



Tajikistan & Kyrgyzstan: Through the High Pamirs 2021

1 JUN – 20 JUN 2021

Code: 22122

Tour Leaders **Katie Campbell, Russell Casey**

Physical Ratings **■■■■■■■■**

Journey to Tajikistan & Kyrgyzstan. This epic road trip through the Pamirs takes us through some of the most impressive mountain ranges on earth.

Overview

Rough and rugged Tajikistan is a place where few travellers venture. The Pamir Highway (M41) is the second highest road on earth (next to the Karakorum in Pakistan) and the majority of the highway is in Tajikistan. Our journey takes us through some of the most impressive mountain ranges on earth – the scenery on this drive is spectacular. This epic road trip through the Pamirs involves staying in some very basic guesthouses in multi-share rooms, as well as extensive travel on varied terrain at high altitude. It is not for the faint-hearted and is ASA's first tour with a physical endurance level rated as 7 flags. All participants will be required to consult with their GP to confirm they are fit to travel.

- This tour is led by Central Asian archaeologist, **Katie Campbell**, with the assistance of **Russell Casey**.
- Journey through spectacular landscapes of glacial lakes, colourful meadows of flowers, turquoise alpine rivers, and stark mountain crags.
- Explore the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Penjikent, Central Asia's 'Pompeii', an ancient Sogdian Silk Road city destroyed by Arabs in the 8th century AD.
- Engage with the unique culture and beliefs of the blonde-haired and blue-eyed Pamiri Tajiks: Ismaili followers of the Agha Khan, descendants of the fabled medieval 'Assassins' as well as the original inhabitants of Central Asia.
- Gaze upon the largest ancient reclining Buddha west of China and wander through cosmopolitan towns where once thrived Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Judaism.
- Engage with the glorious history of the ancient Silk Roads in the ancient bazaars of Khojand, Istaravshan and Osh.
- Visit the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Sarazm; one of the world's earliest towns linking India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, with Central Asia 5000 years ago.
- Explore seven millennia of artistic and cultural endeavour in Central Asia, including bright frescoes from Penjikent, ancient nomadic jewellery, eerie stone-carved nomad grave markers and the golden 'Princess of Sarazm' at Dushanbe's Museum of National Antiquities.
- Follow Marco Polo's route to Xanadu, through the land of lapis lazuli and Wakhan nomads.
- Travel through gorgeous valleys in the High Pamirs to ancient fortresses, abandoned 2000 years ago.
- Follow the Russian Imperial and Soviet history of Central Asia and how these shaped our modern world.
- Travel through the dramatic setting of the chapters of 'The Great Game', in which British and Russian spies and adventurers jostled for control on the Roof of the World.
- Follow Kyrgyz transhumants (seasonal nomads) with their great herds of horses and sheep across alpine summer pastures of the Suusamy Valley, full of herbs and wildflowers.

20-day Cultural Tour of Tajikistan & Kyrgyzstan

Overnight Tashkent (1 night) • Khojand (1 night) • Penjikent (3 nights) • Dushanbe (3 nights) • Kalai-Khum (1 night) • Khorog (2 nights) • Yamg (1 night) • Langar (1 night) • Murghab (1 night) • Osh (2 nights) • Lake Toktogul (1 night) • Bishkek (2 nights)

Overview

Cradled by the Pamir Mountains, source of the life-giving Oxus (Amu Darya) and Jaxartes (Syr Darya) rivers, Tajikistan is the garden of Central Asia. This is an untouched corner of the natural world that nevertheless was also a critical commercial crossroads for countless, diverse peoples for millennia. Between verdant bamboo-forests of the Oxus valley and the stark granite peaks of the Wakhan Valley, Tajikistan is especially rich in flora and fauna. Snow leopards hunt Marco Polo sheep over mountain crags whilst eagles soar above

glacial lakes. Spring unrolls endless carpets of wildflowers and autumn tips a cornucopia of fruit, nuts, and sweet berries from ancient trees shading traditional courtyard gardens. Stalin took the great emporia of Samarkand and Bukhara from the Tajiks, but they are still rightly proud of their long and glorious culture, seen in fine archaeological sites of Penjikent and Dushanbe. Modern Tajikistan is a political backwater between China, Pakistan and the chaos of Afghanistan, but not long ago this land bustled with traders from Europe and Asia all drawn by the treasures of the Silk Road; you'll encounter reminders of past wealth in colourful bazaars like that of Istaravshan, which like many towns we visit has a ruined Arg (fortress), fine Central Asian mosque and madrasa, and a holy shrine, the Sar-i Mazor Complex. Lapis lazuli and Badakhshan rubies were dug from the remote Pamir valleys we visit; it decorated the death-masks of pharaohs and the diadems of long-dead kings. Silk sold in local bazaars became the gorgeous robes of Byzantine queens and European bishops. We follow ancient trade routes that crisscross Tajikistan and hear descendants of the great traders of the ancient Sogdian traders still speaking their ancient language in remote valleys of the Fan Mountains. Islam dominates modern Tajikistan, but a cosmopolitan history of Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Judaism are all marked by ancient Kushan fortresses, reclining Buddhas, abandoned fire temples, and mountain shrines in the High Pamirs combining these different traditions into something unique to the mountain people. Nomad chieftains and merchant-princes, wandering Chinese monks, Russian spies and hearty Victorian women explorers shadow us, following in the footsteps of Marco Polo and Genghis Khan across Tajikistan and into Kyrgyzstan, where we encounter transhumant herdsman their flocks and distinctive yurts.

Leaders



Katie Campbell

An established archaeologist who has worked throughout Central Asia and the Middle East. Her Oxford PhD studies the impact of Mongol Conquests on cities of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Katie leads ASA tours along the Silk Route, and in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan & Kyrgyzstan.

Katie has worked as an archaeologist for the past decade throughout Central Asia and the Middle East and is now completing a doctorate at the University of Oxford's archaeology department looking at the impact of the Mongol Conquest on the cities of Central Asia and the Caucasus. She is currently excavating Medieval cities in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

She has worked on sites dating from the pre-pottery Neolithic in Turkey to the 20th century in Qatar, and many of the periods and countries in between, for institutions including the British Museum and the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, University College London, Copenhagen, Liverpool and York. In particular she is interested in what happens to urban centres when they are conquered and how this can be observed archaeologically, which means spending a lot of time carefully excavating in the cities and trying to work out the difference between the remains of conquest versus those of abandonment and desertion. While not in the trenches, she likes to explore, and has traveled extensively around Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East teaching and lecturing on archaeological field schools and tours, and trying to understand (to some extent!) the many languages of the region.

Current articles include:

- *Semi-fortified palatial complexes in Central Asia: new work at the Great Kyz Kala, Merv, Turkmenistan*, T. Williams, G. Jorayev, K. Campbell & P. Wordsworth.



Russell Casey

A dedicated traveller with a passion for calligraphy, miniature paintings and textiles, Russell has travelled extensively through the Middle East, Iran & Central Asia. His language studies include French, German, Japanese, Arabic, Persian & Mandarin. Russell has led ASA's tours since 2009.

Russell Casey has led tours for ASA since 2009. He has held a fascination for the Middle East, Persia, Central Asia and the Silk Route since studying Latin at school. With a keen interest in languages, Russell studied French, German, Japanese, Arabic, Persian and Chinese (Mandarin). Learning Japanese generated an interest in calligraphy and woodblock prints. Persian and Arabic studies added to the appeal of calligraphy and 'The Art of the Book', which in turn led to visiting some of the great libraries and museums of the United Kingdom and Ireland to view their collections. After independently visiting Turkey, Syria and Jordan, Russell travelled to Iran on the ASA Art and Culture of Persia tour in 2002. In 2005 after completing the ASA Silk Route tour, he revisited Iran to further his understanding of Persian speaking peoples and their arts – including textiles, architecture, gardens and cuisine. He holds a Queensland Ambulance Service first aid certificate, a Master's degree in Medical Physics and is undertaking independent study in the art, history and culture of Central Asia, the Silk Route and surrounding regions. Russell consults in radiation protection and eHealth, including working as an expert advisor to the IAEA.

Combine this tour with

Uzbekistan: The Silk Road Cities 2021

18 MAY – 31 MAY 2021



Itinerary

The detailed itinerary provides an outline of the proposed daily program. The daily activities described in this itinerary may be rotated and/or modified in order to accommodate changes in museum opening hours, flight schedules etc.

Meals will be taken in hotels, in restaurants with a historical or local flavour, or picnic lunches will be provided. All meals are included in the tour price and are indicated in the itinerary where: **B**=breakfast, **L**=lunch and **D**=evening meal. 2-3 500ml bottles of water (per person) will be provided each day for all site excursions. All meals include bottled water, tea or coffee.

Tashkent, Uzbekistan - 1 night

Day 1: Tuesday 1 June, Arrive Tashkent

- Airport Transfer for participants arriving on the 'ASA designated flight' (HY506 at 1415hrs)
- Welcome Dinner

Participants travelling on the ASA 'designated' flight are scheduled to arrive in Tashkent mid-afternoon. Upon arrival we shall transfer by private coach to the [Lotte City Palace Hotel](#), located next to the Alisher Navoi Opera and Ballet House. After settling in to our hotel we dine together at the hotel's restaurant. (Overnight Tashkent) D

Khojand, Tajikistan - 1 night

Day 2: Wednesday 2 June, Tashkent – Oybek Border – Khojand

- Oybek Border Crossing: Uzbekistan/Tajikistan
- Arbob Cultural Palace, Khojand
- City tour: Khojand Fortress & Historical Museum of Sughd, Sheikh Massal ad-Din Complex

This morning we set out overland for Tajikistan. Sixty kilometres north of Khojand we reach the Oybek border crossing between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. After negotiating officialdom, we continue driving to Khojand (Khojent/Khujand, formerly Leninabad) – capital of Sughd Province in northern Tajikistan. The site of Khojand has been continuously occupied for 2500 years and the modern city stands on the remains of a city founded by Alexander the Great: 'Alexandria Eschate', or 'Alexandria the Furthest' defining the furthest point the Macedonian armies reached in north eastern Central Asia. A branch of the ancient Silk Road has run through the strategically important site of Khojand city for millennia and local bazaars were traditionally crowded with traders from China to Afghanistan. Sadly, post-Soviet politics have killed much of the cross-border trade and many citizens of this predominately ethnic Uzbek city find it impossible even to visit family on the other side of the border.

