

History

Central Asia is perhaps the best place on earth to explore the reality of the phrase ‘the sweep of history’. Populations, conquerors, cultures and ideas have traversed the region’s steppes, deserts and mountains for millennia. Central Asia’s role as a conduit between cultures is symbolised by the Silk Road, through which the great civilisations of the East and the West first made contact. But Central Asia was, and is, more than just a middle ground, and its cultural history is far more than the sum of the influences brought from the East and the West.

Here in the heart of the largest landmass on earth, vast steppes provided the one natural resource – grass – required to build one of this planet’s most formidable and successful forms of statehood, the nomadic empire. The grass-fed horses by the millions and mounted archers remained the unstoppable acme of open-ground warfare for more than 2500 years. How the settled civilisations on the periphery of Eurasia interacted with successive waves of mounted nomadic hordes is the main theme of the story of Central Asia.

PREHISTORY & EARLY HISTORY

In the Middle Palaeolithic period, from 100,000 to 35,000 years ago, people in Central Asia were isolated from Europe and elsewhere by ice sheets, seas and swamps.

Cultural continuity begins in the late 3rd millennium BC with the Indo-Iranians, speakers of an unrecorded Indo-European dialect related distantly to English. The Indo-Iranians are believed to have passed through Central Asia on their way from the Indo-European homeland in southern Russia. From Central Asia, groups headed southeast for India and southwest for Iran. These peoples herded cattle, went to battle in chariots, and probably buried their dead nobles in burial mounds (*kurgans*). The Tajiks are linguistic descendants of these ancient migrants. One of these subsequent Indo-European groups was the Sakas (also known as Scythians), who have left *kurgans*, rock carvings and other remains across Central Asia. For more

For more on the Silk Road, including recommended books, see p53.

See www.orientarch.uni-halle.de/ca/bud/bud.htm for more on the archaeology of southeastern Central Asia.

UNEARTHING THE AMAZONS

As early as the 5th century BC the Greek historian Herodotus knew of an army of women warriors, known as the Amazons, who were so dedicated to warfare that they allegedly cut off their own right breast in order to improve their shot with bows and arrows. Recent excavations of Saka (Scythian) burial mounds (*kurgans*), on the Kazakh border with Russia, are unearthing some intriguing links to these perhaps not-so-mythical warrior women.

Archaeologists have discovered skeletons of women, bow-legged from a life in the saddle, buried with swords, daggers and bronze-tipped arrows, indicating warrior status. Others appear to be priestesses, buried with cultic implements, bronze mirrors and elaborate headdresses.

The finds indicate that women of these early steppe civilisations were trained from the outset to be warriors, fighting alongside men, perhaps even forming an elite social group. The status of these steppe women seems far higher than that of sedentary civilisations of the same time, challenging the stereotypical macho image of the Central Asian nomad.

TIMELINE 100,000–40,000 years ago

Remains of Neanderthal man found at Aman-Kutan cave near Samarkand

2nd millennium BC

Saka/Scythian tombs in the Pamirs and the tomb of Sarazm (western Tajikistan) date from this period

For a detailed chronicle of Central Asian history try *Empire of the Steppes* by Rene Grousset, *A History of Inner Asia* by Svati Soucek or the excellent (but hard to find) *Central Asia* by Gavin Hambly.

on Kazakhstan's famous 'Golden Man' find, dating from a 5th-century Saka (Scythian) *kurgan* outside Almaty, see p119.

Central Asia's recorded history begins in the 6th century BC, when the large Achaemenid empire of Persia (modern Iran) created client kingdoms or satrapies (provinces), in Central Asia: Sogdiana (Sogdia), Khorezm (later Khiva), Bactria (Afghan Turkestan), Margiana (Merv), Aria (Herat), Saka (Scythia) and Arachosia (Ghazni and Kandahar). Sogdiana was the land between the Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya, called Transoxiana by the Romans and Mawarannahr by the Arabs (both names mean 'Beyond the Oxus'). Here Bukhara and Samarkand later flourished. Khorezm lay on the lower reaches of the Amu-Darya, south of the Aral Sea, where one day the 19th-century khans of Khorezm would lord it from the walled city of Khiva. Saka (also

called Semireche by the Russians), extending indefinitely over the steppes beyond the Syr-Darya and including the Tian Shan range, was the home of nomadic warriors until their way of life ended in the late 19th century.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

In 330 BC this former pupil of Aristotle, from Macedonia, led his army to a key victory over the last Achaemenid emperor, Darius III, in Mesopotamia. With the defeat of his Persian nemesis, Alexander (356–323 BC) developed a taste for conquest. By 329 BC he had reached modern Herat, Kandahar and Kabul. Crossing the Hindu Kush he pressed northward to Bactria, crossed the Oxus (Amu-Darya) on inflated hides and proceeded via Cyropol/Cyropolis (Istaravshan) and Marakanda (Samarkand) and towards the Jaxartes (Syr-Darya), which he crossed in order to crush Saka defenders. Perhaps in celebration he founded his ninth city, Alexandria Eskhate (Farthest Alexandria), on the banks of the Jaxartes where today's Khojand stands.

Alexander met the most stubborn resistance of his career in the Sogdians, who in concert with the Massagetes, a Saka clan, revolted and under the leadership of Spitamenes held the mountains of Zerafshan (Zeravshan) until 328 BC. After an 18-month guerrilla war, the rebels' fall was a poignant one: attacked and defeated after Greek troops scaled the cliffs of their last redoubt the 'Rock of Sogdiana' (its location today in the Hissar Mountains remains a mystery), their leader yielding his daughter, the beautiful Bactrian princess Roxana, into captivity and marriage to Alexander.

The brilliant Macedonian generalissimo's sojourn in Central Asia was marked by a growing megalomania. It was at Marakanda that Alexander murdered his right-hand general, Cleitus. He tried to adopt the dress and autocratic court ritual of an Oriental despot; however his Greek and Macedonian followers refused to prostrate themselves before him.

When he died in Babylon in 323 BC, Alexander had no named heir. But his legacy included nothing less than the West's perennial romance with exploration and expansion.

EAST MEETS WEST

The aftermath of Alexander's short-lived Macedonian empire in Central Asia saw an increase in East–West cultural exchange and a chain reaction of nomadic migrations. The Hellenistic successor states of the Seleucid empire disseminated the aesthetic values of the classical world deep into Asia; trade brought such goods as the walnut to Europe.

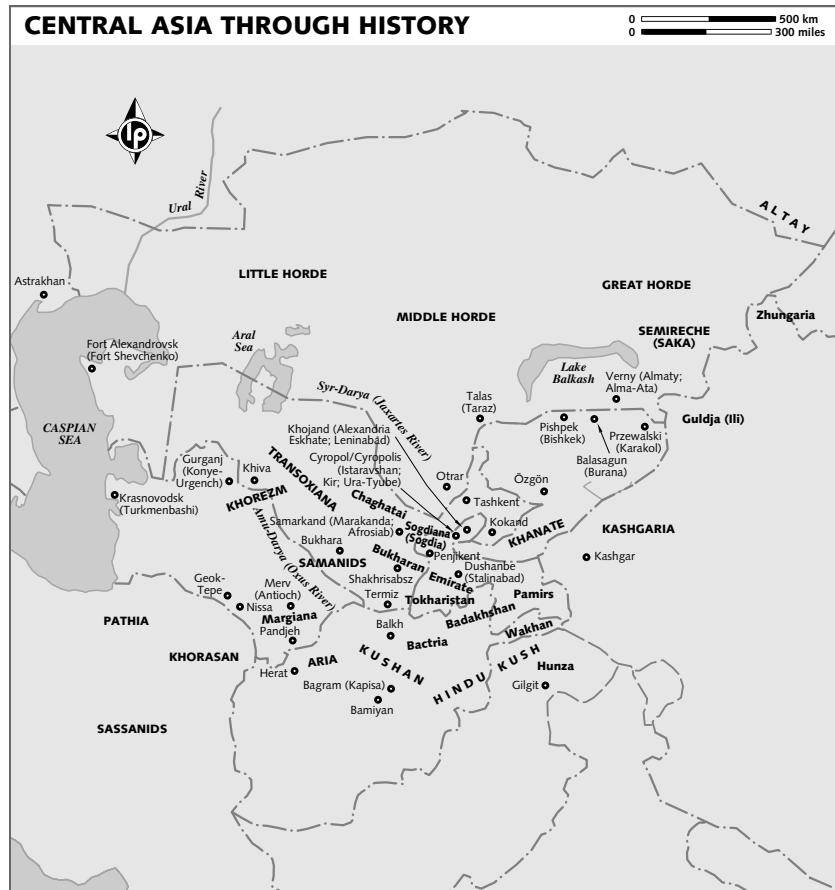
Several thousand kilometres east, along the border of Mongolia and China, the expansion of the warlike Xiongnu (Hsiung-nu) confederacy (probably the forebears of the Ephalites, or Huns) uprooted the Yüeh-chih of western China (the Yüeh-chih ruler was slain and his skull made into a drinking cup). The Yüeh-chih were sent packing westward along the Ili River into Saka, whose displaced inhabitants in turn bore down upon the Sogdians to the south.

The Xiongnu were also irritating more important powers than the Yüeh-chih. Although protected behind its expanding Great Wall since about 250 BC, China eagerly sought tranquillity on its barbarian frontier. In 138 BC, the Chinese emperor sent a brave volunteer emissary, Zhang Qian, on a secret mission to persuade the Yüeh-chih king to form an alliance against the Xiongnu.

Central Asia is strewn with ancient petroglyphs, some of the best of which can be visited at Saimaluu Tash in Kyrgyzstan (p323) and Tamgaly in Southeastern Kazakhstan (p138).

Alexander the Great, known locally as Iskander or Sikander, is a popular figure in Central Asia, after whom several lakes and mountains are named. His troops are blamed for the occasional blond-haired, blue-eyed Tajik, although this is probably more the result of Aryan influence.

Legend has it that the biblical prophet Daniel (of the Lion's Den fame) was buried in Samarkand, where he is known as Daniyar. Another legend says the bones of St Matthew lie buried underneath a recently discovered Armenian monastery on the shores of Issyk-Kul.



329–327 BC

Alexander the Great in Central Asia

250 BC–AD 226

Kushan empire

138–119 BC

Voyage of Chinese Zhang Qian from Xi'an to Central Asia

107 BC

Chinese armies arrive in the Fergana Valley

Hellenistic cities and Buddhist monasteries of the 2nd century BC, such as Ai-Khanum, Takht-i-Sangin, Kobadiyan and Khalchayan, on the southern borders of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, reveal a fascinating mixture of Greek, Persian and local art forms.

When he finally got there, 13 years later, Zhang found that the Yüeh-chih had settled down in Bactria/Tokharistan (southern Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan) to a peaceable life of trade and agriculture, and no longer had an axe to grind with the Xiongnu. But Zhang Qian's mission was still a great success of Chinese diplomacy and exploration and the stage had been set for the greatest of all East-West contacts; the birth of the Silk Road (see p53).

THE KUSHANS

The peaceable, put-upon Yüeh-chih finally came into their own in the 1st century BC when their descendants, the Kushan dynasty, converted to Buddhism. The Kushan empire controlled northern India, Afghanistan and Sogdiana from its base at Kapisa, near modern-day Bagram in Afghanistan. At its height in the first three centuries after Christ, it was one of the four great powers of the world, along with Rome, China and Parthia.

Vigorous trade on the Silk Road helped spread Kushan culture. The rich Kushan coinage is concrete testimony to this classic Silk Road power's lively religious ferment: the coins bear images of Greek, Roman, Buddhist, Persian and Hindu deities. The art of the empire fused Persian imperial imagery, Buddhist iconography and Roman realism. It was carried out from Gandhara over the mountainous maze of deepest Asia to the furthest corners of Transoxiana, Tibet and the Tarim Basin. Indian, Tibetan and Chinese art were permanently affected.

SASSANIDS, HUNS & SOGDIAN

The Silk Road's first flower faded by about AD 200, as the Chinese, Roman, Parthian and Kushan empires went into decline. Sogdiana came under the control of the Sassanid empire of modern-day Iran. As the climate along the middle section of the Silk Road became drier, Central Asian nomads increasingly sought wealth by plundering, taxing and conquering their settled neighbours. The Sassanids lost their Inner Asian possessions in the 4th century to the Huns, who ruled a vast area of Central Asia at the same time that Attila was scourging Europe.

The Huns were followed south across the Syr-Darya by the western Turks (the western branch of the empire of the so-called Kök Turks or Blue Turks), who in 559 made an alliance with the Sassanids and ousted the Huns. The western Turks, who had arrived in the area from their ancestral homeland in southern Siberia, nominally controlled the reconquered region.

The mixing of the western Turks' nomadic ruling class with the sedentary Sogdian elite over the next few centuries produced a remarkable ethnic mix and beautiful artwork in cities such as Penjikent, Afrosiab and Varakhsha, much of which is still visible in museums across the region.

THE ARRIVAL OF ISLAM

When the western Turks faded in the late 7th century, an altogether new and formidable kind of power was waiting to fill the void – the religious army of Islam. Exploding out of Arabia just a few years after the Prophet Mohammed's death, the Muslim armies rolled through Persia in 642 to set up a military base at Merv (modern Turkmenistan) but met stiff resistance from the Turks of Transoxiana. The power struggle between the Amu-Darya

LOST BATTLE, LOST SECRETS

The Chinese lost more than just a fight at the Battle of Talas in 751. The defeat marked the end of Chinese expansion west and secured the future of Islam as the region's foremost religion. But to add insult to injury, some of the Chinese rounded up after the battle were no ordinary prisoners: they were experts at the crafts of papermaking and silkmaking. Soon China's best-kept secrets were giving Arab silkmakers in Persia a commercial advantage all over Europe. It was the first mortal blow to the Silk Road. The spread of papermaking to Baghdad and then Europe sparked a technological revolution; the impact of this on the development of civilisation cannot be underestimated.

and Syr-Darya ebbed and flowed, while Arab armies spread to take Bukhara in 709 and Samarkand in 712.

China, meanwhile, had revived under the Tang dynasty and expanded into Central Asia, murdering the khan of the Tashkent Turks in the process. It was perhaps the most costly incident of skulduggery in Chinese history. The enraged Turks were joined by the opportunistic Arabs and Tibetans; in 751 they squeezed the Chinese forces into the Talas Valley (in present-day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and sent them flying back across the Tian Shan, marking the limits of the Chinese empire for good (see the boxed text, above).

After the Battle of Talas, the Arab's Central Asian territories receded in the wake of local rebellions. By the 9th century, Transoxiana had given rise to the peaceful and affluent Samanid dynasty. It generously encouraged development of Persian culture while remaining strictly allied with the Sunni caliph of Baghdad. It was under the Samanids that Bukhara grew into a the vanguard of Muslim culture and garnered the epithet 'The Pillar of Islam'. Some of the Islamic world's best scholars were nurtured in its 113 medresas and the city became one of the world's main centres of intellectual development (see the boxed text 'Shining Stars', p40).

KARAKHANIDS TO KARAKITAY

By the early 10th century, internal strife at court had weakened the Samanid dynasty and opened the door for two Turkic usurpers to divide up the empire: the Ghaznavids in Khorasan and modern-day Afghanistan, south of the Amu-Darya; and the Karakhanids in Transoxiana and the steppe region beyond the Syr-Darya. The Karakhanids are credited with finally converting the populace of Central Asia to Islam. They held sway from three mighty capitals: Balasagun (now Burana in Kyrgyzstan) in the centre of their domain, Talas (now Taraz in Kazakhstan) in the west, and Kashgar in the east. Bukhara continued to shine, and Karakhanid Kashgar was the home of rich culture and science. The Ghaznavids ruled Afghanistan, Samarkand and Bukhara at their height and are credited with snuffing out Buddhism in the region and introducing Islam to India.

The Karakhanids and Ghaznavids coveted each other's lands. In the mid-11th century, while they were busy invading each other, they were caught off guard by a third Turkic horde, the Seljuqs, who annihilated both after pledging false allegiance to the Ghaznavids. In the Seljuqs' heyday their sultan had himself invested as emperor by the caliph of Baghdad. The empire was

Medieval Merv (in modern Turkmenistan) may well have been the setting for Scheherazade's tales in *The Thousand and One Nights*.

The Karakitay lent their name to both Cathay (an archaic name for China) and Kitai (the Russian word for China).

AD 226–651

Sassanid empire

630

Buddhist pilgrim Xuan Zang travels to Issyk-Köl, Chuy Valley, Tashkent, Samarkand, Balkh and Kashgar in search of Buddhist texts

642–712

Arab conquest of Central Asia brings Islam

751

Battle of Talas

SHINING STARS

In the 9th to 11th centuries Samanid Central Asia produced some of history's most important thinkers:

Al-Khorezmi (Latinised as Algorismi; 787–850) A mathematician who gave his name to algorithm, the mathematical process behind addition and multiplication. The title of another of his mathematical works, *Al-Jebr*, reached Europe as algebra.

Al-Biruni (973–1046) From Khorezm, he was the world's foremost astronomer of his age, who knew 500 years before Copernicus that the earth rotated and that it circled around the sun. He estimated the distance to the moon to within 20km.

Abu Ali ibn-Sina (Latinised as Avicenna; 980–1037) From Bukhara, the greatest medic in the medieval world, whose *Canon of Medicine* was the standard textbook for Western doctors until the 17th century.

vast: on the east it bordered the lands of the Buddhist Karakitay, who had swept into Balasagun and Kashgar from China; to the west it extended all the way to the Mediterranean and Red Seas.

An incurable symptom of Inner Asian dynasties through the ages was their near inability to survive the inevitable disputes of succession. The Seljuqs lasted a century before their weakened line succumbed to the Karakitay and to the Seljuqs' own rearguard vassals, the Khorezmshahs. From their capital at Gurganj (present-day Konye-Urgench), the Khorezmshahs burst full-force into the tottering Karakitay. The Khorezmshahs emerged as rulers of all Transoxiana and much of the Muslim world as well.

And so Central Asia might have continued in a perennial state of forgettable wars. As it is, the Khorezmshahs are still remembered primarily as the unlucky stooge left holding the red cape when the angry bull was released.

MONGOL TERROR, MONGOL PEACE

Jenghiz Khan felt he had all the justification in the world to ransack Central Asia. In 1218 a Khorezmian governor in Otrar (in modern-day Kazakhstan) received a delegation from Jenghiz to inaugurate trade relations. Scared by distant reports of the new Mongol menace, the governor assassinated them in cold blood. Up until that moment Jenghiz, the intelligent khan of the Mongols who had been lately victorious over Chung-tu (Beijing), had been carefully weighing the alternative strategies for expanding his power: commerce versus conquest. Then came the crude Otrar blunder, and the rest is history.

In early 1219 Jenghiz placed himself at the head of an estimated 200,000 men and began to ride west from his stronghold in the Altay. By the next year his armies had sacked Khojand and Otrar (the murderous governor was dispatched with savage cruelty in Jenghiz' presence), and Bukhara soon followed.

It was in that brilliant city, as soldiers raped and looted and horses trampled Islamic holy books in the streets, that the unschooled Jenghiz ascended to the pulpit in the chief mosque and preached to the congregation. His message: 'I am God's punishment for your sins'. Such shocking psychological warfare is perhaps unrivalled in history. It worked and news reached Europe of the 'Devil's Horsemen'.

Bukhara was burned to the ground, and the Mongol hordes swept on to conquer and plunder Samarkand, Merv, Termiz, Kabul, Balkh, Bamian, Ghazni and, eventually under Jenghiz' generals and heirs, most of Eurasia. No opposing army could match them.

Settled civilisation in Central Asia took a serious blow, from which it only began to recover 600 years later under Russian colonisation. Jenghiz' descendants controlling Persia favoured Shiite Islam over Sunni Islam, a development which over the centuries isolated Central Asia even more from the currents of the rest of the Sunni Muslim world.

But there was stability, law and order under the Pax Mongolica. In 20th-century terms, the streets were safe and the trains ran on time. The resulting modest flurry of trade on the Silk Road was the background to many famous medieval travellers' journeys, including the greatest of them all, Marco Polo's (see the boxed text, p56).

On Jenghiz Khan's death in 1227, his empire was divided among his sons. By tradition the most distant lands, stretching as far as the Ukraine and Moscow and including western and most of northern Kazakhstan, would have gone to the eldest son, Jochi, had Jochi not died before his father. They went instead to Jochi's sons, Batu and Orda, and came to be known collectively as the Golden Horde. The second son, Chaghatai, got the next most distant portion, including most of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and western Xinjiang; this came to be known as the Chaghatai khanate. The share of the third son, Ogedei, seems to have eventually been divided between the Chaghatai khanate and the Mongol heartland inherited by the youngest son, Tolui. Tolui's portion formed the basis for his son Kublai Khan's Yüan dynasty in China.

Unlike the Golden Horde in Europe and the Yüan dynasty, the Chaghatai khans tried to preserve their nomadic lifestyle, complete with the khan's roving tent encampment as 'capital city'. But as the rulers spent more and more time in contact with the Muslim collaborators who administered their realm, the Chaghatai line inevitably began to settle down. They even made motions towards conversion to Islam. It was a fight over this issue, in the mid-14th century, that split the khanate in two, with the Muslim Chaghatais holding Transoxiana and the conservative branch retaining the Tian Shan, Kashgar and the vast steppes north and east of the Syr-Darya, an area collectively known as Moghulistan.

TIMUR & THE TIMURIDS

The fracturing of the Mongol empire immediately led to resurgence of the Turkic peoples. From one minor clan near Samarkand arose a tyrant's tyrant, Timur ('the Lame', or Tamerlane). After assembling an army and wresting Transoxiana from Chaghatai rule, Timur went on a spectacular nine-year rampage which ended in 1395 with modern-day Iran, Iraq, Syria, eastern Turkey and the Caucasus at his feet. He also despoiled northern India.

All over his realm, Timur plundered riches and captured artisans and poured them into his capital at Samarkand. The city grew, in stark contrast to his conquered lands, into a lavish showcase of treasure and pomp. Much of the postcard skyline of today's Samarkand dates to Timur's reign, as do many fine works of painting and literature. Foreign guests of Timur's, including the Spanish envoy Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo, took home stories

For more on the Mongols see the excellent book *Storm from the East* by Robert Marshall.

The English word 'horde' comes via French from the Turkic word *orda*, meaning the yurt or pavilion where a khan held his court.

9th–10th centuries

Samanid heyday in Bukhara

998–1030

Mahmud of Ghazni rules Central Asia

1220

Jenghiz Khan destroys Bukhara, killing 30,000

1405

Timur (Tamerlane) dies, his huge Bibi Khanum Mosque unfinished

of enchantment and barbarity which fed the West's dreams of remote and romantic Samarkand.

Timur claimed indirect kinship with Jenghiz Khan, but he had little of his forerunner's gift for statecraft. History can be strange: both conquerors savagely slaughtered hundreds of thousands of innocent people, yet one is remembered as a great ruler and the other not. The argument goes that Timur's bloodbaths were insufficiently linked to specific political or military aims. On the other hand, Timur is considered the more cultured and religious of the two men. At any rate, Timur died an old man at Otrar in 1405, having just set out in full force to conquer China.

Important effects of Timur's reign can still be traced. For instance, when he pounded the army of the Golden Horde in southern Russia, Timur created a disequilibrium in the bloated Mongol empire which led to the seizure of power by its vassals, the petty and fragmented Russian princes. This was the pre-dawn of the Russian state. Like the mammals after the dinosaurs, Russia arose from small beginnings.

For a scant century after Timur's death his descendants ruled on separately in small kingdoms and duchies. A Timurid renaissance was led by Timur's son Shah Rukh (1377–1447) and his remarkable wife Gowhar Shad, who between them established a cultured Timurid capital in Herat, populated by fine architects, musicians, miniature painters and poets (including Jami). From 1409 until 1449, Samarkand was governed by the conqueror's mild, scholarly grandson, Ulugbek (Ulugh Bek). Gifted in mathematics and astronomy, he built a large celestial observatory and attracted scientists who gave the city a lustre as a centre of learning for years to come.

In addition to Persian, a Turkic court language came into use, called Chaghatai, which survived for centuries as a Central Asian lingua franca.

UZBEKS & KAZAKHS

Modern Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the two principal powers of post-Soviet Central Asia, eye each other warily across the rift dividing their two traditional lifestyles: sedentary agriculture (Uzbeks) and nomadic pastoralism (Kazakhs). Yet these two nations are closely akin and parted ways with a family killing.

The family in question was the dynasty of the Uzbek khans. These rulers, one strand of the modern Uzbek people, had a pedigree reaching back to Jenghiz Khan and a homeland in southern Siberia. In the 14th century they converted to Islam, gathered strength, and started moving south. Under Abylqayyr (Abu al-Khayr) Khan they reached the north bank of the Syr-Darya, across which lay the declining Timurid rulers in Transoxiana. But Abylqayyr had enemies within his own family. The two factions met in battle in 1468, and Abylqayyr was killed and his army defeated.

After this setback, Abylqayyr's grandson Mohammed Shaybani brought the Uzbek khans to power once more and established Uzbek control in Transoxiana; modern-day Uzbekistan. Abylqayyr's rebellious kinsmen became the forefathers of the Kazakh khans.

The Uzbeks gradually adopted the sedentary agricultural life best suited to the fertile river valleys they occupied. Settled life involved cities, which entailed administration, literacy, learning and, wrapped up with all of these, Islam. The Shaybanid dynasty, which ruled until the end of the 16th cen-

tury, attempted to outdo the Timurids in religious devotion and to carry on their commitment to artistic patronage. But the Silk Road had disappeared, usurped by spice ships, and Central Asia's economy had entered full decline. As prosperity fell, so did the region's importance as a centre of the Islamic world.

The Kazakhs, meanwhile, stayed home on the range, north of the Syr-Darya, and flourished as nomadic herders. Their experience of urban civilisation and organised Islam remained slight compared with their Uzbek cousins. By the 16th century the Kazakhs had solidly filled a power vacuum on the old Saka steppes between the Ural and Irtysh Rivers and established what was to be the world's last nomadic empire, divided into three hordes: the Great Horde, the Middle Horde and the Little Horde.

