



The Syr Darya *Expeditions*

*A unique three-part journey along the course of Central Asia's Secret River – the Syr Darya.
A journey that will take you across four countries and three thousand years.*

K A Z A K H S T A N · K Y R G Y Z S T A N · U Z B E K I S T A N · T A J I K I S T A N



AN INTRODUCTION

Central Asia's *Secret River*.

From its source in Kyrgyzstan high on the Arabel-Suu plateau of the central Tien Shan, to its estuary 2,200 kilometres downstream where it empties into what remains of the Aral Sea, this river has always been the great highway across the arid steppes and deserts of Central Asia — linking the great mountain chains in the east with the Aral, Caspian and Black Seas in the north-west.

A river known to the Greeks of Alexander and which marks the northernmost point reached by his armies. A river known to Chinggis Khan, to Tamerlane and to the tens of thousands who followed its course to the Golden Horde in Russia.

OPERATING SEASON

Inaugural Private Departure — *September 2026*

Welcome aboard.



THE PROGRAMME
THE SYR DARYA EXPEDITIONS
SOURCE TO SEA



THE SERIES

Three expeditions. *One river.*

Along its course the Syr Darya changes from a raging white-water torrent into a meandering life-bringer, irrigating the cotton fields of the Fergana Valley, before breaking out into the Great Steppe on its journey to the Aral Sea. We have divided it into three distinct journeys, each with its own character. Each with its own terrain, transport, register and intent.

I

From the *Source.*

Tien Shan → Fergana → Kazakh border. The geological expedition. We begin at the meltwater on Arabel-Suu, follow the Naryn through its gorges, raft the upper river, and trace the birth of the Syr Darya at the confluence of the Naryn and Kara Darya. Khojand, where Alexander fought the Saka, lies on the route.

11 DAYS · SEPTEMBER 2026 · 4WD + BOAT

II

The *Middle River.*

Kazakh border → Turkistan. The river expedition. We pick up the Syr Darya where Expedition I leaves it, and travel as much as conditions allow on small boats. The route follows the old caravan corridor: Otrar, where the Mongol envoys were killed and from which a war began.

IN DEVELOPMENT · BOAT + 4WD

III

The *Lost Cities.*

Kyzylorda → Aral. The archaeological expedition. The Northern Silk Road that connected Central Asia with the Golden Horde, traced through its abandoned cities: Sauran, Syganak, Jankent, Chyryk-Rabat. The expedition ends at what remains of the sea the river once filled.

IN DEVELOPMENT · 4WD + RIVER

AT A GLANCE

The whole route, *one page.*

DAY	ROUTE	DISTANCE	HIGHLIGHTS · OVERNIGHT
Sept 15	Almaty → Karkara → Tamga (Issyk-Kul)	~420 km · 6–8 h	Kegen Pass · seasonal border · lakeside camp · eagle hunter
Sept 16	Tamga → Barskoon Gorge → Arabel-Suu	~180 km · 5–7 h	Barskoon Pass 3,816 m · Petrova Glacier · high camp 3,100 m
Sept 17	Camp → Eki-Naryn → Naryn City	~150 km · 4–6 h	Little Naryn gorges · confluence · Khan Tengri Hotel
Sept 18	Naryn → Toktogul	~400 km · 7–9 h	Naryn Valley · Suusamyr valley · turquoise reservoir – guest house
Sept 19	Toktogul → Ken-Sai → Margilan	~380 km · 7–9 h	Border KG → UZ · Fergana Valley · Evergreen Margilan Guestouse
Sept 20	Margilan → Confluence → Kokand	~150 km · 5–6 h	Yodgorlik silk · birth of the Syr Darya · Khudayar Khan palace- Evergreen guest house
Sept 21	Kokand → Bekabad → Khojand (Tajikistan)	~250 km · 7–9 h	Farkhad HPP · border UZ→TJ · Alexandria Eschate · Silk road guest house
Sept 22	Khojand → Buston/Oybek → Tashkent	~280 km · 6–8 h	Fortress · Panjshanbe Bazaar · border TJ→UZ · Chorsu · Farovon hotel
Sept 23	Tashkent → Shahrukhia → Aidarkul Lake	~350 km · 6–8 h	Timur's Silk Road city · boat ride · yurt camp under desert stars
Sept 24	Aidarkul → Akmeshit → Shymkent	~580 km · 8-10 h	Border UZ→KZ · Akmeshit cave · Shymkent – Pana hotel
Sept 25	Shymkent → Taraz → Almaty	~700 km · 8-10 h	Almaty

