Tajikistan – Wildlife & Landscapes

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1	Outbound flights
Day 2	Dushanbe
Day 3	Dushanbe – Kulyab – Zigar
Day 4	Zigar
Day 5	Zigar – Ravmed
Day 6	Ravmed – Khorog
Day 7	Khorog – Alichur
Day 8	Alichur
Day 9	Alichur – Khorog
Day 10 – 11	Khorog & Kalai-Khumb
Day 12 – 13	Kalai-Khumb & Dushanbe
Day 14	Inbound flights

Departs
October

Focus
Mammals, birds and landscapes

Grading
There are some long drives and time spent searching for wildlife in cold conditions at 4,000m altitude.

Dates and Prices
See website (tour code **TAJ01**)

Highlights
- Search for the magnificent Markhor & the rare, range-restricted Marco Polo Argali and Pamir Ibex
- Superb mountain birding with Yellow-breasted Tit, Güldenstädt's Redstart & Great Rosefinch, Himalayan & Tibetan Snowcocks, Tibetan Sandgrouse
- Dramatic landscapes of the Pamir Mountains with 7,000m peaks







Marco Polo Argali, Markhor, Azure Tit (Yellow-breasted) © M. Valkenburg

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Tajikistan Landscapes © M. Valkenburg

Introduction

Tajikistan, a landlocked country in central Asia, is defined by its dramatic mountainous landscape. Over 90% of the country is covered by towering peaks, making it one of the most elevated nations in the world. Its rugged geography is shaped by the convergence of several major mountain ranges, including the Pamir, Alay, and Tien Shan. Among these, the Pamir Mountains, often referred to as the 'Roof of the World', dominate the south-eastern region and are renowned for their breathtaking high-altitude terrain.

The Pamir Mountains include some of the world's highest peaks, such as Ismoil Somoni Peak (7,495 metres) and Peak Korzhenevskaya (7,105 metres). These towering summits are surrounded by vast plateaus, deep valleys, and extensive glacier systems, including the Fedchenko Glacier, one of the longest in the world outside the polar regions. The rivers flowing from these glaciers, such as the Vakhsh and Panj, are critical for irrigation and hydropower, sustaining life in this arid region.

The diverse geography of Tajikistan, ranging from alpine meadows to desert plains, supports a rich variety of wildlife. In the Pamirs, Snow Leopards roam the remote peaks, preying on ibex, Markhor and Marco Polo sheep, the latter being an iconic species endemic to the region. Brown Bear, Eurasian Lynx, and Grey Wolf also inhabit these rugged landscapes. The variation in habitat caused by large altitudinal ranges also supports a rich and diverse birdlife.

Tajikistan's flora is equally impressive, with juniper forests, alpine pastures, and wildflowers blanketing the lower slopes. In spring, these areas burst into vibrant colour, contrasting with the

stark, snow-covered peaks. The unique geography and wildlife of Tajikistan, particularly the Pamir Mountains, make the region a vital ecological and cultural treasure.

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1 Outbound flights

For those taking the group flights, today we depart London for an overnight flight which will have a connection in either Dubai or Istanbul.

Day 2 Dushanbe

After arriving in Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe, today we have an acclimatisation day. Before embarking on our expedition in search of the elusive Marco Polo Argali, the majestic Markhor and the incredible birdlife of the Pamir Mountains, we spend a day exploring the city's highlights: Istiklol Square, the National Museum, Rudaki Park, and the Navruzgoh cultural complex. Our guides, who will accompany us throughout our tour, will be with us to ensure that we see the best of this fascinating city in the heart of central Asia. We'll end the day with a relaxing city walk, soaking in the vibrant charm of Tajikistan's capital, followed by a delicious local meal at a top restaurant. Our accommodation will be a comfortable tourist hotel.

Day 3 Dushanbe – Kulyab – Zigar

Our journey begins early as we travel south-east along the scenic Afghanistan border en route to Shuroobod, with picturesque stops showcasing the stunning landscapes as we climb through the lower slopes of the Pamir range. We'll break for lunch in the historic city of Kulyab after an incredibly scenic 6-hour drive. By evening, we'll arrive at our lodge in Zigar, beside the Pyandzh River, where we will begin our exploration of the area. The river here marks the border with Afghanistan and our target here is the elusive and rare Markhor which inhabits the rocky slopes of this mountainous valley. This impressive screw-horned mountain goat inhabits scrub forests of Pine, Juniper and Oak with a distribution in the far western Himalaya and Pamir ranges. Birders will be entertained by mountain species such as the Bearded Vulture, Streaked Laughingthrush and Wallcreeper while Little Forktail may be found along the river. After the day's excitement we spend the next two nights at Zigar Hunting Lodge.

