



Silk Road Railway • 30 days

Istanbul to Xian

- Turkey, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakstan & China

Travel the Silk Road aboard this exciting new rail adventure from Europe to Asia. From Istanbul – gateway to the East, first to Iran which will surprise and reward every visitor with its warm welcome and the incredible monuments and architecture of Isfahan, then across the Kara Kum Desert and Turkmenistan to the fabled Silk Road cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. Finally across the Tien Shan mountains to the oases of China's Taklamakan Desert – and the eastern terminus of the great silk road – Xian, ancient Chang'an the glittering capital of ancient Cathay and on to Beijing the modern day capital of China.

HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Iran's Impressive Shrine to Emam Reza in the holy city of Mashhad
- ▶ Tamerlane's magnificent ensemble of madrasas at the Registan Square
- ▶ Crossing western China's awesome Taklamakan Desert aboard the legendary Silk Road Railway
- ▶ Crossing Asia along one of its most exciting overland routes

TRAVELSTYLE

Whilst traveling on this journey you will be staying in 3 star hotels, comfortable guesthouses and yurts (the traditional home of nomads across Central Asia). There is plenty of time to experience local life and enjoy the sights each city has to offer. This journey offers an easy pace and suit just about any age. Sundowners Group Leaders and local guides accompany these journeys and sightseeing and some meals are included.

Fitness Guidelines

In order to participate fully in this journey you will need average level of fitness. A typical day will include sightseeing of up to 4 hours of combined bus/walking, including some steps, uneven surfaces and infrequent short rests with access to basic bathroom facilities. The nature of the journey means there will be days spent travelling vast distances (up to 8 hours) on very basic roads. During 'free time' you have the option to join in unscheduled group activities, explore independently or rest, and most itineraries include some optional evening activities also. Travellers generally find their days are full and fairly long. In hotels, accommodation will usually include elevator (lift) access to rooms on upper floors, but this cannot be guaranteed. This journey does not include portage, and you should be able to carry your complete belongings (unaided) for walks of up to 10 minutes (for example, through railway stations with several flights of stairs, across borders on gravel roads, or to some rooms in larger hotels).

LOCAL PAYMENT & TIPPING

Your contribution to the group Overland Fund is an integral part of the tour cost and is used by the Group Leader to pay directly for group services that would otherwise be difficult to pay by more modern methods. On this journey, you are required to contribute USD\$300. This should be given as 2x\$100 and 2x\$50 notes if possible, to be collected by your Group Leader at the Pre-Departure meeting on Day 1.

Your contribution to the group Tipping Kitty for this journey will be US\$80. Please see notes on tipping in the 'General Information' section below.

VISAS

Required for China, Kazakstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey (depends on nationality). Sundowners will provide all required invitation letters and full visa support, including detailed visa guidelines.

GROUP SIZE & GROUP LEADER

15 maximum, plus Group Leader. Every Sundowners group is accompanied by a Group Leader, chosen for their experience, personal qualities and passion for our style of travel. Supported by our operations team and local offices, they take care of all the transport, accommodation and paperwork necessary to ensure a smooth running trip. They are not a

tour guide but instead a combination of organiser, negotiator and bureaucracy battler, and their sheer enthusiasm, energy and spirit are your guarantee of an unforgettable travel experience. Our Group Leaders are a mixture of local specialists and western adventurers, and all have an absolute passion for the destinations in which they work!

EXPERIENCE IN THE REGION

Sundowners have been operating tours to all the regions visited for more than 10 years.

ITINERARY

Days 1-5. Istanbul - Gateway to the Silk Road

Early Silk Road explorers set out from Constantinople to follow the “golden road” of trade to Central Asia and the distant empire known as Cathay. Today the journey is far more comfortable, but no shorter! Following our time in Istanbul (as Constantinople is now known) we join the trans-Asia Express for our 3-night journey across the breadth of Turkey to the capital of Iran, Tehran. Our comfortable sleeper berths provide a wonderful opportunity to witness the wild and changing landscape as we travel to the lands of ancient Persia.

Days 6-10. Incredible Iran

Tehran is a busy, crowded metropolis with few historic sights to reward the visitor, however it boasts some excellent museums many housed in former palaces. Our sightseeing includes the excellent National Museum and Palace Museum, while the carpet, coin and ceramics museums offer more specialised displays. We join our overnight train to the beautiful city of Isfahan with its wonderful blue tiled buildings and covered bazaar. Our sightseeing includes the stunning Masjed-e Emam Mosque, one of Iran's great architectural ensembles, with time to explore the Grand Bazaar and discover some of the cities renowned tea-houses. Reluctantly leaving this incredible city, we climb aboard the train destined for our final stop in Iran - Mashhad. The incredible shrine complex of Emam Reza, the eighth grandson of the prophet Mohammed, is one of the great architectural wonders of the Islamic world, and is said to receive more than 5 million pilgrims each year.

Days 11-18. The “golden” cities of Central Asia - Samarkand & Bukhara

Leaving Iran we cross the Kopet Dag mountains to Turkmenistan and its capital Ashgabad. We explore the city before boarding the trans-Caspian railway across the Kara Kum Desert to Bukhara. Once known as ‘holy’ Bukhara, it was home to more than 2000 mosques, today its monuments are some of the oldest on the Silk Road; the Ark Fortress, Samanid Mausoleum and, spared the destruction of Genghis Khan, the Kalyan Minaret - one of central Asia's tallest. Explore the old town and enjoy one of the many chaikhans (tea-houses) in Labi-Hauz. Across the Kyzyl Kum Desert lie the fabulous monuments of Samarkand. No city is so evocative of the ancient Silk Road than ‘golden’ Samarkand, Tamerlane's turquoise-spangled capital. We explore Central Asia's most spectacular architectural ensemble; the Registan, plus many other highlights including the Shah-i-Zinda complex, Bibi Khanym Mosque and the Ulug Bek Observatory.

Days 19-23. Through the Dzungarian Gate to Xinjiang

We leave Samarkand for the Uzbek capital, Tashkent and the border with Kazakstan where we join the train to Almaty. Nestled in the foothills to the mighty Tien Shan Mountains, Almaty offers an enjoyable change from the endless desert landscapes of Central Asia. These soaring peaks were a formidable obstacle for the camel caravans and only a few passes provided access between Central Asia and China. The long delayed Sino-Soviet Peace Railway project was finally completed, and the railway now traverses the mountains through the Dzungarian Gate to China's Xinjiang Province. Snowcapped peaks can be seen for most of the year at the border post of Druzhba (Peace) before the downhill run to Urumqi.

Days 24-27. China's Silk Road

Beyond Urumqi lie the fabled oases of the Taklamakan Desert: Kashgar, and the overland route to India to the south, while to the east lie Turpan, Hami, Dunhuang and Xian. We explore the oasis of Turpan, which still reflects life as it was along the Silk Road and the faces in the bazaar recall the four corners of Asia. Finally, we board the train for our final two-night journey which carries us westwards across the Taklamakan Desert to Jiayuguan, and the bastion ramparts of the Great Wall's most westerly garrison and onwards to Xian. At the height of Silk Road prosperity Chang'an, as Xian was then known, was the glittering capital of ancient Cathay. Today the old city walls, towers, pagodas and incredible Terracotta Army reveal the city's long and turbulent history.

Days 28-29. Beijing

Beijing will prove unforgettable, all senses assailed - colour and sound, smell and taste. Our sightseeing begins with a visit to the Great Wall. Built to defend the civilised world from the fierce and capable Mongol horsemen, it stretches 5000 kilometres across the distant hills. You are also free to discover at your own pace, there is plenty to see and do; the Temple of Heaven, the Summer Palace, Gate of Heavenly Peace and Tiananmen Square.

