

ASIA · DESERT · HISTORY · ARCHITECTURE · OFF THE BEATEN PATH



Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is one of the world's least visited countries, and that is much of its fascination. The Darvaza gas crater, nicknamed the 'Door to Hell', still flickers in the Karakum desert, Ashgabat glitters with white marble, and the Silk Road cities of Merv and Konye-Urgench lie in ruins on the steppe. Nearly all visits are arranged through a licensed tour agency.

i Before you go, read the UK government's travel advice for Turkmenistan and entry requirements (visas, passport validity). Last updated by FCDO 21 October 2026.

CAPITAL Ashgabat	CURRENCY Turkmenistan manat (TMT) £1 ≈ TMT 4.67	LANGUAGE Turkmen, Russian Uzbek	BEST TIME Apr–May, Sep–Oct
DAILY BUDGET £70–£250 £££ Expensive	PLUGS Type C, F 220V · adapter needed	FLIGHT FROM LONDON 6h 20m direct ~£550–£900 return	TIME ZONE UTC+5 standard time

Around 70 per cent of Turkmenistan is Karakum desert, edged by the Amu Darya in the east and the Kopet Dag mountains along the Iranian border. Its rulers have built Ashgabat into a showpiece of white marble, gilded statues and wide, near-empty boulevards, while the desert holds some of Central Asia's great archaeological sites. Most trips are short and tightly scheduled: Ashgabat and Parthian Nisa, an overnight camp at the Darvaza crater, then north to Konye-Urgench and across into Uzbekistan for Khiva, or east via Merv towards Bukhara. Many travellers fold it into a longer Silk Road journey.

Travel here feels controlled and unusual. Most visitors move with a guide and driver arranged by an agency, itineraries are fixed in advance and document checks are common, so spontaneity is limited. Costs are higher than in neighbouring Uzbekistan because of these arrangements, though hotels and food are not expensive in themselves. Visitors are often struck by Ashgabat's eerie tidiness, the warmth of people in markets and villages, and the reverence for the Akhal-Teke horse, a national emblem. Spring and autumn are the times to come; summer heat regularly passes 40°C.

Top 5 highlights

- 1

ADVENTURE

Darvaza gas crater

A collapsed gas-drilling site in the Karakum, roughly 70 metres across, said to have been set alight by Soviet geologists in 1971. Gas-capture wells have since cut the fire sharply, and by 2025 only scattered pockets still burned, so check its current state before planning a night there.
- 2

HISTORY

Merv

Once among the largest cities on the Silk Road, Merv spreads across several walled sites near Mary, from Achaemenid-era ramparts to the 12th-century mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar. Allow a full day with a guide.

3

HISTORY

Konye-Urgench

Capital of medieval Khorezm until Timur sacked it in the 14th century, now a UNESCO site of turquoise-domed mausoleums and the 60-metre Gutlug Timur minaret, still a place of pilgrimage for Turkmen.

4

HISTORY

Nisa

The earthen fortresses of Old Nisa, an early capital of the Parthian Empire, crown a hill just outside Ashgabat; excavations here uncovered celebrated carved ivory drinking horns. An easy half-day trip.

5

NATURE

Yangykala Canyon

Striped cliffs of red, pink and cream rock drop away towards the Garabogazköl basin in the remote west. Usually visited by 4x4 on longer tours from Balkanabat or Türkmenbaşy, with wild camping on the rim.

Biggest cities

LARGEST CITY

Ashgabat

≈ 1 million people

A surreal capital of white-marble ministries, fountains and monuments, holder of a Guinness record for marble-clad buildings. Visit the sprawling Altyn Asyr (Tolkuchka) bazaar for carpets.

2ND LARGEST CITY

Türkmenabat

≈ 231,000 people

A cotton-trading city on the Amu Darya near the Uzbek border, mainly a transit point between Merv and Bukhara; its market and riverside are worth an hour or two.

3RD LARGEST CITY

Daşoguz

≈ 201,000 people

A northern provincial city near the Uzbek border, used as a base for Konye-Urgench and as the crossing point towards Khiva rather than as a destination in itself.

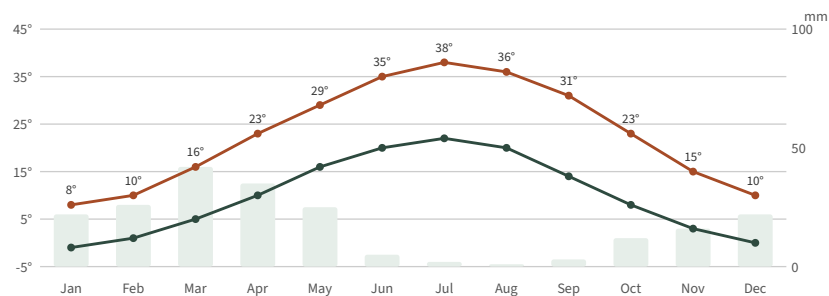
Ranked by urban-area population where available. Figures are rounded estimates, and sources define city limits differently, so rankings of similar-sized cities can vary.

