

Arbustan
Explore Wild Central Asia

ARBUSTAN EXPEDITIONS · KAZAKHSTAN

MANGYSTAU

From the Caspian Sea to the Ustyurt Plateau

An Expedition Across the Ocean That No Longer Exists

25 April–2 May 2027 · 8 days / 7 nights · Group size: max. 14

01 The journey

An Expedition Across the Ocean That No Longer Exists

Some people dream of travelling into space or exploring other planets. We choose to seek the unusual and the unknown here on Earth, a place already full of wonders.

This journey takes us to a place far from the most beaten paths, where the landscapes unfolding before us will make us wonder how they can possibly be real. Away from the city's lights and noise, we will find open skies and starry nights, a closer connection with the land, and time to notice what surrounds us. A journey through time and space, across canyons, salt flats, monumental rock formations and underground mosques that preserve the stories of Sufi masters who withdrew here into silence and away from worldly vanity.

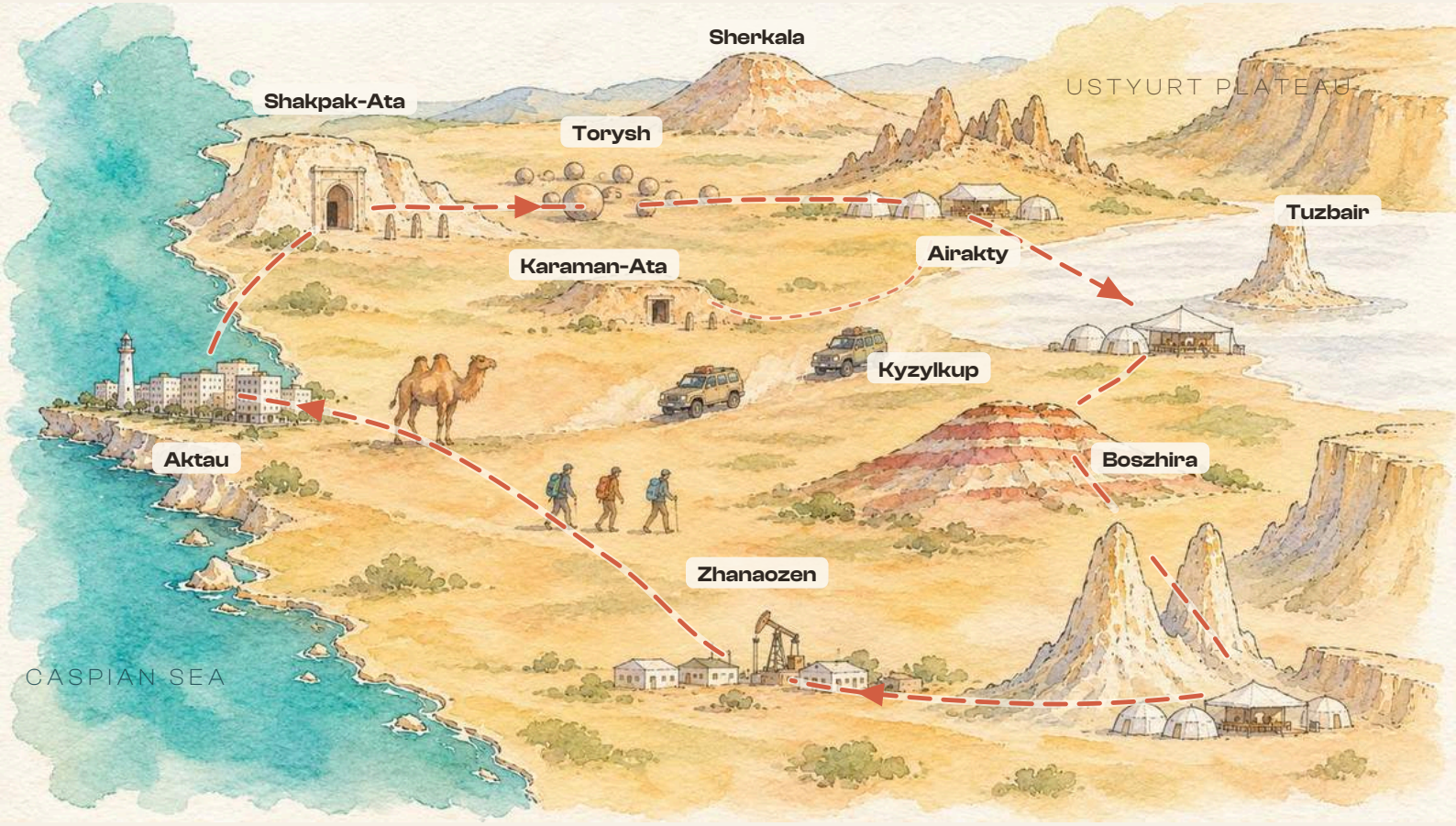
Eight days of expedition travel in Kazakhstan's Mangystau region, between the shores of the Caspian Sea and a desert that holds tangible traces of an ancient ocean, with camels grazing nearby. We will travel by 4x4 jeeps towards the cliffs of the Ustyurt Plateau and walk among limestone walls and rock formations resembling castles, yurts and shipwrecks, overlooking deserts that infinitely stretch to the horizon. Staying in comfortable, fully equipped tented camps, we will follow the rhythm of sunrise and sunset, when the light brings out the pale, red and ochre layers of the rocks and monumental spires.

