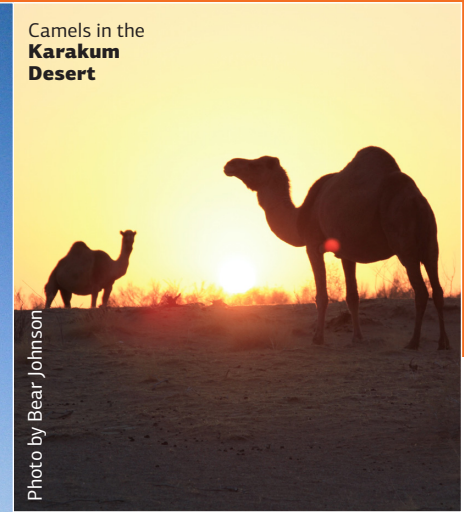




Photo by Bear Johnson

Ashgabat's  
Kipchak Mosque



Camels in the  
Karakum  
Desert

Photo by Bear Johnson



Perpetual fires at  
Darvaza

## Discover Absurdistan

Welcome to **Turkmenistan**: the world's most bizarre country

Described as, “a mix of North Korea and Las Vegas” by expats, Turkmenistan, a big sandbox bordering the Caspian Sea, deserves the title of world's most bizarre nation.

The capital Ashgabat, beneficiary of large natural gas deposits and Saudi benevolence, amazes with its wealth. It's a marvel of white marble—even the sidewalks are covered in it.

There are a few lodging options open to foreigners. The most impressive is The Oguzkent Oteli (US\$450 night)—so luxurious it would make Queen Elizabeth feel like she's slumming it at Buckingham Palace. A more affordable option is the Bezirgen Hotel (US\$40).

Massive Independence Park, ringed in white marble structures and filled with gushing fountains courtesy of the Aral Sea, is the centerpiece of the madness. The park includes a giant replica *Ruhnama*, former dictator Türkmenbaşy's version of the Little Red Book. In an ill-conceived effort to beautify the desert (and halt erosion), evergreens have been planted in the sand around the city. Take a peek

at the saddest trees on the planet on your way to the Kipchak Mosque, which includes quotes from The Koran and *Ruhnama* in the architecture. Finally, Ashgabat is home to the world's largest flag pole. Don't miss this giant phallus of Turkmen engineering.

Turkmenistan has been under the veil of a dictatorship for so long that it remains difficult to travel solo outside key cities. Luckily, flights inside Turkmenistan cost less than US\$12 (for real). You'll have to hire a guide if you leave the main tourist cities. We recommend hiring one at the Ashgabat train station, which will be cheapest (\$50/day). Hotels also run their own guide companies, or try [www.orexca.com](http://www.orexca.com).

Outside the city, check out Tolkuchka, famous for being the largest bazaar in the world. The animal market, complete with camels, sheep and dogs, will make you rethink being a carnivore. Up until last year, the market was a ramshackle affair of booths, but a massive renovation has loaded the place with cement,

steel and of course more white marble.

To see the source of all this wealth, head north from the capital to Darvaza, where you'll find an open natural gas pit that has been burning since the Soviet era. Known as “the gates of hell” this gaping pit would be the perfect backdrop for a Kiss music video.

Turkmenistan has quite a bit of ancient history. Visit Merv, east of the capital, to see massive fortresses built before the reign of Cyrus the Great (550 BC). The fortresses have survived because fowl spit has glued together the decayed mud bricks.

On the east coast of the Caspian, the Turkmen have built the massive resort city of Awaza. Swimming here provides lively interaction with Caspian sea snakes. While not ready to rival the resorts of Turkey, Awaza is a fun stop for anyone on their way to or from Azerbaijan by ferry (\$130).

There are weekly flights from Beijing to Ashgabat (around US\$900 round trip).

■ **Lauren Johnson**