

Uzbekistan's Wildlife & Culture

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Depart London.
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- Day 2** Tashkent.
-
- Day 3/4** Za'amin National Park.
-
- Day 5/6** Samarkand.
-
- Day 7/8** Bukhara.
-
- Day 9** Tashkent.
-
- Day 10** Fly London.
-

Departs

May.

Focus

Birds, other wildlife and culture.

Grading

Grade A/B. Moderate-paced walks, sometimes over rough terrain. Maximum altitude of around 2,000 metres

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code UZB01).

Highlights:

- 2 days exploring Za'amin National Park.
- Turkestan Ground Jay.
- City tours of Tashkent, Samarkand & Bukhara.
- Yellow-breasted & Rufous-naped Tits, White-capped Bunting & Lammergeier possible.
- Visit the Kyzyl Kum Desert & Amu-Bukhara Canal.
- Led by expert naturalist guide



Images from top: Turkestan Ground Jay, Shahi Zinda, Samarkand & Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters (images courtesy of Martin Pitt & Shutterstock).



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Introduction

Uzbekistan is a spectacular and little-visited country lying on the famous 'Silk Road' that once connected the East with the West. It offers a wonderful mix of central Asian history and culture with an exciting variety of birds, mammals and other wildlife. From the Islamic architecture of its cities to its peaceful desert oases, grasslands, wetlands and magnificent mountains, Uzbekistan has much to offer and is sure to become as popular a destination for Naturetrek as Kazakhstan, its larger and better-known neighbour to the north.



Rufous-naped Tit

Our tour begins with a flight to Tashkent, where we begin with a city tour. From here, we will transfer to Zaamin National Park, in the south east of the country. Amongst the dramatic rocky peaks of the Pamir Mountains, we will explore the higher slopes or juniper specialties, including Rufous-naped Tit, Blyth's Rosefinch and Blue-capped Redstart. These peaks are also the home to a range of raptors. We will also try the more wooded slopes and stream lower down in search of White-capped Bunting, Indian Paradise Flycatcher and Blue Whistling Thrush. Travelling west, we will then continue to the ancient city of Samarkand for three nights. Samarkand is home to some of the world's oldest madrassas and a mausoleum thought to have inspired the Taj Mahal! We will take a city tour here to enjoy its cultural and historical highlights.

One morning we will also visit the Takhta-Karacha Pass, where Juniper forests and mountain meadows may yield White-throated Robin, Upcher's Warbler and Red-tailed Shrike.



White-throated Robin

Our final destination will be Bukhara, a city whose central buildings are subtler than those in Samarkand. During our 2-night stay here we will explore the Kyzyl Kum Desert and the Amu-Bukhara canal where we hope to find the beautiful Turkestan Ground Jay, plus Blue-cheeked Bee-eater and Menetries's Warbler. Each afternoon we will return to Bukhara, giving us time to admire the local architecture, allowing us to explore some of the 140 or so protected structures found

throughout the city. Finally, we will return to Tashkent by high-speed train and, after a last night in the city, we must leave this fascinating country at the heart of Asia and join our flight home.

Itinerary

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

Depart London

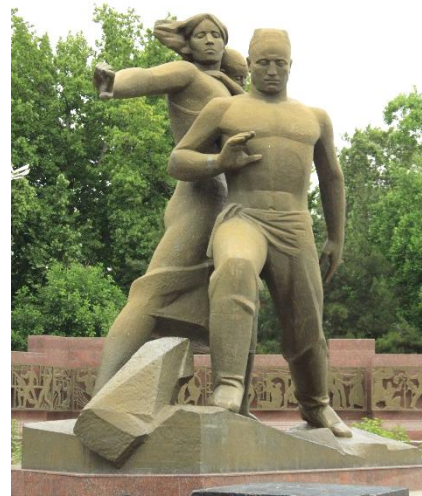
We fly from London to Tashkent, with a stop en route usually in Istanbul, depending on flight schedules.

