

ITINERARY

Day 1 Bishkek We will rendezvous in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital, at our centrally-located hotel, with nearby bars and restaurants. The rest of the day is free to rest or relax by the hotel pool. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 2 Bishkek Ringed by majestic snow-capped mountains Bishkek is a pleasant, laidback city which has come a long way since its beginnings, in the 19th century, as a military outpost on one of the caravan routes through the mountains of the Tian Shan. We have a full day's escorted tour of Bishkek including places such as the State Historical Museum (nee Lenin Museum) and Osh Bazaar. For those who wish there is also the option to visit Ala-Archa Canyon – a National Park about 30km from Bishkek – for the chance to walk amidst wild and magnificent scenery, before we meet up in the evening for a trip briefing over dinner. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 3 & 4 Naryn to Kashgar The 700km journey from Bishkek across the Tourgout Pass to the Chinese border and Kashgar must rank as one of the most exciting in Asia, with the idiosyncratic border post itself being one of the remotest. In places the most basic of roads cut a route through isolated mountain terrain, making road travel in this part of the world physically demanding but not without its rewards. The scenery is often stunningly beautiful and the nomadic culture that we come face to face with is fascinating, being largely untouched by the modern world. On the first day we wind our way up through the Shoestring Gorge deeper into the world of Kyrgyz nomads. After passing through the sleepy village of Kokchor we continue on into the mountains across the lush, alpine pastures that surround Lake Issyk-Kul. Having spent the night in the remote town of Naryn, some occasionally rough roads take us higher into mountains through a dramatic landscape of frozen lakes, and fields of bubbling mud, en route to the Kyrgyz border. Procedures at this desolate border are notoriously slow but once we have completed all the necessary formalities we continue to the arch that marks the official border and the top of the Tourgout Pass (3,752m). Here we will be met by our Chinese guide, who will provide a change of transport and facilitate our entry into China. There is a marked change of scenery on the Chinese side of the pass, as we drive through rose-coloured canyons to the Chinese border post. We then drive another 60 or so kilometres, through small villages lined with poplar trees, to reach Kashgar, the once great oasis stronghold of the Uighurs. *Overnight – guesthouse/hotel*

Day 5 Kashgar The name 'Kashgar' evokes images of an exotic desert outpost. As China's westernmost city, Kashgar, has seen rapid redevelopment of its historic skyline over the last fifteen years, however at street level the spirit of the last 2,000 years just about lives on, with many aspects of daily life still firmly rooted in the city's past. We spend the day exploring the main sites and back streets of the old and new towns, and begin at the Abakh Hoja Mausoleum – a remarkable Taj Mahal like structure with interesting connections to the 'Fragrant Concubine'. In the crowded, narrow passageways behind the vast Id Kah Mosque we can get a real feel for the Uighurs' traditional and modern ways of life. Elsewhere, the remaining buildings of the British and Russian consulates (both of which are now hotels) provide a reminder of the days of the 'Great Game' when the town's strategic position was coveted by the governments of more than one expansionist empire. It was at the Chinnibagh, the old British Consulate that Aurel Stein would rest in the company of the British Consul McCartney and his family at the start or end of his long desert voyages. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 6 Kashgar & Yarkand From before sunrise each Sunday, tens of thousands of Uighurs, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tatars, Huis and Mongols, from all over Central Asia, gather on the banks of the Tuman River to do business. After an early breakfast we join the convoys of trucks, cyclos, motorbikes, donkey-carts and horses en route to the 'mother of all bazaars', though the market has of late been somewhat sanitised by the Chinese. We wander among stalls selling an impressive array of hats, clothing, fabrics, rugs, pottery, carvings, ornamental knives and ephemera before making our way to the livestock market, now situated slightly out of town, where skilled horsemen gallop through the crowds, vigorously testing the steeds that have been brought for sale. In the afternoon we leave behind the crowded, noisy streets of Kashgar and begin our journey south skirting the desert towards Khotan, passing through the knife-making town of Yenisgar, before making our nightstop at Yarkand (Shache), once the final staging post on the journey from British India, just 200 miles to the south over the Karakorum Mountains. If there is time we will visit the mausoleum of Amanisahan, a famous Uighur poetess (1526-1560) credited with preserving the 'Twelve Muqam' (melodic formulas derived from Arabia and used in traditional Uighur music). *Overnight – hotel*