Day 4 Zigar

After breakfast, we'll set off on a morning hike to one of the nearby valleys, an ideal spot for observing the majestic Markhor in its rugged, natural surroundings. The area also offers excellent birding opportunities, with chances to see Himalayan Griffons, Brown Dippers, Plumbeous Redstarts, and Eastern Rock Nuthatches. Views will be breathtaking all day and birders should be mindful that this country has been visited by very few birders and there are undoubtedly discoveries to be made. We will therefore be extra vigilant while birding as there may well be surprises to be

found. Lunch will be a picnic in the field and after a full day's exploration, we will return to the hunting lodge for a restful night, recharged for the exciting days ahead.

Day 5 Zigar – Ravmed

We depart early, continuing our journey along the Afghanistan border, where we'll enjoy a picturesque lunch stop and plenty of photo opportunities capturing the rugged landscapes. There will be birding opportunities en route with mountain birds to be seen on the rocky mountainsides and along the streams. After an 8-hour drive, climbing higher into the mountains, we arrive in Ravmed, where we'll settle into our guesthouse for the night. In the evening, there may be a chance to observe the elusive Pamir Ibex in their mountainous habitat, before retiring to the guesthouse for a welcome dinner and a good night's sleep.



Pamir Ibex © M. Valkenburg

Overnight in Ravmed Guesthouse.

Day 6 Ravmed – Khorog

We start the morning scoping the surrounding mountains in search of Pamir Ibex, enjoying the tranquillity and dramatic views. This is another species endemic to these central Asian ranges and is another impressive beast. The air should be clear and towering snow-capped peaks will be in view as we seek the ibex. In the afternoon, we journey to Khorog and check into a cosy hotel. In the evening, we'll visit the renowned Khorog Botanical Garden, where we might catch sight of the stunning and sought-after Yellow-breasted Azure Tit, as well as Fire-fronted Serin and wintering Black-throated Thrush among the region's diverse plant-life. We end the day with a comfortable overnight stay at the hotel.

Overnight in Lai Inn Hotel

Day 7 Khorog – Alichur

After breakfast, we set off towards Alichur, traversing the high scenic Koitezek Pass with its sweeping mountain views. Upon arrival, we'll enjoy lunch and a brief rest before venturing into one of the nearby valleys for an afternoon of wildlife observation. Our focus here is the majestic Marco Polo sheep that calls this high-altitude realm home. This is another endemic of this remote area and a hardy species adapted to a life at altitude. Alichur is at 4,000 metres and birds of the high

mountains are here. Our aim will be to find Himalayan Snowcock, Tibetan Sandgrouse, Great Rosefinch and possibly Snow Pigeon on the surrounding slopes. Later, we may head to Jarti Gumbez guesthouse, known for its relaxing hot spring.

Two overnights in Alichur Guesthouse.



Himalayan Snowcock © M. Valkenburg

Day 8 Alichur

We dedicate a full day to exploring the breathtaking surroundings, with ample time to observe the unique wildlife in this high-altitude region. Our primary focus will be on getting good views of Marco Polo sheep and we'll stay vigilant for possible sightings of the packs of wolves that roam this rugged terrain. Snow Leopard is present in these mountains but we would have to be extremely lucky to observe this elusive cat and encounters should not be expected. Birders can look forward to seeking more true altitude specialists such as Altai Snowcock, Güldenstädt's Redstart, Plain Mountain Finch, and Horned Lark. This is a true wilderness with epic scenery and it will be a privilege to spend some time here. The pace will be gentle with consideration of the altitude we will be at. After the day's remarkable experience, we return to our hotel for the night.



Güldenstädt's Redstart © M. Valkenburg

Day 9 Alichur – Khorog

We'll dedicate the entire morning to wildlife-watching around Alichur, where we'll seek out Marco Polo sheep and birds we may have missed on the previous days. After a leisurely lunch, we'll embark on our journey back to Khorog, enjoying the breathtaking landscapes along the way. The drive will take approximately 5 to 6 hours as we will descend back down to 2,100 metres, offering chances to reflect on our incredible experiences. We will have stops along the way, so there will certainly be the possibility of more wildlife sightings. Upon our arrival in Khorog, we'll check into our hotel and have the evening free to unwind or explore the local area at leisure.

Overnight at Lal Inn Hotel.

Day 10 Khorog – Kalai-Khumb

We'll have a free morning in Khorog for rest and relaxation, allowing you to enjoy the tranquil atmosphere and take in the stunning scenery. After our leisurely morning, we'll embark on an 8-hour drive to Kalai-Khumb, where we'll spend the night in a comfortable guesthouse. Along the journey, our stops may produce birds such as the Bar-tailed Treecreeper, Pine Bunting, Brambling, White-winged Grosbeak and Long-legged Buzzard. As this region has rarely been visited by birders during this period, we may again encounter unexpected surprises throughout the tour.



