



KAZAKHSTAN & TURKMENISTAN ADVENTURE TOUR

TOUR

April 30th – May 15th 2021
15 nights

OVERVIEW

On our 17-night adventure, we will start in the new capital of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana) and finish in the ostentatious city of Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.

In between these two fascinating cities, we will travel by road, rail, and air as we adventure and explore parts places only a few have seen before, combining ancient history and the bizarre with the sublime.

We will be heading to the industrial base of Karaganda, the infamous Semipalatinsk (in two words; Gulags and Nukes), and Kurchatov - the Los Alamos of the USSR, where the Red Bomb was developed and tested.

Plus, we will even get to ground zero in 'The Polygon'; the vast nuclear testing range full of abandoned measuring platforms, bunkers, craters, buried machinery, and the scenic yet chilling 'Atomic Lake'.

We will make sure to visit the main sites during our time in Turkmenistan such as Ashgabat and the Darvaza Gas Crater (Gates of Hell), but also take you off the beaten path to experience and understand Turkmenistan.

Meet local people, learn about their lives and history, their differences and commonalities.

Combining our 15-year expertise working in this region, contacts, and in-depth research, we've put together a tour that is like no other to offer you the best in Kazakhstan & Turkmenistan tourism.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Nur-Sultan - once the centre of the Virgin Lands campaign, now a national capital
- Combine Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan for the ultimate adventure
- Nur-Sultan (Astana)
- Nuclear Polygon – USSR’s testing range for atmospheric and underground nukes
- May bank holiday (international labour day), in Nur-sultan
- Victory day in Almaty one of the biggest holidays in Kazakhstan
- Darvaza Gas Crater - This Giant burning crater is known as the ‘Mouth of Hell’
- Kow Ata Underground Lake - Natural hot spring 80m under the ground
- Nisa Fortress – UNESCO listed archaeological site

Please note the itinerary may differ slightly to what is publicised. Your tour leader will do their best to ensure that as much is covered as possible. There will also be extra visits when time permits, such as a visit to a local bar or a funfair. We will make the most of your time on the tour to guarantee the experience of a lifetime.

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MAPS



ITINERARY

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DAY 1	Arrival into Nur-Sultan
DAY 2	Nur-Sultan May Day
DAY 3	Nur-Sultan & Train Ride
DAY 4	Arrival into Kurchatov
DAY 5	Atomic Lake
DAY 6	Semipalatinsk/Semey
DAY 7	Departure to Karaganda
DAY 8	Karaganda
DAY 9	Almaty
DAY 10	Almaty Victory day
DAY 11	Almaty to Ashgabat Darvaza Gas Crater
DAY 12	Return to Ashgabat sightseeing
DAY 13	Dashoguz & Konye-Urgench
DAY 14	Ashgabat & Kow Ata
DAY 15	Ashgabat & Kopet Dag Mountains
DAY 16	Departure Day Extension (+550 Eur)
DAY 17	Extension day 2: Ancient Merv

APRIL 30th – FRIDAY (ARRIVAL DAY – NUR-SULTAN)

- **Flights to Nur-Sultan** (airport code TSE) arrive from many international destinations – let us know which flight you will be on, and we will arrange your pick-up and transfer to the hotel. Arriving even earlier is, of course, fine and can be accommodated – this would give you time to settle in, fight jet-lag, etc
- Today we start the tour with a **group dinner** in a restaurant with a stunning view over the city, coordination and briefing session, before the adventure ahead!

Overnight: Nur-Sultan- Kazakhstan's shiny new Capital City!

