

Eldertreks "5 'Stans" Summary
May 8-June 2, 2013

A Visit to Central Asia -- with Eldertreks (Canada)

The Lufthansa flight attendant noticed I was reading Lonely Planets' "Central Asia" and asked where I was going.

"Turkmenistan"

Her demeanor changed..... "have you been there before??"

When I said no she said "I will come talk with you after the dinner service."

Apparently she worked the Frankfurt to Ashkabat run for a few months and asked to be changed. She now prefers Chicago to Frankfurt. She warned me it is a very strange place and very different and suggested that during my time at Frankfurt airport I go to the supermarket in the basement and buy food! As I exited the plane, she handed me a bagful of chocolates, cookies, and almond packets. "You will need these."

Turkmenistan -- what a Zany country

Where is Everybody????

The flight attendant was right. I was expecting medieval streets, dark, earth-brick homes and donkey-carts. Boy was I wrong!

Ashkabat suffered a terrible earthquake in 1948 which demolished the entire city and killed thousands. It is now rebuilt with wide avenues, huge marble-clad buildings, monuments to soviet principals and large expanses of green.

But there is no one here!

The parks are empty - no old people sitting around enjoying the greenery and flowers. And only tourists visit the monuments and museums.

I planned to arrive a week early to get over jetlag (a 13 hour time change!) and visit museums. Come to find out that you are not allowed to be in Turkmenistan on your own and must have an organized program and a licensed guide accompany you. Luckily Eldertreks asked their agent in Ashkabat to design a program based on my interests to keep me busy for the week.

It included camping as some of the archaeological sites I wanted to see are so remote there are no accommodations! But off we went and I only survived one night of

primitive camping (at Darwasa Crater -- the "Gate to Hell") and Shavkat (guide) and I tweaked the itinerary to have some marathon driving days, but to be able to stay in (sometimes basic) places. I've sent you the draft of an trip report for ITN so you have an idea of how that week went.

So after a week of exploring western Turkmenistan I was ready to meet the group. I knew one person on the tour and asked at the hotel if she had arrived yet. Not yet. Strange. I asked again the next morning. Not here yet, but the guide was.

Come to find out the entire rest of the group (7 persons) had been rerouted to Istanbul as their "letter of invitation" had not come thru in time for them to be in Ashkabat on May 8th, the night of the "welcome dinner"!

So Roger Burrows, the tour manager and I had our own "welcome dinner" -- just the two of us. He explained what happened = the group would be coming in a day late, having received their invitation letters while they waited in Istanbul. Eldertreks is picking up all the fees and charges for the rerouting and stay-- it is surely costing them a mint!

As for Turkmenistan..... What a country! Residents have free gas (for heating and cooking), free medical care, free education thru graduate school (upon passing the entrance exams) and free gasoline (!!!). Airfares from one city to the next are not more than \$30 (including taxes). But it still has that soviet mentality with a huge police presence and lots of document checks for locals.

We had an excellent guide to the archaeological sites in Mary/Merv, Nissa and Magush; then guess who guided us the rest of the time until we crossed the border to Uzbekistan-- Shavkat!

My crisis of the trip was a broken camera - and I didn't have a spare. Two fellow travelers let me copy their photos into my computer at the end of the trip, and one had been especially nice and took photos of me whenever I requested.

I liked Turkmenistan a lot -- maybe its because I spent extra time there and got to know the guide really well. In fact, I "voted" it favorite country at our departure dinner.

Uzbekistan

It was like old home week for me. Khiva! Bukhara! And fabulous Samarkand. I had arranged to meet two friends made in 1994 -- Anatoly Ionescov - now director of the Peace Museum, and Bahodir Habibov, who now directs the university's English language program and who had guided me during my previous stay. We had dinner at Anatoly's house and there was a lot of "remember when we....." I felt 45 again!

And I remembered..... everything. But the city had really changed. Where were the lovely winding tree-shaded streets of Samarkand? The monuments have been almost over-restored, with great walls built around them separating them from the “real” city. You drive from madrassa (koranic school), to mausoleum, to observatory, along wide avenues and not see anything of the town.

I brought my journal from that time and enjoyed re-living the moments when Bahodir, Yuri (now deceased) and I bribed the night guard at the Registan to let us climb a minaret to watch the sunset; when we visited Shah-i-Zinda, a magnificent collection of richly decorated tombs during prayer time; when we explored the ruins of the ancient city of Afrosiab picking up pieces of centuries-old pottery and exploring caves and the tunnels beneath the city. I moved mentally from then and now -- it was a very bittersweet experience.

Tajikistan

All right, the tour name was “The Five ‘Stans” - so we crossed the border to Tajikistan for just one night. We had the most darling guide -- Enoya is connected with the museum and I swear, never took a breath while she gave us the city tour and museum commentary. It was here we had the dessert of the trip --a multi-layered cake with an incredible nougat filling.

Kazakhstan

Here we started more of a nature tour. We had several homestays (some good, some not so) in or near national parks. In fact, I can't remember too much about Kazakhstan except for our conversation with the guide about [Sacha Baron Cohen's](#) film “Borat...” (he had never seen it)

Kyrgyzstan aka Kyrgyz Republic

This was voted “favorite ‘Stan” by the group. It could have been the scenery or the excellent guide, the mountains, lakes or interesting villages, but we all thought it is the perfect “adventure tourism” destination. We saw very few other foreigners and those we did run across were European.

I can see the riots from my window!

A day in Istanbul

My master plan had been to fly from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to Istanbul (the flight was at 4AM!) relax at a good hotel in Istanbul - the Grand Hyatt in the Taksim area and do some walking around and maybe last-minute shopping. Well- guess what..... they're rioting here. The transfer agent at the airport told me Taksim is a VERY dangerous

part of the city right now; and when I checked in the receptionist advised not to walk around, but to take a taxi to another part of the city.

So what to do? Swim in the gorgeous pool! Get a body scrub and swedish massage in their lovely spa! Room service! OD on CNN and BBC and watch the rioting from my window.

So was it a good trip? I think so. There were some very long drives for some very marginal sightseeing. But I think it was worth the time and effort. For someone who hasn't been in Central Asia before, I would recommend spending more time in Uzbekistan, for its fabulous silk-road cities and in Kyrgyzstan for nature, and saving Turkmenistan and Tajikistan for "next time."