**fee**-ravut **mozh**-na?).

POST

The postal systems of Central Asia are definitely not for urgent items – due in part to the scarcity of regional flights. A letter or postcard will probably take two weeks or more to get outside the CIS. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are probably the most reliable places to send packages from.

Central post offices are the safest places to post things. Address mail as you would from any country, in your own language, though it will help to write the destination country in Cyrillic too. See the Post entries in the individual country directories for postal rates.

If you have something that absolutely must get there, use an international courier company. DHL (www.dhl.com) and FedEx (www.fedex.com) have offices in major cities. A document to a European country costs about US\$40, a 500g package around US\$42 to US\$60, and it takes about four days.

Express Mail Service (EMS) is a priority mail service offered by post offices that ranks somewhere between normal post and courier post. Prices are considerably cheaper than courier services.

REGISTRATION

This relic of the Soviet era allows officials to keep tabs on you once you've arrived. In Uzbekistan the hotel or homestay in which you stay the night is supposed to register you. Registration in Dushanbe is more involved and you are best to get a travel agency to do it for a fee (though there is some talk of scrapping this requirement). Kyrgyzstan has ended the need to register and in Kazakhstan tourists are generally registered automatically.

The place to register is an OVIR. There's one in every town, sometimes in each city district, functioning as the eyes and ears of the Ministry of the Interior's administration for policing foreigners. Though it has a local name in each republic (eg OPVR in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, IIB in Uzbekistan, UPVR in Kyrgyzstan), everybody still calls it OVIR. In some remote areas where there is no OVIR office you may have to register at the *passportny stol* (passport office).

SHOPPING

In general Uzbekistan offers Central Asia's best shopping; in fact most of central Bukhara and Samarkand's Registan are now one big souvenir stall.

Potential Central Asian buys include carpets, hats, musical instruments, felt rugs, wall hangings, silk, traditional clothing, ceramic figurines and even nomadic accessories such as horse whips and saddles.

Turkmenistan is the place for a 'Bukhara'-style carpet, though getting it out of the country can be a problem (see p435). The best places for a *shyrdak* (Kyrgyz felt carpet) are the women's cooperatives in Kochkor and elsewhere in Central Kyrgyzstan. CBT can often put you in touch with local *shyrdak* producers. You can find more Kyrgyz felt souvenirs at the Yak House (p388) and De Pamiri (p382), both in Tajikistan's Pamir region.

See p447 about exporting antiques or items that look antique.

Central Asian bazaars are enjoyable, even if you're just looking, with everything from Russian sparkling wine to car parts. Tolkuchka Bazaar, outside Ashgabat, has acres of carpets, handicrafts and silks. The best bargains are found in small-town bazaars. Another surprising souvenir source right under your nose is the local TsUM department store.

Turkmenistan's Ministry of Culture shop specialises in the region's most offbeat

Stalinist souvenirs, including Niyazov busts, Niyazov vodka, Niyazov watches and even Niyazov baby food.

SOLO TRAVELLERS

There are no real problems travelling alone in Central Asia. There isn't much of a traveller scene here but you'll meet other travellers in backpacker guesthouses in Bishkek, Osh and the main towns in Uzbekistan.

It's generally not too difficult to find travellers to share car hire costs for the Torugart, Irkeshtam or Pamir Highway trips. Local travel agents and community tourism providers can often help link you up with other travellers or try a post on the **Thorn Tree** (<http://thornree.lonelyplanet.com>).

Travelling alone in Turkmenistan can be expensive. Hotel rooms are almost the same whether you have one of two people in your party and if you are on a tourist visa you'll have to bear the burden of hiring a guide for yourself.

TELEPHONE & FAX International Calls

Private communications centres are the best place to make international calls. Many communications offices and Internet cafés in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan offer internet Phone (IP) calls, which route your call through low-cost Internet connections, which works out as a fraction of the cost of traditional calls (as low as US\$0.15 per minute).

In smaller towns you can place international calls (as well as local and intercity ones) from the central telephone and telegraph offices. You tell a clerk the number and prepay in local currency. After a wait of anything from half a minute to several hours, you're called to a booth. Hotel operators also place calls, but for a hefty surcharge. International calls in the region generally cost between US\$0.50 and US\$2 per minute.

Calls between CIS countries are now treated as international calls, though they are figured at a different rate. Thus to call Uzbekistan from, say, Kyrgyzstan you would need to dial Kyrgyzstan's international access code, the Uzbek country code and then the Uzbek city code.

See the Quick Reference page (on the inside front cover) for individual republic codes, and the individual city entries in the country chapters for their telephone codes.

Local Calls

Placing a local or trunk call on Central Asia's decomposing telephone systems is usually harder than placing an international one, especially as so many locals now use mobile phones. There are token-operated telephones on the streets of bigger cities, though many seem to be permanently out of order. At the ones that do work, you normally just pay cash to a small Uzbek boy seated by the phone. Some shops have a phone available for calls. Local calls are free from many hotels.

TIME

The official time in most of Central Asia is Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) plus five hours, but transcontinental Kazakhstan straddles GMT plus five and six hours. See the World Time Zones Map on pp506-7.

None of the Central Asian republics have Daylight Savings Time.

TOILETS

Public toilets are as scarce as hen's teeth. Those that you can find – eg in parks and bus and train stations – charge the equivalent of US\$0.10 or so to use their squatters (flush or pit). Someone may be out front selling sheets of toilet paper. Most are awful, the rest are worse. You are always better off sticking to top-end hotels and restaurants. Carry a small pencil-torch for restaurant toilets, which rarely have functioning lights, and for trips out to the pit toilet. *Always* carry an emergency stash of toilet paper.

Out in the *jailoos* (pastures) of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan there are often no toilets at all. You'll have to go for a hike, find a rock or use the cover of darkness. Always urinate at least 50m from a water source (and downstream!) and dig a hole and burn the paper after defecating (see p94).

Toilet paper appears sporadically for sale in markets and department stores, though tissues are a better bet than the industrial strength sandpaper that is ex-Soviet toilet paper. Flush systems and pit toilets don't like toilet paper; the wastepaper basket in the loo is for used paper and tampons (wrapped in toilet paper).

Before bursting in, check for the signs 'Ж' (Russian: *zhenski*) for women or 'М' (*muzhskoy*) for men.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Intourist, the old Soviet travel bureau, gave birth to a litter of Central Asian successors –

TOP PLACES FOR CRAFTS

For those interested in learning about local handicrafts, with an eye to purchasing, see the following in the main text. See also the boxed text 'Socially Responsible Shopping' on p232.

- **Ak Orgo Yurt Workshop, Barskoön** (p310) If you have a lots of cash and a generous baggage allowance, the ultimate Kyrgyz souvenir is your very own yurt
- **Altyn Kol, Kochkor** (p317) Local *shyrdak* (Kyrgyz felt carpet) cooperative.
- **Asahi Ecological Art and Handicraft** (p288) Beautiful, top-quality carpets, kilims and *shyrdaks*.
- **Bukhara Artisan Development Centre, Bukhara** (p246) Watch artisans at work here.
- **Caravan, Tashkent** (p208) Browse for stylish handicrafts over a cappuccino.
- **De Pamiri** (p382) Felt carpets, musical instruments and more from the western Pamirs
- **Kyrgyz Style, Bishkek** (p288) Cooperative showroom for high-quality *shyrdaks*.
- **Abulkasim Medressa, Tashkent** (p207) Local artisans work in an old medressa.
- **Tolkuchka Bazaar, Ashgabat** (p411) Turkmen crafts and 'Bokhara' carpets at this wonderful bazaar.
- **Unesco silk-carpet workshops, Khiva and Bukhara** (p257 and p246) Watch how carpets are made.
- **Yak House, Murgab** (p389) For Pamiri-style crafts, bags and socks.
- **Yodgorlik (Souvenir) factory, Margilon** (p220) Silk for US\$4 per square metre, as well as *ikat* (brightly coloured cloth) dresses, carpets and embroidered items.

Yassau in Kazakhstan, Intourist Tojikistan in Tajikistan, Turkmensiyahat in Turkmenistan, and Uzbektourism in Uzbekistan. Few are of any interest to independent travellers. You are almost always better off with one of the growing number of private agencies or community-based-tourism projects.

Uzbektourism wins the booby prize – at best uninterested in individual travellers, at worst hostile to them, with few points for public interface beyond the service bureaus.

The best sources of information at home tend to be foreign travel firms specialising in Central Asia or the CIS.

TRAVEL PERMITS

Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik and Kyrgyz visas allow access to all places in the republics, save for a few strategic areas that need additional permits. Generally you should apply for these permits through a travel agency a few weeks before arrival.

In Kazakhstan some of the most interesting areas, such as Lepsinsk, the Altay region and Zhungar Alatau, require special permits that take from 10 days to three weeks to procure. The Baykonur Cosmodrome and the Polygon nuclear-testing site at Semey are firmly off limits.

In Kyrgyzstan any place within 50km of the Chinese border (such as the Inylchek Glacier, Alay Valley and Pik Lenin) requires a military border permit that is fairly easy to obtain through a trekking agency.

The Gorno-Badakhshan region of Tajikistan needs a separate permit, which takes a couple of weeks to arrange through a travel agency.

Turkmenistan presents a more complicated picture, as much of the country outside the main cities (restricted border zones) has to be listed on your visa for you to be able to visit it. You'll need the help of a travel agency to get the visa in the first place so your visa acts as your permit. For more information see Travel Permits in the individual country directories.

VISAS

To enter forbidden Turkistan without papers? I would sooner pay a call on the Devil and his mother-in-law in Hell.

Gustav Krist, Alone in the Forbidden Land, 1939

CHINESE VISAS

Chinese visas can be arranged in Tashkent and Dushanbe but are a real pain to organise elsewhere in Central Asia, since embassies often demand a letter of invitation from a Xinjiang tourist authority. These are available for around US\$50 from travel agencies but can take a couple of weeks to arrange. It really helps to get a Chinese visa before you set off, though beware that you must normally enter China within 90 days of your visa being issued.

If you are travelling from China, bear in mind that the only consular agencies in Xinjiang are a Kazakh and Kyrgyz consulate in Ürümqi, where you can get visas within a couple of days. Beyond this, it's a long way back to Beijing.

Visas can be the single biggest headache associated with travel in ex-Soviet Central Asia, where the bureaucracy seems designed to actually hinder tourism and regulations mutate frequently. Collecting visas for a multicountry trip through Central Asia can take months and cost hundreds of US dollars.

Things are, however, getting easier. Visas for Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are now a formality for most nationalities and no letter of invitation is required. It's even possible to get a visa on arrival at Bishkek or Dushanbe airports. The difficulty involved in getting an Uzbekistan visa generally depends on how loudly your country criticises their human rights record, and has tightened up in the last year or two. Turkmenistan requires you to jump through the largest number of hoops.

The steps to obtain a visa and the attention it gets after you arrive differ for each republic, but their outlines are similar. The following information is general, with individual country variations detailed in the directories of the relevant country chapters.

