

Turkmenistan

Country name	Turkmenistan
State title	Turkmenistan
Name of citizen	Turkmen
National official language	Turkmen
Country name in official language	Türkmenistan
State title in official language	Türkmenistan
Capital	Aşgabat ¹
Script	Roman script
Romanization system	n/a (see <i>Language</i> below for obsolete Cyrillic usage)
ISO 3166 code (alpha-2/alpha-3)	TM/TKM
Population/Area	6.2 million ² / 491,210km ²

Introduction

Turkmenistan has international boundaries with Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It has a coastline on the Caspian Sea but as this is not directly connected to the World's oceans, Turkmenistan is regarded as landlocked. From 1925 to 1991 it was one of the constituent Republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) but became independent when the USSR was dissolved.

Geographical names policy

Turkmen is the official language of Turkmenistan, and as such PCGN recommends that the Turkmen language forms of place names across the country be shown on UK products. It is, however, difficult to find Turkmen-language cartographic sources (see *Language*, below) and these may need to be supplemented by Russian-language sources³. Turkmen, as of 1993, has been written in Roman script (see *Script*, below) so romanization should not be necessary; however, if pre-1993 Turkmen Cyrillic sources are encountered, these can be romanized by means of the [BGN/PCGN Table of Correspondences between Turkmen Cyrillic and Turkmen Roman](#).

¹ Often seen as Ashgabat in English-language sources; PCGN usually recommends retaining the Turkmen form, given its visual similarity to the 'English' form, and to the Russian transliteration (Ashkhabad) – see '*Geographical names policy*' section for guidance on the use of Russian toponyms in Turkmenistan.

² [Turkmenistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs website](#).

³ For example, the [US Geographic Names Database](#) contains c.4,000 approved names in Turkmenistan of which most are Russian language, including names of Turkmen origin found on Russian sources and romanized by means of the [BGN/PCGN Russian romanization system](#). For example, a hill 'Gora Karadepe', which has a Russian generic (gora = hill) and Turkmen generic (depe) in the name kara (or properly 'gara' in Turkmen) depe = black hill.

Given the preponderance of Russian-language materials, it should be noted that, if taken from a Russian-language source, names should be transliterated according to the [BGN/PCGN Russian romanization system](#), rather than ‘Turkmenising’ (i.e. creating a possibly spurious Turkmen form).

Language and toponymic background

The Turkmen language

Turkmen is the official language of Turkmenistan and is widely spoken⁴ as a mother tongue. Bilingual knowledge with Russian is believed to be around 50%, and decreasing. Turkmen is a Turkic language, closely related to Turkish and Azerbaijani. It is an agglutinative language which denotes connections (e.g. person, tense, mood, plural) by means of suffixes. It also features vowel harmony, in which subsequent vowels in a word or suffix follow the vowel properties (rounded/unrounded, front-produced/back-produced) of the previous vowel. These features are evident in toponymy. Plurals are formed by adding the suffix “-ler” or “-lar” as appropriate; hence the plural of “welaýat” is “welaýatlar”.

Turkmen has absorbed vocabulary from other languages including Russian, Persian and via Persian from Arabic.

Toponymy

The majority of place names in Turkmenistan are Turkic in origin. Some (including the capital city) are Persian, while some are Russian. During the periods of Russian Imperial and later Soviet rule, larger towns were given Russified names, while some new villages might have been given purely Russian names, some of which are still used. The trend post-independence, as in a number of other successor states to the USSR, is for de-russification, with the abandonment of place names that are of Russian and/or Communist origin⁵ (and see *Name Changes*, below).

Script and diacritics

Prior to 1993, Turkmen was usually written in a version of the Cyrillic alphabet (see below for further details). Since 1993, only Roman script has been officially used. Turkmen uses 23 letters of the Roman alphabet. Q, V and X are not used and C without a diacritic is not used.

Eight letters with four distinct diacritics are used:

Upper case	Unicode encoding	Lower case	Unicode encoding
Ä	00C4	ä	00E4
Ç	00C7	ç	00E7
Ñ	0147	ñ	0148
Ö	00D6	ö	00F6
Ş	015E	ş	015F
Ü	00DC	ü	00FC
Ý	00DD	ý	00FD
Ž	017D	ž	017E

⁴ As with the population, and due also to emigration, estimates differ (CIA World Factbook records 72%).

