



Emailed to Paul French for checking after 2018 tour (JW – 19/6/18)
TOUR INFORMATION FOR CENTRAL ASIA: Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan

These notes are designed to help you prepare for your tour. Please read carefully.

As soon as you book on this tour can you please send us a good quality scan of your passport – the pages with all the personal details and photo. Ideally this should be an electronic scan emailed to us. If you do not have the facility to make a scan a good quality colour photocopy will do.

ENTERING UZBEKISTAN: United Kingdom citizens will need a passport valid for six months after the date of entry, and a visa. Sunbird will send you the necessary paperwork for obtaining a visa closer to the date of departure. Visa support letters are no longer needed for citizens of the United Kingdom. Citizens of other countries should check the website of their nearest Uzbekistan Embassy to see if this also applies. If visa support is required please let us know as soon as possible as applying for this can take some time.

ENTERING KAZAKHSTAN: United Kingdom citizens will need a passport valid for six months after the date of entry. UK citizens currently do not need any form of visa for Kazakhstan. Citizens of other countries should check the website of their nearest Kazakhstan Embassy to see if this also applies. If visa support is required please let us know as soon as possible as applying for this can take some time.

Note that some European countries do not have either a Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan Embassy and people living in these countries will have to apply to the London Embassies. However it is possible to obtain a visa for Kazakhstan on arrival in the country. We can advise you on this nearer the time.

It is always a good idea to take a photocopy of your passport and air ticket with you when travelling abroad. They can prove invaluable in helping you get replacements if your originals are lost or stolen. Obviously you should keep the photocopies in a separate bag to the originals.

CURRENCY: The local currency of Uzbekistan is the Suom (UZS) and the local currency of Kazakhstan is the Tenge (KZT). These can be obtained at our larger hotels. Some shops take US dollars, and as cash is much easier to change anyway we suggest you take US Dollars, Euros or UK Sterling to change. Traveller's cheques may be difficult or impossible to change and ATM's are still scarce, although becoming more common. As the tour price includes all travel, hotel, main meal costs, and drinks with meals, you need to change enough money to cover items of a personal nature. The leaders will be happy to advise on this when we arrive. See 'Shopping' below.

CLIMATE: At this time of year the weather in Central Asia can be very changeable and it is difficult to predict. We should experience generally uniform temperatures and weather conditions away from the mountains but in recent years there have been some wet and cold springs. In the mountains around Almaty the altitude alone will ensure that the nights and early mornings will be cool. However even here the sun will very quickly raise the temperatures and if there is no cloud cover it can get very hot, even at 10,000 feet. As with any alpine environment the conditions can change quickly and you should come prepared for this. Away from the mountains we should experience dry and sunny weather with temperatures rising to the mid 80's, in places. The hottest place will probably be the Kyzyl-Kum Desert and a good sun hat and adequate sunscreen will be needed here. It is not humid. The weather can be cool in the northern steppe up at Astana with rain a distinct possibility. Be prepared for wet and cool weather almost anywhere in Kazakhstan, less so in Uzbekistan.

ALTITUDE: We will reach altitudes of up to 10,800 feet during our time in the mountains.

CENTRAL ASIA: Tour Information...2

PACE OF TOUR AND DAILY ROUTINE: Generally this tour will not be strenuous but participants should have a reasonable degree of fitness and mobility and be prepared for the occasional discomfort. There will be some very early starts such as the day we visit the Kyzyl-Kum Desert as we need to be there very early to avoid the intense midday heat. During an average trip there are some departures at 05.00 or 05.30 but typically the day starts around 06.00. We usually finish around 18.00 although there may be longer days if we have a lot of travelling to return to our hotel or if we are taking a late domestic flight.

Central Asia is a big region and, as a result, we have to cover a lot of ground to get to all the various habitats. There are therefore some long drives; the longest being from Bukhara to Samarkand and from Samarkand to Tashkent, each around four hours in duration, but the drives out east from Almaty, and north into the Taukum Desert are also around 3 hours duration. One day in the steppe around Astana involves a long drive to get to the main areas, and back. In the mountains some uphill walking is inevitable but we do all we can to keep this to a minimum.

Camping will obviously be simple (but fun) and you need to be prepared for that. Generally most people are surprised by just how comfortable the camping is. Everyone gets their own tent. (see Accommodation below).

Tourism in Central Asia is still a relatively low-key affair away from places like Samarkand and Bukhara and you should be prepared for the occasional hitch. Things tend not to happen quickly and patience is needed when dealing with hotel and airport check-in.