Letters of Invitation

The key to getting a visa for Turkmenistan and, for most nationalities, Uzbekistan, is 'visa support', which means an invitation, approved by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and/or Interior, from a private individual, company or state organisation in the country you want to visit. After obtaining ministry

approval, your sponsor sends the invitation (known as a letter of invitation or LOI, or visa support) to you, and when you apply at a consular office for your visa it's matched with a copy sent directly to them from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The invitation should include your name, address, citizenship, sex, birth date, birthplace and passport details; the purpose, proposed itinerary and entry/exit dates of your visit; and the type of visa you will need and where you will apply for it. A business visa always requires a letter of invitation.

The cheapest way to get a visa invitation is directly, by fax or email, through a Central Asian travel agency. Many Central Asian agencies will just sell you a letter of visa support for between US\$20 and US\$40, which you pay when you arrive in the country. See the boxed

text on below and also the Travel Agencies sections of capital cities for some trustworthy agencies in Central Asia. A few Western travel agencies can arrange visa invitation but charge up to five times the local fee.

Try to apply for letters of invitation a month, or preferably two in advance. Individual sponsors may need months to get their invitations approved before they can even be sent to you.

Applying for a Visa

Visa applications can be made at some or all of the republics' overseas embassies or consulates, the addresses of which are listed in the Directories of individual country chapters. If your country doesn't have Central Asian representation you'll have to courier your passport to the nearest embassy, arrange a

VISA WEB CONTACTS

Embassies

Useful embassy websites:

- www.kyrgyzembassy.org, www.kyrgyz-embassy.org.uk or www.botschaft-kirgisien.de
- www.kazakhembus.com, www.kazconsulny.org or www.kazakhstanembassy.org.uk
- www.tajikembassy.org or www.embassy-tajikistan.de
- www.uzbekconsulny.org, www.uzbekistan.org, www.uzbekistan.de or www.uzbekembassy.org
- www.turkmenistanembassy.org

Travel Agencies

The following travel agencies can arrange letters of invitation for their republic and in most cases the surrounding republics. Fees are around US\$25 to US\$35. Stantours is recommended by many travellers for impartial regional visa information.

- Central Asia Tourism, Almaty (www.centralasiatourism.com)
- Jibek Joly, Almaty (www.jibekjoly.kz)
- Stantours, Almaty (www.stantours.com)
- Turan-Asia, Almaty (www.turanasia.kz)
- Ayan Travel, Ashgabat (www.ayan-travel.com)
- DN Tours, Ashgabat (www.dntours.com)
- Celestial Mountains, Bishkek (www.celestial.com.kg)
- ITMC, Bishkek (www.itmc.centralasia.kg)
- Great Game Travel, Dushanbe (www.greatgame.travel or www.traveltajikistan.com)
- Advantour, Tashkent (www.advantour.com)
- Arostr Tourism, Tashkent (www.arostrtour.com)
- Dolores Tour, Tashkent (www.sambuh.com)
- Salom, Bukhara (www.salomtravel.com)

visa on arrival (see Visas on Arrival), or arrange your itinerary to get the visa in another Central Asian republic. Kazakh embassies will often issue visas for Kyrgyzstan if there is no Kyrgyz representation, though you need an LOI for this (whereas no invitation is required at a Kyrgyz embassy).

In addition to a letter of support, embassies may want a photocopy of the validity and personal information pages of your passport, two or three passport-size photos and a completed application form. Some may want more.

For Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan visas do not list the towns to be visited and you are free to travel almost everywhere in these countries (see p456). The tourist-visa application for Turkmenistan requires you to list the name of every town you want to visit, and these will normally be printed on your visa. It's a good idea to ask for every place you might conceivably want to see, unless these are sensitive border towns or off limits to foreigners. There's no charge for listing extra destinations.

Bear in mind that many visas have either fixed-entry dates (Turkmenistan) or fixed-validity dates, so you may have to plan the dates of your itinerary closely in advance. If you are weaving in and out of republics, ie from Uzbekistan to Tajikistan's Pamir Hwy, Kyrgyzstan and then back to Uzbekistan, you'll need to ensure that the first visa is still valid for when you return to that republic (and that it's a double- or multiple-entry visa).

Even the most helpful Central Asian embassies in the West normally take a week or two to get you a visa. Most embassies will speed the process up for an express fee (often double the normal fee). Central Asian embassies within the CIS seem to be quicker, eg a day or less at Kyrgyz embassies in other Central Asian republics, a week or less at Kazakh embassies.

Visas can be more difficult to get in the run up to elections and national days (the latter in Turkmenistan only).

Try to allow time for delays and screw ups. Errors do happen – check the dates and other information on your visa carefully before you hit the road, and try to find out what the Cyrillic or other writing says.

Visas on Arrival

If there's no convenient embassy in your country, you can get a visa on arrival at Bishkek and Dushanbe airports without an invitation, and

at Almaty, Tashkent and Ashgabat airports as long as this has been arranged in advance with a travel agency in that country and you have a letter of invitation to prove it. It's possible to get a five-day transit visa on arrival at Almaty airport for US\$25 without an LOI but you should have proof of an onward air ticket and an onward visa.

Responsible sponsors and agencies send representatives to meet their invitees at the airport and smooth their way through immigration. Even so, consular officials at the airport can be notoriously hard to find, especially if your flight arrives in the middle of the night, and may not be able to find your records scribbled in their big black book. You may also need to persuade the airline that you are guaranteed a visa as many are keen to avoid the costs and fines associated with bringing you back if your papers aren't in order. Try to get a visa in advance if possible.

Note that you cannot get a tourist visa at a land border of any Central Asian republic, though Kyrgyzstan plans to introduce this at some point.

Getting Central Asian Visas in Central Asia

Some (not all) visas are simpler and cheaper to get after you arrive. It's relatively easy, for example, to get an Uzbek visa in Kazakhstan, or a Kazakh or Uzbek visa in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan).

This could make your pretrip visa search much simpler, if you're willing to take some chances and have a week or so in a Central Asian republic to deal with the bureaucracy. Indeed, it might be possible (though we have not tried it) to leave home without any visas at all – eg fly to Bishkek and get a visa on arrival, then get a Kazakh or Uzbek visa in Bishkek and continue your trip there. This will work if you contact local travel agencies in advance to prepare any LOIs you might need. In general, though, you are better off getting at least one visa (Kyrgyz is the easiest, followed by Uzbekistan) before you board a plane to Central Asia.

Transit & Multiple-Entry Visas

Even if you are just passing through a republic (eg flying into Almaty and transferring to Bishkek) you will need a transit visa. If you are also flying out this way you will need to

apply for another transit visa (in this case in Bishkek). It is possible to get a five-day Kazakh transit visa for US\$25 on arrival at Almaty airport (see 'Visas on Arrival' earlier).

You will need transit visas for some trips even if you aren't stopping in the country. For example you will need a Kazakh transit visa to take the bus from Tashkent to Bishkek (which goes through Kazakhstan). You may also need a re-entry visa to get back into the first country; ie to travel from Fergana in Uzbekistan to Shakhimardan in Uzbekistan and back you should have a double-entry Kyrgyz visa and a double-entry Uzbek visa.

Train trips can be particularly tricky. New routings mean that you no longer need a Turkmen transit visa to take the Uzbek train between Tashkent and Urgench. Less convenient connections such as Tashkent to the Fergana Valley (requires a Tajik transit visa) and Bukhara to Termiz (requires a Turkmen transit visa) are worth avoiding.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan now even require other Central Asians to have a visa, in a move planned to boost security, which will only add to the visa queues at the respective embassies of those two countries.

Getting Current Information

As with all official mumbo jumbo in Central Asia, the rules change all the time, so the information here may be out of date by the time you read it. Kyrgyzstan is even thinking of getting rid of visas entirely for some nationalities. Check Central Asian embassy websites (see the boxed text p457), the Lonely Planet Thorn Tree (www.lonelyplanet.com) and with one or more CIS-specialist travel or visa agencies.

Visa Extensions

Extending an ordinary tourist visa after you get there is relatively easy in Kyrgyzstan, a bureaucratic tussle in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (you can get a week's extension at Tashkent airport) and almost impossible in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Travel agencies can normally help for a fee. You may find it easier to travel to a neighbouring republic and arrange another tourist visa.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Despite the imposition of Soviet economic 'equality', attitudes in the Central Asian republics remain fairly male-dominated. Many

local men cannot understand why women (in groups of any size, for that matter) would travel without men, and assume they have ulterior sexual motives. Although harassment is not so unrelenting as in some Middle Eastern countries, it tends to be more physical. Macho Uzbekistan tops the list, with Kyrgyzstan by far the least sexist.

Both men and women should seek permission before entering a mosque, particularly during prayer times when non-Muslims will feel uncomfortable. Women are generally not allowed in mosques in Tajikistan and the Fergana Valley. Most mosques in cities and the major tourist areas are open to all.

In bigger cities there is no taboo on unaccompanied local women talking to male visitors in public. Local men addressed by a woman in a couple direct their reply to the man, out of a sense of respect, and you should try to follow suit. Local women tend not to shake hands or lead in conversations. Because most local women don't drink in public, female visitors may not be offered a shot of the vodka or wine doing the rounds. But these are not taboos as such, and foreigners usually tend to be forgiven for what locals might consider gaffes.

Keen sensibilities and a few staunch rules of thumb can make a solo journey rewarding:

- Clothes do matter: a modest dress code is essential (even if local Russian women don't seem to have one).
- Walk confidently with your head up but avoid eye contact with men (smile at everybody else).
- Never follow any man – even an official – into a private area. If one insists on seeing your passport, hand over a photocopy as well as a photocopy of your OVIR registration (have quite a few of these); if he pushes you to follow him, walk away into a busy area.
- When riding in shared taxis choose one that already has other women passengers.
- Sit at the front of the bus, always between two women, if you can.
- When seeking information, always ask a local woman. Most matronly types will automatically take you under their wing if you show enough despair.
- If you feel as though you are being followed or harassed, seek the company of a group of women, or even children; big smiles will get you a welcome.

THE INVISIBLE HUSBAND

In some parts of Central Asia men are unused to seeing women travelling by themselves and you'll be continually asked where your husband is, but the system can often work in the lone woman's favour. So slip on a fake wedding ring and invent the invisible husband (In Russian: '*moy muzh*' means 'my husband'), who can then be used in uncomfortable situations. When being pressured to buy something in a shop, cast your eyes downward and murmur '*moy moosh*' (my husband doesn't give me any money). When a strange man tries to befriend you and you can't shake him, give a frantic glance at your watch and shout '*moy moosh*' (I am meeting my husband at any moment). When officials, guards or policemen demand a bribe, shrug your shoulders helplessly and cry '*moy moosh*' (my husband has left me here and there's nothing I can do!).

- If you are arranging a trek or car hire, ask the agency to include female travellers.
- Some local men will honestly want to befriend and help you; if you are unsure and have a difficult time shaking them, mention your husband (see the boxed text above).
- Wear a whistle around your neck in case you get into trouble. Blow on it relentlessly if you are absolutely in danger.

But it isn't all bad! The opportunities for genuine cross-cultural woman-to-woman interactions can generally be had during homestays, and usually outside the cities. Everyone loves to have their children cooed over and doing so will gain you friends as well as unique experiences. You may well see a side of Central Asia hidden to male travellers.