THE ZHUNGARIAN EMPIRE

The Oyrats were a western Mongol clan who had been converted to Tibetan Buddhism. Their day in the sun came when they subjugated eastern Kazakhstan, the Tian Shan, Kashgaria and western Mongolia to form the Zhungarian (Dzungarian) empire (1635–1758). Russia's frontier settlers were forced to pay heavy tribute and the Kazakh hordes, with their boundless pasturage beyond the mountain gap known as the Zhungarian Gate, were cruelly and repeatedly pumelled until the Oyrats were liquidated by Manchu China.

Reeling from the Zhungarian attacks, the Kazakhs (first the Little Horde, then the Middle Horde, then part of the Great Horde) gradually accepted Russian protection over the mid-18th century.

The Russians had by this time established a line of fortified outposts on the northern fringe of the Kazakh Steppe. However, it appears that there was no clear conception in St Petersburg of exactly where the Russian Empire's frontier lay. Slow on the uptake, Russia at this stage had little interest in the immense territory it now abutted.

THE KHANATES OF KOKAND, KHIVA & BUKHARA

In the fertile land now called Uzbekistan, the military regime of a Persian interloper named Nadir Shah collapsed in 1747, leaving a political void which was rapidly occupied by a trio of Uzbek khanates.

The three dynasties were the Kungrats, enthroned at Khiva (in the territory of old Khorezm), the Mangits at Bukhara and the Mins at Kokand; all rivals. The khans of Khiva and Kokand and the emirs of Bukhara seemed able to will the outside world out of existence as they stroked and clawed each other like a box of kittens. Boundaries were impossible to fix as the rivals shuffled their provinces in endless wars.

Unruly nomadic clans produced constant pressure on their periphery. Bukhara and Khiva vainly claimed nominal control over the nomadic Turkmen, who prowled the Karakum desert and provided the khanates with slaves from Persia and the Russian borderlands. Kokand expanded into the Tian Shan mountains and the Syr-Darya basin in the early 19th century.

The khans ruled absolutely as feudal despots. Some of them were capable rulers; some, such as the last emir of Bukhara, were depraved and despised tyrants. In the centuries since Transoxiana had waned as the centre of Islam, the mullahs had slipped into hypocrisy and greed. The level of education and

For more on the extraordinary life of Timur see *Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World* by Justin Marozzi.

Timur's (Tamerlane) campaigns resulted in the deaths of more than one million people and he became infamous for building towers or walls made from the cemented heads of a defeated army.

The Great Horde roamed the steppes of the Jetti-Suu region (Russian: Semireche), north of the Tian Shan; the Middle Horde occupied the grasslands extending east from the Aral Sea; and the Little Horde took the lands west of there, as far as the Ural River.

Memory of the Oyrat legacy has been preserved in epic poetry by the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, who both suffered under the Oyrats' ruthless predations.

1424–29

Ulugbek builds observatory, before he is beheaded in 1449 as part of a religious backlash

15th century

Shah Rukh rules the Timurid empire from Herat

1592

Khiva made capital of Khorezm

1635–1758

Zhungarian empire terrorises Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and China

literacy was low, and the *ulama* (intellectual class) seems to have encouraged superstition and ignorance in the people.

It was no dark age, however – trade was vigorous. This was especially true in Bukhara, where exports of cotton, cloth, silk, karakul wool and other goods gave it a whopping trade surplus with Russia. Commerce brought in new ideas, with resulting attempts to develop irrigation and even to reform civil administrations. European travellers in the 19th century mentioned the exotic architectural splendour of these distant glimmering capitals.

In none of the three khanates was there any sense among the local people that they belonged to a distinct nation – whether of Bukhara, Khiva or Kokand. In all three, *sarts* (town dwellers) occupied the towns and farms, while clans who practised nomadism and seminomadism roamed the uncultivated countryside. *Sarts* included both Turkic-speaking Uzbeks and Persian-speaking Tajiks. These two groups had almost identical lifestyles and customs, apart from language.

In many respects, the three khanates closely resembled the feudal city-states of late-medieval Europe. But it is anybody's guess how they and the Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomads might have developed had they been left alone.

THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING!

By the turn of the 19th century Russia's vista to the south was of anachronistic, unstable neighbours. Flush with the new currents of imperialism sweeping Europe, the empire found itself embarking willy-nilly upon a century of rapid expansion across the steppe.

The reasons were complex. The main ingredients were the search for a secure, and preferably natural, southern border, nagging fears of British expansion from India, and the boldness of individual tsarist officers. And probably, glimmering in the back of every patriotic Russian's mind, there was a vague notion of the 'manifest destiny' of the frontier.

The first people to feel the impact were the Kazakhs. Their agreements in the mid-18th century to accept Russian 'protection' had apparently been understood by St Petersburg as agreements to annexation and a few decades later Tatars and Cossacks were sent to settle and farm the land. Angered, the Kazakhs revolted. As a consequence, the khans of the three hordes were, one by one, stripped of their autonomy, and their lands were made into bona fide Russian colonies, sweet psychological revenge, no doubt, for centuries of invasion by nomadic tribes from the east. In 1848, as the USA was gaining land stretching from Texas to California, Russia abolished the Great Horde. Theirs was the last line of rulers in the world directly descended, by both blood and throne, from Jenghiz Khan. Kokand was the first of the three Uzbek khanates to be swamped, followed by Bukhara (1868) and then Khiva (1873).

The last and fiercest people to hold out against the tsarist juggernaut were the Tekke, the largest Turkmen clan. Of all nomad groups, the Tekke had managed to remain the most independent of the khanates. Some Turkmen clans had asked to be made subjects of Russia as early as 1865, for convenient help in their struggle against the Khivan yoke. But none were in a mood to have their tethers permanently shortened as Russia expanded into their territory. To add rancour to the pot, the Russians were anguished by the Tekkes' dealings in slaves, particularly Christian ones.

Much blood was spilled in the subjugation of the Tekke. The Russians were trounced in 1879 at Teke-Turkmen, but returned in 1881 with a huge force under General Mikhail Dmitrievich Skobelev (who famously rode a white horse and dressed only in white). The siege and capture of Geok-Tepe, the Tekkes' last stronghold, resulted in up to 16,000 Tekke and only 268 Russians dead.

With resistance crushed, the Russians proceeded along the hazily defined Persian frontier area, occupying Merv in 1884 and the Pandjeh Oasis on the Afghan border in 1885. It was the southernmost point they reached. Throughout the conquest, the government in St Petersburg agonised over every advance, while their hawkish generals in the field took key cities first and asked for permission later.

When it was over, Russia found it had bought a huge new territory – half the size of the USA, geographically and ethnically diverse, and economically rich – fairly cheaply in terms of money and lives, and in just 20 years. It had not gone unnoticed by the world's other great empire further south in British India.

THE GREAT GAME

What do two expanding empires do when their fuzzy frontiers draw near each other? They scramble for control of what's between them, using a mix of secrecy and stealth.

The British called it the Great Game; in Russia it was the Tournament of Shadows. Its backdrop was the first cold war between East and West. All the ingredients were there: spies and counterspies, demilitarised zones, puppet states and doom-saying governments whipping up smokescreens for their own shady business. All that was lacking was the atom bomb and a Russian leader banging his shoe on the table. Diplomatic jargon acquired the phrase 'sphere of influence' during this era.

The story of the Great Game would be dull as dishwater except that its centre arena was some of the world's most exotic and remote geography. The history of Central Asia from the beginning of the 19th century to the present day must be seen in the context of the Great Game, for this was the main reason for Russian interest in the region.

The Russian occupation of Merv in 1884 immediately raised blood pressures in Britain and India. Merv was a crossroads leading to Herat, an easy gateway to Afghanistan which in turn offered entry into British India. The British government finally lost its cool when the Russians went south to control Pandjeh. But the storm had been brewing long before 1884.

By 1848 the British had defeated the Sikhs and taken the Peshawar valley and Punjab. With a grip now on the 'Northern Areas' Britain began a kind of cat-and-mouse game with Russia across the vaguely mapped Pamir mountain range and Hindu Kush. Agents posing as scholars, explorers, merchants – even Muslim preachers and Buddhist pilgrims – crisscrossed the mountains, mapping them, spying on each other, courting local rulers, staking claims like dogs in a vacant lot.

In 1882 Russia established a consulate in Kashgar. A British agency at Gilgit (now in Pakistan), which had opened briefly in 1877, was urgently reopened when the *mir* (hereditary ruler) of Hunza entertained a party of Russians in 1888. Britain set up its own Kashgar office in 1890.

'I hold it as a principle that in Asia the duration of peace is in direct proportion to the slaughter you inflict upon the enemy. The harder you hit them the longer they will be quiet afterwards.'

GENERAL SKOBELEV, TSARIST RUSSIAN COMMANDER IN CENTRAL ASIA

The phrase 'Great Game' was first coined by British officer Arthur Conolly (later executed in Bukhara) and immortalised by Kipling in his novel *Kim*.

For more on that quintessential Great Gamester, Francis Younghusband, read Patrick French's excellent biography *Younghusband*.

1758

Oyrats defeated by Manchu China and Kyrgyzstan nominally under Chinese rule

1832

Alexander 'Bokhara' Burnes visits Bukhara

1842

British officers Conolly and Stoddart beheaded by the Emir of Bukhara

1862–84

Tsarist Russia takes Bishkek (1862), Aulie-Ata (1864), Tashkent (1865), Samarkand (1868), Khiva (1873), Kokand (1877) and Merv (1884)

'Russia has two faces, an Asiatic face which looks always towards Europe, and a European face which looks always towards Asia.'

BENJAMIN DISRAELI

Also in 1890, Francis Younghusband (later to head a British incursion into Tibet) was sent to do some politicking with Chinese officials in Kashgar. On his way back through the Pamirs he found the range full of Russian troops, and was told to get out or face arrest.

This electrified the British. They raised hell with the Russian government and invaded Hunza the following year; at the same time Russian troops skirmished in northeast Afghanistan. After a burst of diplomatic manoeuvring, Anglo-Russian boundary agreements in 1895 and 1907 gave Russia most of the Pamirs and established the Wakhan Corridor, the awkward finger of Afghan territory that divides the two former empires.

The Great Game was over. The Great Lesson for the people of the region was: 'No great power has our interests at heart'. The lesson has powerful implications today.

COLONISATION OF TURKESTAN & SEMIRECHE

In 1861, the outbreak of the US Civil War ended Russia's imports of American cotton. To keep the growing textile industry in high gear, the natural place to turn to for cotton was Central Asia. Other sectors of Russian industry were equally interested in the new colonies as sources of cheap raw materials and labour, and as huge markets. Russia's government and captains of industry wisely saw that their own goods could not compete in Europe but in Central Asia they had a captive, virgin market. Gradually, Russian Turkestan was put in line with the economic needs of the empire.

In the late 19th century, Europeans began to flood the tsar's new lands, a million in Kazakhstan alone. The immigrants were mostly freed Russian and Ukrainian serfs who wanted land of their own. Central Asia also offered a chance for enterprising Russians to climb socially. The first mayor of Pishpek (Bishkek) left Russia as a gunsmith, married well in the provinces, received civil appointments, and ended his life owning a mansion and a sprawling garden estate.

The Trans-Caspian railway was begun at Krasnovodsk in 1880 and reached Samarkand in 1888. The Orenburg–Tashkent line was completed in 1905. This was also the golden age of Russian exploration in Central Asia, whose famous figures including Semenov, Przhevalsky and Merzbacher, are only today getting credit abroad.

The Russian middle class brought with them straight streets, gas lights, telephones, cinemas, amateur theatre, charity drives, parks and hotels. All these were contained in enclaves set apart from the original towns. Through their lace curtains the Russians looked out on the Central Asian masses with a fairly indulgent attitude. The Muslim fabric of life was left alone, as were the mullahs, as long as they were submissive. Development, both social and economic, was initially a low priority. When it came, it took the form of small industrial enterprises, irrigation systems and a modest programme of primary education.

In culture it was the Kazakhs, as usual, who were the first to be influenced by Russia. A small, Europeanised, educated class began for the first time to think of the Kazakh people as a nation. In part, their ideas came from a new sense of their own illustrious past, which they read about in the works of Russian ethnographers and historians. Their own brilliant but short-lived scholar, Shoqan Ualikhanov, was a key figure in Kazakh consciousness-raising.

The Uzbeks were also affected by the 19th-century cultural renaissance of the Tatars. The Jadidists, adherents of educational reform, made small gains in modernising Uzbek schools. The Pan-Turkic movement found fertile ground among educated Uzbeks at the beginning of the 20th century and took root.

THE 1916 UPRISING

Resentment against the Russians ran deep and occasionally boiled over. Andijan in Uzbekistan was the scene of a rebellion, or holy war, from 1897 to 1898, which rocked the Russians out of complacency. After the insurrection was put down, steps were taken to Russify urban Muslims, the ones most under the influence of the mullahs and most likely to organise against the regime.

The outbreak of WWI in 1914 had disastrous consequences in Central Asia. In Semireche (Saka), massive herds of Kazakh and Kyrgyz cattle were requisitioned for the war effort, whereas Syr-Darya, Fergana and Samarkand provinces had to provide cotton and food. Then, in 1916, as Russia's hopes in the war plummeted, the tsar demanded men. Local people in the colonies were to be conscripted as noncombatants in labour battalions. To add insult to injury, the action was not called 'mobilisation' but 'requisition', a term usually used for cattle and materiel.

Exasperated Central Asians just said no. Starting in Tashkent, an uprising swept eastwards over the summer of 1916. It gained in violence, and attracted harsher reprisal, the further east it went. Purposeful attacks on Russian militias and official facilities gave way to massive rioting, raiding and looting. Colonists were massacred, their villages burned, and women and children carried off.

The resulting bloody crackdown is a milestone tragedy in Kyrgyz and Kazakh history. Russian troops and vigilantes gave up all pretence of a 'civilising influence' as whole Kyrgyz and Kazakh villages were brutally slaughtered or set to flight. Manhunts for suspected perpetrators continued all winter, long after an estimated 200,000 Kyrgyz and Kazakh families had fled towards China. The refugees who didn't starve or freeze on the way were shown little mercy in China.

But not all unrest among Muslims was directed against Russia. The Young Bukharans and Young Khivans movements agitated for social self-reform, modelling themselves on the Young Turks movement which had begun transforming Turkey in 1908.

REVOLUTION & CIVIL WAR

For a short time after the Russian Revolution of 1917, which toppled the tsar, there was a real feeling of hope in some Central Asian minds. The society which the West, out of ignorance and mystification, had labelled backward and inflexible had actually been making preparations for impressive progress. The Bolsheviks made sure, however, that we will never know how Central Asia might have remade itself.

In 1917 an independent state was launched in Kokand by young nationalists under the watchful eye of a cabal of Russian cotton barons. This new government intended to put into practice the philosophy of the Jadid movement: to build a strong, autonomous Pan-Turkic polity in Central Asia by modernising the religious establishment and Westernising and educating the people. Within a year the Kokand government was smashed by the Red

More than 200,000 Kazakhs fled to China in 1916 after an uprising over forced labour conscription during WWI, and more fled in the wake of forced collectivisation in the 1920s.

The central district of Karakol, on Lake Issyk-Köl in Kyrgyzstan, is probably the best-preserved relic of the Russian colonial environment.

Mission to Tashkent, by FM Bailey, recounts the derring-do of this British intelligence officer/spy in 1918 Soviet Tashkent. At one stage, under an assumed identity, he was employed as a Bolshevik agent and given the task of tracking himself down!

The Kazakh army officer Shoqan Ualikhanov, a friend of Dostoevsky, was the first man to record a fragment of the Kyrgyz epic *Manas* and, as a spy, managed to make his way in disguise into Kashgar in 1858, risking death if discovered.

1890

Captain Francis Younghusband thrown out of the Pamirs by Russians

1917

Russian Revolution

1920

Soviet troops seize Khiva and Bukhara, ending the respective khanate and emirate

1921

Creation of Turkestan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR)

Army's newly formed Trans-Caspian front. More than 5000 Kokandis were massacred after the city was captured. Central Asians' illusions about peacefully coexisting with Bolshevik Russia were shattered as well.

Bolshevik Conquest

Like most Central Asians, Emir Alim Khan of Bukhara hated the godless Bolsheviks. In response to their first ultimatum to submit, he slaughtered the Red emissaries who brought it and declared a holy war. The emir conspired with White (ie anti-Bolshevik) Russians and British political agents, while the Reds concentrated on strengthening party cells within the city.

In December 1918 a counter revolution broke out, apparently organised from within Tashkent jail by a shadowy White Russian agent named Paul Nazaroff. Several districts and cities fell back into the hands of the Whites. The bells of the cathedral church in Tashkent were rung in joy, but for the last time. The Bolsheviks defeated the insurrection, snatched back power, and kept it. Nazaroff, freed from jail, was forced to hide and flee across the Tian Shan to Xinjiang, always one step ahead of the dreaded secret police.

The end came swiftly after the arrival in Tashkent of the Red Army commander Mikhail Frunze. Khiva went out with barely a whimper, quietly transforming into the Khorezm People's Republic in February 1920. In September, Frunze's fresh, disciplined army captured Bukhara after a four-day fight. The emir fled to Afghanistan, taking with him his company of dancing boys but abandoning his harem to the Bolshevik soldiers.

THE SOVIET ERA

From the start the Bolsheviks ensured themselves the universal hatred of the people. Worse even than the tsar's bleed-the-colonies-for-the-war policies, the revolutionaries levied grievous requisitions of food, livestock, cotton, land and forced farm labour. Trade and agricultural output in the once-thriving colonies plummeted. The ensuing famines claimed nearly a million lives; some say many more.

Forced Collectivisation

Forced collectivisation was the 'definite stage of development' implicit in time-warping the entire population of Central Asia from feudalism to communism. This occurred during the USSR's grand First Five Year Plan (1928–32). The intent of collectivisation was first to eliminate private property and second, in the case of the nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, to put an end to their wandering lifestyle.

The effect was disastrous. When the orders came down, most people simply slaughtered their herds and ate what they could rather than give them up. This led to famine in subsequent years, and widespread disease. Resisters were executed and imprisoned. Millions of people died. Evidence exists that during this period Stalin had a personal hand in tinkering with meagre food supplies in order to induce famines. His aims seem to have been to subjugate the people's will and to depopulate Kazakhstan, which was good real estate for Russian expansion.

The *basmachis* (Muslim guerrilla fighters; see the boxed text, p367), in twilight for some time, renewed their guerrilla activities briefly as collectivisation took its toll. It was their final struggle.

For more on Nazaroff's cat-and-mouse exploits on the run in Central Asia from the Bolsheviks, read his *Hunted Through Central Asia*.

'The Communist Party is the mind, honour and conscience of our era.'

VLADIMIR ILYICH LENIN

Political Repression

Undeveloped Central Asia had no shortage of bright, sincere people willing to work for national liberation and democracy. After the tsar fell they jostled for power in their various parties, movements and factions. Even after they were swallowed into the Soviet state, some members of these groups had high profiles in regional affairs. Such a group was Alash Orda, which was formed by Kazakhs and Kyrgyz in 1917. Alash Orda even held the reins of a short-lived autonomous government.

By the late 1920s, the former nationalists and democrats, indeed the entire intelligentsia, were causing Stalin serious problems. From their posts in the communist administration they had front-row seats at the Great Leader's horror show, including collectivisation. Many of them began to reason, and to doubt. Stalin, reading these signs all over the USSR, foresaw that brains could be just as dangerous as guns. Throughout the 1930s he proceeded to have all possible dissenters eliminated. Alash Orda members were among the first to die, in 1927 and 1928.

Thus began the systematic murder, called the Purges, of untold tens of thousands of Central Asians. Arrests were usually made late at night. Confined prisoners were rarely tried; if any charges at all were brought, they ran along the lines of 'having bourgeoisie-nationalist or Pan-Turkic attitudes'. Mass executions and burials were common. Sometimes entire sitting governments were disposed of in this way.

Construction of Nationalities

The solution to the 'nationality question' in Central Asia remains the most graphically visible effect of Soviet rule: it drew the lines on the map. Before the revolution the peoples of Central Asia had no concept of a firm national border. They had plotted their identities by a tangle of criteria: religion, clan, location, way of life, even social status. The Soviets, however, believed that such a populace was fertile soil for Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism. These philosophies were threats to the regime.

So, starting in about 1924, nations were invented: Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen, Uzbek. Each was given its own distinct ethnic profile, language, history and territory. Where an existing language or history was not apparent or was not suitably distinct from others, these were supplied and disseminated. Islam was cut away from each national heritage, essentially relegated to the status of an outmoded and oppressive cult, and severely suppressed throughout the Soviet period.

Some say that Stalin personally directed the drawing of the boundary lines. Each of the republics was shaped to contain numerous pockets of the different nationalities, and each with long-standing claims to the land. Everyone had to admit that only a strong central government could keep order on such a map. The present face of Central Asia is a product of this 'divide and rule' technique.

World War II

'The Great Patriotic War Against Fascist Germany' galvanised the whole USSR and in the course of the war Central Asia was drawn further into the fold. Economically the region lost ground from 1941 to 1945 but a sizable boost came in the form of industrial enterprises arriving ready-to-assemble

Ultimately, each nation became the namesake for a Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Uzbek and Turkmen SSRs were proclaimed in 1924, the Tajik SSR in 1929, and the Kazakh and Kyrgyz SSRs in 1936.

1928–30

Latin script replaces Arabic script in Central Asia, to be replaced again by Cyrillic script in 1939–40

1930s

Stalin's genocidal collectivisation programmes strike the final blow to nomadic life

1948

Ashgabat destroyed in an earthquake; 110,000 perish

1954

Virgin Lands campaign in Kazakhstan

Do a search for 'Central Asia' at www.loc.gov/exhibits/empire for wonderful old photos of Central Asia from the Prokudin-Gorskii collection.

Independent Uzbekistan is still the world's second-largest producer of cotton.

From the Mongol destruction of irrigation canals to the Russian hamessing of water for cotton production and the death of the Aral Sea, the control of water in the deserts of Central Asia has been central to the region for centuries and will continue to be a source of future contention.

in train cars: evacuated from the war-threatened parts of the USSR, they were relocated to the remote safety of Central Asia. They remained there after the war and kept on producing.

Other wartime evacuees – people – have made a lasting imprint on the face of Central Asia. These are the Koreans, Volga Germans, Chechens and others whom Stalin suspected might aid the enemy. They were deported from the borderlands and shuffled en masse. They now form sizable minority communities in all the former Soviet Central Asian republics.

For many wartime draftees, WWII presented an opportunity to escape the oppressive Stalinist state. One Central Asian scholar claims that more than half of the 1.5 million Central Asians mobilised in the war deserted. Large numbers of them, as well as prisoners of war, actually turned their coats and fought for the Germans against the Soviets.

Agriculture

The tsarist pattern for the Central Asian economy had been overwhelmingly agricultural; so it was with the Soviets. Each republic was 'encouraged' to specialise in a limited range of products, which made their individual economies dependent on the Soviet whole. Tajik SSR built the world's fourth-largest aluminium plant but all the aluminium had to be brought in from outside the region.

Uzbek SSR alone soon supplied no less than 64% of Soviet cotton, making the USSR the world's second-largest cotton producer after the USA. Into the cotton bowl poured the diverted waters of the Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya, while downstream the Aral Sea was left to dry up. Over the cotton-scape was spread a whole list of noxious agricultural chemicals, which have wound up polluting waters, blowing around in dust storms, and causing serious health problems for residents of the area. For further details, see p77.

Another noxious effect of cotton monoculture was the 'cotton affair' of the Brezhnev years. A huge ring of corrupt officials habitually over-reported cotton production, swindling Moscow out of billions of roubles. When the lid finally blew off, 2600 participants were arrested and more than 50,000 were kicked out of office. Brezhnev's own son-in-law was one of the fallen.

In 1954 the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev launched the Virgin Lands campaign. The purpose was to jolt agricultural production, especially of wheat, to new levels. The method was to put Kazakh SSR's enormous steppes under the plough and resettle huge numbers of Russians to work the farms. Massive, futuristic irrigation schemes were drawn up to water the formerly arid grassland, with water taken from as far away as the Ob River in Siberia. The initial gains in productivity soon dwindled as the fragile exposed soil of the steppes literally blew away in the wind. The Russians, however, remained.

Benefits of the Soviet Era

In spite of their heavy-handedness, the Soviets made profound improvements in Central Asia. Overall standards of living were raised considerably with the help of health care and a vast new infrastructure. Central Asia was provided with plants, mines, farms, ranches and services employing millions of people (never mind that no single republic was given the means

for a free-standing economy, and that most operations were coordinated through Moscow). Outside the capitals, the face of the region is still often a Soviet one.

Education reached all social levels (previously education was through the limited, men-only network of Islamic schools and medressas), and pure and applied sciences were nurtured. Literacy rates hit 97% and the languages of all nationalities were given standard literary forms. The Kyrgyz language was even given an alphabet for the first time.

Soviet women had 'economic equality' and although this meant that they had the chance to study and work alongside men *while* retaining all the responsibilities of homemakers, female literacy approached male levels, maternity leave was introduced and women assumed positions of responsibility in middle-level administration as well as academia.

Artistic expression was encouraged within the confines of communist ideology and cinemas and theatres were built. The Central Asian republics now boast active communities of professional artists who were trained, sometimes lavishly, by the Soviet state. And through the arts, the republics were allowed to develop their distinctive national traditions and identities (again, within bounds).

If the Central Asian republics were at all prepared when independence came, they were prepared by the Soviet era.

The Afghan War

In 1979 the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, determined to prop up a crumbling communist regime on their doorstep. In retrospect, someone should have consulted the history books beforehand, for the lessons of history are clear; no-one wins a war in Afghanistan. Central Asian Muslims were drafted into the war to liberate their backward relatives, while the Afghan mujaheddin said a prayer for the souls of their godless Central Asian kin.

In the end, after 10 years of brutal guerrilla war that ended the lives of 15,000 Soviets and 1.5 million Afghans, the Soviets finally pulled out, limping back over the Amu-Darya to Termiz. They weren't quite massacred to a man as were the British before them but the strains of war indelibly contributed to the cracking of the Soviet empire.

POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

One Russian humorist has summed up his country's century in two sentences: 'After titanic effort, blood, sweat and tears, the Soviet people brought forth a new system. Unfortunately, it was the wrong one'.

By the spring of 1991 the parliaments of all five republics had declared their sovereignty. However, when the failure of the August coup against Gorbachev heralded the end of the USSR, none of the republics was prepared for the reality of independence.

On 8 December the presidents of Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus met near Brest in Belarus to form the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Feeling left out, the Central Asian presidents convened and demanded admission. On 21 December, the heads of 11 of the former Soviet states (all except the three Baltic states and Georgia) met in Almaty and refounded the CIS. Gorbachev resigned three days later.

Central Asia's old Arabic alphabet was replaced by the Soviets with a Latin one, and later with a Cyrillic script. Several republics (Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) have shifted back to a Latin script, meaning older people are using alphabets incomprehensible to the youth.

In the last years of the USSR, official reports revealed that Central Asia was home to 16% of the USSR's population, and 64% of its poor.

The collapse of the Soviet Union sent the Central Asian republics into an economic collapse estimated at three times greater than the Great Depression of 1930s America.

1966

Tashkent destroyed in earthquake

1979

USSR invades Afghanistan

8 December 1991

Collapse of the Soviet Union, formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States

1992–97

Civil War in Tajikistan claims 60,000 lives and displaces 500,000

Sons of the Conquerors: The Rise of the Turkic World by the journalist Hugh Pope is a modern portrait of the entire Turkic world.

With independence suddenly thrust upon them, the old Soviet guard was essentially the only group with the experience and the means to rule. Most of these men are still in power today. All the Central Asian governments are still authoritarian to some degree, running the gamut from pure *ancien régime*-style autocracy (Turkmenistan), to a tightly controlled mixture of neocommunist and spurious nationalism (Uzbekistan), to a marginally more enlightened 'channelled transition' to democracy and a market economy (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).

In some ways, not much changed. In most of the republics the old Communist Party apparatus simply renamed itself using various combinations of the words 'People', 'Party' and 'Democratic'. Political opposition was completely marginalised (Turkmenistan), banned (Uzbekistan), or tolerated but closely watched (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). Kazakhstan suddenly found itself with nuclear weapons and a space programme. All the republics swiftly formed national airlines from whatever Aeroflot planes happened to be parked on their runways on the day after independence.

Yet in most ways, everything changed. The end of the old Soviet subsidies meant a decline in everything from economic subsidies to education levels. The deepest economic trauma was/is in the countryside, but even many urbanites are just scraping by, with wages for many professionals as low as US\$35 a month in the cities. Most heart-rending are the pensioners, especially the Slavs whose pensions were made worthless overnight with the devaluation of the rouble. Throughout the 1990s, one of the most common sights across Central Asia was watery-eyed *babushkas* (old women) sitting quietly on many street corners, surrounded by a few worthless possessions for sale, trying not to look like beggars. Suddenly the Soviet era began to look like a golden age.

For an account of the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan visit www.eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan.

13 May 2005

Massacre of between 200 and 1000 unarmed protestors in Andijon, Uzbekistan

2006

President Niyazov (Turkmenbashi) of Turkmenistan dies

The Silk Road

The history of the Silk Road is neither a poetic nor a picturesque tale; it is nothing more than scattered islands of peace in an ocean of wars.

Luce Boulnois, Silk Road: Monks, Warriors & Merchants on The Silk Road

No-one knows for sure when the miraculously fine, light, soft, strong, sensuous fabric spun from the cocoon of the *Bombyx* caterpillar first reached the West from China. We do know that Chinese silk strands have been found in the hair of a 3000-year-old Egyptian mummy. In the 4th century BC, Aristotle described a fibre that may have been Chinese silk. The Romans probably first laid eyes on silk when the Parthians unfurled great blinding banners of the stuff on the battlefield. Cool in summer, warm in winter and impervious to rot, it soon caught on.

Writing a short while after the time of Christ, Pliny the Elder was scandalised by the luxurious, transparent cloths, which allowed Roman women to be 'dressed and yet nude'. He fell wide of the mark in describing silk's origin and processing, though, believing silk to literally grow on trees in a land called Seres or Serica. The Chinese, had they known, would most likely have done little to disillusion him.

Parthia, on the Iranian plateau, was the most voracious foreign trader and consumer of Chinese silk at the close of the 2nd century BC, having supposedly traded an ostrich egg for its first bolt of silk. In about 105 BC, Parthia and China exchanged embassies and inaugurated official bilateral trade along the caravan route that lay between them. With this the Silk Road was born – in fact, if not in name – to flourish for another 800 years.

THE SILK ROUTES

Geographically there's no such thing as a single 'Silk Road', but rather a fragile network of shifting intercontinental caravan tracks that threaded through some of Asia's highest mountains and bleakest deserts.

At any given time any portion of the network might be beset by war, robbers or natural disaster: the northern routes were plagued by nomadic horsemen and a lack of settlements to provide fresh supplies and mounts; the south by fearsome deserts and frozen mountain passes.

Though the road map expanded over the centuries, the network had its main eastern terminus at the Chinese capital Ch'ang-an (modern Xi'an). West of there, the route reached the oasis town of Dunhuang and exited China through the Jade Gate. Here it divided, one branch skirting the dreaded Taklamakan Desert to the north through Loulan, Turfan, Kucha and Aksu,

Silk Road Foundation (www.silk-road.com) has articles on Silk Road cities and travel, as well as information on workshops, lectures and music.

One major Silk Road industry rarely mentioned is the trade in slaves. Slaves dominated the global workforce between the 8th and 11th centuries and nomadic Turkmen slave raiders kept the slave markets of Khiva and Bukhara well stocked into the 18th and 19th centuries.

THE SECRET OF SILK

For centuries China guarded the secret of silk-making jealously, making it illegal to transfer silkworm eggs or mulberry seeds out of the country.

Some people give credit for history's first great industrial espionage coup to a Chinese princess who was departing to marry a Khotanese king: the legend goes that she hid live worms and cocoons in her elaborate hairstyle, in order to fool customs agents so she would be able to enjoy the luxury of silk in her 'barbarian' home. Others give the credit to Nestorian monks who allegedly hid silkworm eggs in their walking sticks as they travelled from Central Asia to Byzantium.



while the other headed south via Miran, Khotan (Hotan) and Yarkand. The two forks met again in Kashgar, from where the trail headed up a series of passes into and over the Pamirs and Tian Shan (two such passes in use today are the Torugart and Irkeshtam, on the Chinese border with Kyrgyzstan).

Beyond the mountains, the Fergana Valley, long famed for its horses, fed westward through Kokand, Samarkand and Bukhara, past Merv and on to Iran, the Levant and Constantinople. Another route wound through the Pamirs and Badakhshan, through Bactria (Balkh) and Aria (Herat) to Iran. Goods reached transhipment points on the Black and Mediterranean Seas, where caravans took on cargo for the march back eastward over the same tracks. In the middle of the network, major branches headed south over the Karakoram range to India and north via the Zhungarian Gap and across the Saka (Scythia) steppes to Khorezm and the Volga.

CARAVANS & TRADE

Goods heading west and east did not fall into discrete bundles. In fact there was little 'through traffic'; caravanners were mostly short- and medium-distance haulers who marketed and took on freight along a given beat according to their needs and inclinations. The earliest exchanges were based on mercantile interactions between the steppe nomads and settled towns, when barter was the only form of exchange. Only later did a monetary economy enable long-distance trade routes to develop.

Nor was silk the only trade, though it epitomises the qualities required for such a long-distance trade; light, valuable, exotic and greatly desired. In fact China's early need for horses was a major reason for the growth of the Silk Road.

Though heavily stacked in favour of China, traffic ran both ways. China received gold, silver, ivory, lapis, jade, coral, wool, rhino horn, tortoise shell, horses, Mediterranean coloured glass (an industrial mystery originally as inscrutable to the Chinese as silk was in the West), cucumbers, walnuts, pomegranates, golden peaches from Samarkand, sesame, garlic, grapes and wine, plus – an early Parthian craze – acrobats and ostriches. Goods arriving at the western end included silk, porcelain, paper, tea, ginger, rhubarb, lacquerware, bamboo, Arabian spices and incense, medicinal herbs, gems and perfumes.

And in the middle lay Central Asia, a great clearing house that provided its native beasts – horses and two-humped Bactrian camels – to keep the goods flowing in both directions. The cities of Bukhara and Samarkand marked the halfway break, where caravans from Aleppo and Baghdad met traders from Kashgar and Yarkand. *Rabat* (caravanserais) grew up along the route, offering lodgings, stables and stores. Middlemen such as the Sogdians amassed great fortunes, much of which went into beautifying cosmopolitan and luxuriant caravan towns such as Gurganj, Merv and Bukhara. The cities offered equally vital services, such as brokers to set up contracts, banking houses to set up lines of credit, and markets to sell the goods.

THE CULTURAL LEGACY OF THE SILK ROAD

The Silk Road gave rise to unprecedented trade, but its true legacy was the intellectual interchange of ideas, technologies and faiths that formed the world's first 'information superhighway'.

Religion alone presents an astounding picture of diversity and tolerance that would be the envy of any modern democratic state. Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, Judaism, Confucianism, Taoism and the shamanism of grassland nomads all coexisted and in some cases mingled, until the coming of Islam. Ironically as the bulk of trade headed west, religious ideas primarily travelled east.

In the course of his archaeological expeditions in neighbouring Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan), Albert von Le Coq brought back examples of 17 different languages written in 24 different scripts.

Silk Road Seattle (<http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad>) has online maps, virtual art, historical texts and articles on traditional culture, architecture and more.

Ruined Silk Road cities in Kyrgyzstan's Chuy Valley include Ak-Beshim, Balasagun and Navekat, all dating from the 6th to 8th centuries AD. The last of these is to be restored by Unesco.

Uzbekistan is the world's third-largest producer of silk. For the opportunity to see traditional silk production in Uzbekistan, see p220.

Buddhism spread along the trade routes to wend its way from India to China and back again. It's hard to imagine that Buddhist monasteries once dominated cultural life in Central Asia – today only the faintest archaeological evidence remains in ex-Soviet Central Asia, at Adjina-Tepe in Tajikistan, Kuva in the Fergana Valley, Termiz in Uzbekistan and Ak-Beshim in Kyrgyzstan.

Musical styles and instruments (including the lute) crossed borders as artists followed in the wake of traders, pilgrims and missionaries. The spread

THE TRAVELLING POLOS (1271–98)

In the 1250s, Venice was predominant in the Mediterranean and looking for new commercial routes. In this context the Venetian brothers Nicolo and Mafeo Polo set out to do some itinerant trading; sailing from Constantinople with a cargo of precious stones, they made their way to the Crimea. Choice business deals followed and took them gradually up the Volga (they stayed a year at the Mongol khan's encampment at Sarai), eastward across the steppes, south to Bukhara (for an enforced three-year stay), then across Central Asia in the company of a Mongol envoy to Karakoram (now in Mongolia), the seat of Kublai Khan, grandson of Jenghiz.

Kublai welcomed the Europeans warmly and questioned them at length about life and statecraft in Europe. Such was the style of hospitality on the steppe that the khan couldn't bear to let them go (modern travellers know similar treatment!). The Polos remained at court for some four years.

In the end Kublai made them ambassadors to the pope in Rome, requesting that the pope send him 100 of his most learned priests to argue the merits of their faith over others. If they succeeded, Kublai said, his whole empire would convert to Christianity. It took the Polos three difficult years to get home; when they arrived, no-one believed where they had been.

Marco Polo, the teller of the world's most famous travel tale, was not yet born when his father Nicolo and uncle Mafeo set out on their journey. When they returned he was a motherless teenager. A couple of years later the elder Polos set off once more for Kublai's court, this time taking the 20-year-old Marco.

The pope had supplied only two monks, and they stayed behind in Armenia, perhaps after their first taste of shashlyk. (It is tempting to conjecture how the fate of Eurasia might have been different if the requested 100 doctors of religion had shown up at Karakoram and converted the entire Mongol empire.)

The Polos made their way to Balkh, and on through the Hindu Kush, Badakhshan and the Pamirs (stopping by Kara-Kul lake, now in Tajikistan, on the way), then on past Kashgar, Yarkand and the southern route around the Taklamakan Desert, reaching China via Dunhuang and the Gansu Corridor. They found the khan dividing his time between Khanbaligh (now Beijing) and his nearby summer capital of Shangdu (the Xanadu of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem).

Marco was exceptionally intelligent and observant, and Kublai took a great liking to him. He was soon made a trusted adviser and representative of the ageing khan. The three Polos spent about 16 years in China; Marco travelled far afield and brought the khan news of his far-flung and exotic empire, little of which he had seen.

The Polos were only allowed to go home when they agreed to escort a Mongol princess on her way to be married in Persia. To avoid long hardship the party took the sea route from the east coast of China around India and up the Gulf. Back in Venice, in 1295, still no-one believed the Polos' tales.

Many years later, during a war with Genoa, Marco Polo was captured in a naval battle. While in prison he dictated the story of his travels. The resulting book has become the world's most widely read travel account, though some question its authenticity. If Marco really did travel to China, why did he omit any mention of the Great Wall and the customs of drinking tea and binding feet? And why do Chinese imperial records fail to make any mention of Polo?

Hounded all his life by accusations that the exotic world he described was fictitious, Marco Polo was asked to recant on his deathbed. His answer: 'I have not told the half of what I saw.'

SILK ROAD READING

Life along the Silk Road, by Susan Whitfield, is a scholarly yet intriguing book that brings alive the Silk Road through a variety of characters (including a Sogdian merchant from Penjikent). Think the *Canterbury Tales* set in Central Asia. It's required reading for Silk Road obsessives.

Silk Road: Monks, Warriors & Merchants on The Silk Road, by Luce Boulnois, is a wonderful new reworking of a classic text. It has chapters on Silk Road museum collections, websites and travel information, all set in an attractive package.

The Silk Road, by Frances Wood, author of *Did Marco Polo Go To China?*, is another good overview, with fine illustrations.

The Silk Road: Art & History, by Jonathon Tucker, is a large-format art book for the connoisseur.

of Buddhism caused Indian, Chinese, Greek and Tibetan artistic styles to merge and fuse to form the exquisite Serindian art of Chinese Turkestan and the Gandharan art of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

To religion and art, add technology. The Chinese not only taught Central Asia how to cast iron but also how to make paper. Prisoners from the Battle of Talas (see p39) established paper production in Samarkand and then Baghdad, from where it spread into Europe, making it culturally the most important secret passed along the Silk Road.

THE DEATH OF THE SILK ROAD

The Silk Road was delivered a major body blow when China turned its back on the cosmopolitanism of the Tang dynasty (618–907) and retreated behind its Great Wall. The destruction and turbulence wreaked by Jenghiz Khan and Timur (Tamerlane) dealt a further economic blow to the region, and the literal and figurative drying-up of the Silk Road led to the abandonment of a string of cities along the southern fringes of the Taklamakan Desert. The metaphoric nail in the Silk Road's coffin was the opening of more cost-effective maritime trading routes between Europe and Asia.

Central Asia remained largely forgotten by the East and the West until the arrival of Russian and British explorers in the 19th century and the rediscovery of the glory of Xinjiang's Silk Road cities. Ironically, it was only then, 20 centuries after the first Chinese missions to the West, that the term 'Silk Road' was thought up, coined for the first time by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen.

REBIRTH

The fall of the USSR has seen a minirevival in all things Silk Road in Central Asia. The re-establishment of rail links to China and Iran, the growth of border trade over the Torugart and Khunjerab Passes and the increase in oil piped along former silk routes have all offered the 'stans a means to shake off ties with Moscow. Camel trains have been replaced by Kamaz trucks and silk replaced by scrap metal, but the Silk Road remains as relevant as it ever was.

Marco Polo's writings inspired Columbus to sail westwards to explore a new route to Asia, in doing so 'discovering' America by accident.

The Sogdians (from modern Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) were the consummate Silk Road traders and their language became the lingua franca of the Silk Road.

People

From gold-toothed Turkmen in shaggy, dreadlocked hats to swarthy skull-capped Uzbeks and high-cheekboned Kazakh and Kyrgyz herders whose eyes still carry the glint of nomadism in their eyes, Central Asia presents a fascinating collection of faces and peoples. The total population of the former Soviet Central Asia is about 57 million, with a 2.4% annual growth rate. Few areas of its size are home to such tangled demographics and daunting transitions.

Each republic has inherited an ethnic grab bag from the Soviet system. Thus you'll find Uzbek towns in Kyrgyzstan, legions of Tajiks in the cities of Uzbekistan, Kazakhs grazing their cattle in Kyrgyzstan, Turkmen in Uzbekistan – and Russians and Ukrainians everywhere. Given the complicated mix of nationalities across national boundaries, Central Asia's ethnic situation is surprisingly tranquil. The most noticeable divide (and a largely amicable one) is between the traditionally sedentary peoples, the Uzbeks and Tajiks, and their formerly nomadic neighbours, the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Turkmen.

PEOPLES OF THE SILK ROAD

Centuries of migrations and invasions have added to Central Asia's ethnic diversity. A trip from Ashgabat to Almaty reveals an absorbing array of faces from Turkish, Slavic, Chinese and Middle Eastern to downright Mediterranean – surmounted, incidentally, by an equally vast array of hats.

Before the Russian Revolution of 1917, Central Asians usually identified themselves 'ethnically' as either nomad or *sarts* (settled), as Turk or Persian, as simply Muslim, or by their clan. Later, separate nationalities were 'identified' by Soviet scholars as ordered by Stalin. Although it is easy to see the problems this has created, some Kazakhs and Kyrgyz at least will admit that they owe their survival as a nation to the Soviet process of nation building.

The following sections are a summary of the peoples of Central Asia.

Kazakhs are the most Russified of Central Asians, due to their long historical contact with Russia, although some still maintain a seminomadic existence.

KAZAKHS

Kazakhstan: 8.4 million
China: 1.1 million
Uzbekistan: 900,000
Russia: 740,000
Turkmenistan: 90,000
Western Mongolia: 70,000
Kyrgyzstan: 50,000
Afghanistan: 30,000

KAZAKHS

The Kazakhs were nomadic horseback pastoralists until the 1920s; indeed the name Kazakh is said to mean 'free warrior' or 'steppe roamer'. Kazakhs trace their roots to the 15th century, when rebellious kinsmen of an Uzbek khan broke away and settled in present-day Kazakhstan. They divide themselves into three main divisions, or *zhuz*, corresponding to the historical Great (southern Kazakhstan), Middle (north and east Kazakhstan) and Little (west Kazakhstan) Hordes (p105). To this day family and ancestry remain crucial to Kazakhs. 'What *zhuz* do you belong to?' is a common opening question.

Most Kazakhs have Mongolian facial features, similar to the Kyrgyz. Most wear Western or Russian clothes, but you may see women – particularly on special occasions – in long dresses with stand-up collars or brightly decorated velvet waistcoats and heavy jewellery. Some men still wear baggy shirts and trousers, sleeveless jackets and wool or cotton robes. This outfit may be topped with either a skullcap or a high, tasselled felt hat resembling nothing so much as an elf's hat.

Kazakh literature is based around heroic epics, many of which concern themselves with the 16th-century clashes between the Kazakhs and Kalmucks, and the heroic *batyrs* (warriors) of that age. Apart from various equestrian

BUZKASHI

In a region where many people are descended from hot-blooded nomads, no-one would expect cricket to be the national sport. Even so, *buzkashi* (literally 'grabbing the dead goat') is wild beyond belief. As close to warfare as a sport can get, *buzkashi* is a bit like rugby on horseback in which the 'ball' is the headless carcass of a calf, goat or sheep (whatever is handy).

The day before the kickoff the *boz* (carcass) has its head, lower legs and entrails removed and is soaked in cold water for 24 hours to toughen it up. The game begins with the carcass in the centre of a circle at one end of a field; at the other end is a bunch of wild, adrenaline-crazed horsemen. At a signal it's every man for himself as they charge for the carcass. The aim is to gain possession of the *boz* and carry it up the field and around a post, with the winning rider being the one who finally drops the *boz* back in the circle. All the while there's a frenzied horsebacked tug-of-war going on as each competitor tries to gain possession; smashed noses and wrenched shoulders are all part of the fun.

Not surprisingly, the game is said to date from the days of Jenghiz Khan, a time when it enforced the nomadic values necessary for collective survival – courage, adroitness, wit and strength, while propagating a remarkable skill on horseback. The point of the game used to be the honour, and perhaps notoriety, of the victor, but gifts such as silk *chapans* (cloaks), cash or even cars are common these days.

Buzkashi takes place mainly outside of the pastoral season, in the cooler months of spring and autumn, at weekends, particularly during Navrus or to mark special occasions such as weddings or national days. Mazar-e-Sharif in Afghanistan is the place to find authentic *buzkashi* but if you are lucky you might catch local versions in Tajikistan (in Hissar), Kyrgyzstan (where it's known as *ulak-tartysh*) and Kazakhstan (where it's called *kökpar*). Navrus is the best time to find a game on, especially in Hissar (outside Dushanbe) or the hippodrome at Shymkent in Kazakhstan.

sports (see above and p275), a favourite Kazakh pastime is *aitys*, which involves two people boasting about their own town, region or clan while running down the other's, in verses full of puns and allusions to Kazakh culture. The person who fails to find a witty comeback loses.

Kazakhs adhere rather loosely to Islam. Reasons for this include the Kazakhs' location on the fringe of the Muslim world and their traditionally nomadic lifestyle, which never sat well with central religious authority. Their earliest contacts with the religion, from the 16th century, came courtesy of wandering Sufi dervishes or ascetics. Many were not converted until the 19th century, and shamanism apparently coexisted with Islam even after conversion.

Kazakh women appear the most confident and least restricted by tradition in Central Asia. All this is despite the lingering custom of wife stealing, whereby a man may simply kidnap a woman he wants to marry (often with some collusion, it must be said), leaving the parents with no option but to negotiate the *kalym* (bride price).

The eight or so million Kazakhs have only recently become a majority in 'their' country, Kazakhstan.

KYRGYZ

The name Kyrgyz is one of the oldest recorded ethnic names in Asia, going back to the 2nd century BC in Chinese sources. At that time the ancestors of the modern Kyrgyz are said to have lived in the upper Yenisey Basin (Ene-Sai, or Yenisey, means 'Mother River' in Kyrgyz) in Siberia. They migrated to the mountains of what is now Kyrgyzstan from the 10th to 15th centuries, some fleeing wars and some arriving in the ranks of Mongol armies.

Many Kyrgyz derive their name from *kyrk kyz*, which means '40 girls' and goes along with legends of 40 original clan mothers. Today, ties to such

Kazakhs make up 56% of Kazakhstan, Tajiks 65% of Tajikistan, Kyrgyz 66% of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbeks 80% of Uzbekistan and Turkmen 85% of Turkmenistan.

KYRGYZ

Kyrgyzstan: three million
Tajikistan: 300,000
Uzbekistan: 180,000
China: 143,000
Afghanistan: 3000

clans as the Bugu (the largest clan), Salto (around Bishkek), Adigine (around Osh) and Sary-Bagysh remain relevant and politicised. Clans are divided into two federations, the Otuz Uul (30 Sons) of the north and the Ich Kilik of southern Kyrgyzstan. The southern and northern halves of the country remain culturally, ethnically and politically divided.

During special events older Kyrgyz women may wear a large white wimple-like turban (known as an *elechek*) with the number of windings indicating her status. Kyrgyz men wear a white, embroidered, tasselled (and slightly silly-looking) felt cap called an *ak kalpak*. In winter, older men wear a long sheepskin coat and a round fur-trimmed hat called a *tebbetey*.

Traditions such as the *Manas* epic (see p275), horseback sports and eagle hunting remain important cultural denominators.

TAJIKS

Tajikistan: 4.4 million
Afghanistan: 3.5 million
Uzbekistan: 630,000
Kazakhstan: 100,000
China: 33,000

TAJIKS

With their Mediterranean features and the occasional green-eyed redhead, Tajiks like to tell visitors that their land was once visited by Alexander the Great and his troops, who are known to have taken local brides. Whether that blood is still visible or not, the Tajiks are in fact descended from an ancient Indo-European people, the Aryans, making them relatives of present-day Iranians. The term 'Tajik' is a modern invention. Before the 20th century, *taj* was merely a term denoting a Persian speaker (all other Central Asian peoples speak Turkic languages).

Tracing their history back to the Samanids, Bactrians and Sogdians, Tajiks consider themselves to be the oldest ethnic group in Central Asia and one that predates the arrival of the Turkic peoples. Some Tajik nationalists have even demanded that Uzbekistan 'give back' Samarkand and Bukhara, as these cities were long-time centres of Persian culture.

There are in fact many Tajik subdivisions and clans (such as the Kulyabis and Khojandis), which is one reason why the country descended into civil war after the fall of the USSR.

Badakhshani or Pamir Tajik (sometimes called mountain Tajiks) are a quite distinct group, speaking a mix of languages quite distinct from Tajik and following a different branch of Islam. Most Badakhshani define themselves primarily according to their valley (Shugni, Rushani, Yazgulami, Wakhi and Ishkashimi), then as Pamiris, and finally as Tajiks.

Traditional Tajik dress for men includes a heavy, quilted coat (*chapan*), tied with a sash that also secures a sheathed dagger, and a black embroidered cap (*tupi*), which is similar to the Uzbek *doppilar*. Tajik women could almost be identified in the dark, with their long, psychedelically coloured dresses (*kurta*), matching headscarves (*rumol*), striped trousers worn under the dress (*izor*) and bright slippers.

There are around 3.5 million Tajiks in Afghanistan and around 33,000 Sarikol and Wakhi Tajiks in China's Tashkurgan Tajik Autonomous County. Wakhi Tajiks also live in northern Pakistan.

TURKMEN

Turkmenistan: 3.6 million
Iran: one million
Afghanistan: 650,000

TURKMEN

Legend has it that all Turkmen are descended from the fabled Oghuz Khan or from the warriors who rallied into clans around his 24 grandsons. Most historians believe that they were displaced nomadic horse-breeding clans who in the 10th century drifted into the oases around the Karakum desert (and into Persia, Syria and Anatolia) from the foothills of the Altay Mountains in the wake of the Seljuq Turks.