Meals included: Dinner

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- Nur-Sultan is a new city rightly famed for its unique approach to architecture; in that, it piles together with a wide range of different styles and forms with the end result being either a glimpse at the future of post-modern cities or a horrifying un-curated mish-mash of clashing buildings.
- **Bayterek Tower** – now the icon of the city, this ornate monument has a viewing platform 97 metres above the ground (1997 is when Astana become the capital city) and is designed to evoke a folk tale about a bird laying an egg in a tree. Fantastic views over the city from here
- **Palace of Peace and Reconciliation** – glass Pyramid from the eminent architect Norman Foster with the vague but noble aim of reconciling the world's faiths and ideologies and bringing an end to violence. Even if this goal remains elusive, it is a stunning building and worth exploring!
- **Hazret Sultan Mosque** – the biggest in Kazakhstan (and second in the region only to the monstrous Gypjak Mosque in Turkmenistan). Classically Islamic in style and Kazakh in décor, this impressive building can house up to 5000 worshippers at once
- **Khan Shatyr Entertainment Centre** – perhaps the building that architecturally sums up modern Astana more than any other. Another Carbuncle/work-of-genius (delete as you prefer) from Norman Foster, this ingenious structure looking somewhat like a lop-sided tent maintains an even temperature year-round and provides leisure facilities, shopping, entertainment in general
- **River Ishim** – we'll stroll the banks of this waterway in the centre of town, an excellent way to see a slice of local life and people enjoying their time. Remember that almost all of Astana's population are recent arrivals so a big mix of people from around the country and beyond can be met with here
- **May Day Events** – While the massive Soviet military parades are a thing of the past, there may be events going on this day. We will keep the itinerary as flexible as possible to include whatever is going on and is open to the public. We will, of course, keep those who have signed up for this tour up to date on what is planned and what they can expect in Nur-Sultan on this national holiday.

Overnight: Nur-Sultan - Kazakhstan's shiny new Capital City!

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch



MAY 2ND – SUNDAY (NUR-SULTAN & TRAIN RIDE)

- We take a drive out of the city to the nearby village of **Akmol**; home of the chilling **Museum of the Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland** – A sensitively-done spot telling the story of the loyal (going to such a place could often be avoided with a divorce and public denunciation) women sent here when their husbands were persecuted.
- We see a little more of this settlement on a walk around; church, mosque, and apartment buildings now occupying this former gulag-site before stopping for an excellent home-cooked lunch with a local family and a supermarket visit for train snacks/drinks in Astana
- All aboard! We jump onto a **sleeper train** making its way through the night and across the country to the city of Kurchatov - home of the soviet atomic weapons program. Comfy beds and a clean restaurant await us as well as rolling steppe outside the windows for this 800km journey. We will have dinner delivered to us on the platform at Ekibastusz Station that evening

Overnight: Onboard the train – 4 beds in each room. Comfortable and clean

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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MAY 3RD – MONDAY (KURCHATOV/NUCLEAR TEST EPICENTRE)

- We arrive very early in the morning in **Kurchatov** and head for an early check-in at a local hotel as well as breakfast and freshening up after the train ride. Then our atomic adventure begins! Kurchatov was founded in 1947 simply to make Soviet Nuclear weapons a reality. Under the control of the KGB Chief Lavrentiy Beria and scientist Igor Kurchatov, this is where the arms race became a two-horse event.
- **Museum of the Semipalatinsk Test Site** – a detailed and in-depth explanation of what this place is, what happened here, and what affects their inventions can have. Some machines from that time are displayed here too
- We board our vehicle and take a drive, deep into a formerly off-limits (very off limits!) area; the **Semipalatinsk Polygon** – nuclear testing ground chosen due to its remoteness, lack of population, and because it seemed like an excellent spot to blow a few things up.
- Our target is the **Nuclear Epicentre** - where the first Soviet Atomic Bomb was tested: Ground Zero. We stop at markers, increasingly-destroyed bunkers and towers, as we make our way to ground zero; the epicentre of this bang heard around the world. Radiation is only higher than average in one spot, and we provide protective gear of course.
- We spend some time checking out more of the relics of this ground-breaking (literally) test before returning to the Kurchatov once more
- Next stop is **Chagan** – once a deeply secret **long-range bomber base**. Now a deeply abandoned former long-range bomber base. See the massive runways, the remaining ammunition hangars, and the collapsing main buildings of the base. Plus the garrison town nearby which housed the base staff from 1954 to 1994 and now stands completely stripped like a spooky post-apocalyptic warning. A bit of UrbEx here to finish the day

Overnight: Mayak Hotel – not named for the site of another nuclear disaster - [see here](#). Mayak means ‘Beacon’ and was a common name for places and institutions in the USSR. This 1980s beauty belongs to the Kazakh Institute of Atomic Energy. Fans of the Soviet Aesthetic will adore this place!