WORK, STUDY & VOLUNTEERING

There are not many casual work opportunities in the region. What work is available is probably limited to English teaching and aid

work, both of which are better arranged prior to your arrival in the region. The US Peace Corps and UK Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) have a strong presence in the region, except in Uzbekistan.

You may find teaching positions in the region's universities, particularly the American University in Bishkek (www.auca.kg), the Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages (www.sifl.50megs.com) and the planned University of Central Asia (www.ucentralasia.org) in Khorog (Tajikistan), Naryn (Kyrgyzstan) and Tekeli (Kazakhstan).

The Alpine Fund (www.alpinefund.org) in Bishkek accepts six-month volunteers. You could also volunteer at Habitat Kyrgyzstan Foundation (www.habitat.elcat.kg). Some travellers have been able to help out at community-based tourism projects in Kyrgyzstan (see p277).

American Councils (☎ 202-833-7522; www.american-councils.org; 1776 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036) organises summer- and year-long academic exchanges and language study programmes in Central Asia.

Transport in Central Asia

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THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

This chapter deals with travel into or out of Central Asia and includes general getting around advice for the region. For details of travel between and within Central Asian countries, see the transport sections of the individual country chapters.

ENTERING CENTRAL ASIA

The region's main air links to the 'outside' are through the ex-Soviet republican capitals of Almaty (Kazakhstan), Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), Tashkent (Uzbekistan), Ashgabat (Turkmenistan) and, to a lesser extent, Dushanbe (Tajikistan). A few smaller cities have further connections to Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries outside of Central Asia, especially Russia.

The long-distance rail connections are mostly with Mother Russia – from Moscow to Tashkent and Almaty, and from the Trans-Siberian Railway to Almaty and Tashkent. The only other rail link is the Genghis Khan Express between Almaty and Ürümqi (and beyond) in China.

The other main overland links are three roads from China – one accessible year-round via Ürümqi to Almaty, and two warm-weather routes from Kashgar to Kyrgyzstan, over the Torugart or Irkeshtam Passes into Kyrgyzstan. Kashgar in turn can be reached by

road over the Khunjerab Pass on Pakistan's amazing Karakoram Highway. A road link connects Mashhad in Iran to Ashgabat at two locations.

Finally there is the offbeat journey from Turkey through the Caucasus Mountains by bus to Baku (Azerbaijan), across the Caspian Sea by ferry to Turkmenbashi (Turkmenistan) and by train to Ashgabat, Bukhara and beyond. See 'From Turkey' (p465) for details.

AIR

Many European and Asian cities now have direct flights to the Central Asian capitals. From North America and Australasia you will have to change planes at least once en route. Of the many routes in, two handy corridors are via Turkey (thanks to the geopolitics of the future) and via Russia (thanks to the geopolitics of the past). Turkish Airlines has the best connections and inflight service, while Russian and Central Asian carriers have the most connections. Turkey also has the advantage of a full house of Central Asian embassies and airline offices. Moscow has four airports and connections can be inconvenient.

Airports & Airlines

Tashkent – seven hours from London, 3½ hours from Moscow, Tel Aviv and Delhi, 4½ hours from Istanbul, 5½ hours from Beijing and 6½ hours from Bangkok – may have the most central airport in Eurasia. More flights go to Tashkent than to any other city in the region.

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motor transport generates CO₂ (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow travellers to offset the greenhouse gases they are responsible for with contributions to energy-saving projects and other climate-friendly initiatives in the developing world – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, supports the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: www.lonelyplanet.com.

Almaty is also a useful gateway to both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek is just three hours by road). KLM and Lufthansa operate shuttles from Almaty airport to Bishkek for their clients (see p348).

Ashgabat is less well connected, most reliably by Lufthansa and Turkish Airlines, and Tajikistan is the least connected, with a popular weekly connection with Turkish Airlines. For Dushanbe it's possible to fly to Bishkek and take a regional flight, or fly to Tashkent and travel overland to Khojand and then take a domestic flight.

The following are the main Central Asian airlines, of which Uzbekistan Airways is probably the best:

Air Astana (www.airastana.com; airline code 4L; hub Almaty) Flies Almaty to Amsterdam, Bangkok, Beijing, Delhi, Dubai, Hanover, Istanbul, London, Moscow and Seoul; Astana to Frankfurt, Hanover and Moscow; Atyrau and Uralsk to Amsterdam.

Air Company (AC) Kyrgyzstan (www.altynair.kg; airline code QH; hub Bishkek) Moscow, Dubai, Dushanbe, Tashkent, Ürümqi, summer flights to Hanover and Frankfurt. Formerly known as Altyn Air.

Tajikistan Airlines (www.tajikistan-airlines.com; airline code 7J; hub Dushanbe) Flies to Munich (via Istanbul), Delhi, Moscow (Domodedovo), Sharjah, Tehran and Ürümqi, Bishkek, Almaty and various Siberian cities

Turkmenistan Airlines (www.turkmenistanairlines.com; airline code T5; hub Ashgabat) Flies to Abu Dhabi,

Amritsar, Bangkok, Beijing, Birmingham, Delhi, Frankfurt, Istanbul, Kiev, London and Moscow.

Uzbekistan Airways (www.uzairways.com; airline code HY; hub Tashkent) Flies to Amsterdam, Athens, Baku, Bangkok, Beijing, Birmingham, Delhi, Dhaka, Frankfurt, Istanbul, Jeddah, Karachi, Kiev, Kuala Lumpur, London, Moscow, New York, Osaka, Paris, Seoul, Sharjah and Tel Aviv.

Other airlines that fly into Central Asia:

Aeroflot (www.aeroflot.ru; airline code SU; hub Sheremetyevo-2, Moscow) Flies to Tashkent and Bishkek.

Aerosvit Ukrainian Airlines (www.aerosvit.com; airline code VV; hub Kiev) Flies to Ashgabat weekly.

Ariana Afghan Airlines (www.flyariana.com; airline code FG; hub Kabul) Flies to Dushanbe weekly.

Asiana Airlines (www.flyasiana.com; airline code OZ; hub Kimpo Airport, Seoul) Flies to Tashkent and Almaty.

Azerbaijan Airlines (www.azal.az; airline code J2; hub Baku) Flies to Aktau.

British Airways (www.britishairways.com, www.flybmed.com; airline code BA; hub London Heathrow) Flies to Bishkek (four weekly via Tbilisi) and Almaty (three weekly via Ekaterinburg) under the name British Mediterranean. Recently axed its four weekly flights to Tashkent.

China Southern (www.cs-air.com/en; airline code CZ; Ürümqi) Flies to Almaty, Tashkent and Bishkek.

Georgian National Airlines (www.national-avia.com; airline code QB; hub Tbilisi) Weekly to Astana and twice weekly to Almaty.

Imair Airlines (www.imair.com; airlines code IK; hub Baku) Flies to Almaty and Tashkent.

Iran Air (www.iranair.com; airline code IR; hub Tehran) Flies to Tashkent, Almaty and Ashgabat (via Mashhad).

Iran Aseman (www.iaa.ir; airline code EP; hub Tehran) Flies from Tehran and Mashhad to Ashgabat, Bishkek and Dushanbe.

KLM (www.klm.com; airline code KL; hub Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam) Flies to Almaty (twice weekly).

Lufthansa (www.lufthansa.com; airline code LH; hub Frankfurt) Flies to Almaty (five weekly), Astana (twice weekly) and Ashgabat (three weekly via Baku).

Pulkovo Airlines (www.pulkovo.ru; airline code FV; hub St Petersburg) Flies to Astana and Almaty (twice weekly), Dushanbe (weekly), Tashkent (weekly) and Bishkek (fortnightly).

Transaero (www.transaero.ru; airline code UN; hub Domodedovo Airport, Moscow) Flies to Almaty, Astana, Atyrau, Aktau, Shymkent, Karaganda, Tashkent and Bukhara.

Turkish Airlines (www.turkishairlines.com; airline code TK; hub Istanbul) Flies to Tashkent (four weekly), Ashgabat (three weekly), Almaty (five weekly), Astana (four weekly), Bishkek (three weekly) and Dushanbe (weekly) from Istanbul.

Ukrainian Mediterranean (UM Airlines; www.umairlines.com; airline code UF; hub Kiev) Flies to Almaty, Astana and Tashkent

Tickets

Finding flights to Central Asia isn't always easy, as travel agents are generally unaware of the region (you'll have to help with the spelling of most cities and airlines) and many don't book flights on Russian or Central Asian airlines. You may need to contact the airlines directly for schedules and contact details of their consolidators, or sales agents, who often sell the airlines' tickets cheaper than the airlines themselves. For airline offices in Central Asia see Getting There & Away in the relevant capital city in each country chapter.

One thing to consider when arranging your itinerary is your visa situation. You may find it easier flying into, for example, Bishkek if that's the easiest place to arrange a visa from home.

DEPARTURE TAX

Departure taxes are figured into your air ticket so you won't face any extra charges when you fly out of Central Asia. The exception that proves the rule is Turkmenistan, where you'll pay a US\$25 departure tax when flying out of Ashgabat airport on any airline other than Turkmenistan Airlines.

You might also consider that it's worth paying a little extra for a reliable airline such as KLM or Turkish Airlines, rather than a relatively inexperienced one, such as Kyrgyzstan Airlines.

Always check how many stopovers there are, how long these are and what time the flight arrives (many airlines arrive in the dead of night) as well as any restrictions on the ticket (ie on changing the return date, refunds etc).

Fares to the region tend to be 10% to 20% higher in peak travel season (roughly July to September and December in North America and Europe; December to January in Australia and New Zealand).

Visa Checks

You can buy air tickets without a visa or a letter of invitation (LOI; see p456), but in most places outside Central Asia you may have trouble getting on a plane without one – even if embassies and travel agents tell you otherwise. Airlines are obliged to fly anyone rejected because of improper papers back home and are fined, so check-in staff tend to act like immigration officers. If you have made arrangements to get a visa on arrival, have your LOI handy at check-in and check with the airline beforehand.

Airline Safety

Aeroflot, the former Soviet state airline, was decentralised into around 400 splinter airlines and many of these 'baby-flots' now have the worst regional safety record in the world, due to poor maintenance, ageing aircraft and gross overloading. In general though, the Central Asian carriers have lifted their international services towards international safety standards, at least on international routes.

In December 1997 a Tajikistan Airlines plane crashed in Sharjah, killing 85 passengers, and an Air Kazakhstan plane collided with a Saudi jet over Delhi killing 350 people. In January 2004 an Uzbekistan Airways Yak-42 crashed in Termez killing 32 passengers. In 1993 a Tajikistan Airlines Yak-40 crashed on take-off from Khorog; it had 81 passengers in its 28 seats. Tajikistan Airlines is currently not allowed into British airspace, due to safety concerns.

See www.airsafe.com/events/airlines/fsu.htm for an overview of recent air accidents in the former Soviet Union.

SAMPLE ONE-WAY AIR FARES FROM CENTRAL ASIA:

These fares are a rough guide only.

