

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan's dual persona is omnipresent. The lavish palaces in the capital, gold statues and marble monuments are as captivating as the deep mysticism and legend that hangs over pilgrimage sites and ancient ruins. This is a land that is at one time gripped by authority and yet overcome by spirituality.

Ancient cities like Merv, Dekhistan (also known as Misrian) and Konye-Urgench inspire visions of slow-moving caravans plodding along the ancient Silk Road. Remnants of their urban tissue are still there, slowly disintegrating under the weight of tribal warfare and time. Nature-lovers will also appreciate the haunting beauty of the Karakum (Black Sand) desert and the occasional quirks of coloured canyons, dinosaur footprints and burning gas craters.

The full Turkmen experience is ultimately about mingling with the Turkmen themselves, only a couple of generations removed from a nomadic lifestyle, they are a welcoming people whose hospitality is the stuff of legend. Proud of their heritage, women are seen decked out in colourful headscarves and ankle-length dresses decorated with Turkmen motifs. Everyone from young boys to *aksakals* (literally 'white beards', revered elders) will greet you warmly with a two-hand clasp and a slight bow.

Xenophobia runs deep in the upper echelons of Turkmen authority, a fact that constricts independent travel. Anyone with a tourist visa is required to hire a guide and despite hopes for change, the situation remains the same in this post-Niyazov era. While this may dampen your independent spirit, it is for now the only way to fully experience the country. Despite this inconvenience, Turkmenistan offers numerous off-beat experiences; you can overnight in a yurt, ride an Akhal-Teke horse or simply disappear for a few days into the desert wilderness.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 488,100 sq km
- **Capital** Ashgabat (Aşgabat)
- **Country Code** ☎ 993
- **Famous For** Golden statues of Turkmenbashi, gas reserves, horses, carpets
- **Languages** Turkmen, Russian, Uzbek
- **Money** manat (M); black market US\$1 = 24,500M
- **Phrases in Turkmen** Peace be with you./ Hello. (*salam aleykum*); Thanks. (*sagh bol*); How are you? (*siz nahili?*)
- **Population** approximately five million



HOW MUCH?

- Snickers bar US\$0.40
- 100km bus ride US\$0.40
- Phone call to the US or UK (three-minute minimum) US\$4
- Traditional hat US\$8
- Good dinner in Ashgabat US\$5
- Litre of bottled water US\$0.25
- Litre of petrol US\$0.02 (budget US\$1.50 per litre to cover road tax)

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Konye-Urgench** (p432) Ancient minarets, mausoleums and palaces that stand testament to the former glories of the Khorezmshah empire.
- **Karakum Desert** (p417) A formidable expanse of shifting sands and incredible lunar landscapes dotted with hardy Turkmen villages and bizarre gas craters.
- **Ashgabat** (p405) Former President Niyazov's self-congratulatory city, laden with gold statues, portraits and monuments of himself. It's also home to the wonderfully chaotic Tolkuchka Bazaar.
- **Yangykala Canyon** (p420) A painted desert that wouldn't look out of place in a John Ford film, and is great for camping and exploration.
- **Merv** (p426) History buffs will find joy at the extensive ruins of Merv, littered with ancient foundations and pottery shards. The largest archaeological excavation in the Near East, Gonur, is nearby.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Arriving on a transit visa, see Ashgabat in a day, making sure to ride up the Monument to the Independence of Turkmenistan and wander Tolkuchka Bazaar. Cross the Karakum Desert and then wrap things up with a visit to historic Konye-Urgench.
- **Seven days** Spend at least three days around Ashgabat before heading east to visit the ancient sites of Merv and Gonur. From here, return to Ashgabat and travel north to Konye-Urgench, camping en route at the unforgettable Darvaza Gas Crater.
- **Two weeks** Along with the above-mentioned sights, head west to Dekhistan,

the Yangykala Canyon and Turkmenbashi. While in the Karakum Desert, scope out some remote villages for the chance to overnight in a yurt.

