

# Uzbekistan – Breathing History and Culture

Curious about the world's most thrilling oasis? The land of the Uzbeks invites you.

Uzbekistan fascinates with over 4000 oriental monuments and four unique world heritage centers, seducing with the traces of the ancient Silk Road and the aura of the spirits of Avicenna (Abu Ali Husayn ibn Abdallah ibn Sina: 980–1037), the Persian scholar, lexicographer, physician, philosopher, musician and poet, or Muhammad Al-Khorezmi (783–850), the Central Asian mathematician, astronomer, historian, geographer and Alhamdulillah the greatest Asian scientist of the Middle Ages, or the genius Al-Biruni (973–1048) who mastered almost all sciences of his time, and last but not least unbelievable rulers such as Tamerlane, Babur ...



We come to the land which once was the center of the Silk Road, now the modern republic of Uzbekistan (about the size of Sweden, 447.400 km<sup>2</sup>). Slowly growing in 20th century, under the Russian Soviet rule it was since 1936 one of the USSR's 15 autonomous republics. Today the landlocked independent nation state (1991) is enclosed with the high mountains in the east (Tianshan) and desert plains in the west, between the dead-end rivers Syr-Darya (the ancient Yaxartes to the north) and Amu-Darya (the ancient Oxus to the south) which Alexander the Great had added to the world map then known to Europeans.

Since the 6th century BC this “continental oasis” was a strategic and dynamic center of the world, where Sogdiana was the homeland of ancient Iranians and Aryans long before Greek and Roman times, where Persians have dominated, Arabs and Mongols invaded, and their descendants created a vast Islamic empire from modern Turkey into India.

## **Fergana and Kokand**

Entrapped by high mountains Uzbekistan's easternmost destination has been known long before Tang China's Empire saw its apogee in 8th century. The fertile Fergana basin supplied the “heavenly horses” to the “Middle Kingdom”, after the descendants of Greek colonists settled there during the times of Alexander the Great in 329 BCE, the “Ionians” leaving their name (“Yuan” 元) and fame in ancient Chinese history as well. In Fergana the first ever known major contacts were made between Indo-Europeans and migrants from the pre-Han Chinese civilization. It was from there that the

transcontinental Silk Road originated in 1st century, enabling Buddhist faith and Greco–Buddhist culture to enter China, attracting Turkish nomads in 6th century and alluring the awesome “invincible” Mongolians in 13th century whose hordes laid in ashes whatever they encountered. One of their descendants was Babur (1483–1530), who was born here conquering Afghanistan and India, and establishing the powerful Moghul empire.

Modern Kokand, the basin’s center, resurged in 18th century as a fortress (Eski–Kurgan). As the trading hub of a vast Khanate and important religious center with over 300 mosques and 35 madrassas (Quran schools) – **Madrasah Norbutabi** (1799) being the largest one – it fiercely rivaled with the neighboring Emirate of Buchara, under which rule it finally fell in 1842.



## **Buchara**

Buchara is the most complete example of a medieval city in Central Asia, remaining a living museum with the tomb of Ismail Samani (10th cent.), an overall townscape shaped under 16th century Uzbek Sheibanid rule (when Samarkand was the capital) and a large number of 17th–century madrassas.

In 709 Buchara was the main cultural centre of the Caliphate of Baghdad, the star of an enormous Arabian empire. In 892 it became the wealthy capital of the independent (Persian) Samanid Kingdom, booming in agriculture, mining and Eurasian trade with textiles, soap, carpets, furs, oil, honey, nuts, melons, cosmetics, horses and slaves. Destroyed by Genghis Khan in 1220, nomadic Uzbek tribesmen revived the oasis town in 15th century establishing the Khanate of Buchara. When this was finally incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1868 the medieval wonder possessed 38 caravanserais, six trading arcades, 45 bazaars, 16 public baths, 200 mosques and over hundred madrassas.

## **Samarkand**

The tributes of exotic fruits called “golden peaches” to the imperial capital of Chang’an made Samarkand famous in China during the Tang dynasty (6–10th cent). Founded as early as 7th century B.C. (ancient Afrasiab), Samarkand is one of the oldest cultural centers in the world and had its apogee during the Timurid dynasty (14th – 15th cent). Tamerlane (Timur–e Gurkani / Timur–e Lang) had conquered large parts of Central Asia from here, theoretically ruling from India to the Black Sea.

His evidence are colossal monuments in the capital, particularly the cathedral–like Bibi–Khanum Mosque, which due to its size could not be fully restored, or his own mausoleum and tomb. Both rival with the palace–style constructions at central Asia’s most splendid square: the Registan (“sandy place”).

This has remained the heart of the old town which is surrounded by three gigantic madrassas – an imposing architectonic ensemble of Persian artwork unique in the world: Ulugbek–Madrassa (1417–1420), Sher–Dor–Madrassa(1619 – 1636) und Tilya–Kori–Madrassa (1646 – 1660).

More exceptional monuments are found in Shakhrisyabz (ancient Kesh), Timur’s birthplace and “model town” encircled by mighty walls and equipped with baths and caravanserais. The center of the Timurids (15th–16th cent) excels with the richly decorated Ak–Sarai (“White House”: 1380) summer palace and the original “Tomb of Timur”.



## **Urgenc and Chiva**

If anything comes next to the aforementioned highlights it is the successor of legendary Choresmia (Khorezm: “low–lands” or “land of the sun”). Urgenc, today a modern town, was settled since 4th century BC. Under Persian rule it gained fame for its water engineering, gardens, orchards, and as a Silk Road trading hub. Yet it was also feared for its infamous inhabitants, who marauded as far as Egypt and Palestine and in 12th/13th century also dominated all over Persia. Again, the Mongols (1220) and Timurids (1388) destroyed this flourishing oasis.

With Uzbek Turks arriving in 1511 a state of Chiva (Khanate since 1643) was founded south of lake Aral. A new town was built in 1598, after the Amu–Darya had changed its riverbed. Chiva town became the last resting–place of caravans before crossing the Karakum desert to Iran. Although few very old monuments have been left, Chiva today is probably the most dazzling fully preserved example of medieval Muslim architecture. It became an “open museum” under Soviet times (1967), and a UNESCO world heritage site in 1990. A 10 m high crenellated brick–wall (17th cent) surrounds the fortified old town (Ichan–Q’ala), where four mighty entrance gates lead to an ensemble of over 50 historic monuments and 250 houses dating back to the 18th / 19th centuries.

At the west gate lies the fortress Kunya Ark, once the Khan’s residence, including the 10th century Djuma mosque. Amongst numerous minarets projects a tremendous unfinished one, intended to become the most splendid Islamic monument in the world: the 14 m “thick” and 26 m high Kaltan minor (“short minarest”) lavishly decorated with typical blue–turquoise–green–white tiles: for the glory of God and urban pomp. The highest minaret with 45 m height rears up besides the Islam–Khodja madrassa (1908), which together with the madrassa of Alla–Kuli Khan (1835) at the eastern gate, amazing for its space and calligraphic artwork, exemplarily demonstrates the once famous Quran schools of this magic oasis town – symbolizing integrated learning and commerce.

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