DEPARTURE

Private Departure — *September 2026* · private expedition · maximum 15 travellers

THE MAP EXPEDITION I FROM THE SOURCE



DISTANCE	DURATION	MAX ALTITUDE	BORDERS	GRADE
~3,800 km	~ 11 days	3,850 m	Four nations, five crossings	Moderate · 2-3/5

15 SEPTEMBER · THE DEPARTURE

~420 KM · 6-8 H · PAVED · CAMP 1,770 M

Almaty → Karkara Border → *Tamga.*

DRIVE

SEASONAL BORDER

LAKESIDE CAMP

EAGLE HUNTER



We leave Almaty before first light. By the time the Kegen Pass crests at 2,550 metres the sky has begun to colour, and the highland steppe opens beneath the windshield in long, unbroken planes.

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 05:00 | Departure from Almaty · early light over the Tien Shan foothills |
| 08:00 | Shelek — last major fuel stop before the mountains |
| 10:30 | Kegen Pass · 2,550 m |
| 12:00 | Karkara border KZ → KG · 1–2 hour processing |
| 15:00 | Descent to Lake Issyk-Kul through the eastern gorge |
| 17:30 | Camp set on the southern shore at Tamga · eagle-hunter at sunset |

16 SEPTEMBER · TO THE SOURCE

~180 KM · 5-7 H · GRAVEL · HIGH CAMP 3,100 M

Tamga → Barskoon Gorge → *Arabel-Suu.*

DRIVE

3,850 M

GLACIER WALK

HIGH CAMP



Above the Barskoon Pass the world flattens. The Arabel-Suu Plateau is one of the great high pasturelands of Central Asia — a syrt of grass, ice-cold streams and ochre rock, ringed by white peaks.

-
- 07:30** Departure west along Issyk-Kul to Barskoon village
-
- 09:30** Barskoon Waterfalls · acclimatisation stop
-
- 11:00** Barskoon Pass · 3,816 m — crest, into the syrt country
-
- 12:30** Lake Petrova · 3,700 m — walk to glacier terminus
-
- 14:30** Lunch above the plateau · 70 km gravel traverse
-
- 17:00** High camp set on the Burkhan River · 3,100 m
-

17 SEPTEMBER · THE GORGES

Camp → Eki-Naryn → *Naryn City.*

~150 KM · 4-6 H · GRAVEL + FORDS · HOTEL 2,040 M

DRIVE

FISHING

RIVER FORDS

HOTEL



At Eki-Naryn – Kyrgyz for “two Naryns” – the Greater and Little rivers meet in a deep, slow pool. It is the best fishing on the expedition.

-
- 06:30** Morning fishing in the down pools beneath camp
-
- 09:00** Break camp · enter the V-shaped canyon of the Little Naryn
-
- 11:30** Tree line returns · 2,500 m
-
- 13:00** Eki-Naryn confluence · 2,250 m — picnic lunch
-
- 15:00** Salkyn-Tor National Park
-
- 17:30** Arrival Naryn city · Han Tengri hotel · cultural show
-

18 SEPTEMBER • ON THE RIVER

~300 KM • 7-9 H • RAFT + PAVED • LAKESIDE 930 M

Naryn → Kazarman → *Toktogul Reservoir.*

KYRGYZ JAILOO

DRIVE

ALA-BEL PASS

LAKESIDE



Before the river enters its great canyons, we spend time with the people who have lived beside it for generations. In a remote summer pasture, a local family introduces us to the traditions of Kyrgyz nomadic life.

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 09:00 | Departure from Hotel |
| 09:30 | Cultural and historical experience, visiting local museum, |
| 12:30 | Arrival at a yurt camp Son Kul, horse ride, lunch |
| 14:30 | Continue west along the Naryn River |
| 16:30 | Ketmen-Töbö Valley viewpoint |
| 20:00 | Arrival Toktogul • turquoise reservoir – guest house/camp |

19 SEPTEMBER · INTO THE FERGANA

~380 KM · 7-9 H · PAVED + BORDER · HERITAGE 490 M

Toktogul → Ken-Sai → *Margilan.*

DRIVE

BORDER

SILK CITY

HERITAGE STAY



Beyond Ken-Sai we enter the Fergana Valley — a country of cotton, mulberry, orchard and irrigation canal, of the geometry that turned this river from a wild thing into agricultural infrastructure.