Day 2

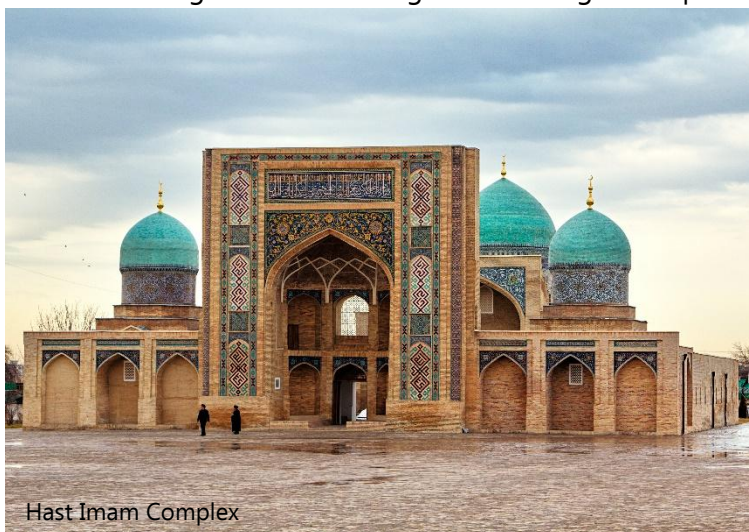
Arrive Tashkent

Upon arrival in Tashkent we will be met by our local guide and, after refreshments, we will take a city tour of the Uzbek capital. Once a walled city, Tashkent means 'Stone Village', and there are still areas of traditional houses and bazaars to be found, crisscrossed by a maze of narrow streets. Other parts of the city, however, are more modern in style, a combination of development undertaken since the city became the nation's capital in the 1930s and rebuilding following the earthquake in the 1966. Wide, tree-lined boulevards, open spaces and greenery are indicators of the Soviet influence. The city is also cut by a series of canals fed by the Chirchiq River.

Monument of Courage



The main place that we aim to visit is the Hast-Imam Complex, including madrassas mosques and the oldest Qu'ran in existence. We will also have a coach tour of the more modern parts of the city, including the Monument of Courage and Independence Square. The city tour is designed to give us a taste of the city and is not an in depth exploration. Please also be aware that some areas may not be open at the time of our visit, particularly parts of the Hast-Imam Complex and Independence Square which can be closed without warning if there are delegations visiting or the president is in residence.



Hast Imam Complex

After the tour, we'll journey to Za'amin National Park, where we'll spend two nights. Za'amin is often referred to as the Uzbek Switzerland. Founded in 1926, it was the first national park in the country and covers an area of over 15,600 hectares close to the Tajikistan border; its main aim is to protect the mountain ecosystem that includes pine and juniper forest, together with alpine

meadows. It is renowned for scarce mammals, although the Ibex, Brown Bear and Snow Leopard that are found here will normally be well beyond our reach!

Days 3 & 4

Zaamin National Park

We now have two days to explore the wonderful habitats and scenery of Zaamin National Park. We will divide our time between the subalpine zone above 2,000 meters and the lower levels of the



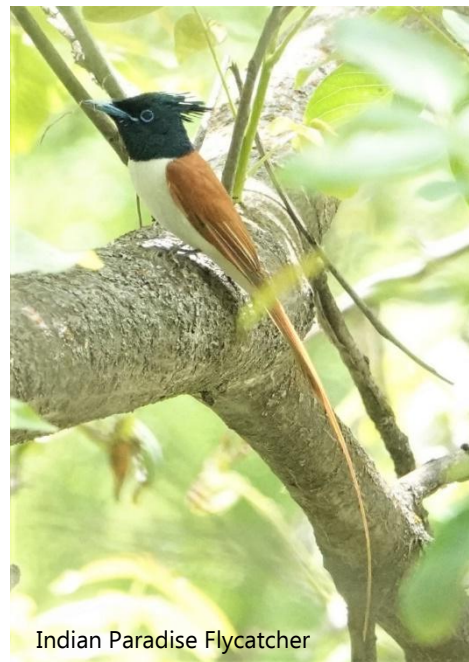
Yellow-breasted Tit

park at around 1,600 metres. Soaring over the high peaks here we can expect to see a variety of vulture species, including Eurasian Griffon, Himalayan Griffon and Eurasian Black (Cinereous) Vulture; these are often joined by a number of eagle species. The high elevation is home to White-winged Grobeak and Blyth's Rosefinch, and we also have the challenges of finding White-browed Tit-warbler. Lower down, the juniper and pine forests are home to White-capped, Rock and Red-headed Buntings along with Yellow-breasted Tit (a sub-species of Azure Tit), Rufous-naped Tit, and along the river edges

can be Blue Whistling Thrush. At all times, we will keep an eye out for the other inhabitants which should include a mix of butterflies and mammals.

In the lower areas we have the chance to find some of the other avian species of this area, including Indian Golden Oriole, Indian Paradise Flycatcher, Rufous Turtle Dove and Long-tailed Shrike.

After lunch on day four, we'll head for Samarkand, and we arrive in Uzbekistan's second city in time for dinner. Samarkand has a population of over half a million people, and rivals Rome in terms of its long, turbulent history and age. It is a very beautiful city and home to a number of buildings decorated with highly detailed and colourful mosaics, made up predominantly of shades of blue.



