

# WILD FRONTIERS



## Silk Road Odyssey Kyrgyzstan-China-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan

This unique Wild Frontiers tour takes you on an epic cultural journey along the Old Silk Road through some of Central Asia's most spectacular mountains, lively bazaars and ancient towns. Our aim is to stick as closely as possible to the ancient trade routes even though modern borders and some rough roads do not always make this an easy thing to do! Traversing parts of Kyrgyzstan, China, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the route offers adventure and culture in equal measure. Riding horses or walking in the mountains by Son Kul Lake or the ancient caravanserai of Tash Rabat will give you a chance to witness the Tien Shan Mountains at their most beautiful. While wandering through the gargantuan sites of Samarkand or sleepy Bukhara, you will be taken back to the heyday of the Silk Road. For those with a sense of adventure, an interest in history and culture - and a good amount of energy - it is a trip you will remember for a very long time to come.

"I have travelled a lot with several different tour companies and would not hesitate recommending Wild Frontiers to those who want a very special adventure by a well-run and organized company." *Jayne Hanlin*

### HIGHLIGHTS

- The Silk Road Caravanserai of Tash Rabat
- Staying with the nomads at Son Kul
- The Kashgar Sunday Market
- Travelling the Fergana Valley into Tajikistan
- The stunning sites of Samarkand, Khiva & Bukhara

Duration: 23 Days

Average group size: 5 - 12

Start: Sat 28 Jul 12

Finish: Sun 19 Aug 12



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## Why Wild Frontiers?

As a young, innovative company, Wild Frontiers is delighted to have been voted one of the 'Top 10 Tour Operators' by the readers of both Wanderlust and National Geographic Adventure. We are frequently asked what makes us different from other tour operators, and feel that the factors below answer this important question.

**The Traveller's Ethos:** WF is a company that has been set up by travellers for travellers, and our ethos is to help adventurous souls get to incredible and inaccessible places in safety and as much comfort as local conditions allow. We are firm believers that travelling is all about the experience and it's the details that make the trip - we specialise in drawing on our own extensive local knowledge and array of contacts to give our clients the very best experience possible.

**Personal Service:** Our London office is manned by experienced expedition leaders and every trip we run stems from their extensive knowledge - in short, we run the kind of trips that as passionate travellers, we like to do ourselves! When you ring our office, you can be guaranteed to chat to someone that knows the trips and the terrain, and is able to offer sound and practical advice.

**Authentic Experiences:** Our unique, original itineraries allow our clients to take journeys that venture beneath the surface of the region. Unlike the plethora of 'world specialists' out there who purport to know a hundred destinations, we concentrate on the locations we know and love. We don't run the same tour over and over, thus running the risk of creating a 'tourist circuit' and spoiling untouched regions. Instead, we rarely run any tour more than a couple of times a year and they are on routes we have discovered for ourselves, meaning we are able to give a truly authentic, off-the-beaten-track experience.

**Be the First:** Our style of travel is all about exploration, and nothing excites us more than opening up new routes to genuine travellers. We keep abreast of new destinations and are often the first to return to places that have vanished from the tourist map. We were the first back into Pakistan after 9/11, the first to return to Kashmir after a decade of tourist isolation, and the first to run a commercial travel trip to Afghanistan for almost 30 years. Since then we have helped bring Colombia, Yemen and Georgia back into the tourist fold, specialising in groundbreaking reconnaissance trips and imaginative expeditions.

