

# Uzbekistan

## Crossroads of Central Asia



**Upper:** The hilltop fortress of Ayaz-Qala in Karakalpakstan, built in the 6th and 7th centuries. **Lower:** A dome of Ulughbek Medressa, in the Registan, the center of Samarkand. It was completed in 1420 and once housed 100 students. It is now a museum and tourist attraction.

**I**t could easily be said that all roads in Central Asia lead to Uzbekistan. In walking the streets of its capital city Tashkent, one is as likely to encounter Uzbeks as one is to see Russians, Kazakhs, Koreans, Kyrgyz, or Tatars. The most historically rich country in the region, Uzbekistan's ancient villages and marvelous architecture take visitors back in time to the glory days of the Silk Road, when legendary cities, such as Bukhara, Khiva, and Samarkand, were prime stops for princes and merchants alike. Uzbekistan can truly be called the heart of Central Asia.

Stretching more than 1,400 kilometers west to east and 900 kilometers north to south, Uzbekistan is the third largest country in the region, with an area of 447,000 square kilometers. It is Central Asia's only country that shares boundaries with each other nation in the region, bordering Kazakhstan to the north, the Kyrgyz Republic to the east, Tajikistan to the southeast, Turkmenistan to the southwest, and Afghanistan to the south. The country is approximately 80% flat desert or semidesert, with the vast Kyzlkum Desert filling its northern lowlands. To the southeast are the foothills of the Tien Shan, which rise steadily to heights reaching 4,500 meters above sea level.

The elevated Fergana Valley, containing Uzbekistan's most fertile land, lies in the northeast.

With desert occupying so much land, and few lakes, water is scarce and unevenly distributed. Main sources of water are the Amu Darya, with headwaters in Tajikistan, and Syr Darya, which originates in the Kyrgyz Republic. Both are used extensively for irrigation, with some of their outflow diverted to artificial canals to expand the area of land in agricultural production. Irrigated agriculture along the valleys of these rivers has been practiced for millennia. Water diversion over the last half century, however, has meant the decline of what was once Uzbekistan's largest water body—the Aral Sea.

Uzbekistan's 27 million people make the country the most populated in the region. Ethnically, 76% of the population are Uzbek, 6% Russian, 5% Tajik, 4% Kazakh, 2% Tatar, and 1% Kyrgyz. Other groups include Armenians, Bashkirs, Karakalpaks, Koreans, Nogay, and Turkmen. Ethnic groups are spread across the Republic of Uzbekistan and Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, in areas that accord with their traditions, livelihoods, and interests.



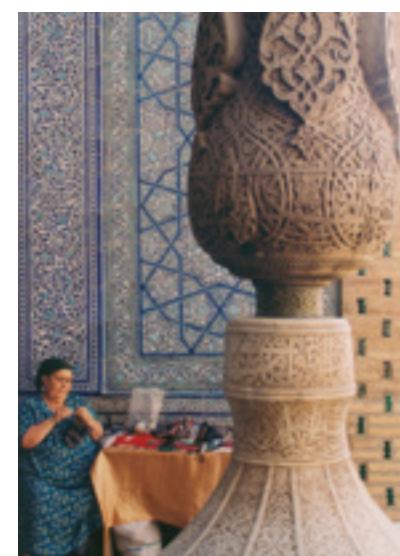
## Growing and Diverse Economy

Uzbekistan's road to development after its independence in 1991 has been different from its neighbors. It has taken a more gradual approach to market reforms, relying on state-led development that has emphasized import-substitution industrialization. Results show significant increases in industrial value added. This approach has also helped make the economic and social transition to a new republic smoother than that experienced by other countries in the region, and has contributed to solid economic performance over the last few years. The country is now shifting to a market-based economy, with progress in reforms mixed.

In 2007, the economy grew by a healthy 9.5%. Industrial growth was anchored by increases in the production and export of automobiles, metals, and gas. Metals represent Uzbekistan's largest single export, and the country has made investments in their production in recent years. The country counts itself among world leaders in gold and uranium reserves, production, and export. The Almalyk complex, which produces copper, gold, lead, and zinc, and the Navoi complex,

which produces gold and uranium, are two of the country's largest enterprises. Uzbekistan is also rich in natural gas. Unfortunately, reliance on Soviet-era pipeline infrastructure restricts most exports of natural gas to Central Asia and the Russian Federation. Once proper access rights are gained and new pipelines are built, Uzbekistan will be primed to become a significant gas exporter to more and more countries in Asia.

Nevertheless, agriculture has been and remains the keystone of the economy, accounting for roughly one-third of gross domestic product. During the Soviet era, Uzbekistan was transformed into a cotton center through the diversion of vast amounts of water that brought enormous tracts of land into cotton production. The country is a world leader in cotton and the product still dominates its agriculture sector. In a recent effort to increase grain self-sufficiency, however, cotton areas have decreased and more land is being sown to wheat. Areas producing fodder and rice have also been reduced while newer plantings include fruits, melons, potatoes, and vegetables. Karakul sheep are also raised, but reduced demand for the skins has created changes in meat production strategies.



