THE HIMALAYAN EXPRESS – Apr 2017

OVERVIEW

Tour Date: 7 April 2017 – 1 May 2017

Tour Duration: 25 days

Tour Cost ($AUD): $16,550

Single Supplement ($AUD): $3,250

In 2006 Travel Directors became the first western company in the world to escort groups on the Himalayan Express and today this trip is one of our most popular. Our 25-day itinerary is a spectacular journey by rail and road across the roof of the world.

Our journey begins in the eastern gateway of the Silk Road, Xian, where we visit the famous Terracotta Warriors, discovered by farmers in 1974. We then fly to Xining where we board the unique oxygenated train, 'The Himalayan Express', for the historic journey to the capital of one of the world's most mysterious countries, Tibet. En-route we pass through extraordinary mountain landscapes as the train rolls on to Lhasa. The next leg of our journey takes us by road into the very heart of the Himalaya as far as Rongbuk, the Everest base supply camp on the remote north face, then on to neighbouring Nepal, another fantastic Himalayan kingdom. Finally we venture to an even less-visited and completely unspoilt nation, the ancient Kingdom of Bhutan – the world's last Shangri-La!

Tour Fitness Level: Active

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TOUR ITINERARY

07/04/2017 Australia – Singapore
Depart Australia from your chosen airport to Singapore.

08/04/2017 Singapore – Xian (D)
On arrival in Singapore we connect with our flight to Xian via Guangzhou.
Depart Singapore SQ 850, 08.20
Arrive Guangzhou 12.20
Depart Guangzhou China Southern CZ 3219, 18.30
Arrive Xian 21.10
After completing customs and immigration formalities we transfer to our hotel.
Grand Mercure Hotel
Xian

09/04/2017 Xian (BLD)
Today we visit the extraordinary site of Qin Shihuang's Terracotta Warriors, known as the eighth Wonder of the World. This incredible 'army' consists of 6,000 life-size terracotta figures, which were discovered by farmers digging a well in 1974. The visit is an unforgettable experience. After lunch we visit the Huaqinq hot springs that were first recorded during the Zhou Dynasty, more than 3,000 years ago. In the evening we have the chance to experience a cultural show dating back to the Tang Dynasty of more than 1,000 years ago.

10/04/2017 Xian (BLD)
Today we continue our tour of Xian with a visit to the superb Shanxi Provincial Museum and the famous Wild Goose Pagoda.

11/04/2017 Xian – Xining – Tibet (BL)
This morning we transfer to the airport for our short flight to Xining.
Depart Xian China Eastern Airlines MU 2313, 07.35
Arrive Xining 09.00
On arrival in Xining we explore the city before transferring to the railway station where we board the Himalayan Express for our thrilling journey to Lhasa. The oxygenated train is the first to link China and Tibet and the 1,200-km journey is a truly memorable experience. The track is built largely on permafrost, with four-fifths laid at an altitude of more than 4,000m. The highest point, between Qinghai and Lhasa, reaches 5,072m.
Depart Xining Train Station, 14.05

12/04/2017 Onboard train – Lhasa (D)
Early morning we arrive in Golmud where two enormous locomotives are attached to the front of the train to haul us up to the Himalayan Plateau and on to Lhasa. Treeless plains give way to snow-capped mountains and we pass by the world's highest lake and through the world's highest tunnel as our incredible journey continues. Finally, late afternoon, the train pulls into the Tibetan capital at the conclusion of its epic trip.
Arrive Lhasa 12.00
On arrival in Lhasa we transfer to our hotel.
Brahmaputra Hotel
Lhasa

13/04/2017 Lhasa (BLD)
Above the banks of the Lhasa River at an altitude of 3,760m and surrounded by beautiful landscapes, lies the mysterious city of Lhasa which is dominated by the extraordinary architectural wonder, the Potala Palace. Often referred to as 'the bright pearl in the roof of the world', the palace is the traditional winter home of the Dalai Lama. It stands 117m tall, with walls more than three metres thick, and has more than 1,000 rooms. After lunch we visit the old city of Lhasa. This fascinating marketplace is often referred to as 'the window of Tibet', as it showcases Tibetan customs and culture.

14/04/2017 Lhasa (BLD)
Today we visit Norbulinka Park. From the mid-18th century each successive Dalai Lama used the park and palace as a summer residence. All religious and political affairs were carried out here and in 1994 UNESCO granted it World Heritage status. In the afternoon we visit the Lhasa Hospital of Tibetan Medicine where we learn about the use of herbs, plants and root vegetables in this ancient science.

15/04/2017 Lhasa (BLD)
After breakfast we continue to explore this fascinating city. One of today's highlights is a visit to the extraordinary Sera Monastery. As a part of their study, lamas here must participate in debates to further their comprehension and proceed to more advanced levels of study. The debating traditions in the Sera Monastery are unique and provide an amazing spectacle. In a battle of words, the lamas supplement their efforts by using a variety of gestures including clapping their hands, pushing their partners for an answer, or plucking their prayer beads to win the virtue of the Buddha.

