

# HARVARD

ALUMNI TRAVELS



## SILK ROAD IN CENTRAL ASIA & THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

OCTOBER 7-25, 2022

### PROGRAM SCHEDULE

**ITINERARY HIGHLIGHTS:** Ashgabat, Merv, Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Baku, Tbilisi, Yerevan

- Venture outside Ashgabat to visit a horse-breeding farm devoted to the renowned Akhal-Teke horse, arguably the oldest cultured breed of horse in the world.
- Take part in a walking tour of Bukhara's Jewish Quarter, in the heart of the Old Town, and meet with community representatives at the synagogue.
- Participate in an exclusive meeting with the Senior Advisor for Bukhara's Ark.
- Admire Samarkand's outstanding Silk Route treasures: the Registan, Bibi Khanum Mosque and Shah-i-Zinda and Ulug-Bek's Observatory.
- Browse the animated Siab Bazaar where vividly dressed Uzbek and Tajik vendors oversee neat stacks of brilliant produce and burlap sacks of nuts and spices, cabbage rolls and shashlik.
- In Tashkent, visit the private art studio of a sixth-generation Uzbek ceramicist whose family has been making pottery since the 1790s.
- Take a curator-led tour of the Azerbaijani Carpet Museum, which beautifully displays the vivid colors and bold designs of Azeri, Caucasian and Iranian carpets.
- Enjoy a private tour and champagne reception at the Nobel Oil Club, the Nobel Brothers' museum.
- Experience a traditional Georgian Table feast complete with local specialties and local wines.

**ACTIVITY LEVEL:** Level 4

**STUDY LEADER:** **Alexandra Vacroux** is Executive Director of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and Lecturer on Government at Harvard University. The Davis Center was founded in 1948 with the hopes that the social sciences could collectively address the pressing national need to understand the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Today the center fosters opportunities for innovative scholarship, creative teaching, and broad learning to educate future leaders who will make enduring contributions and bring deep knowledge to bear on contemporary problems. Vacroux's scholarly work addresses many Russian and Eurasian policy issues. In addition, she teaches popular courses on the comparative politics of Eurasia and post-Soviet conflict. She has mentored dozens of Harvard's best and brightest Russian regional studies students and scholars. She is an active member of the bilateral Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations, and co-chairs the Davis Center's long-running Comparative Politics Seminar.

**ACCOMMODATES:** 8–24 guests. *This is a Harvard exclusive program.*

**PRICING:** \$9,995 per person double occupancy / \$11,685 single occupancy

# SCHEDULE BY DAY

*B=Breakfast, L=Lunch, R=Reception, D=Dinner*

## FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7

### DEPART FROM HOME CITY

Depart USA on international flights bound for Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. (Meals in flight)

## SATURDAY, OCTOBER 8

### CONNECT VIA ISTANBUL/DUBAI

Connect via a gateway city en route to Ashgabat, likely Istanbul or Dubai. (Meals in flight)

## SUNDAY, OCTOBER 9

### ASHGABAT, TURKMENISTAN

Arrive in Ashgabat very early this morning and transfer to the hotel. Rooms at the hotel will be reserved from Saturday night to enable check-in upon arrival.

Enjoy a free morning to rest after the long flight and get used to the time change. In the afternoon embark on the introductory tour of the city.

In spite of its location on a trade route, Ashgabat never achieved the status and influence of other Silk Road cities like Khiva or Bukhara. Originally known as Konjikala, the city was destroyed by Mongols in the 13th century. In 1881 the Russians built a fortress on the site as a buffer against English dominated Persia, and by the early 20th century Ashgabat was a prosperous and flourishing city. In 1948 a massive earthquake leveled the city, killing over two-thirds of the population. Recently Ashgabat has seen a boom in new construction, which has had a major impact on the look of the city.

During the course of today see the Lenin Monument, one of the only structures to survive both the 1948 earthquake and the collapse of the Soviet Union; stop at the 250-foot Monument of Neutrality; wander the fountain-cooled Independence Park, its alleys lined with monuments and statues to prominent figures from Turkmen history; and pause for the view of magnificent President

Palace Square, flanked by the domed palace and the Parliament building.

Enjoy the welcome dinner at the hotel to celebrate the beginning of the journey.

Overnight at *Hotel Oguzkent* (B, D)

## MONDAY, OCTOBER 10

### ASHGABAT

Begin the day with a visit to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the ancient Parthian Kingdom of Nisa, led by a local archaeologist.