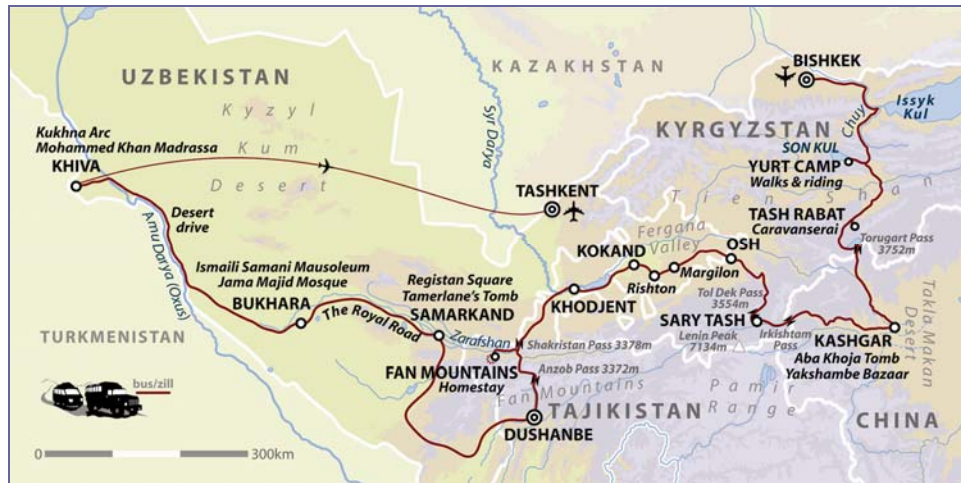
**Small Group Size:** We believe it is imperative to keep the group sizes small. Most trips are limited to a maximum of approximately 12 travellers, thus giving you more access to fragile cultures, better opportunities to interact with local people, and the knowledge you are making less of an impact while there.

**Cost of Tours:** We believe in an honest, upfront pricing system so you know exactly what the tour will cost before you book. We avoid local payments, 'optional extras' or forcing our clients to split every meal bill. Our tours are provided on a predominantly full board basis, with mineral water, government permits, entrance fees and transport all included.

**Added Value:** We aim to give our clients the very best (not the least expensive) experience through whatever facilities are available to us. We always try to provide accommodation that is interesting, characterful and convenient, and transport - another important part of any tour - that is as varied and comfortable as possible.

**Our Clients:** Your companions can make or break a trip, and it's lucky therefore that our clients are our greatest asset. Travelling to remote regions is not for everyone, and as such we tend to attract open-minded travellers looking for genuine experiences, and a desire to reach those hard to get to places.

**Responsible Travel:** Awarded 5 star status by AITO (Association of Independent Tour Operators), responsible tourism has always been an integral part of our company ethos and our adventures are designed with the local people, culture and eco-system in mind. For further details please refer to the RT section on this dossier.



**Day 1: Join tour in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan):** Accommodation for this night is included in the tour cost, due to the arrival times of our suggested flights. Those on the suggested group flight will arrive in the early hours of Day 2.  
*Hotel (no meals)*

**Day 2: In Bishkek:** After a morning to rest & relax, we'll have a look around this city, one of the world's more relaxed capitals, visiting the excellent museum and taking a wander round the bustling Osh bazaar.  
*Hotel (B,L,D)*

**Day 3: Bishkek - Son Kul:** Our journey starts in earnest this morning as we begin a full day's drive along the fertile Chuy valley and then up through the mountains to the beautiful Son Kul Lake. Here we usually stay with Noorgul and her charming family who have been our friends for more than 10 years and 'check in' to their nomad yurt camp on the side of this spectacular 3,000m glacial lake. Tonight we will have a traditional Kyrgyz Nomad's dinner replete with vodka toasts!  
*(There are usually up to 6 people sharing a yurt). Toilets are of the "long drop" variety.*  
*Communal Yurts (B,L,D)*

**Day 4: Son Kul:** Today we'll be free to explore this beautiful region, either on foot or on horseback (optional). Anyone wanting to, can hang out around the camp, watching the nomads go about their traditional life or watch the extraordinarily varied bird life on the lake. There might even be a game of Kok Baru (Buzkashi) to watch in the

afternoon. For dinner we will either have delicious fish from the lake or lamb.  
*Communal Yurts (B,L,D)*

**Day 5: Son Kul - Tash Rabat:** Leaving early this morning we will spend the day driving towards the famous Silk Road Caravanserai of Tash Rabat, through one of the most spectacular regions of the Tien Shan, the Mountains of Heaven. On arrival, we'll settle into our cosy yurts, usually in the company of Jergal the caravanserai caretaker and his delightful family.  
*Communal Yurts (B,L,D)*

