



# Tajikistan

## Zerafshan

**Tourism Product Portfolio  
for International Travel Trade**



# Zerafshan of Tajikistan

## Introduction

The Zerafshan Valley is part of the Sogd Region of Tajikistan. The valley is situated in Central Tajikistan, between the Turkestan Mountains to the north & Zerafshan Range to the south. The Yagnob & Fandarya Rivers lie to the east, with the Marguzor Lakes Valley to the west. The region has approximately 300,000 inhabitants in 259 villages across 24 communities. The local economy is mostly agricultural, but in common with the rest of Tajikistan, a large proportion of the local economy is dependent on migrant remittances. Penjikent, situated in the far west, close to the border with Uzbekistan, is the largest town in the Region and provides an ideal starting point for travelling in the Zerafshan Valley.

The climate of the Zerafshan valley is continental and semi-arid. Winters are usually relatively mild but have plenty of snow. During the main tourist season from May to October, the weather is dry and stable, making the region safe and enjoyable for trekking and mountaineering at this time. The unspoilt environment attracts nature-lovers. In many places, the traveller will meet with the same impressions as Marco Polo did on his journey along this part of the Silk Road 750 years ago. The most popular treks in the Zerafshan Valley connect the alpine lakes of the Fann mountains. Hiking can range from short 1 or 2 day treks, suitable for all levels including families with children, up to 2 weeks crossing the whole range. In addition to the appeal for soft activity tourism, there are also some facilities for mountaineering and alpinism which has re-emerged as a popular activity in recent years.

There is a network of tarmac roads throughout most of the region and access to all main tourism attractions is easy. Mountain roads leading to more remote villages and communities can be accessed by 4 wheel drive vehicles. In addition to the lakes and mountains with appeal to outdoor enthusiasts, Zerafshan is home to historical and cultural sites. Close to Penjikent is Sarazm, the most ancient settlement in Central Asia. Sarazm (sari



*Poppies field*

zamin) – “beginning of the world” is more than 5500 years old and is considered to be the birthplace of Tajik civilization. The UNESCO World Heritage site of Samarqand is only 60km away, making the Zerafshan Valley well suited to combined tours of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Eighth local tour operators, based in Zerafshan, are members of the Zerafshan Tourism Board [www.zerafshan.info](http://www.zerafshan.info). The tour operators are developing an increasingly exciting range of products to suit discerning European travellers. In addition to trekking, there are jeep tours following great adventurers of the past. From the Legendary journeys of Alexander the Great, exploring the life and works of Rudaki, travelling the Silk Road and into the playing fields of the Great Game and to hear the language of Persian Kings surviving from millennia ago in remote mountain valleys. There are options for horse riding, boating, fishing, cycling, local cookery lessons, visits with local musicians and craft producers, tasting the freshest local honey from the local bee keepers.

Community based tourism in the region is being developed by Zerafshan Tourism Development Association. It involves people in tourism development, and aims to improve the well-being of the local communities – to reduce poverty, create new jobs, and at the same time conserve the fragile environment of the region as well as preserve the cultural heritage. A network of 17 homestays has been created and supported close to major attractions in the region. There is opportunity to meet with local people and experience



*Donkeys are a popular vehicle during trekking tours*

Tajikistan's traditional way of life.

Tour packages are offered making full use of local service providers. The ZTDA has a tourist information centre in Penjikent and runs a craft shop to support production of locally produced products for sale to tourists ([www.ztda-tourism.tj](http://www.ztda-tourism.tj)).

In general standards of comfort and service suit only more “adventure seeking” visitors. Rural homestays and guesthouses offer basic, traditional style accommodation. Toilets are generally the “hole in the floor” variety. In larger towns there are former Soviet style tourist hotels, offering modern services, including satellite television and internet connections. In Dushanbe international 5-Star accommodation is available.

## Itineraries in Zerafshan

The following itineraries and excursions are a sample of the interesting places and many routes available to visitors to the region. They are intended to inspire and encourage visitors to find the highlights of Tajikistan and perhaps venture to previously unthought-of destinations.

Using either Dushanbe or Penjikent as a base it is possible to make several short excursions returning back to the city each night. This option is recommended for visitors requiring higher levels of service than could be offered in more remote areas.

For those looking to explore further and experience more of Tajikistan, there are modular jeep and trekking tours lasting from 2 to 9 days. All of these tours can be fitted together to suit your interests and specific requirements. Some routes are circular and others are journeys which can be made in either direction. Most tours have a shorter and extended version. The start and end point of each tour is listed with details of all other tours which could easily begin from this point. Joining 2 or more tours together will enable you to travel from North to South of the region and combine cultural experiences with adventures in the mountains. Tailor-made packages are available combining aspects of all itineraries.

The Fann Mountains offer spectacular and surprisingly accessible trekking. Trekking lasting from 5 to 20 days is available but we have not gone into more detail here. Details of all tour operators offering such services can be found on our website at [www.zerafshan.info](http://www.zerafshan.info). 2 classic Fann Mountain Tours are listed to whet your walking appetite. In addition the Fann Mountains are a fabulous compact arena for alpinists and mountain climbers, with 11 peaks above 5000m within easy reach.