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

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MAY 4TH – TUESDAY (ATOMIC LAKE/KURCHATOV)

- We again go deep into the **Polygon**, this time we head for the sinister-sounding **Atomic Lake**
- We'll make a few stops on the way through but most significantly **Atomic Lake** – caused by a deep underground nuclear blast – this was made deliberately and is known as the world's first and only use of industrial nuclear weapons. Find out what on earth they were thinking and also meet some fishermen looking for three-eyed fish in the 180m deep lake
- We'll have a **Roadside Picnic** (note to non-literature lovers, this is a joke – [read this book](#), and you will find some eerie similarities to this part of the trip) and continue to see some relics of the testing program. A local expert will also be with us to explain in detail, answer questions, etc
- We arrive back in Kurchatov where we'll have a **walking tour** of this semi-abandoned settlement dotted with monuments, fascinating buildings, and of course locals going about their lives
- A **free evening** to explore the town – there are cafes and bars, the locals are friendly and curious. It's walkable and hospitable (one shop even has town souvenirs). Get out there and enjoy it!

Overnight: Mayak Hotel

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch (picnic)

MAY 5TH – WEDNESDAY (SEMIPALATINSK/SEMEY)

- Back to Kurchatov Railway Station for a 2-hour ride in comfort across the steppe to the nearby city of **Semipalatinsk**
- Semipalatinsk is the former name of this city; correctly it is now referred to as **Semey**, we explore with a city tour of this little-visited settlement.
- Once upon a time Semipalatinsk was a wealthy trading city, situated between China and Russia, as well as acting as a gateway to the Central Asian territories added to the Russian Empire in the 19th Century. We will explore mainly on foot and see buildings from various eras, statues and monuments, mosaics and a little-known part of history. All explained to us as we make our way around this unexpectedly-charming place. Sites we visit include...
- **Lenin Alley** – a common sight in Kazakhstan's smaller cities; a collection of Lenin's in a lovely park setting. The central piece is particularly impressive
- **Victory Park** – with statues, tank monument, and a hang-out place for locals
- **Dostoyevsky Museum** – the titan of Russian Literature, was exiled out here in Semipalatinsk and this museum explains the importance of his works. *Pro-tip: read Crime and Punishment before your visit.*
- After lunch, we liberate you for **free time** – a couple of recommendations include;
- **Fine Arts Museum** – not just the best collection in Kazakhstan but also a display of abnormal anatomy, something quirky and troubling (especially with our trip to the nuclear test site coming up)

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- **Stronger Than Death Monument** – in the Tatar section of town (itself an attraction we will explore some more) – shows the resilience of those who live and have lived in this remote part of the world.
- We plan a unique addition to the local experience on this tour too, see for yourself on the trip!

Overnight: Semey Hotel – very Soviet-style place with an aesthetic unlike what you may be used to! All the charm of the late-USSR but with free wifi! You'll love it!

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

MAY 6TH – THURSDAY (TO KARAGANDA)

- We rise early and drive a mere 250km east to **Ust-Kamenogorsk**. Our destination is simply the airport where we board a **local flight** to take us over the test-sites, abandoned gulags, coal mines, fields, and miles of endless undulating grasses that make up eastern Kazakhstan. Our final destination today is the city of **Karaganda**. We will find time before the flight for a quick walk in a local park with an excellent collection of Lenin Statues and Soviet-era tanks
- An introductory **walking tour of the city centre** - focusing on the architecture, history, and local culture of this city (all of which is varied and fascinating), we'll visit the central park as well and see and mix with locals spending leisure time here
- **Karaganda** is a large city but with a very walkable centre – the Russian/Soviet influence here is strong, and our guide (a local to this place) will tell us all about the city, you'll find it fascinating for sure! He can also recommend good spots for dinner/evening socialising/etc

Overnight: Chaika Hotel – amazing brutalist Soviet monstrosity. Real time-warp stuff. One part of the hotel was built specifically for the visit of [Valentina Tereshkova](#), the first woman in space. The rooms are comfy and modern; the building itself is timeless!

