

# CENTRAL ASIA: BIRDING THE SILK ROAD UZBEKISTAN, KAZAKHSTAN & KYRGYZSTAN

MAY 2-24, 2023

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*In the heart of Central Asia, we find the attractive countries of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Kirgizia). Uzbekistan is a country steeped in ancient history. In early times it was a rich region with splendid cities and cultures based along the Great Silk Route to China—a true crossroads between east and west. The country is steeped in fabled historical sites in Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara where ancient civilizations have travelled and fought over possession of central Asia for thousands of years. Superbly intact and incredibly beautiful, extravagant, ancient architecture is everywhere in our midst. There is also a short-list of very special birds to be found. Several species at the western edge of their range in Asia such as Amur Paradise-Flycatcher, Long-tailed Shrike, Rufous-naped Tit and Pied Bushchat mix with local specialties such as Pygmy Cormorant, White-tailed Lapwing, Menetries's Warbler, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, Hume's Lark, Yellow-breasted Tit, Persian Nuthatch, Finsch's and Variable wheatears, White-throated Robin, Eastern Orphean Warbler and Clamorous Reed-Warbler. At the top of the "want-list" is the enigmatic and curious Pander's Ground Jay, easily found in the stony deserts of Kyzyl Kum.*



*For a long time, Kazakhstan has been known for its large variety of rare Western Palearctic species and alluring steppe species like Black Lark and White-winged Lark. In Kazakhstan everything is on a vast scale, which is not surprising as it's the ninth largest country in the world! Great expanses of flat steppe grasslands merge into sandy and stony deserts. Dotted here and there are saline and freshwater lakes which act like magnets to nesting and migrant birds. The bird-life is stunning! Apart from a large list of more typically European species, there is a stunning list of very special breeding birds largely confined to Central Asia. The most attractive to us Western birders are near-mythical species such as the previously mentioned Black and White-winged lark; the endangered Sociable Plover; sensational displaying Macqueen's Bustard; flocks of the secretive and rare Pallas's Sandgrouse; colorful Caspian Plover which are only hundreds of yards away from our sleeping quarters; and tiny Asian Desert Warblers singing loudly in the vast plains of Sogety. Visits to the declining Turanga Forest near Balkhash Lake is a certainty for White-winged Woodpeckers, Saxaul Sparrow, Shikra and the very rare Yellow-eyed Pigeon.*



Exquisite Caspian Plovers are found in the Tau-Kum Desert © Machiel Valkenburg

*In sharp contrast, we find the tiny nation of Kirgizia. The 'Switzerland of Central Asia' is well-known for its massive towering peaks of the Tien Shan Mountains—an extension of the Himalayas—edging onto China, rising to over 20,000 feet. Here we find ecosystems varying from massive tracts of deciduous and coniferous forest cut by untamed rivers in deep gorges at lower elevations, to snow-capped peaks and flower-rich alpine meadows higher up. In Kirgizia we meet a plethora of Himalayan specialties like pleasing White-tailed Rubythroat; glamorous looking Ibisbill; crazy, colorful White-browed Tit-Warblers; and an odd White-winged Grosbeak or two. We relish the Curlew-like calls from Himalayan Snowcock and the flying strawberry better known as Red-mantled Rosefinch is found in some dwarf-junipers, not to mention some very interesting mammals, butterflies and reptiles.*

*European birders have been enjoying these stable countries and their fantastic birds and history ever since they gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. (VENT operated its first and highly successful tour in 2009.) A combined visit to these destinations is a guaranteed success and an*



*unforgettable experience, and we feel sure that participants will be delighted with extraordinary Central Asia.*



**Stunning White-browed Tit-Warblers inhabit junipers in the Tien Shan Mountains © Machiel Valkenburg**

**May 2-3, Days 1-2: Travel to Tashkent, Uzbekistan.** Participants should consider Turkish Airlines (a Star Alliance member airline), as they are the only airline with flights into Tashkent (airport code TAS) and as well for the return home from Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana), Kazakhstan with connections at Istanbul Airport (airport code IST).

NIGHTS: Aboard aircraft in transit to Tashkent

**May 4, Day 3: Arrival in Tashkent.** Upon arrival in Tashkent, you will be met and transferred to our hotel, where your room is reserved for immediate check-in. We will gather in the hotel lobby for a get-acquainted session, tour orientation and welcome dinner at 6:30 p.m.

NIGHT: Hyatt Residence, Tashkent

**May 5, Day 4: Drive Tashkent to Samarkand.** After a hearty breakfast, we will start out for Samarkand. En route we will hopefully have the localized Variable Wheatear staked out for us in addition to a nesting colony of White Storks. We should arrive into Samarkand in time for some preliminary exploration of this fabulous city.

NIGHT: Comfortable tourist hotel (to be announced), Samarkand

**May 6, Day 5: Samarkand.** Today there are many wonders in store with a day based in and around the ancient city of Samarkand. We will commence with an early morning start, driving out of the city to rocky, scrub and bush-covered hills of the Takhtakaracha Pass lying between Samarkand and Zarafshan, where Tamerlane roamed

in centuries past. (Tamerlane was a Turco-Mongol conqueror who founded the Timurid Empire in and around modern-day Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia, becoming the first ruler of the Timurid dynasty.) High on the wanted list will be White-throated Robin along with Eastern Orphean Warbler and the obscure Hume's Lark. Also here are Eastern Rock Nuthatch, Turkestan and Yellow-breasted tits, Amur Paradise-Flycatcher and White-capped Bunting. Back in time for lunch, we will wander from our hotel into the quiet, small ancient city area to explore its historical treasures. The massive Bibi Khanum mosque (once the largest in Central Asia), The Registan, Timur's Mausoleum, the Street of Tombs and the local bazaar present a stunning and memorable "visual overload" of exquisitely elaborate tiled, painted and carved buildings.