- | | |
|-------|---|
| 07:30 | Depart Toktogul · southwest via Jalal-Abad |
| 10:30 | Jalal-Abad · fuel stop |
| 12:30 | Ken-Sai border KG → UZ |
| 15:00 | Fergana Valley · cotton fields |
| 17:00 | Namangan transit — Uzbekistan's second city |
| 19:00 | Arrival Margilan · Evergreen guest house |

20 SEPTEMBER · THE BIRTH OF THE RIVER

~150 KM · 5-6 H · PAVED · BOUTIQUE 410 M

Margilan → Confluence → *Kokand.*

SILK LOOMS

CONFLUENCE

KHANATE PALACE

BOUTIQUE



Between Margilan and Kokand we make the stop the expedition was built around. The Naryn meets the Kara Darya – and the river acquires its name. The Syr Darya is born here.

- 09:00 Yodgorlik silk factory · 1.5 hour tour
- 11:30 Light lunch · Margilan tea house
- 13:30 ★ Confluence of the Naryn & Kara Darya
- 15:00 Aksikent ruins · 3rd–2nd c. BCE
- 16:30 Khudayar Khan Palace · ethnocultural guide
- 19:00 Dinner at a courtyard restaurant, overnight in Silk Road hotel

21 SEPTEMBER · ALONG THE GREAT RIVER

Kokand → *Khojand.*

~300 KM · 5-7 H · PAVED + BORDER · HOTEL 300 M

SYR DARYA

BORDER

KHUJAND

OVERNIGHT TJ



Beneath the Khojand bluff, in 329 BCE, Alexander defeated the Saka cavalry of the Syr Darya and founded Alexandria Eschate, “the furthest” of his cities. The river has moved its bed; the bluff has not.

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 08:00 | Depart Kokand · west along the Syr Darya through cotton fields |
| 10:30 | Bekabad · “beginning of water” · Farkhad HPP 1943 |
| 11:30 | Border crossing UZ → TJ · Bekabad Auto / Khovasobod |
| 13:00 | Arrival Khujand · citadel · Museum of Sughd · riverside walk |
| 16:00 | Panjshanbe Bazaar · javari soup · Sheikh Muslihiddin mosque |
| 19:30 | Dinner in Khojand · overnight Green city hotel |

22 SEPTEMBER · A DAY IN THE CAPITAL

Khojand — *Tashkent.*

~280 KM · 6–8 H · SIGHTSEEING + BORDER · DESIGN HOTEL 440 M

FORTRESS

BAZAAR

BORDER

TASHKENT



A day not to be over-programmed. Tashkent is large, modern and palimpsestic – Silk Road bones beneath Soviet skin beneath new glass. Our suggested itinerary is loose; the city rewards walking.

- 09:30** Khujand Fortress · Museum of Sughd · Syr Darya ramparts
- 11:30** Panjshanbe Bazaar · javari · Sheikh Muslihiddin 12th c.
- 12:30** Lunch in Khujand · depart north
- 14:30** Buston border TJ → UZ · re-enter Uzbekistan
- 16:00** Gulistan optional · Syr Darya 400 m wide
- 19:30** Arrival Tashkent · Chorsu · Centre for Islamic civilisations · dinner

23 SEPTEMBER · SILK ROAD & BOAT RIDE

~350 KM · 6-8 H · PAVED · YURT CAMP 247 M

Tashkent → Shahruxhia, yurt camp on *Aidarkul lake*.

SILK ROAD

BOAT RIDE

YURT CAMP

DESERT STARS



Yurt camps on the shores of Aydarkul Lake in Uzbekistan offer an immersive nomadic experience, combining traditional camel-hair yurts with modern comforts. These remote desert retreats provide camel rides, traditional dinners around the campfire, and stargazing in the Kyzylkum Desert.

05:30	Depart Tashkent southwest along the M39
07:00	Shahruxhia ruins · Timur's Silk Road city on the Syr Darya
11:00	Jizzakh · Silk Road junction · fuel
14:00	Boat riding on the Aidarkul
16:30	Fish lunch grilled on the shore by local fishermen
18:30	Yurt camp · dombra music · campfire · desert stars

24 SEPTEMBER · SACRED PLACE

~350 KM · 6-8 H · PAVED · YURT CAMP 247 M

Aidarkul → Akmeshit-Auliye Cave → *Shymkent*.