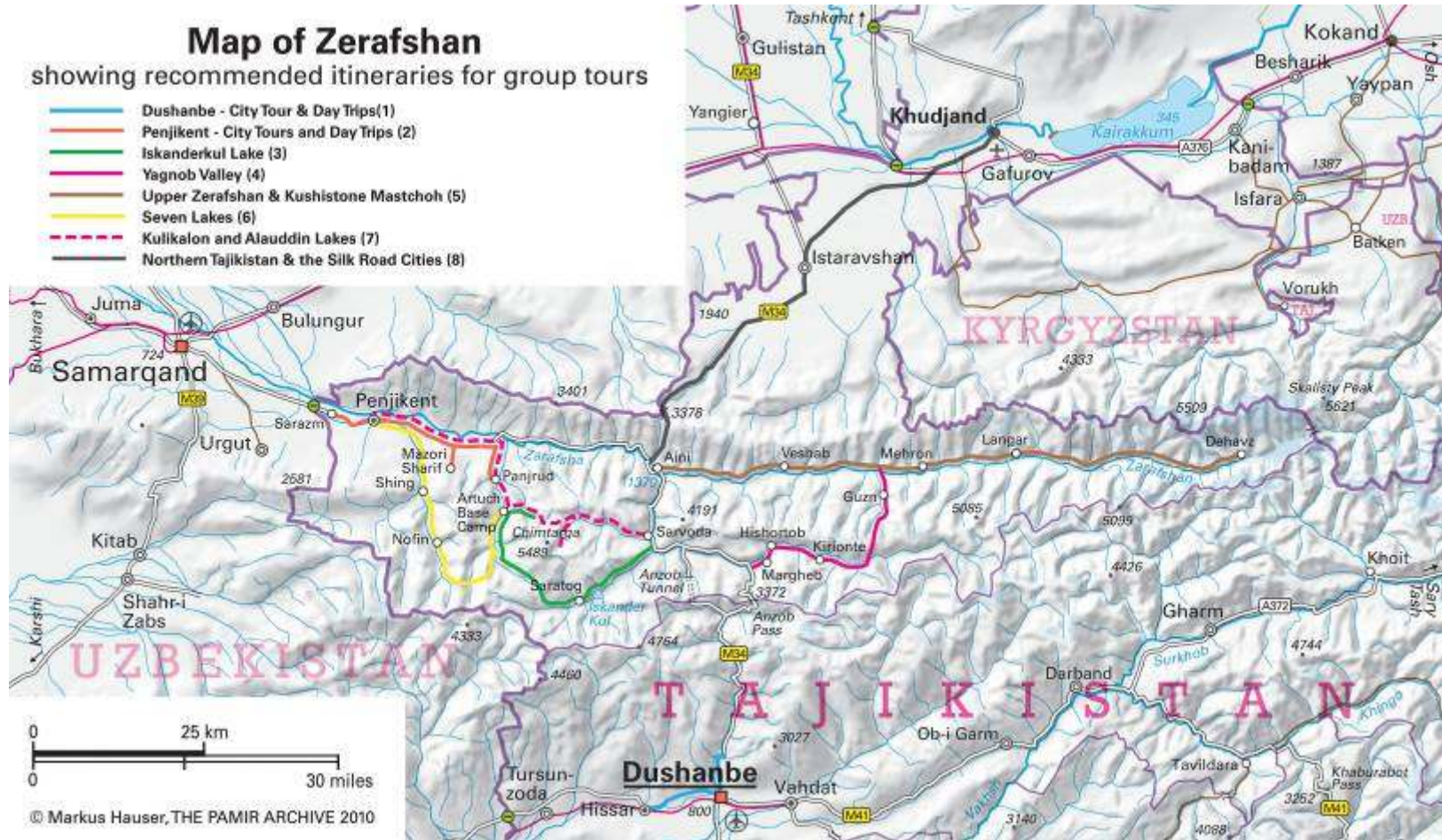
## Overview of itineraries in Zerafshan and map

<b>Number of tour</b> (* see map, next page)	<b>Name of itinerary</b>	<b>Number of days</b>
<b>1)*</b>	Dushanbe City Tour & Day Trips	Day tours
<b>1a)</b>	½ Day Behzod National History Museum	½ Day
<b>1b)</b>	½ Day Gurminj Museum of Musical Instruments & Shashmakom Performance	½ Day
<b>1c)</b>	½ Day National Museum of Antiquities & Botanical Gardens	½ Day
<b>1d)</b>	1 Day Hissor Fortress	Day tour
<b>1e)</b>	1 Day Varzob Trek with Picnic Lunch	Day tour
<b>2)*</b>	Penjikent – City Tours and Day Trips	Day tours
<b>2a)</b>	½ Day Town Tour	½ Day
<b>2b)</b>	½ Day Ancient Sarazm	½ Day
<b>2c)</b>	1 Day Literary & Architecture	Day tour
<b>2d)</b>	1 Day Seven Lakes with Picnic Lunch	Day tour
<b>3)*</b>	Iskanderkul Lake	2 – 6 days
<b>3a)</b>	Iskanderkul	2 days
<b>3b)</b>	Iskanderkul Cycling	3 days
<b>3c)</b>	Trekking from Iskanderkul to Artuch Base Camp	6 days
<b>4)*</b>	Yagnob Valley	2 – 7 days
<b>4a)</b>	Yagnob Experience	2 days
<b>4b)</b>	Short Yagnob Valley Trek Margheb to Kirionte	5 days
<b>4c)</b>	Through Yagnob Valley Trek to Upper Zerafshan, or begin in Veshab for reverse route	7 days
<b>5)*</b>	Upper Zerafshan & Kushistone Mastchoh	1 – 7 days
<b>5a)</b>	Veshab	1 or 2 days
<b>5b)</b>	Kushistone Mastchoh and Zerafshan Glacier	5 or 6 days
<b>5c)</b>	Upper Zerafshan to Yagnob Valley	7 days
<b>6)*</b>	Seven Lakes	2 – 5 days
<b>7)*</b>	Kulikalon and Alauddin Lakes	3 – 6 days
<b>7a)</b>	Artuch - Alp Base Camp	3 days
<b>7b)</b>	Artuch Alp Base Camp to Sarvoda	4 or 5 days
<b>7c)</b>	Trekking Alauddin Circuit	5 days
<b>7d)</b>	Alauddin to Iskanderkul Lake	6 days
<b>8)*</b>	Northern Tajikistan & Silk Road Cities	2 or more days