**Gur-Emir Mausoleum, Tombs of the Temurids, Uzbekistan © Tom Trompert**

NIGHT: Comfortable tourist hotel (to be announced), Samarkand

**May 7, Day 6: Samarkand to Bukhara.** We can opt for an early start to nearby wetlands on the outskirts of Samarkand for such specialties as White-crowned Penduline-Tit, or spend more time immersing ourselves in the historical delights of Samarkand. Later in the morning, we continue our journey along the Silk Road to Bukhara (also known locally as Buxora). Formerly one of the most important trading cities anywhere in Central Asia, there is a rich and colorful history and an overwhelming number of historic sites of interest. The turquoise-blue domes and towering minarets of Bukhara provide a wonderful backdrop to our stay here, while the markets and covered bazaars are bustling. This is a great place to barter for a huge range of very inexpensive souvenirs such as jewellery, spices and the famous Bukhara rugs. Needless to say, we shall have some time to explore this wonderful city.

NIGHT: Comfortable tourist hotel (to be announced), Bukhara

**May 8, Day 7: Bukhara.** "So much to do – so little time!" We will have an early start to spend much of the morning exploring close-by wetlands, which surround the oasis city of Bukhara. These oases can be extremely

attractive to a wealth of water and marsh-loving species and we hope for plenty of Pygmy Cormorants, Dalmatian Pelicans, Glossy Ibis, an abundance of herons and egrets, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater, plus perhaps scarcer finds such as Marbled Duck. Elegant White-tailed Lapwings are easily found. The extensive reed beds, marshy and dry scrub cover here is home to many additional smaller species of interest: Menetries's Warbler, Clamorous and Eurasian reed warblers, Rufous-tailed Bush-Robin, and Pied Bushchat and Long-tailed Shrike (the latter two at the furthest west of their Asiatic range). Returning to the city by late morning, we will be able to spend more time discovering further historical delights—the Ark (the fortified citadel of the Emir within the immense city walls), the Bolo-Hauz Mosque, the 10<sup>th</sup> century Ismail Samani Mausoleum and the Char Minar with its four elaborately tiled minarets.

NIGHT: Comfortable tourist hotel (to be announced), Bukhara

**May 9, Day 8: Bukhara to Tashkent.** Today's birding will perhaps be one of the most memorable. A very early start must be made into the Kyzyl Kum Desert, where we expect to arrive just after dawn. This very special region is home to one of the most sought-after of all the birds that occur in Central Asia—the legendary Turkestan (Pander's) Ground Jay. They are best located in the cool of the early morning when they can often be found along the roadside. We will return to Bukhara for lunch followed by some relaxing local birding and/or more opportunities to take in some further/last sights of Bukhara, including the historic town centre with its surrounding old madrassahs, the Kalyan Minaret—a 150-foot-tall tower built in the 12th century, and also the Miri-Arab Madrasa and Trade Domes. In the evening we will take the high-speed train from Bukhara, arriving in Tashkent in time for dinner.

NIGHT: Hyatt Residence, Tashkent

**May 10, Day 9: Chimgan Hills.** We plan to spend our final days in the Chimgan Hills. These lush, green hills will provide a perfect ending to our amazing trip in Uzbekistan. We will be able to show you some gorgeous little gems. Both Yellow-breasted Azure Tit and Rufous-naped Tit are the main attraction for this region and we will do our best to show you these birds. Overhead we might see European and Oriental honey-buzzards. The hills are set amid mixed forest; we should find Red-rumped Swallows and Common House Martins as well as Common Nightingales, Hume's Whitethroat, and Greenish and Hume's leaf warblers. We will arrive back in Tashkent in time to enjoy a final dinner in a local traditional restaurant.

NIGHT: Hyatt Residence, Tashkent

**May 11, Day 10: Fly to Almaty, Kazakhstan.** After a final morning's birding in the city parks of Tashkent, we will drive to the Tashkent airport and take a flight to the attractive city of Almaty. If time permits, we will commence our exploration of the Almaty area this afternoon.

NIGHT: Mercure Hotel City Center, Almaty

**May 12-13, Days 11-12: Almaty to Sogety Plains.** Heading out from our hotel in Almaty this morning, we travel 125 miles (200 km) east to one of the more spectacular and well-known sites in Kazakhstan—the red, yellow and black canyons of the Charyn River gorge. Amidst this lovely scenery, we should encounter raptors such as Egyptian, Himalayan Griffon and Cinereous vultures; Long-legged Buzzard; Golden Eagle; Saker Falcon and Lesser Kestrel. In the occasional wetlands, small rivers and scrub running through this expansive and dry, rocky landscape are possibilities for Black Stork; Chukar; Tawny Pipit; Pied and Isabelline wheatears; Rufous-tailed and Blue rock-thrushes; Hume's Whitethroat; and White-capped, Gray-necked, Rock and Red-headed buntings. We may come across roadside colonies of the bizarre, pink-and-black, nomadic Rosy Starlings.

Next, we continue our explorations, seeking out species still missing and adding further special birds such as Mongolian and Crimson-winged finches coming down to drink at the edge of a little remote well. We will probably find a colony of Pale Sand Martins (a recent split from Bank Swallow). As well, we will be on the lookout for the eruptive Pallas's Sandgrouse, an elusive species known to breed in the stony deserts of the Sogety Valley.





