



Global Voices

Karakalpakstan is the most obscure and unique tourism destination in Uzbekistan

Rare antelopes and avantgarde art are among the main attractions



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Dahma Chylpyk, a Zoroastrian tower of silence, in Karakalpakstan. Screenshot from [Aleksandr Perhulov](#) YouTube channel. Fair use.

The Autonomous Republic of [Karakalpakstan](#) located in northwestern Uzbekistan has largely untapped tourism potential. When one thinks of tourism in Uzbekistan, the most immediate image that comes to mind are the ancient cities of [Samarkand](#), [Bukhara](#), and [Khiva](#) located along the famous [Silk Road](#). Historical, architectural, and archeological sites in these three cities are the country's main attractions for tourists. In contrast, Karakalpakstan is relatively unknown to the general public.

Karakalpakstan is home to [Karakalpaks](#), an ethnically and culturally distinct group. The last time the region appeared in the international news was in the summer of 2022, when it was engulfed in [violent protests](#). Among environmentalists, it is known for hosting the [Aral Sea](#), once the fourth largest lake in the world, which has largely dried up in the past century resulting in arguably the largest man-made [environmental disasters](#) in history. Among art enthusiasts, Karakalpakstan is famous for the [Savitsky Art Museum](#), widely known as the “Louvre of the Steppe.” However, the region offers many other attractions, including diverse nature, unique wildlife tourism, and ancient archeological and architectural sites.

With the rapid [development of tourism](#) in Uzbekistan since 2016, Karakalpakstan, among other regions, has been receiving an increasing amount of attention. Global Voices spoke to [Sophie Ibbotson](#) to discuss growing tourism opportunities in the region. She is Uzbekistan's Travel Ambassador and the co-author of the longest, most detailed, and most up-to-date [travel guidebook](#) on Karakalpakstan. The interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Emilia Sulek (ES): What is the scale of the tourism industry in Karakalpakstan? How has it developed?

Sophie Ibbotson (SI): Tourism is a rather small sector in Karakalpakstan, both compared to other parts of Uzbekistan and other industries.

Tourism in Uzbekistan started really developing only in 2016. Prior to that the country received little investment in the tourism sector, and attracted only very specialised travellers. When Shavkat Mirziyoyev became president in 2016 and declared tourism to be one of his priorities, things started to change.

In this regard, Uzbekistan first went for the low-hanging fruits: Khiva, Bukhara, and Samarkand. For these destinations there was already some brand recognition. They were also an easy sell. Comparable monuments from the Silk Road are located in Iran, but many Western tourists will not or cannot go there for political reasons. If they want to see the Silk Road they go to Uzbekistan.

In the last few years there has been a push to promote other parts of the country, and Karakalpakstan is one of them. These destinations bring a smaller return on investment, but developing them is important for spreading the economic benefits and reducing excessive tourism at the main three [UNESCO World Heritage sites](#).

ES: What is unique about Karakalpakstan from the tourism perspective? What does the region offer to potential tourists?

SI: Karakalpakstan has some fantastic sights, but they are not the classic sights that one associates with Samarkand or Bukhara. The monuments here are much older, they are less well preserved, and perhaps less decorative. Less conservation work has been done on them as well. In places such as [Shahrisabz](#) and Samarkand, a lot was rebuilt or heavily restored in the late 19th and early 21st centuries. But what you see in Karakalpakstan is mostly in its original state.

It is a paradise for history lovers. The concentration of archaeological sites in Karakalpakstan is higher than probably anywhere else in Central Asia. The republic has over fifty desert fortresses, many of which date back to the first millennium BCE.

Necropolises, shrines, and the [Zoroastrian tower of silence](#) all make it a very exciting destination.

ES: Does the former Aral Sea attract tourists as well? What is there to see in Karakalpakstan in terms of nature?

SI: Some people do want to see the Aral Sea disaster. They also travel to Resurrection Island, which housed a Soviet military complex used for testing biological weapons. Because of the retreating water levels, this is not an island anymore, and the Soviet infrastructure has been removed too.

Today it is actually one of few places where one can see the very rare [saiga antelope](#). This is another element that Karakalpakstan has to offer: wildlife tourism. Karakalpakstan also has some of the darkest skies on our planet, so the quality of the star-gazing available here is unmatched. This type of tourism does not require massive infrastructure. It is very well suited for the [Aralkum National Nature Park](#) that was created on part of the former Aral Sea.

ES: Since 2020, the government has established two national parks in Karakalpakstan: the South Ustyurt National Park and the Aralkum National Nature Park to promote ecotourism. What else has been done since then?

SI: Mostly work at the research and regulatory level. Establishing the Aralkum National Park was particularly important because it overlaps with a gas exploration area in Karakalpakstan. It is necessary to understand which parts of the Aralkum desert allow industrial interventions, which areas can be used for tourism, and where there should be no human interference at all. What is going to take longer is training tourists in why they should visit and how to do so in a responsible manner. Monitoring and enforcing the law in this fragile desert ecosystem will remain of strategic importance.

ES: How do you think tourism will change things in Karakalpakstan?

SI: Tourism can be a good marketing hook to get people interested in the region, and not just from a touristic perspective, but politically and economically as well. It is kind of a paradox that so many people have heard about the tragedy of the Aral Sea, but so few know about Karakalpakstan.

Uzbekistan itself had a similar problem a few years ago. Even people who have heard of Samarkand were not aware that it is in Uzbekistan. It remains an open question whether one should want for the Aral Sea to be linked with Karakalpakstan. From a tourism point of view, there might be other things to promote: wildlife, ancient fortresses, intangible cultural heritage, which the people there are so proud of. There are many positive things in Karakalpakstan – people do not want to be known only for an ecological disaster.