⁵ Examples include: Krasnovodsk (so named between 1869-1993) → Türkmenbaşy (4001N 5258E); Kalinin → Boldumsaz (4208N 5940E) and Oktyabr’ → Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy (4222N 5849E), also both renamed in 1993. A longer list of such changes can be supplied on request.

In the Turkmen alphabet, or in a dictionary, Ä is sorted between E and F, while Ž is sorted between J and K.

In the early 1990s, romanized Turkmen briefly used some other symbols which were soon abandoned. These included the dollar symbol \$ for Ş and the Japanese Yen symbol ¥ for consonantal Ý.

Pronunciation

This table is a guide to the pronunciation of Turkmen orthography that differs from English.

Character	Pronunciation
Ç	Pronounced like <i>ch</i> in English <i>church</i> . International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA): tʃ; the same as in Azerbaijani and Turkish.
J	Pronounced like <i>J</i> in English <i>John</i> . IPA: dʒ
Ň	Pronounced like <i>ng</i> in English <i>song</i> . IPA: ŋ
Ş	Pronounced like <i>sh</i> in English <i>shop</i> . IPA: ʃ; the same as in Azerbaijani and Turkish.
W	Pronounced somewhat like <i>v</i> in English. IPA: β
Y	A vowel, pronounced like undotted <i>ı</i> in Turkish or like Cyrillic letter <i>ы</i> in Russian. IPA: ɯ
Ý	A consonantal Y, pronounced as in English <i>yes</i> , <i>young</i> etc. IPA: j
Ž	Pronounced like <i>s</i> in English <i>pleasure</i> . IPA: z

Capitalisation

Upper-case letters are used less often in Turkmen than in English. In a place name of more than one word, typically only the first word and those that refer to persons will be capitalised, not geographical terms, e.g. Hazar deňzi (Caspian Sea). PCGN recommends following the local practice. Though note that the names recorded in BGN's Geographic Names Database capitalise generic terms.

Hyphenation

Turkmen is an agglutinative language in which numerous suffixes can be added to basic words, and compound nouns are common. Hyphens are very rarely used. Place names made up of more than one word are either written as single words, e.g. Köpetdag, or as separate words unhyphenated, e.g. Altyn asyr, Hazar deňzi.

Usage of Cyrillic

The Cyrillic alphabet is no longer officially used to write Turkmen in Turkmenistan, but was used for Turkmen prior to 1993, and is still used for Russian. Turkmen Cyrillic used five symbols not used in Russian Cyrillic, corresponding to the modern Roman letters Ä, J, Ň, Ö and Ü. For further details, see the [BGN/PCGN Table of Correspondences for Turkmen](#).

There are few sources for Turkmen Cyrillic, as Russian was the primary official language pre-independence. Maps produced by the USSR up to 1991 are most likely to be in Russian Cyrillic, not Turkmen, and if these sources are used the place names shown should be transliterated according to the [BGN/PCGN romanization system for Russian](#).

Administrative structure⁶

The first-order administrative (ADM1) division of Turkmenistan is the *welaýat*, plural *welaýatlar*. After a place name, the form *welaýaty* is used. There are five *welaýatlar* and their boundaries are similar to those of the subdivisions that existed when Turkmenistan was part of the USSR. In Russian these subdivisions were called область = *oblast'* (plural области = *oblasti*). This word may still be used in Russian names of the *welaýatlar*, but it is more common to use the transliterated вела́ят = *welayat* (plural: вела́яты = *welatyaty*). Russian names are in an adjectival form, always ending in -ский = *-skiy*; these are included in the table below for reference.

The capital Aşgabat is administered separately as an ADM1, Aşgabat şäheri, meaning Aşgabat city.

The second-order administrative division (ADM2) is the *etrap* (plural: *etraplar*), usually translated as 'district'. After a place name, the form *etraby* (with a *b*) is used. Russian nowadays uses a transliterated form этра́п = *etrap*, but the word район = *rayon* may also be found.