After lunch we drive to the Arbob Cultural Palace located on the edge of the city. This peculiar monument was commissioned as the headquarters of a local collective farm in the 1950s. Extraordinarily, the local *apparatchiks* modelled Arbob on the Winter Palace in St Petersburg and today the building holds a museum dedicated to the history of the Soviet mission to 'civilise' Central Asia. Arbob was also the location where the Tajik Soviet officially declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and where the design for the new Tajik flag was chosen.

Returning to Khojand, we explore the city, visiting the so-called 'fortress of Timur Malik' and the Provincial Historical Museum of Sughd. The 10th-century *Arg*, or citadel, once boasted seven gates and six kilometres of walls, standing on the site of Alexander the Great's original settlement. Numerous Bactrian/Sogdian and Hellenistic remains have been unearthed from this classic Tepe/Tell. The fortress gained its name from a local folk-hero, Timur Malik, who resisted the Mongol invasion of 1220 by retreating to an island in the Syr Darya (Jaxartes) River to the west of the city. Ultimately, Timur Malik's guerrillas ran out of supplies so he led his men and women in a final suicidal assault against the invaders. The location of the city on the banks of the mighty Syr Darya, at the southern edge of the fertile Fergana Valley, is clear evidence why this location has been continuously settled for so long.

We also visit the Sheikh Massal ad-Din complex, built to commemorate a local religious scholar who lived under the rule of the Ghurid Dynasty of Afghanistan, before being murdered for resisting the predations of the first Mongol governor of his ravaged city (1133-1223). The ensemble of buildings stands opposite the main bazaar and consists of a brick mausoleum built in 1394 by one of Timur Leng's sisters. It features covered porticoes with wooden pillars carved in local Khojandi-style, a 20th-century mosque, and a 21 metre-high brick minaret dating from 1865.

Tonight we dine in a local restaurant. (Overnight Khojand) BLD

Penjikent, Tajikistan - 3 nights

Day 3: Thursday 3 June, Khojand – Istaravshan – Penjikent (280km, 6-7hrs)

- Istaravshan: Mug Tepe, Kuk Gumbaz Mosque & Abdullatif Sultan Madrasa, Sar-i Mazor Complex & Bazaar
- Shakhristan Tunnel (2760m)

We depart Khojand, Tajikistan's northern cultural and economic capital, driving via the town of Istaravshan to the ancient Sogdian city of Penjikent. Located in the northern foothills of the Fan mountains, 78km southwest of Khojand, Istaravshan is another very ancient Silk Road town.

At Istaravshan we visit the former *Arg*, or citadel fortress, of Mug Tepe. Most of the standing architecture

only dates to 2002, with the rather arbitrary reconstruction of the 16th-century gates for the equally arbitrary 2500th anniversary of Istaravshan. On the same spot in the 20th century, Soviet excavators revealed architectural remains from a 4th-century BC Sogdian fort – which may have been stormed via a culvert by Alexander the Great's troops in 329 BC. Later levels contained another mud brick Sogdian fortress that was probably destroyed in an Arab raid in 772 AD. The Mongols predictably ravaged the unfortunate city during their bloody invasion of 1220 and Tsarist Russians pulled down most of the medieval fortress after they captured Istaravshan in 1866.

Despite these deprivations, there is much of interest to see here. In the nearby *shahristan* (inner town) neighbourhood of Shahr-e Kohna, traditional courtyard houses with gardens of fruit trees and flowers shade winding alleys and mud brick walls. This atmospheric district holds the lovely Kuk Gumbaz mosque and madrasa: Tajikistan's only extant example of Timurid architecture. Small and beautiful, with intricate tilework and a classic blue dome, this complex was commissioned by the regicide son of Uleg Beg, Abdul Latin (1420-1450), who probably began construction here after the murder of his father in 1449. Attached to the mosque is a madrasa whose Imams were actively teaching until a couple of years ago, when the government in Dushanbe, fearful of the rise of fundamentalist Islam, closed the classrooms.

We also visit the Sar-i Mazor ensemble of two 15th-16th century mausoleums and a lovely 16th-17th-century mosque, all set in elegant ornamental gardens. The first mausoleum is known by the unusual moniker of *Aijina Khona*, or (Demon House); so-named by the Soviets in their efforts to discourage pilgrims and encourage the development of *Homo Sovieticus*. The exterior is suitably austere brickwork, while the interior retains some original features. The second mausoleum, by contrast, is richly decorated with fine exterior tile work and carved stone ornamentation. The interior is simple and holds the gravestones of Hazraji Mekhdoni Azam, his wife, eldest son, and a nephew. Azami was a local worthy, born during the 14th century in the Oxus delta, in far-away Khorezm. He owed his local significance as an educated governor and perhaps more importantly, the nephew of famed Sufi poet and theologian, Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani. Hamadani was born in even more distant Hamadan, in western Iran, and was deeply influential in spreading Sufi ideals in 14th-century Kashmir. Hamadani's own mausoleum stands in Khatlon (home region of the faction surrounding and supporting the current president of Tajikistan) and both uncle and nephew are evidence of the once sophisticated and cosmopolitan history of the currently obscure, modern, mountain town. The 17th-century mosque is constructed in the Fergana 'Kokandi' style using carved wooden pillars and possesses a richly decorated interior.

In the town bazaar, metalworkers and woodworkers still practice their craft. Blacksmiths sell decorative traditional knives made from animal bone, horn and wood, famed throughout Tajikistan.

From Istaravashan we continue our journey through the Fan mountains towards the upper Zerafshan Valley and Penjikent. We drive through the beautiful Shakhristan Gorge where we enjoy lunch in a local *chaikhana*. We have dinner in a restaurant in modern Penjikent. (Overnight Penjikent) BLD

Day 4: Friday 4 June, Penjikent – Seven Lakes – Penjikent (80km + 80km)

- Seven Lakes (Haft-Kul) of Marguzor, Fan Mountains

Today we drive through the mountains to the 'Seven Lakes' or 'Haft-Kul' of Marguzor: a 20km-long chain of pools strung like blue pearls through the western foothills of the Fan Mountains. Each body of water possesses its own hue, varying from green-turquoise to deep purple. We see Mijgon, Soya, Hushyor, Nophin lakes at 2139m altitude, and the slightly higher Khurdak, Marguzor, Hazorchashma lakes at 2400m. We enjoy a picnic lunch before returning to Penjikent. (Overnight Penjikent) BLD

Day 5: Saturday 5 June, Penjikent

- Proto-Urban Site of Sarazm
- Bazaar and Olim Dodho Mosque
- Rudaki Historic Ethnographic Museum
- Ancient Penjikent

We begin today with a visit to the ancient settlement of Sarazm; translating roughly as 'where the land begins'. This site was discovered by a local farmer who pulled a beautiful copper dagger from the soil in 1977. Excavations began a year later, unearthing one of the earliest urban centres in Central Asia. Rich finds revealed close contact between the people of Sarazm, the peoples of the Indus Valley, and the peoples of the Bactrian Margiana Archaeological Complex culture living along the Oxus River.

This UNESCO World Heritage site was occupied from the early 4th millennium BC to the end of the 3rd millennium/beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. The proto-town is situated between high mountain meadows suitable for cattle rearing by nomadic pastoralists and a large well-watered valley conducive to irrigated agriculture. Finds from Sarazm demonstrate a vast geographic range of commercial and cultural exchange, with trade relations extending from the steppes of Central Asia to the Iranian plateau, the Indus valley, and as far as the Persian Gulf. The people of Sarazm probably exported local turquoise and lapis lazuli from Badakshan, developing into one of the most significant urban centres of its day. Barley and wheat excavated from the site and genetically analysed in 2010, revealed the barley to be one of the earliest strains domesticated in China during the 4th millennium while the wheat came from distant Anatolia. Perhaps the most extravagant find at the site is the so-called 'Princess of Sarazm'. This high-status woman was interred around 3000 BC, dressed in finely worked clothes decorated with lapis lazuli, turquoise, jasper, and limestone beads, and put to rest with an exquisitely worked bronze mirror. Most of these artefacts are now on display at the Archaeological museum in Dushanbe. This early entrepôt, busily trading with far-flung peoples 1000 years before the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza, was probably destroyed by Indo-European steppe raiders who settled the region during the 2nd millennium BC.

Late-morning we return to Penjikent to visit the city's lively bazaar which features a monumental decorative gateway, and the adjacent Olim Dodho Mosque whose multi-domed roof is reminiscent of the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul.

Following a *plov* lunch in a local *chaikhana*, we visit the Rudaki Museum, dedicated to Abu Abdullah Rudaki (858-941), the 'father of Persian poetry' of the Samanid dynasty at Bukhara and a near contemporary and great influence on the writings of Ferdowsi, author of the Iranian classic text the *Shahnameh*, or 'Book of Kings'. The museum holds artefacts excavated from the ruins of Penjikent by the Soviet archaeologist Marshak and a series of reproduction frescoes from some of the houses on the site. Sadly, as with the cache of letters from Mt Mugh, most of the original frescoes now lurk in the gloomy bowels of the Hermitage museum in Russia.