When to go to Turkmenistan

Best time: **Apr–May, Sep–Oct.**

**Average climate in Ashgabat**

— High °C
 — Low °C
 ■ Rain (mm)



Festivals & events

Mar	Nowruz The spring new year around 21 March is a public holiday, with family feasts, semeni sprouted-wheat pudding, folk performances and wrestling.
Apr	Turkmen Horse Day On the last Sunday of April, Akhal-Teke horses — the golden-sheened national breed — compete in races and beauty contests in Ashgabat.
Aug	Melon Day A national holiday on the second Sunday of August celebrates the Turkmen melon with markets, tastings and competitions for the biggest and sweetest varieties.

How much does Turkmenistan cost?

SHOESTRING £70 per person / day ≈ TMT 327 hostels, street food, buses	MID-RANGE £140 per person / day ≈ TMT 654 3-star hotels, restaurants, some taxis	COMFORTABLE £250 per person / day ≈ TMT 1,168 4-star+, guided trips, private transfers
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Estimates per person per day, excluding flights. Prices vary by season and city.

Food to try

Plov

Rice slow-cooked in a cauldron with mutton, onions and carrots in plenty of oil; the centrepiece of weddings and family celebrations.

Dograma

Bread torn into small pieces and mixed with boiled mutton, onion and tomato, then soaked in rich broth; traditionally made on festive days.

Ishlekli

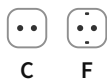
A round pie of minced lamb and onion sealed in dough and baked in the embers of a fire, a favourite of desert herders.

Getting around

Almost all travel is arranged by your agency, usually by car with a driver; hire cars are scarce for visitors. Cheap domestic flights connect Ashgabat with Mary, Türkmenabat, Daşoguz and Türkmenbaşy, and overnight trains cover similar routes slowly. Darvaza is three to four hours north of Ashgabat by road, with the final stretch by 4x4 across sand. City taxis are cheap; agree prices first.

Practical information

PLUGS & VOLTAGE



220V — bring a UK-to-C/F adapter

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

Ambulance: **03** from landline

003 from mobile

Fire: **01** from landline

001 from mobile

Police: **02** from landline

002 from mobile

Source: FCDO “Getting help”

DIALLING CODE

+993

TIME ZONE

UTC+5 (standard time)

TAP WATER

Not safe — drink bottled or treated water

DRIVING

On the right

TIPPING

Guides and drivers expect a tip at the end of a tour; in restaurants, rounding up or adding around 10% is appreciated.

ETIQUETTE

Ask before photographing people, and avoid photographing government buildings, the presidential palace, police or military sites. Treat bread with respect, never placing it upside down, and remove shoes in homes.

MAIN AIRPORTS

Ashgabat International Airport (ASB), Ashgabat

Visas & entry for Turkmenistan

Shown for a British passport.

Visa required — apply before you go

You must have a visa to visit Turkmenistan.

If you have the wrong visa or if you overstay your visa, you could be prosecuted and possibly imprisoned.

From the UK government's FCDO entry requirements for British passport holders — read the full page for passport validity, permits and exceptions.

Health & vaccinations



See a travel health nurse, GP or travel clinic **6–8 weeks before you go**. Make sure routine UK vaccinations (such as MMR and diphtheria-tetanus-polio) are up to date.

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TRAVELLERS

Hepatitis A

Tetanus

Typhoid

SOMETIMES ADVISED — DEPENDS ON YOUR TRIP, ACTIVITIES AND HEALTH

Hepatitis B

Rabies

Tuberculosis

YELLOW FEVER CERTIFICATE

No yellow fever certificate is required to enter.

MALARIA

No malaria risk

Source: TravelHealthPro (National Travel Health Network and Centre), checked 21 October 2026. This is a summary, not medical advice.

Public holidays in Turkmenistan

The next 12 months. Banks, offices and some sights may close, and transport and hotels get busy around these dates.

Sat 12 Dec 2026	International Neutrality Day
Fri 1 Jan 2027	New Year's Day
Mon 8 Mar 2027	International Women's Day
Tue 9 Mar 2027	Eid al-Fitr (date may shift)
Sun 21 Mar 2027	Spring Festival
Mon 22 Mar 2027	Spring Festival
Tue 23 Mar 2027	Spring Festival (observed)
Sun 16 May 2027	Eid al-Adha (date may shift)
Mon 17 May 2027	Eid al-Adha (observed, estimated) (date may shift)
Tue 18 May 2027	Constitution and State Flag Day
Mon 27 Sep 2027	Independence Day
Wed 6 Oct 2027	Memorial Day

National holidays only. Dates based on lunar calendars can move by a day or two depending on official announcements.

Useful phrases in Turkmen

ENGLISH	TURKMEN	SAY IT
Hello	Salam	sah-LAHM
Thank you	Sag boluň	SAG boh-LUNG
Please	Haýyş edýärin	hah-YISH ed-YAH-rin
Excuse me	Bagyşlaň	bah-ghish-LANG
How much is this?	Bu näçe?	boo NAH-cheh

Know before you go

- Bring enough clean, undamaged US dollar notes for your whole stay; foreign bank cards are rarely accepted and ATMs seldom work with them.
- Internet access is heavily filtered and many apps and VPNs are blocked; download offline maps and translations before arrival. From a mobile, emergency numbers gain a zero: 003 for an ambulance.

Arrange your trip with a licensed agency several weeks ahead and check the FCDO travel advice for current entry requirements; approved itineraries are hard to change.

Visa, health and safety rules change. Before you book or travel, check the FCDO travel advice (gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice) and TravelHealthPro (travelhealthpro.org.uk). Costs are estimates. © 2026 Pick My Trip.