Meals included: Lunch

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MAY 7TH – FRIDAY (KARAGANDA)

- We drive an hour out to the museum of **KarLag**, the local gulag system – a dark part of history indeed told through the rooms of this former **NKVD HQ**. State ‘enemies’, departed nationalities (a vast number of whom were dumped in central Asia due to Stalin’s paranoia about enemies within – the largest numbers being Germans from the west and Koreans from the east. Their stories are told here in this chilling memorial to the all-too-recent evils
- The village around this museum is made up largely of former Gulag barracks, admin buildings, and medical centres, we will take a look around and also visit the depressing cemetery for children who died in this cruel system
- The nearby town of **Shahhtinsk** hosts us for lunch and some views of local industries; coal mining primarily, but also steel production and agriculture
- In the afternoon we offer the choice between free time to explore further Karaganda city or a trip to a former execution ground (what a choice, we know!) marked by tasteful and meaningful memorials to the various nationalities whose people were among the unfortunate souls to perish here
- In the evening we will board the modern Spanish-made overnight train for a trip to the south of Kazakhstan, and the largest of the nation’s cities - Almaty, 1000km away through the night

Overnight: On the train. Comfy beds in small, but modern and spotless rooms

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch

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MAY 8TH – SATURDAY (ALMATY)

- We arrive in the morning in the cultural capital (and actual former capital) of Kazakhstan. The beautiful city of Almaty. Nestled against the precipitous Tian Shan Mountain range and dotted with parks, theatres, boulevards, and much more, this is a modern multi-cultural city wrongfully ignored too little-known
- **Almaty Metro** – one of only two subway systems in the whole of Central Asia (the other is the Moscow knock-off in Tashkent) this system opened in 2012 and struck a balance between Moscow opulence and modern efficiency
- **Green Bazaar & Rakhat Chocolate Factory** – these neighbouring sites are local institutions. You can smell the sweetness from the latter all across this part of the city. Banter and barter with sellers in the market, pick up the apples that Almaty is known for as well as all manner of other delicious local delicacies. Get your sweet tooth into action with the terrific and very affordable selection at the chocolate factory (ideal for gifts too!)
- **Panfilovets Park** – Almaty's central place of leisure. Very pleasant and marked with stunning and evocative monuments to the Kazakh soldiers who fell while fighting to defend Moscow from the Nazi invasion. **Zenkov Cathedral** is also located in this park.
- **Arbat Street** – every good former USSR town has one; a pedestrian area ideal for promenading, window shopping, café culture, public art sales, and so on. This one is very modern and is lined with some great examples of brutalist apartment buildings
- **Kok-Tebe** – a cable car ride up to a mountain overlooking the city. Amazing views, a statue of the Beatles, A Ferris Wheel and toboggan ride, small zoo, bars, and entertainment in general. Simply put, this is the city's best spot and a trendy area for local families, youths, and everyone. We'll have a final lunch of the tour here in an excellent restaurant with a panoramic view of the city and mountains. A fitting relaxing end to an intense, mind-blowing week!

Overnight: Hotel Kazakhstan – a towering monstrosity offering magnificent views over the city as well as faded-luxury. An iconic structure in an iconic city; ideal for finishing off our Kazakhstan adventure

Meals included: Lunch



MAY 9TH – SUNDAY (VICTORY DAY)

One of the biggest days in the Kazakh and general post-soviet calendar; May 9th is the anniversary of the end of World War 2, known here as the Great Patriotic War. While the territory of Kazakhstan was not the scene of any battles still a great many men from this part of the USSR were called up and deployed to the front, of course, many never returned.