Indian Paradise Flycatcher

Days 5 – 6

Samarkand

This morning we will embark on a city tour. Most of the cultural monuments date to the period following the reign of Timor the Great and are a tour-de-force of turquoise domes and tiled facades that have come to define the silk road in Central Asia. Highlights will include the Ulug Bek observatory, the spectacular Registan Square, Shah-i-Zinda Necropolis and Mausoleum of Gur-Emir. The latter is said to have inspired the design of the Taj Mahal! We will return to Registan

Square after nightfall to watch the son-et-lumiere, an event that draws out the whole city, in spite of the nightly occurrence.

We can also visit the local parks, where Blyth's Reed Warbler and Turkestan Tit are common, and surprisingly Nightjars can churr after dark.



The following day we will make an early start out of the city to Takhta-Karacha Pass, an area of sub-alpine meadows and wooded streams at around 1,700m, home to an interesting range of bird species including Egyptian Vulture, White-throated Robin, Upcher's Warbler and Hume's Lark. Lower down, in more wooded areas, we will search for Indian Paradise Flycatcher, White-winged Woodpecker and a mix of warblers. We will eat our picnic lunch amongst the woods along the streams.

In the afternoon we will return to Samarkand, but before leaving the area will stop at an area known as Shelm Yavola where, amongst the gritstone boulders, we have a chance of finding Finsch's Wheater alongside Eastern Rock Nuthatch and Red-headed Bunting. Depending on our progress the previous day, we may choose to explore more of the city upon our return.



Days 7 – 8

Bukhara

This morning we will leave Samarkand and travel to Bukhara. Here, the old city is much more compact than either Tashkent or Samarkand, so most of our exploration will take place on foot as our hotel is on the edge of the pedestrianised centre. Our journey there will take us along the Zervashan River Valley. The river's name translates as 'gold-bearing', which is thought to be

connected to the sands containing gold found further upstream. An alternative, more interesting, explanation comes from a local legend about a drought, a sage, dark forces and a sacrifice, which



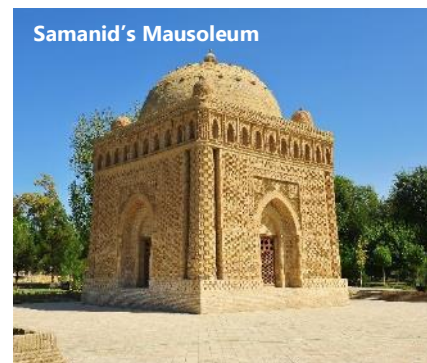
Turkestan Ground Jay

ultimately resulted in the return of the water along with the bonus of gold nuggets! We will briefly stop at the Rabat-i-Malik caravanserai, where only the portal remains together with a preserved 'sardoba', a type of ancient covered wells that used to be located every 30km along the Silk Roads. Today, only four of these wells remain. We expect to arrive in Bukhara for a late lunch. We will take a short excursion to the sights close to our hotel before returning for a traditional meal in a restaurant close to our hotel.

During our time around Bukhara, we will spend some time exploring the Kyzyl Kum Desert. Our main target here will be the localized Turkestan Ground Jay. A member of the corvid family, this smart-looking bird with a pinkish chest and black bib, has an omnivorous diet and favours a habitat of sand dunes dotted with plenty of bushes. This will involve a very early start in order to allow us to get out to the desert in time for dawn, while it is still cool and the conditions are calm. Other species to look out for include Streaked Scrub Warbler, Asian Desert Warbler and Isabelline Wheatear. A mix of reptiles and Great Gerbils are also possible. We will stop at desert oasis to look for grounded migrant species and a few of the distinctive lizards of this arid area.

Back in the city, we will head out again in the afternoon for a tour of the remaining sights. Amongst the monuments that we hope to visit are:

- **Samanids' Mausoleum** – Built around the end of the 9th century in a square shape and constructed of burnt brick, Samanids' Mausoleum is situated in a park near the centre of Bukhara. Thought to be the oldest Islamic monument in Central Asia, it was built for the father of the man who founded the Samanid state, but later also became the burial site for Ismail Samani himself and his son. Despite its modest size, it is of great architectural and historic value as it is one of the few unmodified buildings of its time remaining.
- **Chashma Ayub Mausoleum** – This building is at the site of a holy spring that is associated with the prophet, Job, and now houses the Museum of Water. Its name means 'The Spring of Holy Ayub'. A distinctive feature of the building is the double dome with conical cap over the central building, known as a 'Harezm-style' dome.



Samanid's Mausoleum

- **Poi-Kalyan complex** – Located off Bukhara's main square, this complex consists of three main buildings built over four centuries. The oldest is the Kalyan Minaret, a 45-metre tall tower with a staircase that winds up the inside. Its elegant appearance belies its somewhat gruesome history. The other two main buildings are more decorative, displaying the skill of both the architects and ceramic workers.