Note that at the start of the tour, in Bukhara and Samarkand, we make time to explore the old town and its ancient buildings.

HEALTH: It is essential that you contact your own doctor to obtain the latest information on the regions you are visiting. Please contact your doctor well in advance of your tour's departure as some medication must be initiated weeks before the period of possible exposure.

It is recommended that you are up-to-date on routine vaccinations. These include measles-mumps-rubella (MMR), diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis, varicella (chickenpox), polio, and your yearly flu jab.

The only place we may encounter a large number of day-flying insects is up at Astana where there can occasionally be some large hatches of mosquitoes or lake flies. Insect repellent (preferably with diethyltoluamide - DEET) will provide adequate protection.

Tap water is basically OK in the large hotels but to be safe drink bottled water, which along with soft drinks and beer are widely available.

Mild upset stomachs can be encountered in the Central Asia and in fact seem to be on the increase in the Bukhara region. We suggest bringing anti-diarrhoea medicine such as Imodium or Arret. Packets of Dioralyte are also essential as they replace the vital salts and minerals lost during a bout of diarrhoea. We also suggest bring a broad spectrum antibiotic such as Ciprofloxine if your doctor will prescribe them for you. We will experience strong sun in several places so a good sunscreen is suggested. Sunglasses are also worth bringing, not only for the strong sunlight but also for the snowfields in the Tien Shan mountains. Finally, be sure to bring adequate supplies of all personal medications, as it may be impossible to obtain them during the tour.

For further information on health advice refer to the Medical Advisory Services for Travellers Abroad website www.masta-travel-health.com

CENTRAL ASIA: Tour Information...3

ACCOMMODATION: In Almaty, Astana, Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara we stay in good quality modern hotels or small guesthouses with all the usual facilities. When we stay east of Almaty we use a basic but comfortable lodge. This has a limited number of bathrooms so some sharing may be inevitable depending on the number of singles we have. In the mountains we can no longer stay at the Astronomical Observatory. Instead we intend to use a small hotel a little way down the hill from the Observatory. This has a limited number of rooms (8), some of which have communal bathrooms, so if we have a large number of singles, some sharing of both bedrooms and bathrooms may be inevitable for our 2 nights here. The only alternative is to stay right down almost in the town itself and travel up each time to visit the main birding areas, which while possible would not be very convenient.

We spend two nights camping in the Taukum Desert. The camp is very comfortable with reasonable-sized tents, each with a low camp bed, and foam mattress. A sleeping bag is provided although you can bring your own if you wish. Bringing your own sheet sleeping bag liner is a good idea though. Single tents are available for those who require them. The camp has a separate kitchen and 'mess' tent where our (excellent) meals are served. Washing facilities while camping will be basic. There are simple taps for washing hands, brushing teeth etc. and shower tents, which can be provided with hot water. The toilets are simple earth toilets with conventional toilet seats. A torch is essential when camping. We have found the camping to be surprisingly comfortable but if you have any queries about this aspect of the tour, please contact the Sunbird office. Note that after our two nights' at the camp, we stay in a comfortable hotel in Almaty.

LAUNDRY SERVICE: This is available at the Astana and Almaty hotels and in Samarkand and Bukhara but cannot be guaranteed elsewhere. In Astana and Almaty it is surprisingly expensive.

ELECTRICITY: The current is 220 volts AC, 50 cycles. A continental plug adapter with two small circular pins is required and can be bought in most airport departure lounges. You may find the following website helpful: <http://www.power-plugs-sockets.com>.

FOOD: Central Asian cuisine is usually adequate and sometimes surprisingly good to excellent. Salads are ubiquitous and start most meals. Generally the meals are not too spicy although they can be in one or two places. Soups feature largely in the diet, as does meat, but vegetarians usually cope fairly well. There will be opportunities to try a few regional specialities and in Uzbekistan we try to eat out away from the hotels where we can.

Sunbird tours are all-inclusive and no refunds can be issued for any tour meals participants choose to miss. While we will try to do all we can to accommodate the requirements of all participants, please note that we cannot guarantee all causes of food allergies can be avoided at every destination. Many restaurants offer set menus and are unable to accommodate all special requests within a group. Thus, participants with significant food allergies or special dietary needs should bring appropriate foods with them for those times when their needs can, regrettably, not be accommodated. Our tours are carefully scheduled to insure the best possible birding experience and although the leaders will do all they can to make sure the group eats at a reasonable time, sometimes early or late lunches and/or evening meals cannot be avoided. Any participants who need to eat at specific times may need to bring supplemental food with them.

