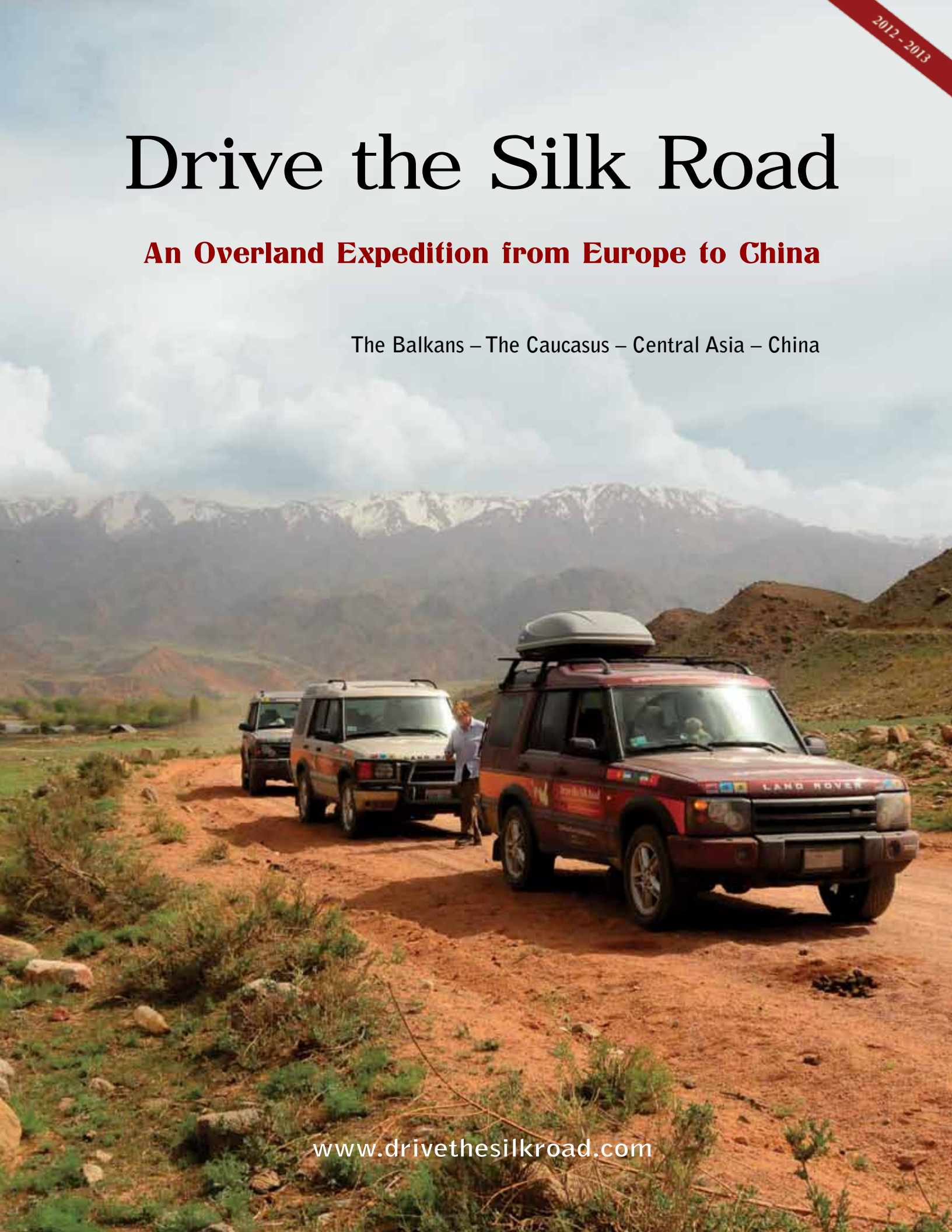


Drive the Silk Road

An Overland Expedition from Europe to China

The Balkans – The Caucasus – Central Asia – China



To travel the Silk Road, the greatest land route on earth, is to trace the passage not only of trade and armies, but also of ideas, religions and inventions...



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One Road that Connected the East and West

Despite the great distance between Europe and Asia, the two regions had contact prior to the first century AD. Traders, pilgrims and warriors all travelled along the Silk Road from the Mediterranean region in the West to as far as China in the East. Cultures spread through interaction among merchants, travellers and conquerors. The most profound influence of all were those brought by conquering civilizations.

To understand the history of cultural diffusion, one must understand the major empires of the Silk Road and the effects that they had on the exchange and spread of culture. The overland journey we organize each year reveals various regions along this historical and legendary route taking travellers into many unspoiled and off-the-beaten-path places. By driving through and visiting these places, the participants have realized that the Silk Road is not just a legend that belongs to the past, but full of liveliness and present-day activities, and the knowledge gained from the trip shall be much greater than those from the history books.

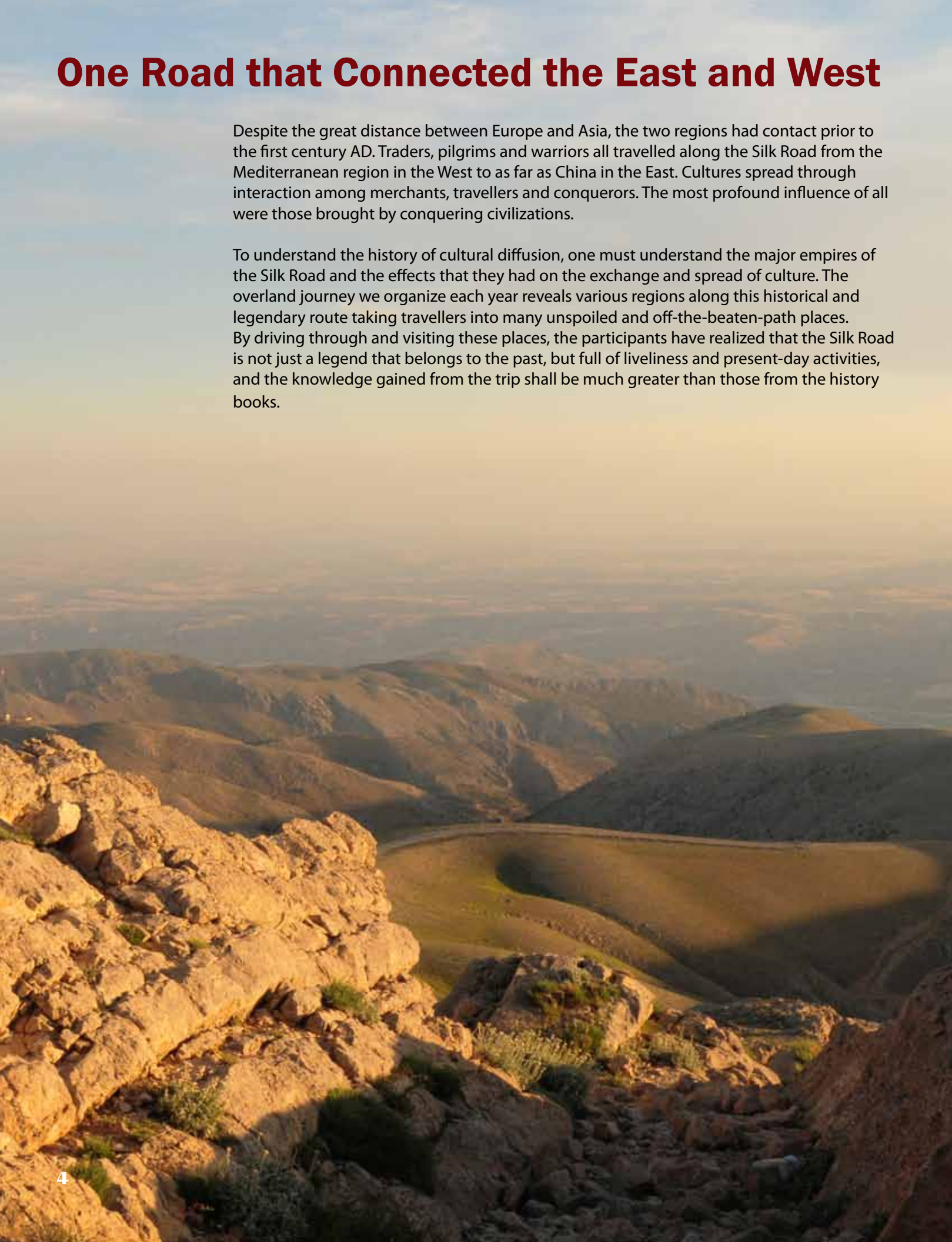


After two years of preparing and scouting, our first Silk Road overland expedition was launched in 2007. Ever since then, this great adventure, once a year, has become the center of our lives.

There are certain roads on earth that can only be thoroughly appreciated by travelling them overland. The Silk Road which connects Europe and Asia is a classic example. This journey is not only a magic carpet ride of discovery but also a significant linkage of mankind.

We hope, through this unforgettable travel experience, that knowledge will be broadened, understanding will be deepened and world peace will be promoted.

Yue Chi
Organizer
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Life is short... go on and live it!

David Visagie
Organizer
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Land Rover Discovery: Our Vehicle of Choice

Much thought and consideration was taken when choosing the most suitable vehicle for the trip. The outstanding history and achievements of one vehicle stood out: The Land Rover Discovery.