We end our day with a visit to the remains of the old Sogdian city of Penjikent. Penjikent was a major town established, probably in the 4th-5th century AD, by colonists from Afrosiab, downstream on the Zeravshan at modern Samarkand. The ancient town is located on a loess terrace, standing high above the Zeravshan River, 1.5km southeast of modern Penjikent and 1000m higher in altitude, blessing Sogdian Penjikent with an especially benign micro-climate. During the 5th to 8th centuries, this was a splendidly cosmopolitan town, enriched by international trade and filled with traders and visitors from across Eurasia. The area enclosed by the formidable city walls covers 20 hectares and probably held a population of 5000-7000 people living within a *shakhristan* protected by bastion towers on the three flanks, the fourth being protected by the river. At least the same number of people lived in *rabads* (suburbs) beyond the walls

and garden villages clustering along the fertile valley. In the western end of the ruined town stands the great Tepe (mound) on which stood the *Arg*, or citadel-palace, of Penjikent. Amongst the ruined structures of the *shakhristan* stand the remains of at least two Sogdian Fire Temples, with pictorial evidence that Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, and Judaism were all openly practiced by the population. Sogdian Penjikent owed allegiance to the elected 'king' of the much larger city of Afrosiab just downstream, or the hereditary kings of the small Sogdian state of Osrushana, who dominated a swathe of mountain valleys between Afrosiab and the Oxus river.

The eruption of Arab Muslim invaders out of the Arabian Peninsula and their destruction of the great Sassanian Empire in just a couple of decades during the 7th century, entirely removed one of the most significant trading and military partners of the Iranian-speaking Sogdian confederation. Even as Ummayad Arab armies pressed north to the Oxus River, Sogdian city-states and small kingdoms would not unite, presenting a disunited face to the Muslim invaders. A 'king' of Samarkand attempted to overthrow the social order of Afrosiab and forge a military alliance with the mighty Tang Dynasty of China, but was overthrown in turn by his own people. The evidence of his last efforts to resist the Arab invaders is immortalised in the stunning frescoes excavated and now on display in the museum of Afrosiab in Samarkand.

In the face of Sogdian disunity, the Arabs captured the western and central cities of Transoxiana one by one: Merv, Paikend, Bukhara, Vabkhent, and Afrosiab were all subdued by the wily Arab general Kutaiba Ibn Islam in alliance with the Bactrian Iranian ruler of Balkh, who was eager to humiliate and annex his traditional northern Sogdian rivals. Kuitaba revelled in his governorship of the new Ummayad province of Greater Khorasan until his unsuccessful rebellion against a new Caliph in 716 AD. A new governor appointed from Damascus, immediately offended the many Sogdian men who had converted to Islam – often from political expediency – by insisting they were liable for the *jizya*, or poll-tax, unless they were publically willing to prove they had been circumcised. By 719 AD, the northern and eastern Sogdian city-states – including Penjikent – were in open rebellion against the Ummayyads and in conjunction with Turkic-speaking nomads from the steppes were able to keep the Muslim armies from pressing into the Fergana Valley, or venturing upstream from Afrosiab.

The disgruntled Caliph in Damascus sent another new governor to Transoxiana in 720 AD, who successfully split the Sogdian resistance with a shameless policy of bribery and a relaxation of some of the more egregious restrictions imposed on converts to Islam by his predecessor. Not all Sogdians were convinced by this steel-fist-in-the-velvet-glove approach and in the same year, a young Sogdian warrior by the name of Divashtich seized power in Penjikent. Divashtich advocated a policy of open war against the Arabs to avert the ultimate destruction of Sogdian independence. The Sogdian successfully led a 2-year rebellion before being betrayed to the Ummayad governor by an 'ally'. Divashtich retreated high into the mountains east of Penjikent, just ahead of Arab armies who besieged and burned the town. This act of destruction had the unexpected side-effect of preserving much of Sogdian Penjikent as it was on the day of its destruction in 722 AD. The great 3 and 4-storey wood and mud brick houses, with gorgeous interiors decorated by frescoes and murals, collapsed in on themselves; the painted walls of the ground floor were protected by the rubble of the upper floors. The fire temples, Manichaeian chapels, Buddhist shrines, Nestorian churches, Jewish synagogue, merchants' warehouses, all were looted and burned before the *Arg* was assaulted and its great walls levelled.

Devashtich and his army were besieged upstream in their mountain-fortress at Mt Mugh for two months, until in July 722 the Sogdian rebellion collapsed. Devashtich was crucified on the smouldering ruins of one of Penjikent's fire temples and his pickled head sent to the Caliph in Damascus as proof of the end of Sogdian independence in Transoxiana. Devashtich would undoubtedly have stayed an obscure footnote for specialists of Central Asian history had not a Tajik shepherd made an extraordinary find on the slopes of Mt

Mugh in 1932. The shepherd discovered a cache of letters written by Devashtich and his senior commanders. These documents relate to the administration of both the rebellion and Sogdian civic life, including marriage contracts and business deals, diplomatic letters to and from the Tang Chinese, and reports about local resistance to the Arabs; all the documents date to 721/22 AD. The Sogdian letters, contracts and reports were written on leather or bone, but three letters on recycled Chinese paper in eight fragments suggest that true paper was indeed a luxury import into Central Asia and beyond before the capture of Chinese specialists at the Battle of Talas in 751 AD. (Overnight Penjikent) BLD

Dushanbe, Tajikistan - 3 nights

Day 6: Sunday 6 June, Penjikent – Dushanbe (220km, 4-5hrs)

- Iskanderkul, Fan Mountains

Today we drive to Dushanbe. En route we pass the Iskanderkul: a beautiful glacial mountain lake at an altitude of 2195m on the northern slopes of the Fan Mountains. According to local legend, Iskanderkul was named after Alexander the Great – known as ‘Iskander’ in the East. Tajiks believe that Alexander the Great’s route to India passed by this lake, but there is no evidence for the tale. We arrive in Dushanbe in the late afternoon and check into our hotel. (Overnight 5-star Hotel Serena Dushanbe) BLD

Day 7: Monday 7 June, Dushanbe – Hissor – Varzob Gorge – Dushanbe

- Hissor Fortress
- Madrasa-i Kuhna & Museum of Ethnography
- Madrasa-i Nau & Caravanserai
- Mausoleum of Mahdumi Azam
- Varzob Gorge
- Demonstration by local musicians

This morning we drive 23km west from Dushanbe to the ancient fortress of Hissor. The medieval *Arg* (citadel) gateway of this ancient Silk Road town still dominates the fertile plain. Below the *Arg*, stands the 16th-century Kuhna *madrasa* which today holds a small museum of ethnography. Next door stands a later 19th-century *madrasa* (Madrasa-i-Nau, *nau* meaning ‘new’) and the remains of a large caravanserai. This latter building is testament to the long mercantile history of Hissor, with a 5th-millennium Neolithic village excavated on a hill beyond the *Arg* and the remains of 23 separate towns and cities buried beneath the current remains. A town at Hissor is attested under Achaemenid, Hellenistic, Sogdian, and Islamic rule and was a key centre for the Emirate of Bukhara, entirely overshadowing Dushanbe in significance. Hissor was an important stopover on the east-west trade routes over the High Pamirs to China, and a redistribution centre for the collection of lapis lazuli, mined upstream in Afghan and Tajik Badakshan. Just next to the *Arg* gateway is a gnarled mulberry tree, festooned with ribbons and tokens left by pious pilgrims and visitors. Reputedly, this tree was bent when Ali, the cousin of the Prophet Mohammad, landed here on the back of his flying horse to defeat a local necromancer. Nearby is a holy well dedicated to the missionary who rushed word to Ali in the Hejaz of the wizard’s evil works. Next to the tree and holy well stands a 16th-century mausoleum dedicated to the Sufi scholar Mahdumi Azam.

From Hissor we drive 25 kilometres north of Dushanbe to visit the picturesque Varzob Gorge and enjoy the atmosphere of this lovely mountain river valley. The main road from Dushanbe to Khojand follows the rushing Varzob River for about 70 kilometres, before climbing steeply up to the Anzob Pass (3373m). We enjoy a picnic lunch in the Varzob Valley before returning to Dushanbe.

Traditional Tajik musical instruments include *setars*, *dutars*, *rubabs*, *tanburs* and *chang*. In the evening we enjoy a demonstration by local musicians using a variety of stringed and percussion instruments. (Overnight 5-star Hotel Serena Dushanbe) BLD

Day 8: Sunday 8 June, Dushanbe

- Museum of National Antiquities & Lecture by Archaeologist Mr Saidmurod Bobomulloev
- Koh-e Navruz (Palace of Navroz)
- Statue of Ismaili Somoni, Rudaki Park & Shah Mansur Bazaar

Dushanbe, which translates as 'Monday' in Tajik Persian, was the location for a quite insignificant town and small bazaar, held on the first day of the week, until the arrival of the Bolshevik Red Army in 1921. The 'Reds' were in pursuit of the last Emir of Bukhara, who had fled east in his Rolls Royce with his favourite dancing boys, whom he hurled off the back of his vehicle, one-by-one, as part of a successful effort to evade capture following the fall of Bukhara in 1920. The Emir attempted to organise resistance to the Bolsheviks from Dushanbe before fleeing south and crossing the Oxus on rafts to the relative safety of Afghanistan in 1921. With the departure of the Emir, the Soviets chose the site of Dushanbe as the administrative capital of their new *Oblast* of Tajikistan. Modernisation quickly followed, with grand new buildings erected along Rudaki Avenue, the growing city electrified, new schools and clinics opened to all. In 1929 a train, driven by an Armenian, steamed into the new station, connecting Dushanbe with the Soviet economic powerhouse of Tashkent. In the same year, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Tajikistan was split off from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan, and Dushanbe was chosen as the capital of the new Republic. Dushanbe continued to benefit from the largesse of Moscow and since Tajikistan was so far from the centre of Soviet political and cultural life, many architects were commissioned by local authorities to build radical modernist structures without fear of censure or imprisonment.