Day 30. Beijing

The adventure is complete, you have travelled the ancient Silk Road by rail and discovered along the way the incredible history and fascinating people of Central Asia

SUMMARY ITINERARY – ISTANBUL TO BEIJING

- Day 1 Istanbul / Hotel / No Meals
- Day 2 Istanbul and join evening train to Tehran/ Train / Breakfast
- Day 3 On train / Train / No meals
- Day 4 On train / Train / No meals
- Day 5 Evening arrival Tehran / Guesthouse / No meals
- Day 6 Tehran and overnight train to Isfahan/ Train / Breakfast
- Day 7 Isfahan / Guesthouse / No meals
- Day 8 Isfahan and overnight train to Mashhad / Train / Breakfast
- Day 9 Arrive Mashhad / Guesthouse / Breakfast
- Day 10 Mashhad / Guesthouse / Breakfast
- Day 11 To Ashghabad / Guesthouse / Breakfast
- Day 12 Ashghabad and to Mary / Guesthouse / Breakfast
- Day 13 Mary and to Bukhara / Guesthouse / Breakfast
- Day 14 Bukhara / Guesthouse / Breakfast
- Day 15 Bukhara / Guesthouse / Breakfast
- Day 16 To Samarkand / Guesthouse / Breakfast
- Day 17 Samarkand / Guesthouse / Breakfast
- Day 18 Samarkand and to Tashkent / Guesthouse / Breakfast
- Day 19 Tashkent and to Chimkent to join train to Almaty / Train / No Meals
- Day 20 Arrive Almaty / Hotel / No meals
- Day 21 Almaty and join evening train to Urumqi / Train / Breakfast
- Day 22 On train / Train / No Meals
- Day 23 Arrive Urumqi and transfer to Turpan / Guesthouse / No Meals
- Day 24 Turpan and join evening train to Xian / Train / Breakfast
- Day 25 On Train / Train / No meals
- Day 26 Arrive Xian / Hotel / No Meals
- Day 27 Xian and overnight train to Beijing / Train / Breakfast
- Day 28 Arrive Beijing/ Hotel/ No Meals
- Day 29 Beijing / Hotel/Breakfast
- Day 30 Beijing / No accommodation /Breakfast

SCHEDULED SIGHTSEEING

Scheduled Sightseeing is part of the itinerary and includes all transport, entrance fees and English speaking local guide.

- ▶ Istanbul: Walking tour of Sultanahmet, Topkapi Palace
- ▶ Tehran: Archaeological & Islamic Art Museum, Carpet Museum
- ▶ Isfahan: Imam Mosque, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, Ali Qapou Palace, Jame Mosque, Vank Church
- ▶ Mashhad: Astan-e Qouds (holy Shrine of Imam Reza)
- ▶ Ashghabad: City tour and excursion to Nissa, Tolkuchka Bazaar.
- ▶ Bukhara: City tour including Samanid Mausoleum, Chor Minor, Poli-Kalon Ensemble, Kalyan Minaret, Ark Fortress, Bolo-Hauz Complex, Labi-Hauz Ensemble.
- ▶ Shakrisabz: Ak-Serai Palace, Kok-Gumbaz Mosque
- ▶ Samarkand: City tour including Gur-Emir Mausoleum, Registan Ensemble, Bibi Khanum Mosque, Shah-I-Zinda Necropolis, Ulugbek Observatory.
- ▶ Tashkent: City tour.
- ▶ Almaty: City tour
- ▶ Turpan: Ruins of Jiahao, Karez irrigation, Bazaar, Emin Minaret and Mosque.
- ▶ Xian: Terracotta Warriors
- ▶ Beijing: Tiananmen Square, Temple of Heaven, Great Wall

CITY EXPLORING

City Exploring is optional sightseeing outside the itinerary guideline with the Group Leader. It is designed to be flexible, may change depending on group wishes and the time available, and is at the discretion of the leader. Travellers will be asked to share the transport cost, if required, and provide their own entrance fees.

Our Group Leaders know the 'off-the-beaten-track' sights and can make suggestions on the best places to explore, eat and relax. By combining Scheduled Sightseeing with City Exploring, they aim to share not only the 'must-sees' of each destination, but to introduce the more personal and idiosyncratic aspects they have discovered themselves. We use local taxis, public transport, underground metro and go on foot - it's about getting involved with everyday life, and local people!

Optional Activities

Please note that City Exploring and any activities you participate in outside the specified itinerary and scheduled sightseeing are at your own risk. While your Group Leader will be happy to assist you in pursuing other activities and interests, Sundowners makes no claims as to the safety of the activity, nor the standard of the local parties operating it. Your Group Leader has the authority to amend or cancel any part of the specified itinerary if it is felt to be unsafe. Although opportunities may be provided locally, Sundowners recommends that travellers do not ride local animals.

ACCOMMODATION

Hotels and Guesthouses - 19 nights (twin share)

We have chosen accommodation of a standard we consider appropriate to the region. Hotel and Guesthouse accommodation is based on a twin share and all rooms have private bathroom facilities. Hotels are chosen for the best available combination of location, comfort and facilities, and may vary for different departures depending on season and group size. The guesthouses are small establishments with a more personal feel and excellent hospitality. While they may not offer as many services or luxuries as the larger hotels, we feel that this is more than compensated by the atmosphere and friendly service.

Train - 10 nights (4-berth).

Overnight accommodation in trains is usually in four-share sleeping compartments, however please see specific notes on trains in Turkmenistan, Turkey and Iran and the information provided in the 'General Information' section below. Please note that the train sector from Istanbul to Tehran includes a ferry service across Lake Van in Turkey. Only baggage carriages are loaded on to the ferry, all passengers must carry their belongings. Your Group Leader will assist you with approximate timing of the ferry service, and the border crossing.

2 Berth Rail Option

We regret that we are unable to offer a 2-berth rail option on this itinerary

Single Supplement Option

For clients who would like sole use of a room, a single supplement is available for a single additional payment. Please note that the supplement only applies to hotel nights (not including dayrooms where applicable), and is not available for train, yurt or homestay nights.

NOTES

The pace, duration and distances covered on this trip can be taxing. While the major sights of each city are visited, overland journeys encompass long distances over varied and rough terrain with little time to rest in each destination. Limited or no facilities exist between each city, and you should be prepared for very basic, or non-existent washrooms, long days travelling over bumpy roads and varying weather conditions. Please consider your own fitness ability and attitude towards overland travel when considering your ability to fully participate in this trip.

GENERAL INFORMATION - FOR SILK ROAD TRAVELLERS

BEFORE YOU GO...

VOUCHERS & GROUP JOINING INFORMATION

With your final documents from Sundowners, you will receive vouchers for your Small Group Journey, Single Supplements (when booked and paid in advance), and any pre or post-tour arrangements you have made with us. These are your 'tickets' and your Group Leader or our local agents will collect them when needed. Please check these vouchers carefully when you receive them, and do not hesitate to contact your travel agent or Sundowners if you have any questions regarding your arrangements. You will also receive information regarding your joining hotel and how to find it, as well as emergency contact details for our local operators. Please refer to separate document 'Joining Instructions' (provided with your final documents) for the details of your group hotel and local contacts.