Turkmen men are easily recognisable in their huge, shaggy sheepskin hats (*telpek*), either white (for special occasions) or black with thick ringlets resembling dreadlocks, worn year-round on top of a skullcap, even

on the hottest days. As one Turkmen explained it, they'd rather suffer the heat of their own heads than that of the sun. Traditional dress consists of baggy trousers tucked into knee-length boots, and white shirts under the knee-length *khalat*, a cherry red cotton jacket. Older men wear a long, belted coat.

Turkmen women wear heavy, ankle-length velvet or silk dresses, the favourite colours being wine reds and maroons, with colourful trousers underneath. A woman's hair is always tied back and concealed under a colourful scarf. Older women often wear a *khalat* thrown over their heads as protection from the sun's rays.

The Turkmen shared the nomad's affinity for Sufism, which is strongly represented in Turkmenistan alongside the cult of sheikhs (holy men), amulets, shrines and pilgrimages. The Turkmen language (also called Turkmen) is closest to Azeri. Interestingly, there was a Turkmen literary language as early as the mid-18th century.

UZBEKS

The Uzbek khans, Islamised descendants of Jenghiz Khan, left their home in southern Siberia in search of conquest, establishing themselves in what is now Uzbekistan by the 15th century, clashing and then mixing with the Timurids. The Uzbek Shaybanid dynasty oversaw the transition from nomad to settler, although the original Mongol clan identities (such as the Kipchak, Mangits and Karluks) remain.

Uzbek neighbourhoods (*mahalla*) and villages (*kishlak*) are coherent and solid, both physically and socially. Houses are built behind high walls, sometimes with handsome gates.

Uzbek men traditionally wear long quilted coats tied by a bright-coloured sash. Nearly all wear the *dopy* or *doppilar*, a black, four-sided skullcap embroidered in white. In winter, older men wear a furry *telpek*. Uzbek women are fond of dresses in sparkly, brightly coloured cloth (*ikat*), often as a knee-length gown with trousers of the same material underneath. One or two braids worn in the hair indicate that a woman is married; more mean that she is single. Eyebrows that grow together over the bridge of the nose are considered attractive and are often supplemented with pencil for the right effect. Both sexes flash lots of gold teeth.

There are around 1.3 million Uzbeks in northern Afghanistan.

SLAVS

Russians and Ukrainians have settled in Central Asia in several waves, the first in the 19th century with colonisation, and the latest in the 1950s during the Virgin Lands campaign. Numerous villages in remoter parts of Central Asia, with names such as Orlovka or Alexandrovka, were founded by the early settlers and are still inhabited by their descendants.

Many Slavs, feeling deeply aggrieved as political and administrative power devolves to 'local' people, have emigrated to Russia and the Ukraine. At the height of the migration more than 280,000 Russians left Kazakhstan and

Turkmenistan's population is now 85% Turkmen, giving it the highest proportion of the titular nationality of any Central Asian republic.

UZBEKS

Uzbekistan: 18 million
Tajikistan: 1.6 million
Afghanistan: 1.3 million
Kyrgyzstan: 690,000
Kazakhstan: 334,000
Turkmenistan: 396,000
China: 14,700

Check out <http://www.oxus.com/Uzbeks.pdf> for more information on the Uzbek people.

HOLY SMOKE

In markets, stations and parks all over Central Asia you'll see gypsy women and children asking for a few coins to wave their pans of burning herbs around you or the premises. The herb is called *isriq* in Uzbek, and the smoke is said to be good medicine against colds and flu (and the evil eye), and a cheap alternative to scarce medicines. Some people also burn it when they move into a new home.

BODY LANGUAGE

A heartfelt handshake between Central Asian men is a gesture of great warmth, elegance and beauty. Many Central Asian men also place their right hand on the heart and bow or incline the head slightly, a highly addictive gesture that you may find yourself echoing quite naturally.

Good friends throughout the region shake hands by gently placing their hands, thumbs up, in between another's. There's no grabbing or Western-style firmness, just a light touch. Sometimes a good friend will use his right hand to pat the other's. If you are in a room full of strangers it's polite to go around the room shaking hands with everyone. Don't be offended if someone offers you his wrist if his hands are dirty. Some say the custom originates from the need to prove that you come unarmed as a friend.

Women don't usually shake hands but touch each others' shoulders with right hands and slightly stroke them. Younger women in particular will often kiss an elder woman on the cheek as a sign of respect.

200,000 left Tajikistan in a single year, most of them well-educated professionals. Some have returned, either disillusioned with life in the motherland or reaffirmed in the knowledge that Central Asia is their home, like it or not.

OTHER PEOPLES

Dungans are Muslim Chinese who first moved across the border in 1882, mainly to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, to escape persecution after failed Muslim rebellions. Few still speak Chinese, though their cuisine remains distinctive.

Over half-a-million Koreans arrived in Central Asia as deportees in WWII. They have preserved little of their traditional culture. They typically farm vegetables and sell their pickled salads in many bazaars.

A further half-a-million Germans were deported in WWII from their age-old home in the Volga region, or came as settlers (some of them Mennonites) in the late 19th century. Most have since departed to Germany but pockets remain. Likewise, Jews, an important part of Bukharan commerce since the 9th century, have mostly already made for Israel (and Queens, New York).

Meskhetian Turks have groups in the Fergana (the largest concentration), Chuy and Ili Valleys.

Karakalpaks occupy their own republic in northwest Uzbekistan and have cultural and linguistic ties with Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz (see p258).

Kurds are another WWII-era addition to the melting pot, with many living in Kazakhstan. Estimates of their numbers in Central Asia range from 150,000 to over a million.

It is estimated that there are half-a-million Uyghurs in the former Soviet Central Asian republics (having moved there from Xinjiang after heavy Chinese persecution in the late 19th century).

You may see colourfully dressed South Asian-looking women and children begging or working as fortune-tellers. These are Central Asian gypsies, called *luli* (*chuki*), who number around 30,000, speak Tajik and originate from areas around Samarkand, southern Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

DAILY LIFE

It's been a social rollercoaster in Central Asia: the overall birth rate is down, deaths from all causes are up, economies have plummeted, crime has skyrocketed, life expectancies have dropped and migration (most especially emigration) is on the rise. Many older Central Asians lost their social and cultural bearings with the fall of the Soviet Union. Health levels are plum-

You'll come across the occasional village in Central Asia with a German name, such as Rotfront in Kyrgyzstan, the legacy of forced German immigration.

Bukhara's once famous community of Jews have largely left the region for a new life in Israel, though the chief rabbi of Central Asia remains in Bukhara – see p237.

DOS & DON'TS

- Dress codes vary throughout Central Asia. The main place where you should dress conservatively is Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley (see p214). Western-style clothes are acceptable in the capital cities and in large towns such as Samarkand, which see a lot of tourist traffic.
- Working mosques are closed to women and often to non-Muslim men, though men may occasionally be invited in. When visiting a mosque, always take your shoes off at the door, and make sure your feet or socks are clean. It is polite to refer to the Prophet Mohammed as such, rather than by his name alone. Never walk in front of someone praying to Mecca.
- When you visit someone's home, take your shoes off at the door unless you are told not to. You will often find a pair of undersized flip-flops waiting for you at the door. (Traditional Central Asian footwear consists of overshoes, which can be taken off without removing the *massi*, soft leather under-boots.) Avoid stepping on any carpet if you have your shoes on. See p87 for tips on food etiquette.
- Central Asian society devotes much respect to its elderly, known as *aksakals* (white beards). Always make an effort to shake hands with an elder. Younger men give up their seats to *aksakals*, and foreigners should certainly offer their place in a crowded chaikhana (teahouse). Some Central Asians address elders with a shortened form of the elder's name, adding the suffix 'ke'. Thus Abkhan becomes Abeke, Nursultan becomes Nureke, and so on.

meting, drug addiction is up and alcoholism has acquired the proportions of a national tragedy.

But it's not all bad news. Traditional life is reasserting itself in today's economic vacuum and tourism projects are encouraging traditional crafts, sports and music. Communities remain strong and notions of hospitality remain instinctual despite the economic hardships. After 15 years of uncertainty, most people have started to find their way in the new order.

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

In Islam, a guest – Muslim or not – has a position of honour not very well understood in the West. If someone visits you and you don't have much to offer, as a Christian you'd be urged to share what you had; as a Muslim you're urged to give it all away. Guests are to be treated with absolute selflessness.

For a visitor to a Muslim country, even one as casual about Islam as Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, this is a constant source of pleasure, temptation and sometimes embarrassment. The majority of Central Asians, especially rural ones, have little to offer but their hospitality, and a casual guest could drain a host's resources and never know it. And yet to refuse such an invitation (or to offer to bring food or to help with the cost) would almost certainly be a grave insult.

All you can do is enjoy it, honour their customs as best you can, and take yourself courteously out of the picture before you become a burden. If for some reason you do want to decline, couch your refusal in gracious and diplomatic terms, allowing the would-be host to save face. As an example, if you are offered bread, you should at least taste a little piece before taking your leave.

If you are really lucky you might be invited to a *toi* (celebration) such as a *kelin toi* (wedding celebration), a *beshek toi* (nine days after the birth of a child), or a *sunnat toi* (circumcision party). Other celebrations are held to mark the birth, name giving and first haircut of a child.

Kazakhs and Kyrgyz share many customs and have similar languages, and in a sense they are simply the steppe (Kazakh) and mountain (Kyrgyz) variants of the same people.

Uzbeks resisted Russification and have emerged from Soviet rule with a strong sense of identification and their rich heritage.

Religion

With the exception of rapidly shrinking communities of Jews and Russian Orthodox Christians, small minorities of Roman Catholics, Baptists and evangelical Lutherans, and a few Buddhists among the Koreans of the Fergana Valley and Kyrgyzstan, nearly everyone from the Caspian Sea to Kashgar is Muslim, at least in principle. The years since independence have seen a resurgence of a faith that is only beginning to recover from 70 years of Soviet-era 'militant atheism'.

ISLAM History & Schisms

In AD 612, the Prophet Mohammed, then a wealthy Arab of Mecca in present-day Saudi Arabia, began preaching a new religious philosophy, Islam, based on revelations from Allah (Islam's name for God). Islam incorporated elements of Judaism, Christianity and other faiths (eg heaven and hell, a creation story much like the Garden of Eden, stories similar to Noah's Ark), but treated their prophets simply as forerunners of the Prophet Mohammed. These revelations were eventually to be compiled into Islam's holiest book, the Quran.

In 622 the Prophet Mohammed and his followers were forced to flee to Medina due to religious persecution (the Islamic calendar counts its years from this flight, known as Hejira). There he built a political base and an army, taking Mecca in 630 and eventually overrunning Arabia. The militancy of the faith meshed nicely with a latent Arab nationalism and within a century Islam reached from Spain to Central Asia.

Succession disputes after the Prophet's death soon split the community. When the fourth caliph, the Prophet's son-in-law Ali, was assassinated in 661, his followers and descendants became the founders of the Shiite sect. Others accepted as caliph the governor of Syria, a brother-in-law of the Prophet, and this line has become the modern-day orthodox Sunni sect. In 680 a chance for reconciliation was lost when Ali's surviving son Husain and most of his male relatives were killed at Karbala in Iraq by Sunni partisans.

About 80% of all Central Asians are Muslim, nearly all of them Sunni (and indeed nearly all of the Hanafi school, one of Sunnism's four main schools of religious law). The main exception is a tightly knit community of Ismailis in the remote western Pamirs of Gorno-Badakhshan in eastern Tajikistan (see p377).

A small but increasingly influential community of another Sunni school, the ascetic, fundamentalist Wahhabi, are found mainly in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley.

Practice

Devout Muslims express their faith through the five pillars of Islam (see the boxed text, opposite)

Devout Sunnis pray at prescribed times: before sunrise, just after high noon, in the late afternoon, just after sunset and before retiring. Prayers are preceded if possible by washing, at least of the hands, face and feet. For Ismailis the style of prayer is a personal matter (eg there is no prostration), the mosque is replaced by a community shrine or meditation room, and women are less excluded.

Just before fixed prayers a muezzin calls the Sunni and Shiite faithful, traditionally from a minaret, nowadays often through a loudspeaker. Islam

The word Islam translates loosely from Arabic as 'the peace that comes from total surrender to God'.

The world's oldest Quran, the Osman Quran (Othman Koran), is kept in a library museum at the Khast Imom Mosque in Tashkent (see p200). The Quran was written just 19 years after the death of the Prophet Mohammed and was later brought to Central Asia by Timur (Tamerlane).

To learn more about Ismailism, try the scholarly *Short History of the Ismailis: Traditions of a Muslim Community*, or *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines*, both by Farhad Daftary.

FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

- The creed that 'There is only one god, Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet'
- Prayer, five times a day, prostrating towards the holy city of Mecca, in a mosque (for men only) when possible, but at least on Friday, the Muslim holy day
- Dawn-to-dusk fasting during Ramadan
- Making the haj (pilgrimage to Mecca) at least once in one's life (many of those who have done so can be identified by their white skullcaps)
- Alms giving, in the form of the *zakat*, an obligatory 2.5% tax

has no ordained priesthood, but mullahs (scholars, teachers or religious leaders) are trained in theology, respected as interpreters of scripture, and are sometimes quite influential in conservative rural areas.

The Quran is considered above criticism: it is the word of God as spoken to his Prophet Mohammed. It is supplemented by various traditions such as the Hadith, the collected acts and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed. In its fullest sense Islam is an entire way of life, with guidelines for doing nearly everything, from preparing and eating food to banking.

Islam in Central Asia

Islam first appeared in Central Asia with Arab invaders in the 7th and 8th centuries, though it was mostly itinerant Sufi missionaries who converted the region over the subsequent centuries (see Sufism, below).

Islam never was a potent force in the former nomadic societies of the Turkmen, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, and still isn't. Islam's appeal for nomadic rulers was as much as an organisational and political tool as a collection of moral precepts. The nomad's customary law, known as *adat*, was always more important than Islamic sharia.

The Central Asian brand of Islam is also riddled with pre-Islamic influences – just go to any important holy site and notice the kissing, rubbing and circumambulation of venerated objects, women crawling under holy stones to boost their fertility, the shamanic 'wishing trees' tied with bits of coloured rag, the cult of Pirs (holy men) and the Mongol-style poles with horse-hair tassels set over the graves of revered figures. Candles and flames are often burned at shrines and graves, and both the Tajiks and Turkmen jump over a fire during wedding celebrations or the Qurban (Eid al-Azha) festival, traditions that hark back to Zoroastrian times. The Turkmen place particular stock in amulets and charms. At Konye-Urgench Turkmen women even roll en masse down a hillside in an age-old fertility rite.

There is also a significant blurring between religious and national characteristics. The majority of Central Asians, although interested in Islam as a common denominator, seem quite happy to toast your health with a shot of vodka.

Sufism

The original Sufis were simply purists, unhappy with the worldliness of the early caliphates and seeking knowledge of God through direct personal experience, under the guidance of a teacher or master, variously called a sheikh, Pir, *ishan*, *murshid* or *ustad*. There never was a single Sufi movement; there are manifestations within all branches of Islam. For many adherents music, dance or poetry were routes to trance, revelation and direct union with God. Secret recitations, known as *zikr*, and an annual 40-day retreat, known as

The melancholy sounding Arabic *azan* (call to prayer) translates roughly as 'God is most great. There is no god but Allah. Mohammed is God's messenger. Come to prayer, come to security. God is most great.'

The percentage of practising Muslims ranges from 47% in Kazakhstan to 75% in Kyrgyzstan, 85% in Tajikistan, 88% in Uzbekistan and 89% in Turkmenistan.

Some archaeologists believe that the Bronze Age site of Gonur Depe (see p428) was the birthplace of Zoroastrianism.

the *chilla*, remain cornerstones of Sufic practice. This mystical side of Islam parallels similar traditions in other faiths.

Sufis were singularly successful as missionaries, perhaps because of their tolerance of other creeds. It was largely Sufis, not Arab armies, who planted Islam firmly in Central Asia and the subcontinent. The personal focus of Sufism was most compatible with the nomadic lifestyle of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz in particular. Although abhorred nowadays in the orthodox Islamic states of Iran and Saudi Arabia, Sufism is in a quiet way dominant in Central Asia. Most shrines you'll see are devoted to one Sufi teacher or another.

When Islam was itself threatened by invaders (eg the Crusaders), Sufis assumed the role of defenders of the faith, and Sufism became a mass movement of regimented *tariqas* (brotherhoods), based around certain holy places, often the tombs of the *tariqas'* founders. Clandestine, anti-communist *tariqas* helped Islam weather the Soviet period, and the KGB and its predecessors never seemed able to infiltrate.

The moderate, non-elitist Naqshbandiya *tariqa* was the most important in Soviet times, and probably still is. Founded in Bukhara in the 14th century, much of its influence in Central Asia perhaps comes from the high profile of Naqshbandi fighters in two centuries of revolts against the Russians in the Caucasus. In 1944 large Chechen and Ingush communities were deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan. When, after Stalin's death, the survivors were permitted to return to their homeland, they left behind several well-organised Sufi groups in Central Asia. A number of well-known 1930s *basmachi* (Muslim guerrilla fighters) leaders were Naqshbandis.

Another important Sufi sect in Central Asia is the Qadiriya, founded by a teacher from the Caspian region. Others are the Kubra (founded in Khorezm, see p432) and Yasauia (founded in the town of Turkistan in Kazakhstan). All these were founded in the 12th century.

The Soviet Era

The Soviet regime long distrusted Islam because of its potential for coherent resistance, both domestically and internationally. Three of the five pillars of Islam (the fast of Ramadan, the haj and the zakat) were outlawed in the 1920s. Polygamy, the wearing of the *paranja* (veil), and the Arabic script in which the Quran is written were forbidden. Clerical (Christian, Jewish and Buddhist as well as Muslim) land and property were seized. Medressas and other religious schools were closed down. Islam's judicial power was curbed with the dismantling of traditional sharia courts (which were based on Quranic law).

From 1932 to 1936 Stalin mounted a concerted antireligious campaign in Central Asia, a 'Movement of the Godless', in which mosques were closed and destroyed, and mullahs arrested and executed as saboteurs or spies. By the early 1940s only 2000 of its 47,000 mullahs remained alive. Control of the surviving places of worship and teaching was given to the Union of Atheists, which transformed most of them into museums, dance halls, warehouses or factories.

During WWII things improved marginally as Moscow sought domestic and international Muslim support for the war effort. In 1943 four Muslim Religious Boards or 'spiritual directorates', each with a mufti (spiritual leader), were founded as administration units for Soviet Muslims, including one in Tashkent for all of Central Asia (in 1990 one was established for Kazakhstan). Some mosques were reopened and a handful of carefully screened religious leaders were allowed to make the haj in 1947.

But beneath the surface little changed. Any religious activity outside the official mosques was strictly forbidden. By the early 1960s, under Khrushchev's

'back to Lenin' policies, another 1000 mosques were shut. By the beginning of the Gorbachev era, the number of mosques in Central Asia was down to between 150 and 250, and only two medressas were open – Mir-i-Arab in Bukhara (p241) and the Imam Ismail al-Bukhari Islamic Institute in Tashkent (p200).

Perhaps the most amazing thing though, after 70 years of concerted Soviet repression, is that so much faith remains intact. Credit for any continuity from pre-Soviet times goes largely to 'underground Islam', in the form of the clandestine Sufi brotherhoods (and brotherhoods they were, being essentially men-only), which preserved some practices and education – and grew in power and influence in Central Asia as a result.

Islam Today

Since independence, Central Asia has seen a resurgence of Islam, and mosques and medressas have sprouted like mushrooms across the region, often financed with Saudi or Iranian money. Even in more conservative Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, those new mosques are as much political as religious statements and the rise of Islam has as much to do with the search for a Central Asian identity as it does with a rise in religious fervour.

Most Central Asians are torn between the Soviet secularism of the recent past and the region's deeper historical ties to Muslim world, but few have a very deep knowledge of Islam. Only the Fergana Valley regions of Uzbekistan and southern Kyrgyzstan can be considered strongly Muslim, and only here do women commonly wear the *hejab* (headscarf).

All the Central Asian governments have taken great care to keep strict tabs on Islam. Only state-approved imams and state-registered mosques are allowed to operate in most republics. Tajikistan's Islamic Revival Party is the only Islamist party in the region not to be outlawed.

Central Asia has experienced Islamic extremism, in the form of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which launched a series of armed raids and kidnappings in 1999–2001 in an attempt to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan. However, the movement largely disappeared when its Al-Qaeda-supplied bases in Afghanistan were destroyed and its enigmatic leader Juma Namangani killed.

Under the cloak of the 'War on Terror', the Uzbek government has arrested thousands of Muslims as 'extremists', most of them from the Fergana Valley. Some, but not all, are members of the peaceful but radical organisation Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Movement of Liberation), which hopes to establish a global Islamic caliphate and has support across the region.

Turkmenistan also keeps tight controls on Islam. Turkmen mosques have quotations from former President Niyazov's book the *Ruhnama* engraved next to quotations from the Quran. The former chief cleric of Turkmenistan was charged with treason and sentenced 22 years in prison after refusing to accept the Turkmen president as a messenger of God.

With the old communist ideals discredited, democracy suppressed and economic options stagnating, the fear is that radical Islam will provide an alluring alternative for a Central Asian youth left with few remaining options.

Before the arrival of Islam, Central Asia sheltered strong pockets of Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity, as well as a long tradition of Buddhism. In the 8th century there were even Nestorian bishoprics in Samarkand and Merv.

The Bakhautdin Naqshband Mausoleum in Bukhara is Central Asia's most important Sufi shrine.

By 1940, after Stalin's attacks on religion, only 1000 of Central Asia's 30,000 mosques remained standing and all 14,500 Islamic schools were shut.

www.muslimuzbekistan.com for pro-Islam website on religious and human-rights abuses in Uzbekistan

Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia, by Ahmed Rashid, is an incisive journalistic review of how and why Islamic militant groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HUT), rose in the Fergana Valley from the ashes of the Soviet Union.

Arts

Set astride millennia-old trade and migration routes, Central Asia has long blended and fused artistic traditions from the Turkic and Persian, Islamic and secular, settled and nomadic worlds to create an indigenous Central Asian aesthetic.

Whether it be the architectural glories of Samarkand, the other-worldly performance of a Kyrgyz bard, the visual splendour of a Turkmen carpet or the exotic musical sounds blasting from your taxi driver's stereo, artistic expression lies at the heart of the Central Asian identity and will follow you on your travels through the region.

ARCHITECTURE

Central Asia's most impressive surviving artistic heritage is its architecture. Some of the world's most audacious and beautiful Islamic buildings grace the cities of Bukhara, Khiva and especially Samarkand; all in Uzbekistan. Few sights evoke the region better than the swell of a turquoise dome, a ruined desert citadel or a minaret framed black against a blazing sunset.

Thanks in the main to the destructive urges of Jenghiz Khan, virtually nothing has survived from the pre-Islamic era or the first centuries of Arab rule. The Bolsheviks further destroyed many of Central Asia's religious buildings, except those of architectural or historical value.

Early Influences

Central Asian architecture has its roots in the Parthian, Kushan and Graeco-Bactrian desert citadels, whose structure was defined by the demands of trade, security and water. Iranian, Greek and Indian art blended in the 2000-year-old sites of Topraq-Qala, Nissa and Termiz, among others.

Environmental constraints naturally defined building construction. The lack of wood and stone forced Central Asian architects to turn to brickwork as the cornerstone of their designs. Tall portals, built to face and catch the prevailing winds, looked fabulous but also had a cooling effect in the heat of summer. The influence of a nomadic lifestyle is particularly relevant in Khiva, where you can still see the brick bases built to house the wintertime yurts of the khans.

Several important technological advances spurred the development of architectural arts, principally that of fired brick in the 10th century, coloured tilework in the 12th century and polychrome tilework in the 14th century.

Without the seemingly insignificant squinch (the corner bracketing that enables the transition from a square to an eight-, then 16-sided platform), the development of the monumental dome would have stalled. It was this tiny technology that underpinned the breathtaking domes of the Timurid era.

Timurid Architecture

Most of the monumental architecture standing today dates from the time of the Timurids (14th to 15th centuries); rulers who combined barbaric savagery with artistic sophistication. During his campaigns of terror Timur (Tamerlane) forcibly relocated artisans, from Beijing to Baghdad, to Central Asia, resulting in a splendid fusion of styles in textiles, painting, architecture and metal arts.

The Timurid's architectural trademark is the beautiful, often ribbed and elongated, azure-blue dome. Other signature Timurid traits include the

Uzbekistan: Heirs to the Silk Road, by Johannes Kalter and Margareta Pavaloi, is a beautiful hardback look at the art of the region.

Monuments of Central Asia: A Guide to the Archaeology, Art and Architecture of Turkestan, by Edgar Knobloch, is an excellent overview of the region's architectural heritage.

For an in-depth look at the Timurid architecture of Samarkand try www.oxuscom.com/timursam.htm.

ARCHITECTURAL HIGHLIGHTS

Merv and Konye-Urgench (both in Turkmenistan), Khiva's Ichon-Qala, the old towns of Bukhara, Samarkand and Shakhrisabz (all in Uzbekistan) and Turkistan's Kozha Akhmed Yasaui Mausoleum (in Kazakhstan) are all Unesco World Heritage sites. These archaeological sites have been included in the list of the 100 most endangered sites in the world: Merv (2000 and 2002) and Nissa (2004), both in Turkmenistan, and Bukhara's Abdul Aziz Khan Medressa (2000) in Uzbekistan.

The following are our picks of the architectural highlights of Central Asia.

Isma'il Samani Mausoleum (900-1000) In Bukhara: mesmerising brickwork (p242).

Kalon Minaret (1127) In Bukhara: Central Asia's most impressive minaret, 48m high (p241).

Sultan Sanjar Mausoleum (1157) In Merv: huge double-domed Seljuq monument (p427).