- Tashkent–Bangkok US\$540
- Tashkent–Baku US\$324
- Tashkent–Delhi US\$345
- Tashkent–Frankfurt/London/Paris US\$560
- Bishkek/Dushanbe/Almaty–Istanbul US\$428/400/405
- Bishkek–London US\$675
- Bishkek–Dubai US\$300
- Ashgabat–Istanbul US\$340
- Dushanbe–Mashhad US\$163
- Almaty–Frankfurt US\$430
- Almaty–London US\$645

From Asia

From Beijing there are twice weekly flights to Tashkent on Uzbekistan Airways, and three weekly to Almaty on Air Astana and to Bishkek on Kyrgyzstan Airlines.

Ürümqi in China's Xinjiang province has weekly or twice weekly flights to/from Almaty (US\$300; five weekly), Bishkek (US\$180 to US\$210), Osh (US\$220) and Dushanbe (US\$260).

Ariana Afghan Airlines flies once a week between Kabul and Dushanbe (US\$108). Kam Air (www.flykamair.com) has slightly unreliable weekly flights from Almaty to Kabul (US\$260).

Kazakhstan's Scat Air (www.scat.kz in Russian) runs a weekly flight between Almaty and Ölgii in western Mongolia (US\$250) via Ust-Kamenogorsk (Öskomen; US\$109 to Ölgii).

Uzbekistan Airways flies three times a week from Tashkent to Lahore in Pakistan.

From Australia & New Zealand

Most flights to Central Asia go via Seoul (to pick up Asiana flights to Tashkent), Kuala Lumpur (Uzbekistan Airways to Tashkent), Bangkok (Uzbekistan Airways to Tashkent or Turkmenistan Airlines to Ashgabat) or Istanbul.

Sample routes include Sydney to Tashkent on Malaysia Airlines via Kuala Lumpur, or via Karachi on Qantas/British Airways/Pakistan International Airlines (PIA); and Sydney to Almaty via Seoul on Korean Airlines. For

Dushanbe and Bishkek you'll probably have to go via Istanbul.

Online agencies include:

Flight Centre (Australia ☎ 133 133; New Zealand ☎ 0800 24 35 44; www.flightcentre.com)

Gateway Travel (☎ 02-9745 3333; www.russian-gateway.com.au; 48 The Boulevard, Strathfield NSW 2135) Ex-USSR specialists with experience in booking flights to Central Asia.

STA Travel (Australia ☎ 134 STA; New Zealand ☎ 0800 474 400; www.statravel.com.au, www.statravel.co.nz)

Trailfinders (☎ 1300 780 212; www.trailfinders.com.au)
www.travel.com.au (www.travel.com.au)

From Continental Europe

The best fares from Europe to Almaty are probably with Turkish Airlines, via Istanbul. Travellers on a tight budget may find it cheapest to fly from Germany to cities in northern Kazakhstan such as Uralsk, Kostanay or Astana, and then continuing by train to southern Central Asia.

Tajikistan Airlines (☎ 89-9759 4210; gartjk@i-dial.de) Located in Munich; operates Europe's only flights to Dushanbe (US\$555 one-way from Dushanbe, weekly via Istanbul).

Turkmenistan Airlines (☎ 69-690 21968) Offices in Frankfurt (US\$540 one way).

Discounted travel agencies include **Voyages Wasteels** (☎ 01-42 61 69 87; www.wasteels.fr) and **OTU Voyages** (☎ 01-55 82 32 32; www.otu.fr) in France and **STA Travel** (www.statravel.com; Frankfurt ☎ 69-7430 3292; www.statravel.de), which has dozens of offices across Europe. In Holland try **Airfair** (☎ 020-620 5121; www.airfair.nl).

From Russia

There are flights from Moscow to most Central Asian cities, including Almaty (US\$270), Tashkent (US\$256 to US\$270, daily), Dushanbe (US\$280, daily), Khojand (US\$270, weekly), Ashgabat (US\$220), Bishkek (US\$250), Osh (US\$225 to US\$300) and many Kazakh cities. There are slightly fewer connections from St Petersburg. Major Siberian cities such as Novosibirsk and Yekaterinburg also have connections to the capitals. You can often get seniors, student and under-30s discounts of 25% on Russian flights.

Uzbekistan Airways flies from Moscow to Samarkand, Urgench and Bukhara weekly for around US\$230. Aeroflot fly from Moscow to Tashkent and Bishkek.

Transaero (☎ 495-788 8080; 2nd Smolensky Pereulok 3/4, Moscow) is an international-grade airline that flies from Moscow Domodedovo (see next paragraph) to Astana, Almaty, Tashkent, Bukhara and several other cities in Kazakhstan, and has connections to European destinations.

Note that Moscow has three airports: Sheremetyevo-1 (terminal one; www.sheremetyevo-airport.ru), the international Sheremetyevo (terminal two), and 'domestic' (ex-Soviet destinations) Domodedovo (www.domodedovo.ru) and Vnukovo. Aeroflot, Uzbekistan Airways and Air Astana now operate to/from Sheremetyevo-1. Transaero, Tajikistan Airlines, Turkmenistan Airways and Kyrgyzstan Airlines use Domodedovo airport. You will need to get a Russian transit visa in advance to transfer between airports and even between Sheremetyevo's two terminals. A bus service runs between Domodedovo and Sheremetyevo (terminal 1 and 2), costs around US\$8 per person and takes at least two hours.

Travel agencies located in Moscow include **Infinity Travel** (☎ 495-234 6555; www.infinity.ru; Komsomolsky prospekt 13) for rail and air tickets and Central Asia packages, affiliated with the Travellers Guest House, and **G&R International** (☎ 495-378 0001; www.hostels.ru; 5th fl, Zelenodolskaya ul. 3/2).

From Turkey

Turkish Airlines flies from Istanbul to Almaty (five weekly), Bishkek (two weekly), Dushanbe (weekly), Tashkent (three weekly) and Ashgabat (four weekly). The various republics' national airlines also fly once or twice a week. Alternatively you could fly from Istanbul or Trabzon to Baku, take the ferry to Turkmenbashi and a 12-hour train ride across the desert to Ashgabat.

One-way flights to Istanbul cost around US\$400 from most Central Asian capitals.

From the UK

The best summer fares to Almaty are about £450 return on KLM via Amsterdam and, possibly, Transaero. It's possible to buy an open-jaw return on KLM, eg into Almaty and out of, say, Karachi. Air Astana's direct flights from London to Almaty are sometimes good value at around £470 return.

The cheapest flights to Bishkek are probably with Aeroflot or Turkish Airlines and are

somewhat more expensive than Almaty. British Mediterranean fly to Bishkek (via Tbilisi) and Almaty (via Yekaterinburg) but fares are generally higher.

To Tashkent the cheapest return fare is around £500 with Transaero, a reliable Russian airline. Other fares with Turkish Airlines or Lufthansa are £520 return. Uzbekistan Airways' London–Tashkent–Delhi run (four weekly, £500 return) is comfortable, with good service and decent food (but the return is no match, with exhausted Delhi passengers sprawled everywhere and poor food from Tashkent). The routing means that for not much extra you can continue on from Tashkent to Delhi or Bangkok, thus treating Tashkent as a stopover. Uzbekistan Airways also flies from Manchester. For details and prices contact **HY Travel** (☎ 020-7935 4775; 69 Wigmore St, London).

The cheapest flights to Ashgabat are with Turkish Airlines from London via Istanbul (overnight), four times a week for £550 return. **Turkmenistan Airlines** (☎ London 020-8577 2211; fax 8577 9900; Birmingham 0121-558 6363) flies three times a week from London to Ashgabat and four times a week from Birmingham to Ashgabat.

Easily the best way to Dushanbe is the weekly connection on Turkish Airlines via Istanbul but it isn't cheap at about £680 return. This flight often fills up several weeks in advance.

Online agencies include www.cheapflights.co.uk, www.ebookers.com, www.opodo.co.uk, www.expedia.co.uk and www.travelocity.co.uk.

Discounted travel agencies include:

Flight Centre (☎ 0870-499 0040; www.flightcentre.co.uk)

STA Travel (☎ 0870-1600 599; www.statravel.co.uk)

Trailfinders (☎ 0845-058 5858, 020-7938 3939; www.trailfinders.com)

From the USA & Canada

From North America you generally have the choice of routing your trip via Istanbul (Turkish Airlines), Moscow (Aeroflot) or a major European city (KLM, British Airways, Lufthansa etc). Stopovers can be lengthy. From the west coast it's possible to fly to Tashkent via Seoul on Asiana.

From the USA, the best return fares to Central Asia at the time of writing were with Aeroflot from New York to Tashkent or Bishkek via Moscow for around US\$1000 return.

Return fares from the east coast were around US\$1080 to Almaty on American/Lufthansa and US\$1400 with Northwest/KLM. To Ashgabat was US\$1800 with Lufthansa.

Uzbekistan Airways (☎ 212-489 3954) flies from New York (JFK airport) to Tashkent (via Belgrade) three or four times a week, an 18-hour flight for almost the same fare, but you may have difficulties finding a travel agent to book it.

Online booking services include www.expedia.com, www.orbitz.com and www.travelocity.com.

Discounted agencies include:

Gateway Travel (☎ 800-441 1183)

STA Travel (☎ 800-781 4040; www.statravel.com)

Travel CUTS (☎ 416-979 2406; www.travelcuts.com)

Canadian travel discounter.

LAND Border Crossings

Cross-border roads that are open to foreigners (by bus, taxi or hired car) are listed in the table on (below) and covered in the Transport sections of the relevant country chapters. There are literally dozens of crossings between Russia and Kazakhstan.

Bus

From China, there are twice-weekly buses (Monday and Tuesday) from Kashgar to Osh (US\$50) via the Irkeshtam Pass (p348 and p340), and also direct buses from Ürümqi (daily except Sunday) and Yining (twice weekly) to Almaty (p183). Foreigners are currently not allowed to take the twice-weekly bus between Kashgar and Bishkek (US\$50), via Naryn (US\$25).