TRAVEL DOCUMENTATION & VISAS

Visas and Sundowners Assistance

Required for all countries that are visited in this itinerary (see above for details) - Sundowners will provide all required invitation letters. Full visa support including detailed visa guidelines will be included with your booking confirmation. Please check these guidelines carefully before applying for visas, and seek advice if anything is unclear. Visas vary in cost according to nationality, processing time and where they are obtained. Costs and processing procedures can change at short notice due to changes in political relationships or the situation at the particular border (if obtained en route). These changes are totally beyond the control of Sundowners or your Group Leader – all advice and information provided is subject to change and Sundowners cannot be held responsible for any inconvenience or additional costs incurred.

For departures including Russia, you will need to complete an Arrival/Departure card. It is important that you fill in both the arrival and departure sections. Immigration officials will return the departure section, and this MUST be kept with your passport at all times. Registration stamps are collected on the back of this form, and need to be presented when checking in to hotels and exiting the country.

In Russia and some countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS - states of the former Soviet Union) you are required to pay a visa registration fee when you check in at hotels - your Group Leader will advise you of any charges that are applicable, and the fee can vary from US\$1-\$5 per person, per hotel. If you are beginning your group journey in Russia, you will need to pay the first fee directly to the hotel when you arrive.

Your Responsibilities

You must ensure that you are in possession of a passport (with at least six months validity from the date you complete your Sundowners arrangements), and any visas necessary to enter or transit any countries involved in the journey. You must also ensure that you have the necessary visas for any travelling you plan to do immediately before or after your Sundowners arrangements. Please note that there is little time or opportunity to obtain visas for onward travel during your Silk Road journey, and you should seek Sundowners' advice if you think this will be necessary.

Customs Declarations

To avoid any problems on exiting CIS countries, Sundowners strongly recommend that you obtain a customs declaration form and that you declare the currency that you are bringing into each country. This form should be stamped by a Customs Official and kept safe until departure. Sundowners also recommends that you retain any currency exchange certificates and bank withdrawal receipts to produce on departure as these are sometimes requested in addition to customs declaration forms.

Please note that there are regulations restricting the export of certain 'cultural' items from CIS countries. You should check current regulations before purchasing expensive carpets, antiques or souvenirs. Your group leader and local guide will assist with information on export restrictions and customs duty.

HEALTH

The pace of these tours can be tiring due to factors such as change of diet, change of environment, high and low temperatures, high altitude (on some itineraries) distances travelled, basic facilities and busy days. You should be in good health to satisfactorily participate in this tour. There is a considerable amount of walking (for example sightseeing tours of several hours without return to the hotel), steps and uneven paths to sites of interest and climbing on and off trains (with very few stations having raised platforms). You may be allocated an upper berth on the train. These are reached by a small ladder some trains, and a single step (approx. 1m above the ground) on others. You should also be aware that an overland journey of this nature and duration will be more taxing than conventional touring in more developed destinations.

Please advise Sundowners of any pre-existing medical conditions which may prohibit your full participation. We recommend that you have a general medical and dental check-up before departure and that all clients consider the rigors of their journey, their personal ability and comfort levels. Please do not hesitate to contact us to discuss the nature of your journey and any concerns prior to booking or departure.

Special Dietary Requirements & General Health

Please note that the selection and variety of foods in China and Russia is reasonable, but in Central Asia the meals are usually meat-based. Vegetarianism is something locals generally do not understand, and vegetarian meals along this route lack variety and are not richly flavoured. It is harder for vegetarians to get a balanced and varied diet, and non-meat meals are not always prepared according to vegetarian requirements. If you have food allergies or preferences please let your Group Leader know, and they will do their best to ensure that your requirements are met. Unfortunately we cannot guarantee that special requirements can always be met, and we recommend you bring a small supply of food from home to supplement your diet if you have special dietary requirements.

Observing simple precautions such as peeling fruit, avoiding uncooked or reheated food and using only bottled or boiled water will minimise stomach upsets. Bottled water is widely available and recommended for drinking and also brushing teeth.

FIRST AID

Medication and other items are widely available in larger cities. However, as the quality may not be as high as products from home, it may be useful to bring a supply of basic items with you. A first-aid kit may include band-aids, antiseptic, aspirin, cough medicine, throat lozenges, cold and flu medication, diarrhoea medication, mild laxative, eye ointments/drops for minor infections, a general antibiotic and any special medications you may need personally.

If you are taking special medication, it is a good idea to carry a letter from your doctor to show authorities if necessary. Since some medications can also be affected by changes in temperature or require special care, we recommend you discuss this with your doctor before departure.

Vaccinations

While there are no compulsory vaccinations required for entry into these countries, we do recommend that you contact your doctor or a recognised travel health specialist for up-to-date advice.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

Travel Insurance is compulsory for all Sundowners Small Group Journeys. You must ensure that your insurance policy covers you for the entire duration of your journey, and that you have purchased the highest level of cover available to you for medical emergencies (including repatriation/evacuation cover) which is relevant to ALL the destinations that you will be visiting. Please bring a copy of your policy, as your Group Leader will check insurance details at the Pre Departure Meeting on Day 1 of the journey. You will not be permitted to join group arrangements until the Group Leader has seen evidence of comprehensive insurance cover. For passengers wishing to use insurance provided by credit cards it will be necessary for you to complete a "Credit Card Insurance Details" form prior to joining your Sundowners journey for this insurance to be accepted. Please contact Sundowners for further information.

LUGGAGE & PACKING

Luggage

Each year a number of our clients find the enjoyment of their journey lessened by the bulk and weight of their luggage. We cannot stress enough that you should only bring what you can comfortably carry unassisted!

You will be required to carry your own luggage - for example on or off the trains, through the stations (up to 10 minutes walk including several flights of stairs and uneven surfaces) and from the bus into the hotel. We recommend using a single rucksack or soft bag as your main luggage for this journey - these fit more easily into the limited luggage space on the trains. We also recommend that you carry a small daypack for personal items used during the day (camera, water, snacks etc.) and a hidden money belt for carrying valuables. A good test after you have packed is to try carrying your bags (including all daypacks, jackets and camera cases!) for at least 200m, and try to include a set of steps too. If you have any difficulty, we would recommend a re-pack! Porterage is not available at all stations or hotels – availability is unpredictable and should not be relied upon. You should not expect the Group Leader or other group members to assist you with your baggage.

Suggested Packing List

A packing list will vary greatly depending on season, overall duration/destinations of travel, and of course personal experience and preference. It is impossible for Sundowners to provide the 'perfect packing list' and so we prefer to direct you towards guidebooks and the internet so that you may research this yourself and decide what is appropriate. The temperature chart provided shows average temperatures and should give you an indication of what to expect. It is important that you do your own research on expected minimum and maximum temperatures as this will affect what you pack. Since this journey covers a huge area and varying terrain you may encounter a range of temperatures and weather conditions, and we would recommend that you bring layers of lighter clothing to allow for changes in temperature along the route. Please also take into consideration the culture and religion of the region you are visiting. See country notes below. The following items are things that we feel are well worth considering

- ▶ money belt
- ▶ comfortable walking shoes or boots
- ▶ medical kit (see notes under health)
- ▶ small torch/flashlight
- ▶ sweater/fleece
- ▶ thermal underwear (Oct-May departures)
- ▶ waterproof & windproof jacket
- ▶ sandals / slip-on shoes (for the train and summer months)
- ▶ casual lightweight clothes for train
- ▶ hat/sun block/lip balm/sunglasses
- ▶ toiletries (if you have preferred brands – most essentials are available en-route)
- ▶ toilet paper/moistened tissues (eg Wet Ones)
- ▶ alarm clock