During our excursions in the Sogety Plains, we focus on finding the rare Pallas's Sandgrouse.  
© Machiel Valkenburg

NIGHTS: Hunting Lodges, Charyn Canyon

**May 14, Day 13: Drive to Karakol, Kyrgyzstan.** The day starts with a walk on the Sogety plains to secure that everybody has seen the Pallas's Sandgrouse. This elegant bird is unfortunately always difficult to see because of its skulky behaviour and rare existence in this part of Central Asia. In the Kokpek Pass we might come across ten-thousands of Black-veined Whites. These gorgeous butterflies fly in large numbers during the month of May. Our



Close views of gorgeous Demoiselle Cranes are almost guaranteed © Machiel Valkenburg

journey continues in a southern direction towards the Kyrgyz border where a lunch stop might render cute Rock Petronias. When we come close to the mountains the ground becomes more suitable for growing crops and in these agricultural lands, we have a chance to come across some really interesting birds such as Upland Buzzard and Saker Falcon. Large groups of gentle Demoiselle Cranes are seen regularly. We arrive in the early evening to our great guesthouse where a fantastic dinner awaits us.

NIGHT: Matsunoki Guesthouse, Karakol

**May 15, Day 14: Chon-Ashuu (May Saz).** Today we drive up to great heights with an excursion to Chon Ashuu Pass, the highest pass on the tour at a dazzling 3,822 meters (12,539 feet). We will venture way past the tree line and look for a rather special set of avifauna. The nearby wild streaming river holds both White-bellied and Brown dipper. Lammergeyers patrol the sky. The lush meadows are home to one of the strangest waders of the world—the elusive Ibisbill. Eversmann's Redstart together with Himalayan and Brown accentors are quite common up here. The gorgeous White-browed Tit-Warbler needs some more time to be found as well as his colorful friend, the Güldenstädt's Redstart. In the open patches of mature, mixed deciduous/coniferous forest, Greenish and Hume's warblers are quite common. In the evening we return to our lovely guesthouse in Karakol to enjoy another flavorful dinner.



Impressive Lammergeiers soar overhead in the Tien-Shan. © Machiel Valkenburg

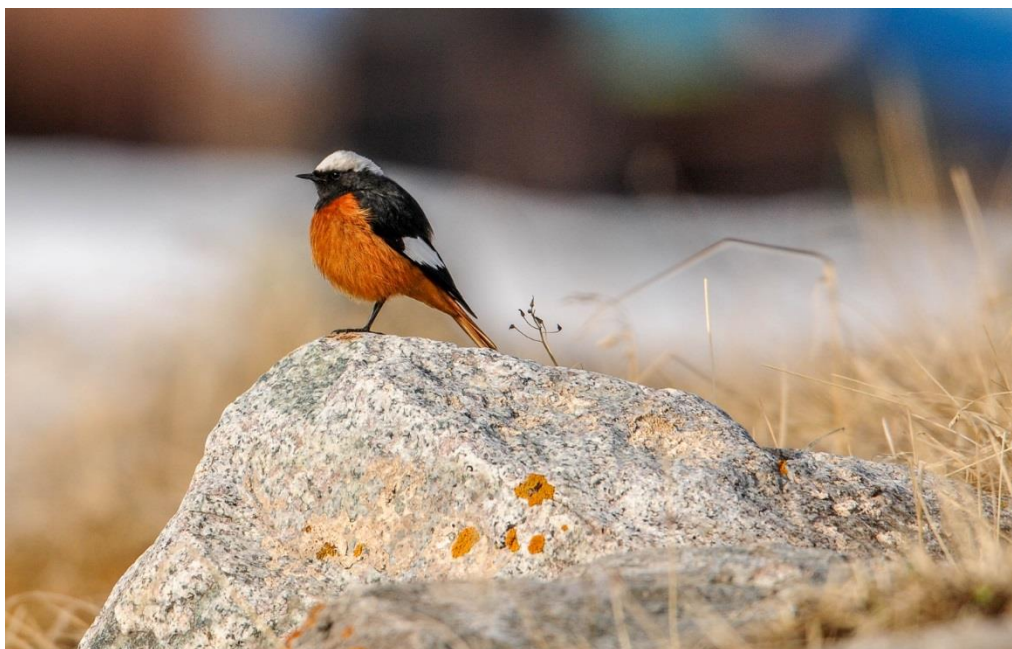
NIGHT: Matsunoki Guesthouse, Karakol

**May 16, Day 15: Barskoon Gorge** We have a full day in this glorious high-altitude landscape to find a wonderful array of alpine specialists. Black-throated, Altai and Brown accentors, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Red-mantled Rosefinch, White-tailed Rubythroat, White-winged Grosbeak and the incomparable White-browed (Severtzov's) Tit-warbler await us! Higher up in the mountains near a gold mine at an altitude of 10,500 feet, we will look for Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffon, Red-billed and Yellow-billed choughs, Plain Mountain-Finches, White-winged (Güldenstädt's) Redstart and the star attraction: Himalayan Snowcock, which we have a good chance to see.





**Captivating White-tailed Rubythroats await in the high mountains of the Tien Shan.  
© Machiel Valkenburg**



**Another high mountain specialist, Gouldenstädt's Redstart (White-winged Redstart), with probably  
the best name of all! © Machiel Valkenburg**

NIGHT: Matsunoki Guesthouse, Karakol



**May 17, Day 16: Karakol to Almaty.** Birding en-route, we retrace our steps back to Almaty. This is a full transfer day, which we will mostly spend admiring the landscape from the bus. A stop in one of the small villages along the road might render Red-rumped Swallows, Indian Golden Oriole, Lesser Gray Shrike, Long-tailed Shrike, Greenish Warbler, and lovely Laughing Doves. Late afternoon we'll arrive at our excellent hotel in Almaty, where a refreshing shower awaits.