Shah-i-Zinda (1300-1400) In Samarkand: features Central Asia's most stunning and varied tilework (p226).

Bibi-Khanyam Mosque (1399-1404) In Samarkand: Timur's intended masterpiece, so colossal that it collapsed as soon as it was finished (p226).

Guri Amir Mausoleum (1404) In Samarkand: exquisite ribbed dome, sheltering the tomb of Timur (p226).

Ak-Saray Palace (1400-50) In Shakhrisabz: tantalising remains of Timur's once-opulent palace (p233).

Registan (1400-1600) In Samarkand: epic ensemble of medressas; the Sher Dor (1636) flaunts Islamic tradition by depicting two lions chasing deer, looked down upon by a Mongol-faced sun (p225).

Lyabi-Hauz (1600) In Bukhara: featuring a pool, *khanaka* (pilgrim resthouse) and medressa (p240).

Char Minar (1807) In Bukhara: quirky ex-gateway, resembling a chair thrust upside down in the ground (p243).

Islom-Huja Minaret (Islam Khoja; 1910) In Khiva: reckoned by Central Asian archaeological specialist Edgar Knobloch to be the last notable architectural achievement of the Islamic era in Central Asia; we'd expand that to say the last notable architectural achievement in Central Asia, period (p255).

tendency towards ensemble design, the monumental *pishtak* (arched entrance portal) flanked by tapering minarets, and exuberant, multicoloured tilework, all evident in the quintessential Timurid showpiece, the Registan Square in Samarkand (see p225).

Architectural Design

Khiva and Bukhara reveal the most about traditional urban structure, highlighting the distinction between *ark* (fortified citadel), *shahristan* (inner city with wealthy residential neighbourhoods, bazaars and city wall) and outlying *rabad* (suburbs), that has formed the structure of settlements since the first Central Asian towns appeared 4000 years ago. A second outer city wall surrounded most cities, protecting against desert storms and brigands.

Apart from the Islamic monuments mentioned below, secular architecture includes palaces (such as the Tosh-Khovli in Khiva), *ark* or *bala hissar* (forts), *hammam* (multidomed bathhouses), *rabat* (caravanserais), *tim* (shopping arcades), *tok* (covered crossroad bazaars) and the local *hauz* (reservoirs) that supplied the city with its drinking water.

MOSQUES

Islam dominates Central Asian architecture. *Masjid* (mosques) trace their design back to the house of the Prophet Mohammed, though later designs vary considerably. Common to most is the use of the portal, which leads into a colonnaded space and a covered area for prayer. The entrance of many Central Asian mosques, such as the Bolo-Hauz Mosque in Bukhara, have, instead, a flat, brightly painted roof, supported by carved wooden columns. Other mosques, such as the Juma Mosque in Khiva, are hypostyle, that is with a roofed space, divided by many pillars.

Whether the place of worship is a *guzar* (local mosque), serving the local community, a *jami masjid* (Friday mosque), built to hold the entire city

The best surviving caravanserai in Central Asia is the Tash Rabat (Stone Caravanserai), high in the pastures of central Kyrgyzstan, near the border with China (see p325).

congregation once a week, or a *namazgokh* (festival mosque), the focal point is always the mihrab, a niche that indicates the direction of Mecca. Central Asia's largest modern mosque is at Gypjak in Turkmenistan (see p417).

MEDRESSAS

These are Islamic colleges, normally two-storeys high and set around a cloistered central courtyard, punctuated with *aiwan* (arched portals) on four sides. Rows of little doors in the interior façades lead into *hujras* (cell-like living quarters for students and teachers) or *khanakas* (prayer cells or entire buildings) for the ascetic wandering dervishes who stayed there. Most medressas are fronted by monumental portals. On either side of the entrance you will normally find a *darskhana* (lecture room) to the left, and mosque to the right.

MAUSOLEUMS

The *mazar* (mausoleum) has been popular for millennia, either built by rulers to ensure their own immortality or to commemorate holy men. Most consist of a *ziaratkhana* (prayer room), set under a domed cupola. The actual tomb may be housed in a central hall, or underground in a side *gurkhana*. Popular tombs offer lodging, washrooms and kitchens for visiting pilgrims. Tombs vary in design from the classic domed cupola style or the pyramid-shaped, tentlike designs of Konye-Urgench (p432) to whole streets of tombs as found at the glorious Shah-i-Zinda in Samarkand (p226).

MINARETS

These tall, tapering towers were designed to summon the faithful during prayer time, so most have internal stairs for the muezzin to climb. They were also used as lookouts to spot invaders, and even, in the case of the Kalon Minaret in Bukhara, as a means of execution. Some minarets (eg at Samarkand's Registan) exist purely for decoration.

Decoration

Tilework is the most dramatic form of decoration in Central Asia, instilling a light, graceful air into even the most hulking Timurid building. The deep cobalts and turquoise ('colour of the Turks') of Samarkand's domes have moved travellers for centuries. Each of Uzbekistan's historic cities has its own colour; greens are most common in Khorezm, khakis in Bukhara and blues in Samarkand.

Decoration almost always takes the shape of abstract geometric, floral or calligraphic designs, in keeping with the Islamic taboo on the representation of living creatures. Geometric and knot (*girikh*) designs were closely linked to the development of Central Asian science – star designs were a favourite with the astronomer king Ulugbek. Calligraphy is common, either in the square, stylised Kufic script favoured by the Timurids or the more scrolling, often foliated thulth script.

Tiles come in a variety of styles, either stamped, faïence (carved onto wet clay and then fired), polychromatic (painted on and then fired) or jigsaw-style mosaic. Take time also to savour the exquisite details of Central Asia's carved *ghanch* (alabaster), patterned brickwork, and intricately carved and painted wood.

FOLK ART

Central Asian folk art developed in tune with a nomadic or seminomadic way of life, focusing on transport (horses) and home (yurts). Designs followed the natural beauty of the environment: snow resting on a leaf, the elegance

of an ibex horn, the flowers of the steppe. Status and wealth were apparent by the intricacy of a carved door or a richly adorned horse. Yet art was not merely created for pleasure; each item had a practical function in everyday life. From brightly coloured carpets used for sleeping and woven reed mats designed to block the wind, to leather bottles used for carrying *kumys* (fermented mare's milk), many of what are today souvenirs in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are remnants of a recent nomadic past.

With such emphasis on equestrian culture it is not surprising that horses donned decorative blankets, inlaid wooden saddles, and head and neck adornments. Men hung their wealth on their belts with daggers and sabres in silver sheaths, and embossed leather purses and vessels for drink. Even today the bazaars in Tajikistan and the Fergana Valley are heavy with carved daggers and *pichok* (knives).

Nomads required their wealth to be portable and rich nomadic women wore stupendous jewellery, mostly of silver incorporating semiprecious stones, such as lapis lazuli and carnelian (believed to have magical properties).

To remain portable, furnishings consisted of bright quilts, carpets and *aiyk kap* (woven bags), which were hung on yurt walls for storing plates and clothing. *Kökör* (embossed leather bottles) were used for preparing, transporting and serving *kumys*; these days empty Coca Cola bottles suffice.

Most Central Asian peoples have their own traditional rug or carpet styles. The famous Bukhara rugs – so called because they were mostly sold, not made, in Bukhara – are made largely by the Turkmen. The Kyrgyz specialise in *shyrdaks* (felt rugs with appliquéd coloured panels or pressed wool designs called *ala-kiyiz*); see p276. Kazakhs specialise in *koshma* (multi-coloured felt mats).

Uzbeks make silk and cotton wall hangings and coverlets such as the beautiful *suzani* (*suzan* is Persian for needle). *Suzanis* are made in a variety of sizes and used as table covers, cushions and *ruijo* (a bridal bedspread), and thus were important for the bride's dowry. Generally using floral or celestial motifs (depictions of people and animals are against Muslim beliefs) an average *suzani* requires about two years to complete. Possibly the most accessible Kazakh textile souvenir is a *tus-kiiz* (*tush-kiyiz* in Kyrgyzstan), a colourful wall hanging made of cotton and silk.

The colourful psychedelic tie-dyed silks known as *ikat* or *khanatlas* are popular throughout the region. Take a close-up tour of how the cloth is made at the Yodgorlik Silk Factory in Margilon (Margilan) (p220). For more on silk production, see p220.

LITERATURE

The division into Kazakh literature, Tajik literature, Uzbek literature and so on, is a modern one; formerly there was simply literature in Chaghatay Turkic (pioneered by the poet Alisher Navoi) and literature in Persian. With most pre-20th-century poets, scholars and writers bilingual in Uzbek and Tajik, literature in Central Asia belonged to a shared universality of culture.

For example, Abu Abdullah Rudaki, a 10th-century Samanid court poet considered the father of Persian literature, stars in the national pantheons of Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan (he is buried in Penjikent) and is also revered by Uzbeks by dint of being born in the Bukhara emirate. Omar Khayyam, famed composer of *rubiyyat* poetry, although a native of what is now north-east Iran, also has strong, if indistinct, ties to Tajikistan and to Samarkand where he spent part of his early life at the court of the Seljuq emir.

A strong factor in the universal nature of Central Asian literature was that it was popularised not in written form, but orally by itinerant minstrels

The niches in the medressas' front walls were once used as shopkeepers' stalls.

The Arts and Crafts of Turkestan, by Johannes Kalter, is a detailed, beautifully illustrated historical guide to the nomadic dwellings, clothing, jewellery and other 'applied art' of Central Asia.

Some of the best examples of Central Asian folk art can be seen at Tashkent's Museum of Applied Arts (p201).

If you are into carpets, don't miss a visit to Ashgabat's Carpet Museum (see p410), which also features the world's largest carpet.

Central Asian film isn't high profile, but two films well worth checking out are *Luna Papa*, by Tajikistan's Bakhtyar Khudojnazarov, and *Beshkempir*, by Kyrgyz director Aktan Abdykalykov.

For a fictional account of Omar Khayyam's life, check out Amin Maalouf's imaginative novel *Samarkand*, partially set in Central Asia.

in the form of songs, poems and stories. Known as *bakshi* or *dastanchi* in Turkmen and Uzbek, *akyn* in Kazakh and Kyrgyz, these storytelling bards earned their living travelling from town to town giving skilled and dramatic recitations of crowd-pleasing verse, tales and epics to audiences gathered in bazaars and chaikhana. With their rhythms, rhymes and improvisation, these performers share much in common with rap artists in the West (but with fewer women in thongs/g-strings and considerably less bling).

The most famous epic is Kyrgyzstan's *Manas* (p275), said to be the world's longest, and recited by a special category of *akyn* known as *manaschi*, though other epics include the Uzbek *Alpamish* and Turkmen *Gorkut*. Certain bards are folk heroes, regarded as founders of their national literatures, and memorialised in Soviet-era street names (eg Toktogul, Zhambul and Abay, see p173). Soviet propagandists even used *akyns* to praise Lenin or popularise the latest directive from party central. Bardic competitions are still held in some rural areas, these days with cash prizes.

It was only with the advent of Bolshevik rule that literacy became widespread. Unfortunately, at the same time, much of the region's classical heritage never made it to print because Moscow feared that it might set a flame to latent nationalist sentiments. Instead writers were encouraged to produce novels and plays in line with official Communist Party themes. While a number of Central Asian poets and novelists found acclaim within the Soviet sphere, such as the Tajik, Sadruddin Ayni (1878–1954), and the Uzbeks, Asqad Mukhtar and Abdullah Kodiri, the only native Central Asian author to garner international recognition has been the Kyrgyz, Chinghiz Aitmatov, who has had novels translated into English and other European languages (see p275). His works have also been adapted for the stage and screen, both in the former USSR and abroad.

One interesting recent work is the exiled Uzbek writer Hamid Ismailov's *The Railway* (2006), a satirical novel that mixes anecdote and fantasy to depict life in the fictional end-of-the-line town of Gilas in Soviet Uzbekistan. The novel was swiftly banned in Uzbekistan.

MUSIC

Although visual arts and literature succumbed to a stifling Soviet-European influence (which they're presently struggling to shrug off), the music of Central Asia remains closely related to the swirling melodies of Anatolia and Persia. The instruments used are similar to those found in this region; the *rabab* (*rubab*; six-stringed mandolin), *dutar* (two-stringed guitar), *tanbur* (long-necked lute), *dombra/komuz* (two-stringed Kazakh/Kyrgyz guitar), *kamanche* (Persian violin, played like a cello) and *gijak* (upright spiked fiddle), *ney* (flute), *doira* (tambourine/drum) and *chang* (zither). Most groups add the ubiquitous Russian accordion.

In the past the development of music was closely connected with the art of the bards, but these days the traditions are continued by small ensembles of musicians and singers, heavily in demand at weddings and other festivals. In Uzbek and Tajik societies there's a particularly popular form of folk music known as *sozanda*, sung primarily by women accompanied only by percussion instruments such as tablas, bells and castanets. There are also several forms of Central Asian classical music, such as the courtly *shash maqam* (six modes) tradition of Uzbekistan. Central Asia has a strong tradition of the performer-composer, or *bestekar*, the equivalent of the singer-songwriter, who mixed poetry, humour, current affairs and history into music.

One Uzbek group that has successfully mixed Central Asian and Middle Eastern folk melodies and poetry with modern pop and dance influences is Yalla.

To listen to DJ Andy Kershaw's musical travels through Turkmenistan visit www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/worldmusic/onlocation/turkmen.shtml.

The art of the Kyrgyz bards and the classical Uzbek music known as *shash maqam* are both included on Unesco's list of 28 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'.

Anyone interested in the music of the region should pick up *The Hundred Thousand Fools of Gold: Musical Travels in Central Asia*, by Theodore (Ted) Levin, one of the world's foremost experts on Central Asian music. The book is part travel, part ethnomusicology and comes with a CD of on-site recordings.

CENTRAL ASIAN DISCOGRAPHY

The following recordings offer a great introduction to Central Asian music and are our personal favourites.

City of Love (Real World; www.realworld.co.uk) By Ashkabad, a five-piece Turkmen ensemble. Superb and lilting, with a Mediterranean feel. Recommended.

Yol Boisin (Real World; www.realworld.co.uk) By Sevara Nazarkhan. Uzbek songstress given a modern feeling by producer Hector Zazou. In 2003 Nazarkhan played at the Womad festival and supported Peter Gabriel on tour. She won a BBC Radio 3 World Music Award in 2004.

Rough Guide to the Music of Central Asia (World Music Network) Excellent introduction to the sounds of the Silk Road, from Tajik rap to Kyrgyz folk melodies. Artists include Munadjat Yulchieva, the Kambarkan Folk Ensemble, Sevara Nazarkhan, Ashkabad, Yulduz Usmanova and Uzbek tanbur player Turgun Alimatov, among others.

A Haunting Voice (Network; www.networkmedien.de) By Munadjat Yulchieva, the classical *maqam* Uzbek music star recently nominated for a BBC Radio 3 World Music Award. Alternatively, try *Asie Centrale Traditions Classique* (World Network).

The Selection Album (Blue Flame; www.blueflame.com) By Yulduz Usmanova. Career retrospective from the Uzbek pop superstar.

Secret Museum of Mankind, The Central Asia Ethnic Music Classics: 1925–48 (Yazoo; www.shanachie.com) Twenty-six scratchy but wonderfully fresh field recordings of otherwise lost music.

The Silk Road – A Musical Caravan (Smithsonian Folkways; www.folkways.si.edu) 'Imagine if Marco Polo had a tape recorder' runs the cover note for this excellent two-CD collection of traditional recordings by both masters and amateurs, from China to Azerbaijan.

Music of Central Asia Vol. 1: Mountain Music of Kyrgyzstan (Smithsonian Folkways; www.folkways.si.edu) Collection of evocative Kyrgyz sounds by Tengir-Too, featuring the *komuz* and jew's harp, with a section from the *Manas*. The other volumes in this series are also worth looking into.

PAINTING

Rendered in a style that foreshadows that of Persian miniature painting, some splendid friezes were unearthed in the excavations of the Afrosiab palace (6th to 7th centuries), on the outskirts of Samarkand, depicting a colourful caravan led by elephants. Similar Silk Road-era wall frescoes were discovered at Penjikent and Varakhsha, depicting everything from panthers and griffins to royal banqueting scenes.

The Arab invasion of the 8th century put representational art in Central Asia on hold for the better part of 1300 years. Islam prohibited the depiction of the living, so traditional arts developed in the form of calligraphy, combining Islamic script with arabesques, and the carving of doors and screens. Textiles and metalwork took on floral or repetitive, geometric motifs.

Painting and two-dimensional art were only revived under the Soviets who introduced European ideas and set up schools to train local artists in the new fashion. Under Soviet tutelage the pictorial art of Central Asia became a curious hybrid of socialist realism and mock traditionalism – Kyrgyz horsemen riding proudly beside a shiny red tractor, smiling Uzbeks at a chaikhana surrounded by record-breaking cotton harvests. You'll see a good selection of these at most regional museums.

The Musical Nomad (www.bbc.co.uk/nomad) is an interesting interactive website chronicling a musical journey through the region in 1997.

Art lovers should not miss the collection of 'lost' Soviet art at the Savitsky Museum (p259) in remote Nukus.

Environment

THE LAND

The Central Asia of this book includes Kazakhstan, which in Soviet parlance was considered a thing apart. It is true that Kazakhstan's enormous territory actually extends westward across the Ural River, the traditional boundary between Europe and Asia, but Kazakhstan still shares many geographic, cultural, ethnic and economic similarities and ties with Central Asia 'proper'.

A quick spin around the territory covered in this book would start on the eastern shores of the oil-rich Caspian Sea. Then dip southeast along the low crest of the Kopet Dag mountains between Turkmenistan and Iran. Follow the Amu-Darya river along the desert border with Afghanistan up along its headstream, the Pyanj, into the high Pamir plateau. Round the eastern nose of the 700m snow peaks of the Tian Shan range; skip northward over the Altay Mountains to float down the Irtysh River and then turn west to plod along Kazakhstan's flat, farmed, wooded border with Russia, ending in the basin of the Ural River and the Caspian Sea.

The sort of blank which is drawn in the minds of many people by the words 'Central Asia' is not entirely unfounded. The overwhelming majority of the territory is flat steppe (arid grassland) and desert. These areas include the Kazakh Steppe, the Betpak Dala (Misfortune) Steppe, the Kyzylkum (Red Sands) desert and the Karakum (Black Sands) desert. The Kyzylkum and Karakum combined make the fourth-largest desert in the world.

Central Asia's mountains are part of the huge chain which swings in a great arc from the Mongolian Altay to the Tibetan Himalaya. Central Asia's high ground is dominated by the Pamirs, a range of rounded, 5000m to 7000m mountains known as the 'Roof of the World', which stretch 500km across Tajikistan. With very broad, flat valleys, which are nearly as high as the lower peaks, the Pamirs might be better described as a plateau (*pamir* roughly means 'pasture' in local dialects). The roof of the Pamir, Tajikistan's 7495m Koh-i-Samani, is the highest point in Central Asia and was the highest in the USSR (when it was known as Kommunistika). The Pamirs is probably the least explored mountain range on earth.

Varying from 4000m to more than 7400m, the crests of the Tian Shan form the backbone of eastern Central Asia. Known as the Celestial Mountains, the Chinese-named Tian Shan (the local translation is Tengri Tau) extend over 1500km from southwest Kyrgyzstan into China. The summit of the range is Pobedy (7439m) on the Kyrgyzstan-China border. The forested alpine valleys and stunning glacial peaks of the range were favourites among such Russian explorers as Fedchenko, Kostenko, Semenov and Przewalski.

These two mountain ranges hold some of the largest glaciers and freshwater supplies on earth (around 17,000 sq km) and are one of the region's most significant natural resources. The 77km-long Fedchenko Glacier (the longest in the former USSR) allegedly contains more water than the Aral Sea.

The Caspian Sea is called either the world's biggest lake or the world's biggest inland sea. The Caspian Depression, in which it lies, dips to 132m below sea level. Lake Balkhash, a vast, marsh-bordered arc of half-saline water on the Kazakh Steppe, is hardly deeper than a puddle, while mountain-ringed Lake Issyk-Köl in Kyrgyzstan is the fourth-deepest lake in the world. Other glacially fed lakes dot the mountains, including Song-Köl in Kyrgyzstan and stunning Kara-Kul, first described by Marco Polo, in Tajikistan.

Central Asia, as defined by this book, occupies 4 million sq km, of which almost 70% belongs to Kazakhstan.

Uzbekistan is only one of two countries in the world defined as double landlocked, ie surrounded by countries which are themselves landlocked.

Most of Central Asia's rainfall drains internally. What little water flows out of Central Asia goes all the way to the Arctic Ocean, via the Irtysh River. The Ili River waters Lake Balkhash; the Ural makes a short dash across part of Kazakhstan to the Caspian Sea. Numerous rivers rise as cold streams in the mountains only to lose themselves on the arid steppes and sands below. The region's two mightiest rivers, the Syr-Darya (Jaxartes River) and Amu-Darya (Oxus River), used to replenish the Aral Sea until they were bled dry for cotton. There is evidence that the Amu-Darya once flowed into the Caspian Sea, along the now-dry Uzboy Channel.

GEOLOGY

The compact, balled-up mass of mountains bordering Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and China is often called the Pamir Knot. It's the hub from which other major ranges extend like radiating ropes: the Himalaya and Karakoram to the southeast, the Hindu Kush to the southwest, the Kunlun to the east and the Tian Shan to the northeast. These young mountains all arose (or more correctly, are arising still) from the shock waves created by the Indian subcontinent smashing into the Asian crustal plate more than a hundred million years ago. Amazing as it seems, marine fossils from the original Tethys Sea have been found in the deserts of Central Asia as a testament to the continental collision. The Tian Shan are currently rising at the rate of around 10mm per year.

Central Asia is therefore unsurprisingly a major earthquake zone. Ashgabat was destroyed by earthquake in 1948 and Tashkent was levelled in 1966. More recently, devastating earthquakes hit the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border in 1997 and 1998.

WILDLIFE

Central Asia is home to a unique range of ecosystems and an extraordinary variety of flora and fauna. The region comprised only 17% of the former USSR's territory, but contained over 50% of its variety in flora and fauna.

The mountains of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan are the setting for high, summer pastures known as *jailoos*. In summertime the wild flowers (including wild irises and edelweiss) are a riot of colour. Marmots and pikas provide food for eagles and lammergeiers, while the elusive snow leopard preys on the ibex, with which it shares a preference for crags and rocky slopes, alongside the Svrtsov ram. Forests of Tian Shan spruce, ash, larch and juniper provide cover for lynxes, wolves, wild boars and brown bears. Lower down in the mountains of southern Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are ancient forests of wild walnut, pistachio, juniper, apricot and apple.

The steppes (what's left of them after massive Soviet cultivation projects) are covered with grasses and low shrubs such as saxaul. Where they rise to meet foothills, the steppes bear vast fields of wild poppies (including some opium poppies) and several hundred types of tulip.

Roe deer and saiga (see Poaching on p80), a species of antelope, have their homes on the steppe. The ring-necked pheasant, widely introduced to North America and elsewhere, is native to the Central Asian steppe, as are partridges, black grouse, bustards, and the falcons and hawks that prey on them. Korgalzhyn Nature Reserve in Kazakhstan is home to the world's most northerly colony of pink flamingos.

Rivers and lake shores in the flatlands create a different world, with dense thickets of elm, poplar, reeds and shrubs known as *tugai*, where wild boar, jackal and deer make their homes. A carplike fish called the *sazan* is the most popular catch.

Some residents of massive Kazakhstan live about as far away from Vienna as they do from Almaty. Tashkent is closer to Kashgar and Tehran than to Moscow or Kiev.

Realms of the Russian Bear, by John Sparks, is an elegant, beautifully illustrated work focusing on the flora and fauna of the old Soviet empire, including 80-plus pages on the Tian Shan and Central Asia's steppes, deserts and seas.

Chiy, a common bullrush-like grass with whitish, canelike reeds, is used by nomads to make decorative screens for their yurts.

HEAVENLY HORSES

Central Asia has been famed for its horses for millennia. The earliest Silk Road excursions into the region were made to bring back the famous blood-sweating (due to parasites or skin infection) horses of Fergana (based in the ancient kingdom of Davan, near modern-day Osh) to help Han China fight nomadic tribes harassing its northern frontier. Much of the highly coveted silk that made its way into Central Asia and beyond came from the trade of steeds the Chinese believed were descended from dragons.

Today's most famous horses are the Akhal-Teke of Turkmenistan, the forefather of the modern Arab thoroughbred. The Roman-era historian Appian praised the horses of Parthian Nissa for their beauty. Today there are only around 2000 thoroughbred Akhal-Teke in the world, of which 1200 are in Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan's state emblem and banknotes feature an Akhal-Teke and there's even a national holiday named after them. Akhal-Teke are regularly handed out as diplomatic gifts (François Mitterrand and Boris Yeltsin each received one), much as they were 2000 years ago. It's possible to ride Akhal-Tekes in several stables outside Ashgabat (see p411).

Other regional breeds include the stocky Lokai of Tajikistan and Karabair of Uzbekistan, which are used in sports such as *buzkashi* (a traditional polo-like game played with a headless goat/sheep/calf carcass) and are descendants of horses that played a pivotal role in the Mongol conquest of Eurasia.

In the barren stony wastes of the Karakum and Kyzylkum you'll need a sharp eye to catch a glimpse of the goitred gazelle (*zheyran*). Gophers, sand rats and jerboas feed various reptiles, including (in Turkmenistan) vipers and cobras.

Turkmenistan's wildlife has a Middle Eastern streak, understandable when you consider that parts of the country are as close to Baghdad as they are to Tashkent. Leopards and porcupines inhabit the parched hills. The *zemen* or *varan* (desert crocodile) is actually a type of large lizard that can grow up to 1.8m long (see p404).

Endangered Species

The mountain goose, among other rare species, nests on the shores of Kyrgyzstan's mountain lakes, but the population has shrunk over the years to fewer than 15 pairs worldwide.

The population of snow leopards in Central Asia and the Russian Altay is estimated at about 1000, out of a global population of around 7000. Only 5% of the snow leopard's habitat is currently protected.