Some of our travelers have found the following items useful

- ▶ heat-proof mug with lid
- ▶ spoon/fork
- ▶ pocket-knife (pack in main luggage for flights)
- ▶ a nice outfit for Moscow, Tashkent and St Petersburg evenings
- ▶ universal sink plug
- ▶ washing line and travel wash
- ▶ small travel towel
- ▶ dustproof bags for camera equipment

Conservative dress

Whilst the majority of Central Asia is considered Muslim, the major cities in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan and Turkmenistan have been strongly influenced by Russian culture and are more liberal in their dress. Rural areas tend to be more conservative and you should dress appropriately. A short sleeve shirt (for men and women), and long trousers/skirt is ideal. Locals rarely wear shorts, and although it is permitted, we would recommend you follow local custom to minimise the cultural impact of your visit. Singlets or revealing tops are not appropriate for men or women - especially when visiting active mosques, or holy sites. For ladies, keeping a light headscarf in your daypack is a great way to avoid disappointment should more conservative dress be required. Your Group Leader and local guide will inform you when a headscarf or more conservative clothing is required.

WHILE YOU ARE TRAVELLING...

CONTACT

Hotel Lists and Details

Since the accommodation we are using can vary according to season, availability and group size, we regret that we are unable to provide hotel lists for our journeys. We also find that the nature of our destinations is such that the contact information is often unreliable, and quickly outdated. Where it is possible to get through to a hotel, our experience is that there are often language barriers, and faxes and messages may not reach guests. Please note that hotels listed on any visa documentation provided are subject to change and should not be considered a 'de facto' hotel list.

Since the hotels are not a reliable point of contact, we strongly recommend that you establish an e-mail address before you leave home that can be used whilst travelling. There are a number of well-known free e-mail providers such as 'hotmail' and 'yahoo', and many smaller providers who can also offer this service. Internet access is available in some of our destination cities, and your Group Leader will be happy to assist you along the way. Please see notes on 'Phone, Fax & Internet' for each region visited.

In an Emergency

We do understand that there are some circumstances where people may need to contact you urgently. In this instance, please ask family or friends to contact the Sundowners office in Melbourne, where they will either be able to speak to a staff member, or note the 24-hour emergency contact number from our after-hours message service. Our Operations team will be able to locate and contact the group as quickly as possible, as well as provide accurate information to those at home. Please phone: + 61 3 9672 5300.

TRAINS

Overnight accommodation in trains is in four-share sleeping compartments (6-berth in Iran). You may be sharing with other group members, or with local travellers. These are not chartered trains but scheduled services that allow you to see the passing parade of local life unhindered by tourist influences. There is a variety of rolling stock on this route and the standard of train compartments is dependent on available wagons and the enthusiasm of your two attendants (conductors). There are no shower facilities on any of the trains we use, however it is possible to have a strip wash in the bathrooms.

Train carriages usually have 9 compartments, and a separate living quarters for attendants (2 per carriage). Compartments have 4 comfortable bunks with a basic mattress, a small table under the window, personal reading lamps and linen. Power outlets are located in the bathrooms and hallway, however it is not usually permitted or advisable to use these outlets. Smoking is permitted in the transit areas between each carriage.

Chinese rolling stock is being upgraded on the most popular routes with new carriages being introduced between Xian and Beijing. The upper berth bunks are reached by a small step approximately 1m from the floor. Luggage space is very limited as the lower bunks do not lift up and only medium sized suitcases and soft-packs will fit in the overhead luggage compartment. Chinese trains usually have a squat style toilet with a small basin at either end of the carriage. Some carriages have a western style toilet at one end and a separate communal washroom.

Russian carriages have a samovar (for hot water) at one end of the wagon, and two western style toilets with a small wash basin. There is ample room for luggage under the lower bunks and in an overhead compartment. Russian commuters like

to be warm and there are some cultural differences as to what constitutes a draft or fresh air. The more modern carriages have air-conditioning which means it is not possible to open windows. Older carriages have a fan and the attendant can open windows upon request.

Train standards in Central Asia tend to be far below that of Russia and China. Although train travel is still an amazing and rewarding experience in this region, you do need to be prepared for some more basic conditions. Trains in Iran, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are of similar standard to Russian trains (but usually a lot older), while train conditions in Turkmenistan are especially basic. Patience is required when dealing with cabin allocations as the ticketing system in Central Asia is overruled by the carriage attendants' discretion – your Group Leader will ensure the best possible outcome.

Borders are an integral part of our journey – patience, a sense of humor, and a positive outlook will ensure you enjoy this experience. Border crossings take a long time due to customs and immigration searching trains – often full of traders – bogey changes (when changing train gauge at international borders), and train schedules. Your Group Leader will assist you with the paperwork and specific timings of the crossing.

DAILY LIVING

Daily expenses

As a guideline we recommend that you budget an average of USD \$5.00 - \$10.00 per day over and above meal costs for day to day expenses. If you are an avid souvenir collector or have a particular indulgence, you may need to increase this amount. Entrance fees will be paid locally for additional sightseeing – see the Scheduled Sightseeing for exact inclusions. Most additional sightseeing is relatively inexpensive. A slightly higher allowance is recommended for days in Moscow and St Petersburg (if applicable).

Money

Please see notes on cash, travellers cheques and credit cards for each region visited. Although a black market for USD\$ cash exists in Central Asia, Sundowners recommend that all travellers use official exchange outlets at banks and hotels. Please also see note above regarding Customs Declarations.

Laundry

Laundry service is available at most hotels along the route. Some hotels in Russia do not provide laundry facilities, however it is usually possible to have your floor attendant wash your clothes for a small fee. Your Group Leader will advise you of available facilities when the group checks in to each hotel. It is advisable to bring some biodegradable laundry soap, a universal bath plug and a small washing line if you wish to hand wash – most hotels do not provide plugs or clothes lines. Laundry costs an average of US\$1-\$3 per item.

Tipping

Across Asia, people have become accustomed to the new freedoms and opportunities of a capitalist economy. Tipping has become an essential (and expected) supplement for those working with foreign tourists, eg: drivers, guides and porters. We have found from experience that it is convenient for the Group Leader or an elected group member to collect a kitty and administer it according to the group's decision. A tip kitty saves the need for regular use of small denomination bills – please see the notes under 'Local Payment and Tipping' at the top of the dossier for the amount recommended for your itinerary. Your contribution to the tip kitty will be collected by your Group Leader at the Pre-Departure Meeting on Day 1 of the Journey. Smaller denominations are appreciated.

Commissions

To ensure services are provided in the best interests of our clients, Sundowners operates a no commission policy. Group Leaders do not rely on commissions or tips for salary – they are paid industry-leading wages and have their expenses covered while travelling. If you feel your Group Leader has done a fantastic job, and you wish to pass on a gratuity, please feel free to do so.

Personal Spending Money

(Please also see notes under individual headings)

We recommend you allow an average USD \$10.00 - \$15.00 per day for meals and food.

We recommend that you budget an average of USD \$5.00 - \$10.00 per day for daily expenses.

Please also budget for tipping kitty, souvenirs, and additional cultural performances.

ENVIRONMENT & CULTURE

Sundowners encourages its group leaders, operators and clients to be culturally sensitive and minimise negative impacts on the environment. Working with local operators we invest heavily in locally owned and run companies, employ local guides and national leaders, and offer opportunities for young locals looking to enter the tourism industry through our youth and student brand 'Vodkatrain'.