## Map of Zerafshan

showing recommended itineraries for group tours

- Dushanbe - City Tour & Day Trips (1)
- Penjikent - City Tours and Day Trips (2)
- Iskanderkul Lake (3)
- Yagnob Valley (4)
- Upper Zerafshan & Kushistone Mastchoh (5)
- Seven Lakes (6)
- Kulikalon and Alauddin Lakes (7)
- Northern Tajikistan & the Silk Road Cities (8)



## Description of itineraries in Zerafshan

### 1) Dushanbe - City Tour & Day Trips

Most international flights to Tajikistan arrive in Dushanbe and visitors will normally spend at least one night here. It's a relaxed city with wide streets and many parks and trees retaining the ambiance intended by the original city planners in the 1920s – wide, tree-lined boulevards with elegant buildings painted in white and pastel colours. Modern Dushanbe was built around the railway station, which brought a branch of the Turk-Sib railway here in 1929. The current terminal building (built in the 1960s) is fronted with stained glass windows depicting enthusiastic Communist workers in the bold colours of the Socialist Realist style. An experienced tour guide helps to bring the city to life explaining the history and features of the buildings, monuments & parks.

#### 1a) ½ Day Behzod National History Museum

Starting at the Railway station, where a statue of the 20th century Tajik writer Sadriddin Aini sits facing the Behzod National History Museum we begin our tour. The museum houses extensive exhibits of natural history, ethnography and archaeology, highlights include a lovely *minbar* (mosque pulpit) and *mihrab* (niche marking the direction of Mecca). Leaving the museum we take a relaxed stroll to Freedom Square. The statue of Lenin which stood here in the Soviet era was quietly moved to Central Park, and it is now the founder of the Persian Samanid dynasty, Ismoil Somoni, who looks down at passers-by.



*Kok gumbaz mosque in Istaravshan*

We continue through the Central Park exploring the commercial centre of Dushanbe on foot. Finish the tour with a traditional lunch in the elaborately decorated grand Tea House “Rohat”

#### 1b) ½ Day Gurminj Museum of Musical Instruments & Shashmakom Performance

The Museum of musical instruments, better known as the Gurminj Museum, was established in 1990 by Gurminj Zavqibekov (1929-2003), National artist of Tajikistan, laureate of the Rudaki state prize. There are about 100 musical instruments in the Museum collection mostly representing the [Pamiri](#) and [Badakhshani](#) musical tradition but also including many musical instruments presented to the Museum. The Museum also contains a small collection of household goods, utensils and national garments. There is an opportunity to organize a performance of Tajik traditional classic music – Shashmakom (meaning “six tones” in Tajik).

#### 1c) ½ Day National Museum of Antiquities & Botanical Gardens

The Museum of National Antiquities is the best in the country. It features exhibits focusing on the Greco-Bactrian sites of Takht-i-Sangin (including a small ivory image of Alexander the Great) and Kobadiyan, plus original Sogdian murals and statues from the excavations of Ancient Penjikent. The highlight is the largest sleeping Buddha in Central Asia, the 14m long “Buddha in Nirvana” of Adjina-Tepe, excavated in 1966. Leaving the museum we walk north where our tour includes the Park of Rudaki with a view of the President’s Residence and the botanical gardens where you can see examples of regional Tajik homes.

### 1d) 1 Day Hissor Fortress



*Hisor fortress*

The remains of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Hissor Fortress lie just above the flat valley to the west of Dushanbe. Hissor was the capital of Eastern Bukhara province and was occupied by the representative of the Emir, Ibrahim Beg until 1924, when it was destroyed in a rearguard action by the Red Army against the Basmachi. The gate towers are all that remain; however, a short climb to the top of the Citadel is rewarded with a panoramic view of the Hissor valley, ringed by mountains. The fortress faces a market square ringed by a caravanserai and two madrasahs, one of which is now a fine ethnographic museum. Other important buildings on the site include the 16<sup>th</sup> century Mausoleum of Makhtum Azam, the Masjid-i-Sangin (“Stone Mosque”) and the natural spring Chashma-i-Mohiyon.

### 1e) 1 Day Varzob Trek with Picnic Lunch

Varzob Gorge is a beautiful alpine mountain region within easy driving distance of Dushanbe. The main road north out of Dushanbe follows the route of the rushing Varzob River for about 70 km, before climbing steeply to Anzob Pass. Some of the highlights include Guzgarf Waterfall and the Sioma River Valley. There are also natural thermal springs at Khoja Obi Garm. Varzob is perfect for walking and there are many scenic spots to stop for a relaxed lunch of fresh local produce.



## 2) Penjikent - City Tours and Day Trips



*A scene from a traditional folklore show*



*Carpet weaving in Shing village*

Penjikent is the gateway to the Fann Mountains and is the largest town in the picturesque Zerafshan Valley, located close to the border with Uzbekistan, just 65km from Samarqand. Modern Penjikent is one of the most important political, economic and cultural centres of Tajikistan. As long as 6000 years ago the ancient inhabitants of this region, the Sarazmians, began city building, manufacturing and trading. From the 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE it was the most important cultural and artistic centre of Sogd.

In addition to these day trips, Penjikent makes an ideal starting point for all the longer itineraries listed.

All tours can include a visit to a local Tea House (Chaikhana), and dining on traditional Penjikent Plov

### 2a) ½ Day Town Tour



*Ruins of fire-worshippers temple in Ancient Penjikent excavations*

- *Ancient Penjikent – Excavations and Museum*
- *Bazaar*
- *Mosque & Madrasah of Olim-dodkho (XVIc)*

The ancient Sogdian City of Penjikent (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries) was sacked by the Arabs and buried for centuries. It was rediscovered in the mid-twentieth century and excavations continue today. It was a superbly fortified well-organized city with a ruler's palace, two temples of the fire worshipping Zoroastrians, markets, rich dwelling houses decorated with numerous paintings, wooden and clay statues of ancient gods. Original frescoes from the excavations can be found in the town Museum. To the west is the Citadel, whose last inhabitant was the last Sogdian King, Devastich. From the site there are stunning views across the new town, which has grown up just 1.5km from the ancient town. The town is also home to a charming walled traditional Bazaar, bustling and full of the sights and sounds of local traders. Directly opposite is the town's largest Mosque. The fine arched Mihrab, indicating the direction of Mecca, is set in the western wall. Every Friday 1500 worshippers congregate here for "Namozi Jum'a" – "Friday prayers".