NIGHT: Mercure Hotel City Center, Almaty

**May 18, Day 17: To Taukum Desert.** We set sail for a Taukum Desert adventure, passing through fields of poppies and other wildflowers, all with the spectacular backdrop of the icy Tien Shan Mountains. We will take an *al fresco* lunch in the field before continuing on to our yurt camp in the Taukum Desert: a comfortable tented camp of nomadic dwellings used by the local inhabitants of this beautiful country. All things being equal, we should arrive in time for afternoon tea and an opportunity to view Black-bellied and possibly Pin-tailed sandgrouse coming to drink at an artesian waterhole.

NIGHT: Comfortable yurt camp, Taukum Desert

**May 19, Day 18: Taukum Desert & Turanga Woodland.** Today is a wonderful day in which we will encounter a wide variety of habitats and some fine birds and other wildlife. Awakening in the midst of this remote desert, we will likely be watching the amazing display of McQueen's Bustards close to our camp; Caspian Plovers are breeding nearby; and wolves are spotted together with Persian Gazelles—all before breakfast! Then we will set forth along narrow back-roads through a variety of steppe/desert habitats to an area of unique Turanga woodland. Here, with a bit of luck, we should encounter such specialties as Turkestan Tit, Saxaul Sparrow, White-winged Woodpecker, Pale-backed Pigeon (Eversmann's or Yellow-eyed Dove) and if we are especially lucky, Pallid Scops-Owl. Along the way we will undoubtedly encounter a myriad of Greater Short-toed, Lesser Short-toed and



Range-restricted Saxaul Sparrows are found in the rare *Populus diversifolia* forests near Lake Balkhash.

© Machiel Valkenburg

Calandra larks; and Isabelline Wheatears and Isabelline (Rufous-tailed) Shrikes, amongst which we must diligently search for Steppe Gray Shrike. Other possible species along our way include Pied and Desert wheatears, Rock Petronia, Spanish Sparrow, gorgeous little Azure Tits and Black-headed Penduline-Tit.



We will explore the area around our private yurt camp in hopes of finding the cute Common Wonder Gecko.  
© Machiel Valkenburg

NIGHT: Comfortable yurt camp, Taukum Desert

**May 20, Day 19: Return to Almaty.** Early this morning we will drive for about 15-20 miles into the desert looking for beautifully marked Caspian Plover and Greater Sand Plover that should look exceptionally smart in breeding plumage. After breakfast we will break camp and head back towards Almaty. We will make several stops along the way, including at a fascinating area of ancient petroglyphs; a scrubby, rocky area for the perky Eastern Rock Nuthatch and a breeding colony of exotic Red-headed Buntings. With a bit of luck, we may find something exceptional such as Little Bustard, which we encountered on past tours! Nearby fringing scrub acts as a magnet for migrant and nesting birds such as Eurasian Hoopoe, European Roller, European Bee-eater, Shikra, Lesser Gray Shrike, Blyth's Reed Warbler, Sykes's Warbler, Oriental Turtle-Dove and Desert Finch. Along the way we'll make a first stop at fantastic Sorbulak Lake. Here the photographers amongst us might enjoy a colony with European Rollers and European Bee-eaters. On the lake itself, gorgeous Dalmatian Pelicans; rare Ferruginous Ducks; Great Crested, Black-necked and the amazing Slavonian grebe might be seen. On the mud flats, waders in the form of Little and Temminck's stint are quite common; Terek Sandpipers are seen yearly as well in good numbers. We will arrive in the early evening to refresh and enjoy a drink in the hotel bar.

NIGHT: Mercure Hotel City Center, Almaty

**May 21, Day 20: Fly Almaty to Nur-Sultan.** A morning flight will bring us to the capital of Kazakhstan (formerly Astana), where amidst the steppes a futuristic new city rose from the ground. The surrounding area is one of seemingly endless steppe and marshland interspersed with immense reed beds and marshes resplendent with large numbers of waterbirds and our first Paddyfield, Cetti's, Moustached, Grasshopper and Savi's warblers; Bluethroat; Citrine Wagtail; and a variety of colorful races of Western Yellow Wagtail. The main target for the day is the elusive Pine Bunting, which has its most southern breeding grounds around Nur-Sultan; we have an excellent chance of coming across this gorgeous bunting.

NIGHT: Hilton Astana, Nur-Sultan

**May 22, Day 21: Korgalzhyn State Nature Reserve.** We will depart early this morning for the best birding sites in the Korgalzhyn State Nature Reserve. Despite being three hours from Nur-Sultan and possessing a collection of birdlife that has recently attracted a nomination for UNESCO World Heritage Site status, the Korgalzhyn area remains surprisingly unknown, even within Kazakhstan. The vast wetland area, a combination of virgin steppe



and lakes, is home to wolves, marmots and saiga antelope. However, it is the birds that are the real attraction. Located at the crossroads of two migration routes, the wetlands act as a giant motorway junction service station for birds (Lake Tengiz alone has the capacity to feed 15 million birds).



**In some years we are lucky to come across steppes full of Schrenk's Tulips. Did you know tulips are originally from Kazakhstan? © Machiel Valkenburg**

The area, most of which is protected as a 'Zapovednik' (national nature reserve), is home to the world's northernmost population of Greater Flamingo—one of over 300 species of birds, which includes one of the largest wildfowl populations in Asia. Other notable residents include pelicans, cranes and a variety of birds of prey.