ADM1 (PCGN recommended form)	ADM1 Russian name (for reference)	ISO 3166-2	No. of <i>etrap</i>	ADM1 centre (PCGN recommended form)	ADM1 centre (Russian) (for reference)	Location of ADM1 centre	Remarks
Ahal welaýaty	Ахалский вела́ят	TM-A	7	Arkadag ⁷	Аркадаг	38°04'N 58°04'E	Aşgabat is within Ahal province, but administered separately.
Balkan welaýaty	Балканский вела́ят	TM-B	6	Balkanabat	Балканабат	39°31'N 54°21'E	When part of the USSR, the administrative centre of Balkan was Krasnovodsk (since renamed Türkmenbaşy).
Daşoguz welaýaty	Дашогузский вела́ят	TM-D	9	Daşoguz	Дашогуз	41°50'N 59°57'E	
Lebap welaýaty	Лебапский вела́ят	TM-L	10	Türkmenabat	Туркменабад	39°06'N 63°34'E	Lebap is from the Persian لب آب <i>Lab-e āb</i> meaning "riverside".
Mary welaýaty	Марыйский вела́ят	TM-M	11	Mary	Мары	37°35'N 61°51'E	
Aşgabat şäheri	Ашгабат	TM-S	0 ⁸	Aşgabat	Ашгабат	37°56'N 58°23'E	Includes central Aşgabat and suburbs mostly to the north-west.

⁶ Information sourced from [Turkmenistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) and [Turkmenistan Statistics](#) websites.

⁷ The new city of Arkadag replaced Änew as the administrative centre of Ahal in December 2022 - [Turkmenistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#).

⁸ Aşgabat has four districts but these are not considered equivalent to the sub-provincial districts.

Name changes

Some place names (especially towns) have changed their names, and some more than once, since the 19th century for the following reasons:

- Turkmen names changed or modified to Russian versions.
- During the Soviet era, use of names connected to Soviet heroes (Marx, Lenin etc.).
- Abandonment or “Turkmenification” of Russian and/or Communist names since independence.
- The name-changing policies of Saparmyrat Nyýazow, ruler of Turkmenistan from 1991 to 2006.
- Since Nyýazow’s death, some replacement of former names that had been changed by the president (largely naming after himself, and members of his family).

Several town names incorporate –*abat*, a Turkmen equivalent of the Persian *ābād* “town” which is found in many place names of Iran, India etc.

It should be noted that Turkmen Cyrillic spellings are not necessarily the same as Russian Cyrillic.

Alternative and obsolete town names:

Current Turkmen name	Modern Russian name	Former names	Names in other languages	Remarks
Aşgabat	Ашхабад = <i>Ashkhabad</i> (since 1927). Still used in Russian.	Russian: Асхабад = <i>Askhabad</i> (1881-1919) Russian: Полторацк = <i>Poltoratsk</i> (1919-27)	Persian: عشق آباد = <i>'Eshq Ābād</i>	Conventional English name is Ashgabat.
Balkanabat	Балканабат = <i>Balkanabat</i>	Нефтедаг = <i>Neftedag</i> (1933-46) Небитдаг = <i>Nebitdag</i> (1946-99)		The town is at the foot of the Great Balkan mountain range in Turkmenistan (not to be confused with the Balkan Mountains of Serbia/Bulgaria).
Bereket	Берекет = <i>Bereket</i>	Russian: Казанджик = <i>Kazandzhik</i> . Turkmen: Gazanjyk		Renamed at uncertain date, probably in the 1990s.
Daşoguz	Дашогуз = <i>Dashoguz</i>	Russian: Ташауз = <i>Tashauz</i> (up to 1992); Дашховуз = <i>Dashkhovuz</i> (1992-99) Turkmen: Daşhowuz (1992-99)		The anglicised spelling Dashoguz may be encountered.

Current Turkmen name	Modern Russian name	Former names	Names in other languages	Remarks
Kerki	Керки = <i>Kerki</i>	Russian: Атамурат = <i>Atamurat</i> . Turkmen: Atamyrat (1999-2017)		Temporarily named Atamyrat after former President's father.
Mary	Мары = <i>Mary</i>		Arabic and Persian: مرو = Marw (ara) / Merv (fas)	The name Merv usually refers to the ruins of the ancient city which are 30km east of the modern town.
Türkmenabat	Түркменабад = <i>Turkmenabad</i>	Russian: Чарджуй = <i>Chardzhuy</i> (15 th century to 1940) Чарджоу = <i>Chardzhou</i> (1940-92) Чарджев = <i>Chardzhev</i> (1992-99)	Turkmen: Çärjew (1992-99)	The old Russian and Turkmen names are derived from a Persian name.
Türkmenbaşy	Түркменбаши = <i>Turkmenbashi</i>	Russian: Красноводск = <i>Krasnovodsk</i> (1869-1993)		The old Russian name means "red water". This does not have Communist connotations but refers literally to a physical feature.