**Day 6: Tash Rabat:** Having checked out the 11<sup>th</sup> century caravanserai, today there will be a chance to either walk or ride (optional) through these beautiful mountains. Being so peaceful and seemingly remote, it is sometimes hard to imagine that these were once major thoroughfares for Silk Road caravans. Those wanting a more laid back day can simply walk around the valley which is lush and green, groaning with horses, yaks, sheep and the nomads who live by them. Tonight we'll have another traditional dinner in the yurts.  
*Communal Yurts (B,L,D)*

**Day 7: Tash Rabat - Kashgar (China):** The distance we travel today is not so far, but expect a long day as we navigate our way through the first of the trip's land border crossings, over the Torugart Pass into China's western-most province - the autonomous Xinjiang region. Here we will say goodbye to our Kyrgyz hosts and transfer to a smart coaster minibus for the journey down to Kashgar. After 4 nights in the mountains, this vibrant

Uighur city provides a complete contrast to the Kyrgyz grasslands and as we usually stay in a hotel in the grounds of one of the old consulates, it also provides a welcome shower!

*Hotel (B,L,D)*

**Day 8: Kashgar:** There will be ample time for personal exploration in this Silk Road city, which sits today, as it has done for centuries at a major crossroads of trade routes. We will of course see the (controversial) statue of Chairman Mao in the city centre as well as visiting the green-tiled Aba Khoja tomb in the quiet suburbs. After a traditional Uighur lunch we will have a break before heading into the old town. We will end the day by having tea on the second floor balcony of one of the old chaikhanas, watching the street market below us. The evening will be free, allowing you to choose where to dine at your own expense.

*Hotel (B,L)*

**Day 9: Kashgar:** Today is a further day in Kashgar for us to experience the famous Yakshambe Bazaar - the Sunday Market. In the morning we will first visit the famous animal market. Here we will spend the morning watching the locals trade everything from woodwork and iron wear to sheep, donkeys, cattle, horses and camels before progressing onto the covered bazaar, believed to be the biggest in Central Asia. The afternoon will be free for you to spend at your leisure and you may want to hire bicycles and head off into nearby fields to explore, before meeting up for a final farewell dinner with your Kashgar guide.

*Hotel (B,L,D)*

**Day 10: Kashgar - Sary Tash (Kyrgyzstan):** An early start sees us drive out of Kashgar, due west along the main artery of the Old Silk Road to the Irkishtam Pass. This is a stunning drive through an area of outstanding natural beauty, with multicoloured sedimentary sandstone flanking our route. At the Irkishtam Pass we will cross back into Kyrgyzstan where our Kyrgyz team will be waiting. We will then continue on towards Sary Tash along another staggering (if rather rough!) road, this time with the high Pamirs rising to the south, and stay the night with a local family either in their yurt or in their cosy house.

*(Between 4 & 6 people will share a room/yurt). Toilets are of the "long drop" variety.*

*House/Yurt (B,L,D)*

**Day 11: Sary Tash - Osh:** Weather permitting we will walk this morning to stunning views of snowy, Lenin Peak, which at 7134m is the second highest mountain in the Pamirs. After breakfast we will drive on another extraordinary road over the 3554m Tol Dek Pass (though by this stage you might be suffering from beauty fatigue!) and on into the Fergana Valley to the ancient Silk Road town of Osh, reputed to be 3000 years old. It is a place steeped in history and claims to have the best bazaar in all Central Asia - something we will check out. We usually stay here with our friend, Iman Jan's family in their charming guesthouse.

*(Between 2 & 4 people will share a room). There are Western-style communal toilets.*

*Homestay (B,L,D)*

**Day 12: Osh - Kokand (Uzbekistan):** After breakfast we say a final goodbye to our Kyrgyzstan team and cross the border into Uzbekistan where we will be picked up and driven through the Fergana Valley. This incredibly fertile region was the breadbasket of the Central Asian USSR and is still one of the wealthiest parts of the whole region. Our first stop today will be in the town of Margilon, centre of the still thriving Silk trade in the area. Here we hope to see the entire silk-weaving process from cocoon to end product. We will also visit nearby Rishton, renowned for its blue & green ceramics.

*Hotel (B,L,D)*

**Day 13: Kokand - Khodjent (Tajikistan):** Most traffic these days now leaves the Fergana Valley via a new route to Tashkent. We however plan to stick as close as possible to the original Silk Road route by following the famous Syr Darya River into Tajikistan. We continue to the Silk Road town of Khodjent, which once played host to Alexander the Great's armies. After checking in to our homestay we can have an optional boat trip and swim in the famous river.