This morning the **Immortal Battalion** marches; this is the name given to those who keep the memories of their family members who took part in this civilisational struggle and every year gather to hold pictures of their heroes aloft and march through the city in their hundreds of thousands, cheering, singing, celebrating, and marking their memories and sacrifices. It is a touching, magnificent, and unforgettable spectacle. And it is open to anyone who wants to march along, take photos, join in as much or as little as you like.

Committing the whole morning to this experience is customary, so be ready for an exciting time with the families of those who took part on the Soviet side of WWII, often-overlooked in the west, joining the Immortal Battalion will give you a sense of how much the bravery of these people matters to their relatives decades later.

The rest of the day is yours to do with as you will; locals flock to bars and coffee shops, sit around in parks or simply go home. Make the most of this national holiday at your leisure there are concerts and events in parks sometimes, lots to see and do, or just park yourself at one of the city's fantastic cafes and unwind after an excellent experience!

Overnight | Hotel Kazakhstan –

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MAY 10TH – MONDAY (Goodbye Almaty welcome Ashgabat)

We have a very early morning flight Almaty/ Kazakhstan to Ashgabat/ Turkmenistan entering Ashgabat through its multi-billion dollar marble-clad eagle-shaped airport. The kind of airport any country in the middle east would be proud of. Once we have exchanged, our letters of invitation for visas were off to the hotel with our local guide; our rooms will be ready to check-in and catch up on some sleep.

This morning is free for you to relax before our desert highlight.

- **Desert adventure!** We head off in a fleet of 4x4s into the deep desert today.
- **Bokhurdag** semi-nomadic village gives us a great look at what desert life is like today. We even stop for a local lunch at a family home.
- Onwards to the bizarre **mud and water craters**, scenes of accidents that opened sinkholes in the desert.
- Finally, we arrive at the stunning and unforgettable **Darvaza Gas Crater**, in the centre of the country and the scene of a 40-year-old industrial accident that ended with a giant flaming pit burning to this day. A hypnotic sight and one of the strangest and most spectacular things you can see!
- We camp tonight besides the crater; it is best viewed at night, dinner cooked on the spot.

Meals: **Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner**

Overnight: Camping at Darvaza Gas Crater - Tents, sleeping bags and roll mats provided. We will also provide tents based on your rooming options. This affords us the best opportunity to view the fantastic gas crater from before sunset to sunrise.

MAY 11th – TUESDAY (ASHGABAT)

- We return to Ashgabat, driving through the morning with a stop at a monument to the Soviet defeat (or suppression) of the Basmachi Rebellion, guerillas who resisted first Russian Imperial and then Soviet rule in Central Asia
- **Afternoon city tour** including **Independence Park** and Monument, **Arch of Neutrality** topped by the gold statue of Turkmenbashi, **Ahal-Teke Horse Monument**, **Earthquake Monument and Museum**.
- Free evening for a night out in the city.

Meals: **Breakfast**

Overnight: Hotel Ak Altyn, Ashgabat.

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MAY 12th – WEDNESDAY (DASHOGUZ & KONYE-URGENCH)

- We take a morning 1-hour flight from Ashgabat to the northern city of Dashoguz, in the Uzbek-majority part of the country.
- We'll see the local bazaar and a taste of life in this very different city.
- The ancient silk road ruined city of Konye-Urgench, ravaged by successive invaders over the centuries and now home to minarets, impressive mausoleums, and all manner of historical tales and stories – one of the most important sites on the old silk-road.

Overnight: Hotel Uzboy, Dashoguz - This local hotel may be basic although there are not many options in this far-flung town. It does offer us the chance to walk out into the local streets and experience life away from the marble city of Ashgabat.