DRINKS: Bottled water, soft drinks or a beer (or local wine if available) are provided at meals, as is coffee or tea. In addition we keep a supply of bottled water on the tour vehicles. Bottled or filtered water may also be provided in some rooms where we stay.

INTERNET AND MOBILE PHONE ACCESS: An increasing number of the hotels we use have internet access although it can be painfully slow. The hotels in Uzbekistan will all have WiFi although it can be slow. In Kazakhstan, the hotels in Astana and Almaty have good WiFi but away from there do not expect any sort of internet access. Mobile phone access is very good throughout both countries and most UK services seem to work there.

CENTRAL ASIA: Tour Information...4

FIELD CLOTHING: Dress is informal throughout. Flexibility is the key. Warm, waterproof clothing, a hat and gloves will be needed in the mountains. These items may also be useful in the desert and steppe areas in the mornings and evenings. However in the middle of the day lighter, cotton clothing will be more comfortable here. So a waterproof jacket and a fleece are ideal, with shirts and tee shirts to create warm layers if needed.

As to footwear, trainers will often be adequate, but stout shoes or boots will be essential for rocky conditions and wet vegetation in the mountains. Here we can also expect to be walking over snow or ice in a few places. Good 'all terrain' sandals will also be useful. It is perfectly OK to wear shorts in both countries.

MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS: Please bring the following:

Notebook and pen

Shoulder bag or small rucksack for day use

Insect repellent

Personal medication

Universal plug, towel and soap. Some hotels may not provide these items or they might be missing, and they will be needed when camping.

Torch with spare batteries

Sun hat and sunscreen

Sun-glasses

Alarm Clock

Optional: Telescope & tripod, camera, spare binoculars and spare spectacles (in case of loss or damage), field guides. For camping, a sleeping bag sheet liner or ordinary sheet will be useful. Telescopes are a distinct advantage on this tour.

Note: The most effective insect repellents are those containing at least 35% of the active ingredient diethyltoluamide (DEET). The higher the percentage, the greater the effectiveness. However, care must be taken to avoid getting the repellent on to optical equipment as it dissolves rubber and plastic and can damage coated lenses. A reasonably effective alternative, which isn't corrosive is Mosi-guard, produced by MASTA. This is available from many high street chemists (including those at the airport). Please make sure you never to spray insect repellent inside the vehicle or when you are standing close to other participants – it may drift on to their optical equipment. Generally we do not encounter many biting insects, although in some years, day-flying mosquitoes can be numerous up at Astana.

LUGGAGE: Our Final Information document, which will be sent to you approximately three weeks before departure, will give details about baggage weight and size restrictions imposed by the airline used for this tour.

If possible, please bring your luggage in soft-sided bags or cases (rather than large hard 'Samsonite'-type suitcases) as these pack more easily into our vehicles during the tour. Please note that on many tour porters are not available to carry your luggage so please ensure that **no bag is so heavy that you are unable to lift and carry it yourself**. As a general rule, in addition to using your luggage labels, it is a good idea to fix identification to the *inside* of each piece of luggage.

LEADER'S EQUIPMENT: The leader will provide the following for group use:

Telescope & tripod

Field guides & reference books

Basic first-aid kit

Play-back equipment

PHOTOGRAPHY: Bring more memory than you expect to use or some sort of memory storage facility. There are plenty of opportunities for good scenic shots and of course Samarkand and Bukhara are very photogenic. Birds are reasonably approachable. Digiscoping is perfectly compatible with the tour, though you should bring your own telescope! The leader's telescope is not available for this activity.

CENTRAL ASIA: Tour Information...5

There will be plenty of opportunities to take photos of birds, mammals and scenery and the leaders will do all they can to accommodate anyone wishing to take photographs. However if you are a serious photographer please bear in mind that this is first and foremost a birdwatching tour. Please do not allow your photographic desires to conflict with other participants' birdwatching activities. In particular please avoid trying to get closer to a bird to take photos while the rest of the group are still looking at it.

TRANSPORT: Transportation is by coach or minibus and three internal flights. There are a few long drives and these are broken by stops for birdwatching. In Uzbekistan, where the roads are good, we usually have a large luxury coach if we have a full or nearly full tour, although on some days we need to switch to small minibuses. In Kazakhstan we use a smaller vehicle to cope with the various off-road driving we need to do. The leader will arrange a seating rotation and participants should be able to ride in any seat in tour vehicles.