On the way back to the city, make a stop at the Kipchak Great Mosque. The huge \$100-million-dollar mosque in former Turkmen President Niyazov's hometown of Kipchak was inaugurated in 2004. The mosque is big enough to hold 10,000 people, and its 164-foot golden dome had to be lowered in place by helicopter. Verses from Niyazov's own spiritual book, the Ruhnama, are etched on the walls alongside Koranic verses. Niyazov was buried here in the family mausoleum that he built, along with the mosque, with government funds.

In the afternoon, visit the National Museum of History and Ethnography. With its grand approach and panoramic views, the museum introduces modern Turkmenistan on the ground floor and ancient history in the galleries above. The historical exhibits begin with artifacts ranging from stone-age tools to carved ivory drinking horns and move through time, telling the story of Turkmenistan through the ages.

Stop at the Russian Bazaar, a large covered market in the center of Ashgabat, where vendors sell all kind of foodstuffs, including prepared foods, fruits, nuts, vodka, high quality caviar and traditional breads.

Following dinner at one of the city's restaurants, return to hotel.

Overnight at *Hotel Oguzkent* (B, L, D)

## **TUESDAY, OCTOBER 11**

### **ASHGABAT/FLY TO MARY/MERV**

Transfer to the airport for the short morning flight to Mary. Upon arrival, set out to explore the ancient remains of Merv. The fertile oasis of Merv has supported human life for over 4,000 years. Formed from the rich silt at the mouth of the Murghab River where it soaks into the Kara Kum Desert, the oasis was an early Bronze Age center. Merv was the center of several succeeding civilizations and became an important way station on the Great Silk Road between the 2nd and the 13th centuries when it was sacked and burned by the Mongols.

After lunch, visit the Archaeological Museum in Mary. The museum is housed in an old merchant's house dating from the 19th century, which has been reconstructed and refurbished a few years ago.

Displays include discoveries from Merv, Gonur-Depe and other Turkmen archaeological sites. Time permitting, wander Mary's small bazaar, admiring stacks of brilliant fruits and displays of nuts and raisins, handmade carpets and Turkmen jewelry.

At the end of the day, check in to hotel for dinner and a one-night stay.

Overnight at *Hotel Mary* (B, L, D)

## **WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 12**

### **MERV/DRIVE TO BUKHARA, UZBEKISTAN**

Today travel to Bukhara in Uzbekistan. The border crossing formalities can be time consuming, both when exiting Turkmenistan and entering Uzbekistan.

Dinner this evening will be at the hotel upon arrival in Bukhara.

Overnight *Hotel Devon Begi* (B, L, D)

## **THURSDAY, OCTOBER 13**

### **BUKHARA**

Spend the day exploring Central Asia's most ancient living city. An oasis in the desert, UNESCO-listed Bukhara offers cool shade and

rest to the modern traveler as it did to the camel caravans that plied the Silk Road hundreds of years ago. Bukhara's Old Town has a unified feel, drawn together by a central reflecting pool and plaza, by commonality in the structure of the domed bazaars and by the major monuments ringing the old town: the Kalon Assembly, the Zindan Prison, and the Ark Citadel.

You will have a chance to meet the Senior Scientific Advisor of the Ark, who is responsible for the ongoing projects, renovations, and events within the territory of the Ark Citadel.

Visit the lovely Ismael Samani Mausoleum, the 10th-century resting place of Ismael Samani, founder of the Persian Samanid Dynasty, with its sixteen different styles of brickwork. The little mausoleum was buried under the desert sands and not discovered until the 20th century.

After lunch, resume touring at Lyabi-Hauz Plaza, the center of Bukhara's old town. The plaza is, as it has been throughout history, a place to meet friends, to eat, to drink, and to relax in the shade.

Visit the nearby Kukeldash Madrassah, the largest Koranic school in Central Asia. Named for the statesman and general Kulbaba Kukeldash, the madrasah was built in 1568.

Stroll through the milliner and spice bazaars and past street-level mosques and madrasahs, before moving on to the 12th-century Kalon assembly, which includes the Kalon Mosque and Minaret and the Miri-Arab Madrassah.

Finish the day with a walk-through Bukhara's old Jewish Quarter, in the heart of the Old Town, where in the mid-19th century 2,500 families of prosperous merchants were estimated to have been living.

Overnight *Hotel Devon Begi* (B, L, D)

## **FRIDAY, OCTOBER 14**

### **BUKHARA**

Visit the Summer Palace of the last Emir and stop at its Museum of National Crafts. Called the Palace of Moon and Stars, the Summer

Palace was built at the turn of the century after the Russians took control of Bukhara.