During WWII Stalin moved vast quantities of men and materials to the Central Asian republics in an effort to keep them out of Hitler's reach and the Soviet war machine functioning. Dushanbe dramatically grew in size and was chosen as the location for a large POW camp for German soldiers and Volga German civilians deported by Stalin. Many apartment blocks were constructed by these German exiles and estate agent windows still proudly proclaim 'German-built' when advertising properties for sale. Dushanbe further expanded through the 50s, 60s and 70s with migrants attracted to the city from across the Soviet Union. This cosmopolitanism came to a bloody halt with independence and the outbreak of civil war in 1992. Within a year, Dushanbe and Tajikistan lost nearly a third of her population: mostly ethnic Russians, Tartars, Balts, Armenians, Azeris, and Jews who had made up much of the republic's technocratic, professional and administrative class. Despite the ending of the civil war, Dushanbe has not recovered her previously sophisticated character and the current president has pulled down much of the splendid 20th-century modernist architecture in the last couple of years, instead favouring glass and metal monstrosities best classified as 'Dubai-chic' or 'Dictator-tat'.

This morning we explore Dushanbe and visit the famous Museum of National Antiquities which opened in 2001. This excellent institution holds artefacts from Tajikistan's Islamic and pre-Islamic past including Greek, Bactrian, Sogdian, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, and Hindu objects, from coins and armour to jewellery and sculpture. The centrepiece of the collection is undoubtedly the 14-metre-long reclining Buddha in Nirvana, a 6th-century AD ceramic statue from southern Tajikistan, discovered in 1966 at a hill known by locals as 'Ajina Teppe', (The Devil's Hill). The Buddha was commissioned by a member of the Iranian-speaking Kushan dynasty, whose great capitals at Taxila in Pakistan, Kapisa (Begram) and Balkh in Afghanistan, were instrumental in propagating Buddhism across Asia and the traditions of Gandharan/Hellenic naturalism in art. The Kushans commissioned the famed monumental Bamiyan Buddhas. The Kushans' Bactrian heartland of southern Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan was littered with

monasteries, stupas, nunneries and shrines, all patronised and commissioned by the Kushan elite.

While at the museum, we have the privilege of a special 1-hour lecture by Tajik archaeologist Mr Saidmurod Bobomulloev who has excavated the extraordinary site of Takht-e Sangin, on the northern banks of the Oxus river. Takht-e Sangin was a Hellenistic shrine dedicated to the God of the Oxus and is almost certainly the original depository for the extraordinary 'Oxus Treasure' – taken from brigands in the mountains of 19th-century Afghanistan by a British officer of the Raj, and now one of the highlights of The British Museum.

Following our museum visit, we see an example of the 'new Dushanbe': the cultural palace of Koh-e Navruz, or 'Palace of the New Year'. Originally planned as a huge *chaikhana* (tea house), the project was high-jacked by the current President who instead insisted on a grand 'palace of the people', consisting of twelve huge chambers, decorated with the traditional Tajik crafts of woodcarving, painting and mosaic, all capable of holding 3200 guests.

We also visit the statue of the great Samanid king, Ismoili Somoni, and Rudaki Park, exploring the centre of the city and the bustling and colourful Shah Mansur Bazaar. Lunch and Dinner will be served at local restaurants. (Overnight 5-star Hotel Serena Dushanbe) BLD

Kalai-Khum, Tajikistan - 1 night

Day 9: Wednesday 9 June, Dushanbe – Nurek – Khulbek – Kalai-Khum (370km, 7-8 hrs, 30% asphalt, 70% dirt road)

- Norak Reservoir
- Shuraba Pass (2277m)
- Ancient City of Khulbek & Museum incl. Lecture by the Museum's Director, Mr Abdullo Khodjaev

Today we leave Dushanbe and drive east to Kalai-Khum village. En route we visit the site of the last gasp of Soviet engineering in Tajikistan: the vast Norak Dam and water reservoir designed to power much of Soviet Central Asia. With the outbreak of civil war and flight of most ethnic Russians and other Soviet nationals, the dam systems quickly fell into disrepair and the old Soviet pan-Central Asian power network entirely broke down. The current President of Tajikistan has committed to building a new, larger dam on one of the other tributaries of the Oxus, with Russian and Chinese engineering and financial assistance. This new dam would effectively allow Dushanbe to control the downstream flow of water to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan – much as Turkey now controls the flow of the Euphrates and Tigris to Syria and Iraq. The former President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, threatened that Uzbek tanks would be in Dushanbe within 24 hours of the start of construction of any new dam; tangible evidence of the importance of irrigation for life in Transoxiana. With the death of Karimov, the former Prime Minister and new President of Uzbekistan has attempted to normalise relationships with Tajikistan, including lifting some restrictions on Uzbeks and Tajiks crossing borders for family visits and reopening direct flights between Tashkent and Dushanbe for the first time in 23 years. The new president is keen to ensure access to cheap power for populous and energy-short Uzbekistan and it seems unlikely he will follow through with Karimov's threat of invasion.

The highest point of our day's journey takes us over the Shuraba Pass at 2267m and on our descent we follow the spectacular road running alongside the Panj River, with Afghanistan looming on the other bank.

En route to Kalai-Khum we stop at the small modern town of Vose to visit the ruins of the medieval Islamic city of Khulbek (Hulbek). This urban centre flourished with the growth of Silk Road trade encouraged by the Samanid dynasty between the 9th and 10th centuries, but was ravaged by a Karakhanid army in the mid 11th century and never recovered. The local museum holds artefacts from the Arg; it was excavated by

the Soviets who partly reconstructed the citadel walls and gateway. We will have the privilege of a special lecture by the founder and director of the museum, Mr Abdullo Khodjaev, who has excavated Khulbek since the late 1980s.

Dinner at hotel or local *chaikhana* in Kalai-Khum. (Overnight 3-star Hotel Karon Palace at 1350m, Kalai-Kum) BLD

Khorog, Tajikistan - 2 nights

Day 10: Thursday 10 June, Kalai-Khum – Parshinev – Khorog (250km, 20% asphalt, 80% dirt road)

- Pir-I Shoh Nosir and Holy Spring dedicated to Nosily Khusrav, Parshinev

Today we drive to Khorog in the High Pamirs where we stay for two nights. Our road follows the dramatic gorge of the Panj River, overlooking Afgan villages clinging to steep mountainsides on the opposite bank. We drive through the spectacular scenery of the Vanch region, gateway to the majestic Fedchenko Glacier. While in the Rushan Valley we may view (from a distance) the Vamar Fortress.

After the village of Rushan (also spelled 'Rushon'), the road begins to climb and we pass into the predominately Ismaili Pamirs. As in the Caucasus, this dramatic landscape of deep valleys and gorges separating stark mountain peaks, encouraged an extraordinary linguistic and cultural diversity. Pamiri Tajiks speak their own language, related to Persian, Tajik and Dari, further subdivided into 20 plus dialects, some of which are nearly mutually unintelligible. The Pamiris of Rushan speak Rushani, a dialect of Western Pamiri, one of twelve local languages spoken by the inhabitants of valleys separated by only a couple of kilometres.

Ten kilometres from the town of Khorog we stop at the Pamiri village of Parshinev whose inhabitants also speak their own dialect. Here we visit the Pir-I Shoh Nosir, a shrine dedicated to a Sufi master, and a holy spring dedicated to Nosiry Khusrav (1001 AD), a missionary who converted the local population to the Ismaili sect of Islam.

On arrival at Khorog we transfer to our hotel. (Overnight 2-star Hotel Lal at 2070m, Khorog) BLD

Day 11: Friday 11 June, Khorog

- Pamir Botanical Garden
- Khorog Museum
- Khorog's new Ismaili Jamatkhana and Cultural Centre

We begin today with breakfast in the capital of Gorno Badakshan. This small town of 24,000 souls was an insignificant place until the Tsarist Russians established a military base here in 1896. The town became the military and administrative capital of one of the most far-flung imperial Russian provinces, frontline of the 19th- and 20th-century 'Great Game' between agents of St Petersburg and the British Empire. Khorog quickly expanded on imperial Russian largesse, blessed with the second highest Botanical Gardens in the world to the delight of the local Tsarist demi-monde. The Bolsheviks arrived in 1921, quickly building a school, hospital, and in 1932, an airport. The same year, the first plane to fly the treacherous route into the High Pamirs landed at Khorog, piloted by an aviatrix from Bukhara, who had burned her *paranja* (horse-hair veil) in Bukhara's Registan twelve years before. A metalled road for Soviet military and scientific vehicles was hacked through the mountains in 1935 (optimistically named the Pamir Highway) connecting Khorog with Osh and Dushanbe.

The Oblast of Gorno-Badakhshan was a curiously blessed province under the Soviets, as it had been under Tsarist rule. Because it was close to international borders with China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and, before Indian independence, the British Empire. Moscow filled the High Pamirs with military bases and watching stations, scientific expeditions, and all the outposts of a paranoid, authoritarian empire. Daily flights connected privileged Soviet citizens of Khorog directly with Dushanbe and from the Tajik capital, on to Moscow, Leningrad and Tashkent. Aeroflot pilots were paid a substantial danger-bonus for their work and this also applied to many of the technicians and specialists living in this remote town and its surrounding districts. This imperial bounty dramatically ended with the reluctant declaration of independence by Tajikistan in 1991 and almost immediate outbreak of civil war. Suddenly stateless Soviet administrators decamped en masse to Russia, while the indigenous Pamiris found themselves very much alone and in serious trouble. Cut-off by the civil war raging in the Tajik lowlands, starvation for the local population was a serious possibility throughout 1993/4. Virtually all food – except meat on the hoof – had been imported to Khorog by the Soviet supply-chain.

