

# Azerbaijan and Mongolia: Explore the Silk Road

While the glory days of the Silk Road came to an end with the expansion of European sea trade in the late 15th century, today many destinations along the old trade routes are considered as important tourism landmarks. The different destinations along the Silk Road offer a huge variety of experiences for tourists. Visitors travel the Silk Road to discover the history and ancient myths, to have active holidays among the stunning sights and beautiful natural sceneries, or to witness at first hand the fascinating and exotic local customs. Among the amazing number of places to visit are Azerbaijan and Mongolia, two countries that are not known very well in most parts of the western world but have a lot to offer.



## **Azerbaijan: Architectural Masterpiece in Baku**

Azerbaijan offers a broad spectrum of opportunities for everyone. Visitors can explore historical attractions as well as natural wonders or spend some time trekking, camping, bird watching or fishing. Azerbaijan's main Silk Road attraction "Old Baku" (the Inner City) is in the capital Baku itself. It was built during the Middle Ages and is encircled by fortress walls. It is worth to visit the Shirvanshakh Palace, which is regarded as a masterpiece of Azeri architecture and gives visitors an impression of how locals lived between the 13th and 15th centuries. Other attractions like the Maiden Tower or the Mohammed Ibn Abu Bakr mosque complete the reflection of the important role Baku played as a political, cultural and economic centre and as leading commercial hub for merchants from Russia, Genoa, Venice and Central Asia.

A good way to explore the specialties of Azerbaijan is to go on the Grand Caucasian Range Tour. This tour takes in historical attractions as well as natural wonders; it follows the old Caucasian artery linking Europe and Asia and leads visitors into a cluster of villages, which still preserve their medieval way of life and distinct language.

Among all the facets that Azerbaijan has to offer the strongest argument to plan a trip to this country might be the stunning natural beauty of its diverse landscape, which includes forests, mountains, coastlines and plains. Excellent ways to enjoy the landscape are trekking tours along the rivers and mountains or bird watching camps in the Talysh region. A natural site not to be missed is Nabran. Situated about 160 kilometers north from Baku, Nabran is a recreational area where forested hills featuring unique trees meet the golden sands of the Caspian Sea. Tourists travelling to Sheki, Ordubad or Ghiandj will find active silk makers. Those places belong to the most important silk worm breeding

regions in the Middle East since ancient times and silk goods are a specialty of Azerbaijan's artisans.



Azerbaijani cuisine has been influenced by the food of different cultures and so food lovers will find a great variety of soups, as well as rice pilafs made with meats, greens and fruits, and kebabs and shashliks.

### **Mongolia: Experience the Life of Nomads**

Mongolia is a little-known land mostly associated with Genghis Khan, the legendary Silk Road conqueror and statesman. But this region has far more to offer. Around half of the inhabitants of Mongolia still retain the nomadic lifestyle and traditions of their ancestors and visitors are welcome to learn about this traditional way of life. Authentic ways to get to know the country are tours including steppe and mountain trekking, kayaking and camping trips where visitors are accommodated in wooden framed 'gers' or round felt tents.

Mongolians are famous for their hospitality and their guests will learn how Mongolians handle horses and livestock, how they hunt and how they practice their shaman-based religion. At the same time visitors will experience Mongolia's most stunning natural site: the fabled steppes. The food is simple and basic and mostly consists of lamb or beef, meat-filled ravioli called "buuz", wheat pastries, milk and cheese.



An event not to be missed is one of the oldest Mongolian traditions, the Naadam Summer Festival. Mongolians gather for three days of horse races, archery contests, wrestling matches, music and festivities. Another breathtaking site to visit is the Gobi Desert. In the past the Gobi Desert was avoided by travellers because of its size and myriad dangers. Today camel expeditions across the Gobi Desert as well as mountain and glacier climbing in the majestic Altai Range are very popular with adventure travellers.

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