Stop at the Bakhaudin Nakshbah Complex. Bakhaudin Nakshbandi was a 14th-century Sufi mystic and founder of the Nakshbandi order of Sufis. His mausoleum complex grew from a simple tomb over his grave to a 16th-century hostel for visiting dervishes, then to a spiritual complex in the 17th century with a mosque added in the 18th century. The complex was restored in 1993 for the celebration of the 675th anniversary of the saint's birth.

The afternoon is free for independent exploration or just relaxing in the old town. This evening before dinner visit a local madrasah to enjoy a performance by local artists.

Overnight in *Hotel Devon Begi* (B, L, D)

## **SATURDAY, OCTOBER 15 BUKHARA/TRAIN OR DRIVE SAMARKAND**

Drive or travel by train to UNESCO-listed Samarkand. Perhaps the most well-known of Silk Road towns, Samarkand, fabled oasis on the fringes of the Kyzyl Kum Desert, has been settled since the 6th century BC. Due to its location on the plains where the Zeravshan River spills out from the Pamir Mountains, Samarkand became a major Silk Road crossroads.

Begin sightseeing in Samarkand up on arrival with a visit to the Registan, the city's centerpiece, and its most recognizable landmark. The three emblematic madrasahs frame the square and loom over the empty space in the center. Also see the Gur-Emir Mausoleum, the final resting place of Tamerlane. The interior of the mausoleum has been restored and is brilliant in gold leaf and fresh tile. The heavily gilded central dome opens over the set of tomb-markers resembling sarcophagi (the bodies are located well below but are on site). All are marble, apart from Tamerlane's, which is a slab of solid jade reportedly from Mongolia.

Upon completion of sightseeing, check in to the hotel. This evening enjoy dinner at a private home of a local family.

Overnight *Hotel Dilimah* (B, L, D)

## **SUNDAY, OCTOBER 16 SAMARKAND**

Continue to explore glorious Samarkand. Visit the Bibi Khanum Mosque, built by Tamerlane to be the largest mosque in the Islamic world, and dedicated to the memory of his favorite wife.

Pay a visit to Ulug Bek's Observatory, built by Tamerlane's grandson Ulug Bek, who found his true interest in the heavens. The astronomer-king was fascinated by the stars and the cosmos and built one of the most advanced observatories of the ancient world.

Other highlights include the colorful bazaar, as well as the workshop where handcrafted paper is made according to traditions handed down from the 8th century, when papermaking began in Samarkand.

During the course of the day, visit a private kindergarten for an opportunity to meet with children, teachers and administrators and discuss the system of education in Uzbekistan.

Overnight *Hotel Dilimah* (B, L, D)

## **MONDAY, OCTOBER 17 SAMARKAND/TRAIN TO DRIVE TO TASHKENT**

Take the opportunity to experience village life in Uzbekistan with a visit to Ohalik village in the Gissar foothills approximately 30 minutes from Samarkand. Visit with a local family in their home and embark upon a hike through sheep-herder trails in the hills surrounding the village. Back in Samarkand, witness a demonstration of traditional Uzbek bread making at a local home.

Traditionally called noni, or patyr, Uzbek bread is baked in round, flat loaves in a clay oven called a tandir. They are usually shaped like a dish with a depression in the middle and decorated using a special patterned stamp. Also stop at the Uzbek-Afghan Silk Carpet

Factory. This joint venture uses natural vegetable dyes to color the thread used in its carpets. Tour the gardens outside the factory where the weavers grow indigo, coleus, and dahlias to use for dye. Observe the entire process of dying the thread and weaving the carpets, with an opportunity to shop afterward.

In the evening catch the express train to Tashkent. Upon arrival, transfer to the city-center hotel for check-in and late dinner.

Overnight *Hyatt Regency Hotel* (B, L, D)

## **TUESDAY, OCTOBER 18 TASHKENT/FLY TO BAKU, AZERBAIJAN**

Tashkent boasts a wealth of the old as well as the new. Start the day with a tour of modern Tashkent beginning at Independence Square, a place where history is revealed in the different names it has borne throughout its existence. Make a stop at the Courage Monument, dedicated to the survivors of the major earthquake in 1966.

In the old Tashkent, stroll through a labyrinth of mud-walled houses surviving from the 19th century to Khast Imam Square, where some of Tashkent's oldest monuments remain. View the Uthman Koran, considered by Sunni Muslims to be the oldest Koran in the world. The holy book is safeguarded in the library of the Muy Muborok Madrassah, where several of Mohammed's hairs are said to have been enshrined.

In the afternoon transfer to the airport for the flight to Baku, Azerbaijan. Lunch today will be independent in flight, and dinner at a local restaurant upon arrival in Baku is included.