**THE major highlight of a visit to the northern steppes is the near-endemic Black Lark. © Machiel Valkenburg**

Our main targets here are nesting groups of the globally endangered Sociable Lapwing, which our local guide should have "staked-out" for us. There are many other fine attractions in this vast landscape. Roadside colonies of Black-winged Pratincoles and White-winged Black Terns in glorious breeding plumage should be dotted with migrant shorebirds such as Red-necked Phalaropes, Spotted Redshank, Terek Sandpiper, Ruffs displaying in all their finery, and Little and Temminck's stints. These enumerable wetlands and lakes should also produce breeding Dalmatian Pelican, Great Bittern, White-headed Duck, Red-necked and Eared grebes, Whooper Swan, Graylag

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Goose, Red-crested Pochard and Caspian Terns. More special still are often close colonies of splendid Great Black-headed Gulls, with a supporting cast of Steppe and Slender-billed gulls!

The damp, grassy steppe contains elegant Demoiselle Cranes while scattered scrub bush should hold Booted Warbler, Pallid Harrier and gorgeous little Red-footed Falcons. Two other very special birds we should find today are Black and White-winged larks—often numerous along the roadside, both species are confined to the Central Asian steppes.

NIGHT: Hilton Astana, Nur-Sultan

**May 23, Day 22: Nur-Sultan.** On our last day in the city, we will enjoy the morning birding just outside of the city to search for that one good picture of the dancing Pallid Harrier or an extra race of Yellow Wagtail. In the afternoon we'll enjoy an extensive city tour followed by a grand final dinner in the best local restaurant of the city! The tour ends with the final list in the Hilton Hotel.

NIGHT: Hilton Astana, Nur-Sultan

**May 24, Day 23: Departure for Home.** A transfer will be provided very early this morning to Nursulton Nazarbayev International Airport (airport code NQZ), in time for the Turkish Airlines flight to Istanbul, currently scheduled to depart at 3:20 a.m.

**NOTE: The tour schedule depends closely on internal flights, which may change from the itinerary listed. If so, the itinerary will be altered, but with all of the special regions still being visited.**

**TOUR SIZE:** This tour will be limited to 12 participants.

**TOUR LEADER:** Machiel Valkenburg



**Machiel Valkenburg** was born in 1982 in a southern province in the Netherlands. Encouraged by his parents, he began birding at a very young age. During his teens, he studied landscape ecology and conducted bird surveys with the Dutch Centre for Field Ornithology. During this time, he discovered his passion for traveling worldwide, which is present to this day. Machiel's first adventure began in Greece, followed by Hungary, Romania, Scotland, and Morocco. Later, his birding travels led him outside of Europe into the astounding lands of Western Africa and farther east to the grand territories of Russia and Kazakhstan. His fascination with the peculiar nature and avifauna of Central Asia led him to establish his own bird tour company, Rubythroat Birding Tours. From Central Asia, he often ventured to Southeast Asia and India, which became his favorite destinations. Lately, he has focused his attention on Africa, leading expeditions to Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, and Malawi. Machiel has solid knowledge of the natural history of Asia. In addition to his fondness for the avian world, Machiel devotes much of his attention to the study of butterflies, dragonflies, botany, and mammals. He is an excellent people person with an innate bird-guide ability and adept organizational skills. Machiel enjoys discovering new destinations and sharing his profound knowledge of birds with fellow birders. He has brilliant spotting skills and excellent hearing. Machiel is known for his calm and respectful social approach, which provides a good atmosphere in the field. Machiel and his wife, Bonny, enjoy spending lots of time with their beautiful son, Dion. After ten years of life in Kazakhstan, the family moved to Valencia, Spain, where they lived for five years. Nowadays, the happy family is living in Kazakhstan.

**FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:** The fee for this tour is **\$8,995** per person based on double occupancy from Tashkent, Uzbekistan (tour ends in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan), meals beginning with breakfast on Day 3 and ending with dinner on Day 22, lodging as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation, internal air flights, gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leader and local guides. Tour fees do not include airfare from your home to



Tashkent and return from Nur-Sultan; Medical Evacuation Insurance (required); transfers or accommodation other than those mentioned in the itinerary; alcoholic beverages; special gratuities; departure taxes; visa fees; phone calls; laundry; or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the group does not have sufficient registration, a small party supplement may have to be charged.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$950**. Single accommodations cannot be guaranteed in the yurt camp (Days 17 & 18) and singles may be asked to share at Charyn Hunting Lodges (Days 11 & 12). This has been taken into account in the single supplement.

**REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT:** To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$1,000** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, the deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. If you would like to pay your deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at <https://ventbird.com>) should be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

**PAYMENTS:** All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days prior to the tour departure date (December 3, 2022)

### **CANCELLATION & REFUNDS:**

#### **Cancellation by Participant:**

Refunds, if any, for any cancellation by a participant are made according to the following schedule: If participant cancels 180 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$500** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made between 179 and 151 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the tour fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre- and post-tour extensions. **For participants' protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

#### If participant cancels:

180 days or more before departure date

179 to 151 days before departure date

150 days or less before departure date

#### Participant's refund will be:

Participant's deposit minus \$500\*

No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance of the tour fee will be refunded

No refund available

\*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

#### **Cancellation by VENT:**

If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant.

If VENT cancels or delays a tour or any portion of a tour as a result of any Force Majeure event, VENT will use its reasonable best efforts to refund any payments on the balance of the tour fee to participant; provided that, VENT will have no obligation to provide a participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to a participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement. A **"Force Majeure"** event means any act beyond VENT's control, including, without limitation, the following: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane,

epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

This VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside of the services described in the tour itinerary.

**Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.**

**MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE REQUIREMENT:** This tour visits remote locations where immediate access to primary medical care may **NOT** be available. **For this reason, travel insurance which covers you for emergency evacuation is required for participation on this tour.** This coverage is included in the **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™** program. Through Ripcord, “emergency evacuation” can be purchased as a stand-alone benefit or as part of a comprehensive travel insurance policy. If you choose not to purchase insurance through Ripcord, you are required to obtain it through another provider.

**TRAVEL INSURANCE:** To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with Redpoint Travel Protection as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend their **Ripcord** plan. Designed for all types of travelers, Ripcord is among the most comprehensive travel protection programs available.

Critical benefits of Ripcord include a completely integrated program with a single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims; **medical evacuation and rescue services** from your point of injury or illness to your **hospital of choice**; comprehensive travel insurance for **trip cancellation/interruption**, primary medical expense coverage, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as security evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or other security events, **waiver for pre-existing medical conditions exclusion**, and a “**Cancel for Any Reason**” benefit. Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.\*

For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: [ripcordtravelprotection.com/ventbird](http://ripcordtravelprotection.com/ventbird); or click the **Ripcord** logo on our website (click Help and Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

\*To be eligible for the pre-existing medical condition exclusion waiver and the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) upgrade, you must purchase your policy within 14 days of making your tour deposit. The CFAR benefit provides reimbursement for 75% of covered costs, and increases the policy premium by approximately 50%. Policies may be purchased either for the full value of the tour fee at the time of deposit or in segments as individual tour payments are made (deposit, mid-payment, final balance, additional arrangements, etc.). The “pay as you go” approach reduces up-front expense and ensures that the amount paid toward your full policy premium is in proportion to the amount paid toward the full tour fee. If you choose to “pay as you go,” you must cover each deposit or payment within 14 days in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. The primary medical expense benefit is available to U.S. residents only. For this reason, non-U.S. residents will pay an adjusted premium when purchasing a comprehensive policy, which includes all of the other benefits available to U.S. residents. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage.

#### **Coronavirus (COVID-19):**

The coronavirus pandemic has brought uncertainty for many people currently holding travel insurance policies or who are considering future travel and purchasing such insurance. Redpoint has added a **Coronavirus FAQ page**



to its website that addresses questions and concerns regarding its travel insurance and the impact of COVID-19. We strongly recommend that you visit the page for an overview of topics such as policy coverage and limitations, policy modifications, cancellation, refunds, and more. Among the most important points: 1) Trip cancellation solely for concern or fear of travel associated with COVID-19 is not covered; 2) Should you request cancellation of your policy, a full refund of your premium is available only under a limited set of conditions; and 3) Should you request cancellation, you may be eligible to receive a pro-rated refund of the unused portion of your premium or a travel insurance credit. Travel insurance credit ("Premium Credit") is for the value of the policy purchased and may be applied to future policies. Premium Credits have no expiration dates. Rules and regulations apply.

Please visit the **Coronavirus FAQ** page at the following link:

[https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid\\_19\\_faq/](https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid_19_faq/)

Additionally, as countries begin opening up for travel, many are instituting an array of COVID-19 entry requirements, including mandates to purchase travel insurance covering medical expenses due to COVID-19 illness and accommodation in case of quarantine. Ripcord's comprehensive travel insurance plans are designed to satisfy the various country-specific travel insurance entry requirements. Those who purchase a Ripcord policy will receive a "letter of confirmation" that affirms that the policy satisfies such requirements.

**EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES:** In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

**FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES:** In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

**AIR INFORMATION:** Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. ***Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be responsible for any air ticket penalties.***

**ACCOMMODATIONS:** In Nur-Sultan, Almaty, Karakol, Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara the hotels will be of reasonable, three-to-four-star standard and some are really very attractive. The lodges in the Charyn Canyon will be the most basic throughout the tour where every building has shared toilet and washing facilities but being located in a fantastic valley along the river, it proves to be a real oasis for birds! Camping in the deserts of Kazakhstan is the best way to experience the area and reach far into this vast habitat. We have our own exclusive yurt camp set up for us with large (5-yard diameter!) sleeping tents with normal single camping-beds in each yurt. There is a separate yurt for meals and shower & toilet.

**CLIMATE:** Climate will be quite varied—very hot in the desert areas of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (possibly up to 35+ C/100 F), yet cool (5+ C/40 F) in the high altitude of the Tien Shan Mountains of Kyrgyzstan. Rain, or even snow, is a possibility in the mountains.

**CLOTHING:** This is one of those trips where a little bit of everything is a good idea! Light, easily washable, quick-drying clothes, sunglasses and sun-hat for the hot steppe and desert, with some lightweight, but very warm, layered clothing for the higher altitudes (up to 10,500 feet). This includes a warm hat, fleece, light gloves, etc. You should bring a light waterproof jacket, too. Light, but sturdy walking boots should cover all eventualities. It

is best to avoid shorts for protection from the sun. It is a conservative region, although in the cities people are very “modern” and wear light western clothing; 24-hour laundry is available at the hotels in the larger cities (Tashkent, Almaty and Nur-Sultan). Furthermore, it is advisable to take a pair of comfortable sneakers for long travel days, and on those days, we visit the enchanted mausoleums and madrassas along the Silk Road.

**CURRENCY:** Local currency in Kazakhstan is the Tenge and in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan the Sum, of which you will probably need very little. US Dollars can be exchanged on arrival. ATM machines are readily available in Kazakhstan and some of the hotels will exchange currency. Credit cards are not widely accepted in Uzbekistan.