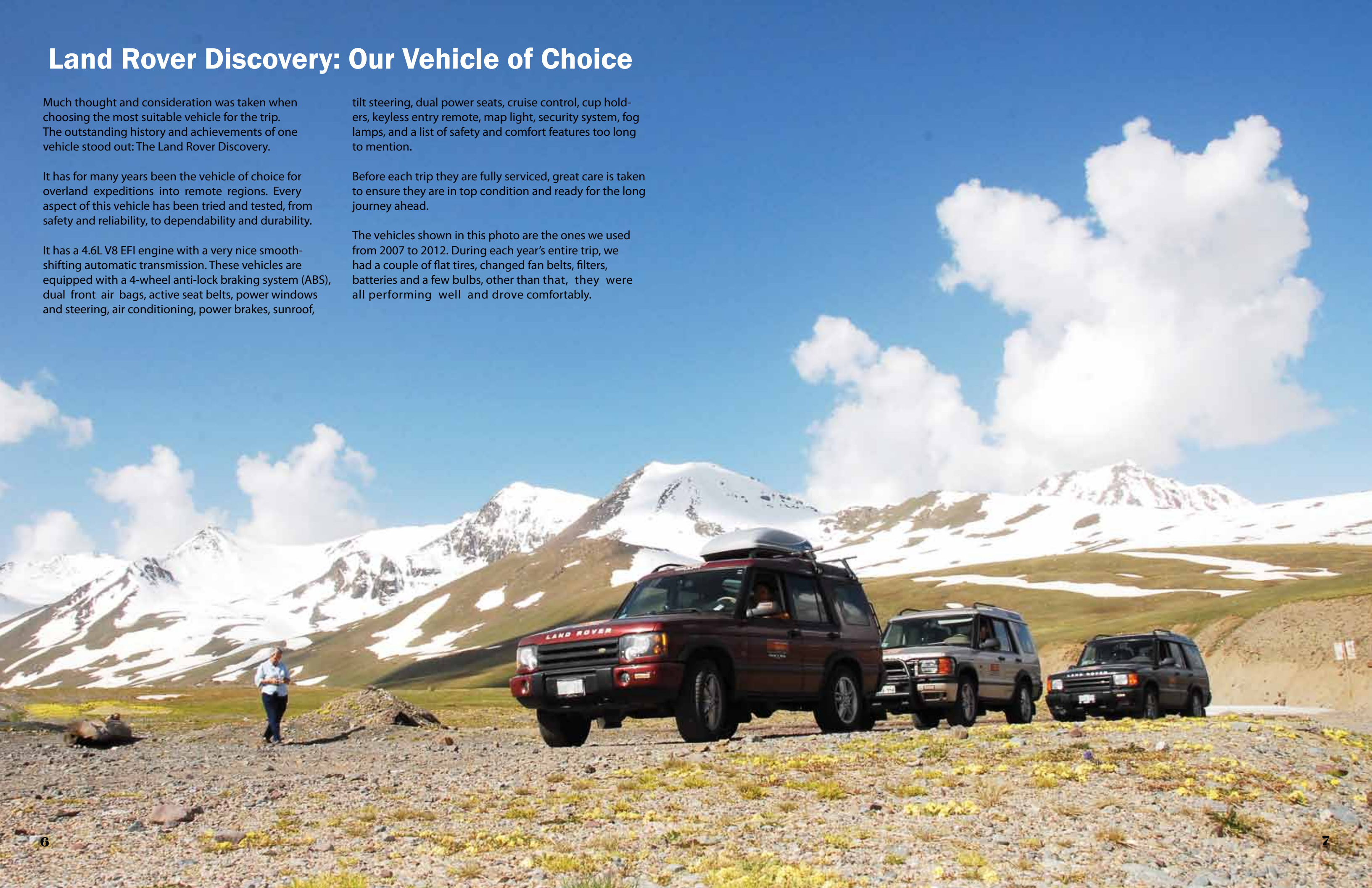
It has for many years been the vehicle of choice for overland expeditions into remote regions. Every aspect of this vehicle has been tried and tested, from safety and reliability, to dependability and durability.

It has a 4.6L V8 EFI engine with a very nice smooth-shifting automatic transmission. These vehicles are equipped with a 4-wheel anti-lock braking system (ABS), dual front air bags, active seat belts, power windows and steering, air conditioning, power brakes, sunroof,

tilt steering, dual power seats, cruise control, cup holders, keyless entry remote, map light, security system, fog lamps, and a list of safety and comfort features too long to mention.

Before each trip they are fully serviced, great care is taken to ensure they are in top condition and ready for the long journey ahead.

The vehicles shown in this photo are the ones we used from 2007 to 2012. During each year's entire trip, we had a couple of flat tires, changed fan belts, filters, batteries and a few bulbs, other than that, they were all performing well and drove comfortably.



The Operation



This is a driving adventure. You will drive one of the Land Rover Discovery vehicles provided by the organizers. In each vehicle, there will be three to four participants and the driving will be shared.

There could be some long days that are around 10 hours driving, though the short ones could be just 2-3 hours. The itinerary is designed with a rhythm, which will allow participants enough time to sightsee, photograph and rest. To make this a unique personal experience for each member, the group size is limited to a maximum of 16 people.

The convoy will include a lead vehicle with a mechanic and a tour escort. In each country, local guides will join the group at certain stops when necessary. The group leaders and guides are thoroughly familiar with the local facilities, petrol stations, maintenance centres and road conditions. When camping in the desert (1 night), camping equipment and cooking facilities will be supplied.



Each participant of the trip will be responsible for obtaining his/her own visas for each country, while the organizer will provide invitation letters when necessary.

A valid driving license and travel medical insurance are also required.

The route has been thoroughly researched and carefully chosen. The trip follows the route indicated by the latest route map, but may be modified to accommodate changing roads or environmental conditions. With the support and knowledge of our team, you will have the opportunity to enjoy the challenges of driving through this historical route in safety.

This program is designed for those travellers who have a taste for exploration and adventure. Some of the remote historic areas along our path are somewhat challenging and unpredictable, but richly rewarding in their scenic and cultural splendour.



Get Up Close to Local People and Their Fascinating Cultures

Being a stranger in a strange land makes it difficult to become acquainted with the local people and their cultures. We are travellers, however, not tourists, and the way we travel allows us more opportunities to meet with local people and become less of a stranger.

Many of the local people speak English and would love to have a chance to practice with you, but it is also a pleasure for us to learn a few words of Croatian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Russian, Chinese or Tibetan along the way. A friendly greeting to people in their own language helps a great deal to make new friends.

We will have opportunities to shop in the local stores and markets, drop by bazaars and eat in the local restaurants. We will get off the beaten path, go beyond the tourist areas, explore residential neighbourhoods, small towns and rural communities. With a slower pace of life than in a large city, we will find people more hospitable and enthusiastic to talk to us.



Section One: *The Balkans*

With colourful tapestry of cultures, landscapes and traditions, the Balkan countries offer a wonderful insight into a lesser-known Europe.

After slumbering for decades, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria have become Europe's mostly fascinating new destinations. Sandwiched between Italy, Austria, Hungary and the Mediterranean, this entire region remains genuinely "unspoilt". This is a stunning area marked by ruggedly beautiful scenery, enriched history, unique architecture, ancient castles, peaceful villages, delicious food and wine, all worthwhile to experience.

Each year, we ship our Land Rover Discovery vehicles to Western Europe to start the journey. We discover cities and regions that have survived the ravages of war to become the medieval treasures they are today.



Croatia

At the Crossroads between East and West



Croatia is a country of great contrasts and stunning beauty, from ancient Roman ruins and medieval walled cities to the bustling streets of Zagreb, its capital city, and luxurious resorts along its sparkling Dalmatian coast. The country boasts a rich and colorful history, as well as a culture that reflects the region's centuries-long role as a crossroads between east and west. Independent from Yugoslavia since 1991, Croatia has become a popular tourist destination.

Our overland expedition team will drive almost the entire length of this fascinating country. We will have heard stories about a land of a thousand islands, her magical nature and rich heritage, her great Men whose glorious deeds have forever etched the name of Croatia in large letters on the map of the world; this time, we put our wheels onto a land where beauties have been celebrated since ancient times. From Cassiodorus, who wrote of the divine life led by Patricians on her shores, to Dante, who wrote his immortal verses, enthralled by the epic scenes of the blue expanse, and all the way to George Bernard Shaw, who found his paradise on Earth right here.

The first cities we encounter will be Opatija and Rijeka. Opatija is a town located in the Kvarner Bay rich with cultural and entertainment events, a modern city with the longest tradition of Croatian tourism. For more than 160 years Opatija has been welcoming visitors from all over the world, due to lush vegetation and a pleasant climate, this city is often referred as the "Pearl of the Adriatic".

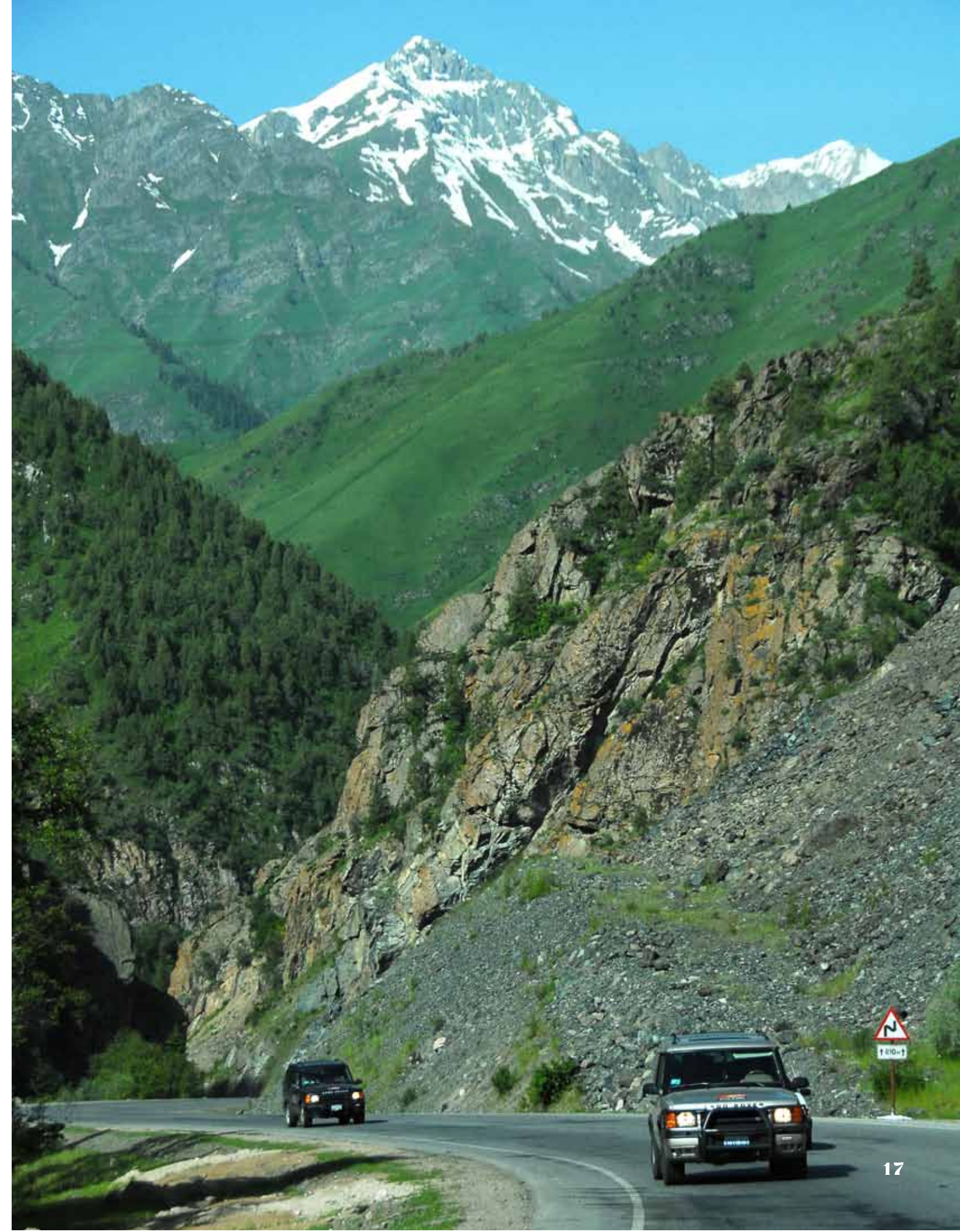
We have known that Rijeka is an important port city, but do you know that Moretto is the symbol of Rijeka? Moretto is a traditional jewellery art form from this region, which stands out for its Moorish motifs, basically a black head and a contrasting white turban figurine. This is a basic design for earrings, amulets, brooches and necklaces. This figurine of a black man denoting a wealthy oriental merchant harks back to the rich history of Croatia when men of all nationalities and race travelled to the Croatian coast. The Moretto is made from metal with enamel coating. The richer nobles used to have their Moretto earrings made out of gold and enamel and gems such as rubies for decoration. These earrings are worn as good luck charms across the Croatian coast by men and women alike. Each province has its own variation of the Moretto, which only a local can differentiate. A 16th century legend attributes divine providence to the victory of the Croats of Rijeka who successfully defeated the white turbaned Turks in a battle, which was later commemorated by making earrings in the shape of black men with white turbans that are now famously recognized as the Moretto.