MAJOR BORDER CROSSINGS INTO CENTRAL ASIA

Border	Crossing	Means of Transport	Page	Comments
Iran-Turkmenistan	Gaudan/Bajgiran	car	p441	From Mashhad to Ashgabat; change transport at the border
Iran-Turkmenistan	Saraghs	car/rail	p441	The best bet if you want to head straight for Mary/Merv
Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan	Turkmenbashi	Boat	p468	Upgrade to a cabin when on board
Afghanistan-Turkmenistan	Gushgi/Torghundi	car	p441	You'll need to arrange this with a Turkmen travel agent
Afghanistan-Uzbekistan	Termiz	car	p266	Across the Friendship Bridge from Mazar-i-Sharif
Afghanistan-Tajikistan	Panj-e-Payon (Nizhniy Panj)	boat	p395	From Kunduz, involves a ferry crossing until the new bridge opens in 2007
Afghanistan-Tajikistan	Ishkashim	car/foot	p395	Getting a GBAO permit can be a problem entering Tajikistan
China-Tajikistan	Qolma (Kulma) Pass	car	p396	Currently closed to tourists but might open soon
China-Kazakhstan	Khorgos	bus	p183	Direct buses run from Yining and Ürümqi to Almaty, or change buses at the border
China-Kazakhstan	Dustlyk/Ālāshānkou	rail	p183	Twice-weekly direct trains between Almaty and Ürümqi take 30 hours and cost US\$60
China-Kazakhstan	Bakhty/Tachéng	bus	p171	Little-used crossing from Ürümqi
China-Kazakhstan	Maykapshagay/Jeminay (Jímunai)	bus	p171	Little-used crossing but direct buses to buses to/from Altai in China
China-Kyrgyzstan	Torugart Pass	car	p348 and p327	Relatively expensive as you must hire your own transport in advance on both sides
China-Kyrgyzstan	Irkeshtam Pass	car/bus	p348 and p340	Weekly bus between Kashgar and Osh (US\$50) or take a taxi, closed weekends

SILK ROAD BY RAIL

Silk Road romantics, train buffs and nervous fliers can cross continents without once having to fasten their seatbelt or turn off their cell phones. From Moscow (or even St Petersburg) you can take in the transition to Central Asia on the three-day train trip to Tashkent or Almaty. From here you can add on any number of side trips to Samarkand, Bukhara or even Urgench (Khiva), all of which are on the railway line. Then from Almaty it's possible to continue on the train to Ürümqi in China and even to Kashgar. From Ürümqi you can continue along the Silk Road by train east as far as Beijing, Hong Kong or even Lhasa or Saigon, making for an epic transcontinental ride. It's not always comfortable and it will take some time, so why do it? Because like Everest, it's there.

There are also direct buses between Ust-Kamenogorsk in eastern Kazakhstan and the towns of Ürümqi (daily) and Altay (twice weekly) in Xinjiang province (see p171 for details), though few foreigners take these buses.

Car & Motorcycle

Although car or motorbike is an excellent way of getting around Central Asia, bringing your own vehicle is fraught with practical problems. Fuel supply is uneven, though modern petrol stations are springing up throughout the region. Prices per litre swing wildly depending on supply. Petrol comes in four grades – 76, 93, 95 and 98 octane. In the countryside you'll see petrol cowboys selling plastic bottles of fuel from the side of the road, often of very poor quality.

The biggest problem is the traffic police (Russian, GAI). Tajikistan's roads have almost as many checkpoints as potholes. In Uzbekistan there are police skulking at every corner, most looking for excuses to wave their orange baton and hit drivers (local or otherwise) with a 'fine' (*straf*). There are no motoring associations of any kind.

The state insurance offices, splinters of the old Soviet agency Ingosstrakh, have no overseas offices that we know of, and your own insurance is most unlikely to be valid in Central Asia. You would probably have to arrange insurance anew at each border. See Getting Around (p471) for more information on hiring a car within Central Asia.

Train

There are three main rail routes into Central Asia from Russia. One comes from Moscow via Samara or Saratov, straight across Kazakhstan via Kyzylorda to Tashkent (3369km), with branch lines to Bishkek and Almaty (4057km). Another, the Turkestan-Siberian

railway or 'Turksib' (see www.turksib.com for timetables) links the Trans-Siberian railway at Novosibirsk with Almaty. A third route goes around the other side of the Aral Sea via Urgench, Bukhara and Samarkand to Tashkent, with a branch line to Dushanbe.

These 'iron roads' don't have quite the romance or the laid-back feel of the Trans-Siberian railway, but they are usually cheaper than flying, and allow Central Asia to unfold gradually, as you clank through endless plains, steppe and desert.

Another line crosses Kazakhstan via Karaganda. From the Caspian Sea yet another line crosses Turkmenistan – the Trans-Caspian route. No international trains run to or from Turkmenistan. A line connects Mashhad in Iran with Ashgabat in Turkmenistan, but no passenger trains run along this line at present.

Completed in 1992, after being delayed almost half a century by Russian-Chinese geopolitics, is a line from China via Ürümqi into Kazakhstan, joining the Turksib for connections to Almaty or to Siberia.

CLASSES

A deluxe sleeping carriage is called *spets-vagon* (SV, Russian for 'special carriage', abbreviated to CB in Cyrillic; some call this *spalny vagon* or 'sleeping carriage'), *myagkiy* (soft) or 1st class. Closed compartments have carpets and upholstered seats, and convert to comfortable sleeping compartments for two.

An ordinary sleeping carriage is called *kupeyny* or *kupe* (which is the Russian for compartmentalised), *zhyosky* (hard) or 2nd class. Closed compartments are usually four-person couchettes and are comfortable.

A *platskartny* (reserved-place) or 3rd-class carriage has open-bunk accommodation. *Obshchiy* (general) or 4th class is unreserved bench-type seating.

With a reservation, your ticket normally shows the numbers of your carriage (*vagon*) and seat (*mesto*). Class may be shown by what looks like a fraction: eg 1/2 is 1st class two berth, 2/4 is 2nd class four berth.

FROM CHINA

The 1359km Silk Road Express between Ürümqi and Almaty leaves twice a week and takes about 33 hours, which includes several hours at the border for customs checks and to change bogies. Sleeper tickets cost around US\$66 and are easily booked in either Ürümqi or Almaty. See p183.

FROM RUSSIA

Most trains bound for Central Asia depart from Moscow's Kazan(sky) station. Europe dissolves into Asia as you sleep, and morning brings a vast panorama of the Kazakh steppe.

Train connections between Russia and Central Asia have thinned out in recent years. At the time of writing, fast trains left three times a week to/from Tashkent (No 5/6, 66 hours), every other day to/from Almaty (No 7/8), three or four times a week to/from Bishkek (Nos 17/18 and 27) and three times a week to/from Dushanbe (No 319/320). Trips take about three days. There are other, slower connections but you could grow old and die on them. Trains out of Moscow have even numbers; those returning have odd numbers.

Typical fares for a 2nd-class (*kupeyney*) berth are US\$200 Moscow–Tashkent and US\$180 Moscow–Almaty (via Astana).

Other offbeat connections include the Astrakan–Dushanbe (twice weekly), the St Petersburg–Astana (every other day) and Saratov–Nukus–Andijon (weekly) lines.

For a useful overview of international trains to/from Central Asia see www.seat61.com/silkroute.htm. For an online timetable see www.poezda.net.

SEA

The Baku (Azerbaijan) to Turkmenbashi ferry route (seat US\$47, 12 to 18 hours) across the Caspian is a possible way to enter and leave Central Asia. Buy the cheapest seat: once on board you'll doubtless be offered a cabin by a crewmember, for which you should realistically pay US\$10 to US\$20. The best cabins have private bathrooms and are comfortable, although all are cockroach infested.

Boats usually leave several times a day in both directions, but there is no timetable. You'll simply have to arrive and wait until the ship is full of cargo. You should leave with a couple of days left on your visa in case the boats are delayed, which is very possible. Stock up on food and water beforehand, as there is little food available on board. Crossings can end up taking 32 hours.

There are irregular boats every week or 10 days between Baku and Aktau (18 to 24 hours, US\$61 to US\$78) in Kazakhstan. One of these ferries sunk in October 2002, killing all 51 people aboard.

Boats also sail occasionally from Turkmenbashi to Astrakan in Russia.

GETTING AROUND

Flying is the least interesting and arguably the least safe mode of transport in Central Asia, but to some destinations and in some seasons it's the only sensible alternative. Trains are slow but crowded and generally not very convenient outside Kazakhstan. Buses are the most frequent and convenient way to get between towns cheaply, though trips can be cramped and vehicles are prone to breakdowns. The best option in many areas is a car: shared taxis or private drivers are often willing to take you between cities for little more than a bus fare (see p472).

The biggest headache for travellers crossing the region is that most inter-republic bus services have been cut. Travellers generally have to get a shared taxi or minibus to and from both sides of the border (see the boxed text p471). Crossings into Uzbekistan are the most tightly controlled, particularly coming from Tajikistan.

AIR

Flying saves time and takes the tedium out of Central Asia's long distances. It's also the only sensible way to reach some places, particularly in winter. But the Central Asian airlines have some way to go before meeting international safety standards on their domestic routes. Flights are particularly good value in Turkmenistan, where a domestic flight costs around US\$10!

You generally have to pay for air tickets in local currency (there's often an exchange booth nearby), though you can pay in US

dollars in Kyrgyzstan. Some airline offices and travel agencies accept credit cards

Apart from the national Central Asian airlines (see p461), there are a couple of domestic airlines, such as Kyrgyzstan's Itek Air and Altn Air (www.altynair.kg/en), which are pretty good. Domestic and inter-republic services are no-frills; you might get a warm glass of Coke if lucky. For long flights consider packing lunch.

At the time of writing there were no Almaty–Bishkek or Dushanbe–Tashkent services. Major internal connections still run daily.

Flights between the biggest cities generally stick to their schedules, but those serving smaller towns are often delayed without explanation and cancellations are common, usually a result of fuel shortages (big-city flights get priority). Printed schedules are unreliable; routes and individual flights are constantly being cancelled or reintroduced. The only sure way to find out what's flying is to ask at an air booking office. In any

case, confirm any flight 24 hours prior to departure.

Tickets for Central Asian airlines are most easily purchased from private travel agents (*aviakassa*). You'll often need your passport and visa. Many booking offices have a special window for foreigners and/or for international flights. It is rarely possible to book a return flight.

The airfare diagram (see p470) shows approximate one-way foreigners' fares in US-dollar equivalents, for the major regional connections. Expect these fares to change over time.

Seating is a bit of a free-for-all (there are often no assigned seats), especially if the flight is overbooked. To minimise the risk of loss or theft, consider carrying everything on board.

Helicopter flights were once popular in the Tian Shan and Pamir Ranges but rising fuel costs have made most services prohibitively expensive (around US\$1300 per hour).

TRAVEL AGENCIES & ORGANISED TOURS

Throughout this book, in the relevant city sections, we list reliable Central Asian travel agencies abroad who can help with the logistics of travel in Central Asia – whether it be visas, a few excursions or an entire tailored trip.

The following agencies outside the region can arrange individual itineraries and/or accommodation, tickets and visa support.

Australia

Passport Travel (☎ 03-9867 3888; www.travelcentre.com.au, www.russia-rail.com; Suite 11A, 401 St Kilda Rd, Melbourne, Victoria 3004) Accommodation and rail tickets.

Russian Gateway Tours (☎ 02-9745 3333; www.russian-gateway.com.au; 48 The Boulevard, Strathfield NSW 2135) Airfares to Central Asia, hotel bookings, homestays, visa invitations and airport transfers.

Sundowners (☎ 03-9672 5300; www.sundowners.com.au; Suite 15, Lonsdale Court, 600 Lonsdale St, Melbourne, Victoria 3000) Small-group and independent tours into Central Asia.

The UK

Regent Holidays (☎ 0870-499 0911; www.regent-holidays.co.uk; 15 John St, Bristol BS1 2HR) Offer short tours, and can cobble together an individual itinerary.

Scott's Tours (☎ 020-7383 5353; www.scottstours.co.uk; 141 Whitfield St London W1T 5EW) Hotel bookings, visas and more.