*Homestay (B,L,D)*

**Day 14: Khodjent - Fan Mountains:** After a look around Khodjent we will continue on one of the most spectacular days of

the trip as we drive over the Shakristan Pass (3378m) to arrive in the Fan Mountains, an area of outstanding natural beauty lying to south of the Zarafshan River.

*Homestay (B,L,D)*

**Day 15: In Fan Mountains:** We'll have a full day to explore the famed alpine scenery of this rarely visited part of Central Asia. Abounding in deep blue lakes and inhabited in the summer months by Tajik pastoralists, the area is still relatively undiscovered and allows for a fascinating insight into this gem of a country.

*Homestay (B,L,D)*

**Day 16: Fan Mountains - Dushanbe\*:** Heading south, we plan to arrive in Tajikistan's relaxed capital by mid-afternoon. The rest of the day will be free to stroll along Rudaki, the main street or just to relax and enjoy a few home comforts.

*Hotel (B,L,D)*

*\*Please see IMPORTANT NOTE below*

**Day 17: Dushanbe - Samarkand (Uzbekistan):** Leaving Dushanbe this morning, we take a short drive to our final border crossing of the trip as we head once more into Uzbekistan, and then make our way to the most famous of all of Silk Road cities, Samarkand.

*Hotel (B,L,D)*

**Day 18: Samarkand:** We have all day in this amazing town, wandering through the gargantuan sights visiting Guri Amir (Tamerlane's tomb), Bibi Khanym mosque and the town's excellent bazaar, Shah-i-Zindar - the street of the dead. Of course we will also visit the Registan Square, one of Central Asia's most iconic sights. There'll also be some free time to explore more of this city at your leisure. Dinner will be out at a local restaurant and afterwards we will drive around to see many of the sights spectacularly floodlit at night.

*Hotel (B,L,D)*

**Day 19: Samarkand - Bukhara:** After breakfast we'll drive along the Royal Road to Bukhara, stopping during the 4-hour journey to look at the remains of an old caravanserai. On arrival in Bukhara we'll check into our guesthouse superbly located in the Labi Hauz region, the 17<sup>th</sup>

century pool and eating area. After lunch in the old town we will familiarise ourselves with its mellow streets and alleyways followed by some free time before dinner by the Labi Hauz.

*Hotel (B,L,D)*

**Day 20: Bukhara:** We have all morning for sightseeing. We will start at the Ismaili Samani mausoleum; continue via the Jama Majid (or the mosque of forty pillars) to the Ark where Connolly and Stoddard - two luckless British officers - met their deaths while playing the Great Game. From here we will visit (and climb if you wish) the Kolan Minaret and the beautiful mosques and madrassas that lie beneath it. En route there is silk weaving, knife making and metal engraving. After lunch you will have the rest of the day free for shopping and generally relaxing in this most characterful of the old Silk Road towns.

*Hotel (B,L)*

**Day 21: Bukhara - Khiva:** Today we'll take our last major drive of the trip across the desert towards Khiva. En route we'll cross the famous Amu-Darya River (Oxus) before checking into the converted Madrassa in the heart of this UNESCO protected old town. This evening there will be time to take a first wander around the quiet streets of this wonderfully preserved Silk Road city.

*Hotel/Converted Madrassa (B,L,D)*

**Day 22: Khiva - Tashkent:** There'll be ample time to soak up the atmosphere of Khiva. We'll visit some of the most colourful and sumptuous sites, including the Kukhna Arc and the Mohammed Khan Madrassa. In addition, there'll be the opportunity to climb up the Kalta Minor minaret, explore the Jama Majid mosque with its amazing wooden pillars and the Alloqli Khan Madrassa, bazaar and caravanserai before transferring to the airport for an evening flight to Tashkent.

*Hotel (B,L,D)*

**Day 23: Tour ends in Tashkent:** Today those taking the group flight will fly to London early in the morning. Those who have made alternative arrangements will finish their tour after breakfast.

