Cornell’s Adult University presents:
Tracing the Silk Road through Central Asia’s Five ‘Stans
Kazakhstan • Kyrgyzstan • Uzbekistan • Tajikistan • Turkmenistan
May 13-29, 2013 — Preliminary Itinerary

Overview Daily Itinerary

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Day 5, Fri, May 17  Bishkek • Fly to Tashkent, Uzbekistan
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Eric Tagliacozzo, our faculty leader for this once-in-a-lifetime trip, is richly versed in Central Asia and in Islam. A warm and wonderful travel companion, he will provide the cohesive academic overview of our study tour, in lecture and discussion helping us to understand the place of Islam in these lands, the role of the 'Stans in the imperial “Great Game” played out between Russia, England, and China over control of Asia, and the vibrant and enduring culture of trade along the Great Silk Road.

Descriptive Daily Itinerary

Day 1, Mon, May 13  Depart USA

Depart USA on international flights to Almaty, Kazakhstan.
Meals: In flight

Day 2, Tue, May 14  Arrive Almaty, Kazakhstan

Most flights arrive late tonight or very early tomorrow morning. Transfer to a five-star hotel in the city center for a two-night stay.
Meals: In flight

Hotel Intercontinental or similar
Located in downtown Almaty, the five-star Intercontinental is beautifully appointed with a grand atrium entryway. Rooms have a minibar, air conditioning and satellite TV. Multiple restaurants on the property serve everything from Chinese to Turkish cuisine and the French-inspired Belvedere Grill with its rooftop dining terrace is known as one of the best restaurants in the city.
Day 3, Wed, May 15  Almaty

Following a leisurely breakfast and an introductory lecture, begin exploring Almaty. Spread out at the foothills of the Zaili Alatau Mountains in the Tien Shan range, Almaty is the largest city in Central Asia’s richest country, Kazakhstan. Present-day Almaty sits on the site of an old Silk Road oasis town called Almatu; laid waste by the Mongols in 1211, the city left no ancient remains. Almaty’s name means “the place with apples,” and the many varieties of wild apple in the vicinity give scientists reason to believe that this is where apples were first cultivated. Today the city is thriving on the considerable foreign investment it has attracted, primarily in the oil and gas industries.

A city tour includes Panfilov Park with its Zenkov Cathedral and a visit to the local bazaar where one can find all types of produce, nuts, and dried fruits. Panfilov Park, a green oasis in Almaty’s central area, was renamed by the Soviets in honor of 28 Kazakh soldiers led by General Panfilov who died on the outskirts of Moscow during World War II. A monument in the park honors the soldiers, and an Eternal Flame memorializes all the people who died during the war.

Zenkov Cathedral stands in the middle of Panfilov Park. It is a wooden Orthodox church built at the turn of the century without the use of nails. Its yellow and green facade and golden domes are from the era of czars. It is one of the few buildings in Almaty that came through the devastating 1911 earthquake.

Continue to the State Central Museum with exhibits that detail the development of Kazakhstan and its people from the Bronze Age through the Russian Empire, the Communist Period, and the present day. One of the exhibits is a miniature replica of the country’s chief archaeological treasure, the Golden Man, a warrior’s armor made from 4,000 gold pieces. There are also displays of Kazakh handicrafts and souvenir shops selling rugs and jewelry.

Later, observe traditional Kazakh falconry at a falcon farm outside of Almaty. Hunters on horseback wearing traditional costumes demonstrate how the beautiful birds are used for hunting here.

In the evening enjoy a welcome reception and dinner at a local restaurant. 

Meals: B, L, D
Day 4, Thu, May 16   Almaty • drive to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

This morning travel outside Almaty to the Small Almaty Gorge. The Small Almaty or Maloye Almatinskoye Gorge snakes upward from Almaty to approximately 5,000 feet, where the Medeo Sports Complex is located. Here enjoy lunch and a musical performance at a traditional Kazakh yurt restaurant.

In the afternoon, travel via the western road to Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan. On arrival, check in to the hotel and enjoy dinner at a local restaurant with a Kyrgyz Manas folk performance.

The Kyrgyz mythical hero, Manas, fought against the Uighur people in the 9th century. His story, the Epic of Manas, is a Kyrgyz epic poem with nearly a half million verses. Never written down until the 19th century, the poem has been passed down by word of mouth for centuries. A performance of selections from the beloved poem is often given at Kyrgyz festivals, accompanied on the komuz, a traditional three-stringed instrument.