Silk Road and Beyond (020-7371 3131; www.silkroadandbeyond.co.uk; 371 Kensington High Street, London, W14 8QZ)

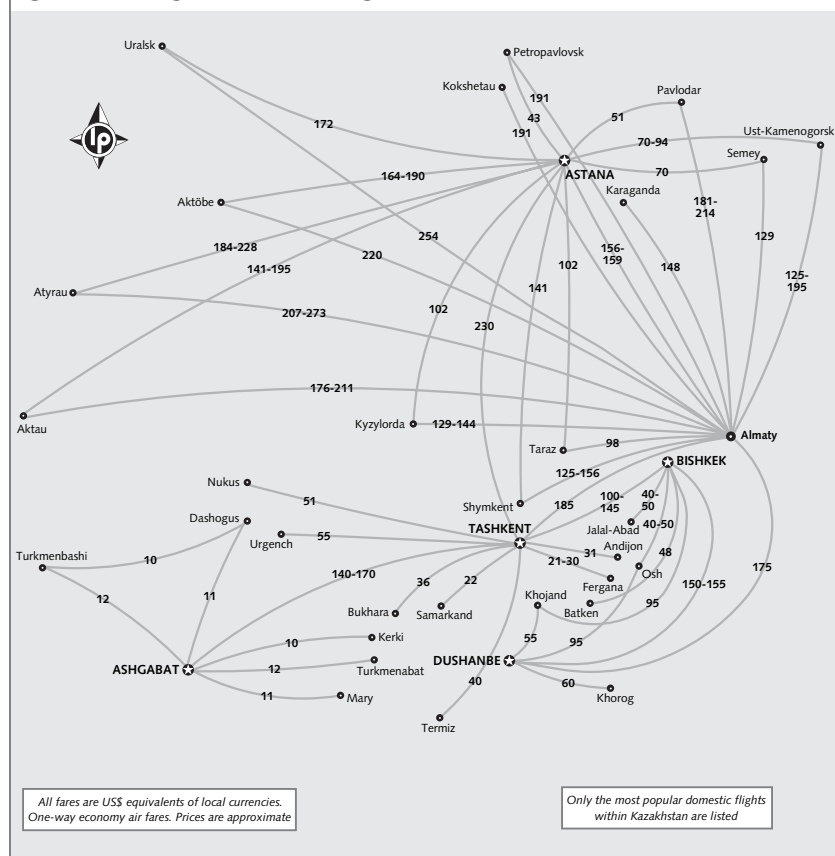
Steppes East (☎ 01285-651 010; www.steppeseast.co.uk; 51 Castle St, Cirencester GL7 1QD)

The USA

Mir Corporation (☎ 800-424 7289; www.mircorp.com; Suite 210, 85 South Washington St, Seattle, WA 98104) Independent tours, homestays and visa support with accommodation.

Red Star Travel (☎ 800-215 4378, 206-522 5995; www.travel2russia.com; Suite 102, 123 Queen Anne Ave N, Seattle, WA 98109) Organises tours, individual itineraries, accommodation, train tickets, visa support with booking.

CENTRAL ASIAN AIR FARES



Maintenance is also patchy; avoid them except in summer and go only if the weather is absolutely clear.

BUS

This is generally the best bet for getting between towns cheaply. The major transport corridors are served by big long-distance coaches (often reconditioned German or Turkish vehicles), which run on fixed routes and schedules, with fixed stops. They're relatively problem-free and moderately comfortable, with windows that open and sometimes with reclining seats. Luggage is locked safely away below. Journey times depend on road conditions but are somewhat longer than a fast train.

Regional buses are a lot less comfortable and a bit more...interesting. Breakdowns are common. They are also used extensively by small-time traders to shift their goods around the region, and you could gradually become surrounded by boxes, bags, and both live and dead animals.

Private minibuses, generally called marshrutka (Russian for 'fixed route'), are a bit more expensive, sometimes faster, and usually more hair-raising. They generally have fixed fares and routes but no fixed timetable (or no departure at all if there aren't enough passengers to satisfy the driver), and will stop anywhere along the route. They can be clapped-out heaps or spiffy new Toyota vans.

Keep in mind that you're at the mercy of the driver as he picks up cargo here and there, loading it all around the passengers, picks up a few friends, gets petrol, fixes a leaky petrol tank, runs some errands, repairs the engine, loads more crates right up to the ceiling – and then stops every half-hour to fill the radiator with water.

Tickets

Most cities have a main intercity bus station (Russian: *avtovokzal*, Kyrgyz and Uzbek: *avtobekat*) and may also have regional bus stations (sometimes several) serving local towns.

Try to pick buses originating from where you are, enabling you to buy tickets as much as a day in advance. Tickets for through buses originating in a different city may not be sold until they arrive, amid anxious scrambles. At a pinch you could try paying the driver directly for a place.

Most large bus stations have police who sometimes create headaches for foreigners by demanding documents. Be wary of any policeman who approaches you at a bus station. Long-distance bus stations are, in general, low-life magnets, rarely pleasant after dark. Disregard most bus-station timetables.

CAR

Car is an excellent way to get around Central Asia and it needn't be expensive. Main highways between capitals and big cities (eg Almaty–Bishkek–Tashkent–Samarkand–Bukhara) are fast and fairly well maintained. Mountain roads (ie most roads in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) can be blocked with snow in winter and plagued by landslides in spring.

See Car & Motorcycle (p467) for advice about driving your own vehicle through Central Asia.

Hire

Almaty and Bishkek have a Hertz/Avis franchise and travel agencies can hire you out a Mercedes or 4WD, but you are almost always better off hiring a taxi for the day.

Community-based tourism organisations and travel agencies hire 4WDs for remoter areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Hiring a car unlocks some of Central Asia's best mountain scenery and is well worth it, despite the cost. CBT in Kyrgyzstan (see p277) charges around US\$0.25 per km, META (p388) in Tajikistan's eastern Pamirs charges US\$0.34 to US\$0.38 per kilometre. Travel agencies are more expensive.

JIGSAW BORDERS

When Stalin drew the borders between the different republics in 1924 no-one really expected them to become international boundaries. Areas were portioned off on the map according to the whims of Party leaders, without much regard to the reality on the ground. As these crazy jigsaw borders solidify throughout post-Soviet Central Asia, many towns and enclaves are finding themselves isolated, as the once complex web of regional ties shrinks behind new borderlines.

The Fergana Valley has been particularly affected. Travellers (and locals) may find it tricky to get to more remote areas or trekking bases by public transport. Borders sometimes close, especially between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Cars with Tajik number plates can no longer cross into Uzbekistan, and Uzbek border guards often give locals the third degree.

Buses no longer run from central Uzbekistan into the Fergana Valley along the natural route via Khojand but rather take the mountain road from Tashkent over the Kamchik Pass. Only train connections exit the Fergana Valley through its mouth.

Trains are not immune to these border shenanigans, as lines occasionally veer into other republics. Trains from Astrakan and Khojand to Termez and Dushanbe dip into Turkmenistan and Turkmen guards sometimes board the train to fine travellers without a Turkmen visa.

The bottom line is that there are now border checks at many hitherto disregarded borders and you need a visa any time you cross into another republic. If you are just transiting in another republic before heading back into the first you should invest in a double- or multiple-entry visa. There are exceptions, eg the Tajikistan–Kyrgyzstan border.

These problems may be short-lived, as new transport connections are springing up everywhere. Uzbekistan has built a railway line to bypass Turkmenistan and roads have sprung up in Kyrgyz parts of the Fergana Valley to avoid Uzbek border guards. But these are just a few of the thousands of ties that bind the ex-Soviet republics to one another and to Russia, and disentangling them will take decades.

Long-distance taxi hire in Turkmenistan is around US\$0.10 per km.

Taxi

There are two main ways of travelling by car in Central Asia if you don't have your own vehicle: ordinary taxi or shared taxi.

ORDINARY TAXI

This form of travel is to hire an entire taxi for a special route. This is handy for reaching off-the-beaten-track places, where bus connections are hit-and-miss or nonexistent, such as Song-Köl in Kyrgyzstan. Select your driver with care, look over his car (we took one in Kyrgyzstan whose exhaust fumes were funnelled through the back windows) and assess his sobriety before you set off. See opposite for more on Central Asian taxis.

You'll have to negotiate a price before you set off. Along routes where there are also shared taxis, ordinary taxis are four times the shared taxi per-person fare. Make sure everyone is clear which route you will be taking, how long you want the driver to wait at a site and if there are any toll or entry fees to be paid. You will need to haggle hard.

You can work out approximate costs by working out the return kilometre distance; assume the average consumption of cars is around 12 litres per 100km and then multiply the number of litres needed by the per litre petrol cost (constantly in flux). Add to this a daily fee (anything from US\$5 up to the cost of the petrol) and a waiting fee of around US\$1 per hour and away you go.

SHARED TAXI

Shared taxi is the other main form of car travel around Central Asia, whereby a taxi or private car does a regular run between two cities and charges a set rate for each of the four seats in a car. These cars often wait for passengers outside bus or train stations and some have a sign in the window indicating where they are headed. Cars are quicker and just as comfortable as a bus or train, and can work out to be just a little more expensive than a bus. In Kyrgyzstan per-person fares are so cheap that two or three of you can buy all four seats and stretch out. Otherwise smaller cars can be a little cramped. The most common car is the Russian Zhiguli, fast being replaced by modern Daewoo models such as the Nexia (the most comfortable) and the smaller and

cheaper Tico, both made in Central Asia. The front seat is always the one to aim for.

These services are particularly useful in Kyrgyzstan along certain major routes such as Bishkek–Almaty, Bishkek–Osh, and Naryn–Bishkek. Other useful shared taxi routes are Bukhara–Urgench/Khiva, Samarkand–Termiz, Dushanbe–Khojand and Ashgabat–Mary.

HITCHING

In Central Asia there is generally little distinction between hitching and taking a taxi. Anyone with a car will stop if you flag them down (with a low up-and-down wave, not an upturned thumb) and most drivers will expect you to pay for the ride. If you can negotiate a reasonable fare (it helps to know the equivalent bus or shared taxi fare) this can be a much quicker mode of transport than the bus. There's also a good chance you'll be invited to someone's house for tea.

Hitching to parks and scenic spots is generally much easier on the weekends but you'll lose some of the solitude at these times.

Normal security rules apply when trying to arrange a lift; don't hitch alone, avoid flagging down cars at night and try to size up your driver (and his sobriety) before getting in.

LOCAL TRANSPORT

Most sizable towns have public buses, and sometimes electric trolleybuses. Bigger cities also have trams, and Tashkent has a metro system. Transport is still ridiculously cheap by Western standards, but usually packed because there's never enough money to keep an adequate fleet on the road; at peak hours it can take several stops for those caught by surprise to even work their way to an exit.

Public transport in smaller towns tends to melt away soon after dark.

Bus, Trolleybus & Tram

Payment methods vary, but the most common method is to pay the driver cash on exit. Manoeuvre your way out by asking anyone in the way, *vykhodite?* (getting off?).