There are some simple ways you can help us minimise impact on the environment. These measures include minimizing the amount of packaging you bring – as local waste collection services are well below western standards - using biodegradable soap for washing laundry, and collecting rubbish on the train and ensuring it gets placed on station platform bins (and not thrown out the window by well-meaning attendants!). This all benefits the environment, and will encourage environmental awareness in local communities.

Respect, an open mind and understanding when dealing with local customs and value systems will enrich your experience and endear you to locals in your interactions. Learning a little of the language, reading as much about the history and culture of the region and observing local conventions in each country is a great way to start. Wearing appropriate clothing to religious sites, and on the street, avoiding expensive jewellery (which emphasises the wealth 'gap' between you and your hosts), using restaurants that are family owned and will have a flow on benefit for the local community, and never participating in activities that support crime organisations (such as prostitution and black market currency exchange) are just a few ways you can ensure our trips have a positive impact on local communities.

Understanding the local culture will also enrich your travel experience. People in this region will have a different concept of time – and you are far more likely to enjoy your experience if you remain flexible and go with the flow. To fully enjoy this experience, avoid judging other cultures by western standards and assumptions.

We are not here to judge, but to observe and understand.

GROUP BEHAVIOUR

Travelling in a group may require some compromise to accommodate the different desires and abilities of group members. A willingness to be involved, a positive and flexible approach to travel, understanding the particular demands of the journey and behaviour that is conducive to good group dynamics will ensure your enjoyment on one of the most satisfying and rewarding travel experiences of your life. Please see notes under 'Reasonable Behaviour' in the booking conditions.

FILM & PHOTOGRAPHY

Cameras & Videos

As film is often expensive, old or unobtainable en route, it is preferable to take all you will need from home, or purchase from Duty Free shops en route. A lead-lined film bag is useful for protecting film from security x-ray machines. While video cameras may be recharged in hotels we recommend bringing spare batteries to avoid disappointment.

Fees

Please be aware that there are fees for the use of cameras and videos at some sites visited. Costs vary, but as a guide you can expect to pay US\$1-\$5 for a still camera and US\$5 up to US\$30 for a video camera.

Sensitivity

When photographing local people please respect their privacy. Many are happy to be photographed (some will expect payment), but many prefer not to be the subject of your interest. Some subjects may be sensitive and you should not photograph military installations, border crossings or bridges. Consideration should also be given at religious sites or events.

RECOMMENDED RESEARCH

As well as conventional guidebooks, there are many travelogues, novels and websites that give compelling accounts of adventures and personal experiences in these destinations. They convey more inspiring impressions than mere facts and statistics can ever offer, and we recommend that you seek out and compare for yourself those that will appeal to your own interests and match the level of research you wish to undertake before you travel.

As an introduction, we suggest you look at the following titles - although this list should by no means be considered exhaustive or exclusive!

Guidebooks

- ▶ Silk Route by Rail - Dominic Streatfield-James (2nd ed. Trailblazer Guides)
- ▶ Introduction to the Silk Route - Judy Bonavia (Odyssey)
- ▶ Uzbekistan - Calum Macleod & Bradley Mayhew (Odyssey)
- ▶ Central Asia - Bradley Mayhew et al (Lonely Planet)
- ▶ Central Asia - Giles Whittell (Cadogan Guides)
- ▶ Central Asia Phrasebook - Justin Jon Rudelson (Lonely Planet)
- ▶ Travelogues & Novels
- ▶ The Great Game - Peter Hopkirk
- ▶ Foreign Devils on the Silk Road - Peter Hopkirk
- ▶ The Lost Heart of Asia - Colin Thubron
- ▶ My Life as an Explorer - Sven Hedin
- ▶ A Ride to Khiva - Frederick Burnaby
- ▶ The Road to Oxiana - Robert Byron
- ▶ The Travels of Marco Polo - trans. Ronald Lantham

DISPATCHES FROM THE FRONT LINE

What does it cost to....

Buy a cup of black coffee		Georgia	USD\$0.50
Beijing	USD\$0.50 - \$1	Armenia	USD\$0.50
Bishkek	USD\$1	Azerbaijan	USD\$0.50
Tashkent	USD\$1		
Moscow	USD\$1- \$3	Launder a pair of jeans	
Ashghabad	USD\$0.25-\$1.30	Beijing	USD\$0.50 - \$1
Tehran	USD\$0.50 - \$2	Bishkek	USD\$1
Georgia	USD\$0.50	Tashkent	USD\$0.50
Armenia	USD\$0.50	Moscow	USD\$4
Azerbaijan	USD\$0.50	Ashghabad	USD\$2 - \$5
		Georgia	USD\$3
Buy a bottle of local beer		Armenia	USD\$3
Beijing	USD\$1 - \$1.50	Azerbaijan	USD\$3
Bishkek	USD\$1		
Tashkent	USD\$0.50 - \$1	Short journey in a taxi	
Moscow	USD\$1 - \$3	Beijing	USD\$1.50 - \$3
Ashghabad	USD\$0.80 - \$2.50	Bishkek	USD\$1 - \$1.50
Tehran	USD\$0.50(malt brew)	Tashkent	USD\$0.50 - \$2
Georgia	USD\$0.50-\$1.50	Moscow	USD\$4 - \$10
Armenia	USD\$0.50-\$1.50	Ashghabad	USD\$0.25 - \$0.50
Azerbaijan	USD\$0.50-\$1.50	Tehran	USD\$5 - \$10
Use 30 minutes on e-mail		Georgia	USD\$2
Beijing	USD\$.50	Armenia	USD\$2
Bishkek	USD\$1	Azerbaijan	USD\$2
Tashkent	USD\$1		
Moscow	USD\$2		
Ashghabad	subject to availability		
Tehran	USD\$0.50		

Turkey

SPECIFIC PACKING ISSUES

Turkey is a modern and secular Muslim country. Although there are no restrictions on dress, it is important to wear appropriate clothing out of respect for local custom and to avoid unwanted attention. The major mosques in Istanbul are active and tourists who are not dressed appropriately will be asked to cover themselves with a sarong that can be obtained at most mosque entrances. Although shorts are permitted, men should wear long trousers and a short sleeved shirt, and women should wear long trousers/skirt and a short sleeved shirt as a minimum.

PHONE, FAX & INTERNET

Internet access is cheap, fast and reliable in Istanbul. Some users may have difficulty with the Turkish keyboards, however internet café owners have experienced this problem many times and are able to assist. International calls can be made from public telephones using international phone cards at reasonable rates. There are two kinds of public telephone in Turkey, and both operate using cards. US\$1 is sufficient for local calls and around US\$3 for a short international call. Telephone and fax service from hotels tend to be disproportionately expensive.

MEALS & FOOD

Turkey offers some amazing culinary treats for the traveller. There is a list of the included meals for your trip in the 'Summary Itinerary' - all other meals are at your own expense. Where meals are not included your Group Leader will recommend options for all budgets and taste, and provide opportunities to eat at traditional local restaurants. Food is plentiful and inexpensive. Restaurants in Istanbul can be similar in price to Europe, however you should be able to get a great meal for US\$5-\$10 in the city and coastal areas and US\$2-\$5 in regional areas.

CURRENCY

Due to inflation as high as 90% in 2001, the Turkish lira is currently exchanging at around 1.5 million lira to the USD. This rate changes daily and you should check the most up to date rate on arrival to Turkey. It is advisable to change small amounts of cash daily to ensure you get the best possible rate of exchange.

