

# THE FIVE STANS

## OVERVIEW

**Tour Date:** 3 September 2017 – 2 October 2017

**Tour Duration:** 30 days

**Tour Cost (\$AUD):** \$16,450

**Single Supplement (\$AUD):** \$3,350

*For more than 2000 years Central Asia has been the focus of ancient east-west trade routes known as the Silk Road. Our 28-day tour to this geographically diverse and historically fascinating region is perhaps one of the most magnificent tours in our repertoire. Join us for a truly memorable journey through Central Asia!*

*The Five Stans* is one of our most popular and cutting-edge tours, taking in the extraordinary countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. This part of the globe is home to great steppes, magical deserts, fertile valleys and some of the highest mountains in the world. The scenery is breathtaking and remarkably varied, with green/blue glacial lakes, saw-toothed mountains, red rock formations, sparkling rivers and rolling hills. These lands produced great scholars and conquerors, and were a 19th and 20th century geopolitical chess board on which the 'Great Game' was played out between Britain and Russia. Until recently shut off from the outside world and still shrouded in legend and mystery, the personality of each of the 'stans' makes an extraordinary journey into the greatest remaining story-book history in world travel today.

**Tour Fitness Level: Active**

## TOUR ITINERARY

### **03/09/2017 Australia – Guangzhou**

Depart from your chosen Australian airport on the flight to Guangzhou.

#### **Pullman Airport Hotel**

Guangzhou, China

### **04/09/2017 Guangzhou – Urumqi – Almaty (B)**

On arrival in Urumqi we connect with the flight to Almaty.

**Depart Guangzhou China Southern CZ 6001, 12.50**

**Arrive Urumqi 18.20**

**Depart Urumqi CZ 6011, 21.00**

**Arrive Almaty 20.30**

On arrival in Almaty we transfer to our hotel.

#### **Rixos Hotel**

Almaty, Kazakhstan

### **05/09/2017 Almaty (BLD)**

Situated in the shadows of the Tian Shan Mountains, Almaty is the cultural and commercial hub of Kazakhstan. Literally meaning 'rich with apples' the former capital is known as the 'Garden City' for its large areas of fragrant gardens and the majestic firs and spruce of the Tian Shan Mountains that surround it. Today we explore this beautiful city before moving high up to the outskirts to see the magnificent panorama of Almaty before us.

### **06/09/2017 Almaty – Chon Kemin Valley (Kyrgyzstan) (BLD)**

This morning we leave Almaty and soon begin to see the high peaks of the Tian Shan Mountains. Crossing the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border at Black River, we then follow the Chuy River, and, skirting briefly back into Kazakhstan, we reach the turnoff that will take us around the back of the mountains into the serene valley of Chon Kemin.

#### **Ashu Guesthouse**

Chon Kemin valley

### **07/09/2017 Chon Kemin Valley (BLD)**

This morning we explore the Chon Kemin valley, which is flanked by snow-capped mountains on both sides. The entire valley was formerly a collective farm and much of the Soviet rural atmosphere remains as we are transported back in time. During our walk we meet friendly and inquisitive locals and are also treated to a fantastic exhibition of horsemanship by the skillful Kyrgyz horsemen. In the afternoon we board a craft for two hours of exhilarating fun on the fast flowing Chon Kemin River. Passing through canyons and gorges we finally reach the basin and disembark.

### **08/09/2017 Chon Kemin – Karakol (BLD)**

After breakfast we depart for Karakol and soon begin to skirt the north shore of Issyk Kul Lake. The second largest saline lake after the Caspian Sea, Issyk Kul is virtually a basin within the Tian Shan Mountains. A combination of vast depth, salinity and underground thermal activity ensures the lake never freezes. Issyk Kul is also the second largest alpine lake in the world after Lake Titicaca. We take a boat ride on the lake before we continue around the north shore to the Cossack outpost of Karakol.