*(B)*

### IMPORTANT NOTE

Border crossings in Central Asia are occasionally subject to closure making it always a challenging (and yet endlessly fascinating) destination to visit. Consequently it may become necessary to amend the itinerary nearer the time of departure and you should be prepared for the need for such flexibility. At the time of writing, the border between Panjikent (Tajikistan) and Samarkand (Uzbekistan) was not open, hence we have not included it in our itinerary. If it does open in time for us to make the necessary changes, however, we would plan to amend the itinerary to our preferred option as below:-

Day 16: Fan Mountains - Samarkand  
Day 17: In Samarkand  
Day 18: Samarkand - Bukhara  
Day 19: In Bukhara  
Day 20: Bukhara - Khiva  
Day 21: Khiva - Tashkent  
Day 22: In Tashkent  
Day 23: Tour ends in Tashkent

#### **Wild Extensions:**

Arrive early to adjust to a new time zone or just to get a feel for the country before your tour starts. Explore the country after your tour on a bespoke Wild Extension or just allow a few days to relax afterwards. Maybe choose all of the above and get cheaper flights mid-week?

**Turkmenistan:** Want an even more depth insight into the Silk Road? Why not extend your trip to the bizarre country of Turkmenistan, home to the ancient city ruins of Merv, the spectacular Darvaza gas crater, and one of the world's most memorable cities in Ashgabat. Allow 5-7 days.

Contact the office for extension specifics.

### TOUR DETAILS

Tour Code: SRO/C

**Tour price:** All our tours are priced on a LAND ONLY basis, giving you maximum flexibility when deciding how to get to and from your tour.

**Single Supplements:** These are NOT compulsory for any Wild Frontiers tour. Where single supplements are available please note that a single room cannot always be guaranteed for every night of the tour as depending on the destination, rooms may be limited. On this tour we are able to offer an optional single supplement that will cover you for all nights of the tour except when in the yurts and homestays.

NB: for those nights when we are camping you will get a single tent.

**Flights:** If you would like us to send you a quote for the suggested tour flight (see GETTING THERE) or on any alternative flight that may suit you better, please let us know.

In all cases, for the latest prices, please refer to our website or contact the office.

Please remember that all Wild Frontiers tour prices mean NO hidden extras, NO local payments or kitty and NO compulsory single supplements.

### WHAT IS INCLUDED?

- Full services of a Wild Frontiers Tour Leader with local guides and drivers.
- Meal plan as detailed in the itinerary (B=Breakfast, L=Lunch, D=Dinner) with mineral water as required.
- All transport as outlined in the itinerary.
- All accommodation
- All entrance fees, as per itinerary.

### WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED?

- Visas
- Local airport taxes
- Tips
- Beverages & any costs of a personal nature
- International Flights

- Airport transfers (unless booking suggested flights through WF office)

### GETTING THERE

Our suggested flights for this trip (subject to change) are:

28JUL SU2579 LHR-SVO 13:25/20:00  
28JUL SU1882 SVO-FRU 22:55/05:10 +1  
19AUG SU1871 TAS-SVO 04:50/07:50  
19AUG SU2578 SVO-LHR 11:20/12:30

Key:

LHR - London Heathrow

SVO - Moscow

FRU - Bishkek

TAS - Tashkent

SU - Aeroflot

**NB** If you wish to arrange your own flights you are completely free to do so and in this case we can arrange any transfers or supplementary accommodation that you may require.

Please note that if you are making your own flight arrangements, we recommend that you only purchase flights that are totally flexible and refundable as due to the nature of adventure travel, itineraries can change at any time. For more information, please refer to our booking conditions.

### PRACTICALITIES

Accommodation will be in small hotels and guesthouses with Western style bathrooms and traditional yurts/homestays with communal long drop facilities. As a general rule, a single room can be obtained everywhere except: the Communal Yurts -Son Kul, Tash Rabat & Sary Tash - (though tents can always be arranged for those that would like more privacy) and the homestays (Osh, Khodjent & the Fan Mountains).

Any accommodation mentioned in the itinerary is subject to availability and if not available substitutes will be of a similar quality.

Transport in Central Asia varies with the country. Generally we use minibuses in Kyrgyzstan, cars in Tajikistan, and coasters/buses in Uzbekistan and China.