Cash

Foreign currency is easily exchanged at banks, hotels and money exchange offices in Istanbul and throughout Turkey. The USD and Euro are the most recognised and accepted of all foreign currencies. It is important that you obtain USD notes in good condition (not torn or too worn, with no stamps, ink or other marks) and issued after 1996 as older or damaged USD notes are not accepted. Smaller denominations are less frequently needed now, and we would recommend you carry a mixture of \$10, \$20, \$50 and \$100 bills.

Travellers Cheques

We do not recommend this method of carrying funds since the process of changing them is inconvenient and time-consuming. If you do wish to use Travellers Cheques, ensure they are well-known brands such as American Express, Thomas Cook or Diners Club and preferably in US Dollars. Please be aware that between 3% and 10% commission may be charged.

Credit Cards

'VISA' and 'Mastercard' are usually accepted for purchases in large hotels and shops in Istanbul and the main cities of Turkey but are not accepted in rural areas. A credit card cash advance from banks and bank machines is possible in major cities, with most bank machines connected to the VISA, Mastercard and Cirrus networks. Please contact your card issuer for information regarding using your credit cards in this region.

TRAINS

The train sector from Istanbul to Tehran (or vice versa) includes a ferry trip across Lake Van. The crossing takes approximately 5 hours on a passenger/cargo ferry. Train ticket and seating allocations are different for the Turkish, and Iranian trains, so some confusion is expected upon arrival at the ferry terminal. Your Group Leader will assist you with the seating arrangements and timings of the border. Accommodation on Turkish trains is in comfortable 4 berth compartments. Beds fold up to form comfortable chairs during the day, and there is adequate storage for small suitcases. Clean linen is provided. There are squat style toilets and wash basins located at either end of the carriage. The restaurant car operates on set meal times, and usually has a reasonable selection – meals cost around 10USD.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Istanbul is the perfect way to start or finish a Silk Road journey. Overland journeys do not spend much time in this ancient capital, and the focus of our travel in Turkey is starting/finishing an amazing journey. If you wish to fully explore this amazing country, please book appropriate pre or post tour services.

Turkey's population of almost 69 million people are mostly Sunni Muslim (99.8%) and ethnic Turks (80%). An estimated 20% of the population are Kurdish. Turkey is a secular nation, and travellers can expect a mix of western and eastern influences. Tourism is well established in this region and facilities and services are of a higher standard in Istanbul than the more remote areas.

Iran

HEJAB - CLOTHING REQUIREMENTS FOR WOMEN

The Islamic Republic Of Iran respectfully requires all female visitors to abide by the hejab requirements laid down in law by the government. All females over the age of seven must wear the hejab - the general term to describe the type of Islamic dress required for females in Iran. Women do not have to wear the chador, that all-encompassing, head-to-toe black 'tent', except when visiting a particularly holy place such as Mashhad or an important mosque. On these occasions, you will be advised of the requirement and our local operators will supply a chador.

The most common mode of dress for middle and upper class Iranian women is the roupush, a sort of baggy trench coat and easily obtained in Tehran. Although you may wish to purchase other roupush on arrival, you must bring something like this with you in order to get past the immigration officials at the border or airport. The coat must be below the knee, and cannot show any shape of the body. The coat has to be buttoned to the neck, and trousers (jeans are OK) must be worn underneath. A light fabric is recommended if travelling in the summer. In addition, a scarf is required to cover hair and must be worn in public at all times. Sandals are becoming acceptable, however it is not advisable as law stipulates that ladies footwear should completely cover feet.

Men may dress more casually but it is worth noting that shorts are not acceptable in urban public areas and short sleeve shirts are not usually worn in religious buildings. Sandals are permitted for men.

Black is not compulsory, and we recommend websites such as www.hejabiran.com to get a contemporary perspective on Iranian hejab fashion. If you are still unsure on Islamic hejab requirements please do not hesitate to contact us for further advice.

PHONE, FAX & INTERNET

Since the hotels are not a reliable point of contact, we strongly recommend that you establish an e-mail address before you leave home that can be used whilst travelling. There are a number of well-known free e-mail providers such as 'hotmail' and 'yahoo', and many smaller providers who can also offer this service. Internet access is available in Tehran and in regional centres, and your Group Leader will be happy to assist you to find access points. Phone and fax are readily available in hotels but a little expensive. Call centres are more readily available and a cheaper option. Again your Group Leader will assist you.

MEALS & FOOD

There is a list of the included meals for your trip in the 'Summary Itinerary' - all other meals are at your own expense. Where meals are not included your Group Leader will recommend options for all budgets and taste, and provide opportunities to eat at traditional local restaurants. Iranian food is predominantly rice with lamb or chicken. Breakfasts are usually flat bread, jam, boiled eggs and cheese with juice of some sort. Restaurant food is usually of a good standard (if sometimes lacking in choice) and there are many street stalls and small kiosks to purchase drinks and snacks. Large markets and bazaars have a huge range of fruit, vegetables, bread, meats and other foods, and bottled water, soft drinks are widely available. We recommend you allow an average of USD \$10.00 - \$15.00 per day for meals in this country.

CURRENCY

The 'rial' is the official currency of Iran. The current exchange rate is approximately 8000 rials to one USD, but is very susceptible to market fluctuations. When making purchases, most Iranians will refer to 'toman', and not rials. Toman is a shorter version of the official currency used in everyday transactions. It is easily calculated by dropping one zero from prices written in rials - 8000 rials is equal to 800 toman.

Cash

Foreign currency is easily exchanged banks and money changing offices and some hotels. Money changing offices will usually offer a better rate of exchange than the banks. Considering the political situation it is ironic that the USD is the most recognised and accepted of all foreign currencies. It may be possible to change UK pounds at some major banks, but this is time-consuming and inconvenient as the USD is the currency of choice. It is important that you obtain USD notes in good condition (not torn or too worn, with no stamps, ink or other marks) and issued after 1996 as older or damaged USD notes are not accepted. Smaller denominations are less frequently needed now, and we would recommend you carry a mixture of \$10, \$20, \$50 and \$100 bills.

Travellers Cheques

Travellers Cheques are only accepted at limited banks in Iran. We do not recommend this method of carrying funds since the process of cashing them is inconvenient and time-consuming. If you do wish to use Travellers Cheques, ensure they are well-known brands such as Thomas Cook or Diners Club (never American Express) and preferably in US Dollars. Please be aware that between 3% and 10% commission may be charged.

Credit Cards

Credit Card access is extremely limited in Iran and we would recommend you take as much cash as you feel comfortable carrying to cover expenses on your journey. Mastercard may be accepted for some purchases in well-connected carpet shops in major centres, however this cannot be guaranteed. At the time of writing Visa card was not accepted in Iran. Cards issued in the US will not work due to the trade embargo. Please contact your card issuer for current information regarding using these or other credit cards in Iran.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Iran is a predominantly Shi'a Muslim (89%), country with Sunni Muslim (9%), Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Baha'i (2%) religions also present. The population of approximately 69 million people is primarily made up of the Persian (51%) ethnic group with Azeri (24%), Gilaki and Mazandarani (8%), Kurd (7%), Arab (3%), Lur (2%), Baloch (2%), Turkmen (2%), other (1%) making up the difference.

When travelling through Iran you can expect a warm welcome and amazing hospitality, a young population and inquisitive and open conversations about how you live. American Citizens can expect delays at the border as officials must fax Tehran with a report of entry. This is a formality and most American travellers will be enthusiastically welcomed.