Meals: B, L, D

Hyatt Regency Bishkek or similar
The five-star Hyatt Regency was built in 2001 and is located in the center of the city close to the Opera House and the Fine Art Museum. Amenities include a swimming pool and a restaurant with a Western-style buffet breakfast. All rooms feature satellite TV, minibar, and private bath or shower.

Day 5, Fri, May 17   Bishkek • Fly to Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Following breakfast at the hotel, depart for a city tour. Bishkek was founded as the Russian garrison of Pishpek. The city is set before a backdrop of the northern edge of the Ala-Too mountain range, and was originally a heavily forested rest stop on the Silk Road. Appropriated by the Russians in 1877, the city was eventually re-named Bishkek when Kyrgyzstan achieved its independence at the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Bishkek has two rivers, the Alamedin and the Ala-Archa, that run from the mountains, through the city into the Chuy River, which also forms the Kazakh border. Bishkek is graced with large boulevards, friendly people, and more trees than any other Central Asian city. On clear days, the permanently snow-capped mountains looming over the city provide spectacular views.

Explore the State Historical Museum where you will learn about the history and culture of the nomadic people of the region.

Meet with professors, administrators, and students at the American University in Bishkek and learn their perspective on life in Kyrgyzstan through the eyes of U.S. expats.

In the evening, transfer to the airport for a flight to Tashkent. Located at the foot of the Tien Shan Mountains, Tashkent dates back to the first century BC. Unfortunately, most of the city’s architectural history was destroyed in a massive earthquake in 1966. Today, the city is an odd mix of wide tree-lined boulevards, oversized 20th century Soviet buildings and reconstructed traces of the old city with mud-walled houses, narrow winding lanes, mosques, and madrassahs.

On arrival in Tashkent, transfer to the city center hotel for check-in and a late dinner.

Meals: B, L, D

Hotel Tashkent Palace or similar
This four-star hotel is known for excellent service. The hotel boasts three international style restaurants, three bars, a fully equipped health and fitness center with sauna and an outdoor swimming pool. All rooms have direct dial phones, TV, and mini bar and there is Wi-Fi in the lobby.
Day 6, Sat, May 18  Tashkent

Following breakfast, embark on a full day of exploring Tashkent. The history of Independence Square (*Mustakillik Maydoni*) is revealed in the different names it has borne throughout its existence. First named Cathedral Square in honor of the Orthodox cathedral built here by Konstantin Kaufman, the first Russian Governor-General of Turkestan, it became Red Square in 1917. In 1966 it was designated Lenin Square, and it was not until 1992 that it became Independence Square.

View the Uthman Koran, considered by Sunni Muslims to be the oldest Koran in the world. The holy book is safeguarded in the library of the Muy Muborok Madrassah, where several of Mohammed's hairs are said to have been enshrined. Written on deerskin 19 years after the death of Mohammed, the manuscript was compiled in Medina by Uthman, the third caliph of Islam. (Shi’a Muslims believe that Uthman’s successor, Ali, was the first true caliph, and his version of the Koran is held to be the only true version.) Only a third of Uthman’s original manuscript remains, about 250 large pages bound into a huge book. It has been inscribed onto the UNESCO Memory of the World Register.

Stop at the Kukeldash Madrassah. Located on a hill above Chorsu Plaza, the Kukeldash Madrassah is one of the largest 16th century *madrassahs* remaining in Central Asia. Constructed of baked brick with only one facade decorated in majolica and glazed bricks, the *madrassah* was part of an ensemble that marked the center of the old town and included the newly restored Jummi Mosque.

Over lunch, subject to the Embassy representatives’ weekend availability, meet with representatives from the U.S. Embassy who will present an overview of Uzbekistan’s political and economic situation.

After lunch, time allowing, we will visit the Alisher Navoi Park and Monument. To commemorate the 550th anniversary of Alisher Navoi, the father of Uzbek language and literature, a statue of the poet and thinker was unveiled in Alisher Navoi National Park. Across from the new blue-domed Parliament building, the hill with Navoi’s monument offers a vantage point from which one can see the whole park. A 4,000-person concert hall; two lakes; an open-air venue where Tashkent citizens gather to celebrate Navruz, the favorite Uzbek holiday; a big Wedding Palace with banquet halls; and the former Abul Kassym Madrassah, now the Artisan Center, are all within the area of the lovely green park.