Day 7 Khotan In the morning we continue our drive to Khotan. It was to the Kingdom of Khotan that the jealously guarded secret of Chinese sericulture (silk production) was first lost, when the cocoon of a single silkworm was secreted in the dress of a Chinese princess as she was taken away and married off to a Khotanese king. Today Khotan is equally renowned for its fine carpets, and is famous throughout China for its high quality jade – the rare Sheep Fat Jade (Yang Zhi Yu) is considered to be the finest of them all. We have the rest of the day to explore Khotan. Its surrounding area, one of the remotest in Xinjiang, is dotted with the ruins of lost cities such as Melikawat, the abandoned ancient capital of the pre-Islamic Yutian kingdom, perched on the banks of the White Jade River. Depending on our arrival time we may visit the Cultural Museum where the main attraction of the Historical Relics Ancient Corpses Exhibit is the 1,500 year old mummified remains of a 10 year old girl and a 35 year old man. *Overnight – hotel*

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Day 8 Yutian Although largely arid (Xinjiang as a whole has no measurable rainfall 93% of the year) as we travel eastward there is a surprisingly diverse topography within the ever changing and often hauntingly beautiful desert landscape. Far to the south marking the border with Tibet, run the high snow-covered peaks of the Kunlun Mountains, while the bewitching expanse of the Taklamakan Desert stretches relentlessly to the north. Road conditions have improved in recent years but in some sections sand may have blown across the road, possibly slowing our progress. While the environment beyond the road can be inhospitable to outsiders the inhabitants of the small and windswept settlements are invariably welcoming and friendly, as we will no doubt find out tonight when we stay in the ancient oasis of Yutian. The town has a traditional Uighur bazaar as well as a statue of Mao with a Uighur electrician who has the dubious honour of being the only man in China to share a plinth with the late Great Helmsman.

Overnight – hotel

Day 9 Keriya River Leaving the main highway behind we begin our journey north into the desert following the Keriya Valley and passing small Uighur settlements on the way. From now on the tracks will be on sand and it may on occasion be necessary to help out with a little bit of gentle jeep-pushing! In the afternoon we will stop for the night setting up our first camp at a beautiful site on the banks of the Keriya Darya (*darya* is Uighur for 'river').

Overnight – camp

Day 10 Tongguzbasti Our final day of driving takes us across a sandy landscape of poplar trees, stunted pine and scrub. After around 120km we reach the last populated outpost here, the town of Tongguzbasti (Daheyan). This remarkable desert village is home to people who have become known as 'the Lost Tribe of the Taklamakan', around 50 families in all, and whose existence only became known to China's authorities during the 1980's. They were perhaps the only people in China not to have benefitted from the thought of Chairman Mao and the joys of the Cultural Revolution. There are still some older residents who have never travelled even as far as Yutian. Since their discovery, there have now been built some brick dwellings, a school and a village hall. Most of the houses however are still constructed on a light poplar wooden frame with walls and roofs made of lattice and mud. They no doubt look much the same as their half-buried predecessors from two thousand years before. For all who live out here the conditions remain quite tough.

Overnight – very basic hotel/camp

Days 11 - 16 Desert Today, accompanied by our Uighur guides and camels we set off on our trek across the desert leaving the Keriya riverbed behind. As we travel westward the vegetation which is mainly made up of Tamarisk and Desert Poplar becomes increasingly sparse and soon we find ourselves in a landscape of soft, rolling sand dunes. At the end of our first day we should reach Karadong, abandoned in the 4th century AD until its rediscovery by Sven Hedin in 1896 and Stein in 1908. From here on our pace will be the gentle pace of the caravan and each day we will walk a leisurely 6 or 7 hours, approximately 15 to 20 km. Occasionally we have to climb up and over dunes but generally the going is quite easy with the sand on the windward side being compacted by the wind and easy to walk on. As we progress it may feel as if we are almost becoming part of the surreal landscape as we bear spellbound witness to the ever changing play of the desert light. Occasionally we come across ancient forests with desiccated trees over a thousand years old. Going far back into prehistory one would have found in the Tarim Basin a sea as vast as the Mediterranean. Later, after that great collision of continents that hoisted the Himalayas high into the sky the sea drained away, after which the whole area became forested and alive with animals such as wild deer and boar. Today in the interior, and mercifully for the Caravaneer, not even flies survive. Occasionally we will come across salt pans, evidence of water close beneath the surface – water can usually be found less than ten metres below ground level and though it is often brackish, after wells are dug by our Uighur guides, it is enthusiastically lapped up by thirsty camels. Each day we will endeavour to pitch camp mid to late afternoon leaving plenty of time to take in the sunset, enjoy desert life around the campfire, and in the spirit of Omar Khayam, marvel at the breathtakingly bright stars. Heading ever westward we will settle into the rhythm of the caravan as we make our way through a harem of untouched virgin dunes often with the sight of the Mazartagh Mountains off in the distance.