16/04/2017 Lhasa – Gyangtse (BLD)
Today we begin our amazing journey across the Himalayan Plateau, driving 280 km through magnificent countryside to the ancient city of Gyangtse. En-route we picnic by the beautiful turquoise waters of Yamdruk Lake and, in the afternoon, pass the 5000m Kanola Glacier before reaching Gyangtse early evening.
Gyangtse Hotel
Gyangtse

17/04/2017 Gyantse – Tingri (BLD)
After breakfast we drive along the Friendship Highway to the remote town of Tingri. This is another day of awe-inspiring scenery, and we make many scenic stops before getting our first glimpse of magnificent Mount Everest. We arrive at Tingri as the sun begins to set behind her northern face.
Everest Hotel
Tingri

18/04/2017 Tingri – Everest Base Camp – Tingri (BLD)
After breakfast we drive 100 km to Everest Rongbuk Base Camp. The mountain stands before us, soaring 8,848m into the heavens. There are few sights on earth that challenge the imagination in quite the same way. In the afternoon we visit Rongbuk, which was once the largest monastic centre in the region. It is a settlement that all mountaineers must pass through when attempting the treacherous north face of Everest.

19/04/2017 Tingri – Shigatse (BLD)
Today we drive to Tibet's second-largest city, Shigatse. Meaning 'fertile land', Shigatse is more than 600 years old and sits at the confluence of the Yarlong Tsangpo and Nyangchu rivers. It is the traditional seat of the Punchen Lama and is an important stop for pilgrims travelling between Lhasa and western Tibet.
Tashi Choe Ta Hotel
Shigatse

20/04/2017 Shigatse – Lhasa (BLD)
After breakfast we begin our five-hour journey through stunning landscapes to Lhasa. On arrival in Lhasa we check in to our hotel, and after lunch the afternoon is free to further explore the city and markets.
Brahmaputra Hotel
Lhasa

21/04/2017 Lhasa – Kathmandu (BLD)
This morning we transfer to the airport for our flight to Nepal.
Depart Lhasa Sichuan Airlines 3U 8719, 10.55
Arrive Kathmandu, 10.10
After clearing customs, we board our coach for the 20km drive to Dhulikhel. Here we have lunch in the gardens at New Horizon, with spectacular views over the Himalayas. After lunch we drive into the bustling centre of Kathmandu and check in to our hotel.
Hotel Radisson
Kathmandu

22/04/2017 Kathmandu (BLD)
The fertile Kathmandu Valley lies at an altitude of 1,200 – 1,500m. Although small in size, no fewer than seven UNESCO World Heritage sites are to be found within the valley. These architectural wonders are monuments to Nepal's past prosperity and artistry, which essentially make the whole area a living museum. This morning we take a leisurely tour of Kathmandu and the afternoon is free to continue exploring this extraordinary city.

23/04/2017 Kathmandu (BLD)
Today is extremely special as we immerse ourselves in Nepalese culture, meeting the Kathmandu locals and attending an extraordinary festival.

24/04/2017 Kathmandu – Thimphu (Bhutan) (BD)
This morning we transfer to the airport for our flight to Bhutan.
Depart Kathmandu Druk Air KB 205, 09.10
Arrive Paro 10.25
Our flight across the Himalaya to Bhutan is dramatic, to say the least. The views are simply astonishing as we soar above the highest mountains on earth. Often referred to as 'the last Shangri-La', Bhutan's isolation has protected it from western influences, leaving the country blissfully untouched. The sparsely populated kingdom has a rich cultural heritage that is unique in the Himalaya and a visit here is a step into a timeless and magical world. On arrival in Paro we make the beautiful two-hour drive to the capital, Thimphu.
Hotel Druk
Thimphu

25/04/2017 Thimphu (BLD)

Today we explore Thimphu, starting with the Folk and Heritage Museum that displays the lives of typical Bhutanese farmers in the medieval period. Bhutan is world-famous for its textiles and later today we visit the Textile Museum. The afternoon is free to explore the downtown area of this charming and relaxing capital.

26/04/2017 Thimphu – Punakha (BLD)
This morning we drive across the Dochula Pass, which offers spectacular views over the eastern Himalaya. En-route we pass through fascinating villages and rice fields, where farmers still practise traditional methods, before arriving in Punakha, the former capital city of Bhutan.
Hotel Zangtho Pelri
Punakha

27/04/2017 Punakha (BLD)
After breakfast we visit the Temple of the Divine Madman. The 20-minute walk takes us through a fascinating Bhutanese village and picturesque countryside before reaching the hill where the temple is located. The views from here are breathtaking. Afterwards we explore the Punakha Dzong, a stunning fortress located on the confluence of the Mo Chuu and Pho Chuu rivers. Originally this fortress housed 600 monks; today it is the winter home of the central monk body.