## 2b) ½ Day Ancient Sarazm



*Historical museum in Penjikent*

- *Excavations of Ancient Sarazm*
- *Republican History and Regional Study Museum, named after A. Rudaki*

15km to the west of Penjikent is another important archaeological site, Sarazm, the oldest known settlement in Central Asia, with finds dating from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages (4<sup>th</sup>- 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BCE). The site includes houses and a fire temple with a circular altar imitating solar rays. A large 25m diameter grave from the 4th century BC had several tombs including the grave of a wealthy woman, now known as the "Queen of Sarazm". The excavations of Ancient Sarazm are currently under consideration to become the 1<sup>st</sup> UNESCO World Heritage site in Tajikistan. Many artefacts from Sarazm are on display in The Republican History and Regional Study Museum named after A. Rudaki. The museum was specially commissioned and built in 1958 in honour of the 1100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the poet Abuabdulloh Rudaki, the founder of Tajik-Persian classical literature.



*Mausoleum gates*



*Mausoleum of Rudaki*

- *Mausoleum of Muhammad Bashoro (XI c.) in Mazar-i Sharif village*
- *Museum of Loik Sherali*
- *Rudaki Mausoleum in Panjrud*

To the east of Penjikent, in the village of Mazar-i Sharif, is the 11<sup>th</sup> century Mausoleum of Muhammad Bashoro, the famous Islamic scholar who died here in 866 CE. The mosque features an unusual central wooden pillar and a *Chila-Khona* ("forty-day room"), where holy men could isolate themselves for 40 days to read and meditate on the Qu'ran. Close to the mausoleum is the Museum of Loik Sherali, a famous local poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The village is home to an elaborately decorated traditional teahouse.

The Tajik-Persian classical poet Rudaki also came from a village near Penjikent. He was born in Panjrud, and although he spent much of his life in Samarqand in Bukhara, he returned here to die. His mausoleum is in an attractive garden in his home village.

## 2c) 1 Day Literary & Architecture



*Traditional chaikhana (tea house) in Panjrud village*

## 2d) 1 Day Seven Lakes with Picnic Lunch

There are places in every country of the world which make the country famous by their beauty and uniqueness. The natural miracle “Seven Lakes” is one of such places and is one of the most attractive places in Tajikistan. The Seven Lakes flow one into other and at the same time have different colours, shapes and sizes. Drive to the third of the Seven Lakes, Hushyor, meaning “vivacious”. Enjoy an invigorating short trek in the fresh mountain air, around the second and third lakes before enjoying a lakeside picnic lunch of fresh local produce.



*Tovassang pass*



*Monument to the first heroic woman-pilot in Penjikent*

### 3) Iskanderkul Lake



*Iskanderkul lake*

2 hours from Dushanbe or 4 hours from Penjikent by road lies the legendary Iskanderkul Lake, one of the most picturesque mountain lakes in Central Asia. The deep blue glacial waters of the lake are ringed by the high peaks of the Fann Mountains. At 1295m it is the highest lake in the mountains and also the deepest, reaching depths of 72m. As well as being a place of stunning natural beauty, many legends about Alexander the Great cling to this place. Local legend declares that Alexander's armies passed through these mountains on their way to conquer Samarqand.

Some say that the Sogdian leader Spitamen was pursued to his death near here. Other tales tell of the ghostly figure of Alexander's battle horse Bucephalus galloping across the surface on moonlight nights.

Fed by the Sarytag, Hazormech and Serima Rivers, the water flows out to the Iskander-Darya River, which plunges dramatically down a 38m waterfall. A platform allows spectators to stand right above the thunderous torrent.

The narrow road leads round the lake to Panjchashma, which means five springs. Here there is a summer pavilion and resting place and an enclosure of wild Ptarmigan. Walking around the lake there are excellent viewing points of both Iskanderkul and the nearby "Snake" Lake. A diversity of wildlife inhabits the vicinity of the lake, though the lake itself is devoid of life. The entire lake and surrounding area is a Wildlife Preserve.



*Turtles on Iskanderkul shore*

Close to Savador, just before the merger of the Yagnoba with the Iskander-Darya you can observe a rare natural phenomenon - underground coal fires. Smouldering underground for centuries, the burning hard coal has produced gases, reaching three hundred degrees. The walls of caves in this area are covered with crystals of sulfur and ammonia, and the soil near the cracks is so hot that it is possible to roast meat, bake cakes or boil tea on the stones.

Saritag can be used as an overnight stop or as the start or end point of many classic Fann Mountain Trekking Routes, including our longer Seven Lakes and Artuch Itineraries

### 3a) Iskanderkul (2 Days )

*Day 1: Ayni or Dushanbe ~ Iskanderkul ~ Saritag*

By road to Iskanderkul. A picnic lunch and exploring the flora and fauna around the lake, where 169 different varieties of birds have been recorded. A short 9km to the village of Saritag.

**Overnight:** Choice of 3 local homestays in Saritag

*Day 2: Saritag ~ Iskanderkul*

After a delicious breakfast of fresh local produce our hosts in Saritag share their fascinating local knowledge of traditional mountain plants and flowers. Spend the morning exploring and relaxing in the fresh mountain air. After lunch trek back to Iskanderkul and then drive to Ayni or Dushanbe or a short drive to Margheb to start one of our Yagnob Itineraries.



*Iskanderkul lake shore*



*Camping*

### 3b) Iskanderkul Cycling (3 Days)

*Day 1: Ayni or Dushanbe to Iskanderkul*

By road to Sarvoda. Stop to visit the amazing natural coal fires burning underground. From Sarvoda cycling 24km to Iskanderkul Lake.