SMOKING: Smoking is not allowed in the vehicles or when the group is gathered for meals, checklists etc. If you are sharing a room with a non-smoker, please do not smoke in the room. If you smoke in the field, we ask that you do so well away and downwind from the group if possible.

TRAVEL INSURANCE: Travel insurance is essential and we insist that you take out suitable cover as soon as your tour is booked. If you are bringing expensive optical equipment or other valuable items, please make sure they are also adequately insured on your home contents policy, as most travel insurance policies do not cover very expensive individual items. You may wish to consult your insurance broker regarding coverage. Please also ensure that your policy covers you in the event of a medical emergency, cancellation of a trip or severe delays. Medical costs abroad can often be extremely expensive. Please note that Sunbird is not liable for any medical or repatriation costs resulting from injury or illness during a tour or for covering any costs resulting from a flight delay such as extra hotel accommodation.

If you wish, insurance can be arranged by Helen Fisher, Bullerwell Independent Insurance Brokers, 13 Goldington Road, Bedford, MK40 3JY. Tel: 01234-866964. Please contact Helen for a quote and she will send the schedule directly to you.

TIPPING: All tour-based tips are included in the tour price and are taken care of by the leader. These include tips to local guides, drivers, hotel porters, and waiters and waitresses when we have group meals together in restaurants. You only need to pay tips for personal services such as room service or drinks from the bar.

SHOPPING: We are frequently asked about this. Samarkand and especially Bukhara are rapidly becoming superb places for buying all sorts of crafts and souvenirs. Bukhara is of course famous the world over for its rugs and it is possible to buy traditional Bukharan rugs of good quality that will last forever. The range of sizes, patterns and material varies and so does the price - haggling is essential. Most rugs can easily be rolled up and carried home on the 'plane and purchase usually includes a small sturdy plastic bag to carry it in, and a receipt, which you may have to show at the airport.

The leader will be happy to give advice about any purchase and assist with haggling! Payment for most of the souvenirs will probably be in US dollars. Credit cards are not widely accepted but some rug sellers are happy to give you their bank details and let you transfer the payment once you return home.

CENTRAL ASIA: Tour Information...6

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Birds:

Aye, R., Schweizer, M., Roth, T. 2012 *Birds of Central Asia*. Helm Field Guides. This new book is now the standard guide for the tour. Some of the taxonomy used proposes some new splits and lumps that are at odds with our current bird list but we have amended the checklist to follow the book. **Highly Recommended.**

Adamian, M.S. & Klem, D. Jnr. 1997. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Armenia*. A guide that will cover some of the more unusual species we will encounter that are not covered particularly well elsewhere. **Useful.**

Wassink, A., and Oreel, Gerald, J. 2007. *The Birds of Kazakhstan*. Wassink. A guide to distribution. All 498 species recorded in Kazakhstan (up to early 2007) are covered, and more than 900 maps and graphs give their breeding and temporal distribution. The text, including the introductory chapters, is further illustrated by maps and many photographs.

Mullarney, Killian et al. *Collins Bird Guide*. 2010. HarperCollins. 2nd edition. This book has quickly become established as the standard field guide for Europe and as such covers some of the species we see on this tour. **Recommended.**

Porter, Richard, Aspinall, S. *Birds of the Middle East*. 2010. Helm Field Guides. 2nd edition. Another guide that covers in detail some of the birds we will encounter.

General Interest: There are a wealth of guide books, novels and historical accounts of Central Asia. A good all round guide is the Lonely Planet – *Travel Survival Kit to Central Asia*, published by Lonely Planet Publications. This contains a long list of recommended reading. A new guide to Uzbekistan is also available and others may appear at any time as more tourists visit the region. Check with your nearest travel book shop. Anyone interested in the history of the region and the places we visit should seek out *The Great Game*, by Peter Hopkirk.

MAPS: There is a small selection of maps covering the region. Maps are available from:

The Map Shop
Tel: 01684 593146
www.themapshop.co.uk

Stanfords
Tel: 020 7836 1321
www.stanfords.co.uk

OBTAINING BOOKS: Most of the field guides and the major ornithological references in print are available by mail order from booksellers specialising in natural history titles.

Natural History Book Service Ltd
Tel: 01803 865913
www.nhbs.co.uk

WildSounds
Tel: 01263 741100
www.wildsounds.co.uk

FINAL INFORMATION: Final information with instructions for meeting the group, hotel addresses etc., and your international air tickets will be sent out about three weeks before the start of the tour. If you have any questions, please contact us.