In Croatia's rugged interior, a stone's throw from the Bosnian border, hides one of Europe's most exotic parks: Plitvice Lakes National Park. There's nothing like this lush valley of 16 terraced lakes, laced together by waterfalls and miles of pleasant plank walks. As a World Heritage Site, Plitvice maintains a pristine environment that is nearly primeval in its beauty. It's one reason why there's "no swimming in the lakes". But we will be able to marvel



at the travertine formations and the extraordinary variety of plants and animals that make their home in the park.

After the costal drive and island hopping, Dubrovnik will be the last city in Croatia we visit before leaving this stunning country. Dubrovnik is a city reborn. It was cut off from the world and subjected to sustained attack during the Yugoslav wars of the early 1990s. Many buildings in the Old Town were damaged (though those thick walls stood firm), the infrastructure of the city as a whole was the destroyed, and the beautiful Dalmatian coastline disappeared from the tourist map. Now, every inch of the walled city has been restored, and Dubrovnik is once again a chic destination and a celebrity magnet. 🌸



Section Two: *Turkey and the Caucasus*

Straddling two continents, Europe and Asia, and bordering the Middle East, Turkey has a unique history dating back thousands of years. From the ancient Hittites to the Ottomans, countless civilizations have made Turkey their home, leaving behind them an impressive historical and archaeological heritage.

Our convoy will travel through the entire Turkey, from its west end Istanbul to the north-eastern city of Kars visiting the medieval Armenian archaeological site, Ani, before entering the Caucasus region.

The Caucasus countries comprise three unique yet interconnected former Soviet republics: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, each with its own distinct customs, language and traditions. Connected historically with the great Silk Road, this rich region was once traced by ancient caravans from the East carrying delicate jewels, precious stones and spices.





Mount Nemrut

Exotic History and Astonishing Scenery



Turkey's Mount Nemrut lies 40km north of Kahta, near Adiyaman. In 62 BC, King Antiochus I Theos of Commagene built on the mountain top a tomb-sanctuary flanked by huge statues (8-9 meters high) of himself, two lions, two eagles and various Greek, Armenian and Persian gods, such as Hercules, Zeus-Oromasdes (associated with the Persian god Ahura Mazda), Tyche, and Apollo-Mithras. These statues were once seated, with names of each god inscribed on them. The heads of the statues are now scattered throughout the site; the pattern of damage to the heads (notably to noses) suggests that they were deliberately damaged because of belief in iconoclasm. The site also preserves stone slabs with bas-relief figures that are thought to have formed a large frieze. These stones display the ancestors of Antiochus, who included both Macedonians and Persians.





The same statues and ancestors found throughout the site can also be found on the tumulus at the site, which is 49 meters tall and 152 meters in diameter. The statues have the likeness of Greek facial features, in conjunction with Persian clothing and hairstyling. The western terrace contains a large slab with a lion, showing the arrangement of stars and the planets Jupiter, Mercury and Mars on 7 July 62 BC, the possible time when construction began on this monument. The eastern portion is well preserved, being composed of several layers of rock, and there is evidence of a walled passageway linking the eastern and western terraces, from a path below at the foot of Mount Nemrut. Possible uses for this site might have included religious ceremonies, due to the astronomical and religious nature of the monument.

The arrangement of such statues is known by the term hierothesion. Similar arrangements have been found at Arsameia on Nymphaios at the hierothesion of the father of Antiochus, Mithridates I Callinicus.

This tomb was excavated in 1881 by Karl Sester, an engineer from Germany. Subsequent excavations have failed to reveal the tomb of Antiochus. However, this is still believed to be the site of his burial. In 1987, Mt. Nemrut was made a World heritage site by UNESCO. ❁



*The traveller's heart stood and awoke
 And born aloft on wings of hope
 ...
 Yet in the footsteps that you make
 I see the path that I must take
 So may I follow you and learn the secrets that you keep
 ...
 You cannot worship until you love
 You cannot love until you feel
 You cannot feel until you understand
 You cannot understand until you learn
 You cannot learn until you have been found
 You cannot be found until you seek
 ...*

By Nasheed: The Caravanserai

Armenian Cuisine

Taste of the Caucasus

The glory of Armenian cuisine extends far beyond the country's borders. There is not a place on the post-Soviet territory (and even farther) where people do not know or love and cultivate Armenian cuisine. The juicy smoking shashlick emitting magnificent aroma, baked vegetables – khoravats saturated with the smell of coals; tender cooked without oil dolma melting in your mouth ... delicious! All the dishes of Armenian cuisine are well familiar and loved by the travellers. But what is the historical background of the culinary attraction of Armenia?

Armenian Cuisine is as ancient as its history, as the land it is standing on. Armenian culinary traditions are over 2000 years old. The abundance of meat on Armenian tables is the result of the most ancient development of cattle breeding in Armenian uplands which led to such a variety of livestock and poultry. Cattle breeding was also the source of various dairy products – basically brine-ripened cheeses as well as sour-milk products which serve as the basis for traditional Armenian dishes and beverages. Traditionally Armenians cooked food on fire. The clay furnace began to be called "tonir" and has retained this name. Armenians used clay kitchen ware too. Tonir was used for cooking bread, mashes, fish and poultry, vegetables, soups and other dishes.

Armenian cooking techniques are rather complicated. The most difficult to cook are meat, fish and vegetable dishes which require stuffing, whipping, puree and soufflé making as it takes a lot of time and work. Armenians very much love dishes from chopped meat and all possible

variants of stuffed dishes.

Another feature of Armenian cuisine is a great number of greengrocery and spices in preparation of dishes. Armenian cooks use 300 kinds of wild-growing grasses and flowers which are used as seasonings or even as basic dishes.

Fragrant spices are very popular: pepper, coriander, fenu-greek, black pepper, mint, tarragon, basil, thyme and of course garlic and onion; and for sweet dishes - cinnamon, cardamom, clove, saffron and vanilla.

The surprising fact is that Armenian cuisine practically does not use fats. The majority of dishes is cooked in drawn butter. It is used for soups, stewing and roasting of meats, poultry, fish and vegetables as well as sweet dishes. Vegetable oils are used in Armenian cuisine less frequently - for preparation of fish and some vegetable dishes (string beans, eggplants). Sesame oil is traditional. Armenian cuisine is in many ways similar to the ones of other Caucasian countries. But at the same time is different too. Georgians, for example, use a lot of ingredients to achieve complex variety of tastes. Armenians, on the contrary, most of all value the naturalness of taste. Meat is traditionally not fried and cut in large chunks. It is boiled, stewed or baked.

There a special cult of meat dishes in Armenian cuisine. The most simple and ancient dishes are the famous shashlick, pastynery meat kchuchi and of course poultry

dishes. They are cooked in the same way as they were 1,500 years ago.

Traditional Armenian bread – lavash (unleavened wheat cake) – is loved all over the world. Armenian cuisine without lavash simply does not exist. Not without a reason the expressions meaning to eat, have dinner, have breakfast, have supper in Armenian are replaced with one – "to eat bread".

Armenians do not cultivate tea. The most widespread beverage there is coffee. Strong brew with foam is diluted with ice cold water like Turkish coffee. Also popular are excellent mineral waters of the country and fruit juices.

Armenians have been known as great wine makers. During our drive through the country, we will have opportunities to explore the vineyards and taste their various products. ❁



Visit the Molokans in Armenia

The Molokans (Russian for “milk-drinkers”) are sectarian Christians who evolved from “Spiritual Christian” Russian peasants that refused to obey the Russian Orthodox Church, beginning in the 17th century. They were so named for their drinking milk on most of the approximately 200 fasting days, especially the Great Fast (Lent)— an activity which was prohibited by ecclesiastical authorities. Russian Tsar Nikolai I in 1830 signed a decree prohibiting “Molokans” to live in the central areas of Russia. This made them resettle in Trans-Caucasus. The villages of the Molokans are still existing in Northern Armenia.

Molokans live in complete harmony with nature. They preserve not only the fields, but also the forests. They collect wild berries, pears and grow cabbages. Their home-made jams, cheese and pickles are fantastic.

When we reach Dilijan near the Sevan Lake in Armenia, we will have an opportunity to visit a Molokan village and spend an evening with local families, learning first-hand about their unique cultural and religious traditions, and the survival of the community in modern time. ❁





Crossing the Caspian Sea From Baku to Turkmenbashi



The Caspian Sea is the largest enclosed inland body of water on Earth by area, variously classed as the world's largest lake or a full-fledged sea. It is in an endothermic basin (has no outflows) and is bounded to the northwest by Russia, to the west by Azerbaijan, to the south by Iran, to the southeast by Turkmenistan, and to the northeast by Kazakhstan.

The Port of Baku is the capital of Azerbaijan. Lying on the western shores of the Caspian Sea. Baku is blessed with the best harbour in the Caspian because the bay is sheltered by the islands of the Baku Archipelago to the east and the

Abseron Peninsula to the north. Petroleum is the base of Baku's economy. Most of the surrounding towns are drilling centers that are linked to local refineries by a network of pipelines. Oil is piped to the Black Sea Port of Batumi (Georgia) or shipped by tanker across the Caspian to the Volga River. With its busy petroleum industry, the Port of Baku has also become a center for manufacturing oil industry equipment. Other important industries in the Port of Baku include shipbuilding and repair, metalworking, food processing, and the manufacture of electrical machinery, chemicals, and construction materials.