■ Intricate stonework in the 19th century Tash Hauli Palace, Khiva.



## Sustaining Citizen Well-Being

Uzbekistan maintained many Soviet-era social service protection for its citizens and refrained from a quick embrace of liberal economic reforms. This resulted in less economic shock for its people in the years following independence, and has helped Uzbekistan position itself for a high rate of Millennium Development Goals achievement.

The goal of universal access to education has been achieved, with literacy rates approaching 100%. Gender equality and female empowerment are moving in the right direction. This is evidenced by equal male and female attendance at the primary and secondary levels of education, increases in female students at the college graduate level, and introduction of affirmative action to encourage women to run in elections.

**Top left:** The old city of Khiva, viewed from the Islom-Huja Minaret.  
**Top right:** Uzbek children waiting to perform a traditional dance.  
**Middle:** Uzbek spice seller in Bukhara market. **Bottom:** Traditional hat making from animal pelts is dependent on protection of wildlife.

## Protecting Environment and People

Uzbekistan's primary ecosystems include lowland deserts, piedmont semidesert and steppe, and riverine, wetland delta, and mountain systems. Each features its own distinct plant and animal life. The Kyzlkum Desert alone is home to more than 900 plant types, and 1,400 species and subspecies of animals. In all, more than 4,500 plant and 15,000 animal species are found in the country. Dozens of these species, however, are under threat, and hundreds of others are believed extinct.

As with other countries in the region, threats to the environment are many. The main causes are extensive agriculture development and use of harmful chemicals during the Soviet period, ineffective use of water resources and inadequate land-use practices, overgrazing, deforestation, pollution from hydrocarbon and mineral extraction, industrial waste, and climate change. The destruction of the Aral Sea is a prime example. Diversion of water inflow for irrigation and pollution from agrochemicals have not only dried up much of the Aral Sea but have also rendered most of it biologically dead.

Environmental damage is also hard on Uzbekistan's people, two-thirds of whom live in rural areas and so depend on the country's air, land, and water resources for their health and livelihood. For example, land degradation and salinization lead to reduction of cropland productivity and increase of abandoned land areas. People living near the Aral Sea and lowlands of the Amu Darya River basin experience health problems caused by river water contamination and windblown pollutants from the dry bed of the Aral Sea. Dangerous levels of industrial waste also affect the Samarkand and Tashkent regions.

The country is taking steps to address environmental issues. Since its independence, a number of environment protection programs and



strategies have been prepared, including the 1999 National Action Plan to Combat Desertification, National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (1999), Concept and Strategy of Sustainable

Development (2000), Agenda for XXI Century, Strategy of Welfare of the Uzbekistan Population for 2008–2010 (2007), and National Environmental Action Plan for 2008–2012 (2008).

**Above left:** Carpet salesmen in Bukhara. **Above right:** Cotton production goes into the making of some of Central Asia's most-renowned carpets.

## Tashkent

**W**ith a population of more than 2 million, Uzbekistan's capital, Tashkent, is the largest city in Central Asia and one of the Asian continent's premier capitals. Located square in the middle of the Central Asian land mass, it has served as a major transport junction for 2 millennia. Known variously as Dzhadzh, Chachkent, Shashkent, and Binken, the name Tashkent ("Stone Village" in Uzbek) first appeared in the 11th century. The city functioned as a vital Silk Road link under the rules of the Arabs beginning in the 8th century, Ghenghis Khan in the 13th century, and Tamerlane in the 14th century. Named the cultural capital of the Islamic world in 2007 by the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the city is considered by many to be Central Asia's economic and cultural hub. The 2,200th anniversary of Tashkent was celebrated with much splendor and festivity on 1 September 2009.

Tashkent is situated in northeastern Uzbekistan in the Chirchiq River valley just west of the Chatkal Mountains. This is Uzbekistan's industrial heartland, where cotton is the chief crop and economic driver. Much of the city's economy revolves around manufacture of cotton textiles, and agricultural and textile machinery. It also manufactures automobiles, television sets, and tractors, and serves as Uzbekistan's military center. Tashkent is a major export center for products destined for Eastern Europe, serving as an entrepôt for everything from silk and cotton textiles to rice, coal, copper, oil, and sulfur. For travelers, it possesses the best international flight connections as well as connections for regional



air and rail travel to any city in the region, plus boasts of Central Asia's only metro subway system.

But Tashkent is far more than just an economic center with rows of modern buildings. It has numerous research institutes and libraries, and more than a dozen colleges. The city features several stadiums and excellent museums, including the Museum of Cinematic Art, Museum of Decorative and Applied Arts, and the State Art Museum. It also contains numerous Uzbek and Russian theaters, such as the Navoi Theater of Opera and Ballet, located in the center of the city. The old section of the city, whose narrow, serpentine streets lead to a host of beautiful mosques and colorful bazaars, attracts tourists from around the world. What's more, thanks to its carefully laid-out parks, Tashkent is incredibly green.



**Upper:** Bird's-eye view of the city. **Lower:** Sympathetic architecture links the modern Hotel Chorsu and ancient Kikeldash Medressa near the main Chorsu Bazaar in Tashkent.