Hydrological features

Turkmenistan is arid with low rainfall throughout. However, many large rivers with their sources in other countries flow into Turkmenistan, and there are many immense water supply and irrigation schemes that have created canals plus artificial or semi-natural lakes with a variety of names in various languages. Russian forms are shown (in grey) in the tables below to assist recognition.

Turkmen name	Russian name (Cyrillic and BGN/PCGN Romanization)	Other names	Feature type	Remarks
Garabogaz köli / Garabogaz aýlagy ⁹	Кара-Богаз-Гол = <i>Kara-Bogaz-Kol</i>		Bay/Lake	This is a huge bay or lake connected to the Caspian Sea by a narrow strait. The three-part name means "Black Strait Lake" in Turkmen. The full Turkmen name inconsistently adds the word <i>aýlag</i> (=gulf) or <i>köli</i> (=lake) or sometimes both: <i>Garabogazköli aýlagy</i>
Garagum kanaly / Garagumy derýasy ⁹	Каракумский канал = <i>Karakumskiy kanal</i>	English: Karakum Canal	Canal	This canal, one of the longest in the world, is entirely within Turkmenistan. It is not an international feature, so a single Turkmen name is sufficient. However, the anglicised version of the Russian spelling may usefully be added as a conventional alternative. The term <i>derýasy</i> (=river) is increasingly used, although this is misleading as only the easternmost part of the canal follows a natural channel.

⁹ Though both names are encountered in Turkmen sources, PCGN recommends using the first name (in bold) for consistency on UK products.

TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

Turkmen name	Russian name (Cyrillic and BGN/PCGN Romanization)	Other names	Feature type	Remarks
Altyn asyr Türkmen köli	Золотой век = <i>Zolotoy vek</i> / Туркменское озеро = <i>Turkmenskoye ozero</i>	English: Golden Age Lake	Lake	A lake being created in north-west Turkmenistan by filling the natural Garaşor (Russian: Карашор = <i>Karashor</i>) depression with waste-water from irrigation schemes. Latest Turkmen language sources suggest that Altyn asyr Türkmen köli is the favoured name, often appearing with inverted commas around ‘altyn asyr’.
Sarygamyş köli	Сарыкамьшское озеро = <i>Sarykamyshskoye ozero</i>	Sariqamish ko’li (<i>Uzbekistan</i>); English conventional: Sarykamysh Lake	Lake	A lake divided between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The “neutral” anglicised Russian form Sarykamysh Lake remains appropriate for English language usage as a single toponym on small-scale mapping where space does not allow for multiple names.
Garaşszylygyň 15 ýyly suw howdany (Formerly: Zeýt suw hodan)	Formerly: Зейтское водохранилище = <i>Zeytskoye vodokhranilishche</i>	English translation (not for use as a name): Fifteen Years of Independence reservoir (formerly Zeyd or Zeyt reservoir)	Reservoir	A vast settling pond in eastern Turkmenistan, first formed in the 1980s as part of the Garagum (Karakum) Canal scheme. Renamed in 2006.
Hanhowuz suw howdany	Хаузханское водохранилище = <i>Khauzkhanskoye vodokhranilishche</i>		Reservoir	
Amyderýa	Амударья = <i>Amudar’ya</i>	English conventional: Amu Darya آمو دریا = <i>Āmū Daryā</i> (<i>Afghanistan</i>) Амударё = <i>Amudaryo</i> (<i>Tajikistan</i>) <i>Amudaryo</i> (<i>Uzbekistan</i>)	River	The conventional English name is Amu Darya. This name should be used for this international river that flows through four countries. <i>Daryā</i> means “[large] river” or sea in Persian. The river was historically known to Europeans by its Greek or Roman name Oxus.
Etrek	Атрек = <i>Atrek</i>	اترك = <i>Atrak</i> (<i>Iran</i>)	River	This river forms part of the border between Iran and Turkmenistan.
Murgap	Мургаб = <i>Murgab</i>	مرغاب = <i>Murghāb</i> (<i>Afghanistan</i>)	River	The river’s source is in Afghanistan. It flows north into Turkmenistan forming an inland delta in which lies the oasis of Mary.