There are only cargo ferries sailing across the Caspian Sea. Since 1963, the ferry line Baku – Turkmenbashi, former Krasnovodsk, has been operating and connecting the two cities. For those who combine the second and the third sections of the trip, will be using the ferry travelling from Azerbaijan to Turkmenistan.

There are no fixed scheduled ferry services so we have to visit the office in the morning and try our luck. If and when the ferry leaves depends on weather conditions, though we had never experienced bad weather in May. Another reason for the ferry not departing could be waiting for a train cargo that might take long time to arrive. Keep in mind, the ferry is mainly for freight and won't take passengers if it isn't loaded with freight.

To travel this route, we need to face the uncertainty of ferry crossing and plan in some time flexibility (we should always remember to have a couple of extra days in our visa just in case). There could be also a long delay of departure if the ship's engines need to be serviced.

It's a huge ship, with about fifty crew members. But we could be the only passengers on the ship! Bear in mind that the conditions on board are quite minimal. Cabins are equipped with wooden bunks and working toilet. If we pay a few dollars in cash, the cabin manager would provide clean sheets and pillow cases. There is no dining room on board but very often, we could convince the kitchen to cook us something to eat. It is also not hard to find hot tea in kitchen area.

The sailing takes about 12 hours but boarding and disembarking time can be quite lengthy, therefore we need to set our mind for at least 24 hours for the crossing.

Despite the above challenges, the ferry trip would be fun and unique. We would be rewarded with beautiful coastline views of Baku Bay and Turkmenistan harbour. Sunset scene over the Caspian Sea can also be absolutely stunning. ❁



Section Three: *Central Asia*

Central Asia, the land of the “Stans”, may also be referred to as the “Land of the Caravans”. The Caravan routes affected history and cultures greatly as they opened the lines of communication and trade between previously isolated societies; cultures influenced, and were influenced, resulting in rich diversity and significant cultural growth. Driving along this Route of the Caravans is an expedition through a very significant part of the Silk Road network, a journey back in time to birthplaces of great builders of empires such as the Mughuls and Tamerlane.



Into the Karakum Desert in Turkmenistan

Karakum Desert, or the "Black Desert", occupies about 350,000 km² and covers more than 80% of the entire territory of Turkmenistan. Unlike the Sahara, the Karakum Desert is largely covered with bushes and wild camels can often be seen. Travel into this vast desert is only possible by 4WD with well-prepared water, food and camping facilities.

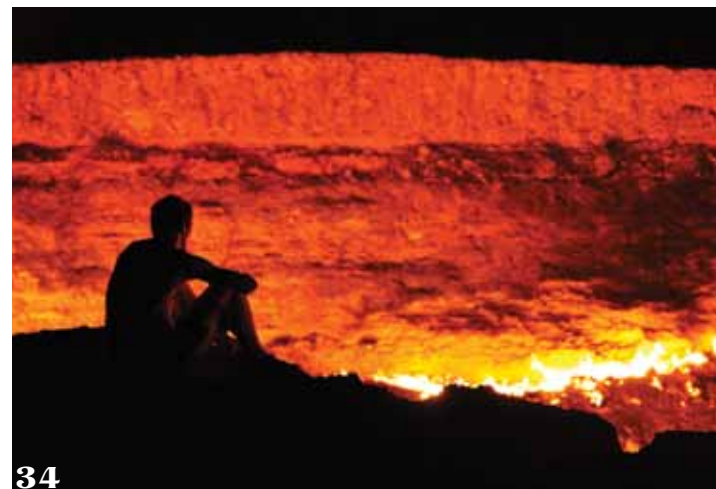
The population here is sparse, with an average of one person per 6.5 km². Rainfall is equally sparse, where precipitation comes maybe once a decade in some areas. Before entering the desert, we will go through some basic driving techniques so that our convoy could conquer the dunes while staying safe and comfortable when offroading in the desert.

After getting off the paved road for about an hour, at the heart of the desert lies the Darvaza Gas Craters, one of the World's most unusual sights.

This crater is a result of a Soviet gas exploration accident that occurred in the 70's. When a Soviet drilling team was digging for natural gas, ground surface collapsed resulting crater which today measures roughly 60 meters in diameter and 20 meters deep. It was set alight shortly after being discovered and has been burning ever since.

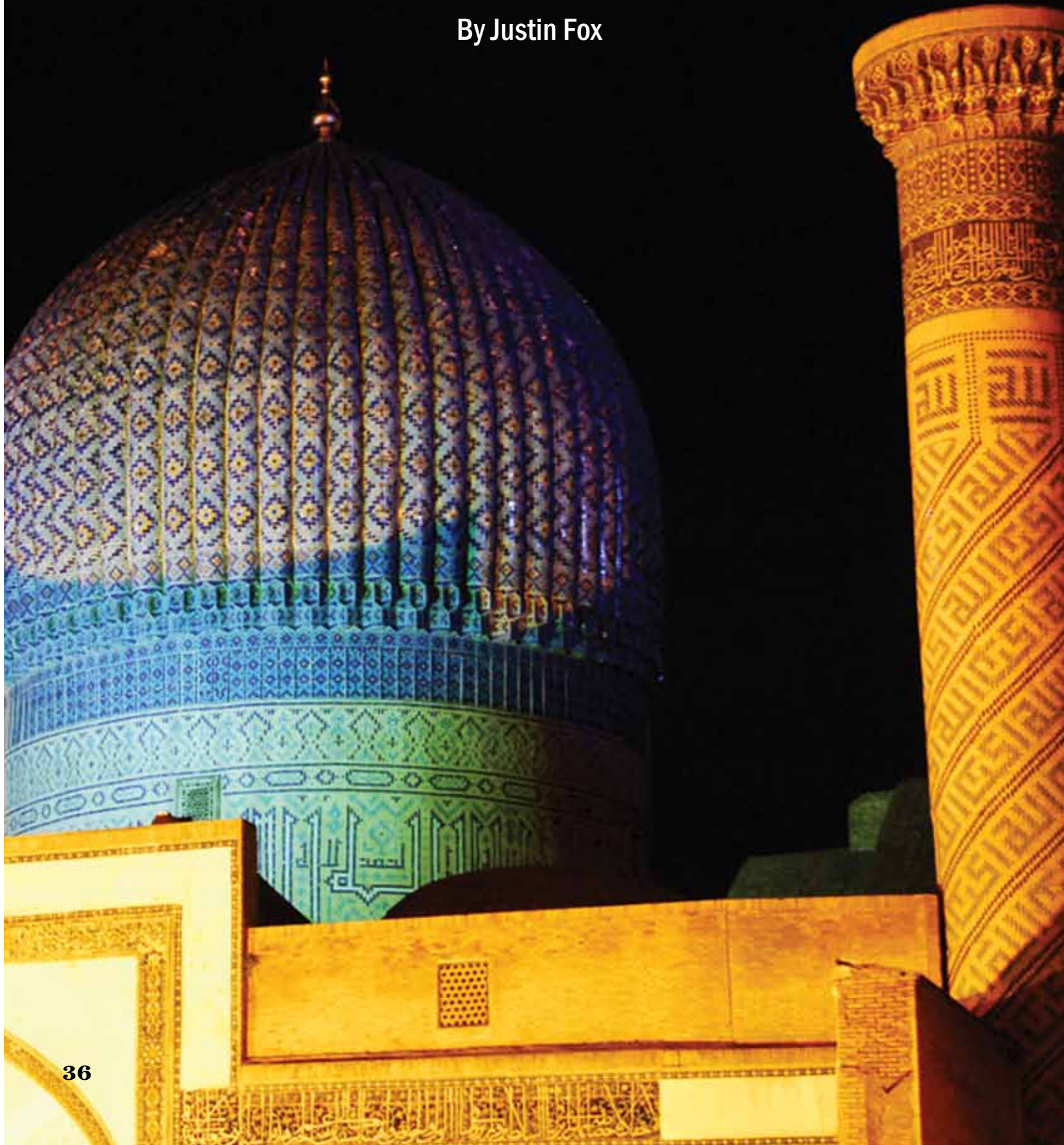
The glow of the gas crater was shimmering on the horizon and, as we drove closer, the smell of the gas and the heat given off from the many fires blazing from within the crater creates a volcanic atmosphere ... almost looks as if lava is flowing inside. We camped beside it that night.

Sky could be starry, and the extraordinary, eerily beautiful sight of the crater will stay in memory for a long, long time.



Uzbekistan - The Jewel of the Silk Road

By Justin Fox



Central Asia lies way off most people's travel radar. But the southern states of the former USSR do have some bucket-list gems. Perhaps the most compelling of these is the trio of cities at the heart of the old Silk Road. South African writer Justin Fox travelled to Uzbekistan to visit Khiva, Bukhara and fabled Samarkand.

Uzbekistan is the cradle of culture in Central Asia. For the better part of two millennia, camel caravans snaking along the various Silk Roads passed through this triumvirate of wealthy cities beside the Oxus River. Despite the pillaging and destruction of warlords down the ages, from Genghis Khan to Joseph Stalin, these trading cities retain their charm and still work their sultry magic.

Since the dissolution of the USSR, the union's southern states – the Islamic 'Stan' countries – have been trying to find their political feet and an identity to pin their aspirations to. A fledgling tourism industry is beginning to attract Western travellers with Uzbekistan's three ancient cities providing the major draw card in the region. But as travelling in Central Asia is difficult, the roads are bad, distances long and the languages opaque, it's best to go with a tour group.

Every year, a Canadian-South African company AAST Inc. offers a self-drive trip in Land Rovers along the Silk Road from Europe to China. The tours are led by an intrepid and indefatigable Chinese woman, Yue Chi, who somehow manages to thread her way through the complexity of border crossings, tetchy police, customs, visas and Byzantine bureaucracy across the length of Asia. Some guests do the whole journey, others fly in for sections. I was most interested in seeing the Silk Road cities and joined the Land Rovers in Turkmenistan, from where we crossed into Uzbekistan.

A golden summer's afternoon found our 4x4s trundling across a plane towards the mud-walled city of Khiva, famous for its slave market and impregnable fortress. I imagined us as part of an ancient camel caravan, having crossed deserts and steppes, endured freezing nights and attacks by wild tribesmen, to finally reach the gates of legendary Khiva.

Legend has it that the town was founded when Shem, son of Noah, discovered a well there. Destroyed seven times by invaders, Khiva rose to regional prominence when the Uzbek Shaybanid dynasty made it their capital in the 16th century and it grew into an important slave market.