#### **Hotel Tagaytay**

Karakol

### **09/09/2017 Karakol – Jeti Oguz – Karakol (BLD)**

Today we travel to nearby Jeti Oguz. Here inside the canyon there are extraordinary formations of red sandstone cliffs known as the 'seven bulls'. We continue into the

Valley of Flowers before reaching the magnificent Oguz valley glacier, and in this pristine environment we enjoy a BBQ lunch before heading back to Karakol.

### **10/09/2017 Karakol (BLD)**

After breakfast we start to explore the town of Karakol. Formerly known as Przewalski, after one of the most intrepid explorers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Karakol today is a pretty Russian town filled with quaint cottages shaded by rows of huge poplar trees. We visit the fascinating memorial of Nikolai Przewalski, which charts his various expeditions, including the one to the steppes of central Asia in which he discovered a wild horse that was subsequently named after him – Przewalski's horse. An animal rehabilitation centre in Karakol currently has two of these very rare horses and we visit the centre before walking through Karakol itself.

### **11/09/2017 Karakol – Bishkek (BLD)**

This morning we drive around the south shore of Issyk Kul Lake. Although still ringed by the snowcapped mountains of Tian Shan, the south part of the lake is a very different landscape and at times the road skirts the very shoreline of the lake itself.

#### **Park Hotel**

Bishkek

### **12/09/2017 Bishkek (BLD)**

After breakfast we commence a walking tour of the city seeing some of Bishkek's interesting sights including Ala Too Square, the State History Museum, Oak and Victory Parks. The afternoon is at leisure giving you the chance to explore more of this czarist planned city; laid on a grid with wide boulevards flanked by irrigation canals and large trees.

### **13/09/2017 Bishkek – Dushanbe (BLD)**

After breakfast we transfer to Bishkek's Manas airport for our flight to Dushanbe.

**Depart Bishkek YK749, 09.15**

**Arrive Dushanbe 09.30**

Tajikistan, like Turkmenistan, can be considered one of the last unexplored frontiers in the world. Totally unspoilt by tourism, this delightful country is home to a warm and open-hearted populace. Dushanbe's original settlement dates back more than three thousand years, but the last decade has seen a huge transformation. Modern Dushanbe is a veritable 'garden city', with its wide boulevards and sleepy back streets lined with towering plantain and poplar. Many large parks are scattered throughout the city, watered by a network of canals and channels. On our arrival we explore the city.

#### **Serena Hotel**

Dushanbe

### **14/09/2017 Dushanbe – Hissar – Dushanbe (BLD)**

Today we head 30km out of Dushanbe to the fortress town of Hissar which lies on a wide mountain-fringed plain. Due to its strategic location and commanding views along the valley, the fortress was attacked numerous times in its long history, by such notables as Alexander the Great, Ghenghis Khan and Tamerlane. In more recent times it was a stronghold of the Islamic guerrilla fighters known as Basmachi. The Basmachi fought a guerrilla war against Soviet rule in central Asia from 1917 until 1924, when the Red Army eventually besieged the fortress. On our return to Dushanbe, the rest of the day is at leisure.

### **15/09/2017 Dushanbe – Iskander Kul Lake (BLD)**

This morning we board 4WD vehicles and drive high up into the Fann Mountains, following the Varzob River through some of Dushanbe's most affluent neighbourhoods before ascending into stunning landscapes. We then enter the Anzob tunnel, an extraordinary 5.5km tube through the mountains which leads us towards Iskander Kul Lake. Skirting the lake we come to Sary Tag village, located beneath rugged mountain peaks punctuated by glaciers, and perched amongst some of the most beautiful vistas in the world. After lunch with a local family we walk along the Karakol river gorge back to Iskander Kul Lake where we check into our chalets that are located on the edge of the lake itself.