BORDER

SACRED CAVE

SHYMKENT



The cave is enormous – 150 metres long, 65 wide, vaulted to 25 – partially open to the sky. Trees grow inside, sustained by a constant 18-degree microclimate. A place of pilgrimage.

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 08:30 | Dawn departure from yurt camp · east to Jizzakh |
| 11:00 | Tashkent bypass · ring road · Kaplanbek border UZ→KZ |
| 14:00 | Boraldai petroglyphs |
| 15:00 | Akmeshit-Auliye cave · 150 m long · trees inside · +18°C |
| 18:00 | Arrival in Shymkent. Visiting the Kazakh Carpet Museum |
| 20:00 | Dinner and overnight in Shymkent |

25 SEPTEMBER · RETURN TO ALMATY

Shymkent → Taraz → *Almaty.*

~750 KM · 8-10 H · M39 MOTORWAY · HOTEL 800 M

MOTORWAY

EXPEDITION CLOSE

FINAL DINNER



The final day is paced quietly. M39 east, Kordai Pass at 1,230 metres, Almaty by dinner. The expedition does not end on a flight; an extra hotel night gives the city a final supper.

-
- 08:30** Depart Shymkent · M39 eastward through the mountains
-
- 11:00** Arrival in Taraz – lunch and exploring ancient Taraz, visiting Akyrtas complex
-
- 16:30** Kordai Pass · 1,230 m – enter Almaty Region
-
- 19:00** Arrival Almaty · expedition concludes
-
- 20:00** Farewell dinner · downtown · eleven days, four countries, one river

PRACTICALITIES

Where the expedition *spends its nights*.

THE CAMPS · TWO NIGHTS

Both expedition camps follow our Yurtada standard – authentic, comfortable, grounded. Sleeping tents with proper bedding, bio-toilets, solar shower bags, a separate mess tent with full kitchen.

At Tamga (Day 1) the camp is a beach pitch on the warm southern shore of Issyk-Kul. At Burkhan River (Day 2) the camp is at 3,100 metres above the tree line; the night is cold and the sky exceptional.

Yurtada is not luxury glamping. It is the expedition's working environment – set up by people who know the terrain.

NIGHTLY PROFILE

DAY 1 · TAMGA	Lakeside camp
DAY 2 · BURKHAN	High camp · 3,100 m
DAY 3 · NARYN	Boutique hotel
DAY 4 · TOKTOGUL	Lakeside guesthouse
DAY 5 · MARGILAN	Guest house
DAY 6 · KOKAND	Guest house
DAY 7 · KHOJAND	Boutique hotel
DAY 8 · TASHKENT	Boutique hotel
DAY 9 · AIDARKUL LAKE	Yurt camp on the lake
DAY 10 · SHYMKENT	Hotel

SAFETY, MEDICAL & BORDER

What we carry. *What to know.*

MEDICAL STANDARD

Expedition leader: Wilderness First Responder + Advanced Wilderness Life Support. Drivers: ERC basic life support, off-road recovery certification. Two full medical kits with AED, IV fluids, splints. Separate altitude kit deployed under leader judgment.

EVACUATION REACH

Convoy can reach a regional hospital with surgical capacity in five to nine hours by road. Helicopter evacuation available in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, contingent on weather. Insurance-funded evacuation to Almaty or Tashkent is the standard pathway.

INSURANCE

Comprehensive travel insurance covering high-altitude trekking to 4,000 m, rafting Class III, helicopter evacuation and repatriation is mandatory.

VISA POSITION

For most EU, UK, US, Canadian, Australian and Japanese passport holders, all four countries are visa-free for short tourist visits — Kazakhstan (30 days), Kyrgyzstan (60 days), Uzbekistan (30 days), Tajikistan (30 days; e-visa for some).

CROSSINGS

Five crossings: Karkara (KZ→KG, Day 1), Ken-Sai (KG→UZ, Day 5), Bekabad Auto (UZ→TJ, Day 7), Buston (TJ→UZ, Day 8), Kaplanbek (UZ→KZ, Day 10). Khujand overnight on Day 7.

KARKARA • SEASONAL CROSSING

September sits at the end of the operating window. We monitor closure forecasts and carry a Korday contingency (+4 hours). Chernyaevka has been closed since February 2025; Kaplanbek is the operational alternative.

WEATHER & ALTITUDE

September — clear skies, *cool nights*.