We parked outside the city and entered on foot through the ornate, western portal. Here was the magical Ichon-Qala – the inner city – in all its glory. Beside the gate stood the mud-walled Ark, for centuries the fortress and residence to Khiva's rulers. We wended our way through the throne room, harem, barracks and up a flight of stairs to the watchtower. From there you had a magnificent view of the encircling city walls, the monotoned, mud-plastered warren of houses, bazaars and mosques within. Wandering the cobbled lanes of Khiva is like stepping into the pages of the Arabian Nights. Wailing music pours from high windows, a doorway is adorned with a cat basking on a Persian carpet, women tend to their looms in the darkened interior. A camel sagely chew her cud as she watches the world go by; the call to prayer echoes across the roofs. We pass a series of alcoves where slaves were once displayed for sale. 'Pretty young girls fetched the highest prices,' titters our guide with a mouthful of gold teeth.

The terrible road to the oasis of Bukhara led through the dry wastes of the Kyzylkum Desert. Molten tar, cavernous potholes, insane truck drivers. For the better part of a day we travelled at 20km/h. Yue admitted that it to be 'the most challenging road in Asia'.

Bukhara is the region's holiest city and is crammed with sumptuous Islamic architecture.

As capital of the Samanid Dynasty in the 9th and 10th centuries, Bukhara experienced an intellectual and commercial renaissance and rose again for a second flowering in the 16th century. During its golden age it boasted a vast marketplace with dozens of bazaars and caravanserais, more than 300 mosques and over 100 madrassas (Islamic schools) housing 10 000 students.

We spent days exploring the city's sights, its stately buildings and bustling markets. There are circuitous warrens of multi-domed bazaars that can waylay you for hours. The carpets and embroidery work here is excellent and affordable, as is the jewellery and earthenware, leading to many a hard-bargaining detour.

Architecturally, the most striking part of Bukhara is a complex comprising the blue-domed Mir-i-Arab Madrassa, Kalon Mosque and adjacent minaret. The two towering edifices stare at each other across a square. The mosque can host 10 000 people in one sitting and is a honeycomb of vaulted ceilings and colonnades. Its 12th-century minaret looks like a giant terracotta lighthouse. Indeed, the structure served a double function. Fires were lit in the 'lantern' at its summit as a night-time beacon for caravans approaching across the desert.

Our second evening found us at a dinner-show in the Nadir Divanbegi, a former madrassa. There was traditional music and dancing by lithe young women. We sat in the courtyard, eating delicious shashlyk (lamb kebab), plov (a

staple of rice and vegetables) and nan bread. The sound of drums, violins and banjos dipped and swirled about us as the women danced, sometimes veiled, sometimes in Russian Cossack garb, at others in a sinuous Indian robes or whirling in dervish mayhem. All of Asia was there in their dress and movements, and in their genes, for their features were a blending of the whole continent. We drove due east, into the rising sun across the dusty steppe. The lines of James Elroy Flecker's 1913 poem, 'The Golden Journey to Samarkand' echoed in my head:

We travel not for trafficking alone,
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned.
For lust of knowing what should not be known
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

Like Timbuktu or Xanadu, the name Samarkand conjures a place that hovers somewhere between fact and romantic fiction. Its fame stretches back into the mists of time. Alexander the Great exclaimed, 'Everything I have heard about Samarkand is true, except that it's more beautiful than I ever imagined!'

This city is the jewel in the crown of the Silk Road. In the 14th century, under Tamerlane, that ruthless warlord and patron of the arts, it became a shimmering Islamic capital that eclipsed all other Central Asian cities.

These days, however, the approach is anything but golden and not a bit romantic. You have to endure kilometres of

grey, Soviet-style apartment blocks before reaching the old centre. Once there, you can resume your dreaming, as the Registan has been painstakingly restored. This is medieval Samarkand's commercial centre and is dominated by three madrassas facing off across a square. Their facades are a riot of colourful majolica and azure mosaics that dazzle the eye. It's best to set aside a whole day to explore these buildings with their gold-leafed interiors, cool courtyards and colourful bazaars.

For those with limited time, the other must-sees are the Bibi-Khanyam Mosque and nearby mausoleum. The former used to be one of the world's biggest mosques and, at the time, stretched building techniques to the limit. Its mausoleum comprises an avenue of blue-and-green burial buildings with some of the richest tile work in the Islamic world. The inner sanctum is the last resting place of a cousin of the Prophet Mohammed who brought Islam to the region in the seventh century. It is a hauntingly beautiful spot.



It's sunset on Registan square. A few notes of baksheesh slipped to the friendly policeman gains you entrance to the tall, leaning minaret. The spiral staircase narrows until your body presses the sides. You squeeze out the top like a cork to find all of Samarkand laid out in gold at your feet.

A sickle moon hangs above snow-capped mountains to the south. Beyond them, Afghanistan and trouble. But here it is all peace. Children play in the square below, dervish music pulses from a ghetto blaster. The air is warm and sultry. Stars begin to prickle above the domes. You stare at the great buildings and marvel at the flowering of learning and science, astronomy and law, that took place in this ancient seat of enlightenment and civilization. You narrow my eyes to erase the suburbs. Out there, in the distance, you can see a caravan wending its way towards Samarkand, laden with trade goods, the thick-haired Bactrian camels straining forward at the prospect of water and rest. Tonight man and beast will rest easy in the most beautiful city between Europe and China. ❁



Manas Singing in Kyrgyzstan

Today, the Kyrgyz Manas is one of the most celebrated epic heroic poems in the world. At the turn of the new millennium it was appointed a UNESCO 'Masterpiece in the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Mankind', signalling its global significance. It sits alongside Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, or the South Asian Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana, although politics and language have during the twentieth century conspired against allowing it to become as well known.

The great epic poem "Manas" contains more than a million lines and is 20 times as long as the Odyssey and Iliad together and 2.5 times longer than the Mahabharata. Taking as its subject the entire history of the Kyrgyz people starting in about the 10th century, the epic is a description of valorous feats of the central hero Manas, battling the barbarian hordes to create a homeland for his people. Before being slain in the triumphant final battle, he marries the wise Kanykei, daughter of a Samarkand khan. Sequels tell of the exploits of their son, Semetei, and his son Seitek. Along the way, the epic detours through colorful descriptions of everyday life with its traditions, customs, feasts and funerals. The manaschy is the traditional professional Manas storyteller. An esteemed bard was always welcome in any house. Many of Kyrgyzstan's most respected historical figures, like Toktogul (of city, reservoir, and street-in-Bishkek fame), were manaschy. Singing Manas was ideally suited to the different situations and is the core of the Kyrgyz self-image.

Each year when we arrived a small town called Korchkor, about 220 km southeast of Kyrgyz capital Bishkek, there would be a Manas singing ceremony waiting for us. Men, women and children dressed in festive costume to perform in excitement. This evening has become one of our unforgettable highlights in Central Asia. ❁



Section Four: *China*
- from *Kashgar to Hong Kong*

Despite China's meteoric rise to modernization there is still a part of the country that has resisted the advancements of the 21st century. Known as the Wild West of China, which includes the vast Xinjiang Autonomous Region, the The Loess Plateau of Gansu and Qinghai, Upper Tibet. Driving overland through these regions gives the modern-day traveller a true feeling of the vastness and wilderness of this part of the country and enables one to gain a thorough understanding of its distinguished nomadic culture, spirit and tradition.



Kashgar's Attractions: The Famous Bazaar and Animal Market

By Brooke Schoenman



About a week ago, I ventured down from central Kyrgyzstan across the Torugart Pass until reaching China's ancient city of Kashgar.

Kashgar, located in the western area of China in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, closer to the Tajikistan border, has a special draw because of its ties to the Silk Road.

When doing our research, the ability to explore a place with such ancient ties are what initially drew us in, but the more we heard – particularly about the predominant Uyghur population and how many Chinese will consider this a “dangerous place” – I have to admit, the more intrigued we became.

“There are places in the Old Town that when you walk around in them, you won't even feel like you're in China,” explained our driver who took us from the edge of the Chinese side of the Torugart Pass to Kashgar.

He was absolutely spot on. I would say there were many moments in Kashgar where we felt like we had gone the other way from Kyrgyzstan and somehow ended up in the Middle East.

Besides that, we also learned from our driver that Sunday is a popular day for visitors in Kashgar, particularly because of the Sunday Bazaar and Animal Market.

As far as bazaars go, the Sunday Markets of Kashgar take the cake with a history that is said to date back around 2000 years. This bazaar is located, because of its size, on the far end of town near the East Gate, and it is also known as the “International Trade Market of Central and Western Asia”.

While the bazaar is open every day of the week, traders from all over neighbouring countries make the trek into Kashgar each Sunday to be a part of the main spectacle that encompasses over 4,000 permanent stalls and an entire street dedicated just to food.

It is possible to shop for the following goods: carpets, jewellery, instruments, pottery, fruits, nuts and meat. To get to the bazaar, you can walk a good 20 to 30 minutes from the city center, or take a \$2 taxi ride. On the opposite end of town, only on Sundays, the Animal Market takes place. The Animal Market was at one time a part of the great Sunday Bazaar, but it split off to become a show all its own in a big open area across town.

The animal market is the place where locals and traders from afar gather to buy, sell, and trade livestock – especially sheep and cow. To the locals, it is just another day of work, but for tourists, it is clearly a step into the past. Local Uyghur men, dressed in traditional garb, herd or haggle; when they get hungry, they just head to the sidelines where various food stalls have been set up, each cooking a dish made of fresh mutton.

We saw sheep head soup and sheep laghman going down a treat, but for me... well I'd rather not eat my food right next to where a group of animals is potentially defecating.

(A small warning: I, at times, found it very hard to walk around the animal market given the conditions provided to the animals, so if you have very strong feelings towards animal rights and living conditions, it might not be a place for you to visit.) ❀



Kashgar's Sunday Market



Buddhism and Its Spread Along the Silk Road

Source: Silk Road Foundation



Leaving Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, we enter the areas of China under strong influence of Buddhism... Buddhist paintings, sculptures, caves and temples have opened a new chapter of the Silk Road in front of our eyes...



Besides silk, paper and other goods, the Silk Road carried another commodity which was equally significant in world history. Along with trade and migration, the world's oldest international highway was the vehicle which spread Buddhism through Central Asia. The transmission was launched from north-western India to modern Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Xinjiang (Chinese Turkistan), China, Korea and Japan. Buddhism not only affected the lives and cultures on those regions but also left us with a world of wonders in arts and literature.

According to legend, the Buddha (The Awakened), or Gotama (Sanskrit) lived in northern India in the 6th century BC. Gotama was his family name and his personal name was Siddhattha in Pali language. He was born in a noble family and ancient lineage, the Sakyas. A title by which Siddhattha came to be known as 'the Sage of the

Sakyas', Sakyamuni. To the West, he is known as the Buddha.