The landscape will be our starting point for getting to know the region, its people and its history. From fossils and ammonites in the Caspian Depression to underground mosques that are now places of pilgrimage; from Aktau's Soviet-era districts and plastic palm trees along the waterfront to local bazaars, we will explore the stories woven into this land: its geology, spiritual traditions, nomadic past, Soviet period, and the changes and revolutions of contemporary Kazakhstan.

A journey to discover how a region that may seem peripheral has been, and remains, central to the history of the country. A chance to step away from everyday routines and make time for observation and listening, with days of exploration and nights beneath the desert's starry sky. A chance to be surprised once more by the beauty of a landscape that seems to belong to another planet, yet tells the story of our own.

DATES	DURATION	GROUP SIZE	TOUR LEADER
25 April–2 May 2027	8 days / 7 nights	max. 14	Tommaso Aguzzi

02 — Itinerary



Expedition route; the line breaks at each stop

Illustrated map, not to scale

DAY BY DAY

24–25 APRIL	Moonlanding in Mangyshlak
26 APRIL	From the Caspian Sea to the Torysh Valley
27 APRIL	Airakty, Sacred Places and Legendary Rocks
28 APRIL	On the Seabed of a Vanished Ocean
29 APRIL	Exploring the Tuzbair Salt Flats
30 APRIL	Desert Wonders
1 MAY	The Boszhira Valley
2 MAY	Departure from Aktau



24–25 APRIL

Moonlanding in Mangyshlak

Departure on 24 April and, after a layover, arrival in Aktau in the early hours of 25 April. Transfer to the city centre and meet tour leader Tommaso Aguzzi. The day is devoted to the city and to an initial introduction to the region we will be travelling through.

We begin at the Mangystau Regional Museum, which offers an introduction to the region's geological history, settlement and religious traditions. Then we take a walking tour of the city, visiting memorials and monuments dedicated to people connected with the region, including the Soviet World War II memorial and the monument to Taras Shevchenko, the Ukrainian poet, writer and artist exiled here under tsarist rule. At the bazaar, we will stop among the stalls to discover and taste local products such as the famous Caspian caviar.

In the afternoon, we explore Aktau's Soviet microdistricts. This is an opportunity to talk about the city's origins and development, the role of energy resources, and the social and environmental issues affecting the region today. We end the day with a sunset walk along the Skalnaya Tropa, the coastal path between the cliffs and the Caspian Sea. After dinner, we will take a little time to introduce ourselves and share what we are looking forward to on the journey.

> Overnight at a hotel in central Aktau.

26 APRIL

From the Caspian Sea to the Torysh Valley

After breakfast at the hotel, we meet the drivers and the local guide, then leave Aktau by 4x4 to discover some of Mangystau's most fascinating places and spectacular landscapes. Our first stop is the Zhygylgan viewpoint: a vast ground collapse overlooking the sea, made up of coquina, a rock formed from shells, molluscs and corals.

We continue to Kapamsai Canyon, with its high white walls, niches where eagles nest and hollows shaped by erosion. We visit the necropolis and underground mosque of Shakpak-Ata, the oldest Islamic site in Mangystau (9th/10th centuries AD). The rooms carved into the rock and the engravings on the walls introduce us to the region's religious history.

We then move to the Torysh Valley, where we walk among the concretions of the Valley of Spheres: a surreal landscape dotted with large, rounded rock masses, some split apart, emerging from the sediment. In the late afternoon, we reach Airakty, where the hills resemble towers and fortified walls. We set up camp here for our first two nights in the desert. Our cooks prepare all meals on site and serve them in the dining tent.