White-winged Grosbeak © M. Valkenburg

Two overnights at KT Guesthouse

Day 11 Kalai-Khumb

We'll dedicate a full day to birding in the scenic region of Khalai-Khumb. Along the river, we'll search for the striking Plumbeous Water-redstart, often seen alongside the common but charming Brown Dipper. Our explorations will also take us to higher elevations, where we'll aim to spot Himalayan Snowcock and other high-altitude bird species. After an exciting day in the field, we'll return to our guesthouse.

Day 12 Kalai-Khumb – Dushanbe

We'll begin our journey back to Dushanbe, which will take approximately 8 hours. Along the way, we'll make a stop at the water treatment impounds and Victory Park, offering opportunities to spot lower-altitude bird species such as Yellowhammer, Hawfinch, and Rock Bunting. After a day of travel and exploration, we'll gather for a farewell dinner, reflecting on our incredible adventure and the memories we've created together.

Two nights in a comfortable tourist hotel in Dushanbe.

Day 13 Dushanbe

We'll enjoy a relaxed day before our flight home, with some light exploration options utilising local reports. We will either visit the local water treatment plant, an excellent spot for birding, or explore the botanical garden. Nestled in a steep gorge, the garden's unique micro-climate often attracts lingering winter birds such as Black-throated Thrush and, with luck, a rare Naumann's Thrush. This will be a perfect way to wrap up our journey with a relaxed day adding some excellent final species!

Day 14 Inbound flights

After a memorable tour of this beguiling country, we will make our return to London.

Tour Grading & Focus

It will be very cold in Alichur. You are visiting one of the world's highest and most remote mountain ranges, where conditions are unpredictable – snow may fall at any time. For much of the winter, the sun does shine in this region to the north of the Himalayas, and at altitudes between 3,000 and 4,000 metres we will expect sunny weather with a chill wind. Temperatures could drop as low as -25°C at night but are more typically between -8°C and -20°C. Conditions underfoot may be very difficult – icy, snowy and steep. Dushanbe is at 700 metres altitude and we will be acclimatising as we climb gradually over six days to 4,000 metres at Alichur. Altitude sickness affects people in different ways and is not a reflection of relative fitness. It can be serious and should not be taken lightly. To minimise your risk, you should ascend slowly, keep hydrated, avoid alcohol, move slowly and rest regularly.

Weather, Clothing & Equipment

Weather in October in Alichur is cold, with daytime temperatures typically reaching around 2°C to 6°C and nighttime temperatures often falling well below freezing, commonly to between -5°C and -10°C. Conditions are frequently clear and sunny, providing excellent visibility across the mountains, although snowfall is still possible at any time, particularly at higher elevations. You should therefore be prepared for a range of weather conditions.

In Khorog, temperatures are generally milder, with daytime highs of around 15°C and overnight lows of 2°C to 5°C. In the capital, Dushanbe, temperatures are usually pleasant, ranging from approximately 10°C to 24°C. Rain is possible at the lower elevations, although prolonged wet weather is uncommon.

You will need to be well equipped for this holiday, particularly for time spent at higher altitudes. Essential items include a warm insulated jacket (preferably down), a woolly hat or balaclava, warm gloves, a waterproof jacket, fleece layers, thermal base layers, sturdy walking trousers and good-quality, well-broken-in walking boots. We recommend bringing several warm layers that can be added or removed as conditions change throughout the day. Temperatures can drop rapidly after sunset, and early mornings in the Pamirs can be particularly cold.

What's Included

- Accommodation in comfortable hotels and guesthouses that includes breakfast and dinner.
- Light lunch and refreshment during the daytime.
- Ground transport in 4x4 vehicle, and also transport from and to the airport.
- Expert guiding at all times

Accommodation

Throughout our journey in Tajikistan, we will primarily travel off the beaten track. While Tajikistan is known for its stunning mountains, rich culture, and hospitable people, its tourism infrastructure

is still developing. In Dushanbe, we will stay in a comfortable tourist hotel with private facilities. As we explore further, our accommodations will consist of several basic lodgings, typically offering simple, clean rooms with basic amenities, including shared bathrooms and WCs.

Extending Your Holiday

We would be happy to assist in arranging extensions, should this be of interest. Please contact Dan Lay (Dan@naturetrek.co.uk or 01962 733051) for further information and/or make sure to stipulate any interest in a possible extension upon booking.

How to Book Your Place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements at the time of booking.

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Blue skies and stunning landscapes © M. Valkenburg