Marshrutka

A marshrutka taxi, or marshrutnoe (marsh-root-na-yuh tahk-see), is a minibus running along a fixed route. You can get on at fixed stops but can get off anywhere by saying '*zdyes pazhalsta*' (zd-yes pa-zhal-stuh; here please). Routes are hard to figure out and schedules

TAXI PRECAUTIONS

Avoid taxis lurking outside tourist hotels – drivers charge far too much and get uppity when you try to talk them down. Never get into a taxi with more than one person in it, especially after dark; check the back seat of the car for hidden friends too. Keep your fare money in a separate pocket to avoid flashing large wads of cash. Have a map to make it look like you know your route. If you're staying at a private residence, have the taxi stop at the corner nearest your destination, not the specific address.

erratic, and it's usually easier to stick to other transport. Fares are just a little higher than bus fares.

Taxi

There are two kinds of taxis: officially licensed ones and every other car on the road. Official taxis are more trustworthy, and sometimes cheaper – if you can find one. They rarely have meters and you'll have to negotiate a fare in advance. Or let a local friend negotiate for you – they'll do better than you will.

Unofficial taxis are often private cars driven by people trying to cover their huge petrol costs. Anything with a chequerboard logo in the window is a taxi. Stand at the side of the road, extend your arm and wait – as scores of others around you will probably be doing. When someone stops, negotiate destination and fare through the passenger-side window or through a partially open door. The driver may say '*sadytse*' (sit down) or beckon you in, but sort the fare out first. It helps a lot if you can negotiate the price in Russian, even more so in the local language.

A typical fare across Dushanbe at the time of research was around US\$3; less in Tashkent and Bishkek, and less than half that in Ashgabat. Fares go up at night and extra charges are incurred for bookings.

TRAIN

Lower-class train travel is the cheapest but most crowded way to get around Central Asia. Travel in the summertime is best done at night. Kazakhstan is probably the only

country where you'll find yourself using the train system much.

Connections

Trains can be useful to cover the vast distances in Kazakhstan. Certain corridors, such as the Turksib (Semey–Almaty) are well served by fast trains every day or two. The morning commuter trains from Tashkent to Samarkand and Bukhara are faster than the buses and feature airplane-style seats. There's also a useful overnight Tashkent–Bukhara run. As an indication of journey times, Urgench–Tashkent is 20 hours and Tashkent–Almaty is 25 hours on a fast train.

Elsewhere, connections are drying up as fast as the Aral Sea; few trains run to Dushanbe any more (those that do take a very roundabout route and may require a Turkmen transit visa) and there are no direct lines, for example, between Ashgabat and any other Central Asian capitals.

Many trains to and from Russia can be used for getting around Central Asia, and may be faster and in better condition. But any train originating far from where you are is likely to be filthy, crowded and late by the time you board it.

Tickets

Book at least two days ahead for CIS connections, if you can. You will probably need to show your passport and visa. A few stations have separate windows for advance bookings and for departures within 24 hours; the latter is generally the one with the heaving mob around it (beware of pickpockets). Many tourist hotels have rail-booking desks (including their own mark-up). Few travel agencies are interested in booking trains.

If you can't get a ticket for a particular train, it's worth turning up anyway. No matter how full ticket clerks insist a train is, there always seem to be spare *kupeyniy* (2nd-class or sleeping carriage) berths. Ask an attendant.

A few sample *kupeyny* fares (one-way) from Tashkent are US\$18 to Urgench and US\$12 to Bukhara. Fares from Almaty include Semey (US\$27), Taraz (US\$22) and Astana (US\$41 or US\$73 to US\$135 express). A seat on the daytime commuter train costs US\$9.70/12 to Samarkand/Bukhara.

Health

Dr Trish Batchelor

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Stomach and digestive problems are by far the most common problem faced by visitors to Central Asia. A diet of mutton, bread and *plov* seems to induce diarrhoea and constipation in equal measure!

Since independence, health rates across the region have dropped and many diseases formerly eradicated or controlled in the time of the USSR, such as tuberculosis (TB) and diphtheria, have returned.

Minor risks such as malaria, rabies and encephalitis depend largely upon the location and/or months of travel. More common

during the searing summer months is heat exhaustion, so make sure you keep cool and hydrated in the 35°C heat. Most short-term travels to the main tourist areas remain problem-free.

BEFORE YOU GO

Pack medications in their original, clearly labelled containers. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical conditions and medications (using generic names) is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity. If you have a heart condition, bring a copy of your ECG taken just prior to travelling.

If you take any regular medication, bring double your needs in case of loss or theft. In most Central Asian countries you can buy many medications over the counter without a doctor's prescription, but it can be difficult to find some of the newer drugs, particularly the latest antidepressant drugs, blood pressure medications and contraceptive methods.

Make sure you get your teeth checked before you travel – there are few good dentists in

INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel-health advice on the internet. It's also a good idea to consult your government's travel-health website before departure, if one is available.

- Australia (www.dfat.gov.au/travel/)
- Canada (www.travelhealth.gc.ca)
- New Zealand (www.mfat.govt.nz/travel)
- South Africa (www.dfa.gov.za/consular/travel_advice.htm)
- UK (www.doh.gov.uk/traveladvice/)
- USA (www.cdc.gov/travel/)
- Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) – good basic health information
- World Health Organization (WHO; www.who.int/country) – a superb book called *International Travel & Health* is revised annually and available online
- MD Travel Health (www.mdtravelhealth.com) – provides complete travel-health recommendations for every country and is updated daily

Central Asia. If you wear glasses take a spare pair and your prescription.

INSURANCE

Even if you are fit and healthy, don't travel without health insurance – accidents do happen. Declare any existing medical conditions you have – the insurance company *will* check if your problem is pre-existing and will not cover you if it is undeclared. You may require extra cover for adventure activities such as rock climbing. If you're uninsured, emergency evacuation is expensive – bills of over US\$100,000 are not uncommon.

Make sure you keep all documentation related to any medical expenses you incur.

RECOMMENDED VACCINATIONS

Specialised travel-medicine clinics are your best source of information; they stock all

available vaccines and will be able to give specific recommendations for you and your trip. Most vaccines don't produce immunity until at least two weeks after they're given, so visit a doctor four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received.

The only vaccine required by international regulations is yellow fever. Proof of vaccination will be required only if you have visited a country in the yellow-fever zone within the six days prior to entering Kazakhstan.

Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan all require HIV testing if staying more than three months (two months for Uzbekistan). Foreign tests are accepted under certain conditions, but make sure to check with the embassy of your destination before travelling.

MEDICAL CHECKLIST

Recommended items for a personal medical kit:

- Antifungal cream (eg clotrimazole)
- Antibacterial cream (eg mupirocin)
- Antibiotics for skin infections (eg amoxicillin/clavulanate or cephalexin)
- Antibiotics for diarrhoea (eg norfloxacin, ciprofloxacin or azithromycin for bacterial diarrhoea; tinidazole for giardiasis or amoebic dysentery)
- Antihistamine – there are many options (eg cetirizine for day and promethazine for night)
- Antiseptic (eg Betadine)
- Antispasmodic for stomach cramps (eg Buscopan)
- Decongestant (eg pseudoephedrine)
- DEET-based insect repellent
- Diamox if going to high altitude
- Elastoplasts, bandages, gauze, thermometer (but not mercury), sterile needles and syringes, safety pins and tweezers
- Ibuprofen or another anti-inflammatory
- Indigestion tablets (eg Quick Eze or Mylanta)
- Laxative (eg Coloxyl)
- Oral rehydration solution for diarrhoea (eg Gastrolyte), diarrhoea 'stopper' (eg loperamide) and antinausea medication (eg prochlorperazine)
- Paracetamol
- Permethrin to impregnate clothing and mosquito nets, for some regions, see p477
- Steroid cream for allergic/itchy rashes (eg 1% to 2% hydrocortisone)
- Thrush (vaginal yeast infection) treatment (eg clotrimazole pessaries or Diflucan tablets)
- Ural or equivalent if prone to urine infections

The World Health Organization recommends the following vaccinations for travellers to Central Asia:

Adult Diphtheria & Tetanus Single booster recommended if none in the previous 10 years. Side effects include sore arm and fever.

Hepatitis A Provides almost 100% protection for up to a year; a booster after 12 months provides at least another 20 years' protection. Mild side-effects such as headache and sore arm occur in 5% to 10% of people.

Hepatitis B Now considered routine for most travellers. Given as three shots over six months. A rapid schedule is also available, as is a combined vaccination with hepatitis A. Side effects are mild and uncommon, usually headache and sore arm. In 95% of people lifetime protection results.

Measles, Mumps and Rubella Two doses required unless you have had the diseases. Occasionally a rash and flu-like illness can develop a week after receiving the vaccine. Many young adults require a booster.

Polio In 2002 only Uzbekistan reported cases of polio. Only one booster is required as an adult for lifetime protection.

Typhoid Recommended unless your trip is for less than a week. The vaccine offers around 70% protection, lasts for two to three years and comes as a single shot. Tablets are also available; however, the injection is usually recommended as it has fewer side-effects. Sore arm and fever may occur.

Varicella If you haven't had chickenpox discuss this vaccination with your doctor.

These immunisations are recommended for long-term travellers (more than one month) or those at special risk:

Meningitis Recommended for long-term backpackers aged under 25.

Rabies Side effects are rare – occasionally headache and sore arm.

Tick-borne Encephalitis (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan) Sore arm and headache are the most common side effects.

Tuberculosis Adult long-term travellers are usually recommended to have a TB skin test before and after travel, rather than vaccination.

FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Healthy Travel – Asia & India* is a handy pocket size and packed with useful information, including pretrip planning, emergency first aid, immunisation and disease information, and what to do if you get sick on the road. Other recommended references include *Traveller's Health* by Dr Richard Dawood and *Travelling Well* by Dr Deborah Mills – check out the website (www.travellingwell.com.au).

IN TRANSIT

DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) occurs when blood clots form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly because of prolonged immobility. Though most blood clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, some may break off and travel through the blood vessels to the lungs, where they can cause life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling or pain of the foot, ankle or calf, usually but not always on just one side. When a blood clot travels to the lungs, it may cause chest pain and difficulty in breathing. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights, you should walk about the cabin, perform isometric compressions of the leg muscles (ie contract the leg muscles while sitting), drink plenty of fluids, and avoid alcohol and tobacco.

JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones; it results in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag try drinking plenty of fluids (nonalcoholic) and eating light meals. Upon arrival, seek exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine), promethazine (Phenergan) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. Their main side effect is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger, which works like a charm for some people.

IN CENTRAL ASIA

AVAILABILITY OF HEALTH CARE

Health care throughout Central Asia is basic at best. Any serious problems will require evacuation. The clinics listed in the relevant country chapters can provide basic care and may be able to organise evacuation if necessary. In Central Asia a pharmacist is known as an *apoteka* in Russian or *dorikhana* in Turkic. Clinics are widely known as *polikliniki*.