Next we will step into the Abdul Khasim Madrassah, where each tiny student cell has been transformed into a different craft workshop. Here you can observe craftspeople painting their brilliant lacquer boxes, woodcarvers fabricating elaborate stands for the Koran, and painters working on miniatures. This is great place for buying keepsakes or just for browsing and people-watching.

Enjoy dinner at a local restaurant.
*Meals: B, L, D*

Day 7, Sun, May 19  Tashkent • Drive to Khujand, Tajikistan

This morning after breakfast, get an early start and drive to the Uzbek / Tajik border and proceed with formalities to enter into the northern part of Tajikistan.

After crossing the border into Tajikistan, continue to Khujand. Situated at the entrance to the Fergana Valley on the Syr Darya River, Khujand is the second largest city in Tajikistan. Its origins have been attributed to both Alexander the Great
(in 329 BC) and Cyrus the Great of Persia (several centuries earlier); whichever is true, the city is an ancient one. A former religious center and an important Silk Road stop, Khujand is home to several medieval monuments.

A city tour includes a visit to the Timuralik Fortress, the Muslihiddan Madrassah, the Sogdian Museum and the exciting Panshanbe Bazaar.

Khujand’s pink-painted covered bazaar is overflowing with goods to buy. The huge columned structure shelters orderly rows of tables covered with bags of brilliant spices and nuts, strawbedded melons with macramé handles, hanging haunches of meat, and piles of vegetables.

Twelfth-century leader and poet Muslihiddin Khudjandi is buried here in the Muslihiddan memorial complex, which has been rebuilt many times since his day. Today the complex includes a 16th century mosque and 19th century minaret as well as the poet’s mausoleum.

Enter the new Historical Museum of Sogdiana through a reconstructed medieval city gate. Displays include ancient Sogdian artifacts and exhibits from more recent Tajik history. On the left bank of the Syr Darya in the middle of Khujand are the remains of its 10th century citadel, restored in 1999. Archeological excavations around the walls have uncovered artifacts from the 4th century BC.

Enjoy dinner at a local restaurant and enjoy a discussion of ongoing humanitarian projects with representatives of a local Tajik NGO.

Meals: B, L, D

**Sugd hotel, Khujand Grand hotel or similar**

The modern and comfortable Sugd Hotel is located about a 15-minute walk from the city center. A lobby bar, shop and Internet access can be found in the public spaces, and rooms include TV, minifridge, and hair dryer.

**Day 8, Mon, May 20  Khujand • Drive to Samarkand**

This morning after breakfast some time is allotted to continue our exploration of Khujand in case we need to move something from yesterday to this morning.

Next, set off for UNESCO-listed Samarkand. Perhaps the most well-known of Silk Road towns, Samarkand, fabled oasis on the fringes of the Kyzyl Kum Desert, has been settled since the 6th century BC. Because of its location on the plains where the Zeravshan River spills out from the Pamir Mountains, Samarkand became a major Silk Road crossroads. It has been visited through time by many of the world’s conquerors – Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. Alexander said of Samarkand, “Everything I have heard about the beauty of the city is indeed true, except that it is much more beautiful than I imagined.” Tamerlane made it his capital city and gathered the finest architects, builders and artisans of the time to enhance its beauty.

On arrival, begin the introduction to Samarkand at the Registan, considered to be Central Asia’s noblest square. Three emblematic madrassahs frame the square, and loom over the empty space in the center. It was this central space that
Originally gave the place its name, for “registan” simply means “place of sand.” This sandy place was at the center of ancient Samarkand and was a public square and marketplace before Ulug Bek built the Ulug Bek, Tillya-Kori, and Shir Dor madrassahs. In its reconstruction, the square maintains the majesty that it has radiated through the ages.

Later, check in to hotel for dinner and overnight.
Meals: B, L, D

Hotel Registan Plaza or similar
Hotel Registan Plaza is located in the city center on University Boulevard, and offers a fitness center with sauna, indoor swimming pool, two outdoor tennis courts, a business center, and souvenir shop.

Day 9, Tue, May 21  Samarkand

Today continue exploring glorious Samarkand. Visit the Bibi Khanum Mosque, built by Tamerlane to be the largest mosque in the Islamic world, and dedicated to the memory of his favorite wife. Architects from India and Persia were brought in to build the mosque, and it is said that 95 elephants were used to transport the marble and other building materials from India to Samarkand.

