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Central Asia's Silk Road

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Palaces, trade domes and bazaars constructed along the 4,500-mile Silk Road turned destinations like Bukhara, Uzbekistan, into international cities.

Although travel to Asia is still considered an exotic undertaking by many, there are travelers who are able to say, "been there, done that," to most of the Far East. For your clients who fall into this category, we recommend looking into Central Asia.

Central Asia, made up of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, has been a cultural and intellectual crossroads. The region is bordered by the Russian steppe to the north, the Caspian Sea to the west, the Iranian and Afghan mountains to the south and China to the east, making it a true blend of East and West.

Also in Asia

[Travelport Teams With Air China Travelport](#) is reporting a new multiyear global full-content agreement with Air China. The agreement provides Travelport-connected agencies with access to Air China's full range of inventories. Air China will also be implementing online check-in on Travelport's ViewTrip website.

['Legendary' Yangtze Itinerary Victoria Cruises](#) and [Travcoa](#) have teamed up to offer a 12-night Legendary China itinerary, which includes Beijing, Xi'an and Shanghai in addition to two other itineraries featuring Yangtze River Cruises throughout 2012.

[China by Travel Impressions Travel Impressions](#) is expanding its portfolio into the Asian market by offering five fully escorted tours to China through a partnership with [Wendy Wu Tours](#), a specialist tour operator selling group and private tours to China for over 15 years. Travel Impressions is offering an additional 1 percent commission bonus on all bookings, as well as 5 percent commission on all published airfares to China.

The Silk Road began as a trade route through the region, bringing travelers and traders that way for centuries. Palaces, trade domes and bazaars were constructed in major cities along the 4,500-mile route, turning destinations such as Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Khiva, Merv, Kashgar, Penjikent, Khodgand, Karakol, Mary and Turkistan into international cities. Today travelers can revisit these sites; unleash their inner Marco Polo and discover ruins, classical architecture; shop in bazaars; listen to ancient music; and take in the scenes of the deserts and Tian Shan and Pamir Mountains.

Uzbekistan is one of the first stops on a tour of Central Asia. Travelers can tour the Kyzyl Kum desert, which connects the cities of Khiva and Bukhara. A must-see in Uzbekistan is [Savitsky Collection](#) in Nukus, which houses more than 40,000 pieces of local and Russian avant-garde art.

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Kazakhstan has beautiful landscapes and ancient architecture. Recommended sites include **Turkistan**, the history of which dates back to the third millennium B.C., as well as the former capital, **Almaty**, which sits at the foot of the **Zaili Alatau** mountain range.

Adventure seekers will feel most at home in **Kyrgyzstan**, which is dominated by the **Tian Shan** mountains. This is a great destination for rafting, trekking and heli-skiing. A visit to **Bishkek** is a must. This city was once a caravan rest stop, and now it thrives with bazaars selling everything from food and clothing to wood carvings, as well as goods from China.

For a taste of Persian culture, there's Tajikistan. This mountainous country is home to the **Pamir Mountains**, which are famous for glaciers and alpine lakes. Visit the capital Dushanbe, where your clients can roam the European-style streets.

Finally, Turkmenistan is rich with museums and bazaars. A must-see here is the rotating statue of former leader Turkmenbashi, or cross the walls into Merv, which was once known as the "Queen of Cities."

Things to Do

For a more complete cultural experience, suggest your clients to time their visit to Central Asia to coincide with one of the lively local events there. We have rounded up some of the most popular festivals.

The spring festival Nayrus, which means new day, is celebrated on March 21 throughout all the countries of Central Asia.

Another popular event is the **Shark Taronalari**, or the international music festival. It falls every other year in August and is held in **Samarkand**, Uzbekistan.

Also in Uzbekistan, the ancient cities celebrate **Asrlar Sadosi**, a cultural affair that means "Echoes of the Centuries."

The Silk and Spice Festival is held every May/June in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, as well.

For another taste of culture, there's the Turkmen Carpet Day Festival, marked on the last Sunday of May, which celebrates the best carpet weaving in Turkmenistan.

Where to Stay

Central Asia is full of popular hotel brands that will please even the most cautious traveler. In Almaty and Astana, Kazakhstan, guests can stay at the **InterContinental**. There are Hyatt Regency properties in **Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan** and **Dushanbe, Tajikistan**. **Radisson Blu** hotels can be found in Astana, and Tashkent, Uzbekistan. There is also a **Sofitel** in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.

Looking for something a bit more boutique? Check out Uzbekistan's **Sasha and Son** or **Minzifa**.

Getting There

Travelers can fly into Uzbekistan via **Uzbekistan Airways**, **Turkish Airlines** or Kazakhstan-based **Air Astana**.

Silk Road Treasure Tours is a U.S.-based tour operator that caters to experienced travelers looking to explore Central Asia. The company arranges multilingual guides, hotel experiences and excursions to help customize a traveler's trip to the region. Specialty packages include photography and wine tours.

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