### Trip Grading:

Adventure Rating ❖❖❖❖❖

Comfort Grade ❖❖❖❖❖

Fitness Level ❖❖❖❖❖

Cultural Interest ❖❖❖❖❖

Please note that this grading is an indication only and should you have any concerns please contact the office.

### Fitness...

Anyone in a decent state of health will enjoy central Asia, however it should be noted through certain parts of Central Asia you will be camping and staying in yurts so you should be prepared for long drop toilet facilities and no showers for part of the trip. But don't panic too much - what you will be witnessing will easily make up for any discomfort.

### It may sound obvious but...

Wild Frontiers tours are not always for everyone and it is important to us that the tour you choose is the most suitable. Please therefore take time to read the dossier carefully. All our tours are graded to give an overall picture of the trip but these are only guidelines and you should check the daily itinerary. Should you have any concerns about your ability to partake in any aspect of the tour then please contact the office.

**Insurance:** Insurance that provides cover for emergency repatriation in case of a medical emergency is compulsory for all tours. You should be aware that many standard insurance policies may not cover you adequately for all aspects of a Wild Frontiers trip and so we strongly recommend that you purchase a suitably designed insurance policy. One such policy is the "Wild Frontiers" policy underwritten by Travel & General Insurance Company plc, which is available to UK and Republic of Ireland residents through our website or via the insurance company direct on 0845 408 0583. Under this policy there are two different levels of cover available and for this trip the minimum requirement would be the Standard policy.

### Cover explained:

**Standard policy:** a comprehensive travel insurance policy that provides cover for all Wild Frontiers activities, including trekking up to 6,000m. This policy does not provide cover for travel to areas where the FCO is advising against all or all but essential travel.

**Elite policy:** provides the same comprehensive level of cover as the standard policy. In addition the Elite policy also provides cover for travel to areas where the FCO is advising against all or all but essential travel. The policy will not provide cover for any claims arising from or relating to the reasons why the FCO is advising against travel.

If purchasing the Elite policy you also have the option to extend the cover provided by the policy to include cover for claims arising from a terrorist act in an area where the FCO is advising against travel. You can add this cover to your policy when purchasing online or over the telephone.

These policies are only available to those travelling on a Wild Frontiers holiday.

For more information and to purchase your policy online please visit the insurance section of our website.

The cover is underwritten by the International Insurance Company of Hannover Limited (IICH), who are authorised and regulated by the Financial Services Authority (FSA). Wild Frontiers Limited is an Introducer Appointed Representative of Travel & General Insurance Company plc, details of which can be found at the FSA's website [www.fsa.gov.uk](http://www.fsa.gov.uk).

If you do decide to purchase alternative insurance, then you must ensure that it covers you for every aspect of this trip (please see the Foreign & Commonwealth Office section below).

**Visas:** Visas are necessary for many of the destinations we travel to and while we aim to provide you with the most up-to-date information, requirements frequently change and as such we advise that you check with the relevant embassies or contact our recommended

visa agency, Travcour (020 7223 5295) [www.travcour.com](http://www.travcour.com) for the latest advice.

For this tour, UK passport holders currently require visas for Kyrgyzstan, China, Uzbekistan & Tajikistan.

Non-UK passport holders should contact the relevant embassies for individual requirements.

Further details will be sent out to you on booking, however ensuring that correct and valid visas are obtained remains the sole responsibility of the client.

**Visa Costs:** At the time of writing, visa costs for this trip amounted to approximately £250 for UK citizens.

### **Ramadan (20 JUL - 19 AUG 2012)**

Please note that parts of this trip will take place during the holy month of Ramadan. From our experience we believe that this is a fascinating time to visit the region and the evenings especially can be very lively. Normal business hours are sometimes a little erratic during Ramadan and at times it may be necessary to make some minor re-arrangements to the itinerary and all we ask is that you keep an open mind and a flexible attitude. Although respect and understanding will be expected of us, it should be noted that Westerners are not required to fast and food and drink will be available to you throughout the day.