What is known of the Buddha's life is based mainly on the evidence of the canonical texts, the most extensive and comprehensive of which are those written in Pali, an ancient Indian language. According to the canon, Buddha's birth place was Lumbini, near the small city of Kapilavastu on the borders of Nepal and India. In his twenties, he renounced his life in the palace and left home in search of enlightenment after witnessing sights of suffering, sickness, aging and death. He achieved Enlightenment at Bodh Gaya and gave the first sermon at Sarnath. He spent his remaining life in travelling, teaching and spreading Buddhism.

By the 7th century all the small kingdoms of the Tarim region of Western China had been entirely won over to Buddhism, which brought with it so much of Indian culture that Sanskrit had become the religious language. As Buddhism advanced towards the Tarim basin, Kashgar and Khotan in the west, Tumsuk, Aksu and Kizil in the north, Loulan, Karasahr and Dunhuang in the east, and Miran and Cherchen in the south became important centers of Buddhist art and thought. The Buddhist texts were translated from Sanskrit into various local Indo-European dialects. The early art form in the Tarim area were strongly Indo-Persian in style, but Persian elements were gradually overlaid by the Chinese in the 6th century after Tang's power dominated the Tarim basin.

It is impossible to make any general rules about the precise schools of Buddhism that flourished in the Tarim basin, but the early pilgrims who traveled there gave some clues. Fa-hsien and Xuan Zang appeared to indicate that most of the kingdoms such as Kashgar, Kizil, Karashahr and Kucha on the northern route followed the Hinayana Vehicle whereas Mahayana flourished along the southern route including the kingdoms of Khotan and Yarkand.

The information on how the nomads adopted Buddhism is fragmentary but the Chinese seemed to indicate that Buddhism penetrated Hun, or Xiongnu (Early Hun), as early as the 2nd century BC. The Xiongnu lost few major

battles at Hexi Corridor (Gansu Province) and surrendered to Han general Ho. It was reported that the Xiongnu chief Kun-hsieh offered General Ho a golden statue called "Great Divinity". The statue was later placed in the Kan-chuan Temple. People burned incense and worshipped him. This incident seems to indicate that the conversion to Buddhism had taken place among the Xiongnu at an early stage of Buddhism.

Buddhism certainly had a strong effect on some other lives in the steppes. According to historians, once a nomadic tribe adopted the Buddhist faith, they no longer possessed tough barbaric and soldierly qualities. Eventually they lost their nomadic identity and were absorbed by the civilized neighbours. This can be demonstrated by the tribe of Toba, whose empire extended to Mongolia and northern China. From 386-534, they controlled northern China under the Northern Wei dynasty. These eastern Turks had contact with Chinese Buddhism early on. Some of the Turkic emperors were foremost patrons of Buddhism.

At the end of 10th century, a Chinese envoy, Wang Yen-te, found in Kaochang (near Turpan) a flourishing Buddhist culture with some fifty Buddhist convents and a library of Chinese Buddhist texts. Turpan remained the main center of Turkish Buddhism until the end of the 15th century when its ruler converted to Islam.



While the Mongols were controlling the Silk Road, Kublai Khan clearly showed his preference for Buddhism even though most of the Mongol kingdoms converted to Islam. Buddhist doctrine was expounded by Na-mo, who won the debate with Taoists in 1258. Marco Polo told us that Kublai Khan accorded a magnificent ceremonial reception to the relics of the Buddha, sent him by the raja of Ceylon. Most of Kublai's successors were equally fervent Buddhists.

It is not certain when Buddhism reached China, but with the Silk Road opened in the second century BC, missionaries and pilgrims began to travel between China, Central Asia and India. The record described that Chang Ch'ien, on his return from Ta-hsia (Ferghana) in the 2nd century BC, heard of a country named Tien-chu (India) and their Buddhist teaching. This is probably the first time a Chinese heard about Buddhism. A century later, a Buddhist community is recorded at the court of a Han prince. However the most famous story is the Han emperor Mingdi's dream about Buddha. In 68 AD, Mingdi sent his official Cai Yin to Central Asia to learn more about Buddhism after a vision of a golden figure appeared to him in a dream. The next morning he asked his ministers what the dream meant and was told that he had seen the Buddha - the god of the

West. Cai Yin returned after 3 years in India and brought back with him not only the images of Buddha and Buddhist scriptures but also two Buddhist monks named She-mo-teng and Chu-fa-lan to preach in China. This was the first time that China had Buddhist monks and their ways of worship. A few years later, a Buddhist community was established in Loyang, the capital, itself. From then on, the Buddhist community grew continuously. They introduced the sacred books, texts and most importantly the examples of Buddhist art, never before seen in China.

During the 4th century, Kumarajiva, a Buddhist from Central Asia organized the first translation bureau better than anything that had existed before in China. He and his team translated some 98 works from many languages into Chinese, of which 52 survive and are included in the Buddhist canon. By around 514, there were 2 million Buddhists in China. Marvellous monasteries and temples were built and the work of translating the scriptures into Chinese was undertaken with great industry.

Buddhism in China reached its apogee during the Sui and Tang dynasties (581-907). Popular forms of Buddhism percolated down to the ordinary folk. A fully developed



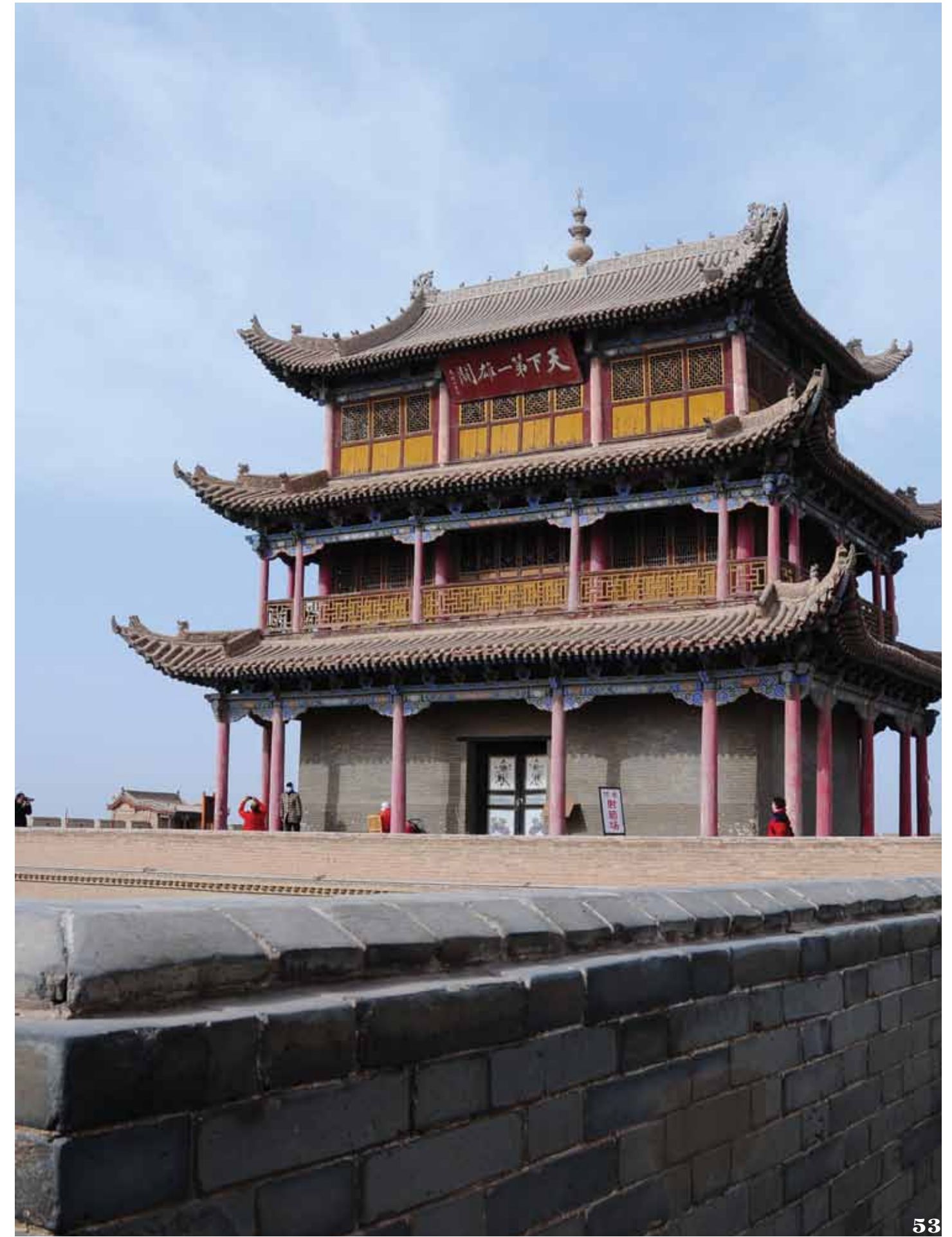
Buddhist religion and art emerged and spread into Korea, and thence into Japan by the end of the sixth century. However in 845 a persecution of Buddhists in China had 4600 temples destroyed and 260,500 monks and nuns defrocked; this was a severe setback Buddhism.

While numerous pilgrims arrived China from the West, Chinese Buddhist pilgrims were sent to India during different times and the accounts which some of them have left of their travels in the Silk Road provide valuable evidence of the state of Buddhism in Central Asia and India from the 4th to the 7th centuries. Some of the more famous Chinese pilgrims were Fa-hsien (399 to 414), Xuan-zang (629-645), and I-tsing (671-695).

The decline of Buddhism along the Silk Road was due to the collapse of the Tang Dynasty in the East and the invasion of Arabs in the West. The conversion to Islam started in the 8th century in Central Asia. Since Islam condemned the iconography, most of the Buddhist statues and wall-paintings were damaged or destroyed. Buddhist temples and stupas were abandoned and buried beneath the sand. By the 15th century, the entire Central Asia basin had been converted to Islam.

It is impossible to talk about Buddhism without mentioning its profound impact on the development of Central

Asian art. It is through those artworks that a fusion of eastern and western cultures was demonstrated. The art of Buddhism left the world the most powerful and enduring monuments along the Silk Road, and among them, some of the most precious Buddhist sculptures, paintings and murals. The development of Buddhism along the Silk Road resulted in a proliferation of monasteries, grottoes, vishanas and stupas throughout the entire Buddhist communities. However the cave temples hold the most unique position in the development of Buddhist architecture. The Buddhists' devotion was deeply reflected by the wall paintings of its rock-cut caves. Buddhist artists, with arduous labour, created the most impressive wall paintings of cave temples dedicated to the Buddha, his saints, and his legend. They present us an astonishing pageant of local societies with kings, queens, knights, ladies, monks and artists. Aside from their artistic values, those cave temples provide us with an immense amount of historical information. The portraits of Kizil donors with light complexions, blue eyes, and blond or reddish hair teach us they are more Indo-European than Mongol in appearance. The processions of Uighur prince and princess from Dunhuang illustrate how Uighurs dressed in the 9th century. It is from these wall paintings that we can have a glance at the lives and cultures of these fascinating but vanished ancient peoples. ❀



About the Drive - Safe and Sane Convoy Driving

By David Visagie



By taking part in this trip, you are stating that you like driving and overland travel. In the modern world, being on a road means putting yourself at risk; even more so when you are driving on foreign roads in countries where languages, cultures, signs, and codes between drivers and pedestrians all appear alien to you. You also need to cope with a certain amount of disorientation, discomfort and sometimes even exhaustion associated with travelling far from home. The leading vehicle and AAST's escort will be with you to help minimize the

risk of any unpleasant incidents, therefore respecting the decisions and guidance of the experienced group leader is crucial to ensure a safe and enjoyable journey.