**Overnight:** Tents by the lakeside

*Day 2: Iskanderkul Lake ~ Saritag*

A relaxing morning followed by a short 9km hike to the ancient village of Saritag

**Overnight:** Enjoy traditional Tajik hospitality in a village homestay.

*Day 3: Saritag ~ Dushanbe*

Trek back to Iskanderkul 9km, where our bikes are waiting. Continue cycling 24km to Sarvoda or if you prefer by Jeep back to Dushanbe or Ayni.

Iskanderkul is a popular staging point for many classic trekking routes in the Fann Mountains. Too complex to cover in detail here, more information on planning such trips is available from our website at [www.zerafshan.info](http://www.zerafshan.info). Easy to Moderate Trekking through the mountains. Not technically difficult but strenuous at times. Fully supported by experienced mountain guides and crew. Overnight in tents, luggage carried by donkey and handlers.

### **3c) Trekking from Iskanderkul to Artuch Base Camp (6 days)**

#### *Day 1: Saritag Canyon ~ Sugurkhona (2600m)*

After breakfast, trek through Saritag Canyon to the foot of Dugdon Pass. This part of our tour passes through deep canyons covered in a tangle of a Juniper and low bushes of dog rose and iris. You are sure to see many marmots here since Sugurkhona means “Marmot Colony”. There are many other small mammals, birds and medicinal herbs and plants to be seen.

#### *Day 2: Sugurkhona ~ Dugdon Pass (3810m) ~ Sarikhodan (2400m)*



Dugdon Pass is the longest and highest pass of our tour. From here you can enjoy a spectacular panorama of the snow-covered Fann Mountains. These peaks are Pushnova (4637m), Dugdon (4896m), Sarikhodan (4679m). Picnic lunch on the pass. After crossing Archamaidon Valley we will stop at the camp of Sarikhodan (2400m).

*Amazing view to “Hat of Alexander” mountain*

#### *Day 3: Sarikhodon ~ Duobai Sarimat (1800m)*

Trek through the beautiful canyon of Archamaidon. Unexpected meetings with local shepherds are possible, and perhaps an opportunity to sample local yoghurt and fruit. Overnight in the Duobai Sarimat at the place where the rivers of Archamaidon and Duoba merge.

#### *Day 5: Sarimat ~ Guytan Village (2400m)*

Continue trek through the Archamaidon Valley. We will visit the villages on the way and introduce you to the life of the inhabitants.

#### *Day 6: Guytan Pass ~ Chukurak Lake (2600m) ~ Artuch Alp Base Camp*

Over the Guytan Pass to Chukurak Lake – trek around the lake.

**Overnight:** Alp Base Camp, Artuch.

#### 4) Yagnob Valley



*Private cornfield of yagnobis*

The Yagnob River is a part of the Zeravshan river basin. It is 130 km long and belongs administratively to Ayni district of Sughd region. The river originates in a high-mountain valley of the same name situated between the Southern slope of the Zeravshan range and Northern slope of the Hissar range. (<http://www.yagnob.org/>).

In the first millennium BCE, Sogd (Sogdiana or Sogdia) was a centre of a developed ancient civilization with high levels of culture, arts and crafts.

In the 8th century, the troops of the Arab Caliphate invaded Central Asia, and with fire and sword

spread a new religion – Islam. The Sogdians escaped to this inaccessible mountain gorge. At the eastern edge of the Zeravshan Valley, it is still possible to hear the Sogdian tongue being spoken. This was the language of the Persian kings – the language of Roxanne, the wife of Alexander the Great.

In the 1970s, many inhabitants of the higher territories of the Zarafshan Valley were resettled to undeveloped lands of the present Ganchi, Zafarabad and Matcha districts. Among this population there were also Yagnobian people. But in the 1990's, after Tajikistan gained independence, many began returning back to their own villages. Today there are Yagnobis living in 14 of the 22 villages remaining in the valley. The villages are located at a height of 2500 – 3000m. Here they have been striving to preserve their culture and traditions, including elements of their ancestors' fire worshipping Sogdian religion, Zoroastrianism.

Yagnob Valley Tours combine walking in some of the least frequented mountains of Central Asia with an opportunity to see this almost extinct culture and hear a language that echoes from thousands of years ago.

#### 4a) Yagnob Experience (2 Days)



*Yagnobian village*

Margheb (1700m) means “green, blossoming place” in the Sogdian language. Here, as soon as snow cover vanishes from the earth, green immediately appears, a colourful emerald carpet from rich mountain grass and plants. In Margheb there is a chance to experience the traditional life of mountain villagers. One of the most stunning sites is a kilometre-high rock, which soars above the village, called Zaminkaror, or “Holder of the Earth”.

#### Activities:

- Visit of the local farm, which houses more than 150 yak;
- Introduction to tobacco producing and traditional methods of butter making;
- Hike to the summer pastures.

**Overnight:** Traditional home stay. Enjoy the warm hospitality of your local hosts

Margheb can be visited for an overnight stay or used as a starting or ending point for longer Yagnob treks.

## 4b) Short Yagnob Valley Trek Margheb to Kirionte (5 Days)



Farmhouses in a yagnobi village

*Day 1 in Margheb*

*Day 2 Margheb – Bidev – Shovita (1850m)*

Bidev is 22 km from Margheb. The hike leads west along the Yagnob Gorge, to Shovita.

**Hiking features:** Above the Yagnob River (16km; 5hrs; altitude difference -300m). The hike is not technically difficult, but the hiker should be in good physical condition. Porterage is provided.

**Overnight:** Camping

*Day 3 Shovita – Kirionte*

Hike to the heart of Yagnob Gorge – the settlements of Pscon and Naumetcan. The central part of the Yagnob area is divided into four smaller parts: Soyaru – “in a shadow”, Aftobru – “on a sun side”, Kul river valley and Pscon. The most amazing fact is that the people living in these four parts speak different dialects of the Yagnob language.