**Responsible Travel:** Responsible travel and sustainable tourism are fundamental ideas that Wild Frontiers has been committed to since our birth. It is our strong belief that these words should not be simply 'tagged on' to dossiers and websites but should be at the very core of each trip, and our adventures are therefore designed with the local people, culture and eco-system in mind. We believe that a successful trip not only delivers a unique and unsurpassable journey for our clients, but that it also benefits the peoples whose lands we are privileged to visit.

**The Wild Frontiers Foundation:** In order to facilitate an enduring support structure for the communities we visit, and to show a commitment to these values, Wild Frontiers has set up a charitable foundation through which we

can channel funds to both existing NGOs and our own development projects. In addition to organising ethically sensitive tours, having our own charitable foundation allows us to raise money - through the cost of our tours, charity trips and fund raising events - which can then be used to fund various projects in education, sanitation, reforestations and a number of other important issues facing developing communities. Wherever possible we are happy for our clients to visit these projects to see for themselves where and how this money is being spent. For a comprehensive list of all partner NGOs please visit our website. Should you wish to donate to the foundation please contact the office for details.

**The Environment:** Trying to do our bit for the environment, in 2005 we were among the first UK-based travel companies to automatically offset every client's international flight (if booked with us) with a payment to Carbon Clear to help promote sustainable energy.

**Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO):** The FCO travel advice highlights potential hazards people might experience when travelling abroad. Given the nature of destinations offered by Wild Frontiers it is inevitable that from time to time some itineraries contravene this advice. Whilst WF takes the safety and security of its clients extremely seriously, we will not necessarily cancel a trip because of the FCO advice. It is recommended therefore that clients check this advice before booking and contact us if they have any queries or concerns. Please see our website for further information.

Please note that Days 10 to 12 of this trip travel through Osh province where, at the time of writing, all but essential travel is advised against by the FCO. Following careful discussions with our partners in Kyrgyzstan and several other parties, we can confirm that we are happy that it is currently safe for us to take this route. If you have any questions, please contact us and we will be happy to discuss this further.

Travel & General have confirmed that the Standard insurance policy (see Insurance section above) is sufficient for this trip, but if you have alternative insurance you should check with your insurer

**Climate:** The weather conditions can be extremely varied. In the mountains of Kyrgyzstan, you will often be travelling at heights in excess of 3,000m, and even in the middle of summer it can turn bitter with snow falling; at the same time mercury in the thermometers of Bukhara can be nudging 40 degrees.

**Further information:**  
When you make a confirmed booking with Wild Frontiers we will send you our confirmation pack with complete pre-departure information giving you details on visas, health and vaccinations, packing lists, suggested reading on the region, insurance, photography and other useful tips to make your trip more enjoyable.

## SILK ROAD - THE FACTS



**The Silk Road:** Lasting almost 2000 years, the Silk Road is surely 'the most romantic and culturally important trade route in the history of the world.' The term itself is in fact something of a misnomer for there was never one 'road' but a labyrinth of tracks and trails threading their way from Xi'an in central China, across the mountains and deserts of Central Asia, and on to the great markets of Byzantium and Rome. The need for strong horses (see 'Heavenly Horses' section) and the desire to be clothed in the mysterious Chinese fabric were what gave birth to the trade route but it soon developed into a thriving thoroughfare of people and commerce, carrying all manner of things along its path. As well as silk, from the east came porcelain, paper, tea, lacquer-ware, perfumes and medicinal herbs; while from the west came gold, silver, ivory, jade, wool, horses, coloured glass, walnuts,

cucumbers, grapes, wine and spices. But it wasn't only goods the caravans carried; just as importantly, through the traders and their escorts' ideas, religions and technologies were spread across the world.

Caravans seldom travelled the road's entire length, but instead carried their goods only a certain stage of the overall journey before handing them on to others. As a result, great cities sprang up, such as at Samarkand, Bukhara, Kashgar and Merv, where agents, contract makers and brokers - the Silk Road's middlemen - became rich on the trade. Much of their glory can still be seen today.



But in the end the opening of the sea routes, with their quicker, safer and ultimately cheaper means of transport caused the great Silk Road's demise. That said, since the break-up of the Soviet Union and the thawing in relations between China and the newly-formed Central Asian states, the route is once again being plied and it is not unusual to see trucks from Turkey, Iran and even Italy thundering down the road between Samarkand and Bukhara where once the languorous camels wandered.

