

A Week in Western Turkmenistan

Eldertreks (www.eldertreks.com) has a stellar itinerary to the “Five Stans” and I wanted to spend time in western Turkmenistan prior to their main trip. There is a bit of a Soviet mentality left and not only is a visa needed, but you must have a “letter of invitation,” from an “approved” company, an organized program and a licensed guide to accompany you at all times. I asked Bob Perry, Operations Manager from Eldertreks to help me organize a week of activities to include museums in Ashkabat, archaeological sites not on our tour itinerary, cultural ethnography and visits to markets. Eldertreks’ partner in Ashkabat, Owadan Tourism (65 Azady Street, Ashkabat 744000, Turkmenistan, www.owadan.net and email voyageowadan@online.tm)) organized an itinerary based on my interests.



Shavkat and Merdan

It was not cheap! But I received a well designed itinerary, the company of Shavkat Metekov, a young, enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide, Merdan Hojamberdiyev, a more than capable driver who we called a human compass as he used neither maps nor GPS for the mountain and desert

driving and a rugged four-wheel-drive Toyota Landcruiser. The original program involved few nights of primitive camping as some of the sites I wanted to visit are so remote there are no accommodations.

We visited several archaeological sites not far from Ashkabat. Abiverd is a silk road town just off a main highway. Remnants of mud-brick walls can be seen and everywhere you look there are pottery sherds - many with color and designs still intact. Along the way, we also visited an ancient mosque that has become a pilgrimage site.

We camped at Darwasa Crater where (luckily) I was joined by three British women on their way to the Turkmenistan/Uzbekistan border. Our drivers and guides set up our tents, cooked for us (grilled chicken!) and made sure we had everything we needed. The flaming crater, known locally as the "Gate to Hell," is best seen at night. Turkmenistan is flush with natural gas and due to a mining accident 60 years ago, this huge pit ignited and has never been extinguished.

Our next night was a homestay in Nohur, located in the Kopet Dag Mountains about 10 miles from the Iranian border. Residents believe they are descended from the armies of Alexander the Great and have their own dialect and customs. It is a lovely mountain town with a unique and remarkable cemetery.

We continued thru the desert to Dehistan another Silk Road town that bit the dust in the 14th century.

The *piece de resistance* of the eight days was a visit to Yangykala Canyon - about 3+ hours northeast from Balkamabat or 4 1/2 hours from Turkmenbashi. It is not easy to get to, and you need a professional driver to get you there. Choices for accommodation are slim -- primitive camping in the canyon, or "semi-camping" at the Pilgrim House at the shrine of Gozli Ata. I chose the Pilgrim House and was extremely happy I did.

Gozli Ata was a 12th century Sufi teacher who established a madrassa (school) in the Yangykala Canyon. His students must have been very devoted as remote as the site is now, it must have been considered the end of the earth then.

The shrine consists of Gozli Ata's mausoleum, that of his wife, an ancient tribal cemetery filled with carved stone tombs, many carved with Turkic inscriptions, a small mosque and the recently completed pilgrim accommodations. There is a row of nine simple rooms, some large and some very large -- the size of two or three of the regular rooms, plus a roof terrace running the whole length of the building which can also accommodate visitors.



Mats and pillows are piled at the back of each room and you can use what you wish. Each room has a cast-iron stove that is handy in winter and some rooms have air-conditioning. There is a large outdoor cooking area with 27 fireplace/ovens as well as a good sized indoor kitchen and a huge outdoor communal kitchen where pilgrims can cook for larger groups. Pots/pans as well as dinnerware are available for anyone to use.

Each of the floors are covered with hand woven carpets, many traditional Turkmen, what we call "Bukhara" style and others made of felt. In addition,

under the shade of a large carport, there is a tall pile of old, and some definitely antique, carpets which can be set down along the wide portico in front of your room to relax.

Toilet facilities are basic and in another building. There are no shower facilities.

No matter how many pilgrims show up, there is room for them. In fact last year on October 6th, the anniversary of their devastating earthquake in 1948, 6,000 people arrived and they are expecting 7,000 this October.

As luck would have it Mr. Gazakbay Anndklychev and his wife were staying here at the time of my visit. He is a descendent of Gozli Ata's middle son and over the years, has made it his mission to encourage more pilgrims to visit the area. He has paid for the remodeling of the shrines, electrical lines to be extended to the site, for the accommodations building, and the mosque. He was here to supervise the building of a museum as he hopes to bring together artifacts that have been collected.

Expect a warm and hospitable welcome. Your fellow pilgrims are very likely to be very devout men with long beards wearing traditional robes and askrahan hats and women in colorful embroidered dresses with flowing headscarves wearing magnificent heritage jewelry. Everyone will smile at you and offer you tea or cookies -- whatever they are having. At dinner, someone might knock at your door and offer a bowl of "pilgrim" (lentil) soup. Kindness to strangers is a practice here.

So what do you do during the day - you visit the spectacular Yangykala Canyon! It is a land of legends and of stories passed down thru generations. Shavkat knew them all and listening to his tales of miracles and magic was a highlight. Every rock formation is significant, not to mention impressive - try to picture the Arizona mesas Georgia O'keefe loved; festooned with horizontal stripes of Cliffs of Dover white, Petra rose/red, creamsicle orange and a pink reminiscent of a birthday girl's balloon. The horizontal striations on the mesas ringing the canyon are in sharp contrast to the brown earth of its floor.

It is a spectacular drive throughout and along the way, you can easily spot turtles of all sizes, monitor lizards, large rodents skipping into their burrows, various birds, butterflies, lots of camels and an occasional desert fox.



On the Mesa

My driver Merdan knew every “road,” path, turn, rock, and track in this high desert. We were bumping along off-road most of the time as quite frankly, the established path was so bad, it was easier and better to be off it. In some areas, we followed tracks in the sand, but most of the time we made our own. At one point Merdon drove onto a high mesa -- an insurance man’s nightmare as in the narrow one-vehicle-wide areas, there are sharp drops on either side. Standing on a promontory rock, we were enveloped by the the fabulous formations surrounding and below us. In all, we spent three days exploring the canyon, including the stay at the Pilgrim House.

A very pleasant surprise is that there is no charge to stay at the Pilgrim House. But you can always give a monetary thank you to the caretaker and leave a donation at the mosque.

As we left, the caretaker's wife gave each of us a goodbye gift of cookies, candies, a small towel and baggies of salt. Everything a pilgrim needs for the trip home.

We tweaked the itinerary a bit and ended up in Turkmenbashi (our final point) half a day early and rather than waiting to fly back to Ashkabat the next day (50 min flight, airfare \$27.00), we cancelled the tickets and drove seven hours back to Ashkabat, arriving at midnight, and giving me an extra day to explore the capital city a bit more before the group tours' welcome dinner.

It was well worth the time and money to experience western Turkmenistan, which turned out to be a very good adventure travel destination. You feel like a time traveler suspended in a different dimension especially since at just about all the sites you are the only foreigner.