*Traditional Yagnobi house*

The walls of the Yagnobi houses are made out of bond-stones. The houses are built very tight to each other having a common roof for storing hay. Ceilings are borne by wooden beams. The stove is an obligatory attribute of the each room in the house. The traditional house of Yagnobis is very low and has a small aperture instead of windows. It is divided into MUR – the room, where the stove (*inkir* in Sogdians or *tandir* in Tajik) for baking bread is placed. The ceiling in this room has one hole to let the smoke come out; KANNA – the room for processing and storing the milk products; PISTIK – the room for other storage, and a small corridor. According to historical accounts, the Sogdians -

ancestors of the Yagnobis, were excellent farmers. Today, their descendants manage to grow wheat at an altitude of 3000m.

### **Activities:**

- Visit of a traditional Yagnobi house in Pscon;
- Visit of the school in Kirionte

**Hiking features:** Above the Yagnob River, (12km; approx 5 – 6hrs; altitude difference - 400m). The hike is not technically difficult, but the hiker should be in good physical condition. Porterage can be provided.

**Overnight:** Camping closed to Kirionte village

*Day 4 Trekking Kirionte - Shovita*

*Day 5 Trekking/driving Shovita – Margheb*



#### **4c) Through Yagnob Valley Trek to Upper Zerafshan (7 Days) or begin in Veshab for reverse route**

The highest pass of the Yagnob Valley is the Samarqand pass (5082m). This itinerary offers a splendid view over the Rost Pass, at 4020m. Marmots are the most frequently met friends among the Yagnob fauna. You may even be lucky enough to see the snow leopard (*uncia uncia*), the rarest animal of the Gorge.

*Days 1 – 3 as above*

*Day 4 Kirionte - Dehkalon*

We continue to ascend to upper side of the Valley leaving the Yagnobi villages behind and enjoying wild unexplored nature. Overnight camp. (18km; 5 hours; altitude difference +700m).

*Day 5 Dehkalon (3100m) - Over Rost Pass*

Ascent through small glaciers to one of the highest passes in the Hissar Range (4020 m). Camp at the alpine zone at the foothills of Zerafshan range (12km; 7 hours, +120m, -820m)

*Day 6 Foothills of Zerafshan Range - Saripool*

Walking with the good paths down from the upper lakes to the village of Saripool. Wildlife is abundant particularly birds, including large lammergeier and eagles. (12km; 5hrs; -1250m)

*Day 7 Saripool – Khadishahr – Veshab*

Descent to Khadishahr. (10km; 4 hours; -600m). Transfer by vehicle to Veshab

Veshab can be visited for an overnight stay or used as a starting or ending point for longer Yagnob Treks, Kushistone Mastchoh and Zerafshan Glacier Treks.
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## 5) Upper Zerafshan & Kushistone Mastchoh



*Poppies in Tabaspin gorge*

Kuhistone Mastchoh (“mountainous Mastchoh”) is a unique historical district of Tajikistan located in the upper Zerafshan Valley, which runs due east of Ayni for 200km. This remote region is hidden between two mountain ranges – Zerafshan in the south and Turkestan in the north. Zerafshan means “golden river” in Tajik. The local people are strongly dependent on agriculture and the river provides its inhabitants with the most precious resource – water. Kuhistone Mastchoh is the junction of the Alay, Turkestan and Zerafshan ranges, at a height of 4500m. The 25km long Zerafshan Glacier, source of the Zerafshan River, is located at the junction of the Turkestan and Zerafshan ranges.



*Oasis surrounded by high mountains near to Veshab village*

Before the Soviet period, the Fann Mountains area was surrounded by three principalities: Magian, Falgar with the centre in Varzi Minor (today Aini), and Mastchoh. The Mastchoh principality was the most isolated and well defended. A chain of forts was constructed starting in Obburdon up to the east of Mastchoh. This region was one of the last to succumb to the Soviet army.

The rich culture and traditions of this region are fascinating to visitors. The upper Zerafshan is famous for its poets and singers. The Tajik traditional art of singing Shashmakom (meaning “six tones” in Tajik) has its roots in this region. In every village you can find poets composing “baits” - short poetical verses. You may have a chance to attend a travelling music contest, which are much loved by local people.

Veshab can be used as an overnight stay or as the start or end point of longer treks in Upper Zerafshan & to the Zerafshan Glacier, the long Yagnob Valley Trek.

### 5a) Veshab (1 or 2 Days)

Veshab is a very old Tajik Village where the inhabitants have preserved old traditions in their everyday life till this day. The houses here are built on top of each other, a creative solution for survival in such a mountainous area.

#### Activities:

- Visit of Mausoleum of Shamsiddin Tebrezi, a famous scientist, philosopher and Islamic theologian who lived in Veshab.
- Short walk to orchards, an old mill and traditional houses, one of which contains a museum of local plant species.
- 5 km hike to summer pasture.
- Shashmakom performance by local music teacher and his students.

**Overnight:** Traditional home stays in Veshab

## 5b) Kushistone Mastchoh and Zerafshan Glacier (5 or 6 Days)



*On the road to remote villages of Mastchoh*

*Day 1 Aini – Veshab (48 km by car)*

Spend the day in Veshab, as above and overnight in home stay.

*Day 2 Veshab – Obburdon – Hadishahr – Langar (62 km by car)*

Obburdon was one of many forts built by local beks of the Mastchoh region in the 18th century and offers a beautiful view over the valley. Coming from Yagnob valley on foot, it is possible to join the tour at Hadishahr.

Hadishahr Village, which is located 10 km from Obburdon, is the birthplace of the Tajik poet Yusuf Vafo.

### **Activity:**

- Visit of small museums close to the Obburdon Fortress,
- Recitation by villagers of the poetry of Yusuf Vafo.