> Overnight at a fully equipped tented camp in the Airakty Valley.

Tented camp accommodation: comfortable camp beds, with two people per tent. The camp has a dining tent, electricity, Wi-Fi, hot showers, toilets and drinking water.





27 APRIL

Airakty, Sacred Places and Legendary Rocks

Wake up in the Airakty Valley and have breakfast in the first morning light. Then we head to Karaman-Ata, an underground Sufi sanctuary and an important pilgrimage site for believers from across Central Asia, and not only.

We continue to Ybykty Canyon. We explore one of the most remote places on the journey, where erosion has carved extraordinary hollows and patterns into the rock walls, which we can observe up close as we walk through the canyon.

On the way back, we detour to Mount Sherkala, a striking and legendary place for the nomadic peoples who once lived here. We return to Airakty in the afternoon, with time for a walk around camp and to watch the sunset.

> Overnight at the same fully equipped tented camp in the Airakty Valley.

28 APRIL

On the Seabed of a Vanished Ocean

Before leaving Airakty, we make our way to a viewpoint above the valley to look down on the hills among which we have spent the last two nights. We then travel east towards the Tuzbair salt marsh.

As we approach the edge of the Ustyurt Plateau, the ground breaks into escarpments and ravines overlooking a vast salt depression. We will stop at several viewpoints to read the landscape: the limestone walls, channels carved by water and the white land below.

Tuzbair changes appearance depending on ground conditions and the presence of water: the salt surface may be dry or covered by a shallow film of water. Near the salt marsh, we visit the formation known as the Sphinx and look for ancient shark teeth and other marine fossils that bear witness to the region's oceanic past.

> Overnight at a fully equipped tented camp in the Tuzbair area.





29 APRIL

Exploring the Tuzbair Salt Flats

We spend the whole day exploring the area around Tuzbair. In the morning, we walk among canyons and eroded walls, observing the layers of rock and piecing together the area's geological history. We will also look for traces of ammonites in the sediment.

We return to camp for lunch and a rest during the middle of the day. In the afternoon, we set off by 4x4 towards a more secluded canyon and a natural arch, where we can walk beneath Tuzbair's monumental arches.

We end the day watching the sunset over the salt flats, one of the most striking moments of the trip, surrounded by the salt crusts of the marsh with the cliffs on the horizon. We pause to watch dusk before returning to camp for dinner, featuring a dish from Kazakh tradition. Over dinner, there will be time to share impressions of the day and, with our guide, hear a few stories about local customs and life in the region.

> Overnight at the same fully equipped tented camp in the Tuzbair area.

30 APRIL

Desert Wonders

Wake before sunrise for one last look at Tuzbair, then have breakfast and set off. We cross the desert along tracks linking landscapes of strikingly different shapes and colours, letting our gaze wander beyond the window.

At Kyzylkup, known as the “Tiramisu”, we hike among hills striped with white, red and ochre bands. We continue to beautiful Bokty, an isolated mountain rising from the plain. As we circle it, its outline takes on different shapes that we will try to make out.

In the afternoon, we reach legendary Boszhira. From the upper viewpoints, we look out over the Ustyurt escarpments and the limestone pinnacles rising from the valley. We settle into camp for our last night in the desert.

> Overnight at a fully equipped tented camp in the Boszhira area.





1 MAY

The Boszhira Valley

After breakfast, we drive to the starting point of the hike to the Boszhira Fangs viewpoint, the Klyki Bozhyry. We walk to the viewpoint, where we can observe, take in and photograph the two pinnacles, ravines and walls enclosing the valley.

We then begin the drive back to Aktau, passing through Zhanaozen. The journey gives us a chance to return to the story of the region's recent history and its relationship with the extractive industry. Together, we will explore why this city is so crucial to independent Kazakhstan.

We arrive in Aktau in the late afternoon, with time for dinner in town and, depending on flight times, one last walk along the Caspian Sea.

> Overnight at a hotel in Aktau.



2 MAY

Departure from Aktau

After breakfast and check-out, there is free time for one last walk around Aktau, depending on flight times. The tour leader will be available to assist with departure arrangements and the transfer to the airport.