Tragically the last Turan (Caspian) tiger was killed in the Amu-Darya delta in 1972. Wild Bactrian camels, once the quintessential Silk Road sight, are now only found in remote areas of Afghanistan, though you can sometimes see them from the Tajikistan side of the Wakhan Valley. Perhaps 1000 remain.

There has been some good news, though: eight Przewalski's horses were recently reintroduced into Kazakhstan's Altyn-Emel National Park after being extinct in the region for 60 years.

NATIONAL PARKS

Many of the region's approximately two-dozen nature reserves (*zapovednik*) and protected areas (*zakazniki*) and nine or so national parks (*gosudarstvenny prirodny park*) are accessible for tourists.

The existing system of national parks and protected areas, one of the positive legacies of the USSR, is nevertheless antiquated and inadequate. Unfortunately all suffer from a chronic lack of government funding and are under increasing pressure from grazing, poaching, firewood gathering and even opium-poppy plantations.

Extremes along the Silk Road, by Nick Middleton, is a geographical travelogue through the region by the Oxford professor turned TV star.

Locals have blamed Vozrozhdenia, a former island used to store bioweapons (see p79) for the terrifying sudden deaths, in less than an hour, of half a million saiga antelope on the Turgay Steppe, northeast of the Aral, in 1988.

In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan just 2.5% of the country's area is dedicated to land conservation, of which most is only semiprotected and commercially managed, often as hunting reserves. This is well below the minimum 10% recommended by the World Conservation Union.

The most easy to visit protected areas include the following:

Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve (p146) In southern Kazakhstan, famed for its beautiful tulips, it also has a fledgling ecotourism programme.

Ala-Archa National Park (p292) Offers fine hiking and climbing just outside Bishkek.

Almatinsky Nature Reserve Outside Almaty, with big-horned sheep, gazelle and hiking trails.

Badai-Tugai Nature Reserve (p252) In Karakalpakstan, it protects a strip of *tugai* riverine forest on the eastern bank of the Amu-Darya. Once off limits, today it welcomes foreign tourists, as the entry fee pays for food for a Bukhara deer-breeding centre.

Karakol Valley (p307) Alpine ecosystem in the Tian Shan, southeast Issyk-Köl, with superb scenery and fine trekking routes.

Kugitang Nature Reserve (p431) The most impressive of Turkmenistan's nature reserves, focused around the country's highest peak, is home to the rare markhor mountain goat and several hundred dinosaur footprints.

Sary-Chelek Biosphere Reserve (p329) Remote trekking routes cross this Unesco-sponsored reserve, centred on a large mountain lake.

Ugam-Chatkal National Park (p211) Unesco-sponsored, with juniper forests, wild boars, bears and snow leopards, plus some fine hiking and rafting.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Central Asia's 'empty' landscapes served as testing grounds for some of the worst cases of Soviet megalomania. Land and water mismanagement and the destruction of natural habitat were part of a conscious effort to tame nature ('harness it like a white mare', as the propaganda of the day had it). The results are almost beyond belief and on a staggering scale.

Even casual students of the region are familiar with some of the most infamous catastrophes of Soviet environmental meddling: the gradual disappearance of the Aral Sea and the excessive levels of radiation around the Semey (Semipalatinsk) nuclear testing site. Add to this the consequences of Khrushchev's Virgin Lands scheme, which was planned to boost grain production but which ended up degrading tens of millions of hectares of Kazakh steppe. For information on these last two issues see p111.

In the economic malaise of the post-Soviet years, the environment has taken a back seat. Whether it is poaching, hunting tours or pollution from gold-mining operations, the promise of hard-currency in an otherwise bleak economic landscape means that nature is often the victim.

The extreme continental climate of Central Asia is particularly susceptible to global climate change and locals can expect even colder winters and even hotter summers in the years ahead. Glaciers in the Pamirs and Tian Shan are already starting to shrink and you can expect water issues to become increasingly pressing over the next few decades. Central Asia's future will be defined by two of nature's greatest gifts: oil and water.

The Aral Sea

One of the most amazing things about the Aral Sea disaster is that it was no accident. The Soviet planners who fatally tapped the rivers that fed the Aral Sea, in order to irrigate new cotton fields, expected the sea to dry up. They also wanted to bring water to Central Asia by a huge canal from Siberia, not to replenish the Aral Sea but to expand cotton production still further. They either didn't understand that drying up the world's fourth-largest lake would wreck a whole region's climate and ecology, and cause untold suffering to its people, or didn't care.

For news articles on environmental issues click on the Environment Department of www.eurasianet.org.

For reports on the state of Central Asia's environment search the website of the United Nations Environment Programme (www.grida.no).

The Aral Sea was once the world's fourth-largest lake. It is now recognised as the world's worst manmade ecological disaster.

The Aral Sea, or rather seas, since it split into two in 1987, straddles the border between western Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan. It's fed (in the years that they actually reach it) by the Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya rivers, flowing down from the Tian Shan and Pamir mountain ranges. Back in the 1950s these rivers brought an average 55 cubic km of water a year to the Aral Sea, which stretched 400km from end to end and 280km from side to side, and covered 66,900 sq km. The sea had, by all accounts, lovely clear water, pristine beaches, plenty of fish to support a big fishing industry in the ports of Moynaq and Aralsk, and even passenger ferries crossing it from north to south.

Then the USSR's central planners decided to boost cotton production in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, to feed a leap forward in the Soviet textile industry. But the thirsty new cotton fields, many of them on poorer desert soils and fed by long, unlined canals open to the sun, required much more water per hectare than the old ones. The irrigated area grew by only about 20% between 1960 and 1980, but the annual water take from the rivers doubled from 45 to 90 cubic km. By the 1980s the annual flow into the Aral Sea was less than a tenth of the 1950s supply.

Production of cotton rose, but the Aral Sea sank. Between 1966 and 1993 its level fell by more than 16m and its eastern and southern shores receded by up to 80km. In 1987 the Aral divided into a smaller northern sea and a larger southern one, each fed, sometimes, by one of the rivers.

The two main fishing ports, Aralsk (Kazakhstan) in the north and Moynaq (Uzbekistan) in the south, were left high and dry when efforts to keep their navigation channels open were abandoned in the early 1980s. Of the 60,000 people who used to live off the Aral fishing industry (harvesting 20,000 tons of fish a year), almost all are gone. These days the rusting hulks of beached fishing boats lie scattered dozens of miles from the nearest water.

In any case there are hardly any fish left in the Aral Sea: the last of its 20-odd indigenous species disappeared in about 1985, wiped out by the loss of spawning and feeding grounds, rising salt levels and, very likely, residues of pesticides, fertilisers and defoliants used on the cotton fields, which found their way into the sea. Only introduced species such as the Black Sea flounder remain, though there is some hope for future shrimp cultivation in the increasingly briny waters.

The Aral Sea's shrinkage has devastated the land around it. The climate around the lake has changed: the air is drier, winters are colder and longer, and summers are hotter. The average number of rainless days has risen from 30 to 35 in the 1950s to between 120 and 150 today. Salt, sand and dust from the exposed bed is blown hundreds of kilometres in big salt-dust sandstorms, which also pick up residues of the chemicals from cultivated land. Locals talk of a new Akkum (White Sands) desert forming an unholy trinity with the Kyzylkum (Red Sands) and Karakum (Black Sands) deserts. A visit to anywhere near the sea is a ride into a nightmare of blighted towns, blighted land and blighted people.

In human terms, the worst-affected areas are those to the Aral Sea's south – as far as northern Turkmenistan – and east (the areas north and west of the Aral Sea are very sparsely populated). The catalogue of health problems is awful: salt and dust are blamed for respiratory illnesses and cancers of the throat and oesophagus; poor drinking water has been implicated in high rates of typhoid, paratyphoid, hepatitis and dysentery; and the area has the highest mortality and infant mortality rates in the former USSR, as well as high rates of birth deformities. In Aralsk, tuberculosis is common.

Humans are not the only ones affected. Of the 173 animal species that used to live around the Aral Sea, only 38 survive. Especially devastating has been the degradation of the big Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya deltas, with their diverse flora and fauna. The deltas have supported irrigated agriculture for

many centuries, along with hunting, fishing, and harvesting of reeds for building and papermaking. The dense *tugai* forests, unique to the valleys of these desert rivers, have shrunk to a fifth of their old size, causing a catastrophic drop in the once-abundant water bird population.

The local name for the Aral is the Aral Tenghiz, or Sea of Islands. Barsakelmes (the Place of No Return) Island, a nature reserve protecting the saiga antelope and the rare Asiatic wild ass, has reportedly become an unviable habitat because it is now so arid.

Nor can matters have been helped by the use of Vozrozhdenia Island as a Soviet biological warfare testing site (anthrax and plague were both released on the island) until it was abandoned in 1992. In 2002 the island's secrets were joined to the mainland by the exposed seabed. Ironically, the island's name in pious Russian means 'rebirth'.

LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS

Dozens of inquiries, projects and research teams have poked and prodded the Aral problem; locals joke that if every scientist who visited the Aral region had brought a bucket of water the problem would be over by now. The initial outcry over the disaster seems to have largely evaporated, along with the sea, and the focus has shifted from rehabilitating the sea, to stabilising part of the sea and now stabilising the environment around the sea.

To restore the Aral would require irrigation from the Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya to cease for three years, or at least a slashing of the irrigated area from over 70,000 to 40,000 sq km; in other words, a complete restructuring of the economies of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. No-one is seriously considering this.

Finally in 1988 a gradual increase in water flow to the sea was ordered, to be achieved by more efficient irrigation and an end to the expansion of irrigation. However, early promises of cooperation and money from the Central Asian leaders bore little fruit. The now annual Aral Sea convention of Central Asian leaders has achieved little, except to highlight conflicting claims to sections of the Amu-Darya. A US\$250-million World Bank scheme aims to clean up water supplies, improve sanitation and public health, restore some economic viability and biodiversity to the Amu-Darya delta, and stabilise the Aral's northern sea.

In 2003 the little channel still connecting the northern and southern seas was blocked by a 12.8km-long dike, preventing further water loss from the northern sea (see the boxed text, p151), but condemning the southern sea to oblivion. The northern sea is now expected to rise almost 3.5m and should reach a state of equilibrium, with an area of 3500 sq km, by about 2025. But if recent rates of depletion continue, the southern sea is expected to split again into western and eastern parts. The eastern part will receive the Amu-Darya and is expected eventually to stabilise into three lakes with the construction of small dikes, but the western part will go on shrinking.

Longer-term efforts may focus on building more dikes around parts of the sea, rehabilitating the blighted region around the sea and stabilising its fragile environment, improving water management and building up local institutions to manage these projects. Whether the will exists among Central Asia's politicians to introduce less water-intensive irrigation methods, or even less thirsty crops than cotton, remains to be seen.

Overgrazing

Overgrazing and soil degradation are major problems affecting all the Central Asian republics. The steady rise in livestock grazing has unhinged delicate ecosystems and accelerated desertification and soil erosion. From 1941 to

The best place to view the Aral disaster is Moynaq (p260), where you can see rusty fishing trawlers beached 150km from the sea.

In parts of Karakalpakstan (far-west Uzbekistan) more than one baby in 10 dies (compared to one in 100 or more in Britain or the USA), a rate largely attributable to health problems caused by the Aral Sea disaster.

www.cawater-info.net has info on Aral Sea and other water-related issues in Central Asia.

The Aral isn't the only body of water drying up. Lake Balkhash in Kazakhstan, which gets its water from the Ili River of Xinjiang, has shrunk by 2000 sq km in recent years.

A 600-year-old mausoleum recently discovered on the dried-out bed of the Aral Sea has indicated that Aral levels might be cyclical to some degree.

The Devil and The Disappearing Sea, by Robert Ferguson, gives a recent (2003) look at the politics of aid and corruption in Central Asia, with a car chase and murder accusation thrown in for good measure.

RETAIL THERAPY FOR SNOW LEOPARDS

At Ak Shyrak and Inylchek (Engilchek), two villages in Kyrgyzstan's remote Central Tian Shan, a US-based organisation called the Snow Leopard Trust is trying to help people increase their household income in a way that also helps protect snow leopards and their habitat.

Together with local partners, the Snow Leopard trust provides herders with training and equipment to produce handicrafts like felt rugs, handbags and slippers, using wool from their livestock. These products are marketed at stores in the US and through the Snow Leopard Trust's website (www.snowleopard.org). Members pledge not to kill snow leopards or wild sheep and goats (the snow leopard's most important large prey) and to follow sustainable herding practices. About half of households in Ak Shyrak, bordering the Sarychat-Ertash Reserve, currently participate in the programme.

1991 the population of sheep and goats more than doubled to 5.5 million in Turkmenistan and quadrupled to 10 million in Kyrgyzstan, while a third of Kyrgyzstan's available grasslands have disappeared.

In Kazakhstan much of the semiarid steppe, traditionally used as pasture over the centuries, was put to the plough under the Virgin Lands campaign (see p111). Wind erosion in the steppes of north Kazakhstan has accelerated soil depletion.

Soil degradation is also activated by failure to rotate crops and by excessive use of chemicals, and aggravated by irrigation-water mismanagement. In Kazakhstan, 40% of rangeland is considered to be overused, and will need 10 to 50 years to be restored to its original fertility. In Kyrgyzstan an estimated 70% of pastureland suffers erosion above acceptable levels. In Tajikistan the productivity of summer pastures in the mountains has dropped by 50% over the last 25 years and large areas of the Pamirs are threatened by desertification.

Pollution

Cotton is to blame for many of Central Asia's ills. Its present cultivation demands high levels of pesticides and fertilisers, which are now found throughout the food chain – in the water, in human and animal milk, in vegetables and fruit, and in the soil itself. In the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan 94% of soils contain DDT.

Kazakhstan, the third-largest industrial power in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), suffers particularly from industrial pollution, the worst culprits being power stations running on low-grade coal, and metallurgical factories. Lake Balkhash has been polluted by copper smelters established on its shores in the 1930s; bird and other lake life is now practically extinct. An added threat comes from a planned nuclear power station on the shores of the lake. There are also concerns about oil and other pollution draining into the Caspian Sea (see p111) and radioactive seepage from Soviet-era uranium mines in Kyrgyzstan (p278).

Mining techniques are inefficient, outdated and environmentally hazardous. In 1998 almost two tonnes of sodium cyanide destined for the Kumtor gold mine in Kyrgyzstan was spilled into the Barskoön River, which made its way into Issyk-Köl.

Poaching

The unfortunate combination of economic hardship, a sudden crisis in funding for wildlife protection and the opening of borders with China (the region's main market for illegal trafficking in animal parts) saw a huge rise in poaching after the fall of the Soviet Union, both as a food source and for trophies to sell for hard currency.

Tens of thousands of critically endangered saiga antelope are killed every year by poachers, who sell their horns to Chinese medicine makers. Musk deer, currently found in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Russia, are killed for their musk glands. Around 160 deer are killed for every 1kg of musk, making the musk worth three to four times its weight in gold. Tens of thousands of the deer have been killed in the last 20 years and numbers in Russia have fallen by 50%.

Several private and government travel agencies run hard-currency hunting expeditions. The high prices charged for trophies (US\$7500 for a Marco Polo sheep) can, in theory, fund wildlife protection and discourage local poaching by adding broader value to local endangered species. Ironically, one of the few places in Tajikistan not to have seen a dramatic drop in the number of ibex and Marco Polo sheep in recent years is the Jarty-Gumbaz hunting camp, where local poaching has almost completely ceased.

In the last few years the number of saiga (antelope) has dropped from over one million to less than 40,000.

Marco Polo sheep are named after the Italian traveller who first wrote of them, 'There are... wild sheep of great size, whose horns are a good six palms in length.'

Food & Drink

In the heavily Russian-populated cities of northern Kazakhstan and in all the Central Asian capitals, the dominant cuisine is Russian.

The Central Asian culinary experience is unlikely to be a highlight of your trip. Most restaurants and cafés serve only standard slop, which somehow seems to taste (and smell) indelibly of the old USSR. The situation has improved in recent years, particularly in the cities, with a rush of pleasant open-air cafés, fast-food joints and particularly Turkish restaurants. The best way to appreciate regional cuisines, and the region's extraordinary hospitality, is still at a meal in a private home.

For country-specific food-and-drink information, see the Food & Drink entries in each individual country chapter.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Central Asian food resembles that of the Middle East or the Mediterranean in its use of rice, savoury seasonings, vegetables and legumes, yogurt and grilled meats. Many dishes may seem familiar from elsewhere – *laghman* (similar to Chinese noodles), pilau or *plov* (similar to Persian rice pilafs), nan (flat breads found all over Asia), and *samsa* (the samosa of India). Others are more unusual, such as Kazakh horsemeat sausage.

The cuisine falls into three overlapping groups. First, there's the once-nomadic subsistence diet found in large areas of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan – mainly meat (including entrails), milk products and bread. Second, there's the diet of the Uzbeks and other settled Turks, which includes pilafs, kebabs, noodles and pasta, stews, elaborate breads and pastries. The third group is Persian, ranging from southern Uzbekistan to Tajikistan, which is distinguished by subtle seasoning, extensive use of vegetables, and fancy sweets.

Seasoning is usually mild, although sauces and chillies are offered to turn up the heat. Principal spices are black cumin, red and black peppers, barberries, coriander and sesame seeds. Common herbs are fresh coriander, dill, parsley, celeriac and basil. Other seasonings include wine vinegar and fermented milk products.

Ingredients

Mutton is the preferred meat. Big-bottomed sheep are prized for their fat, meat and wool, and fat from the sheep's tail costs more than the meat. The meat-to-fat ratio is generally stacked heavily in favour (and flavour) of the fat, and you will soon find that everything smells of it. Sheep's head is a great delicacy, which may be served to honoured guests in some homes.

Produce is at its most bountiful around September. In general, May is the best time for apricots, strawberries and cherries, June for peaches, and July for grapes and figs. Melons ripen in late summer, but are available in the markets as late as January.

You can find caviar and seafood dishes in western Kazakhstan, near the Caspian Sea. Dried and smoked fish are sold near Issyk-Köl.

Standards

The ubiquitous shashlyk – kebabs of fresh or marinated mutton, beef, minced meat (*farsh* or *lyulya kebab*) or, in restaurants, chicken – is usually served with nan and vinegary onions. The quality varies from inedible to additively delicious. Liver kebabs are known in Turkic as *jiger*.

Plov (*pilau* in Tajikistan) consists mainly of rice with fried and boiled meat, onions and carrots, and sometimes raisins, chickpeas or fruit slices,

all cooked up in a hemispherical cauldron called a *kazan*. *Plov* is always the *pièce de résistance* when entertaining guests and Uzbekistan is the *plov* capital of Central Asia.

Stout noodles (*laghman*) distinguish Central Asian cuisine from any other. *Laghman* is served everywhere, especially as the base for a spicy soup (usually called *laghman* too), which includes fried mutton, peppers, tomatoes and onions. Korean, Uyghur and Dungan noodles are generally the best.

Other soups include *shorpa* (*shurpa* or *sorpo*), boiled mutton on the bone with potatoes, carrots and turnips; *manpar* (noodle bits, meat, vegetables and mild seasoning in broth); and Russian borsht (beetroot soup).

Nan (*non* to Uzbeks and Tajiks; *lepyoshka* in Russian), usually baked in a *tandyr* (tandoori) oven, is served at every meal. Some varieties are prepared with onions, meat or sheep's-tail fat in the dough; others have anise, poppy or sesame seeds placed on top. Nan also serves as an impromptu plate for shashlyks. Homemade breads are often thicker and darker than normal nan. Boring, square, white-flour Russian loaves are known simply as *khleb*.

Salads are a refreshing break from heavy main courses, although you'll soon tire of the dreaded salat tourist (sliced tomatoes and cucumbers). Parsley, fresh coriander, green onions and dill are served and eaten whole.

Snacks

There are four other variations on the meat-and-dough theme – steamed, boiled, baked and fried. *Manty* (steamed dumplings) are a favourite from Mongolia to Turkey. *Chuchvara* (*tushbera* in Tajik, *pelmeny* in Russian) are a smaller boiled cousin of *manty*, served plain or with vinegar, sour cream or butter, or in soups. Both are sometimes fried.

One of the most common and disappointing street foods are *piroshki*, greasy Russian fried pies filled with potatoes or meat.

Fruits are eaten fresh, cooked, dried or made into preserves, jams and drinks known as *kompot* or *sokh*. Central Asians are fond of dried fruits and nuts, particularly apricots and apricot stones, which when cracked open have a pith that tastes like pistachios. At any time of year you'll find delicious walnuts, peanuts, raisins and almonds, plus great jams (sea-buckthorn jam is a real treat) and wonderful mountain honey.

Milk Products

Central Asia is known for the richness and delicacy of its fermented dairy products, which use cow, sheep, goat, camel or horse milk. The milk itself is probably unpasteurised, but its cultured derivatives are safe if kept in hygienic conditions.

The fresh yogurt served up to guests in the mountain pastures of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan will be the best you've ever tasted. Yogurt can be strained to make *suzma*, which is like tart cottage or cream cheese, and used as a garnish or added to soups. *Ayran* is a salty yogurt/water mix, the Russian equivalent is called *kefir*; don't confuse this with the Russians' beloved *smetana* (sour cream). *Katyk* is a thinner, drinkable yogurt. Many doughs and batters incorporate sour milk products, giving them a tangy flavour.

The final stage in the milk cycle is *kurut*, which is dried *suzma* (often rolled into marble-size balls), a rock hard travel snack with the half-life of uranium. Scrape away the outer layer if you're uneasy about cleanliness.

Tvorog is a Russian speciality, made from soured milk, which is heated to curdle. This is hung in cheesecloth overnight to strain off the whey. The closest Central Asian equivalent is *suzma*. *Kaimak* is pure sweet cream, skimmed

Food Culture in Russia & Central Asia, by Glenn Mack & Asele Surina, is a detailed look at everything from *plov* (pilaf) to *piroshki* (fried potato or meat pies).

A favourite snack is the *samsa* (*sambusa* in Tajik), a meat pie made with flaky puff pastry, and baked in a tandoori oven – at their best in Kyrgyzstan.

Central Asians of every ethnic group love ice cream (*marozhnoe* in Russian). You'll find a freezer of the stuff almost anywhere.

NASVAI

You might notice some men chewing and copiously spitting, or talking as if their mouth is full of saliva. *Nasvai* (also known as *nasvar* or *noz*) is basically finely crushed tobacco, sometimes cut with spices, ash or lime. As a greenish sludge or as little pellets, it's stuffed under the tongue or inside the cheek, from where the active ingredients leach into the bloodstream, revving up the user's heart rate. Amateurs who fail to clamp it tightly in place, thus allowing the effluent to leak into the throat, might be consumed with nausea.

Before you try it, bear in mind that *nasvai* is sometimes cut with opium and can be quite potent.

from fresh milk that has sat overnight. This wickedly tasty breakfast item, wonderful with honey, is available in many markets in the early morning, but sells out fast, usually by sunrise.

Turkish Food

Turkish restaurants are popping up everywhere in Central Asia and most are excellent value. *Pides* are similar to thin-crust pizzas; *lahmacun* is a cheaper, less substantial version. Kebabs are popular, especially Adana kebabs (mince-meat patties) and delicious Iskander kebabs (thinly sliced mutton over bread, with yogurt and rich tomato sauce). *Patlıcan* (aubergine) and *dolma* (stuffed peppers) are the most common vegetable dishes. *Çaçık* is a delicious yogurt, cucumber and mint dip and makes a great snack with *lavash*, a huge bread similar to nan but lighter. Desserts include baklava (light pastry covered in syrup) and *sütlac* (rice pudding).

Holiday Food

A big occasion for eating is Navrus (see p450), a celebration of the spring equinox. Along with *plov* and other traditional fare, several dishes are served at this time in particular. The traditional Navrus dish, prepared only by women, is *sumalak* – wheat soaked in water for three days until it sprouts, then ground, mixed with oil, flour and sugar, and cooked on a low heat for 24 hours. *Halim* is a porridge of boiled meat and wheat grains, seasoned with black pepper and cinnamon, prepared just for men. *Nishalda* (*nishollo* in Tajik) – whipped egg whites, sugar and liquorice flavouring – is also popular during Ramadan. To add to this, seven items, all beginning with the Arabic sound 'sh', are laid on the dinner table during Navrus – wine (*sharob*), milk (*shir*), sweets (*shirinliklar*), sugar (*shakar*), sherbet (*sharbat*), a candle (*sham*) and a new bud (*shona*). Candles are a throwback to pre-Islamic traditions and the new bud symbolises the renewal of life.

A special holiday dish in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is *beshbarmak* (*besbarmak* in Kazakh, *shilpildok* in Uzbek, *myasa po-kazakhskiy* in Russian), large flat noodles with lamb and/or horsemeat and cooked in vegetable broth (the Kazakh version serves the broth separately). It means 'five fingers' since it was traditionally eaten by hand.

DRINKS Tea

Chay (чай; *choy* to Uzbeks and Tajiks, *shay* to Kazakhs) is drunk with reverence. Straight green tea (*kok* in Turkic languages; *zelyonnyy* in Russian) is the favourite; locals claim it beats the heat and unblocks you after too much greasy *plov*. Black tea (*kara* in Turkic languages; *chyonnyy chay* in Russian) is preferred in Samarkand and Urgench, and by most Russians. Turkmen call green tea *gek* and black tea *gara*.

Uzbek men usually stay out of the kitchen but are almost always in charge of preparing *plov*; an *oshpaz*, or master chef, can cook up a special *plov* for thousands on special occasions.

TEAHOUSES

The *chaikhana* or teahouse (*chaykhana* in Turkmen, *chaykana* in Kyrgyz, *choyhona* in Uzbek and Tajik, *shaykhana* in Kazakh) is male Central Asia's essential sociogastronomic institution, especially in Uzbekistan. Usually shaded, often near a pool or stream, it's as much a men's club as an eatery – although women, including foreigners, are tolerated. Old and young congregate to eat or to drink pot after pot of green tea and talk the day away.

Traditional seating is on a bedlike platform called a *tapchan*, covered with a carpet and topped with a low table. Take your shoes off to sit on the platform, or leave them on and hang your feet over.