#### **Iskander Kul Turbaza**

Iskander Kul Lake

### **16/09/2017 Iskander Kul Lake – Khujand (BLD)**

After breakfast we take a short walk along the river to a beautiful waterfall that tumbles into a ravine soon after the river leaves Iskander Kul Lake. We then drive north through spectacular landscapes, climbing high above the Zerafshan valley. The road then plunges into the Shahrston tunnel. Built by the Chinese and opened only in November 2012, this 5km tunnel is one of the greatest engineering feats in the world. Shortly afterwards we descend to the edge of the fertile Fergana valley which is lined with orchards and cotton fields, as we continue on to Khujand.

#### **Sogd Hotel**

Khujand

### **17/09/2017 Khujand – Tashkent (BLD)**

Khujand is Tajikistan's second largest city. It was founded 2,300 years ago and was the easternmost outpost of Alexander the Great. This morning we immerse ourselves in the labyrinth of the Khujand bazaar. In the afternoon we make the short journey to the Tajik-Uzbek border at Oybek. After customs and immigration formalities we make the two hour journey to the Uzbek capital of Tashkent.

#### **Tashkent Palace**

Tashkent

### **18/09/2017 Tashkent (BLD)**

Today we explore Tashkent, renowned for its fountains, parks and tree-lined streets. In 2007, Tashkent was named the cultural capital of the Islamic world as the city is home to numerous historic mosques and Islamic locations of interest. Tashkent also houses the earliest written Koran which has been in the city since 1924.

### **19/09/2017 Tashkent – Samarkand (BLD)**

After breakfast we transfer to the railway station and board the new high-speed train, the Afrosiab, which gets us to Samarkand in two hours and ten minutes.

#### **Depart Tashkent, 08.00**

#### **Arrive Samarkand 10.10**

Perhaps no name is more evocative of the Silk Road than Samarkand. This fabled city has fired the imagination of writers and poets from all over the world. On our arrival we explore the old town which is full of Uzbeks, Georgians, Tajiks and Russians, as well as many other central Asian nationalities.

#### **Hotel Grand Samarkand**

Samarkand

### **20/09/2017 Samarkand (BLD)**

This city of fables and legends is perhaps the most exotic on the Silk Road. Known as the 'Rome of the Orient', Samarkand was already a flourishing city when Rome

and Babylon were founded. The great Tamerlane was determined to make it the most beautiful and magnificent city in the world and today it is an enduring reminder of his legacy.

### **21/09/2017 Samarkand (BLD)**

Today's highlights include breathtaking Registan Square, where the finest collection of buildings in Asia dominates the most public place in Samarkand. Intricate tile-work and fluted cobalt tile domes provide a spectacular vista. In a wonderful day of sightseeing we also visit Tamerlane's mausoleum, the observatory of Ulugbek and the Shahi-Zinda Necropolis.

### **22/09/2017 Samarkand – Bukhara (BLD)**

This morning we make our way to Bukhara. On arrival we visit the Fayzulla Khodjaev house in the old section of the city. The house belonged to Fayzulla Khojaev's father, Ubaydullokhaja, a rich merchant who traded in karakul pelt in Russia, Germany and other countries. Fayzulla Khodjaev's house is a wonderful example of 19<sup>th</sup> century residential architecture.

#### **Minorai-Kalon Hotel**

Bukhara

### **23/09/2017 Bukhara (BLD)**

Today we explore Bukhara where, a thousand years ago, a thriving slave trade was conducted. This city is a treasure chest of ancient monuments. We see the Ark Fortress, the crumbling city wall and the superb Samanid Mausoleum, which dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. We walk through the narrow streets of the old city to the splendid covered bazaar, where we enjoy meeting the colourful locals.

### **24/09/2017 Bukhara (BLD)**

Surrounded by the vast expanse of the Kyzyl Kum Desert, Bukhara still retains the atmosphere of an ancient Silk Road city. Today we further explore this amazing settlement, strolling through its warren of narrow medieval streets to discover historic sites such as the 16<sup>th</sup> century trading domes, the beautifully decorated Bolo Hauz and Kalyon mosques, and the Labi Hauz pond, where old men in traditional dress while away the afternoon drinking tea and playing chess.

