

Yurt Camp Aydar – A Traditional Uzbek Steppe Experience

Somewhat off the beaten path of the Great Silk Road in Uzbekistan, travelers can sample life as the Uzbek people's nomadic ancestors did – in yurts. Beyond the ancient cities of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Khiva, beyond the pulsating capital city of Tashkent, a trip to the desert steppe for a stay in an authentic yurt makes the Uzbekistan travel experience complete.



A yurt, a portable tent-like structure with a lightweight wooden lattice frame and walls of animal skins or furs, is an icon of desert nomad traditions. Yurts are designed to be assembled and disassembled quickly, then loaded onto the backs of horses or camels. Roaming pastoralists of Central Asia have been using yurts for centuries as housing that can follow them as they follow their herds.

Today, yurt camps cater to travelers who seek adventure and the real Central Asian steppe experience in Uzbekistan. A few different yurt camp options are available outside the city of Khiva. For those who wander even farther off the beaten path, however, the Aydar Yurt Camp is an oasis in the very center of the Kyzi-Kum desert. Here, the founder A. Syrymov has created the ultimate steppe experience, complete with a lake excursion, camel safari, traditional Uzbek tea, banquet meals, and nighttime bonfires serenaded by a national folk singer.

Upon arrival at Aydar Yurt Camp, Syrymov greets his guests with cordiality and jest. He offers tea in the shade once each guest has settled into the yurt. “You must know how to read the signals that your host provides in traditional tea drinking in the steppe,” he explains. “If your host fills your cup to the top, it means he wants you to drink fast and leave. If your host fills the cup halfway, it means he will continue to fill it, little by little. You are welcome to stay.” He fills each guest’s cup, partially.

After tea time, guests have a chance to spend the afternoon riding camels around the premises or going on an excursion to nearby Lake Aydar. A dip in the cool waters of the lake is a refreshing escape from the desert heat, and the sandy shores make Uzbekistan feel a little less landlocked than it is.



Upon returning from the lake, guests can rinse off in the newly-installed bathroom and shower facilities. Recently, Afsona tour operator partnered with Aydar Yurt Camp to bring all their restroom facilities up to Afsona's tour accommodation standards. Now that the project is complete, Aydar is ready for all classes of tourists, and Afsona can include Aydar Yurt Camp in its upscale itineraries. "We wanted to be able to bring our whole spectrum of clients here," says Kristina Yermakova, trip developer for Afsona, "even the ones whose itineraries include only the higher-end hotels during the rest of the trip."

The interior of each yurt is comfortable and simple. Folkloric weavings and decorations add color to the wood lattice walls. Each yurt can sleep up to ten people, as bedding is a simple yet cozy mat and pillow, with fresh sheets and blankets. Luke Ford, founder of Gunyah Short Breaks, was impressed with the quality and comfort of the sleeping conditions. "I slept better in the yurt than in any other hotel during the trip," he recalls.

Once the guests have bathed and relaxed, they are called to dinner in the dining yurt. Inside, a traditional candlelit Uzbek banquet awaits. The first course, as always, is variety of fresh vegetable salads, soup, and the decoratively stamped Uzbek bread. This is followed by a delicious 'plov,' a classic Uzbek main dish consisting of rice, lamb, and savoury seasonings. Rounds of vodka are poured from start to finish.



Nightfall on the Uzbek steppe brings with it a whole new enchantment. A highlight of the stay is watching the sun set behind the rolling desert dunes. Eventually vivid shades of red give way to dusk and a stunning moonrise. This queues the host that it's time to start preparing the wood for the nightly bonfire. After dinner, everybody moves out to the center of the yurt camp, where the fire is smoldering. On special nights, a national folk singer mesmerizes guests with songs he plays on the stringed shashtar accompanied by bittersweet lyrics about nomadic life on the steppe.

Finally, for one last moment of awe and wonder at the darkness of the desert sky at night, Syrymov fine-tunes his telescope and invites his guests to peer into it. It is aimed at the surface of the moon.

Constellations of stars are shining overhead, and everyone slowly retires to the yurts. A night on the Central Asian steppe comes to a brilliant end.

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<http://www.afsona-travel.com/>

<http://www.gunyah.com/>

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