Virtually all Pamiris are Ismaili Muslims and with political independence in 1991 came religious freedom. The leader of the Ismaili community, the Agha Khan, organised airlifts of food, medical supplies, and specialist personnel throughout the 1990s – almost certainly saving the lives of the local people. With the end of the civil war, Khorog and the Pamiris achieved a certain wary autonomy from Dushanbe, subsidised by the wealth of the Agha Khan. Most of the local educational facilities, including the extraordinary University of the Mountains, healthcare and social facilities of Khorog and nearby valleys are paid for by the Agha Khan Foundation.

Khorog is today once again a frontier town, with vast quantities of Afghan heroin smuggled over the border upstream of the Panj River for on-shipment to Russia and Europe. Unsurprisingly, this *tsunami* of opiates has also drowned this desperately poor region in corruption; the Tajik military commander in charge of drug indictment in all Gorno Badakhshan engaged in a shoot-out in the town centre in 2015 with military colleagues and special forces sent from Dushanbe over claims and counter-claims of who was protecting rather than arresting the smugglers.

This morning we drive east of Khorog, along the 'Pamir Highway', through the lovely Ghunt river valley where small villages cluster along a beautiful, turquoise-blue river. Just outside of Khorog, on a high terrace between the Gunt and Shahdara rivers, lies the Pamir Botanical Garden, which we visit. Planted at an altitude of 2320m (the second highest in the world), garden staff carry out research on Badakhshan endemic fruit, ornamental plants and vegetables, and experiment with acclimatizing foreign plants. In 1934 the first seed potatoes were planted. Today they are grown in abundance, even at altitudes above 300 metres.

Later we return to Khorog for a visit to the ethnographic museum, containing a piano carried all the way across the Pamirs by 20 bearers from Osh, for the edification of a Tsarist military officer's daughter.

After lunch we visit the new Ismaili Jamatkhana and Culture Centre of Khorog which opened its doors to the Jamat in December 2018. Built primarily of local granite, over 400 local craftsmen worked on the construction. The completed Centre offers tranquil spaces for both spiritual and secular endeavour. Its focal point is the prayer hall, which features a Pamiri roof, stone walls, stained glass windows, and carved wood pillars. The Centre also houses a social hall, library, meeting and multipurpose rooms, a foyer, a covered veranda, an amphitheatre and courtyards. Pamiri Isma'ilism is unique in a number of ways. The region's geographical isolation made it difficult for initial Muslim missionaries to break ground, and so compromises were made allowing older religious practices to be incorporated into contemporary worship. Mosques are almost non-existent in the region, with Khorog's Jamatkhana the first official place of public worship. Many traditions are instead centred around the Pamir House, a traditional residential building that draws on ancient fire-worship as much as contemporary Islam. (Overnight 2-star Hotel Lal at 2070m, Khorog) BLD

Yamg, Tajikistan - 1 night

Day 12: Saturday 12 June, Khorog – Garm Chasma – Wakhan Valley – Yamg (190km, 4-5hrs)

- Mineral Hot Springs of Garm Chashma (2325m)
- Kakhkah (Khaakha) Fortress & Shrine of the King of Men (Oston-i-Shoh-i Mardon), Namadgut
- Sogdian Fortress, Darshai
- Shoh Isomuddin Shrine and Sacred Trees, Ptup

We depart Khorog, driving south along the Panj River. We stop en route at the mineral hot springs of Garm Chashma, literally 'hot spring', believed by local Pamiris to have opened-up when Ali fought and killed a local dragon. The hero's famous sword sliced through the beast's neck, helpfully bringing forth the mineral spring to wash away the dragon's poisonous blood. We'll take the waters, popular with locals for their supposed restorative and healing powers.

On the Afghan bank of the river, we see a pass leading deep into Badakhshan. This was the path likely taken by Marco Polo on his hunt for famous local ruby mines. These so-called Lali Badakhshan Rubies are in fact spinels, but still considered precious enough to have been incorporated into Queen Elizabeth II's Coronation Crown; they were widely treasured across Eurasia prior to the 20th century.

We enjoy a simple lunch in the mixed Whaki and Pamiri village of Ishkashim, which is one of the locations of an official Tajik border crossing into Afghanistan (along with the Friendship Bridge crossing at Khorog). The Panj River takes a sharp turn eastward at Ishkashim and we follow the flow upstream to the village of Namadgut. Here the valley is known as the Wakhan and both valley and village are dominated by a Kushan fortress known to locals as the 'citadel of Kakhkaha'. Kakhkaha is believed by Pamiris to have been the chieftain of the *Siah-Posh* or 'Black Robes'; a tribe of fire worshippers, driven by Ali from the Wakhan to exile in Nuristan in Afghanistan. In reality, this was a fortress dating back to the 2nd century BC, constructed to guard the lapis and spinal ruby trade east to China, west to Bactria, and north to Fergana. The legend of the fire worshipping Kakhkaha is almost certainly a folk memory of Zoroastrian and Kushan practice and the arrival of Islam.

Nearby is the Ismaili *mazor*, or shrine, of Oston-i Shoh-i Mardon dedicated to Ali at the site of his reputed victory over the fire-worshipping Kakhkaha. The wooden *mazor* door is decorated with lovely carving and dates to the 11th century. The shrine is also decorated with ram's horns, typical of shrines in the area. Following the Panj up the Wakhan Valley we pass through the village of Darshai, featuring a Sogdian fortress dating to the 6th-8th century AD, and continue to the village of Ptup with a lovely *mazor* and garden of sacred trees.

On arrival at the village of Yamg we transfer to our homestay with Aydar Malikmamadov in his traditional Pamiri house. These structures are filled with symbolic and ritual space, as Ismailis in the Pamirs do not build mosques, instead worshipping at home. Pamiri Ismaili Islam is further overlaid on a deep Iranian history stretching back over four millennia. Three separate living spaces represent the three kingdoms of nature, while five carved wooden pillars simultaneously correspond to the family of Ali (cousin and brother-in-law of the prophet Mohammad) and five Zoroastrian immortals, including Anahita and Mehr. Each pillar also represents a different age of human existence, from childhood to marriage, and death. Carved roof beams represent the number of Ismaili Imams; the number of Shia Muslims killed at the battle of Karbela; all the prophets of Islam, from Abraham to Jesus; and the seven Zoroastrian heavenly bodies. A wooden skylight called a '*chorkhona*' or 'four houses' in Pamiri Tajik, is divided into four quarters representing the four elements. Some of the exterior and interior of each house is painted. The colours white and red have deep meaning in Pamiri culture: red represents life and the sun (the first thing created by God), while white

represents light and milk (the font of human sustenance for this predominately pastoral culture). (Dinner and overnight: Home Stay of Aydar Malikmamadov, great-grandson of famous Muboraki Vakhoni, in a traditional Pamir House, Yamg 2850m) BLD

Langar - 1 night

Day 13: Sunday 13 June, Yamg – Yamchun – Vrang – Zong – Langar (100km, 3hrs)

- House Museum & Solar Stone of Sufi Muboraki Vakhoni, Yamg
- Yamchun Fort (Zulkhomor Fort)
- Oston-e Bibi Fotima-Zahro (Bibi Fatima Springs), Yamchun
- Vrang Buddhist Stupa & Ruined Fortress
- Mazor-I Shoh Kambar-I Oftob (Shrine of Lord Kambar of the Sun), Zong

We begin today with a visit to the reconstructed house museum of Sufi master Muboraki Vakhoni (1839-1930), where we may view the stone that he used as a solar calendar to determine the date and time of the *Navruz* festival. Our host from the night before, Aydar Malikmamadov, is the great-grandson of the Sufi and will explain how his ancestor devised his instrument. Aydar Malikmamadov will also show us the process by which he makes the traditional musical instrument *rubab*, of which he is both master craftsman and musician. The local museum is a gorgeous traditional Pamiri house with especially fine carved woodwork.

Next, we drive west back to Yamchun village to explore the imposing Zamr-e Atish Parast or the 'Fortress of the Fire Dwellers'. Elements of this fortress date back to the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom of the 3rd century BC, as well as Gandharan Kushan construction from the 2nd to the 1st century BC. Most of the standing remains date from the late 1st millennium AD and the arrival of Islam. However, on a rock-plug, off the eastern lower flank of the main fortress, stands a smaller isolated fort known locally as *Zulkhomor*. This fort dates to Sogdian control of the region in the 7th to 8th century AD. *Zulkhomor* is believed by locals to have been the younger sister of Kakhkaha, who built this great house for her pleasure.

Nearby is a hot mineral spring known as Oston-e Bibi Fotima-Zahro, or 'the Holy site of the sleeves of Bibi Fatima', regarded for its supposed power over female fertility and reputedly popular with *Zulkhomor* herself. After a relaxing dip we enjoy one of the finest views in all the Pamirs.

We return to Yamg for lunch before driving east up the Wakhan valley to the village of Vrang. On a hill behind the village stands a Kushan Buddhist stupa of the 5th to 6th centuries AD, surrounded by 60 caves used by pilgrims and monks. The top of the stupa holds a stone carved footprint of the Buddha. Below the stupa stands a *mazor* dedicated to a famous Sufi poet and mystic of the 11th century, Abdullah Ansari of Herat (western Afghanistan). Looming above the village, stupa, and shrine alike, are the remnants of a probable Kushan fortress of the early 1st millennium BC.