**The Mountains of Heaven:** The Tien Shan, or Celestial Mountains are quite simply one of the most beautiful mountain ranges on earth. Though perhaps not as immediately dramatic as the mighty Himalaya or Karakoram, the colour, variety, shapes and simple wildness of the Tien Shan will still have you gasping with wonder. But what makes a trip into these mountains so special isn't just the views; it lies in the fact that here you really feel as though you are amongst them, a part of them, not simply staring up at far-away peaks. Living with nomads in their yurts or camping by wild rivers in forests of pine, for the most part many miles away from 'civilisation', after

a few days in the Tien Shan you will feel like a nomad yourself!



**Tash Rabat:** Sheltering in the lee of a black granite cliff, in what must surely be one of the prettiest valleys in the country, this ancient Silk Road caravanserai, constructed of dark stone with a huge arched entrance, domed roof and corner turrets, appears like some ancient eastern castle, a mythical outpost from some long forgotten legend. Before it, sweeping out of sight behind a sheer ridge, is a wide green valley, dotted with yurts and hundreds of animals - horses, cattle, yaks and sheep. With a friendly family to stay with in cosy, well-equipped yurts, wonderful walks and rides in the mountains around, a visit to Tash Rabat is one of the highlights of any trip to Kyrgyzstan.

**Kashgar:** During the heyday of the Silk Road, Kashgar was a vitally important oasis town forming a sanctuary for travellers heading to or from the dangerous lands of the Taklamakan Desert that lie immediately to the east. But it wasn't just from China and Europe that the travellers came. Kashgar sits at a natural junction with the ancient trade routes through the Karakoram Mountains to India and the southern seas. From here the traders also journeyed, carrying fine cloth, cashmere, spices, jade, coral, pearls and precious gems. Hence a great market sprung up. The geography hasn't changed and though Kashgar's importance may have waned in recent times, the bazaars - especially the famous Yakshambe Bazaar or the Sunday Market - still thrive today. At the beginning of the third millennium, however, Kashgar is a tale of two cities: that of the modern Han and the ancient Uyghur. Wide, tree-lined streets, bordered by modern stores, hotels and supermarkets that are peopled by Han migrants from the east, but look hard enough and you'll still find glimpses

of the Uyghur world, barely changed from the heady days of the old Silk Road, echoing that of the Arabian Nights.



**Samarkand:** 'All travellers who set out for Central Asia hold in their hearts the dream of reaching Samarkand.' In the third century BC Alexander the Great took 'the Pearl of the East' and declared, 'Everything I have heard about the beauty of the city is true, except that it is much more beautiful than I'd even imagined.' In the thirteenth century the celebrated Moroccan traveller, Ibn Battuta, discovered, 'one of the largest and most perfectly beautiful cities in the world.' And in 1898 Lord Curzon was to write, 'I know of nothing in the East approaching its simplicity and grandeur; and nothing in Europe which can even aspire to enter the competition.' Even today, standing in Registan square, surrounded by exquisite fluted domes, mosaic madrassas, majestic arches and towering minarets, the romantic mind drifts easily back to a mystical time of fables, myths and legend - to the world of Omar Khayyam and his famous *Ruba'iyat*; to the colourful Sogdian and Samanid courts; to the slaughter streets of Ghengis Khan and Tamerlane's renaissance; to the lands through which Marco Polo, Xuan Zang and a thousand other great travellers passed. Over the centuries, nowhere has symbolised the romance of the east more than Samarkand.

**Bukhara:** There is an ancient saying in Central Asia - 'Samarkand is the beauty of the earth, but Bukhara is the beauty of the spirit'. During the heyday of the Silk Road, Bukhara became so rich from trade that it boasted 365 mosques, one for every day of the year. Lying at a strategically important crossroad between Herat, Kabul, Merv and Samarkand, Bukhara has played a leading role in the colourful history of the region. Home to the Kolan Minaret, once the

tallest tower in the Islamic realm (and variously used to call the faithful to prayer, as a beacon to guide travellers in from the desert and, more notoriously, as a means of execution) the famous Arc and beautiful Labi-Hauz, here in Bukhara you will find the true beauty and serenity of urban Central Asia.



#### How to book:

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