Our Land Rover Discover vehicles will be driving in convoy. The leading vehicle will be occupied by the group leader(s), and guide, and will be carrying tools and equipment. The other vehicles will follow the leading vehicle in agreed order, which may be altered from time to time. With this in mind, let's enjoy this driving adventure.

DAVID VISAGIE is a Land Rover specialist. He is responsible for organizing the vehicles used for the trip and providing technical support en route. Originally from Durban, South Africa, David has an extensive overland driving experience. His driving records include crossing the African continent three times, and he has led the Silk Road convoy in the past seven years.

Here are a few tips for the drivers:

1. Before departing test radios in each vehicle.
2. Always consult local regulations and respect the speed limits.
3. On most occasions, our vehicles will make it through a traffic light before it changes. In case one falls behind, the others will wait at the first safe place they can stop.
4. Signal all turns early and consistently.
5. Favour the right to middle lane when on 4-lane highway.
6. Allow suitable clear distance between you and the car in front of you. This will prove its value as we make judgments whether to stop or proceed through stoplights. Always try to keep the car in front of you in sight.
7. Pay attention to the car behind you. If he slows down, you slow down. As the leader sees the car behind him slowing down, it is his cue to slow down also.
8. If a non-convoy driver needs or wants to cut in, let him! In fact, make it easy for him. There will be plenty of time to regroup on stretches of multi-lane road or at rest stops.
9. If the convoy gets separated, the group leader will proceed until he can find a safe place to pull over and let the rest of the vehicles catch up. If your vehicle gets separated, do not panic or try to speed to catch up. Find a safe place to pull over and radio the leading vehicle.



10. If the leader or any other driver sees that the convoy must stop, push the “emergency” button on the radio to let everyone know.

11. Use your best judgment when approaching a long green or yellow traffic signal. Don’t be concerned about delaying the vehicle behind you by conservatively judging the light. Judge it as you would if you were travelling independently of a group.

12. Passing: if you need to pass a slow car or cars, it should be done “one car at a time”. In other words, don’t all move out at the same time and pass at once. Pass as an individual, not as group.

13. Rain and sand storms: these are two of the most dangerous instances you will encounter, especially if visibility is poor. Each driver should turn on the fog lights under such circumstances. If the driver of the leading vehicle judges a rain or sand storm to be heavy, he will attempt first to find an exit ramp before resorting to the shoulder. Never ever just stop on the road in poor visibility. Big trucks cannot stop for you.



14. Potholes: this is another safety hazard during the trip and can result in serious vehicle damage. First, try to avoid potholes by doing what the vehicle in front of you does. The lead vehicle has the best vision, therefore when it moves to the other side of the road to avoid a pothole, the other vehicles should follow in the same manner. If it cannot be avoided, remember that the best solution is to brake before impact and then roll through the obstruction slowly. Braking during impact only increases the possibility of damage to the vehicle.

15. If the group leader misses a turn or heads in a wrong direction, he will announce the error on the radio and proceed cautiously to a place where the convoy can safely turn around.

16. Use common sense. Drive as though you are an individual following a planned route. On the road, there will be overloaded buses, pushy trucks, careless local cars, and even donkeys, camels, cows, herds of goats, running children and pedestrians: none of them follow the customary rules of the road. If you are tired, please switch drivers. Stay alert at all times. Our first and most important objective is always safety. ❁



What a participant needs to know...

What's included in AAST's services:

- 4WD vehicle throughout the journey (3-4 people per vehicle).
- Petrol charges, toll fees, maintenance and repair of the vehicle.
- Leadership of experienced group leaders including mechanical support.
- Local sightseeing tours with entrance fees (sometimes via chartered van or coach).
- Accommodation: 4 & 5-star hotels in major cities, local guest houses or best available in remote areas and camping facilities.
- Hotel taxes and service charges.
- Meals which are indicated in the day-by-day itinerary.
- Arrival and departure transfers.
- All cross-border handling.
- Banquets, parties and special events.
- Travel manual and educational materials.
- Use of travel accessories (GPS, maps, GMRS Radio Walkie-Talkie, tools, general emergency kit)

What would be your extra cost:

- Your international flights and related taxes.
- Personal travel insurance (mandatory) .
- Visa fees.
- Vaccinations (not mandatory).
- Items of a personal nature such as telephone calls, use of internet, laundry, shopping.
- Cash payment (5 euro or 7 dollars per traveller, per day). This will cover all gratuities and incidentals. The group leader will collect this cash payment at your trip's starting point.

Essential Information

How & When to Register

"Drive the Silk Road" is planned for a maximum of 16 travellers, therefore it is recommended to register early to secure your place on the trip. Our cut-off time is usually the beginning of February of each year since the trip requires extra preparation time.

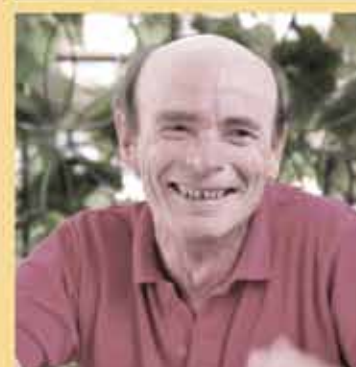
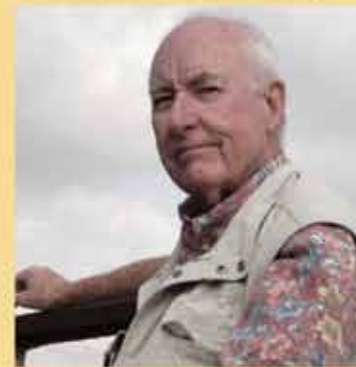
The quickest and easiest way to make a reservation is to e-mail us: info@aast-journeys.com. You may also call +1-866-564-1226 to leave a message. We will mail you a reservation form (reservation form can also be obtained at www.drivethesilkroad.com). Once the registration form is completed, you may mail it back to us, or fax to: +1 866 260 2978.

We accept Visa, MasterCard and American Express credit cards for the initial deposit. The balance of the payment may only be paid by cheque, wire transfer or bank deposit.

Information Kit & Travel Dossier

Upon receiving your reservation form and deposit, we will hold your space and send you a notice confirming the receipt of your registration. The minimum number of passengers on this trip is 6. Once we receive this number of registration, the departure will be confirmed, and we will send you a trip information kit. This kit contains general and practical information on the countries you will be visiting, a suggested reading list and packing list; as well as a medical information disclosure form and liability waiver form, which you need to fill out, sign and return to us. Your trip dossier will be sent out approximately 3 weeks prior to departure. The trip dossier contains more detailed information related to many aspects of the journey such as detailed itineraries, local contact numbers and group meeting locations, maps, etc. - all of which are useful in the final planning of your journey.

These are the faces of some of our past participants. They were from all over the world, and from all walks of life. Our youngest participant has been 26 years of age, and our oldest, 83.



Visas & Passport

Depending on the nationality of your passport, it is safe to assume that a visa will be required for all or most countries you intend to visit. Many of these visas will require an invitation letter, which we will obtain on your behalf. It is your own responsibility to ensure that you are in possession of a passport (with at least six months validity from the date of return at the end of the trip) and any visas necessary to enter the countries involved in the journey.

Participant Suitability

While this trip is not extremely strenuous, there are periods when the driving times are long and the conditions basic. All participants should be in relatively good health and be prepared to experience long days on the road travelling over varying types of terrain. A willingness to be involved, a positive and flexible approach to travel and an understanding of the particular demands of this trip will ensure your enjoyment on one of the greatest travel adventures of your life. In addition, this is a self-drive program. You will be required to drive 4x4 vehicle provided by the organizers. Currently, what we provide you is Land Rover Discovery II with automatic transmission. You need to bring along your valid driver's license (international driver's license is not required). If you'd rather not to drive, please notify the organizer in advance. Back-up drivers will be made available.

Joining & Ending

Each year, you will find the start and end dates from our website (www.drivethesilkroad.com). It is your responsibility to ensure that you are in your starting point on or before the section starts. You will need to notify the organizer your flight information in order to be met at the airport by our local representative. Similarly our services will end with a transfer to the airport of your ending point for your departure home. Should you require extra pre or post-tour and accommodation, please contact AAST and we will make arrangements for you accordingly.

Scheduled Sightseeing

Sightseeing tours and activities are specifically arranged for this program and will vary according to the local conditions. 'Scheduled Sightseeing' is part of the itinerary inclusions and is generally by minibus or coach but some times we will use the Land Rovers. All sightseeing programs include transportation, entrance fees and English-speaking local guides.

Luggage & Packing

Due to the nature of this trip, luggage space will be limited. Each Land Rover will need to carry essential supplies and it is therefore strongly recommended that all participants limit their luggage to one main piece per person. In addition, we recommend bringing a single backpack or soft bag for the journey. A moderate sized suitcase with retractable handle and wheels is acceptable. Please do not bring oversized suitcases or irregularly-shaped bags. You should also carry a small day-pack for personal items used during the day (camera, water, snacks etc.). A hidden money belt for carrying valuables will also be useful.

Porterage

While porterage will be provided during hotel stays there are times when we will be camping or staying in local accommodation, in which case you will be required to carry your own luggage.

Our Experienced Team

AAST Inc. is based in Toronto, Canada and Durban, South Africa. We have been organizing unique cultural adventures to Asia and Africa since the 90's. AAST is committed to expert advice and planning and have a strong and knowledgeable team working to ensure that your trip runs smoothly and that you return from your journey with a deeper understanding and appreciation for the peoples and lands you have visited. We are constantly travelling to the region and our staff are available to answer any of your questions. Each group is accompanied by a leader, chosen for their experience, personal qualities and passion for our style of travel. The leader takes care of all the transport, accommodation and paperwork necessary en route.

What a participant needs to know... (continue)

Group Travel

Travelling in a group may require some compromise to accommodate the different desires and abilities of group members. When joining this trip you undertake to conduct yourself in a manner conducive to good group dynamics. If you act in a manner that threatens or disrupts the safety or enjoyment of others on the tour, the group leader may in his or her absolute discretion require that you leave the group. If you are required to leave a group in such circumstances, no refund will be made for any unused services.