Overnights - camp

Day - 17 Mazartagh Our last day of walking brings us ever closer to the Tibetan Fort at Mazartagh, the ultimate goal of our desert caravan. After reaching the river flats of the Khotan Darya, its low banks covered by the dense fur of gnarled trees, another couple of hours walk brings us to the foot of the bare, gaunt, russet cliffs of marl and alabaster that mark the end of the Mazartagh chain of mountains. On top sits the desert crown that is Fort Mazartagh and which in its present form dates from around 790AD being built shortly after the Chinese at Khotan surrendered to the superior Tibetan forces. A smaller structure probably existed before this time and the fort is testament to the site's strategic importance dominating the once flourishing north-south trade route between Aksu and Khotan. When the Russian explorer Prejevaslky (who gave his name to the prototype wild horse but not of course to the subject of a wilder theory that he was in fact the father of Joseph Stalin!) passed this way in 1885 he dismissed the structure as the recent work of an Islamic warlord. It wasn't until the no doubt olfactorily challenging descent of Stein's trusty trowel into the fort's rich refuse tip, below its eastern wall, that the site's true history was revealed. For in that hidden midden, past which Prejevaslky had ridden oblivious, was found a true treasure trove of tablets, woodslips and manuscripts,

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written not only in Tibetan, but also in Chinese, Khotanese, Brahmi, Sogdian, Arabaic and Uighur, together clearly showing the international nature of trade along the Silk Road at that time. We will have time in the afternoon and early evening to climb up to and explore the site and, as so many Tibetan warriors must have done in days gone by, to gaze out over the vastness of dunes and back across the distance we have trekked in the last seven days. The evening will be time for celebration as we meet our drivers for tomorrow's journey and bid farewell to the true Caravaneers who have helped us on our way so far. *Overnight – camp*

Day 18 Kuqa This morning we begin our journey out of the desert and head north following the Khotan Darya as it snakes its way north soon reaching a new desert highway that all being well will bring us to Kuqa before sundown. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 19 Korla Starting early we will make a visit to the impressive Buddhist grottoes at Kizil said to be the earliest major Buddhist cave complex in what is now called Xinjiang (*lit. 'New Border'*) and which are still home to some stunning frescoes. Continuing on we drive through ever-changing desert scenery eventually arriving at Korla, a flourishing industrial town where we will spend the night. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 20 Turfan This morning we travel through some geologically fascinating landscapes before making our descent into the Turfan Depression, some 150m below sea level. Known by the Chinese as Huozhou 'the Land of Fire' (having a highest recorded temperature of 121.3°F and very low humidity) the Turfan Basin is widely famed for the wine and sultanas harvested from its vineyards. At 80m below sea level it is a lively agricultural oasis, making it a great place to sit and relax beneath the town's many grape trellises, sharing a bottle of wine and a Hami melon while being carried gently back through the centuries by the plaintive desert songs of the Uighur. The very existence of the city and outlying districts has been made possible by an ingenious, gravity-fed irrigation system comprising over 1,000 hand-dug *karez* wells and 3,000 miles of underground channels, some of which were constructed more than 2,000 years ago. Turfan's long history is evidenced by the nearby ruins of the 2nd century garrison town at Jiaohe which we will aim to visit this afternoon and those of the former (9th century) Uighur capital of Gaochang which include the remains of the city walls – in parts up to 12m deep. The Uighurs were the first of the nomadic Turkic tribes to turn to pastoralism when, in the ninth century, they arrived at the oases of the Taklamakan from their erstwhile home in the Orkhon valley area of Mongolia. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 21 Urumqi On our way out of town, having explored the principal sites within the city, we visit the relatively modern Afghani-style Sugong mosque (c1777), with its 44m high 'bullet' minaret. If there is time, we will venture a little further afield to reach the town of Beziklik and the much plundered Thousand Buddha caves, travelling through the beautiful Flaming Mountains – so named because the purply-red sandstone ridges appear to be set on fire by the heat haze of the midday sun. In the afternoon we take a relatively short drive to Xinjiang's lively provincial capital of Urumqi. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 22 Urumqi Today has been left free for relaxation and individual exploration. Highly recommended is a visit to the Xinjiang Museum to witness the incredible display of ancient 'Celtic' mummies including the 'Beauty of Loulan' and 'Cherchen Man', possible evidence of a time when even areas of the Far East were part of Greater Celtica! Also of interest are the city's vibrant and colourful Uighur Market, night market and, farther afield, Heavenly Lake. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 23 Bishkek Today we board our flight for the return journey to Bishkek. The rest of the day has been left free. In the evening we will come together for a farewell meal. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 24 Our Caravan concludes...