TRAINS

Overnight accommodation in trains is in six-share sleeping compartments. You may be sharing with locals or other group members. Social custom in Iran usually means that when you are sharing with locals, it will be on a single sex basis - your Group Leader will assist with bed allocations. Upper bunks are reached via a central ladder and beds have a safety rail, personal reading lamp, and clean linen. On some train sectors only one bedsheet will be provided (a sleeping bag liner can be useful for these journeys). Luggage space is limited (please see notes on Luggage & Packing). Washrooms are located

at either end of the carriage, with a squat style toilet and small wash basin. Hot water and tea are available from the attendants and the dining car. There are no showers on board.

RECOMMENDED RESEARCH

As an introduction to Iran, we suggest you look at the following titles - although this list should by no means be considered exhaustive or exclusive!

Guidebooks

- ▶ Odyssey Iran - Helen Loveday et al (Odyssey Guides)
- ▶ Iran - Pat Yale & Anthony Ham (Lonely Planet)
- ▶ Farsi (Persian) Iran Phrasebook - Yavar Dehghani (LP)
- ▶ Persepolis - Arthur Upham Pope
- ▶ Iranian Architecture - Silvia Mateson

Travelogues & Novels

- ▶ The Road to Oxiana - Robert Byron
- ▶ Persian Mirrors The Elusive Face of Iran - Elaine Sciolino
- ▶ Black on Black: Iran Revisited - Ana M Briongo

Turkmenistan

SPECIFIC PACKING ISSUES

The months of July and August in Turkmenistan are hot. Temperatures in the capital city range from 35 to 50 degrees celcius and clients should pack accordingly. Light, loose clothing and a hat are a must. When visiting the mosque in Ashgabad, men must wear long pants and a long sleeve shirt, and ladies must wear a headscarf, long skirt/pants and long sleeves. Your group leader will assist you with clothing regulations.

PHONE, FAX & INTERNET

Phone, Fax and Internet access in Turkmenistan is limited and where available the quality of these services are well below the usual standard and often prohibitively expensive. It is sometimes possible to use the internet at the Sheraton hotel in Ashgabad, 104,000 manat per hour, however you should assume that during your stay in Turkmenistan you will be out of contact- and notify friends and family.

MEALS & FOOD

There is a list of the included meals for your trip in the 'Summary Itinerary' - all other meals are at your own expense. Where meals are not included your Group Leader will recommend options for all budgets and taste, and provide opportunities to eat at traditional local restaurants. Standard central asian fare such as 'shashlig' (lamb, beef or mince on a skewer) is supplemented by some surprising local dishes including Caspian Sea sturgeon, vegetable and meat pastries and flat bread. Ashgabad has a range of modern western style restaurants and bars, as well as fresh fruit and vegetable markets and street vendors offering local treats. You should budget between US\$10-\$15 per day for meals if you want to eat at the upmarket restaurants in Ashgabad. If you eat your meals with locals at smaller restaurants and markets, you should budget between US\$2-\$5 per day for meals.

CURRENCY

The national currency of Turkmenistan, manat, has been rapidly de-valuing since the early 1990s. The official rate still stands at approximately 5,200 manat to the USD, however most street vendors and hotels will quote the black market rate of approximately 23,000 manat to the USD. Using the black market in Turkmenistan is illegal, and police are often on the lookout for tourists who approach money changers on the street. Your group leader will assist you in obtaining local currency for your stay in Turkmenistan.

Cash

The USD is the most recognised and accepted of all foreign currencies. It is important that you obtain USD notes in good condition (not torn or too worn, with no stamps, ink or other marks) and issued after 1996 as older or damaged USD notes are not accepted. Smaller denominations are less frequently needed now, and we would recommend you carry a mixture of \$10, \$20, \$50 and \$100 bills.

Travellers Cheques

We do not recommend this method of carrying funds since it is not always possible to change travellers cheques and where possible the process of cashing them is inconvenient and time-consuming. If you do wish to use Travellers Cheques, ensure they are well-known brands such as Thomas Cook or Diners Club and preferably in US Dollars. Please be aware that between 3% and 10% commission may be charged.

Credit Cards

Credit Card access is limited in Turkmenistan and we would recommend you take as much cash as you feel comfortable carrying to cover expenses on your journey. Mastercard and VISA are accepted for some purchases in large hotels and shops in major centres. Please contact your card issuer for current information regarding using these or other credit cards in Turkmenistan.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Turkmenistan's population of approximately 5 million people are predominantly Muslim (89%), with Eastern Orthodox (9%) still present after the Russian exodus. The people of Turkmenistan are of Turkmen (85%) ethnic descent, with some Uzbek (5%), Russian (4%) and various other ethnic groups present.

Travel in Turkmenistan affords a unique and intense experience, but it is important that you understand and abide by the guidelines detailed by your local guide. This is not a destination that suits all travellers. The personality cult of president Niyazov (Turkmenbashi.) is evident throughout the country, with statues, photos, books and his favorite sayings prominent on every street corner. There are restrictions on communications, photography in central Ashgabad, and tourism guides are monitored. Travel in Turkmenistan is challenging but rewarding. The history and amazing landscape reward the visitor who is able to see past the lack of tourism infrastructure and enjoy a remarkable travel experience.

VISAS

Customs and Immigration procedures in Turkmenistan are especially bureaucratic. Crossing a land border can take several hours as multiple forms and searches are conducted. Please note that there is a US\$10 administration fee payable on arrival in Turkmenistan. This is in addition to the basic visa cost. Please see notes on 'Visas and Sundowners Assistance' above.

TRAINS

Turkmenistan's trains are usually of a lower standard than services elsewhere in Central Asia. Overnight accommodation in trains is in four-share compartments. Compartments usually have 4 bunks and a reading table. These are local services and allow you to experience majority of the population. As with most of Central Asia, the attendants discretion overrides any existing tickets and locals will sleep wherever it is possible. Your Group Leader will ensure the group has the best possible bed allocations.

Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakstan & Tajikistan

SPECIFIC PACKING ISSUES

Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakstan and Tajikistan are secular and tolerant countries, however what is acceptable in central Tashkent may offend people in more traditional or rural areas. Locals usually dress up and appreciate long trousers and a short sleeve shirt for men, and a long skirt/trousers and short sleeve shirt for ladies. Shorts are permitted for ladies and men – but this is not standard local attire. See notes on 'What to Expect' below. The summer months of July and August can be especially hot, and light, loose clothing and a hat are a necessity. For travel in the high Pamirs sunglasses, a high-factor sunscreen and a lip protector (e.g. zinc cream) are essential as the sunlight is very intense at high altitudes.

PHONE, FAX & INTERNET

Internet access is available in most capitals from a growing number of internet cafes, however the connection speed is very slow. Reasonable quality phone and fax services are available from hotels, internet cafes and some international call centres, however they can be disproportionately expensive.

MEALS & FOOD

This journey covers an amazing range of cultures and landscapes, and the food available en-route reflects this diversity. From Kyrgyzstan's nomadic cooking heritage to Alexander the Greats 'pilov' and the Central Asian staple shashlik (meat on a skewer), the local cuisine will be an unforgettable experience. There is a list of the included meals for your trip in the 'Summary Itinerary' - all other meals are at your own expense. Where meals are not included your Group Leader will recommend options for all budgets and taste, and provide opportunities to eat at traditional local restaurants. Please see notes on 'Special Dietary Requirements and General Health' regarding the availability of vegetarian food and specific dietary needs.