Health & Fitness

It is your responsibility to ensure that you have a suitable level of fitness to undertake this journey and that you have received the required vaccinations. We recommend that you consult with your doctor or travel health specialist regarding the specific health recommendations for travel to the countries and regions visited en route. You must inform AAST Inc. of any medical condition that may prevent your full participation in the trip. Should you fail to do this and AAST Inc. or your group leader find that you are medically unfit to participate in the trip or should your medical condition deteriorate during the trip, to an extent where you are no longer able to fully participate in the trip, you will be required to leave the trip. No refund will be made for any unused services in such an event. AAST Inc. and their agents reserve the right to withhold or withdraw tour participation for anyone whose inappropriate behaviour or medical condition is likely to affect the smooth operation of the trip or adversely affect the safety or enjoyment of other travellers on the trip. As well, AAST Inc. reserves the right at any time to insist on a current medical certificate stating that you are fit to travel, and may refuse your participation if a satisfactory certificate is not supplied. Any decision to exclude a passenger for any reason will be made by AAST Inc. without any further recourse. When joining Drive The Silk Road you accept the authority of the Group Leader.

Travel Insurance

Travel insurance is mandatory for this trip. Policies must provide adequate coverage for the loss of personal items and any potential medical expenses. You will be required to provide your medical insurance provider's contact details and your policy number in case of emergency.

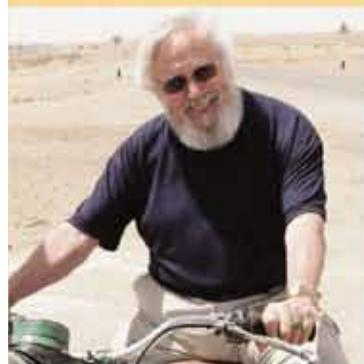
Health & Government Travel Advisories

It is your sole responsibility to inform yourself of the prevailing travel advisories issued by the government of your country regarding the risks and associated precautions (including health) related to travel to the countries and regions visited on this trip. Health advice is available from travel health specialists and international bodies such as the World Health Organization. AAST Inc. will not be responsible for advising you of such travel advisories or of any changes that occur to such travel advisories prior to departure of the trip.

Itinerary Changes and Related Issues

We will take every measure to ensure the accuracy of itineraries and promotional literature. However, circumstances beyond our control may necessitate changes to our route, accommodation, date and activity. In the case of program change, you should refer to the daily itinerary included with your final documents package as it may have been updated since you sign up for the trip. In the case of a shift in dates, we will notify you as early as possible of such changes so that necessary adjustments can be made. Changing conditions in the field may also necessitate itinerary modifications after the trip has departed. Participants may be asked to share any increased costs associated with the changes. We also reserve the right to change hotels with accommodations of similar standard when necessary.

Please note that we are travelling through some of the most remote regions of the world: the trip could be delayed because of weather, road conditions, political conflicts, sickness or other contingencies for which we cannot reasonably make provision. The cost of the delay and/or trip interruption is not included in your payment.



Cancellation Policy

Cancellations or revisions must be made in writing and your right to a refund if you cancel your trip is as follows:

Cancellation Made (days before departure)

More than 90 days prior
89 - 60 days
59 - 0 days

Cancellation Penalty

Loss of deposit
50% of payment
100% of payment

Note: "departure" means the departure of the convoy, which means in early April of each year from Western Europe.

There are no refunds for no-shows or any unused portion of the trip. Cancellation fees will apply and are non-refundable for any reason whatsoever. In the event that the trip cost increases by more than 7% from the time of booking by the passenger, the participant has the right to cancel the contract for travel and obtain a full refund of payment(s) made to AAST by providing written notice at any time after a payment has been made up to, and including the date of departure as set out in your program, unless the increase of the cost is as a result of government taxation or a fuel surcharge permitted by the National Transportation Agency with respect to charter air travel services, as may be applicable.

Note to Trip Costs

Prices you will be given are based on double occupancy. AAST Inc. endeavours to keep land costs as published. However, since trips are often planned more than a year in advance, AAST reserves the right to change costs due to extraordinary circumstances beyond our control, including fluctuations in currency exchange rates, changes in costs, surcharges for fuel, flights, etc. Please contact us to obtain the detailed itinerary and the most up-to-date information.

This trip is based upon a minimum of 6 registrants. Should we receive less than 6 people, we reserve the right to cancel the trip, or apply a surcharge as in our experience most participants usually prefer to pay an additional cost rather than have their trip cancelled. Participants will be notified as early as possible should this situation arise.

Total seats available: 16

Minimum number of passengers for a guaranteed departure: 6.

Final confirmation date (should the minimum number of travellers not be reached earlier): 90 days prior to departure of the drive starts.

A Word of Warning :

Passion for Adventure

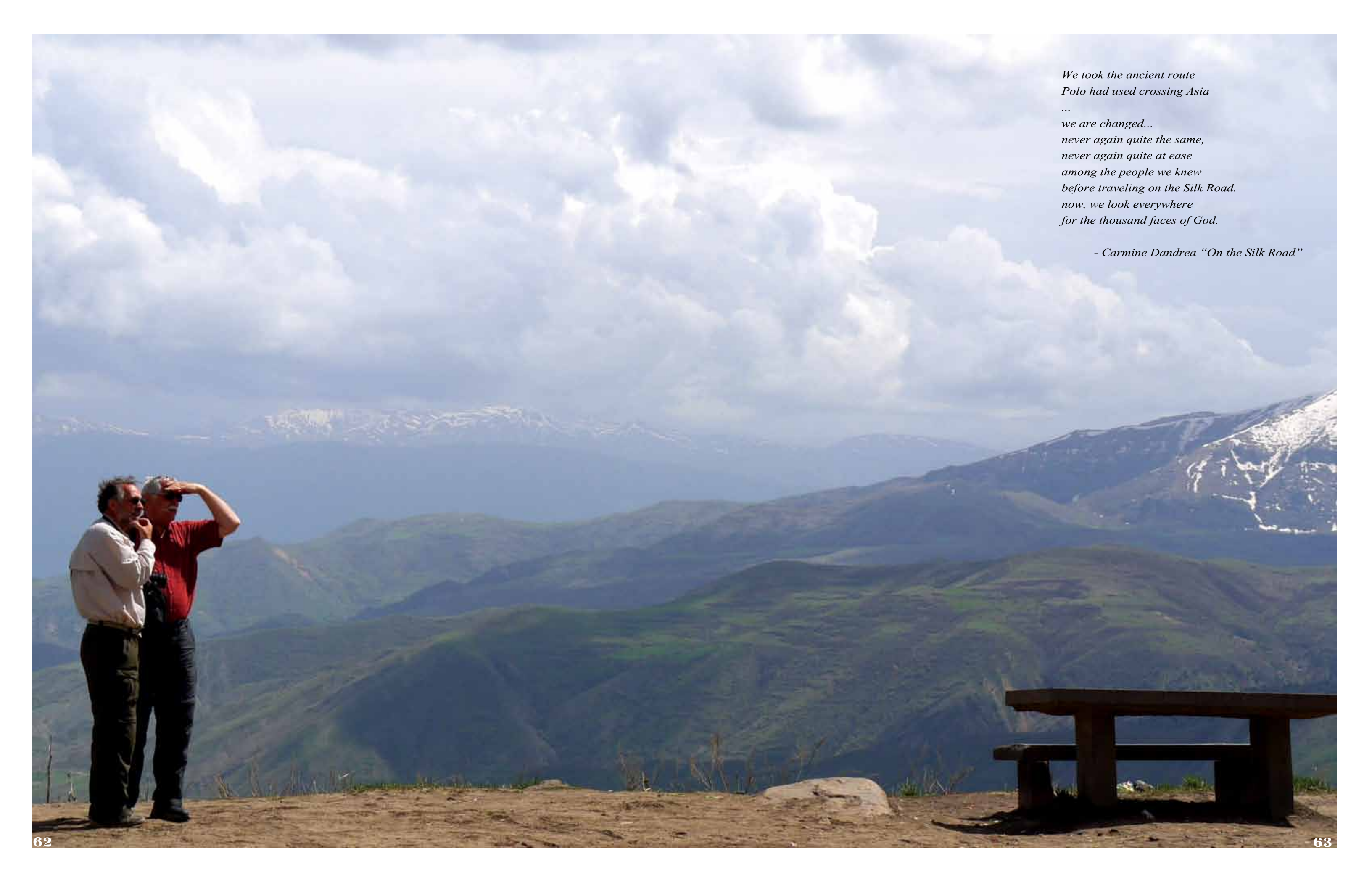
By Yue Chi

While this trip covers a multitude of countries and a great distance, many areas we drive through are still new to modern-day tourism. The stunning scenery, friendly hospitality and collision of cultures at this crossroads of East and West are the ingredients for a unique and rewarding adventure.

However, with the sometimes frustrating nature of the countries visited, you will need to exercise patience and approach things with a sense of humour. If you expect everything to run exactly as planned, if you want a predictable and consistent high quality in your accommodation, meals and general travel conditions, then this is not the trip for you.

If you love adventure and want a completely unique travel experience, join us and we guarantee your journey will be a rewarding and memorable experience.





*We took the ancient route
Polo had used crossing Asia
...
we are changed...
never again quite the same,
never again quite at ease
among the people we knew
before traveling on the Silk Road.
now, we look everywhere
for the thousand faces of God.*

- Carmine Dandrea "On the Silk Road"

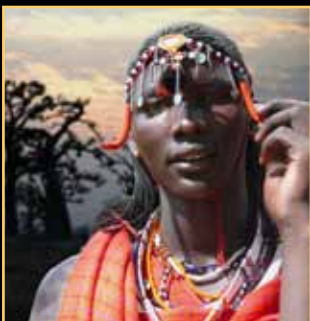
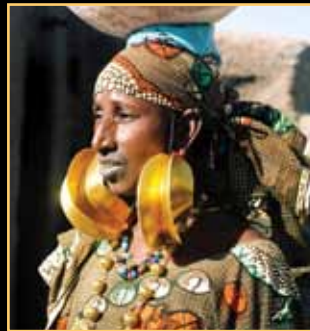
“Drive the Silk Road” is an annual event organized by AAST Inc., an adventure travel company based in Canada and South Africa. The full overland trip spans roughly three months – from the beginning of April to the beginning of July. The route is divided into four segments that can vary slightly from year to year. Travellers may participate in any number of segments or the entire trip. For more information on the upcoming expeditions, please email to info@aast-journeys.com.



www.drivethesilkroad.com

Explore Africa...

AAST also operates overland expeditions in Southern and Eastern Africa



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