Wander the row of tombs and mausoleums collectively called Shah-i-Zinda, or “place of a living king,” stretching between the present and the past. At its front is living Samarkand, and at its back the dusty slopes at the edge of ancient Afrosiab. Even on hot summer days the mausoleums remain shady and cool, and seem to lure the traveler to approach the oldest tomb at the far end. Behind the complex and set into the hill lies an active cemetery with gravesites dating back as far as the 9th century, and as recently as the present day.

Pay a visit to Ulug Bek’s Observatory. Though concerned with conquest, politics, and other matters of terrestrial importance, Tamerlane’s grandson Ulug Bek found his true interest in the heavens. The astronomer-king was fascinated by the stars and the cosmos and built one of the most advanced observatories of the ancient world. The observations, which he undertook with the naked eye only, predated the telescope by over 150 years. They were aided by the building itself, which housed a large vertical half-circle, only a quarter of which remains today. By using careful methods, rigorous observation and meticulous recording, Ulug Bek calculated the length of the year to within a minute of the modern accepted value. He also created the most comprehensive (to that date) catalog of the heavens, earning his place in history.

Other highlights include the colorful bazaar, as well as the Gur-Emir Mausoleum, the final resting place of Tamerlane. It was originally built for his grandson after the latter’s death, at the turn of the 15th century. The interior of the mausoleum has been restored and is brilliant in gold leaf and fresh tile. The heavily gilded central dome opens over the set of tomb-markers resembling sarcophagi (the bodies are located well below, but are on site). All are marble, with the exception of Tamerlane’s, which is a slab of solid jade reportedly from Mongolia.

Visit the Afrasiab Museum, the repository of artifacts from the archaeological work on the ancient pre-Islamic City of Samarkand. Alexander got there and turned it into more or less a Greek state, which lasted until Ghengis Khan essentially effaced it.
Later, visit a workshop where hand-crafted paper is made according to traditions handed down from the 8th century, when paper-making began in Samarkand. Founded in 1997 with the support of UNESCO, the workshop of Abdurakhim Mukhtarov produces lovely paper crafts and stationery as you watch.

Meals: B, L, D

Day 10, Wed, May 22  Samarkand • Drive to Bukhara

Following breakfast at the hotel, depart for Bukhara. Along the way, make a stop at Gijduvan, whose school of ceramics has long been known for its use of flower ornamentation combined with geometric shapes. Ibodullo Narzulaev (1927-1987), Gijduvan’s ceramic master, was one of the most famous Uzbek ceramicists. His children Alisher and Abdul and his grandchildren are continuing Narzulaev’s tradition. Their work includes more than sixty different shapes, using over a hundred design motifs and a variety of natural colors.

After a tour of the workshops led by a member of the Narzulaev family and lunch at the ceramic master’s in Gijduvan, continue on to Bukhara.

Check in to a charming local boutique hotel in time for dinner.

Meals: B, L, D

Sasha & Son B&B or similar

This charming property is more a boutique hotel than a B&B and is decorated in the national style. Fashioned from several old merchant houses, it contains high ceilings, exposed beams, and beautifully decorated niches. All rooms have private toilet and shower/bathing facilities, are air-conditioned with satellite TV, Wi-Fi, and minibar. The rooms surround a nice gardened courtyard.

Day 11, Thu, May 23  Bukhara

Spend the day exploring Central Asia’s most ancient living city. An oasis in the desert, UNESCO-listed Bukhara offers cool shade and rest to the modern traveler as it did to the camel caravans that plied the Silk Road hundreds of years ago. Bukhara is as old as Samarkand and has preserved its ancient architecture and design to an arguably larger extent than that city. The Old Town in Bukhara has a unified feel, drawn together by a central reflecting pool and plaza, by commonality in the structure of the domed bazaars, and by the major monuments ringing the old town: the Kalon Assembly, the Zindan Prison, and the Ark Citadel.

Sightseeing begins at Lyabi-Hauz Plaza, at the center of Bukhara’s old town. The plaza is, as it has been throughout history, a place to meet friends, to eat, to drink, and to relax in the shade. The atmosphere is cooled by the long rectangular reflecting pool that makes up the center of the plaza and by the shade of the trees that ring the plaza. The mulberry trees here are hundreds of years old and frame the 16th and 17th century madrassahs that make up three of the four edges of the ensemble.

Visit the nearby Kukeldash Madrassah, the largest Koranic school in Central Asia. Named for the statesman and general Kulbaba Kukeldash, the madrassah was built in 1568.