03 Price and inclusions

PRICE PER PERSON

€1,650

Single room supplement (both in hotel and tented camp): €350

Included

- 2 nights in a hotel in Aktau
- 5 nights at fully equipped tented camps during the journey through steppe and desert
- Unlimited use of camp facilities**: dining tent, electricity, Wi-Fi, hot shower, toilets and drinking water
- A cook travelling with the group to prepare hot meals on site
- Full board from 26 to 30 April: breakfast, lunch and dinner
- Breakfast and lunch on 1 May
- Transport in 4x4 vehicles with experienced drivers
- English-speaking local guide from 26 April to 1 May
- Tour leader Tommaso Aguzzi's fee and expenses for the entire trip
- All entrance fees for the museums, national parks and sites included in the itinerary
- VAT and local taxes

**Tented camp facilities: spacious inflatable tents, each with two camp beds, sleeping mats, warm sleeping bags with an individual fleece sleeping-bag liner, and pillows. You can stand upright in the middle of the tent. Each camp also has a toilet tent, a dedicated dining tent, a charging station and an internet connection.

04 Conditions and information

Not included

- International flights
- Airport transfers (local taxis booked through Yandex are recommended)
- Meals not expressly listed under "Included" (lunch and dinner on 25 April; dinner on 1 May)
- Trip cancellation insurance
- Travel health insurance (mandatory)
- Tips, personal expenses and anything not expressly listed under "Included"

Booking conditions

- Deposit: 30% of the total trip price, payable within two days of booking
- Balance: payable no later than 60 days before the trip begins

Cancellation conditions

If you cancel the trip, the following charges apply to land arrangements:

- Cancellation more than 61 days before departure: 30% of the total trip price
- Cancellation between 60 and 31 days before departure: 90% of the trip price
- Cancellation 30 days or less before departure: 100% of the trip price

Practical information

TOUR LEADER AND SUPPORT

The trip will be led by Tommaso Aguzzi, founder of Arbustan and an experienced Central Asia tour leader. Tommaso lived in Kazakhstan for 4 years and holds a PhD in economics focused on the region. For over 10 years, he has explored Central Asia, combining academic research, hiking, photography projects and backpacking.



TOMMASO AGUZZI

SEASON AND WEATHER

The trip takes place in a dry, semi-desert environment, where daytime temperatures can be high. At this time of year, daytime temperatures are around 20°C, while at night they drop to about 10°C. It is important to stay hydrated from the first day and wear a hat when exposed to the sun. We also recommend bringing sun protection and skin moisturiser. Anyone who wears contact lenses and/or suffers from dry eyes is strongly advised to bring eye drops containing hyaluronic acid.

FULLY EQUIPPED TENTED CAMPS

The five nights in tented camps are in spacious inflatable tents, each with two camp beds, sleeping mats, warm sleeping bags with an individual fleece sleeping-bag liner, and pillows. You can stand upright in the middle of the tent. Each camp also has a toilet tent (traveller-to-toilet ratio: 6:1), with toilets and a hot shower; a dining tent for meals; a charging station; and Wi-Fi.

MEALS

From lunch on 26 April to lunch on 1 May, all included meals will be hot and prepared on site by the cook travelling with the group. Dietary requests related to allergies, intolerances and preferences, including vegetarian and vegan meals, can be accommodated if communicated in good time.

TRANSPORT

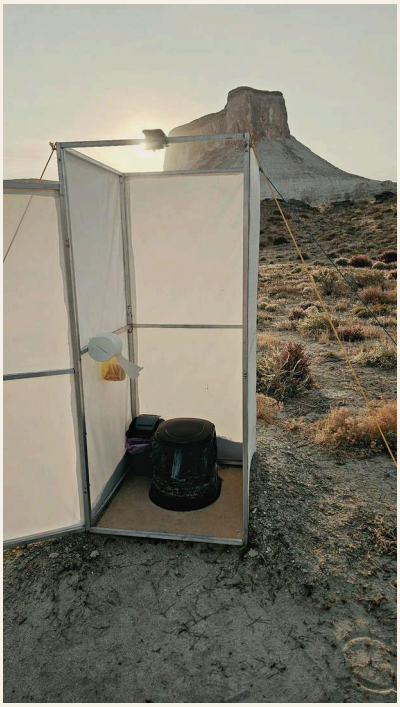
We travel in 4x4 vehicles driven by experienced local drivers. Each vehicle carries a maximum of three passengers, ensuring a comfortable journey and a window seat for every participant.

05 — Fully equipped tented camps











06 The region in pictures



























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