SEPTEMBER — THE DEPARTURE WINDOW

September is the clearest month of the operating season. The summer haze has lifted; the Tien Shan peaks stand sharp against the sky. High camp 0–8 °C overnight, 12–18 °C by day. Fergana lowlands 22–32 °C — warm but no longer hostile. First snow possible on the highest passes in the final days.

WEATHER CONTINGENCY

Barskoon Pass (3,816 m) can close briefly in late September for early snow. We hold a contingency rest day in Tamga and a re-routing via Bishkek and the M41 if the pass is impassable.

SLEEP ALTITUDE RULE

“Climb high, sleep low.” The expedition takes you to 3,850 m by day but never sleeps above 3,100 m. Deliberate, not incidental.

ACCLIMATISATION PROTOCOL

STEP 01

Day 1 · 1,770 m pre-acclimatise at Issyk-Kul shore

STEP 02

Day 2 reach 3,850 m daytime only

STEP 03

Sleep at 3,100 m — descended 700 m

STEP 04

Day 3 onward · below 3,000 m

MONITORING

HR & SpO₂ at high camp

RESPONSE

Descent first · medication second

SCOPE OF DELIVERY

A precise scope *of delivery.*

INCLUDED

- + Eleven nights' accommodation — two camps, one yurt camp, eight hotel rooms
- + All meals from Day 1 lunch through Day 10 lunch
- + Private convoy of 4WD expedition vehicles with drivers
- + Dala Arba senior expedition leader throughout
- + Regional fixers in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan
- + Local cultural specialists at key sites
- + Ethnocultural guides — Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik
- + Expedition support crew — kitchen, camp, mechanics
- + All camp equipment, kitchen, bedding
- + All listed cultural sites and entries
- + Eagle-hunter demonstration on Day 1
- + Iridium satellite communications & daily welfare check
- + Full medical kits — AED, oxygen, altitude pharmacopoeia
- + Border facilitation across all crossings
- + Welcome & farewell dinners in Almaty

NOT INCLUDED

- International flights to and from Almaty
- Visas (where required) & travel insurance
- Alcohol beyond house wine at dinner
- Personal kit (clothing, footwear, technical gear)
- Personal laundry beyond two complimentary loads
- Gratuities for crew (guidance issued separately)
- Optional extensions
- Specialist guides booked on request (archaeologist, glaciologist)
- Helicopter charter / medical evacuation (insurance-covered)
- Items of a personal nature

RIVER STORY FROM DROPLET TO RIVER

A RIVER ESSAY

From a droplet *to a great river.*

It begins as a sound. On the Arabel-Suu syrts the ground is wet underfoot for the first three hundred metres around any stream — and the streams themselves are no wider than a hand. They are cold enough to numb your fingers in seconds. They braid and split and join again across the syrt floor, and somewhere on the long western slope of the plateau they coalesce into what the Kyrgyz, with characteristic understatement, call the Naryn — “narrow.”

By the time we meet it at Eki-Naryn the river is no longer narrow. The V-shaped canyon below carries the sound of moving water for kilometres in either direction. Burkhan, Atbashi, Alabuga — tributary by tributary the river acquires the muscle that defines it.

At Naryn city the rafts go in. The water is glacial-cold, the colour of pale jade, and the rapids are continuous. Then the dams. Toktogul, finished in 1975, holds 19 cubic kilometres of water against an earthen wall 215 metres high.

It is in the Fergana, finally, that the river acquires its name. The Naryn meets the Kara Darya on a flat bend of agricultural land near Balikchi, and from that confluence the Syr Darya begins. The water at your feet is the same water you saw on Arabel-Suu seventy-two hours earlier, but the river is new.

It exits the Fergana through the Farkhad narrows at Bekabad — a sudden constriction, the last truly mountainous moment of its course. Below Bekabad the gradient flattens. The river becomes a lowland giant: 200 to 400 metres wide, slow, the colour of clay.

Past Otrar, Sauran, Syganak, Jankent. It ends at what remains of the Aral Sea — divided into two basins. The Kazakh north, fed by a dam built across the old channel in 2005, is partially back. The fish have returned.

“A river is a country that runs.”

— OLZHAS SULEIMENOV



A river is not a route. *It is a thread.*

The Syr Darya Expeditions are an account of one such thread — drawn from the glaciers of the central Tien Shan to the salt floor of what was once the Aral Sea.

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PRIVATE DEPARTURES

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