Stroll through the cap maker and spice bazaars and past street-level mosques and madrassahs, before moving on to the Kalon Mosque and Minaret. The 12th century Kalon assembly, including the Kalon Mosque and Minaret and the Mir-i-Arab Madrassah, surrounds an open plaza teeming with merchants and local vendors. The minaret towers over the dusty square, looking down from a height of more than 150 feet and casting its shadow between the mosque and the madrassah. Fourteen distinct and unique bands of brickwork circle the tower at intervals and at the top of the minaret resolve into a traditional stalactite formation.

Located near the Kalon Mosque is the Ark Citadel, the original fortress of Bukhara and likely dating back two thousand years or more. The current structure has been built and rebuilt on the same site throughout its history, and has preserved something of the form, purpose, and function of the first Ark. Like the medieval castle complexes of Europe,
the Bukhara Ark served the Emirs of Bukhara as a residence, audience hall, as protection from neighboring enemies, and for more mundane purposes, such as a trade center and a police station.

While at the Ark, possibly attend an exclusive lecture by the Museum’s Senior Advisor.

Just behind the Ark Citadel is the infamous Zindan Prison and the even more infamous "bug pit" or "black hole," the cell where two of Britain's finest Great Game players, Colonel Charles Stoddart and Captain Arthur Conolly, were imprisoned before their execution.

Also visit the lovely Ismael Samani Mausoleum, the 10th century resting place of Ismael Samani, founder of the Persian Samanid Dynasty, with its sixteen different styles of brickwork. The little mausoleum was buried under the desert sands and not discovered until the 20th century.

Finish the day with a walk through Bukhara's old Jewish Quarter, in the heart of the Old Town, where in the mid-19th century 2,500 families of prosperous merchants were estimated to have been living. Cut off in the 15th century from contact with other Jews, the Bukharan Jews developed their own dialect of the Tajik-Persian language that incorporates many Hebrew words, their own style of dress and their own unique form of Judaism. The only Bukharan synagogue allowed by the Soviets to remain is an unassuming place near the Lyabi-Hauz pool. Almost underground and still somewhat rundown, the synagogue is the center of life for Bukhara's greatly diminished Jewish community. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, more than 70,000 Jews have left Uzbekistan.

During today's touring, possibly meet with a local Bukharan architect who will provide you with an interesting look into the current state of historical architectural renovation in Bukhara. After dinner at a local restaurant, return to hotel for overnight.

Meals: B, L, D

Day 12, Fri, May 24  Buchara • Drive to Khiva

This morning, head for the last great city on the Uzbekistan itinerary, Khiva. The drive lies across long stretches of the Kyzyl Kum, or Red Sands, Desert. This is the same route ridden by loaded Silk Road camel caravans and once plagued by brigands on hand to plunder their riches. The landscape is made up of dunes, saxaul bushes, and the distant mountains. Stop en route to take a look at the Amu Darya River, which used to be called the Oxus and loosely parallels the Uzbek-Turkmen border. Arrive in Khiva in time for dinner.

Meals: B, L, D

Hotel Asia Khiva or similar
Located just outside of Ichon Qala and a two-minute walk from the city wall, Hotel Asia Khiva offers a beautiful lobby, a restaurant with its own bakery, bar, conference hall, Internet, pool, and sauna. All rooms have air conditioning, satellite TV, phone, and minibar.
Day 13, Sat, May 25  Khiva

Legend says that the ancient Silk Road oasis of Khiva was founded at the place where Shem, son of Noah, discovered water in the desert, and that the city got its name from Shem’s joyful shout, “Hey va!” at the discovery. Today the living city is part museum town, part recreation of life hundreds of years ago.

Spend the day exploring Khiva on foot. Highlights include the Tash Hauli Palace, once the home of the khan and his four legal wives, and an open courtyard for enthroning the khans. Also see the 9th century Dzuma Mosque with an unusual wood ceiling and 115 carved wood columns, creating a forest-like effect. The khans had several residences, including the Tash Hauli Palace, but the Kunya Ark (Old Fortress) dates back to the 5th century as the original residence. The view from the watchtower of the Kunya Ark encompasses an ensemble of architectural masterpieces.