### **25/09/2017 Bukhara - Khiva (BLD)**

Early this morning we begin our 450-km drive across the Kyzyl Kum Desert. En-route we may spot wild camels, and eagles soaring high above the sand dunes. On arrival in Khiva we check into our hotel.

#### **Orient Star**

Khiva

### **26/09/2017 Khiva (BLD)**

The city of Khiva has retained its exotic image of a medieval oriental town thanks to the older part of the city, known as Ichan-Kala. All of Khiva's famous architectural monuments are located here. Among them are the Kunya-Ark Citadel and the Tosh-Khovli Palace, residence of the Khan, which has been preserved intact along with its ornate gates. The silhouettes of Ichan-Kala's towering minarets, hemmed in by flat-roofed houses, and surrounded by the powerful clay walls of the fortress, give a clear idea of a typical Central Asian feudal city.

### **27/09/2017 Khiva – Dashoguz – Darvaza (BLD)**

Today we drive to the Uzbek–Turkmen border at Shavat. After crossing the border we continue to Dashoguz where we visit the fort and have lunch. In the afternoon we depart for Darvaza, transferring to 4WD vehicles for the final leg of the journey to the

one of the most extraordinary sights in the world: the Darvaza gas crater. The Derweze area is rich in natural gas, and, whilst drilling in 1971, Soviet geologists tapped into a cavern filled with gas. The ground beneath the drilling rig collapsed, leaving a large hole with a diameter of 80 metres. To avoid poisonous gas discharge it was decided the best solution was to burn it off. Geologists had believed at the time that the fire would burn all of the gas in a matter of days. Forty-four years later the crater still burns! Locals call it "The Door to Hell".

### **Darvaza**

#### **28/09/2017 Darvaza – Ashgabat (BLD)**

After breakfast we drive to Ashgabat and on arrival, check into the hotel. The rest of the afternoon is at leisure.

#### **Grand Turkmen Hotel**

Ashgabat

#### **29/09/2017 Ashgabat (BLD)**

Today we visit the UNESCO World Heritage site of Nissa. This was the capital of the Parthian Empire and existed more than 2000 years ago. Then continue to a farm where we have lunch with the locals. In the afternoon we visit the Turkmenbashi Mausoleum.

#### **30/09/2017 Ashgabat (BLD)**

After breakfast we embark on a city tour of Ashgabat. After lunch we explore more of the gleaming golden-domed capital, often described as the North Korea of Central Asia, Turkmenistan is a 'stan' like no other. Late evening we transfer to the airport for homeward flight.

#### **01/10/2017 Ashgabat – Urumqi – Guangzhou – Australia**

**Depart Ashgabat China Southern CZ 6016, 00.45**

**Arrive Urumqi 07.10**

**Depart Urumqi CZ 6002, 09.40**

**Arrive Guangzhou 14.25**

On arrival in Guangzhou we connect with our China Southern flight to Australia.

#### **02/10/2017 Arrive Australia**

Today we arrive in Australia and connect to our preferred capital city.

## FAQs

### **Why is the tour Fitness Level rated as 'Active'?**

The tour involves a reasonable amount of walking, some of it in wilderness areas, climbing steps and stairs and getting on and off boats. Some of the areas we visit are quite remote and some of the accommodation is more basic due to this. In order to get the most from this tour it is important to have a good level of fitness.

### **I have heard that the borders are really difficult on this tour. How difficult are they?**

With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, borders in the 'Stans' can be very difficult. These countries are even more bureaucratic than the Soviet Union ever was. However, we have excellent contacts in these countries and indeed much of our paperwork will have already been completed before arrival thereby obviating the need to spend time filling in forms that are written only in Russian!