Driving further along the valley we pass through the village of Zong which is dominated by the remains of the Graeco-Bactrian/Gandharan/Kushan fortress. Zong also has six different *mazors*, including one dedicated to the prevention of plague, especially credited with preventing an epidemic of cholera. Another, the Mazor-I Shoh Kambar-I Oftob, which we shall visit, is dedicated to the 'Master of the Sun', has been used since pre-Islamic times.

On arrival at the village of Langar, strategically situated where the Pamir and Wakhan Rivers join, we transfer to our homestay with a local family in their traditional Pamiri House. (Dinner and overnight Homestay in Hisor, Langar 2950m) BLD

Murghab, Tajikistan - 1 night

Day 14: Monday 14 June, Langar – Alichur Valley – Murghab (250km, 6-7hrs)

- Khargush Pass (4344m) & Nauzetash Pass (4314m)
- The Pamir Highway
- Holy Pool at Ak Balik
- Nayzatosh Pass (3137m)
- NGO Women’s Cooperative, Murghab

Today we turn northeast, driving past the Kushan fortress at Ratm and following the Panj river valley. We cross into the high, arid semi-desert region of Murghab via the high Khargush Pass (4,344m) and Nauzetash Pass (4,314m) and the village of Alichur at 3863m (whose name translates appropriately as ‘Ali’s curse’). The stretch of road from Langar to the Pamir Plateau via the Khargush Pass is particularly scenic. If we are lucky, we may see marmots, golden eagles, vultures, ibex, Marco Polo sheep, and trailing snow leopards.

We join the Pamir Highway and our drive takes us through a landscape of bleak bogs and moors – and a reputedly holy pool at Ak Balik (meaning ‘white fish’). The road carries on climbing over desolate barren ground, crossing another mountain pass at Nayzatosh (3137m) before descending to the predominately Kyrgyz town-at-the-end-of-the-world: Murghab. On arrival we visit the NGO women’s cooperative selling predominantly Kyrgyz *shyrdak* (felt products). (Overnight Hotel Pamir, Murghab, 3630m) BLD

Osh, Kyrgyzstan - 2 nights

Day 15: Tuesday 15 June, Murghab – Kizil Art Pass – Sary Tash (230km) – Osh (185km)

- Akbaital Pass (4655m) & Uybulok Pass (4232m)
- Lake Karakul (3914m)
- Tajik/Kyrgyz Border at Kyzyl Art Pass (4336m)

Murghab is the administrative and economic centre for the Tajik knot of the High Pamirs, with nomad tracks leading from the town over the high mountain passes into Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China. We depart Murghab early this morning and drive along the fenced border with China via the Akbaital Pass (4655m), Uybulok Pass (4232m) to the Tajik/Kyrgyz border crossing at Kyzyl Art Pass (4336m). The landscape en route is an extraordinarily blasted mountain desert, punctuated by the vivid lapis blue of Lake Karakul (3914m). On clear days we can see Mt Somoni (or ‘Pik Lenin’ to most former Soviet citizens) the highest peak in the Pamirs, at 7134 metres.

Completing border formalities with the Tajiks we drive over the top of Kizil Art Pass and descend to the Kyrgyz border crossing. Completing our Kyrgyz paperwork, we proceed down the pass on a new Chinese-built road through the beautiful Pamir Mountains via the Kyrgyz town of Sary-Tash and on to the Fergana city of Osh. (Overnight 4-star Hotel Classic, Osh) BLD

Day 16: Wednesday 16 June, Osh

- Osh’s Jayma Bazaar
- Takht-i-Suleiman (Solomon’s Throne)
- Time at leisure

Osh is Kyrgyzstan’s oldest, and second-largest, city with a mostly Uzbek population of around 250,000. A lively commercial city that links Central Asia with China, Osh has one of the largest bazaars in Central Asia,

which we visit in the morning, relaxing after our high-altitude adventure, tasting delicious local fruit and enjoying the smell of spices.

We then drive to Takht-i-Suleiman or 'Throne of Solomon', located on a rocky outcrop in the city centre. Here we visit the local museum and, following in the footsteps of many pilgrims, ascend the hill where Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur (founder of the great Mughal Dynasty) built a shelter for his spiritual retreat in the 15th century. 'Babur's House' is an important pilgrimage site and many Muslims from across Fergana come here to pray, or have prayers said for them by the resident Imam. Following our visit, the remainder of the day is at leisure. (Overnight 4-star Hotel Classic, Osh) BLD

Lake Toktogul, Kyrgyzstan - 1 night

Day 17: Thursday 17 June, Osh – Uzgen – Lake Toktogul (360 km)

- Karakhanid Monuments of Uzgen: 11th-Century Brick Minaret & 12th-Century Mausoleum Complex
- Gorges of the Central Tien Shan Mountains

This morning we travel 55km northeast to the town of Uzgen (Özgön), located on a cliff-top above the Kara-Darya River at the eastern end of the Ferghana Valley. Uzgen, mentioned by Chinese chroniclers of the 2nd century BC, later became an important Sogdian Silk Road city with a vibrant economy and its own mint. Uzgen was chosen as one of the capitals of the Turkic-speaking Karakhanid dynasty who overthrew the Samanids and ruled a large – if shaky – Central Asian empire from Uzgen, Bukhara, Balasangun (outside modern Bishkek) and Kashgar for much of the 10th to 12th centuries. The Mongols finished off the eastern branch of the Karakhanids in the 13th century, while the western Karakhandids were overthrown and subjugated by the Ghurids of Afghanistan and Khwarezmshahs of Khorezm in the 12th century. Uzgen was a ceremonial capital for the Karakhanids. We will visit the lovely 11th-century brick minaret (close cousin of the great minaret in Bukhara) and three well-preserved 12th-century mausoleums, constructed from beautiful decorated brick, including the tomb of the greatest ruler of the Karakhanid dynasty, Ahmed ibn Ali.

From Uzgen we continue our journey north to Lake Toktogul via the stunning gorges of the central Tien Shan Mountains. Tonight we stay in the small, recently renovated Hotel Kok-Bel, located near the lake. (Overnight 2/3-star Hotel Kok-Bel, Lake Toktogul) BLD

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan - 2 nights

Day 18: Friday 18 June, Toktogul – Suusamyr Valley – Bishkek (360km)

- Chychkan Gorge & Suusamyr Valley

This morning we depart for Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan. Our journey takes us via the beautiful Chychkan Gorge and Suusamyr Valley, a huge prairie where local transhumants come in summer to herd their cattle. Our journey takes us through some of Kyrgyzstan's most dramatic mountain scenery, across passes of over 3000 metres (Teo Ashhu pass approx. 3586m) and peaks over 4000 metres.

The first textual references relating to peoples living in the territory of modern Kyrgyzstan are in the sacred book of Zoroastrians, the *Avesta*, and Herodotus' splendidly profane *Histories*. In Achaemenid Persian administrative sources, local tribes were known as *Saka*, while contemporary Greeks called them 'Asian Scythians'. These *Saka*, or Scythians, are best known from their *kurgan* burial mounds, often containing spectacular metalwork, and a few inscriptions carved into the rocks of the Tien Shan. Most Scythians were pastoralist nomads, united in tribal associations, and ultimately subsumed by other nomad confederations

during the 3rd to 2nd centuries BC. A number of Scythian *kurgans* line our journey north to the capital Bishkek.

En route we shall probably see Kyrgyz shepherds and their yurts: the ubiquitous felt tents of nomads across much of Eurasia. Kyrgyzstan is a small, mountainous country, at the western tip of the Tian Shan mountain range and the most picturesque and least urbanized of all the Central Asian Republics. With the collapse of the Soviet economic system and consequent devastation of Kyrgyz industry, many people reverted to a more traditional life rearing sheep, cattle, pigs and goats in garden-villages and, at altitudes too high for these, herding yak. In the fertile green valleys, fruit, vegetables, cereal crops and cotton are grown in semi-collective farms. (Overnight 5-star Hyatt Regency, Bishkek) BLD

Day 19: Saturday 19 June, Bishkek

- Ala-Archa Canyon
- National History Museum, Bishkek (scheduled to reopen in 2019)
- Farewell Dinner with opera singer and local musicians

After breakfast we make an excursion to the Ala-Archa Canyon, located in the highest, central part of the Kyrgyz Ridge. This is famous for its eternal snow – stretching for almost 200 km – and such peaks as Dvurogaya (4,380 m), Korona (4,860 m), Baylyanbaish (4,700 m), as well as the highest peak of the Kyrgyz ridge – Semenov-Tian-Shansky (4,875 m). The Ala-Archa Canyon is the centre of the Ala-Archa National Park, one of the main tourist attractions in Kyrgyzstan. The name of the national park, Ala-Archa, means “many-coloured juniper”, which testifies to the abundance of this tree here. A river with the same name crosses the canyon. This river, like all rivers in Kyrgyzstan, originates from mountain glaciers. The Ala-Archa, the Adygene and the Ak-Sai are the largest rivers in the national park. There are 160 species of birds in Ala-Archa. Local fauna also includes the snow leopard, a butterfly called the Night Peacock Eye, wolves, snakes, owls, and many other creatures. The Ala-Archa Canyon has about 1,100 species of plants: wormwood in the steppe zone at the mountain foot, different grasses, bushes and juniper forests on mountain slopes that are replaced with alpine meadows. We will take lunch here after enjoying a walk in the park and visiting a small museum (if open) which contains an excellent display of the range of animals and birds that live in the park.