Self-treatment may be appropriate if your problem is minor (eg travellers' diarrhoea),

you are carrying the relevant medication and you cannot attend a recommended clinic. If you think you may have a serious disease, especially malaria, travel to the nearest quality facility immediately to receive attention. It is always better to be assessed by a doctor than to rely on self-treatment.

Buying medication over the counter is not recommended, as fake medications and poorly stored or out-of-date drugs are common.

To find the nearest reliable medical facility, contact your insurance company, your embassy or a top-end hotel.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Brucellosis

Risk: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan. It is rare in travellers but common in the local population, it's transmitted via unpasteurised dairy products. Common symptoms include fever, chills, headache, loss of appetite and joint pains.

Hepatitis A

Risk: all countries. A problem throughout the region, this food- and waterborne virus infects the liver, causing jaundice (yellow skin and eyes), nausea and lethargy. There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A, you just need to allow time for the liver to heal. All travellers to Central Asia should be vaccinated.

Hepatitis B

Risk: all countries. The only sexually transmitted disease that can be prevented by vaccination, hepatitis B is spread by contact with infected body fluids, including via sexual contact. The long-term consequences can include liver cancer and cirrhosis.

HIV

Risk: all countries. HIV is transmitted via contaminated body fluids. Avoid unprotected sex, blood transfusions and injections (unless you can see a clean needle being used) in Central Asia.

Influenza

Risk: all countries. Present particularly in the winter months, symptoms of the flu include high fever, muscle aches, runny nose, cough and sore throat. Vaccination is recommended for those over the age of 65 or with underlying medical conditions such as heart disease or

diabetes. There is no specific treatment, just rest and painkillers.

Leishmaniasis

Risk: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan. This sandfly-borne parasite is very rare in travellers but common in the local population. There are two forms of the disease – one which only affects the skin (causing a chronic ulcer) and one affecting the internal organs. Avoid sandfly bites by following insect avoidance guidelines.

Malaria

Risk: southern Tajikistan, southeastern Turkmenistan and far southern Uzbekistan; only present in the extreme south in the warmer summer months (June to October). Malaria is caused by a parasite transmitted by the bite of an infected mosquito. The most important symptom of malaria is fever, but general symptoms such as headache, diarrhoea, cough or chills may also occur. Diagnosis can be made only by taking a blood sample.

Two strategies should be combined to prevent malaria – general mosquito/insect avoidance and antimalaria medications. Before you travel, it is essential you seek medical advice on the right medication and dosage. In general, Chloroquine is recommended for Turkmenistan and southern Uzbekistan. Some resistance to Chloroquine is reported in southern Tajikistan (mainly Khatlon province), so get your doctor's advice on whether to take Chloroquine, Larium (Mefloquine), Doxycycline or Malarone. See the World Malaria Risk Chart (www.iamat.org/pdf/world-malariarisk.pdf) for detailed information.

To prevent mosquito bites, travellers are advised to take the following steps:

- Use a DEET-containing insect repellent on exposed skin. Natural repellents such as citronella can be effective, but must be applied more frequently than products containing DEET.
- Sleep under a mosquito net impregnated with permethrin.
- Choose accommodation with screens and fans (if not air-conditioned).
- Impregnate clothing with permethrin in high-risk areas.
- Wear long sleeves and trousers in light colours.
- Use mosquito coils.
- Spray your room with insect repellent before going out for your evening meal.

Rabies

Risk: all countries. Still a common problem in most parts of Central Asia, this uniformly fatal disease is spread by the bite or lick of an infected animal – most commonly a dog. Having a pretravel vaccination means the postbite treatment is greatly simplified. If an animal bites you, gently wash the wound with soap and water, and apply iodine-based antiseptic. If you are not vaccinated you will need to receive rabies immunoglobulin as soon as possible and seek medical advice.

STDs

Risk: all countries. Sexually transmitted diseases most common in Central Asia include herpes, genital warts, syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia. People carrying these diseases often have no signs of infection. Condoms will prevent gonorrhoea and chlamydia but not warts or herpes. If after a sexual encounter you develop any rash, lumps, discharge or pain when passing urine seek immediate medical attention. If you have been sexually active during your travels, have an STD check upon your return.

Tuberculosis (TB)

Risk: all countries. Medical and aid workers, and long-term travellers who have significant contact with the local population should take precautions against TB. Vaccination is usually given only to children under the age of five, but adults at risk are recommended pre- and post-travel TB testing. The main symptoms are fever, cough, weight loss, night sweats and tiredness.

Typhoid

Risk: all countries. This serious bacterial infection is spread via food and water. It gives a high and slowly progressive fever and headache, and may be accompanied by a dry cough and stomach pain. Be aware that vaccination is not 100% effective so you must still be careful what you eat and drink. Dushanbe had typhoid outbreaks in 2003 and 2004.

Travellers' Diarrhoea

Travellers' diarrhoea is defined as the passage of more than three watery bowel actions within 24 hours, plus at least one other symptom, such as fever, cramps, nausea, vomiting or feeling generally unwell. It is

by far the most common problem affecting travellers – between 30% and 50% of people will suffer from it within two weeks of starting their trip.

Travellers' diarrhoea is caused by a bacterium and, in most cases, treatment consists of staying well hydrated; rehydration solutions such as Gastrolyte are the best for this. It responds promptly to treatment with antibiotics such as norfloxacin, ciprofloxacin or azithromycin. Loperamide is just a 'stopper' and doesn't get to the cause of the problem. It can be helpful, for example, if you have to go on a long bus ride. Don't take loperamide if you have a fever, or blood in your stools. Seek medical attention quickly if you do not respond to an appropriate antibiotic.

Amoebic Dysentery

Amoebic dysentery is actually rare in travellers but is often misdiagnosed. Symptoms are similar to bacterial diarrhoea, ie fever, bloody diarrhoea and generally feeling unwell. You should always seek reliable medical care if you have blood in your diarrhoea. Treatment involves two drugs: Tinidazole or Metronidazole to kill the parasite in your gut, and a second drug to kill the cysts. If left untreated, complications such as liver or gut abscesses can occur.

Giardiasis

Giardia is a parasite that is relatively common in travellers. Symptoms include nausea, bloating, excess gas, fatigue and intermittent diarrhoea. 'Eggy' burps are often attributed solely to giardia, but research in Nepal has shown that they are not specific to giardia. The parasite will eventually go away if left untreated, but this can take months. The treatment of choice is tinidazole; metronidazole is a second option.

Other Diseases

Kazakhstan occasionally reports outbreaks of human plague in the far west. Outbreaks are often caused by eating diseased meat but are also transmitted by the bites of rodent and marmot fleas. There were also isolated outbreaks of anthrax in south Kazakhstan in 2000.

Crimean-Congo Haemorrhagic Fever is a severe viral illness characterised by the sudden onset of intense fever, headache, aching limbs, bleeding gums and sometimes a rash of

red dots on the skin, a week or two after being bitten by an infected tick. Though not all ticks are infected, it's a minor risk for trekkers and campers in Central Asia during the summer months. Insect repellent will help keep the blighters off you.

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

Altitude Sickness

This is a particular problem in high-altitude regions of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. With motorable roads (such as the Pamir Hwy) climbing passes of over 4000m, it's a problem not just restricted to trekkers.

Altitude sickness may develop in those who ascend rapidly to altitudes greater than 2500m. Being physically fit offers no protection. Risk increases with faster ascents, higher altitudes and greater exertion. Symptoms may include headaches, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, malaise, insomnia and loss of appetite. Severe cases may be complicated by fluid in the lungs or swelling of the brain.

To protect yourself against altitude sickness, take 125mg or 250mg of acetazolamide (Diamox) twice or three times daily, starting 24 hours before ascent and continuing for 48 hours after arrival at altitude. Possible side effects include increased urinary volume, numbness, tingling, drowsiness, nausea, myopia and temporary impotence. Acetazolamide should not be given to pregnant women or anyone with a history of sulfa allergy. For those who cannot tolerate acetazolamide, the next best option is 4mg of dexamethasone taken four times daily. Unlike acetazolamide, dexamethasone must be tapered gradually upon arrival at altitude. Dexamethasone is a steroid, so it should not be given to diabetics or anyone for whom steroids are contraindicated. A natural alternative is ginkgo.

When travelling to high altitudes, avoid overexertion, eat light meals, drink lots of fluids and abstain from alcohol. If your symptoms are more than mild or don't resolve promptly, see a doctor.

The Murgab Ecotourism Association (META; see p388) in Tajikistan's eastern Pamirs has a hyperbaric chamber in case of altitude-related emergencies.

Food

Eating in restaurants is the biggest risk factor for contracting travellers' diarrhoea. Ways to avoid it include eating only freshly cooked

DRINKING WATER

- Never drink tap water, especially in Karakalpakstan, Khorezm, Dushanbe and remoter Kazakhstan
- Bottled water is generally safe – check the seal is intact at purchase.
- Avoid ice.
- Avoid fresh juices – they may have been watered down.
- Boiling water is the most efficient method of purifying it.
- The best chemical purifier is iodine. It should not be used by pregnant women or those with thyroid problems.
- Water filters should also filter out viruses. Ensure your filter has a chemical barrier such as iodine and a small pore size, eg less than four microns.

food, avoiding food that has been sitting around in buffets, and eating in busy restaurants with a high turnover of customers. Peel all fruit, cook vegetables and soak salads in iodine water for at least 20 minutes.

Insect Bites & Stings

Bedbugs don't carry disease but their bites are very itchy. They live in the cracks of furniture and walls, and then migrate to the bed at night to feed on you. You can treat the itch with an antihistamine.

Lice inhabit various parts of your body but most commonly your head and pubic area. Transmission is via close contact with an infected person. They can be difficult to treat and you may need numerous applications of an anti-lice shampoo such as permethrin. Pubic lice are usually contracted from sexual contact.

Ticks (*kleshch* in Russian) are contracted after walking in rural areas. They are commonly found behind the ears, on the belly and in the armpits. If you have had a tick bite and experience symptoms such as a rash at the site of the bite or elsewhere, fever or muscle aches, you should see a doctor. Doxycycline prevents tick-borne diseases.

Anyone with a serious bee or wasp allergy should carry an injection of adrenaline (eg an EpiPen) for emergency treatment. For others, apply ice to the sting and take painkillers.

Skin Problems

Take meticulous care of any cuts and scratches to prevent complications such as abscesses. Immediately wash all wounds in clean water and apply antiseptic. If you develop signs of infection (increasing pain and redness) see a doctor.

Sunburn

Even on a cloudy day sunburn can occur rapidly, especially at high altitudes. Always use a strong sunscreen (at least factor 30), and always wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses outdoors. If you become sunburnt stay out of the sun until you have recovered, apply cool compresses and take painkillers for

the discomfort. One percent hydrocortisone cream applied twice daily is also helpful.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

Supplies of sanitary products may not be readily available in rural areas. Birth control options may be limited so bring adequate supplies of your own form of contraception.

Heat, humidity and antibiotics can all contribute to thrush. Treatment is with anti-fungal creams and pessaries such as clotrimazole. A practical alternative is a single tablet of fluconazole (Diflucan). Urinary tract infections can be precipitated by dehydration or long bus journeys without toilet stops; bring suitable antibiotics.