**DIFFICULTY:** We will at times have to travel long distances, some on poor or unpaved roads—but the journeys help emphasize the vastness and adventure. Transport will vary from place to place and in most areas, good, comfortable, modern coaches will be used, but more rugged four-wheel drive vehicles will be required in Samarkand only. Walking for these tours is mostly easy to moderate; even in the high elevations of the Tien Shan Mountains, we are mostly walking short distances on flat terrain or downhill.

**DOCUMENTS:** A valid passport is required for travel to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. We strongly recommend that your passport be valid for at least six months beyond your planned return date. Visas are also required for entry to Uzbekistan and must be obtained prior to arrival. Instructions on obtaining your visa will be provided after registration. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan do not require a visa for US citizens, for those staying no longer than 30 days. Non-United States citizens should check with their consulate/embassy for instructions.

**EQUIPMENT:** You should pack a pair of binoculars that are in good condition, along with a belt pack or day pack (good for carrying books, sunscreen, extra film, etc.). Your leader will have a spotting scope; but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so. Items such as toothpaste, soap, deodorant, and cosmetics can be purchased in-country, but it is simpler to bring your own supply. Bring a small amount of insect repellent; we do not anticipate many mosquitoes, but some damper and marshy areas may host a few. For the few nights camping, there are sleeping bags provided, but you may wish to bring a thin sleeping bag liner with you. Bring a lightweight, super-absorbent, microfiber, quick-drying camping towel. A couple of packets of moist towelettes and/or hand-cleanser can be a pleasant way of keeping refreshed and clean en route—especially useful are the antiseptic type—useful for hand-washing prior to the picnic lunches. Sunscreen is a must. And a small headlamp or flashlight will be good for the nights spent camping; they will also prove very handy during the evening excursions to find Wonder Geckos and Eurasian Scops Owls! There are excellent photo opportunities for those who enjoy scenic photography; bring plenty of digital storage cards, ensure you have batteries, and means to recharge and store images.

**HEALTH:** There are no mandatory health requirements for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan. Because you are visiting the Tien Shan Mountains area (up to 10,500 feet), don’t forget to take precautions to avoid altitude sickness. One suggestion is to try hot tea or water when you arrive, and during the first day move slowly and eat lightly.

VENT follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for standard travel precautions, which includes vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases. Among these so-called Routine Vaccinations are measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine, diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine, poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travellers), and Varicella (Chickenpox). You should also be up-to-date with Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccinations.

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

**COVID-19:** The world has been in the grip of a pandemic since early 2020, a result of the uncontrolled spread of SARS-CoV-2, the novel coronavirus that causes the illness COVID-19. COVID-19 is transmitted through person-to-person contact, almost always through inhaling respiratory aerosols or droplets exuded from an infected person.

Common signs of COVID-19 illness include fever or chills, fatigue, shortness of breath, cough, loss of taste or smell, and more. Based on what is known about the disease, COVID-19 is far more serious than seasonal flu. Few places in the world have been unaffected. The impact on travel has been substantial, as demonstrated by the fact that VENT did not operate a tour between late March 2020 and late April 2021. The development and deployment of COVID-19 vaccines, particularly in the United States, has allowed VENT to return to tour operations. We emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. **With this in mind, VENT instituted a COVID-19 vaccination requirement.** All tour participants and tour leaders must be fully vaccinated in order to travel with us while we are still in a declared public health emergency. In accordance with the latest guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), full vaccination is defined as an individual being 14 days beyond having received the required amount of vaccine for reaching full immunity to the degree specific vaccines confer. In the United States, so far, this means either the two-shot sequence for the Moderna or Pfizer vaccines or the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine. Proof of vaccination must be provided to our office at least one week before the start of the tour and kept with you while on the tour. Because the world is a very different place than it was before the pandemic, we've made a number of important adjustments to our processes to ensure that our tours can operate as safely as possible. Please visit the **Coronavirus Travel Update** page of our website <https://ventbird.com/covid-19>, where you may view our **COVID-19 Protocols for VENT Tours** document, which details the guidance VENT will follow in the operation of its tours in the time of pandemic. Our decision and policy are firmly rooted in the latest CDC guidance regarding recommendations for avoiding COVID-19. As we move forward, VENT will continue to follow the latest information from the CDC and will update our policy accordingly. Please visit the CDC website for the most up to date information about COVID-19 and associated guidance for proper health and hygiene: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>.

**Insect Repellents** – There are insect repellents for the skin and an insect repellent used to treat clothing that should not be applied to the skin.

Insect repellents for the skin are commonly available in three forms:

- DEET (N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide): A chemical compound that is marketed under various brand names (OFF!®, Cutter™, Ultrathon™, etc.) and offered in a variety of formulations including sprays, lotions, time-release preparations, and disposable wipes. The formulations will state a percentage of the active ingredient DEET on the packaging. DEET may be applied to exposed skin directly and/or sprayed on clothing. Please be careful when applying DEET as it can damage plastics and lens coatings.
- Picaridin: A synthetic formulation that is derived from piperine, a substance found in plants that produce black pepper.
- Herbal insect repellents: Various mixtures of organic ingredients such as oils from eucalyptus, citronella, cedar, and other herbs. The herbal repellents are more difficult to categorize because of the difference in ingredients from one brand to another. There is considerable variation in their effectiveness.