After lunch we shall return to Bishkek where we spend the remainder of the afternoon touring this small Russian colonial city. Bishkek was only founded in 1825 and was called Frunze when Kyrgyzstan was part of the USSR. We visit the National History Museum which gives an excellent introduction to the history of this region’s nomadic cultures, from the Scythians to the modern Kyrgyz, and contains a memorable and even controversial section illustrating the Communist period. This evening we shall dine at a local restaurant where we shall enjoy a performance of Kyrgyz folk music. (Overnight 5-star Hyatt Regency, Bishkek) BLD

Day 20: Sunday 20 June, Depart Bishkek

- Departure transfer for participants travelling on the ASA ‘designated’ flight

Participants travelling on the ASA ‘designated’ flight will transfer by private coach to Bishkek’s airport in the early morning. Please contact ASA if you require assistance with arranging an independent transfer. B

Accommodation

20-day Cultural Tour of Tajikistan & Kyrgyzstan

Accommodation ranges from 5-star hotels to very basic guest houses offering multi-share accommodation with shared bathroom facilities. The standard is very much based on availability in the areas where we will be travelling. Furthermore, some hotels/guest houses are extremely small, offering only 6-12 rooms. Single rooms will therefore not be possible in Penjikent, Yamg & Langar. Further information on hotels will be provided in the 'Tour Hotel List' given to tour members prior to their departure.

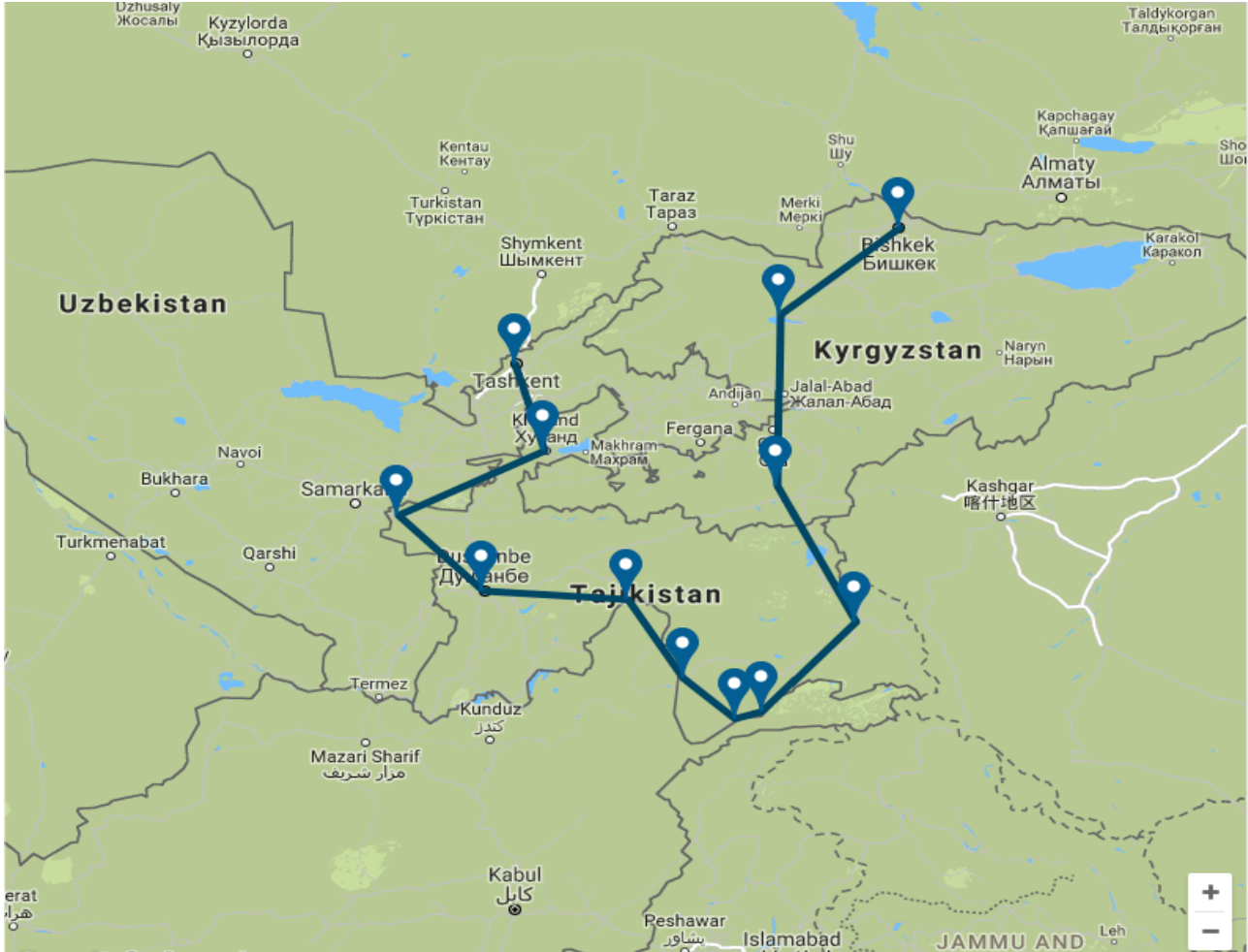
- Tashkent (1 night): 4-star Lotte City Tashkent Palace Hotel – recently renovated modern hotel with an excellent location next to the Alisher Navoi Opera and Ballet House. www.lottehotel.com
- Khojand (1 night): 4-star Parliament Palace Hotel – a new hotel located in the city centre, offering air-conditioned rooms equipped with en suite bathroom, flat-screen TV and free WiFi. <https://pph.tj>
- Penjikent (3 nights): 2-star Hotel Sughd – formerly a guesthouse, this new hotel, located in the town centre, offers 9 air-conditioned rooms with en suite bathroom and free WiFi.
- Dushanbe (3 nights): 5-star Hotel Serena Dushanbe – located on Rudaki Avenue, the main boulevard of the city, within walking distance to the National Museum. This modern hotel offers air-conditioned rooms with en suite bathroom, satellite TV, minibar and free WiFi. www.serenahotels.com
- Kalai-Kum (1 night): 3-star Hotel Karon Palace – a modern hotel offering air-conditioned rooms equipped with en suite bathroom, satellite TV, minibar & WiFi. www.caravantraveluz.com
- Khorog (2 nights): 2-star Hotel Lal – located in the centre of Khorog, offering 13 rooms with en suite bathroom. lalhotel.tj
- Yamg (1 night): Homestay of Aydar Malikmamadov – traditional Pamiri House offering multi-share accommodation in either twin or triple rooms (with beds), or mattresses provided in a large room suitable for 5 people. There is one common toilet and a shower cabin in the courtyard. For images of the bedrooms, bathroom and dining room see [image gallery](#).
- Hisor, Langar (1 night): Davlathon Guesthouse – located in Hisor village, consisting of 2 houses located near each other. Each house offers 5 rooms, each with 2-3 beds. There is one common toilet and a shower cabin in the courtyard. For images of the bedrooms, bathroom and dining room see [image gallery](#).
- Murgab (1 night): Hotel Pamir – a very basic guesthouse, offering rooms on first floor with own bathroom (with hot water heated by generator); other rooms offer shared bathroom facilities. www.pamirhotel.com For images of the bedrooms, bathroom and dining room see [image gallery](#).
- Osh (2 nights): 4-star Hotel Classic – located in the city centre, offering air-conditioned rooms with en suite bathroom, minibar and flat-screen TV. classichotel.kg
- Kok-Bel, Lake Toktogul (1 night): Hotel Kokbel – a simple hotel, recently renovated, offering air-conditioned twin rooms (a double room is 2 beds pushed together) with en suite bathroom and TV.
- Bishkek (2 nights): 5-star Hotel Hyatt Regency – located in the city centre and overlooking the Tien-Shan Mountains, offering air-conditioned rooms equipped with en suite bathroom, satellite TV, minibar & WiFi. bishkek.regency.hyatt.com

Note: *Hotels are subject to change. In this instance a hotel of similar standard will be provided.*

Single Supplement

Payment of the single supplement will ensure accommodation in a single room throughout the tour except in Penjikent, Yamg & Langar, where accommodation is extremely limited.

Tour Map



Tour Price & Inclusions

AUD \$TBA Land Content Only – Early-Bird Special: Book before 31 July 2020

AUD \$TBA Land Content Only

AUD \$TBA Single Supplement **

** Payment of the single supplement will ensure accommodation in a single room throughout the tour except in Penjikent, Yamg & Langar, where accommodation is extremely limited.

For competitive Economy, Business or First Class airfares please contact ASA for further information.

Tour Price (Land Content Only) includes:

- Accommodation ranging from twin-share rooms with private facilities in 3-5-star hotels to very basic guesthouses offering multi-share accommodation with shared bathroom facilities
- All meals, indicated in the itinerary, where: B=breakfast, L=lunch & D=evening meal
- Transportation which includes Hyundai minivans from Oibek border to Dushanbe, 4WD air-conditioned Toyota Rav4 jeeps from Dushanbe to Kyzyl-art (3 pax per vehicle), and in Kyrgyzstan 2 air-conditioned 13-seater minibuses.
- Airport-hotel transfers if travelling on the ASA 'designated' flights
- Porterage of one piece of luggage per person where available (this is not available in the smaller guesthouses)
- Lecture and site-visit program
- Tour Notes
- Entrance fees
- 2-3 x 500ml bottled water per person each day for all site excursions
- Bottled water and tea or coffee at all meals; wine with 'Welcome' and 'Farewell' meals
- Tips to the coach driver, National Guides and restaurants for included meals

Tour Price (Land Content Only) does not include:

- Airfare: Australia-Tashkent, Bishkek-Australia
- Beverages with meals
- Personal spending money
- Airport-hotel transfers if not travelling on the ASA 'designated' flights
- Luggage in excess of 20kg (44lbs)
- Travel insurance
- Visa for Tajikistan



Physical Endurance & Practical Information

Physical Ratings **■■■■■■■■■**

The number of flags is a guide to the degree of difficulty of ASA tours relative to each other (not to those of other tour companies). It is neither absolute nor literal. One flag is given to the least taxing tours, seven to the most. Flags are allocated, above all, according to the amount of walking and standing each tour involves. Nevertheless all ASA tours require that participants have a good degree of fitness enabling 2-3 hours walking or 1-1.5 hours standing still on any given site visit or excursion. Many sites are accessed by climbing slopes or steps and have uneven terrain.