- **Three weeks** Explore the above sights at a slower pace and take the time for some activities, such as horseback riding in Geok-Dere, cave exploration in Kugitang Nature Reserve and hiking in Nokhur.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Turkmenistan is the hottest country in Central Asia, although its dry desert climate means that it's not always uncomfortably warm. That said, only the insane or deeply unfortunate find themselves in Ashgabat in July and August, when the temperature can push 50°C. The best times to visit are between April and June, and September and early November. Winters are very cold in the north, although southern Turkmenistan almost never freezes.

HISTORY

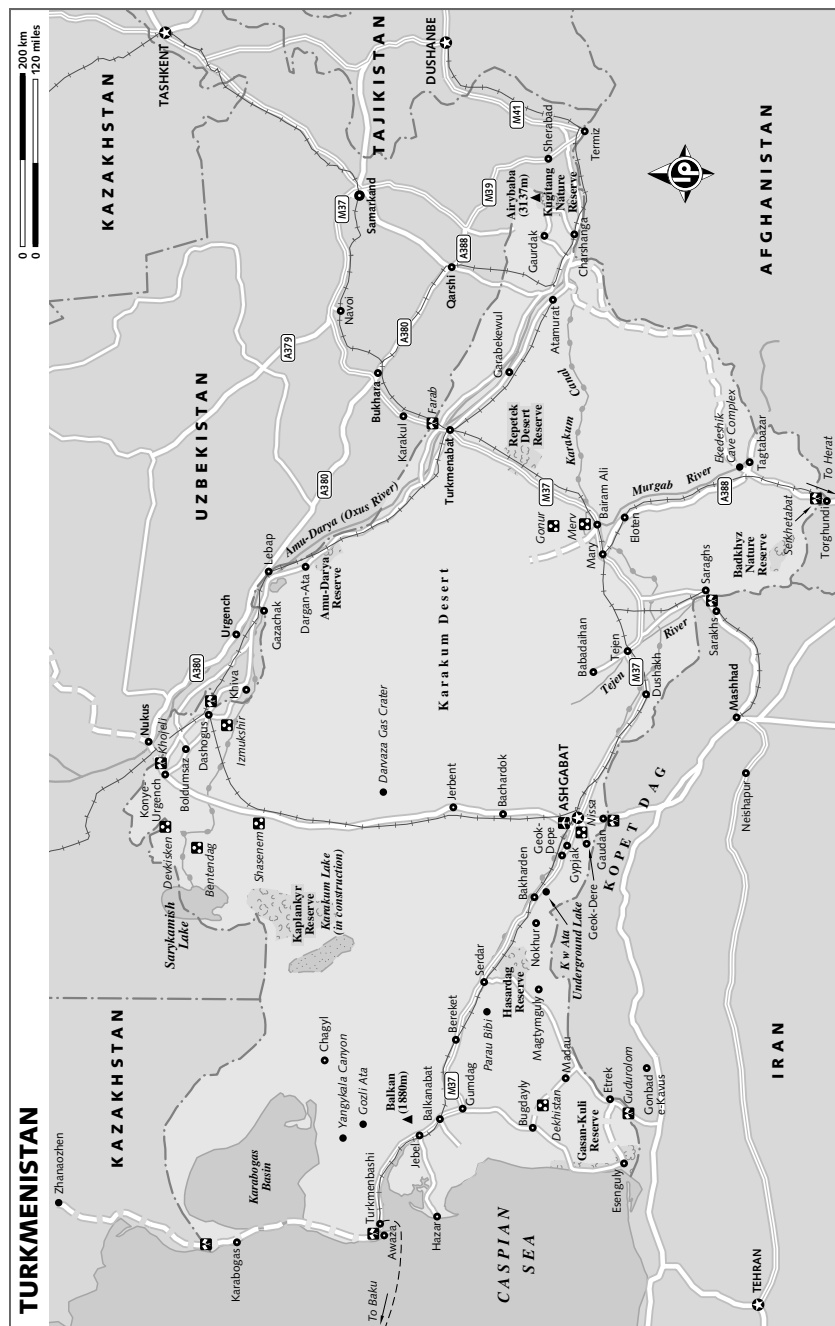
From Conquerors to Communists

Stone Age sites have been identified in the Big Balkan Mountains but the first signs of agricultural settlements appeared in Kopet Dag in the 6th millennium BC. More Bronze Age sites have been located in the Margiana Oasis, where archaeologist Viktor Sarianidi has identified a sophisticated culture that encompassed several villages and an extensive capital. Rivers that shifted over the centuries caused the abandonment of these settlements, but paved the way for a great civilization around Merv. Alexander the Great established a city here on his way to India.