Western Turkmen brew tea with *chal* (camel's milk) and Pamiris use goat's milk. Kazakh tea is taken with milk, salt and butter – the nomadic equivalent of fast food – hot, tasty and high in calories.

Nonalcoholic Drinks

Don't drink the tap water. Cheap bottled mineral water is easy to find, but it's normally gassy and very mineral tasting. Modern joint-venture brands are more expensive but taste a lot better, though most are carbonated. Companies such as Coca-Cola have factories in all the republics and their products are everywhere.

Tins of cheap imported instant coffee can be found everywhere; hot water (*kipitok*) is easy to drum up from a hotel floor-lady or homestay.

Alcoholic Drinks

VODKA & BEER

Despite their Muslim heritage, most Central Asians drink. If you don't enjoy hard booze and heavy drinking, make your excuses early. Like the Russians who introduced them to vodka, Central Asians take their toasts seriously and a foreign male guest may be expected to offer the first toast.

Given the depth of Central Asian hospitality it's impolite to refuse the initial 'bottoms up' (Russian – *vashe zdorovye!*), and/or abstain from at least a symbolic sip at each toast. But there's usually heavy pressure to drain your glass every time – so as not to give offence, it is implied – and the pressure only increases as everybody gets loaded. It's worth knowing that while Russian dictionaries define *chut chut* as 'a little bit', when applied to a shot of vodka it would appear to mean 'up to the rim'.

Apart from the endless array of industrial-strength vodkas, you'll find a wide range of Russian and European beers (*pivo*) for around US\$1 to US\$2 a can. The St Petersburg's Baltika is the brew of choice and comes in a wide range of numbers from 0 (nonalcoholic) to 9 (very strong). Baltikas 3 and 6 are the most popular. Popular beers on tap include Tian-Shansky, Shimkent (both Kazakh) and Siberian Crown (Russian). The first time you order a local Berk Beer in Turkmenistan always seems to raise a smile.

KUMYS & OTHER ATTRACTIONS

Kumys (properly *kymys* in Kyrgyz; *qymyz* in Kazakh) is fermented mare's milk, a mildly (2% to 3%) alcoholic drink appreciated by Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, even those who no longer spend much time in the saddle (nonalcoholic varieties are also made). It's available only in spring and summer, when mares are foaling, and takes around three days to ferment. The milk is put into a *chelek* (wooden bucket or barrel) and churned with a wooden plunger called a *bishkek* (from where that city derives its name).

Locals will tell you that *kumys* cures anything from a cold to TB but drinking too much of it may give you diarrhoea. The best *kumys* comes from the

herders themselves; the stuff available in the cities is sometimes diluted with cow's milk or water.

Kazakhs and Kyrgyz also like a thick, yeasty, slightly fizzy concoction called *bozo*, made from boiled fermented millet or other grains. Turkmen, Kazakh and Karakalpak nomads like *shubat* (fermented camel's milk).

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

You can eat in streetside stalls and cafés, private and state-run restaurants and chaikhana's and, best of all, in private homes. There has recently been an explosion of private restaurants in larger towns and you can now eat well and cheaply, a great improvement on a few years ago. In smaller towns, restaurants, if they exist at all, can be pretty dire, and hotels may have the only edible food outside private homes.

A few restaurants (*askhana* in Kazakh and Kyrgyz, *oshhona* in Uzbek) in bigger cities offer interesting Central Asian, Turkish, Chinese, Georgian, Korean or European dishes and earnest service.

Outside the cities, Russians and Russified locals don't expect good food from restaurants. What they want at midday is a break. What they want in the evening is a night out – lots of booze and gale-force techno music or a variety show. Even if there's no music blasting when you come in, the kind staff will most likely turn on (or turn up) the beat especially for the foreigners.

The canteen (столовая; *stolovaya*) is the ordinary citizen's eatery – dreary but cheap, with a limited choice of cutlet or lukewarm *laghman*.

Certain old-town neighbourhoods of Tashkent and Samarkand have home restaurants offering genuine home-style cuisine. There is rarely a sign; family members simply solicit customers on the street, and the competition can be intense.

Midrange and top-end restaurants are limited to Tashkent, Bishkek, Dushanbe and Almaty. The food is generally well-prepared European cuisine, with the occasional Siberian salmon or black caviar to liven things up.

Self-Catering

Every sizable town has a colourful bazaar (*rynok* in Russian) or farmers market with hectares of fresh and dried fruit, vegetables, walnuts, peanuts, honey, cheese, bread, meat and eggs. Private shops now sell a decent range of European and Russian goods.

Korean and Dungan vendors sell spicy *kimchi* (vegetable salads), a great antidote for mutton overdose. Russians flog *pelmeny*, *piroshki* (deep-fried meat or potato pies) and yogurt. Fresh honey on hot-from-the-oven nan makes a splendid breakfast.

Don't be afraid to haggle (with a smile) – everybody else does. As a foreigner you may be quoted twice the normal price or, on the other hand, given a bit extra. Insist on making your own choices or you may end up with second-rate produce. Most produce is sold by the kilo.

The odd state food store (*gastronom*) exists here and there, stocked with a few bits of cheese and dozens of cans of Soviet-made 'Beef in its own Juice' stacked up along the windowsill.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Central Asia can be difficult for vegetarians; indeed the whole concept of vegetarianism is unfathomable to most locals. Those determined to avoid meat will need to visit plenty of farmers markets.

In restaurants, you'll see lots of tomato and cucumber salads. *Laghman* or soup may be ordered without meat, but the broth is usually meat-based. In private homes there is always bread, jams, salads, whole greens and herbs on

Don't misread meat prices on menus in fancier restaurants – they are often given as per 100g, not per serving (which is often more like 250g to 400g).

Bear in mind that many Russian main dishes are just that and you'll have to order garnishes (rice, potatoes or vegetables) separately.

Perhaps the best opportunity to sample authentic Kyrgyz, Dungan and Tartar specialties is Kyrgyzstan's Festival of National Cuisine and Folklore, held near Issyk-Köl in July – see p310.

the table, and you should be able to put in a word to your host in advance. Even if you specifically ask for vegetarian dishes you'll often discover the odd piece of meat snuck in somewhere – after a while it all seems a bit of a conspiracy.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

There are a few social conventions that you should try to follow.

Devout Muslims consider the left hand unclean, and handling food with it at the table, especially in a private home and with communal dishes, can be off-putting. At a minimum, no-one raises food to the lips with the left hand. Try to accept cups and plates of food only with the right hand.

Bread is considered sacred in Central Asia. Don't put it on the ground, turn it upside down or throw it away (leave it on the table or floor cloth). If someone offers you tea in passing and you don't have time for it, they may offer you bread instead. It is polite to break off a piece and eat it, followed by the *amin* (see the boxed text, below). If you arrive with nan at a table, break it up into several pieces for everyone to share.

The *dastarkhan* is the central cloth laid on the floor, which acts as the dining table. Never put your foot on or step on this. Try to walk behind, not in front of people when leaving your place at the *dastarkhan* and don't step over any part of someone's body. Try not to point the sole of your shoe or foot at anyone as you sit on the floor. Don't eat after the *amin*. This signals thanks for and an end to the meal.

Hospitality

If you're invited home for a meal this can be your best introduction to local customs and traditions as well as to local cuisine. Don't go expecting a quick bite. Your host is likely to take the occasion very seriously. Uzbeks, for example, say *mehmon otanda ulugh*, 'the guest is greater than the father'.

It's important to arrive with a gift. Something for the table (eg some fruit from the market) will do. Better yet would be something for your hosts' children or their parents, preferably brought from your home country (eg sweets, postcards, badges, a picture book). Pulling out your own food or offering to pay someone for their kindness is likely to humiliate them (although some travellers hosted by very poor people have given a small cash gift to the eldest child, saying that it's 'for sweets'). Don't be surprised if you aren't thanked: gifts are taken more as evidence of God's grace than of your generosity.

You should be offered water for washing, as you may be eating with your hands at some point. Dry your hands with the cloth provided; shaking the water off your hands is said to be impolite.

Wait until you are told where to sit; honoured guests are often seated by Kyrgyz or Kazakh hosts opposite the door (so as not to be disturbed by traffic through it, and because that is the warmest seat in a yurt). Men (and foreign women guests) might eat separately from women and children of the family.

The meal might begin with a mumbled prayer, followed by tea. The host breaks and distributes bread. After bread, nuts or sweets to 'open the appetite', business or entertainment may begin.

AMIN

After a meal or prayers, or sometimes when passing a grave site, you might well see both men and women bring their cupped hands together and pass them down their face as if washing. This is the *amin*, a Muslim gesture of thanks, common throughout the region.

'Without meat' is *etsiz* in Turkmen, *atsiz* in Kazakh and Kyrgyz, *goshsiz* in Uyghur, *gushtsiz* in Uzbek, and *bez myasa* in Russian.

TEA ETIQUETTE

Tea is the drink of hospitality, offered first to every guest, and almost always drunk from a *piala* (small bowl). From a fresh pot, the first cup of tea is often poured away (to clean the *piala*) and then a *piala* of tea is poured out and returned twice into the pot to brew the tea. A cup filled only a little way up is a compliment, allowing your host to refill it often and keep its contents warm (the offer of a full *piala* of tea is a subtle invitation that it's time to leave).

Pass and accept tea with the right hand; it's extra polite to put the left hand over the heart as you do this. If your tea is too hot, don't blow on it, but swirl it gently in the cup without spilling any. If it has grown cold, your host will throw it away before refilling the cup.

The meal itself is something of a free-for-all. Food is served, and often eaten, from common plates, with hands or big spoons. Pace yourself – eat too slowly and someone may ask if you're ill or unhappy; too eagerly and your plate will be immediately refilled. Praise the cook early and often; your host will worry if you're too quiet.

Traditionally, a host will honour an important guest by sacrificing a sheep for them. During these occasions the guest is given the choicest cuts, such as the eyeball, brain or meat from the right cheek of the animal.

If alcohol consumption is modest, the meal will end as it began, with tea and a prayer.

The cuts of meat served are often symbolic; the tongue is served to someone who should be more eloquent and children get the ears, to help them be better listeners.

EAT YOUR WORDS

We have used mostly Russian words and phrases in this section.

Useful Phrases in Russian

I can't eat meat.

ya ni em myasnovo

Я не ем мясного.

I'm a vegetarian.

ya vegetarianka (female)/ya vegetarianets (male)

Я вегетарианка./Я вегетарианец.

Can I have the menu please?

dai'te, pazhalsta, myenyu

Дайте, пожалуйста, меню?

How much is it/this?

skol'ka eta stoit

Сколько это стоит?

May I have the bill?

schyot, pazhalsta

Счёт, пожалуйста?

Menu Decoder

A typical menu is divided into *zakuski* (cold appetisers), *pervye* (first courses, ie soups and hot appetisers), *vtorye* (second or main courses) and *sladkiye* (desserts). Main dishes may be further divided into *firmennyye* (house specials), *natsionalnyye* (national, ie local, dishes), *myasnyye* (meat), *rybnyye* (fish), *iz ptitsy* (poultry) and *ovoshchnyye* (vegetable) dishes.

Don't be awed by the menu; they won't have most of it, just possibly the items with prices written in.

SALADS

agurets (огурец) – cucumber

chuisky salat (чуйский салат) – spicy carrot salad in vinaigrette

Frantsuzky salat (Французский салат) – beetroot, carrots and French fries

gribi (грибы) – mushrooms

kapustiy salat (капустный салат) – cabbage salad

kartoshka (картошка) – potato

mimosa salat (салат мимоза) – fish and shredded-potato salad

The prize for 'Most Surreal Place to Eat' goes to the Hound Dog Hole in the US embassy in Almaty (guests only), where food is prepared in Elvis Presley's kitchen (he bought it while serving in the military).

morkovi salat (морковный салат) – carrot salad

olivye salat (салат оливье) – potato, ham, peas and mayonnaise

pomidor (помидор) – tomato

salat iz svezhei kapusty (салат из свежей капусты) – raw cabbage salad

salat tourist (салат турист) – sliced tomatoes and cucumbers

stolichnyy (столичный) – beef, potatoes, eggs, carrots, mayonnaise and apples

MEAT, POULTRY & FISH

antrecot (антрекот) – steak

befstroganov (бефстроганов) – beef stroganoff

bifshteks (биштекс) – 'beefsteak', glorified hamburger

bitochki (биточки) – cutlet

farel (форель) – trout

frikadela (фрикаделька) – fried meatballs

galuptsi (голубцы) – cabbage rolls stuffed with rice and meat

gavyadina (говядина) – beef

gulyash (гуляш) – a dismal miscellany of meat, vegetables and potatoes

kotleta po-Kievski (котлета по-киевски) – chicken Kiev

kuritsa (курица) – chicken

lyulya kebab (люля кебаб) – beef or mutton meatballs

ragu (рагу) – beef stew

shashlyk iz baraniny (шашлык из баранины) – mutton kebabs

shashlyk iz okorochkov (шашлык из окорочков) – chicken kebabs

shashlyk iz pecheni (шашлык из печени) – liver kebabs

sosiski (сосиски) – frankfurter sausage

sudak zharey (судак жареный) – fried pike or perch

SNACKS

chuchvara (чучвара) – dumplings

kolbasa (колбаса) – sausage

laghman (лагман) – noodles, mutton and vegetables

nan (нон) – bread

pelmeni (пельмени) – small dumplings in soup

samsa (самса) – samosa (meat pie)

GARNISHES

grechka (гречка) – boiled barley

kartofel fri (картофель фри) – French fries, chips

kartofel pure (картофельное пюре) – mashed potato

makarony (макаронны) – macaroni, pasta

ris (рис) – rice

SOUPS

borsht (борщ) – beetroot and potato soup, often with sour cream

okroshka (окрошка) – cold or hot soup made from sour cream, potatoes, eggs and meat

rassolnik s myasam (рассольник с мясом) – soup of marinated cucumber and kidney

shorpa – soup of boiled mutton on the bone with potatoes, carrots and turnips

manpar – noodle bits, meat, vegetables and mild seasoning in broth

Food Glossary

FRUIT & VEGETABLES

agurets cucumber

pomidor tomato

gribi mushrooms

kartoshka potato

MEAT, POULTRY & FISH

<i>beshbarmak</i>	chunks of meat served atop flat squares of pasta. The broth from the meat is drunk separately.
<i>farel</i>	trout
<i>gavyadina</i>	beef
<i>karta</i>	horsemeat sausage
<i>kazy</i>	smoked horsemeat sausage
<i>kolbasa</i>	sausage
<i>kuurdak</i>	fatty stew of meat, offal and potato
<i>kuritsa</i>	chicken
<i>shashlyk</i>	kebab

DAIRY & FARM PRODUCE

<i>ayran</i>	salty yogurt/water mix
<i>kurut</i>	dried suzma (see below)
<i>kaimak</i>	sweet cream
<i>marozhenoe</i>	ice cream
<i>sir</i>	cheese
<i>smetana</i>	sour cream
<i>suzma</i>	strained yogurt, similar to tart cottage or cream cheese
<i>yitso</i>	egg

SNACKS

<i>samsa</i>	samosa (meat pie)
<i>manty</i>	steamed dumplings
<i>myod (assal in Turkic)</i>	honey
<i>nan</i>	bread
<i>nahud sambusa</i>	chickpea samosas
<i>nahud shavla</i>	chickpea porridge
<i>barsook</i>	fried bits of dough

PASTA, RICE, NOODLES & GRAINS

<i>laghman</i>	noodles, mutton and vegetables*
<i>plov</i>	rice pilaf
<i>Tuhum barak</i>	egg-filled ravioli coated with sesame-seed oil

DRINKS

<i>bozo</i>	beverage made from fermented millet
<i>chay</i>	tea
<i>katyk</i>	thin, drinkable yogurt
<i>kompot</i>	juice/fruit squash
<i>kumys</i>	fermented mare's milk
<i>mineralnaya vada</i>	mineral water
<i>piva</i>	beer
<i>sok</i>	juice
<i>shubat</i>	fermented camel's milk

Activities

The soaring peaks, rolling pasturelands and desert tracts of Central Asia offer some of the region's finest active adventures. Make like the Kazakh hordes and ride horses across the Tian Shan, explore the Pamirs on foot like the first Russian imperial explorers, or live the Silk Road dream on a camel trek across the Kyzylkum desert – these are just some of the ways to get under the skin and into the landscapes of Central Asia.

With few facilities, tricky paperwork and modest traveller infrastructure, the 'stans aren't the easiest place for do-it-yourself adventurers. The good news is that the ever-increasing network of community-based tourism projects offers thrilling new opportunities to get off the map and meet locals on their own terms. Once the exclusive playing fields of Soviet scientists and Eastern European alpinists, these days you are almost guaranteed to have these magical places to yourself. See the Itineraries chapter (p24) for a variety of trips available throughout the region.

TREKKING

Central Asia is not only one of the world's great trekking destinations but also one of its best kept secrets. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and southeastern Kazakhstan hold the cream of the mountain scenery thanks to the mighty spurs of the Tian Shan and Pamir ranges. See the 'Top Trekking Areas' boxed text (below) for a list of the most popular trekking destinations and cross-references to coverage in the text.

With many established routes and excellent trekking companies, Kyrgyzstan is the best republic for budget trekking. Treks here have the added bonus of adding on a visit to a eagle-hunter or a night or two in a yurt en route.

Tajikistan packs a double whammy, with the Fan Mountains in the west and high Pamirs in the east. The former offers a wide range of route options and difficulties, plus dozens of turquoise lakes. Treks in the Pamirs are more hardcore and anyone but the most experienced trekkers will really need professionals with them for these remote, demanding routes. See p391 for a list of the easier Pamir trek options.

In Kazakhstan, the mountains south of Almaty conceal some great mountain scenery, just an hour's drive from the city. Other less-visited regions in Kazakhstan include the Zhungar Alatau range east of Taldyqorghan and the Altay Mountains in the far northeast.

For some off-the-beaten-treks in Kyrgyzstan, not covered in this guide, try the three-day trek from Sokuluk Canyon to Suusamy Valley; from Shamsy

For an overview of trekking options in Tajikistan check out the excellent trekking section of www.pamirs.org.

TOP TREKKING AREAS

- Fan Mountains (p374), Tajikistan
- Tian Shan (p308), around Karakol, Kyrgyzstan
- Around Arslanbob (p331), Kyrgyzstan
- Geisev Valley (p383), western Pamirs, Tajikistan
- Khan Tengri and Inylchek Glacier – from Kyrgyzstan (p313) or Kazakhstan (p312)
- Around Almaty, Kazakhstan – either from Bolshoe Almatinskoe Lake (see p133 and p136) and Medeu (p131), or around the Kolsay Lakes (p134).
- Ala-Archa National Park (p292), Kyrgyzstan

to yurtstays at Sarala-Saz; or from Kyzyl-Oi to Köl Tör lakes. Another option is the trek from Chong-Kemin Valley to Grigorievka or to Jasy-Köl and back; arrange horses in Kaindy (p293).

What Kind of Trek?

Self-supported trekking is possible but not easy in Central Asia. There are no trekking lodges like the ones you'd find in Nepal and few porters, so you will have to carry all your own food for the trek. Public transport to the trail heads can be patchy, slow and uncomfortable so it's generally worth shelling out the extra money for a taxi. Some trekking areas are at the junction of several republics, requiring you to carry multiple simultaneous visas and a fistful of different currencies. It is possible to hire donkeys at many trail

COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

At the end of the 1990s, with few economic options left to Kyrgyzstan, development organisations started to look to a new form of tourism to support remote communities. The idea was to help connect intrepid tourists to a series of service providers, from drivers to herders, in a fair and equitable way, while supporting local craft production and sustainable tourism practices.

The phenomenon started in Kochkor in central Kyrgyzstan with Swiss help (Helvetas) and has since rapidly spread throughout the region. Today these community-based tourism organisations offer you some of Central Asia's best and most exciting experiences, at fantastic value. The bottom line is that you'll sleep better in your yurtstay at night knowing that your money is going directly to the family you are staying with, rather than a middleman in Bishkek or abroad.

Community Based Tourism (CBT; p277; www.cbtkyrgyzstan.kg) in Kyrgyzstan is the region's leader, with a network across the country in a dozen locations, sometimes overlapping with original organisation Shepherd's Life. Most towns in Kyrgyzstan have CBT-inspired homestays and the organisation now offers everything from homestays and horse treks (see 'Horse Trips' in this chapter) to folk music concerts and horse-racing festivals. See the boxed text on opposite for a rundown of the best CBT adventures in Kyrgyzstan.

In Tajikistan, **Murgab Ecotourism Association** (META; p388; <http://phiproject.free.fr>) offers fantastic adventure in the Pamirs and can put you in touch with remote yurtstays, fixed price 4WD hire and English-speaking guides in a region devoid of any formal tourist infrastructure. **Mountain Societies Development and Support Project (MSDSP)** in Khorog has helped establish homestays in the eastern Pamir and recently initiated a homestay and hiking programme in the Geisev Valley (see p383).

The hub for ecotourism in Kazakhstan is the **Ecotourism Information Resource Centre** (EIRC; p117; www.ecotourism.kz), which offers similar grassroots adventures and homestays, from flamingo-watching at Korgalzhyn Nature Reserve to horse riding in Sayram-Ugam National Park, though at higher prices than elsewhere in the region. See p112 for a run down of ecotourism options in Kazakhstan, including horse treks and nature trips at Lepsinsk and Aksu-Zhabaghly Nature Reserve.

Community-based tourism is even starting to make its way into Uzbekistan through a Unesco-supported programme in the Nuratau-Kyzylkum Biosphere Reserve (see the boxed text, p236).

In addition to gung-ho adventures, most community-tourism organisations offer a range of cultural activities. CBT can organise displays of felt-making or eagle-hunting. EIRC arranges fun *kumys*-making workshops and concerts of traditional Kazakh music.

Programme coordinators in CBT or META sustain themselves through a 15% commission or, in the case of Shepherd's Life a small coordinator's fee. A few teething problems remain to be addressed, including issues with nepotism and service providers breaking away and founding their own rival businesses, and most of the organisations are not yet financially self-supporting. Remember also that these are not professional tourism companies, so pack a sense of humour and expect some delays and schedule changes during your trip.

Community-based tourism projects are a fantastic resource for independent travellers and deserve your support. Expect the experience to rank amongst the highlights of your travels.

TOP COMMUNITY TOURISM ADVENTURES IN KYRGYZSTAN

The following adventurous trips can be arranged by the various CBT branches in Kyrgyzstan and offer exciting ways to get off-the-beaten track without blowing your budget.

- Two- or three-day horse trip across the *jailoo* (summer pasture) from Kyzart or Jumgal to Song-Köl (p318).
- Four-day trek from Arslanbob to the holy lakes of the Köl-Mazar (p331).
- Trekking in the alpine valleys behind Karakol (see the boxed text, p308).
- Trek through a Unesco Biosphere from Talas to Sary-Chelek (five days) or from Kara-Suu to Sary-Chelek (two to three days; p329).
- Excursion to Chatyr-Köl from Tash Rabat – day hike/horse trip or overnight at the lake (p325).
- Overnight horse trek from Kazarman to petroglyphs at Sailmaluu Tash (p323).
- Intrepid seven-day horse trek from Echki-Bashy (near Naryn) to Bokonbayevo or four-days to Song-Köl (p321).
- Three-day trip from Kochkor to Köl Ükök lake (p317).
- Eagle hunting in Bokonbayevo (p312).

heads (eg in the Fan Mountains) and hire horses (around US\$10 per day) in Kyrgyzstan. Companies such as CBT and META (see the boxed text, opposite) can often offer logistical support.

You can hire tents, sleeping bags and stoves from Bishkek and Karakol but in general, good gear, particularly sleeping bags, is hard to find in the region. A multifuel (petrol) stove is most useful, though you will need to clean the burners regularly as local fuel is of extremely poor quality. Camping gas canisters are generally available in Karakol.

Karakol is the main centre of trekking. The tourist information centre here sells 1:100,000 topo maps and has a folder detailing trekking routes. Several companies here offer a range of logistical support.

Trustworthy local knowledge, and preferably a local guide, are essential for trekking in Central Asia. The various branches of CBT (p277) in Kyrgyzstan can put you in touch with a guide for US\$10, though for someone with a guaranteed knowledge of mountain routes you are better off arranging this with a trekking agency for between US\$15 and US\$20 per person per day.

There are lots of competent trekking agencies in Central Asia who can arrange a full service trek. See the Adventure Travel Operators in Central Asia list, p100, for the most reliable. Treks organised through local trekking agencies cost from US\$50 per person per day, far cheaper than international companies.

Foreign trekking companies such as **Himalayan Kingdoms** (www.himalayankingdoms.com), **Explore Worldwide** (www.explore.co.uk), **Exodus** (www.exodus.co.uk), **KE Adventure** (www.keadventure.com) and **World Expeditions** (www.worldexpeditions.com) run treks in the Inylchek/Khan Tengri region and the Fan Mountains.

When to Go

The best walking season is June to September, but be ready for bad weather at any time. Most high-altitude treks or climbs take place in July or August; lower areas can be scorching hot during these months.

Trekking Permits & Problems

Permits are needed in some areas of Kazakhstan, including Lepsinsk, the Altay region and the Zhungar Alatau. These take up to three weeks to procure (see p181) so apply ahead of time if you plan to trek in these regions.

Trekking in Russia & Central Asia by Frith Maier is an unrivalled guide to the former USSR's wild places. It has 77 pages of Central Asia route descriptions, plus chapters of useful background and planning info. Unfortunately it's now seriously dated, as it was written in 1994.

RESPONSIBLE TREKKING

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of Central Asia, consider the following tips when trekking.

Rubbish

- Carry out all your rubbish. Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as silver paper, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Empty packaging should be stored in a dedicated rubbish bag. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish: digging disturbs soil and ground cover, and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Minimise waste by taking minimal packaging and no more food than you will need. Take reusable containers or stuff sacks.
- Sanitary napkins, tampons, condoms and toilet paper should be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.

Human Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, please use it. Where there is none, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm (6in) deep and at least 100m (320ft) from any watercourse. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. In snow, dig down to the soil.
- Ensure that these guidelines are applied to a portable toilet tent if one is being used by a large trekking party. Encourage all party members, including porters, to use the site.

Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable.
- For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a water container (or even a lightweight, portable basin) at least 50m (160ft) away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully.
- Wash cooking utensils 50m (160ft) from watercourses using a scourer, sand or snow instead of detergent.

Erosion

- Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing tracks and avoid short cuts.
- If a well-used track passes through a mud patch, walk through the mud so as not to increase the size of the patch.
- Avoid removing the plant life that keeps topsoils in place.

Fires & Low-Impact Cooking

- Don't depend on open fires for cooking. The cutting of wood for fires in popular trekking areas can cause rapid deforestation. Cook on a light-weight kerosene, alcohol or Shellite (white gas) stove and avoid those powered by disposable butane gas canisters.
- Fires may be acceptable below the tree line in areas that get very few visitors. If you light a fire, use an existing fireplace. Don't surround fires with rocks. Use only dead, fallen wood. Remember the adage 'the bigger the fool, the bigger the fire'. Use minimal wood, just what you need for cooking. In huts, leave wood for the next person.
- Ensure that you fully extinguish a fire after use. Spread the embers and flood them with water.

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

When trekking over the Zailiysky Alatau range between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the lack of border posts (and thus a visa entry stamp) can cause potential problems when you leave the country. Travel agencies can usually smooth over the problem, otherwise you'll have to hike back over into the republic you started from.

While most commonly used trekking routes are quite safe, there have been problems in the past with bandits in the mountains between Almaty and Lake Issyk-Köl. Some trekking routes, especially those in southern Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, traverse some remote areas that are ripe opium-growing territory. American climbers were kidnapped in this region in 2000. Discuss your route with a trekking agency before you wander off into these hills and, if possible, take a local guide.

Maps

The following trekking/climbing maps for Central Asia are published and available abroad:

Central Tian Shan (EWP; www.ewpnet.com) 1:150,000; Inylchek Glacier and surroundings.

Fan Mountains (EWP; www.ewpnet.com) 1:100,000; Fan Mountains in Tajikistan.

Pamir Trans Alai Mountains (EWP; www.ewpnet.com) 1:200,000; Pik Lenin and the Fedchenko Glacier.

Pik Lenin (Gecko Maps; www.geckomaps.com) 1:100,000; topographical map of the mountain.

Geoid (see p279) in Bishkek sells useful maps of major central Tian Shan trekking regions for the equivalent of about US\$3 each.

Firma Geo (see p116) in Almaty sells a wide variety of topographic and trekking maps from 1:25,000 to 1:100,000, as well as more general maps.

Asia Travel in Tashkent (p199) can often supply good 1:100,000 Uzbek topographical maps, printed in 1992, which are essential for trekking. These include:

Bisokiy Alay Treks from Shakhimardan, Khaidakan and the Sokh Valley in southern Kyrgyzstan.

Fannsky Gory Tajikistan's Fan Mountains.

Matcha Palmiro-Alay Tsentralnaya Chast Treks from Vorukh and Karavshin Valley, southern Kyrgyzstan.

Note that on Russian maps, passes marked Unclassified (N/K) or 1A are simple, with slopes no steeper than 30°; glaciers, where they exist, are flat and without open crevasses. Grade 1B passes may have ice patches or glaciers with hidden crevasses and may require ropes. Passes of grade 2A and above may require special equipment and technical climbing skills.

Hiking

Hiking (as opposed to trekking, which is multiday) is a major outdoor pursuit for Almaty residents and there are fine hikes from Medeu (p131), among others. The Sayram-Ugam National Park and Aksu-Zhabaghyly Nature Reserve are two beautiful areas of hiking country on the fringes of the Tian Shan between the southern Kazakhstan cities of Shymkent and Taraz. Rakhmanovskie Klyuchi in far north Kazakhstan is the starting point for hikes up the sublimely beautiful Altay valleys that fall off the slopes of Mt Belukha.

You can make nice day-hikes from bases in Ala-Archa National Park, near Bishkek, and Altyn Arashan, near Karakol, both in Kyrgyzstan. The Wakhan

The website http://mountains.czweb.org/foto_all.html offers general information and photos of treks in the Pamir, Khan Tengri, Pik Lenin and Fan Mountains.

Robert Craig's *Storm and Sorrow in the High Pamirs* chronicles the tragic 1974 climbing season on Pik Lenin, during which all eight members of a Soviet women's climbing team perished on the mountain.

Valley in the Pamirs of Tajikistan offers superb valley walks, as does the Geisev Valley (p383), where you can overnight in village homestays.

Uzbekistan has less potential, though Chimgan has some nice hikes. Walks in the mountains around Nokhur are possible in Turkmenistan. Most of the trekking regions mentioned earlier offer fine day-hikes.

HORSE TRIPS

Kyrgyzstan is the perfect place to saddle up and join the other nomads on the high pastures. CBT and Shepherd's Life coordinators (p277) throughout the country arrange overnight horse treks to *jailoos* (summer pastures) around central Kyrgyzstan, or longer expeditions on horseback lasting up to two weeks. Horse hire costs the equivalent of around US\$11 per day, or around US\$30 per person per day with a guide, yurtstay and food.

Horseback is the perfect way to arrive at Song-Köl. Trips can depart from either Jangy Talap, Chayek, Jungal or Chekilek and take around three days, staying in yurts en route. The six-day horse trek from Song-Köl to Tash Rabat via the Mazar Valley is an adventurous choice.

There are also good horse treks from Karakol (Altyn Arashan offers some lovely day trips) and Tamga (on the southern shores of Issyk-Köl), as well as Naryn, Arslanbob, Kazarman and Ak-Terek north of Özgön. Kegeti canyon, east of Bishkek, is another popular place for horse riding. See the boxed text, p93, for longer horse-trek ideas.

For organised trips in Kyrgyzstan, the following private local companies are also recommended:

AsiaRando (☎ 3132-47710/47711, 517-73 97 78; www.asiarando.com; Padgornaya 67, Rot Front, Chuy Oblast) Horse-riding trips to Song-Köl from their base in Rotfront village. Contact Gérard and Dominique Guillerm.

Pegasus Horse Trekking (p297) Trip from Choplan-Ata into the mountains on the north side of Issyk-Köl, including the Ornok Valley and Grigorievka.

Shepherds Way (www.kyrgyzstrek.com; p310) Excellent treks into the Terskey Ala-Tau south of Barskoön.

Foreign companies that offer horse-riding trips in Kyrgyzstan include **Wild Frontiers** (www.wildfrontiers.co.uk), **The Adventure Company** (www.adventurecompany.co.uk), **High and Wild** (www.highandwild.co.uk) and **Alexandra Tolstoy** (www.alexandra.tolstoy.com).

If you know what you're doing, there's nothing at all to stop you buying your own horse, though you'll be haggling with some wily horse traders. You can buy a horse in Karakol's animal bazaar for around US\$400 to US\$500.

For a classy ride, you can't do better than astride a thoroughbred Akhal-Teke in Turkmenistan. A couple of stables in the Geok-Depe region outside Ashgabat (see p411) offer short rides and some travel agencies can arrange multiday horse treks. **DN Tours** (www.ridingholidays.com) offers an 11-day desert ride on Akhal-Tekes, camping and staying in local villages. **Stan Tours** (www.stantours.com) offers a week-long horse-riding trip through the Kopet Dag Mountains.

Kan Tengri (see p100) offers horse treks through the desert landscapes of Altyn-Emel National Park and also in the central Tian Shan. There are further horseback options in the ecotourism centres of Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve and Sayram-Ugam National Park (ride between them in three days) and at the Kolsay Lakes in southeast Kazakhstan. These are generally more expensive than in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan.

The German company **Kasachstan Reisen** (<http://kasachstanreisen.de>) offers interesting horse riding and trekking trips in Kazakhstan.

If you know what you're doing, there's nothing at all to stop you buying your own horse.

CAMEL TREKKING

If you've got Silk Road fever and imagine a multiday caravan across the wastes of Central Asia, you could be in for a disappointment. Bukhara travel agencies arrange camel treks north of Nurata around Lake Aidarkul (p236) and there are also possibilities at Ayaz-Qala in northwest Uzbekistan (p251) but these are mostly short jaunts from comfortable tourist yurts (with electricity, plumbing and three-course meals). The best time for low-altitude desert camel trekking is from March to May, when the spring rains turn the floor of the Kyzylkum into a Jackson Pollock canvas.

For the full-on 'Marco Polo' experience, META in Tajikistan offers one- to three-day treks on Bactrian camels in the high-altitude Rang-Kul region of the eastern Pamirs (see p389).

MOUNTAIN BIKING

Several tour companies offer supported biking trips over the Torugart Pass, although die-hard do-it-yourselfers will find the Irkeshtam crossing logistically easier. The Kegeti canyon and pass in northern Kyrgyzstan is another biking location favoured by adventure-travel companies. In the past Dostuck Trekking (p100) has offered an amazing mountain-biking itinerary to Merzbacher Lake in the central Tian Shan.

In Kyrgyzstan the Karkara Valley offers a quiet country backroads. From here you can cycle around the southern shore of Issyk-Köl and then up into central Kyrgyzstan. Karakol's Guide and Porters Association (p302) arranges five-day mountain bike trips from Karakol. The dirt road from Almaty to Kyrgyzstan looks like serious fun but you may have visa problems (see p93).

A few die-hards bring their mountain bikes to Central Asia. The most popular route is probably the Pamir Hwy in Tajikistan. For accounts of bicycling around Central Asia see www.tandemturkistan.com and www.trans-tadji.info.

You can rent mountain bikes for local trips in Bishkek, Naryn and, possibly, Murgab. You can get some bike parts in Bishkek (see p289).

RAFTING

A good venue for rafting and kayaking at all skill levels is Tashkent, where you can find flat water on the Syr-Darya and Angren rivers, and more exciting stretches on the Ugam, Chatkal and Pskem. The best season is September through to October. **Asia Raft** (Map pp196-7; ☎ 71-360 09 18; <http://asiaraft.netfirms.com/eng/MavlonoRieziy77>) in Tashkent can arrange trips.

There is easy rafting and canoeing on the Ili River, between Lake Kapshagay and Lake Balkhash, north of Almaty, from mid-April to mid-October. You could also try the Uba and Ulba Rivers near Ust-Kamenogorsk.

In Kyrgyzstan rafting is possible on the Kokomoron, Chuy (p344), Naryn and Chong-Kemin Rivers (grades II to V). The season runs from 25 June until 15 September and wetsuits are essential in the glacial melt water. Contact **Silk Road Water Centre** (p282; www.rafting.com.kg) to take the plunge.

Great Game Travel in Tajikistan (p362) can help with information on kayaking and rafting in Tajikistan.

MOUNTAINEERING & ROCK CLIMBING

Central Asian 'alpinism' was very popular during the Soviet era, when climbers dragged their crampons from all over the communist bloc to tackle the region's five impressive 'Snow Leopards' (peaks over 7000m).

Top of the line for altitude junkies are Khan Tengri, Pik Pobedy and other peaks of the central Tian Shan in eastern Kyrgyzstan (p312) and southeast

The website www.mountain.ru/eng has some articles on climbing in Central Asia. The Kyrgyz Alpine Club (www.kac.centralasia.kg) is another good resource.

Kazakhstan (p137). Khan Tengri is a stunningly beautiful peak. Massive Pobedy is the world's most northern 7000m-plus peak and the hardest of Central Asia's 7000m-plus summits.

Several Almaty and Bishkek tour agents can arrange trips to this region, including helicopter flights to the base camps during the climbing season from the end of July to early September. There are two approaches, via the northern Inylchek Glacier from Kazakhstan and along the southern Inylchek Glacier from Kyrgyzstan. Even if you aren't a climber, these are fine treks that lead into a breathtaking mountain amphitheatre. There are no peak fees in Kyrgyzstan but you will need a border zone permit (see p347). Peaks in Tajikistan require a US\$100 permit.

The other prime high-altitude playground is the Pamir in southern Kyrgyzstan and eastern Tajikistan, especially Pik Lenin (Koh-i-Istiqal), accessed from Achik Tash base camp (p342). Lenin is a non-technical climb and is considered one of the easiest 7000m summits, yet one which has claimed the most lives. The season is July and August. Peaks Koh-i-Samani (Komunizma; 7495m) and Korzhenevskaya (7105m) are much less known and both accessed from Moskvina Glade base camp to the west.

The most accessible climbing is in Ala-Archa National Park, just outside Bishkek, where popular routes from the Ak-Say glacier require just a couple of days. Mt Korona and Mt Free Korea are the most popular peaks here. The **Alpine Fund** (p282; www.alpinefund.org) in Bishkek is a good resource for this region.

Other 4000m-plus peaks include Mt Sayramsky in the Aksu-Zhabaghy Nature Reserve and Mt Belukha in east Kazakhstan's northern Altay Mountains. Experienced climbers will find that plenty of unclimbed summits await, especially in the Kokshal-Tau range near the border with China.

Some of the best rock climbing is in the Turkestan range in Kyrgyzstan's southern arm, in particular the Karavshin and Liailiak regions, often called 'the Patagonia of Central Asia' due to its towering rock spires. The action focuses on Mt Pyramid (5509m) and the 2km vertical wall of Mt Ak Suu (5335m). Trips to this once volatile region are best organised by a travel company.

Kyrgyzstan: A Climber's Map & Guide, by Garth Willis and Martin Gamache, and published by the American Alpine Club, is a map that covers Ala-Archa, the western Kokshal-Tau and Karavshin regions. See p95 in this chapter for more climbing maps.

Jagged Globe (www.jagged-globe.co.uk) is one foreign company that offers supported climbs on Khan Tengri. Most of Almaty and Bishkek's trekking agencies arrange mountaineering expeditions, as does Moscow-based **RusAdventure** (www.rusadventure.com).

Mountaineering equipment is hard to find in the region and you should really bring your own gear, though you might find basic equipment at the Leader office in Karakol (no rope).

WINTER SPORTS

Central Asia's ski season is approximately November to April, with local variations. The region's best-known and best-equipped downhill area is **Chimbulak** (Shymbulak; p130; www.chimbulak.com), a day-trip from Almaty. February is the best time to be there. A lift pass here costs US\$31 to US\$40 per day. The luxury new Ak Bulak resort near Talgar is due to open winter 2006/7. Almaty made an unsuccessful bid to host the 2014 Winter Olympics.

Skiing is still in its infancy in Kyrgyzstan, but there are options in the Kyrgyz Alatau valleys (especially Ala-Archa), south of Bishkek (p292) and at Karakol (p309). It's possible to rent skis and boards in Bishkek through

Extreme Plus (p289) and ITMC Tien Shan (p284). Nearby Kashka-Suu has a chairlift and 'ski lodge'. Kashka-Suu (www.karakol-ski.kg) in Karakol has pulls and rental equipment between November and March and was revamped in 2005.

Nearly every sports-related agency in Central Asia offers heli-skiing, in which old Aeroflot MI-8 helicopters drop you off on remote high peaks and you ski down. Most guarantee from 3000 to 4000 vertical metres per day for descents of up to 5km but require a group of 12 to 15 people. The Kyrgyz Alatau range behind Bishkek is one of the cheapest places to do this (p293).

Heli-skiing is also awesome in Uzbekistan's Chimgan and Chatkals ranges behind Tashkent from January to May. While the Chatkals aren't huge, they are blanketed in some of the driest, fluffiest powder you'll find anywhere and the winter weather is relatively stable, lessening the chances of getting grounded for days on end. But the best part is the price – US\$355 per day for about 6000 vertical metres, which is little more than half of what you'll pay in North America. Book heli-skiing through Asia Travel (p199), as most other agencies go through them.

Kazakhstan's pristine Altay Mountains are renowned for cross-country skiing; the best place to do this is Rakhmanovskie Klyuchi (p172).

A few travel firms in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan offer ski-mountaineering trips in central Tian Shan in July and August, and in the Zailiysky Alatau and Küngey Alatau ranges, between Almaty and Lake Issyk-Köl, from February to April. In Tajikistan contact the **Dushanbe Ski Federation** (p362; www.tajiktraveller.com) for this.

The Medeu ice rink (p130) just outside Almaty is one of the largest speed-skating rinks in the world; it's open to the public on weekends from about November to March. There's also some winter skating at football grounds in Kazakhstan, including at Almaty and Karaganda.

FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE TRIPS

The back roads of Kyrgyzstan, and particularly Tajikistan's Badakhshan region, offer great scope for adventure travel in an indestructible Russian UAZ 4WD. Four wheel drives can be hired for around US\$0.25 to US\$0.40 per kilometre in both countries.

In Kyrgyzstan one possible 4WD itinerary leads from Talas over the Kara Bura Pass into the Chatkal river valley and then around to Lake Sary-Chelek. Other tracks lead from Naryn to Barskoön, and Barskoön to Inylchek, through the high Tian Shan.

It's well worth hiring a 4WD from Murgab in the eastern Pamirs for trips out to such gorgeously remote places as Shaimak, Jalang and Zor-Kul (see p389).

More 4WD fun, of a slightly sandier nature, is possible in Turkmenistan. One exciting itinerary is the trip from Yangykala Canyon across the Karakum desert to the Darvaza Gas Craters. Expect plenty of dune bashing, sleeping under starry skies and stops for tea in remote Turkmen villages.

Kasachstan Reisen (☎ 030-4285 2005; http://kasachstanreisen.de; Schönhauser Allee 161, Berlin) operate interesting 4WD trips in Kazakhstan.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Several companies organise caving trips, especially around Osh in Kyrgyzstan and Chimgan, north of Tashkent in Uzbekistan. It's possible to scuba dive in Lake Issyk-Köl, but some of the equipment used looks like props from a 1960s Jacques Cousteau documentary.

There are some fine opportunities for nature spotting. Kazakhstan's Korgalzhyn Nature Reserve is a water-bird habitat of major importance and offers

The website <http://mountains.tos.ru/kopylov/pamir.htm> is an excellent climbing resource, with route descriptions, plans and schematic maps. This link is for the Pamir mountain range, follow the index links for other Central Asian regions.

For more on summits in Central Asia visit www.summitpost.com and start with a search for 'Snow Leopards'.

For more on the issues behind community-based tourism see www.unesco.org/culture/ecotourism.

the world's most northerly flamingo habitat (between April and September). The tulips of Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve are world famous and several local and foreign companies run tours to this area in spring. **Kan Tengri** (see below) offers bird-watching and botanical tours in Kazakhstan and **East Line Tours** (www.birdwatching-uzbekistan.com, www.eastlinetour.com) runs bird-watching trips in Uzbekistan. The website www.kazakhstanbirdtours.com is a great resource for bird-watching in Kazakhstan. Foreign companies include **Naturetrek** (www.naturetrek.co.uk), which runs botanical and bird-watching tours of Kazakhstan, and **Wings** (www.wingsbirds.com), which offers a 'Birding the Silk Road' tour of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in May. All these websites have good background info on the type of birds you might spot.

Odyssey Travel (www.odysseytravel.com.au), in Australia, operates archaeological tours to the Khorezm region of Uzbekistan, during which you'll spend two weeks on an archaeological dig, followed by a short general tour of the country.

Sport fishing is an option in the Ili delta in Kazakhstan p138.

ADVENTURE TRAVEL OPERATORS IN CENTRAL ASIA

The following travel companies all offer adventure trips in the region, whether it be a full tour or partial logistical support for your own trip.

Kazakhstan

Altai Expeditions (p169; altai_expeditions@dmv.kz) Wide range of active trips and nature tours in the Altay. Email for the current trip list.

Asia Discovery (p118; www.asia-discovery.nursat.kz) Experienced agency offering treks, horse riding, rafting and bird-watching tours lasting one to two weeks for €400 to €1100.

Kan Tengri (p118; www.kantengri.kz) Kazakhstan's top adventure travel company, offering trekking and heli-skiing in the central Tian Shan (including Mt Khan Tengri) and the ranges between Almaty and Lake Issyk-Köl. Also offers horse treks, mountain biking, heli-skiing, snowboarding, sport fishing, bird-watching and botanical tours. A two-week trekking tour typically costs around €1000 per person from Almaty. The company's director is Kazbek Valiev, the first Kazakh to scale Mt Everest.

Karlygash (Karla) Makatova (p118; kmakatova@yahoo.com) Independent one-woman operator who offers day hikes, treks and climbs, plus kayaking.

Rakhmanovskie Klyuchi (p172; www.altaytravel.ru) This travel firm owns the Rakhmanovskie Klyuchi health resort near Mt Belukha, and offers foot and horse treks in the Altay, plus rafting, skiing and snowboarding elsewhere in the region.

Tour Asia (p118; www.tourasia.kz) Long-established company offers trekking and mountaineering in the central Tian Shan, the mountains south of Almaty and the Pamirs, plus horse riding, mountain bike trips and horse treks in Aksu-Dzhabagly

Kyrgyzstan

Unless otherwise specified, the following companies are based in Bishkek:

Ak Sai (p284; www.ak-sai.com) Trekking, mountaineering, biking and heli-skiing. Operates base camps at Inylchek, Pik Lenin and the Red Fox camping store (p289).

Alp Tour Issyk Köl (p303; khanin@infotel.kg; Karakol) Contact Stas & Igor. A range of treks around Karakol and further afield, including Kazakhstan and Khan Tengri base camp. They can arrange border permits in a day (US\$25), supply guide/cooks (US\$25/35 per day), porters (US\$18) and climbing guides for Khan Tengri (US\$40 to US\$50). They will also resupply your own long-distance treks and arrange daily transport on request to the ski base in winter.

Alptreksport (p336; Osh) Contact Yuri Lavrushin. Two brothers, veterans of the Soviet sports agency Sovintersport's Pamir International Mountaineering Camp (IMC), organise mountaineering, trekking and caving trips, including some around Sary-Chelek, Achik, Jiptik Pass (4185m) and Sary Moghul in the Alay Valley. Yuri speaks English and prefers advance bookings.

Asia Mountains (p285; www.asiamountains.co.uk) A well-organised agency charging US\$25 to US\$55 per person per day, depending on the programme. Can get border permits for the Central

Tian Shan, even if you aren't trekking with them. Runs a base camp at Achik Tash and a guesthouse in Bishkek; (p285).

Dostuck Trekking Ltd (p284; www.dostuck.com.kg) Offers ascents to peaks, including base camps near Khan Tengri, Pobedy and Lenin as well as less specialised, fixed date treks including yurt camps in the Suousamy Valley and Tash Rabat. Can arrange helicopter transport and border permits.

Edelweiss (p284; www.edelweiss.elcat.kg) Trekking, mountaineering, heli-skiing, horse tours, ski trips and visa support. Contact Slava Alexandrov.

International Mountaineering Camp Pamir (IMC Pamir; p284; www.imcpamir.netfirms.com) Trekking and mountaineering programmes and operates the Achik Tash base camp at the foot of Pik Lenin. Contact Bekbolot Koshoev.

ITMC Tien-Shan (p284; www.itmc.centralasia.kg) Competent adventure-travel operator offering package and piecemeal help, including mountaineering, with base camps at Khan Tengri, Achik Tash (for Pik Lenin/Independence Peak) and Koh-i-Samani; trekking/heli-skiing and mountain biking.

Kyrgyz Travel (p311; ☎ 67 99 75; www.kyrgyz-travel.com; 237 Bakinskaya, Bishkek) Based in Tamga, with horse riding, trekking and biking in mountains south of Issyk-Köl.

Neofit (p303; www.neofit.kg/Kyrgyzstan.htm; Karakol) All kinds of trekking support including outfitting and border permits; based in the Neofit guesthouse.

Novinomad (p282; www.novinomad.com) Horse treks, mountain bikes and trekking with an environmentally responsible company. Can book CBT trips.

Tien-Shan Travel (p284; www.tien-shan.com) Ex-cartographers with expedition gear and a menu of set group tours into the mountains, but unaccustomed to walk-in clients. Contact Vladimir Birukov.

Top Asia (p285; www.topasia.kg) Trekking, mountaineering and horse riding.

Turkestan (see p302; www.karakol.kg; Karakol) Professionally-run treks and mountaineering trips to Khan Tengri, horse treks into the Küngéy Alatau mountains north of Issyk-Köl. In winter they operate heli-skiing trips (eight-day package for 14 skiers, US\$2250 per person). Contact Sergey Pyshnenko.

Tajikistan

Great Game Travel Co (p362; www.greatgame.travel; Dushanbe) Treks to the interesting Yagnob region and to Sarez Lake, plus the Fan Mountains and support for most other adventures you can dream up. British-run and contactable in the UK or Dushanbe.

Pamir Adventure (☎ 223 54 24; surat@pamir-adventure.com, www.pamir-adventure.com; Dushanbe) Pamir treks operated by the experienced English-speaking trekking guide Surat Toimastov.

Pamir Travel (☎ 2240906; www.travel-pamir.com; Rudaki 154-8, Dushanbe) Good for Fan Mountain treks.

Yevgeny and Elena Lourens (☎ 237 91 76; lem_camp@mail.ru; Dushanbe) English-speaking trekking and adventure guides who run the base camp for Peak Koh-i-Samani.

Turkmenistan

Ayan Travel (p408; www.ayan-travel.com; Ashgabat) Wildlife watching, horse treks, hikes, camel trek, 4WD desert tours.

DN Tours (p408; www.dntours.com; Ashgabat) Horse riding.

Uzbekistan

Asia Travel (p199; www.asia-travel.uz; Tashkent) Trekking and climbing specialists, with mountain biking and camel trekking in central Uzbekistan, horse riding from Arkit, heli-skiing.

Elena Tour (p199; www.elenatour.uz; Tashkent) Trekking, horse treks, rafting, camel treks around Nurata, heli-skiing in Chimgan and mountain-bike trips, with a focus on the Chimgan and Chatkat area, northeast of Tashkent.

Orient Star (p225; www.tour-orient.com; Samarkand) Trekking in the Zerafshan, Hissar and Fan Mountains.

In 1990 an earthquake-induced avalanche killed 43 people on Pik Lenin in mountaineering's worst single accident.

For useful but dated info on Sokuluk, Suousamy, Kyzyl-Oi and the Chong-Kemin Valley see www.kirgistan-reisen.de

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'