This 20-day Cultural Tour of Tajikistan & Kyrgyzstan involves:

- An epic journey that is long and taxing, both in tour duration and the length of some of its days.
- Time schedules that can be unpredictable: road conditions are variable which may extend the daily program to 12 hours or more.
- Walking across uneven terrain, climbing up slopes or steps at high altitude.
- Extensive travel (ranging from 2-10 hrs per day) using Hyundai minivans from Oibek border to Dushanbe, 4WD air-conditioned Toyota Rav4 jeeps from Dushanbe to Kyzyl-art (3 pax per vehicle), and in Kyrgyzstan 2 air-conditioned 13-seater minibuses.
- Accommodation ranges from 3-5-star hotels to **very basic guesthouses** offering multi-share accommodation with **shared bathroom** facilities. There are 11 accommodation changes.
- You must be able to carry your own luggage. Porterage is NOT available at some hotels/guesthouses.
- Rudimentary facilities during many road journeys.
- High risk of gastric ailments (you should consult your doctor about medication before departure). Refer to the Travel Doctor's web site www.travellingwell.com.au. The section in the book regarding traveller's diarrhoea treatment is very good and aligns with the advice from the Centre for Disease Control.

It is important to remember that ASA programs are group tours, and slow walkers affect everyone in the group. As the group must move at the speed of the slowest member, the amount of time spent at a site may be reduced if group members cannot maintain a moderate walking pace. ASA tours should not present any problem for active people who can manage day-to-day walking and stair-climbing. However, if you have any doubts about your ability to manage on a program, please ask your ASA travel consultant whether this is a suitable tour for you.

Please note: it is a condition of travel that all participants agree to accept ASA's directions in relation to their suitability to participate in activities undertaken on the tour, and that ASA retains the sole discretion to direct a tour participant to refrain from a particular activity on part of the tour. For further information please refer to the ASA Reservation Application Form.

The Effects of Altitude

The effects of altitude should be taken very seriously, especially by those with heart or breathing problems. However, neither age nor general fitness have been shown to affect your susceptibility. To help prevent altitude sickness the best measure is to limit activity, eat light meals, drink lots of water and abstain from alcohol. Please consult your doctor regarding medications available for altitude sickness prevention and treatment.

Further information

Tour members will receive prior to departure practical notes which include information on visa requirements, health, photography, weather, clothing and what to pack, custom regulations, bank hours, currency regulations, electrical appliances and food. The Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade website has advice for travellers: www.smartraveller.gov.au

Passport & Visa Requirements

All tour members should ensure that they have sent ASA a copy of the front page of their current passport no later than 3 months prior to departure.

- Please check that your passport will be valid for 6 months after your date of return to Australia. This is important because many countries will refuse entry to anyone whose passport is about to expire.
- Please make sure your passport has at least 2 empty pages.

Visa requirements:

- Uzbekistan Nationals of Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom **do not** require a visa for thirty days.
- Tajikistan Nationals of Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom will need to purchase an Electronic visa.
- Kyrgyzstan Nationals of Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom **do not** require a visa for sixty days.

Booking Conditions

Making a Tentative Reservation before the tour price has been published

ASA INTENTION TO TRAVEL APPLICATION FORM

Some ASA tours fill almost immediately. Don't miss out! You can register your 'Intention to Travel' by completing this application and returning this to ASA with a AUD \$100.00 per person deposit. Once the tour price has been published, the itinerary and ASA Reservation Application Form will be sent to you. From the time you receive the itinerary you will have two weeks to either:

- Send us a completed ASA Reservation Application Form together with an additional deposit of AUD \$400.00 per person. On receipt of this Reservation Application and deposit, ASA will process your booking and if approved, send you a tour confirmation. At this time your deposit of AUD \$500.00 is subject to the tour's Booking Conditions.

Or

- CANCEL your Intention to Travel in writing. ASA will refund your AUD \$100.00 per person deposit, less a \$33.00 service fee (including GST).

Participation Criteria

To participate in an ASA tour, you must be reasonably fit, in good health and able to participate in all activities without assistance from Tour Leaders or other tour members. If you require assistance, a fit and able travel companion must undertake to accompany and assist you with all tasks for the duration of the whole tour. ASA's ability to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate your specific needs, your health and safety and the health and safety of other tour members, is of paramount importance to us. For this reason the ASA Reservation Application includes a Medical Information section. As a general guideline, you must be able to accomplish each of these activities without assistance or support:-

- walk and stand unassisted for at least 2-3 hours a day in hot, humid conditions
- walk confidently on and over uneven surfaces
- climb at least 3 flights of stairs
- embark and disembark from ferries, buses and trains
- walk up and down steep slopes
- walk at a steady pace and no less than 1km every 15-20 minutes
- organise, manage and carry your own luggage
- follow and remember tour instructions
- meet punctually at designated times and places
- administer your own medication

Single Supplement

Payment of this supplement will ensure accommodation in a single room throughout the tour (except in Penjikent, Yamg & Langar, where accommodation is extremely limited). People wishing to take this supplement are therefore advised to book well in advance.



Intention to Travel Application

TOUR NAME _____

TOUR DATES _____

Booking before the tour price is available

Some ASA tours fill almost immediately. Don't miss out! You can register your 'Intention to Travel' by completing this application and returning this to ASA with a AUD\$100.00 per person deposit. Once the tour price has been published, the itinerary and ASA Reservation Application Form will be sent to you. From the time you receive the itinerary you will have two weeks to either:

- Send us a completed ASA Reservation Application Form together with an additional deposit of AUD\$400.00 per person. On receipt of this Reservation Application and deposit, ASA will process your booking and if approved, send you a tour confirmation. At this time your deposit of \$500.00 AUD is subject to the tour's Booking Conditions.

OR

- Cancel your Intention to Travel in writing. ASA will refund your AUD\$100.00 per person deposit, less a \$33.00 service fee (including GST).

Applicant Details (as in passport)

TITLE Mr Mrs Ms Miss Dr Other _____

FIRST NAME _____ Preferred FIRST NAME _____

MIDDLE NAME _____ SURNAME _____

POSTAL ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ COUNTRY _____ POSTCODE _____

TEL. (AH) () _____ TEL. (BH) () _____ Mobile Tel: _____

EMAIL address _____

Date of birth ____ / ____ / _____ GENDER Male Female

Tour Accommodation (rooming preferences)

I/we would like: a twin-bedded room a double-bedded room a room for sole occupancy

I am travelling: on my own with a friend/family member Travel Companion _____

Meals

I do not have any specific dietary requests

Please **X** the box if you **CAN NOT** eat any of the following:

fish poultry red meat dairy products

eggs pork nuts

Other _____

Allergies: Refer to the Medical Information

Correspondence

Your preferred method of correspondence Postal Mail Email Address _____

Participation Criteria

To participate in an ASA tour, you must be reasonably fit, in good health and able to participate in all activities without assistance from Tour Leaders or other tour members. If you require assistance, a fit and able travel companion must undertake to accompany and assist you with all tasks for the duration of the whole tour.

ASA's ability to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate your specific needs, your health and safety and the health and safety of other tour members, is of paramount importance to us. For this reason the ASA Reservation Application includes a Medical Information section.

As a general guideline, you must be able to accomplish each of these activities *without assistance or support*:-

- walk & stand unassisted for at least 2-3 hours a day in hot, humid conditions
- walk confidently on and over uneven surfaces
- climb at least 3 flights of stairs
- embark and disembark from ferries, buses and trains
- walk up and down steep slopes
- walk at a steady pace and no less than 1 km every 15 - 20 minutes
- organise, manage and carry your own luggage
- follow and remember tour instructions
- meet punctually at designated times and places
- administer your own medication.

Applicant's Signature _____

Dated _____

Tour / Course Name

Name of Traveller 1 _____

Name of Traveller 2 _____

I have enclosed a payment to the value of \$ _____ (including CC or bank fee if applicable) for this tour

Payment by (please indicate): Cheque Direct Debit (see below) Credit Card (see below)

International Payments

Welcome to our international travellers! If you are making a payment and do not have an Australian bank account/credit card, we can only accept payment as follows:

- via credit card with the applicable fee - the credit card company/bank will set the exchange rate
- via bank transfer; please give your surname and tour code (eg. Smith 21705) as a reference and ask your bank to allow for all charges.

Bank cheques or personal cheques will not be accepted.

By Cheque (accept Australian cheques only)

Please make cheques payable to *Australians Studying Abroad*

Direct Deposit or Internet Banking

You will need to:

1. Provide your bank with ASA's bank details (see below) and the amount you wish to transfer OR make a direct deposit through any ANZ branch
2. Include any fees levied by the banks
3. Provide a reference number (Mobile or last name recommended).
4. Complete section below, including confirmation no. (given when transaction completed).

Australians Studying Abroad bank details

Bank ANZ
 Branch 420 St Kilda Road, Melbourne Vic
 Swift Code ANZBAU3M
 BSB 013-423
 Account No 3472-32759

Bank confirmation No. _____

Reference used: Mobile or last name recommended

Date Money Transferred

Credit Card Payment

Credit card fees apply: Mastercard & Visa 2%
 American Express 2%

Please debit my: Mastercard Visa American Express

I authorise ASA to debit my credit card for the amount due plus the applicable fee as above

Credit Card Number

Expiry Date _____ Security Code (CVC) _____

Bank the Card is linked to (eg. NAB or ANZ)

Cardholders Name

Cardholders Billing Address

Postcode

State _____ Country _____

Phone

Email

Cardholders Signature