- **Ulugbek Medressa** – The original Medressa of Bukhara's main square, parts of the building show mathematician Ulugbek's love of astrology. It was the centre of secular science for a time and lectures on maths, astronomy, philosophy and theology were given in the lecture halls and teaching rooms.
- **Lyabi-Hauz complex** – This ensemble is built around three sides of a reservoir in the modern heart of Bukhara. Many such pools around Bukhara were drained to reduce the spread of disease, but this one remains. Mulberry trees planted in the 15th century surround the pool, making it a pleasant place to spend some time. The Jewish Quarter is located to the south of the square and there are Jewish and Islamic legends associated with the complex.
- **Sitorai Mokhi Khosa** – Roughly translated, its name means the Palace of the Moon-like Star, in memory of the wife of an emir. Both the original summer palaces that stood here were destroyed and this structure was built, at the behest of the last Emir of Bukhara, in the 1900s by the best of the Bukhara masters and two Russian engineers. As well as the private chambers, there is a ceremonial terrace and several ornate throne rooms.
- **Bolo Khauz Mosque** – This complex has one of the few remaining pools in the city at its centre – the 'children's pool'. It's said that this mosque was commissioned by an emir's wife due to her husband's preference for public prayer among the common people. It has been modified several times, including the addition of an ayvan that displays the craftsmanship of traditional Uzbek art.
- **Ark** – The Ark Citadel is a town within a town; as old as Bukhara itself and home to the royal emirs for over a thousand years. It was, unfortunately, mostly destroyed by a bombing raid in the 1920s, although parts have been restored and there is ongoing work to reconstruct as much of this ancient structure as possible.



After our city tour, we will have our final dinner in Bukhara before preparing to depart tomorrow.

Day 9

Tashkent

Our final morning in this area will be spent to the south of the city where the Jeyran Eco Centre and the Amu-Bukhara Canal are found. Again as early start will be required, before the heat of the day starts to build. Along the canal banks and around the nearby pools there are reeds and Tamarisk bushes growing, where we will be hoping to locate Clamorous Reed Warbler, Sykes's Warbler and Menetries's Warbler. We will also be looking for a variety of ducks, herons, egrets and other water birds, particularly around the edges of the lake and pools. The exact locations that we visit will vary depending on where the water is this year.



White-tailed Lapwing

As we spend time here, we should also watch out for White-tailed Lapwing, Collared Pratincole and Blue-cheeked Bee-eater. It is also a hot spot for dragonflies.

The nearby Jeyran Eco Centre has a breeding programme for Turkmen Gazelle, Kulan (or Wild Ass) and Przewalski's Horse, which we may be fortunate enough to see while we are in the area, as they roam widely across the reserve. There are also Asian Houbara Bustard (Macqueen's) breeding on the dry steppes, so we will scan to try and spot a displaying bird.

We must, regretfully, leave this fascinating city and take an afternoon train back to Tashkent for our final night in Uzbekistan.

Day 10

Fly London

This morning, we will catch our flight back to London, usually via Istanbul, arriving back in the UK later the same day.

Images courtesy of Martin Pitt, A Steel, Shutterstock & M. Mitropolskiy

Tour Focus

The main focus of this holiday will be birds and, to a lesser degree, other wildlife as well. Uzbekistan's fascinating culture and history will also be enjoyed, mainly during the city tours.

Tour grading

In terms of physicality, this is a relatively straightforward wildlife holiday with no high altitude trekking or overly demanding walks involved. However, it is likely that over the course of each day, we will cover several miles in total and sometimes over rough ground. The distances covered will be tailored to suit the group, however a reasonable level of fitness is required, and some of our time in the field will be spent in the mountains at an altitudes of up to 2,000 metres, with some ascents and descents included. All walks will be taken at a moderate pace.

Accommodation and food

We will be using a variety of tourist hotels of 3* standard or equivalent, each room with private facilities. All food and accommodation in Uzbekistan is included in the price of this tour.

Additional Expenses

On this tour you will need to budget extra for:

- Drinks other than water (which is provided in the bus each day)
- Personal expenses – souvenirs, postcards, etc.
- Discretionary tips to local guides and local staff.
- Visas are not currently required for UK citizens, however would be at additional cost if this changes.

Climate

Uzbekistan has an arid continental climate, with the north being colder than the south. Also located in the northern hemisphere, it has similar seasons to the UK, with November to February being the coldest months and July to August being the hottest. It does not get much rain, with an average year seeing just 300mm rainfall at most, and temperatures reaching the low 40s°C.

This tour will run in May, a good season to visit as the temperatures are normally warm, but not overly hot and there is only a small likelihood of some showers. We can expect the weather to be mainly clear and sunny. The highest temperatures are likely to be experienced in Bukhara and may reach low 30s°C. Early mornings and evenings can feel cool, particularly in the mountains. However, with climate change, we are seeing an increase range of temperatures even this early in the year.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Uzbekistan. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/uzbekistan regularly prior to travel.

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, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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