Around the time of Christ, the Parthians, Rome's main rivals for power in the West, set up a capital at Nissa, near present-day Ashgabat. In the 11th century the Seljuq Turks appropriated Merv, Alexander's old city and a Silk Road staging post, as a base from which to expand into Afghanistan.

Two centuries later Jenghiz Khan stormed down from the steppes and through Trans-Caspia (the region east of the Caspian Sea) to lay waste to Central Asia. Entire city-states, including Merv and Konye-Urgench, were razed and their populations slaughtered. Unlike Samarkand and Bukhara, the cities to the south failed to recover.

It's not known precisely when the first modern Turkmen appeared, but they are believed to have arrived in modern Turkmenistan in



TEN CRAZY THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT TURKMENISTAN *Bradley Mayhew*

- Turkmenistan plans to build Central Asia's largest artificial lake in the middle of the Karakum Desert at a cost of up to US\$8 billion. Turkmenistan is already home to the world's longest irrigation canal, at 1370km.
- The Turkmen language has its own unique, copyrighted alphabet called 'Elipbi'.
- In 2003 the government confused everybody in Ashgabat by replacing all street names with a four-digit number code.
- The Turkmen Carpet Museum houses the world's largest hand-woven carpet, woven for the 10th anniversary of Independence.
- Central Asia's largest mosque is built on the site where former President Niyazov's mother and two brothers were killed by an earthquake in 1948.
- Turkmenosaurus is the name suggested by scientists for the dinosaur that left hundreds of footprints across the east of the country.
- The archaeological site of Anau has some of the world's earliest evidence of grain cultivation.
- Petrol in Turkmenistan costs US\$0.02 per litre at the pumps.
- In Turkmenistan natural gas is free but matches aren't, with the result that many Turkmen keep their gas stoves burning 24 hours a day.
- The largest banknote in Turkmenistan is worth less than US\$0.50.

the wake of the Seljuk Turks some time in the 11th century. A collection of displaced nomadic horse-breeding tribes, possibly from the foothills of the Altay Mountains, they found alternative pastures in the oases fringing the Karakum desert and in Persia, Syria and Anatolia (in present-day Turkey). Being nomads they had no concept of, or interest in, statehood and therefore existed in parallel to the constant dynastic shifts that so totally determined Central Asia's history.

Terrorising the Russians, who had come to 'civilise' the region in the early 19th century, Turkmen captured thousands of the tsar's troops, and sold them into slavery in Khiva and Bukhara. This invited the wrath of the Russian Empire, which finally quelled the wild nomads by massacring thousands of them at Geok-Depe in 1881.

After the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, the communists took Ashgabat in 1919. For a while the region existed as the Turkmen *oblast* (province) of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, before becoming the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in 1924.

The Turkmen SSR

Inflamed by Soviet attempts to settle the tribes and collectivise farming, Turkmen resistance continued and a guerrilla war raged until 1936. More than a million Turkmen fled

into the Karakum desert or into northern Iran and Afghanistan rather than give up their nomadic ways. The Turkmen also fell foul of a Moscow-directed campaign against religion. Of the 441 mosques in Turkmenistan in 1911, only five remained standing by 1941.

Waves of Russian immigrants brought with them farming technology and blueprints for cotton fields. Turkmenistan's arid climate was hardly conducive to bumper harvests, and to supply the vast quantities of water required the authorities began work in the 1950s on a massive irrigation ditch – the Karakum Canal. The 1100km-long gully runs the length of the republic, bleeding the Amu-Darya (Oxus River) to create a fertile band across the south. Cotton production quadrupled, though the consequences for the Aral Sea have been catastrophic (see p77).

In 1985 the relatively unknown Saparmurat Niyazov was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan (CPT) and retained power until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although totally unprepared for the event, Niyazov was forced to declare independence for Turkmenistan on 27 October 1991.

Independence & The Golden Age

Determined to hold onto power, Niyazov renamed the CPT the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan for the sake of appearances