Meals included: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

MAY 13th – THURSDAY (ASHGABAT & BEYOND)

- We'll fly back to Ashgabat and get on with some more touring activities straight upon arrival.
- Ahal-Teke horses are considered as heavenly and sacred beasts in Turkmenistan; this stud farm visit will show you why. Have a ride on one of the horses if you like.
- We then drive on to the bizarre Kow-Ata underground lake. A Sulphur-heated lake 100m deep underground. Take a swim, explore the cave, and then have lunch at a shashlik restaurant on the spot.
- After lunch, we will visit a couple of large mosques; first, the Geok Deppe Mosque, built on the site of a late 19th Century massacre that marked the beginning of Russian dominance in the region.
- Then we see the even more massive Gypjak Mosque, built on the site of the 1949 Earthquake that devastated the city; this is also home to the Turkmenbashi Mausoleum which we will visit.
- Back to the city for a relaxing evening before beginning the final day of this adventure!

Overnight: Hotel Ak Altyn, Ashgabat

Meals included: Breakfast, Dinner

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MAY 14TH – FRIDAY (ASHGABAT & KOPET DAG MOUNTAINS)

- Free morning in Ashgabat for any final shopping, wandering, relaxing that you want to do and then we meet for a packed last afternoon.
- A cable car ride into the Kopet Dag mountains to see a view of the city from above.
- The world's largest indoor Ferris Wheel – yes, indeed! A bizarre and quite fun trip to this oddity at the edge of town.
- An evening drive around the marble city, stopping at some viewpoints for some great photos of the nighttime illuminations which are very impressive.
- Final dinner of the tour, time for goodbyes and the last night out if you've got the energy!

Overnight: Hotel Ak Altyn, Ashgabat

Meals included: Breakfast, Dinner

MAY 15TH – SATURDAY (DEPARTURE DAY or EXTENSION DAY 1)

- Departure day – airport transfers provided for everyone regardless of the time of flight or where you are going

OR

- **Extension day 1: Mary & Margush**
- Flight from Ashgabat to Mary, in the centre of the country and the nearest city to the ancient silk road metropolis of Merv
- Visit Gonur-Deppe (Margush); another ancient city in this area, with some lovely extent architectural features
- Back to Mary City and explore this modern town, mix with the locals, go to parks, bars, etc. as you like, a sleepy area with welcoming and friendly locals
- Meals: Breakfast

Meals included: Breakfast

Overnight: Hotel in Mary

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MAY 16TH – SUNDAY (EXTENSION DAY 2)

- Excursion to ancient Merv, probably the most important city in the world at certain times of its history and a place where you will learn a great deal about the history of Central Asia, the rise and fall of dynasties and cities, the silk road, and human civilization in this part of the world in general. This vast area is roamed by animals, explorers, existing buildings, ruins, etc. All are contributing to a sense of the dynamism of the ancient silk road.
- In the afternoon you fly back to Ashgabat for a final rest/night out before departure. Hotel not included.

Please let us know if you wish to book an extra night in Ashgabat. The flight should return to the capital at around 8 PM - 9 PM.

Overnight: Hotel Ak Altyn, Ashgabat (optional)

TOUR PACKAGE

INCLUDED

- English-speaking local guides
- Western Tour Leader
- Meals (where indicated)
- Accommodation
- One International flight (Almaty to Ashgabat)
- Internal flights (x2)
- Domestic trains (x2)
- All included sightseeing
- All taxes & entrance fees to areas where special permits are required
- Airport transfers
- An amazing time!

NOT INCLUDED

- Tips for the local guides and driver (approx 10-15 USD per day)
- Incidentals, extra drinks, etc
- Optional single supplement (USD 30 per night in Kazakhstan, USD 50 per night in Turkmenistan)
- Kazakhstan visa fee (where appropriate). Some nationalities will not require a visa for Kazakhstan. Please check in advance.
- Turkmenistan: All visitors will need a visa USD 80 to USD 140 depending on nationality, we will do the work required for this.
- International flights to Kazakhstan and from Ashgabat not included
- Extra nights accommodation.

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ADDITIONAL NOTES

- Please note that when on tour your day-to-day itinerary may differ to what is advertised above. Your tour leader will ensure, however, that everything available at the time is covered, and replacement options are provided where needed. We will also add in extras when there is time (such as a visit to a local bar or amusement park).
- After the tour, we will send out a list of all participants' emails so you can keep in touch, swap photos etc. If you do not wish to be on this list, then please let us know.

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