### **Is there a dress code for these countries?**

Although these are primarily Muslim countries, they are generally surprisingly liberal. Of them all, Tajikistan is the most conservative. Generally speaking there is no specific dress code for women; three-quarter pants, longer shorts, and short sleeved tops are fine.

### **What is the standard of hygiene like in Central Asia?**

The standard of hygiene in this area is of course not as high as in Australia. However all meals are included in this journey and we have hand-picked all of our eating establishments. Nonetheless, we highly recommend washing your hands with antiseptic hand gel at regular intervals and particularly before meals. Using this method we would not expect our guests to contract any stomach problems or bacterial infections.

### **Very few companies go to Central Asia? Is it dangerous?**

It is true that few companies go to Central Asia, though mostly because the visas are so difficult to obtain without a good network of contacts. Actually Central Asia is very safe in much the same way the Soviet Union was before its collapse. Central Asians are wonderfully hospitable and in countries such as Tajikistan and Turkmenistan the kindness which is shown to visitors can often be a humbling experience.

### **I have heard that visas are difficult to obtain. Is this the case?**

Though they are difficult to obtain, you need not worry about this at all as we organize all of the visas. However, we require your passport for 10 -14 days, preferably three months prior to departure, in order to process the visas.

### **Do I need vaccinations for this journey?**

No vaccinations are mandatory on this route but we would recommend you seek advice from your doctor. Tetanus should certainly be up to date and a flu jab is useful to help prevent colds.

### **What is the climate like at the various times of the year?**

We time our departures for spring and autumn which are delightful seasons in all of the 'Stans'. However it can be cooler in the evenings in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan and rather warmer at times in the Karakum Desert in Turkmenistan. Our pre-departure information booklets will provide specific temperature and weather guides for your trip.

### **What is the standard of the hotels?**

We choose our hotels for their central locations, which we believe is very important. They are generally 3-4 star quality (or better), comfortable and clean. However, in some areas of this tour it is not possible to adhere to this standard of accommodation. At Iskanderkul Lake accommodation for the one night's stay is basic and, of course, at the Darvaza Gas Crater there are no hotels at all. However, we spend the night in a tent just metres from the magnificent spectacle of the burning gas crater. The rest of the accommodation on the tour varies from stunning to very pleasant.

### **If I travel alone, do I have to pay the single supplement?**

If you do not want to share a hotel room with another person in the group, you will have to pay the single supplement. However, if you are willing to share we will team you up with another passenger of the same gender in the hotels. If a match-up is not possible, we will upgrade you at our expense.

### **Do I have to fly straight home from Turkmenistan?**

Because of the complexity of the visas, which are all date specific, we will all need to leave Turkmenistan together. However a stop in China in both directions is possible.

### **A lot of companies have many expensive optional extras on their tours. Do you?**

We don't believe in a lot of expensive 'optional tours'. Our itineraries are designed to make the best possible use of time and to include all the must-see sights, plus additional surprises. Therefore practically everything is included in the tour cost.

### **What currency do I need to take?**

US dollars is by far the best currency to take as they can easily be changed into the local currency in every country en-route. Some countries on some occasions will accept US \$ directly. The notes should be post-2006, clean and unmarked.

### **How much spending money do I need for the entire trip?**

Because almost everything is included, we would suggest an amount of US \$900 per person as being ample for the whole month-long journey.

### **Are credit cards acceptable?**

Credit cards are widely accepted throughout the journey and ATMs are available along the entire route. However, we don't recommend relying on these as your main source of funds. It is advisable to take some cash.

### **Are there internet and WiFi facilities en-route?**

Most of the hotels we use have internet and WiFi facilities, though not all.

### **Do mobile telephones work?**

Telstra and Optus mobiles work throughout the entire journey except in Turkmenistan. You will need to ensure you have global roaming. Contact your service provider for further details.

### **How much should we tip the guides and porters?**

There is no need to tip guides or porters as all tips and gratuities are included in the tour cost.