Overnight *Hotel Four Seasons* (B, D)

## **WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 19 BAKU**

Set out to explore Baku. Parts of Azerbaijan, notably Gobustan on the Caspian coast, show evidence of human habitation beginning in the Stone Age. Flaming natural gas vents on the Absheron Peninsula, where Baku is now located, may have inspired Zarathustra, a

local resident around 1000 BC, to include fire rituals in his Zoroastrian religion. Today Baku is a booming metropolis of over 2 million people with well-preserved old city and pleasant public promenades around the Fountain Square and along the Caspian Sea waterfront.

Begin the tour with a stop at The Martyrs' Cemetery, or Martyrs' Lane, set on a terraced hill above Baku's harbor, a beautiful place formerly called Kirov Park, after one of Lenin's contemporaries. Today it pays homage to the 137 people killed during Black January 1990, when the Soviets sent tanks into the city and fired on Azerbaijani civilians. The attack marked the turning point in the country's drive toward independence. The memorial has expanded to honor the Azerbaijanis who lost their lives in the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Take a walk-through Baku's Old City, or Icheri Shere. It was once the whole city and is the best place to get a sense of its history. It is completely encircled by the old city walls with their medieval gates.

The winding streets and alleyways are home to private residences, mosques and madrassahs, carpet merchants and tiny shops. The aura of the past that permeates the town rewards exploration and careful investigation with surprising glimpses of a bygone era. Pass by the UNESCO listed Maiden's Tower and Shirvan Shah Palace. Enjoy a curator-led tour of the State Museum of Azerbaijani Carpets and Applied Folk Art, which beautifully displays the vivid colors and bold designs of Azeri, Caucasian, and Iranian carpets.

Finish the day with dinner featuring authentic Azeri dishes and traditional mugham music.

Overnight *Hotel Four Seasons* (B, L, D)

## **THURSDAY, OCTOBER 20 BAKU/FLY TO TBILISI, GEORGIA**

Following breakfast, transfer to the airport for a morning flight to Tbilisi. Upon arrival, take an introductory tour of Georgia's capital.

Georgia's strip of central lowlands has long been an important link between East and

West. Tbilisi is set at the mouth of this passageway, in the Mtkvari River valley, and has changed hands many times. Most notably, the Arabs ruled the city for 400 years before King David the Builder defeated them in 1121 and moved his capital here from Kutaisi. The Georgian king fostered tolerance for Tbilisi's Arab population, and the city still has a multiethnic atmosphere.

Explore the red-roofed old town, its houses sporting carved wooden balconies beneath the Narikala Fortress on the hill above. The hike to the fortress may be undertaken if time permits, but if not, the view from Metekhi Church of the Virgin is perfect. Also visible from many vantage points within today's tour is Mother Georgia, a soaring monument above the city bearing a sword for her enemies and a bowl of wine for her guests. Visit the 6th-century stone Anchiskhati Basilica, the city's oldest church. Pause at Sioni Cathedral, sheltering the Cross of St. Nino, the woman who brought Christianity to Georgia, and pass by the 19th-century caravanserai built to house traveling merchants. Tour the 13th-century Metekhi Church of the Virgin, constructed on an outcropping above the river on the site of David the Builder's former palace.

Make stops at a working bakery and a craft studio before checking in to hotel in the afternoon. Enjoy the free evening at leisure, and dinner tonight is independent.

*Overnight Rooms Hotel (B, L)*

## **FRIDAY, OCTOBER 21 TBILISI**

Visit Tbilisi's best museums, including the Georgian National Museum with one of the largest collections of ancient gold decorative arts as well as very well-preserved medieval cloisonné; the Museum of Soviet Occupation, which was created to commemorate the almost 900,000 Georgians who were killed or deported during the Soviet years of 1921 to 1991; and tour the Georgian National Art Gallery.

Conclude the day with a private tour and reception at the house museum of Georgian painter Elene Akhvediani (1901-1974), who is

probably best remembered in Georgia for her atmospheric paintings of old Tbilisi. She was one of an influential generation of Georgian artists who began their careers in the early 20th century. Her interests included stage and costume design, and during her lifetime she produced designs for over 70 productions. Her studio, always a gathering place for artists, musicians, and poets, was transformed in 1978 into a house museum.

Return to hotel for the free evening and an independent dinner.

*Overnight Rooms Hotel (B, L)*

## **SATURDAY, OCTOBER 22 TBILISI/DAY TRIP TO MTSKHETA & GORI**

Today make a day trip to the towns of Mtskheta and Gori. Leaving Tbilisi, the first stop is Jvari Monastery, an imposing structure atop a hill overlooking the confluence of the Kura and Aragvi Rivers.