Turkmen name	Russian name (Cyrillic and BGN/PCGN Romanization)	Other names	Feature type	Remarks
Tejen	Теджен = <i>Tedzhen</i>	هری رود = <i>Harī Rōd (Afghanistan)</i> ; <i>Harīrūd (Iran)</i>	River	The river's source is in Afghanistan. It flows north, forming the border between Iran and Turkmenistan, ending in an inland delta.
Uzboý	Узбой = <i>Uzboy</i>	O'zbo'y (<i>Uzbekistan</i>)	River	A dried-up distributary of the Amu Darya which reached the Caspian Sea in the remote past. Part of its bed is now being utilised for the Golden Age drainage scheme (see above under Lake: Altyn asyr).

Selected other geographical features

For features solely within Turkmenistan, the Turkmen name should be used (the conventional English name (if any) can be added in brackets); for international features, the name form according to the label's location on a map should be used (e.g. both Aýrybaba and Ayribobo can be shown or (if one exists) the English conventional name can appear alone (e.g. Karakum Desert)).

Turkmen	Russian	Other languages	Remarks
Aýrybaba, (officially: Beýik Saparmyrat Türkmenbaşy belentligi)	Айрибаба = <i>Ayribaba</i>	Uzbek: Ayribobo	The highest peak in Turkmenistan (3,138m), bisected by the frontier with Uzbekistan. Long name means "Peak of the Great Saparmyrat Turkmenbashi" renamed in 2004; PCGN recommends simply using the form Aýrybaba in Turkmen.
Bathyz	Бадхыз = <i>Badkhyz</i>		A nature reserve in the far south of Turkmenistan.
Garagum	Каракумы = <i>Karakumy</i> (Кара-Кумы = <i>Kara-Kumy</i>)	English: Karakum Desert	A desert that occupies around 75% of Turkmenistan. Bounded to the north by the Amu Darya (river) and to the south by the Köpetdag (mountains) and the foothills of the Hindu Kush, it is entirely within Turkmenistan except for a small part extending into northern Afghanistan. The name simply means "Black Sand". As it is essentially a non-international feature, the Turkmen spelling with (Karakum Desert) in brackets is recommended.
Kiçi Balkan dagy	Малый Балхан = <i>Malyu Balkhan</i>		Mountain range south of Balkanabat.
Köpetdag	Копетдаг = <i>Kopetdag</i>	Persian: کپه داغ (<i>Kopeh Dāgh</i>)	Mountain range between Iran and Turkmenistan. Spelling "Kopet Dagh" sometimes seen on English-language maps.
Köýtendag	Кугитангтау = <i>Kugitangtau</i>	Uzbek: Ko'hitang	Mountain range at the far eastern end of Turkmenistan, forming part of the boundary with Uzbekistan and including Aýrybaba (see above).
Uly Balkan dagy	Большой Балхан = <i>Bol'shoy Balkhan</i>		Mountain range north of Balkanabat.

Glossary of geographical terms

Turkmen	English	Remarks
akym	stream	
bent	dam	
çöl	desert	
dag	mountain	
demirgazyk	north	
demirýol	railway (railroad)	May be written as two words: demir ýol
deňiz	sea	
depe	hill	
derýa	river	
etrap	district	Second-order administrative division (ADM2)
gum	sand	
günbatar	west	
gündogar	east	
günorta	south	
jülgesi	valley	
kanal	canal	
köçe	street	
köl	lake	
merkezi	central	
şäher	town / city	
serhet	border / frontier	
suw	water	
suw howdany	reservoir	
welaýat	province	First-order administrative division (ADM1)
ýol	road	

Useful references

- BBC Country Profile: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16094646>
- CIA World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/turkmenistan/>
- FCDO Travel Advice: <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/turkmenistan>
- ISO Online Browsing Platform (OBP): <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/>
- Language and scripts: www.ethnologue.com; <https://www.omniglot.com/writing/turkmen.htm>
- US Board on Geographic Names GEOnet Names Server (GNS): [Geographic Names Server](#)
- [BGN/PCGN Romanization of Russian](#)
- [BGN/PCGN Agreement – Turkmen Table of Correspondences](#)
- Turkmenistan Statistics: <https://www.stat.gov.tm/>
- Turkmenistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, administrative information: <https://www.mfa.gov.tm/en/articles/2>

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