CURRENCY

The Uzbekistani sum currently exchanges at approximately 1040 sum to the USD. Kyrgyzstan uses the Kyrgyzstani som, which exchanges at approximately 41 som to the USD. The currency in Kazakstan is the 'tenge' which currently exchanges at approximately 130 tenge to the USD. Tajikistan recently introduced the somoni which has been fairly stable in the last few years, varying between 2.90 and 3.15 somoni to the USD. Exchange rates in this region are especially susceptible to change, and before departure, you should check the current exchange rate. There are many websites, such as www.xe.com, that can provide useful information, as well as currency exchange and travel offices.

Due to potential difficulties in accessing funds whilst travelling, we recommend that you bring as much cash as you feel comfortable carrying, and have the remainder available by credit card.

Cash

Foreign currency is easily exchanged in hotels and at banks. USD\$ is the best recognised and accepted of all foreign currencies. It is important that you obtain USD notes in good condition (not torn or too worn) and issued after 1996 as older or damaged USD notes will not be accepted. Smaller denominations are less frequently needed now, and we would recommend you carry a mixture of \$10, \$20, \$50 and \$100 bills.

When changing money at exchange offices, have the exact amount you want to change ready. To avoid showing large tempting wads of USD in the street, carry your cash in a hidden money belt and have enough currency available for the days purchases – your Group Leader can assist you with budgets for daily expenditure. Always count the money that you receive before leaving the exchange kiosk. You may find it useful to carry a small calculator.

Please note that a black market for USD\$ cash exists in Uzbekistan and throughout Central Asia. In 2000 the official exchange rate for US\$ was substantially increased, reducing the incentive to use this method. Sundowners recommend that all travellers use official exchange outlets at banks and hotels.

Travellers Cheques

We do not recommend this method of carrying funds since the process of cashing them is inconvenient and time-consuming. If you do wish to use Travellers Cheques, ensure they are well-known brands such as Thomas Cook or American Express and preferably in US Dollars. Please be aware that between 3% and 10% commission may be charged. It is only possible to change travellers cheques at a few major banks and hotels in some of the major cities.

Credit Cards

'VISA' and 'Mastercard' are usually accepted for purchases in large hotels and shops in the main cities of this region but are not accepted in rural areas. A credit card cash advance from banks is possible in major cities, but this is a time-consuming process and availability cannot be guaranteed. Please contact your card issuer for information regarding using your credit cards in this region.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Uzbekistan's population of approximately 26 million people are predominantly Muslim (88% - mostly Sunnis) and Eastern Orthodox 9%. Ethnic Uzbeks make up 74.3% of the population with Russian (14.2%), and Tajik (4.4%) the other major ethnic groups.

Kyrgyzstan's population of approximately 5 million people are mostly Muslim (75%), with Russian Orthodox (20%) the other major religion. Ethnic Kyrgyz make up the majority of the population (64%), with Uzbek (13.8% - many situated in the Fergana Valley), Russian 12.5% and Dungan (1.1%), Ukrainian (1%) and Uygur (1%) ethnic groups also present. A significant portion of the population live a nomadic lifestyle.

Kazakhstan's population of approximately 15 million people are predominantly Muslim (47%) and Russian Orthodox (44%). Ethnic Kazakh (Qazaq-53.4%) and Russians (30%) make up the majority of the population.

Tajikistan's population of approximately 7 million people are Sunni Muslim (85%), and ethnic Tajik (64.9%) and Uzbek (25%).

Islam is the predominant religion, and plays an important role, being closely tied with cultural and ethnic identity. This region is secular and tolerant, especially in the cities, and the influence of Russian politics, infrastructure and immigrants has had a marked impact in the regions development.

TRAINS

Although trains in these countries are usually older and of a lower standard than those in Russia and China, train travel in this region is a rewarding experience. Travellers need patience, a sense of humor and a sense of adventure when travelling by train in this region. Seating arrangements are subject to the attendants discretion, and the services we use are local services often frequented by traders. The train from Tashkent to Moscow is famous for watermelon traders and their efforts to get fresh produce to Russian markets, and unsold produce back to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Facilities are basic on these services. Your group leader will ensure the best possible outcome for the group.

China – the Silk Route

China covers more than 9 million square kilometers, and has an amazing range of climates, cultures, languages and travel destinations. The Silk Road commonly departed from old 'Changan', present day Xian, and departed across the deserts to the oasis towns and bazaars in the west. The information provided here will give you an indication of the facilities available to the traveller along this route in China. If you are planning travel in China before or after your journey, please research each region you intend on travelling to as facilities in China vary greatly between regions.

PHONE, FAX & INTERNET

Phone and fax can be accessed in hotels, phone centres and some internet cafes. International call centres in Beijing are cheap however the quality and reliability of some phone lines can be below the necessary standard. Public internet access in China is subject to strict observation by the authorities. Internet can be used for US\$2-3 per hour in the hotels in Beijing, Xian, Turpan and Kashgar, or US\$0.50 in local internet cafes where available. Internet security is an issue along the Silk Route and we advise against using Internet Banking facilities whilst travelling.

MEALS & FOOD

From China's diverse regional dishes and extravagant flavours will be an unforgettable experience. There is a list of the included meals for your trip in the 'Summary Itinerary' - all other meals are at your own expense. Where meals are not included your Group Leader will recommend options for all budgets and taste, and provide opportunities to eat at traditional local restaurants. You should budget US\$5-8 in China for everyday meals, and have some money aside for special occasions such as 'Peking Duck' US\$10, local beers US\$0.20-US\$3 and tea houses

CURRENCY

The monetary unit in China is the Renminbi (approx. 8.2 = 1USD), also known as Yuan, and more colloquially as 'Quai'.

Cash

Foreign currency is easily exchanged in hotels, banks and money changing offices. The USD is the most recognised and accepted of all foreign currencies. It is important that you obtain USD notes in good condition (not torn or too worn, with no stamps, ink or other marks) and issued after 1996 as older or damaged USD notes are not accepted. Smaller denominations are less frequently needed now, and we would recommend you carry a mixture of \$10, \$20, \$50 and \$100 bills.

Travellers Cheques

Travellers Cheques are generally only accepted at major banks and hotels in China. Although it is possible to cash Travellers Cheques the process is very time-consuming and inconvenient. If you must use Travellers Cheques, ensure they are well-known brands such as Thomas Cook or American Express and preferably in US Dollars. Please be aware that between 3% and 10% commission may be charged.

Credit Cards

'VISA' and 'Mastercard' are usually accepted for purchases in large hotels and shops in Beijing, but are generally not accepted in the west or rural areas. Cash advances in local currency can be obtained from most Bank of China bank machines (ATMs) situated throughout China using 'VISA' and 'Mastercard'. Please note that bank machines in China only accept 4 digit PIN codes. A very limited number of bank machines are also connected to the Cirrus and Maestro networks – Please contact your card issuer for information regarding using these or your other credit cards.

WHAT TO EXPECT

China's population of almost 1.3 billion people are predominantly from the Han Chinese (91.9%) ethnic group and are practicing Daoists (Taoist) and Buddhists. There are many smaller ethnic groups such as Zhuang, Uygur, Hui, Yi, Tibetan, Miao, Manchu, Mongol, Buyi and Korean. Islam is the dominant religion in the west of China.

China has one of the fastest developing economies in the world, and progress in the major cities has seen elements of the "old China" bulldozed to make way for the new. Within the metropolis of Beijing, the industrial city of Xian, and the new façade of the Kashgar Sunday Market lies the true heart of China, its ancient history and traditions – waiting for those willing to discover. Take an inquisitive and open mind and your time in China will be rewarded with rich travel experiences.