Continue to Mtskheta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Mtskheta was the capital of the eastern Georgian kingdom of Iberia from the 3rd century BC until the 5th century AD. Because of its location, it was an important market town.

On the way to Gori, make a stop in the temporary refugee village Tserovani. Here, on land owned by the Georgian government, 2200 individual houses were constructed in about a week's time, and thousands of displaced individuals live in small, private cottages. Meet with people who live in the village, visit the local school, and tour the small businesses set up with help from USAID that help support the population. Stalin was born here in December 1879 and lived here until 1883. The family's original wooden hut on Stalin Avenue is today the Stalin House Museum. On the grounds of the museum is Stalin's private railway car, used to carry him in style throughout the Soviet Union.

Time permitting, visit the nearby cave town of Uplistsikhe, meaning Lord's Castle. It was once one of the most important stops along the trade route linking Byzantium with India and China and was primarily inhabited by

artisans and merchants. Although heavily eroded and damaged by earthquakes, the town is still fascinating to explore.

Returning to Tbilisi in the evening, enjoy a musical performance and dinner of delicious Georgian specialties.

Overnight *Rooms Hotel* (B, L, D)

## **SUNDAY, OCTOBER 23 TBILISI/DRIVE TO YEREVAN, ARMENIA**

Following breakfast, depart for the Armenian border. After the usual border crossing formalities, continue the drive to Yerevan. Armenia famously claims to be the first country to embrace Christianity as a state religion, and this record informs its history. Powerful old churches built of huge blocks of red or yellow stone are silhouetted on the hilltops or tucked away in the valleys. Thousands of basalt khachkar crosses, lovingly carved and filigreed memorial stones dating from the 10th century onward, draw the eye towards the east.

The drive today takes us across the Armenian countryside, stopping at Sevanavank Monastery, located on a peninsula that was once an island in Lake Sevan. The monastery is made up of two remaining churches – the Church of Saint Astvatsatsin and the Church of Saint Arakelots – though it was a much large compound at one time and ruins of other buildings can be seen. It was founded in the year 874 AD and was an important center of pilgrimage for Armenian Christians throughout the Middle Ages.

Blue-green Lake Sevan, at over 6,200 feet above sea level, is one of the largest alpine lakes in the world. Filling two inter-mountain depressions, the brilliant lake is a favorite resort for citizens of Yerevan, about 45 miles away. Arrive in Yerevan in the evening and check in to the city-center hotel before dinner.

Overnight *Alexander Hotel* (B, L, D)

## **MONDAY, OCTOBER 24 YEREVAN**

Today explore Yerevan, the capital city of Armenia, a city older than Rome. Yerevan was founded under the name Erebuni in 782 BC. In the 4th century, Armenia became the first country in Europe to adopt Christianity as its official religion. The Armenian peoples' faith, culture and language have managed to survive through centuries of conflict with Arabs, Mongols, Persians, and Turks: Yerevan changed hands 14 times between 1512 and 1735.

Take a drive from Republic Square along Abovyan Street to the Cascade Complex. The giant Cascade stairway links central Yerevan to the Mother Armenia Statue in Victory Park. The top of the Cascade and along the stairway offer fantastic views of Yerevan and Mt. Ararat on a clear day. The Cafesjian Museum of Modern Art, built on the extensive collection of Gerard Cafesjian, is located inside and focuses on sculpture, glass, and paintings from contemporary artists.

Ride the escalators towards the top of the stairway and reach the Mother Armenia statue. Designed so that its interior resembles the iconic St. Hripsimeh Church at Echmiadzin, the base of this 167-foot monument was first used as a museum dedicated to World War II. In 1995, it was renamed the Military Museum of Mother Armenia and includes exhibits pertaining to the Nagorno-Karabakh war.

After lunch, drive to the town of Echmiadzin, founded as Vagarsapat in 117 AD and once the capital of Armenia. It is best known as the spiritual center of Armenia and the seat of the Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church. It is a special place of pilgrimage for Christian Armenians the world over.

It was here that St. Gregory the Illuminator (who converted Armenian King Trdat III to Christianity at the end of the second century) had a vision of Christ descending to Earth, and on this spot the Cathedral at Echmiadzin was built in 301.

Return to the Yerevan the festive farewell dinner marking the conclusion of the program.

Overnight *Alexander Hotel* (B, L, D)

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 25**  
**DEPART YEREVAN**

The tour concludes this morning with transfers to the airport for departing flights.

(B)