**Overnight:** at traditional home stay of Kholov Fuzaili in Langar

*Day 2 Alternative (a) From Langar Trek to Tabaspin Gorge (20 km)*

The car will drop you on the highest point, where the hike will start.

**Hike features:** Moderate hiking for up to 7 hours. Participants should be used to walking and have at least average fitness levels.

**Overnight:** camping

*Day 3 Langar – Madrushkat - Sabag (62 km by car)*



*Veshab village and its incredible architecture*

Madrushkat is a centre of the eastern part of Kuhistone Mastchoh.

The small weather forecast station survives from the 1940's. It is now a museum, which displays rarities from pre-war times, unfortunately it no longer works to predict the weather. We predict fair weather for the rest of our trip!

On the way to Sabag a short trek to Tabushn leads to a beautiful waterfall. At Sabag, there is a Sabag-sai - a mountain spring. On the rocks near the spring there are some petroglyphs - engravings of animals and people, geometrical forms, symbols as well as some Islamic inscriptions from a later period.

It is possible to take a 7km hike to the shrine of Khoja Ibrahim in the gorge of the La Gargif Sai.

**Overnight:** at traditional houses in Sabag.

#### *Day 4 Sabag – Paldorak – Dehavz*

On another side of the River is Paldorak village. Here one can visit the remains of the old fortress.

In Dehavz there is the shrine of Abu-Muso Ashgari, which receives every year hundreds of pilgrims. Abu Muso Ashgari was a scientist who collected and recorded the Prophet's sayings and is held in high respect among all Muslims of the world. A further 7 km by car, and then we hike 15 km to the foot of Zerafshan Glacier, where the "golden" river begins its journey.



*Unexplored nature of Tabaspin gorge*

#### *Day 5 Dehavz - Langar*

#### *Day 6 Langar – Ayni or Dushanbe*

Departing Langar, it is possible to begin any of the Dushanbe, Iskanderkul or Yagnob Tours. Departing early, after an overnight stay it is possible to begin Fann Mountains, Penjikent and Northern Tours.

### **5c) Upper Zerafshan to Yagnob Valley (7 Days)**

This is the reverse of the 7 Day Yagnob Valley Itinerary.

## Fann Mountains



*View from Tavassang pass*

The renowned Fann Mountains with many glacier-fed rivers, waterfalls and lakes, offer some of the best trekking opportunities in Central Asia. They are an alpine arena of outstanding beauty and character. For decades virtually unknown to the western world, the “Fanski Gori” ranked amongst the popular mountain destinations in the Soviet Union – on a par with the Caucasus and the Pamirs. Their lush alpine meadows, juniper forests and dozens of turquoise lakes embedded in an ocean of snow-capped peaks indeed make the area a paradise for hiking and alpinism.

The area offers excellent treks of varying difficulty ranging from a few hours to a few weeks in length. They will lead you along unspoilt rivers and lakes where shepherds graze their flocks and up to spectacular passes overseeing a world of rock and ice.

The Fann Mountains are unique in terms of their microclimate too. Featuring extraordinarily stable weather and very low precipitation throughout the summer months, the area is among the safest alpine destinations worldwide in terms of reliably good weather. The best time for visiting is May-October for trekking.

### 6) **Seven Lakes** (various options from 2 - 5 days)



*Nofin lake*

The Seven Lakes, the longest chain of lakes in Tajikistan, are one of the most attractive destinations in the region. Tours can be with jeep or combined jeep/hiking. A five-day adventure trek can be organised to the Artuch base camp (2200m), comprising high passes, rugged and pure natural scenery, colourful canyons and crystal clear streams (donkey portering and overnight in tents).



*Marguzor lake*

From Penjikent the first lake is 40km, by car a little over 2 hours. In the remarkable village of Shing which was partly destroyed in 1990s by mud slides, there is accommodation in local homestays. Further on your way you will see the very conservative religious village of Rashnai Poyon. Villagers follow very old rules and traditions and children are often sent to the madrasah rather than local schools. Starting from this village don't be surprised when meeting women, that they turn away and wait until you pass by.

After breakfast you will have time to explore the village and taste mountain honey, which is made in Shing village.

A little way from the village the 1st lake is Mijgon, “Eyelash”.



*River above Padrud village*

Through a small pass behind Mijgon is the the 2<sup>nd</sup> lake Soya, “Shadow” and nearby 3<sup>rd</sup> lake, Hushyor, “Vivacious”.

At the top of a winding path lies the 4<sup>th</sup> and longest of the all Seven lakes – Nofin “Central” Lake. On the shore of the lake there is a small village with the same name – here there are homestays.

Above the river is the beautiful village of Padrud – meaning “village on the river”. Almost all the houses are located under the foot of a mountain and in the shadow of big rocks. Here is one homestay very close to the river and sitting in a small pavilion you

can enjoy the noise and freshness of the river. Crossing Padrud village you will see the 5<sup>th</sup> lake: Khurdak, meaning “small” in Tajik.

The 6<sup>th</sup> and biggest of the lakes, Marguzor, is considered to be the most beautiful one. On its shores there are several villages.

The 7<sup>th</sup> lake is called Hazorchashma which means “thousand springs,” probably because its water comes from many small rivers and springs. Hazorchashma is the most peaceful lake in the area, because no villages are located next to it.

**Overnight:** Traditional Homestay

## 7) Kulikalon and Alauddin Lakes

Resting high in the mountains surrounding the Zerafshan Valley of Tajikistan, Artuch Base Camp offers a comfortable place to relax in the fresh mountain air. From Artuch visitors can explore the famous lakes and mountains of the Fann Mountains. For nature lovers there is much to see and explore. In the Fann Mountains alone, over 40 lakes in all shades of shimmering blue. Surrounded by the high snow capped peaks including Chimtarga Peak, at 5494m it dominates the skyline, contrasting with the lush valleys



*Alauddin lake*

below. At Artuch you can explore and discover it all. Or simply rest and relax, swim or soak up the beauty all around.

