

TURKMENISTAN

Lonely Planet

Getting Around

Bus and train travel can be a nightmare. Services are infrequent, always full and station staff can be astoundingly surly or even hostile. Same-day departure windows are absolute scrams; you can be elbow-locked and compressed for hours, only to find everything sold out (by contrast, advance-purchase windows rarely have long queues). Bus timetables change frequently so check well beforehand on the state of play. Turn up early to avoid having to wrestle with someone for the seat you have purchased and also because buses occasionally leave early. An option in many areas is to hire a car and driver: taxis and private citizens are often willing to take travellers between cities.

Visas, Embassies & Border Crossings

Iran-Turkmenistan: the road from Iran to Ashgabat is open for cyclists as well, but be prepared for an awfully long wait at customs.

Chris Wagner (Mar 2000)

Crossing the Iran/Turkmenistan border wasn't much drama. I was questioned by every man and his dog, but there was no forceful demand for cash. There are a lot of customs, soldiers, etc, and it does take a long time, but all should be okay. I spoke to two Australians who did the crossing which goes directly from Mashad to Ashgabat. They had no real trouble (even though it is supposed to be closed to foreigners), except that they were kept a very long time, questioned a great deal and decided that it was not really worth the stress it involved.

In Ashgabat, the following embassies are now all located in the one place at 14 Giozogly: Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Georgia (although it may move).

Anthony Williams, Australia (Nov 99)

Everyone needs a visa to enter Turkmenistan, except Polish people. I had an invitation from one of the tourist offices in Ashgabat confirmed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but Immigration said that people from Poland did not need a visa to enter. However, you may need it when boarding the plane.

When I was there, there was no bus connection between Ashgabat and Mashad, so I crossed the border by feet. If you start in the early morning, all the immigration and customs procedures can take as little as two hours. The border is only 20 minutes by taxi from Ashgabat's city centre. From the Iranian border, you can take a taxi to Mashad without any problems for about US\$10-15.

Rafal Turowski, Poland (Sep 99)

Travel Tips

Cycling in Turkmenistan is not funny at all. We went at the end of May, and it was some degrees colder than hell. The day we left Ashgabat at 4am in the morning, I drank 16 litres of water, which was partly blended with rehydration salts. My head was fully covered, but despite taking all precautions, I got heatstroke. It could have turned out very badly, but a very helpful Peace Corps lady (thanks a thousand times) picked us up and helped put me back on my feet. If you really want to cycle in Turkmenistan, consider the following advice:

a) Don't do it; take a bus. b) If you go, go in early spring or late fall. c) Leave early in the morning. d) Carry enough water with you. The innocent-looking blue line following the road on the map is in reality a multicoloured soup full of chemicals, which is neither drinkable (unless you want to look as colourful as the "water") nor filterable. e) The temperatures you find in the guide have been metered in the shadow, and along the way, you will not find any shadow at all. f) There is hardly any traffic on the main roads out of major cities, so help can be far away in an emergency. g) Don't go alone. h) Turkmen don't understand why Westerners travel by bike through their country, and they are more than right! i) Camping is horrible - by the "waterside" there are armies of mosquitoes waiting for you. If you consider that once in a thousand years a traveller camps there, you can imagine how aggressive these beasts are. Camping in the sand - forget it. j) Buy all important stuff in Ashgabat. Consider that out of the major cities, there are no houses, gas stations or anything else at which you can buy food or something to drink. Also, if you find a little spot on you map indicating a smaller village, it does not mean that you'll find water or something edible there. k) Again, it's really not worth cycling there. There is nothing to see, except sand and some bushes; certainly nothing to risk your life for.

Christian Wagner, Switzerland (Mar 2000)

A good and regularly updated source of information on life in Central Asia is the website of *The Times of Central Asia*, an English language weekly that is published in Bishkek. You can find it at the following address:

<http://www.times.elcat.kg>

Bruno de Cordier, Belgium (Nov 99)

I wanted to see the underground lake at Bakharden, but at the station, police stopped me and wanted to see some "permission" as Bakharden is a border area. I'm afraid if you don't have luck, you won't be allowed to see this highlight as an individual, because permission must be arranged by a tourist office and stamped by border police. They turned me back to Ashghabat. Also, Turkmens are generally happy to change your dollars into manats on the black market, but this doesn't work in a small city like Bakharden; it is wise to take enough manats with you when travelling here.

Rafal Turowski, Poland (Sep 99)

Moving About

It's not a bad idea to get a sleeper for the Charjou-Ashghabat part of the trip - they're quite comfortable and very cheap. I ended up being invited to two parties in my train carriage that night. On such occasions, it's important that you know the Russian word for "vegetarian" if you are of that faith - they won't be too insulted, especially if you gobble up something else - and if you have something you can contribute yourself, like some Western sweets, you'll be made president for life of your carriage. These people like a laugh!

Damian McCormack, Ireland (Nov 99)