During the final dinner in Uzbekistan, enjoy a colorful Khalfi performance of Khorezmian music and dance.
Meals: B, L, D

Day 14, Sun, May 26  Khiva • Drive to Tashauz, Turkmenistan • Fly to Ashkhabad

Drive from Khiva to Tashauz, Turkmenistan and fly to Ashkhabad. The drive to the border takes a little over an hour. Customs formalities can be time consuming; after clearing customs, drive to the city of Tashauz for some light touring and lunch. Later this afternoon, transfer to the airport for a flight to Ashkhabad. Following an hour-long flight over the Kara Kum (Black Sands) desert, arrive in Ashkhabad and transfer to the hotel for dinner and overnight.
Meals: B, L, D

Sofitel Ashkhabad Oguzkent
Elegant, yet traditional, the Sofitel Hotel is situated in Ashkhabad’s city center, across from Neutrality Park. Designed for comfort and convenience, rooms come with a minibar, safe, air conditioning, and Wi-Fi. Three restaurants, a spa, and mall are also located within the hotel.

Day 15, Mon, May 27  Ashkhabad

Following breakfast at the hotel, begin touring the city of Ashkhabad. In spite of its location on a trade route, Ashkhabad never achieved the status and influence of other Silk Road cities like Khiva or Bukhara. Originally known as Konjikala, the city was destroyed by Mongols in the 13th century. In 1881 the Russians built a fortress on the site as a buffer against English dominated Persia, and by the early 20th century Ashkhabad was a prosperous and flourishing city. In 1948 a massive earthquake leveled the city, killing over two-thirds of the population. Recently Ashkhabad has seen a boom in new construction, which has had a major impact on the look of the city.
Visit the **Lenin Monument**, one of the only to survive both the 1948 earthquake and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the **New Mosque** and **Turkmen-Turkish Cultural Center**, and enjoy the view of magnificent **President Palace Square**, flanked by the domed palace and the Parliament building.

Visit the **National Museum of History and Ethnography**. With its grand approach and panoramic views, the museum introduces modern Turkmenistan on the ground floor and ancient history in the galleries above. The historical exhibits begin with artifacts ranging from stone-age tools to carved ivory drinking horns and move through time, telling the story of Turkmenistan through the ages. Other galleries display weapons, applied arts such as carpets and jewelry, and the flora and fauna of Turkmenistan. Be sure to examine the huge meteor, complete with unknown elements in its composition.

Time allowing, venture outside the city to visit a **horse-breeding farm** devoted to the renowned **Akhal-Teke horse**, arguably the oldest cultured breed of horse in the world. **The owner accompanies you on the tour** to talk about the workings of the farm and about the breed. These elegant horses have long, slender necks, small heads, long legs, and narrow chests. They are said to have lent their genes to both the Arabian horse and the American Quarter Horse.

Time today for a briefing or special meeting with either US Embassy or local US company operating in Turkmenistan. 

**Meals: B, L, D**

### Day 16, Tue, May 28  Ashkhabad

This morning visit Ashkhabad’s excellent **Museum of Carpets and Textiles**. The museum displays an abundance of gorgeous carpets, kilims, cushions, and costumes and explains the nuanced differences in carpet and textile patterns among different Turkmen tribes and regions. One of the largest hand-knotted carpets in the world can be seen here. The museum makes a great place to shop for a carpet, as the staff here can provide you with the necessary authorizations.

Enjoy a **farewell lunch** at a local restaurant featuring musical entertainment (due to early morning departure the following morning, we recommend a farewell lunch event instead of dinner).

In the afternoon visit the **UNESCO World Heritage Site of the ancient Parthian Kingdom of Nisa**, led by a **professional local archaeologist**. The beautiful Kopet-Dag Mountains rise up around Nisa, a site 15 miles outside of Ashkhabad that was once a major center of the ancient Parthian Kingdom. More than two thousand years ago the Parthian Empire spread out from Nisa and took its place among such kingdoms as the Achaemenid under Cyrus the Great and the Macedonian under Alexander the Great. Though Nisa was ruled by a succession of dynasties, it remained an important center in the ancient world until the 13th century, when the Mongols sacked it. Today archaeological work continues at Nisa.

Stop at **Kipchuk Mosque**, a huge $100-million-dollar mosque in the former Turkmen President Niyazov’s hometown. The mosque is big enough to hold 10,000 people, and its 164-foot golden dome had to be lowered in place by helicopter. Verses from Niyazov’s own spiritual book, the Ruhnama, are etched on the walls alongside Koranic verses. Niyazov was buried here in the family mausoleum that he built, along with the mosque, using government funds. After dinner at a local restaurant, the evening is free in preparation for the departure very early next morning.

**Meals: B, L, D**

### Day 17, Wed, May 29  Depart Ashkhabad

The tour concludes with an early morning transfer to the airport for departures to the US.

**Meals: in flight**