Artuch can be visited for an overnight stay or as a base for trekking in the Fann Mountains, Kulikalon and Alauddin Lakes. The range of routes is vast and we have included just a few of the most popular treks. more information is available on [www.zerafshan.info](http://www.zerafshan.info)

### 7a) Artuch - Alp Base Camp (3 Days)



*Kuli kalon lakes*

#### *Day 1: Penjikent to Artuch Base Camp*

By 4 wheel drive vehicle from Penjikent into the heart of the Fann mountains. Stopping at the village of Mazar-i-Sharif, is the XI<sup>th</sup> Century Mausoleum of Muhammad Bashoro. Close to the mausoleum is the Museum of Loik Sherali, a famous 20<sup>th</sup> century local poet. The village has an elaborately decorated traditional teahouse.

**Overnight:** Private cottages or shared bunk rooms in Alp Base Camp

#### *Day 2: Chukurak Lake*

Short trek to Chukurak Lake (2455 m) and Ziyorat Lake. There are options for swimming, fishing & boating, or relaxing in the camp. This evenings meal will be the Traditional “Food of Kings”. Today we will share with you, our famous recipe and you can learn to prepare “Oshi Palov” and join in with cooking in the traditional way.

**Overnight:** Private cottages or shared bunk rooms in Alp Base Camp

#### *Day 3: Artuch to Penjikent*

## 7b) Artuch Alp Base Camp to Sarvoda (4 or 5 Days)



*Alpine meadow*

*Day 1: As above*

*Day 2: Artuch Base Camp To Kulikalon Lakes (10km; +700m; 5hrs)*



Trek up the Urej River valley to the upper of two dams (2-3 hours), on the other side of which is turquoise necklace of 14 Kulikalon Lakes framed in jagged ridges and summits over 5000m: known as the Kulikalon Wall.

*Towards Chimtarga peak*

**Overnight:** Tents by the lake shore

*Day 3: Trek over Alauddin Pass to Alauddin Lake (7km; + 950m; - 740m; 6hrs)*

Steep trek through alpine meadows to Alauddin Pass (3,860m). On the way up we see vultures and eagles hovering in the blue sky. We enjoy a birds-eye view of Dushaha Lake and the entire Kulikalon Lake system. Down in the valley bottom we see the blue speck of Alauddin Lake (in fact, one of two major lakes) varying in colour from lilac to deep turquoise and providing a stunning contrast against the backdrop of the *Chimtarga* peak (5489m).

**Overnight:** tents, option of overnight in traditional homestay is available



*Optional Day 4: Alauddin Lake to Mutnoe Lake (3540m).*

We steadily climb up the narrow and rather short U-shaped Alauddin valley and go round Mutnoe ("Muddy") Lake, with its night reflection of the stars.

*Homestay in Alauddin lakes area*

**Overnight:** Tents

*Day 5: Mutnoe to Sarvoda to Penjikent*

Descend from Mutnoe to Alauddin Lake: from here it is a short descent to the road, where our transport is waiting to transfer us back to Penjikent

From Sarvoda crossroad where this tour ends it is possible to return to Penjikent or begin any of the itineraries



## 7c) Trekking Alauddin Circuit (5 Days)

*Day 1 – 3 As above*



*Alauddin lakes*

*Day 4: Laudan Pass to Kulikalon*

Returning to Kulikalon through an alternative pass where we stop for lunch before descending to the lakes. The water here is warmer and you might be tempted to swim in one of the lakes here.

**Overnight:** In tents

*Day 5: Kulikalon – Chukurak – Artuch Base Camp*



*Summer pasture*

Descend to the Chukurak Lakes (2600m) whose waters are coloured by tiny crustaceans. From here we continue a short distance down the valley to Artuch Base Camp.

**Overnight:** Private cottages or shared bunk rooms in Alp Base Camp

## 7d) Alauddin to Iskanderkul Lake (6 Days)



This is the reverse of the Longer Iskanderkul Lake Trek 3c.

*Alauddin lakes*

## 8) Northern Tajikistan & the Silk Road Cities

All transport by road, accommodation in hotel or guest houses.



*Traditional hand made dolls and souvenirs*

### Tajikistan

*Day 1: Penjikent to Khujand – formerly Alexandria Eshkata.*

- Local Museum Archeological Museum
- Local bazaar (Panjshanbe)
- Mausoleum of Sheikh Muslehedin

Standing at the entrance to the Fergana Valley on the banks of the Sir Darya River, Khujand is the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest city in Tajikistan. Alexander the Great founded a Greek settlement near the site of today's Khujand in 329 BC called the city of Alexandria Eshkata or "Alexandria The Furthest" - modern Khujand. It formed a bastion for the Greek settlers against the Scythian tribes to the north of the Syr Darya, which the Greeks called the Jaxartes. It became a major staging point on the northern Silk Road. Many of the medieval citadels and mosques have survived, making Khujand an extremely attractive city.



*Fortress in Khujand*

*Day 2: Istaravshan*

- Mug Tapa Hill
- Kakh Kakha Fortress
- Hazrati Shoh Mausoleum
- Kuk Gumbaz Mosque



*Hazrati Shoh mausoleum in Istaravshan*

Though close to Khujand, (80 km/1.5 hrs) Istarafshan is quite different in character from its neighbour. A well preserved old town it forms a maze of small alleys that wind through neighbourhoods of shady, mud-walled Central Asian homesteads. Sights include the fifteenth century Kuk Gumbaz Mosque, the Hafz-i-Sangin Mosque and the eighteenth century Hazrat-i-Shah Mosque and mausoleum complex. Istaravshan is also a handicrafts center, known for its woodcutting. Visit an 'ustokhana' or artisans' workshop.

### Uzbekistan

Tours can be extended to take in Samarqand, Bukhara, Khiva and Tashkent.