Practical Information

Price (excluding international flights) – £2,985 per person on a twin share basis

Group size & Leader This group will comprise between 6 and 12 group members, and will be escorted throughout by Mandarin-speaking Chief Caravaneer Phil Colley, accompanied by Chinese and Uighur guides, drivers, cameleers and cook and local guide in Kyrgyzstan.

Transport In Kyrgyzstan we will travel in a private air-conditioned minibus. In China we will use a combination of private bus and 4 x 4s with a truck to carry equipment. In keeping with the vastness of the area and the distances between oases there are some long drives on this trip although where possible these have been kept to a minimum. All participants should be comfortable with this and be aware that driving conditions and standards in China are often well below those to be found in the West. In particular roads are often bumpy and potholed and in the desert not asphalted and throughout Xinjiang roads can be subject to landslides, roadworks and detours that can interfere with the best laid itinerary. This also goes for unfavourable weather conditions and flight delays and schedule changes. For the trek we will use camels for portage. Although travelling by foot is preferable there is the possibility, at extra cost, of riding a camel subject to having suitable insurance and competent riding ability.

Trekking Conditions The desert walking is all technically simple but the going on the sand dunes can occasionally be tiring and participants should be in good physical condition with the necessary stamina and physical forbearance to cope with extremely varying conditions and an alien environment. Trekking sticks with a wide disc base can be useful on the dunes. October is considered to be the optimum time to undertake this trek with pleasant daytime temperatures and mild nights. However weather is always unpredictable and temperatures can vary greatly with days as hot as 35°C or more and nights potentially below freezing; in terms of clothing and equipment these conditions need to be prepared for. All participants will be required to provide a medical certificate attesting to their physical ability to undertake the trip.

Accommodation In most places we will stay in good, though sometimes basic, tourist class hotels. In Naryn, where accommodation options are more limited, we will spend one night at a guesthouse. Throughout the region, away from the principal cities, accommodation has improved greatly but can still be unpredictable. Our wiser expectations should not therefore be overly high as, although they are generally clean and comfortable, conditions in terms of comfort and service in Chinese hotels are often much more basic than those found in the West. In the desert we will sleep in two-person tents. A single supplement including single occupancy of tents is available at a cost of GBP256. Participants will need to provide their own sleeping bags and sleeping mats.

Food We enjoy full board while in Xinjiang including mineral water on trek. Despite the fame of its cuisine diners can sometimes have mixed fortunes in China, although generally the food is substantial and often excellent. Uighur specialities when found include freshly baked poppy seed, sesame and fennel breads and *matang* walnut loaf, kebabs, *samsa* meat pasties, spiced *suoman* noodles and *chuchura* dumplings, barrel-churned vanilla ice-cream *maroji*, and raisin-filled *kharsen meghriz* doughnuts, washed down with nutmeg-laced green tea or *dogh* – a syrup, yoghurt and iced water cocktail. In Kyrgyzstan only breakfasts are included, thus allowing group members the opportunity to eat at a variety of restaurants according to their particular tastes and budgets.

Health Formalities There are no statutory inoculation requirements for visiting China or Kyrgyzstan unless arriving from an area where Yellow Fever is endemic, whereupon an up-to-date vaccination certificate is required. It is however strongly recommended that you consult your doctor or travel clinic prior to departure, and follow their advice regarding immunisation and any other health considerations for travel to these areas. Please also see 'Trekking Conditions' above.

Luggage requirements and Special equipment More detailed information on what to pack is included in the 'Pre-departure Information' (PDI) that will be sent to all group members closer to the date of departure. It will be possible to leave luggage not required on trek with our ground staff and be reunited with it once the trek has concluded.

Insurance Passport & Visa It is a condition of travelling with The Oriental Caravan that each group member be fully insured against medical and personal accident risks (including the cost of repatriation) and have adequate baggage cover. Please see our booking conditions for further details. All nationalities require a passport valid for at least 6 months beyond the date of final departure from China. All group members will require visas to enter China and Kyrgyzstan which must be obtained before travel commences. Further details will be provided on enquiry or upon booking.

This dossier, and the itinerary it describes, have been carefully compiled and are provided in good faith. As with any such journey to a remote destination unusual and unexpected conditions can occur at any time and this type of tour can be subject to unforeseen changes; to fully enjoy this kind of travel it is, necessary for participants to accept its inherent dangers and, on occasion, be prepared to adopt a certain amount of flexibility.

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