An insect repellent for clothing is marketed in one approved formulation:

- Permanone® (Permethrin) is an odorless spray-on repellent that may be used for **pre-treatment** of clothing, gear, and tents. It should not be used directly on the skin or sprayed on clothing while it is being worn. The pre-treatment process requires a number of hours to complete and must be done outdoors, so is best completed in advance of travel. Do-it-yourself pre-treatment has to be repeated more often than commercial treatment using Insect Shield® technology. It is available at various outdoor stores and can easily be found online.
- Insect Shield® apparel: Clothing pre-treated with Permanone is made by a variety of manufacturers. It is available for purchase from some sporting goods suppliers. The clothing is advertised as retaining its repellency for up to 70 washings.

The US EPA offers a search tool to help choose a repellent that is best for a particular situation. For example, some repellents work for mosquitoes, but not for ticks.

<https://www.epa.gov/insect-repellents/which-insect-repellent-right-you>



In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line (800) CDC-INFO (800-232-4636). You can check the CDC website at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html> (click on Travel Health).

**MISC:** Electricity - 220 V AC, 50 Hz; round two-pin continental plugs are standard  
Language – Kazakh, Uzbek, and **Kyrgyz**; all Turkic languages  
Time – Central Asia is 10 hours ahead of Eastern Daylight Savings Time

**SUGGESTED READING:** A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) which has a wide selection; [www.buteobooks.com](http://www.buteobooks.com) and [www.nhbs.com](http://www.nhbs.com) which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com) for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

**Field Guides:**

Aye, Raffael, Manuel Schweizer & Tobias Roth. *Birds of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan*. Princeton University Press, October 2012. First-ever field guide to the birds of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, and covers 618 species including all residents, migrants, and vagrants. **This will be the guide to bring along for field identification on this tour!**

Svenson, Lars, Peter J. Grant, Killian Mullarney, and Dan Zetterstrom. *Birds of Europe*. Princeton University Press, March 2000. This is the best of the Europe/Middle East/North Africa guides and covers most species we encounter other than localized and near-endemic birds. It has the most up-to-date taxonomy, identification detail and illustrations than other guides and has received excellent/rave reviews.

**Others:**

Kazmierczak, Krys and Ber Van Perlo. *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*. 2000. This book of Indian birds also covers a large number of the species encountered, including most of those not covered by the European guides. Well-illustrated and modern.

Knystautus, Algirdas. *The Natural History of the USSR*. Century Press, 1987. This book is possibly out of print, but gives an interesting, attractively illustrated and very digestible overview of all habitats and wildlife of the former USSR, of which Kazakhstan was part. Well written and nicely illustrated, it is good pre-tour background reading.

Porter, Richard, Lars, S. Christensen and P. Sciermacker-Hansen. *Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East*. Helm, 2004. This is another very well-illustrated, up-to-date guide to a region (the Middle East) that will include many of the species we may encounter.

Wassink, Arend and Gerald Oreel. *The New Birds of Kazakhstan*. De Cocksdorp, Texel, 2015. (ISBN-13: 9789081146203) This book is not a field guide, but an interesting atlas, listing and mapping species occurring in Kazakhstan. Published privately by Arend Wassink. Useful background with a few good photos – but not the book to buy for identification.

**Travel:**

Bloom, Greg, Noble, John and Bradley Mayhew. *Central Asia Travel Guide*. Lonely Planet, latest edition.

Abazov Rafis. *Culture and Customs of the Central Asian Republics*. Greenwood Press, 2007.  
ISBN 0-313-33656-3

Macleod, Callum and Bradley Mayhew. *Uzbekistan*. Odysee Travel Guides, most recent edition.

Schreiber, Dagmar. *Kazakhstan Nomadic Routes from Caspia to Altai*. Odysee. 2008. ISBN 978-962-217-789-5.

A beautifully illustrated, superbly presented and well researched account of this fascinating country. Arguably one of the very best travel guides I have ever come across.

**TIPPING:** Tipping (restaurant staff, porters, drivers, local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that tips are not expected and are entirely optional. Tips should be given directly to your tour leader; they should not be sent to the VENT office.

**RESPONSIBILITY STATEMENT:** Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc., a Texas corporation, and/or its agents (together, “**VENT**”) act only as agents for the participant in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the participant or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in airfare or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will be borne by the participant, as tour rates only provide for arrangements for the time stated.

VENT reserves the right (i) to substitute hotels of similar category, or the best reasonable substitution available under the circumstances, for those indicated and (ii) to make any changes in the itinerary that are deemed necessary by VENT or which are caused by third party transportation schedules (i.e. railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, etc.).

VENT reserves the right to substitute leaders or guides on any tour. Where VENT, in its sole discretion, determines such substitution is necessary, it will notify tour participants.

VENT reserves the right to cancel any tour prior to departure with or without cause or good reason. See the VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy set forth above.

Tour prices are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on July 6, 2022, and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change thereto.

VENT reserves the right to decline any participant’s Registration Form and/or refuse to allow any participant to participate in a tour as VENT deems reasonably necessary, in its sole discretion. VENT also reserves the right to remove any tour participant from any portion of a tour as VENT deems necessary, in its sole discretion, reasons for such removal include but are not limited to, medical needs, injury, illness, inability to meet physical demands of a tour, personality conflict or situations in which such removal is otherwise in the best interest of the tour, the tour group and/or such participant. A participant may also voluntarily depart from a tour. If a participant is removed from a tour or voluntarily departs from a tour, such participant will be responsible for any expenses associated with such removal or departure, including but not limited to, transportation, lodging, airfare and meals, and VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any such removed or departed participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by such participant.

Baggage is carried at the participant’s risk entirely. No airline company, its employees, agents and/or affiliates (the “**Airline**”) is to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time participants are not on board the Airline’s aircraft. The participant ticket in use by any Airline, when issued, will constitute the sole contract between the Airline and the purchaser of the tickets and/or the participant. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for VENT tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airlines Reporting Corporation.