28/04/2017 Punakha – Paro (BLD)
We leave beautiful Punakha this morning and drive north, returning to the magnificent Paro Valley.
Tiger Nest Resort
Paro

29/04/2017 Paro (BLD)
Our final day in Bhutan is an extra-special one: we visit the breathtaking Taktsang Monastery, more commonly known as the 'Tiger's Nest'. Clinging to a mountain ledge, this world-famous monastery is steeped in myths and legends. It is said that in the 7th century, Guru Rinpoche flew from Tibet on the back of a flying tigress and established Buddhism in Bhutan here. It is a 90-minute trek up to the monastery with spectacular views all the way. If you wish you can hire a horse to make the ascent, or you can simply stay put and admire this extraordinary construction from the valley below.

30/04/2017 Paro – Bangkok – Singapore (B)
This morning we transfer to the airport for our flight to Singapore via Bangkok.
Depart Paro Druk Air KB 140, 11.45
Arrive Bangkok 17.15
Depart Bangkok Singapore Airlines SQ 981, 21.00

01/05/2017 Singapore – Australia
Arrive Singapore 00.25
In Singapore we connect with the flight to our chosen destination in Australia.

THE HIMALAYAN EXPRESS

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 sex and similar age in the hotels. If a match-up is not possible, we will upgrade you at our expense.

Why are meals not included on the trains and how much do they cost?

We don't include the meals on the train because we feel it is too regimented and, as you are not exercising, you don't need so much food. Meals on the train are wholesome and cheap (around US $5-8) and very good. It should also be noted that the total travelling time from Xining to Lhasa is approx. 22 hours.

What are the compartments and facilities like on the train?

There are two types of compartments that we use on the train. The first is 4-berth, which we endeavour to provide. Typically these are 2 lower bunks and 2 upper bunks. If 4-berth compartments are not available for the entire group we would provide 6-berth compartments. In this case there would be only 4 people occupying the cabin. In the 4-berth carriages there are 2 toilets, one Chinese-style and the other Western. In the 6-berth carriages both toilets are Chinese-style.

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

Because almost everything is included, we would suggest an amount of AUD $500 and USD $300 per person as being ample for the whole month-long journey. In China and Nepal, Australian dollars can be changed into local currency in most areas. However in some remote areas of Tibet it is better to have US dollars.

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.

This tour spends several days at altitude. Is this a problem?

Our leaders have been to altitude many times and are very competent in dealing with high elevation. Generally we don't have too many problems with altitude sickness, but we believe that preparation is very important. Perhaps the key factor in helping the body to adjust is water. Travel Directors supply unlimited water for the whole period while in Tibet. In addition, all our leaders carry pulse oximeters, which enable us to monitor everyone's progress and adjustment to altitude.

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

The climate varies greatly along the route, depending on the time of year. Our pre-departure booklets will provide expected weather tables for the whole year.

Do I need to buy a lot of expensive clothing for this tour?

The weather in China, Lhasa, Nepal and Bhutan will mainly be warm so light cotton clothing is recommended. In Gyangtse, Shigatse and Everest Base Camp the layer system of clothing, together with a good windproof jacket, will suffice. A hat, sun screen and good comfortable walking shoes will be necessary.

If I wanted to stop in Singapore or Bangkok either on the way or on the return would it be possible?
Stops can be made both on the outbound in Singapore and the return in Bangkok.

Is the visa for Bhutan difficult to obtain?
A Bhutanese visa is very difficult to obtain but because we arrange all this paperwork there is no need to worry. We also organise the Chinese and Nepalese visas. However, we require your passport three months before departure in order to process the visas.

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.

Is the water safe to drink en-route and what is the general standard of hygiene?
We err on the side of caution on all of our tours and advise travellers to drink only bottled water. This is easy to obtain everywhere and indeed Travel Directors supply all water in Tibet. The standard of hygiene is surprisingly high along the entire route.

Is it possible to have a shower on the train?
No. There are no showers on the train, however the washrooms are spacious and there are two per carriage. Hot water is always available so keeping clean is not a problem.

What is the standard of the hotels?
We choose our hotels for their central locations, which we believe is very important. The Himalayan Express tour goes to some remote locations, such as Everest Base Camp and we always endeavour to use the best hotels available in such areas. Therefore the standard of hotels on this journey will vary from 3-star to 5-star. All hotels have en-suite facilities.

Are credit cards acceptable?
Credit cards and ATMs are available in China and Nepal and some parts of Tibet. Bhutan does not have any ATMs and credit cards are seldom accepted. Therefore you will need US dollars if you wish to buy any souvenirs in Bhutan.

Are there Internet facilities en-route?
Most of the hotels we use have internet facilities. There are also many internet cafes in the near vicinity of the hotels offering cheaper access.

Do mobile telephones work?
Optus mobiles work in all places except for Bhutan, while Telstra mobiles work in all places except for Nepal. You will need to ensure you have global roaming. Contact your service provider for further details.

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