Mongolia

Birding the Gobi & Beyond



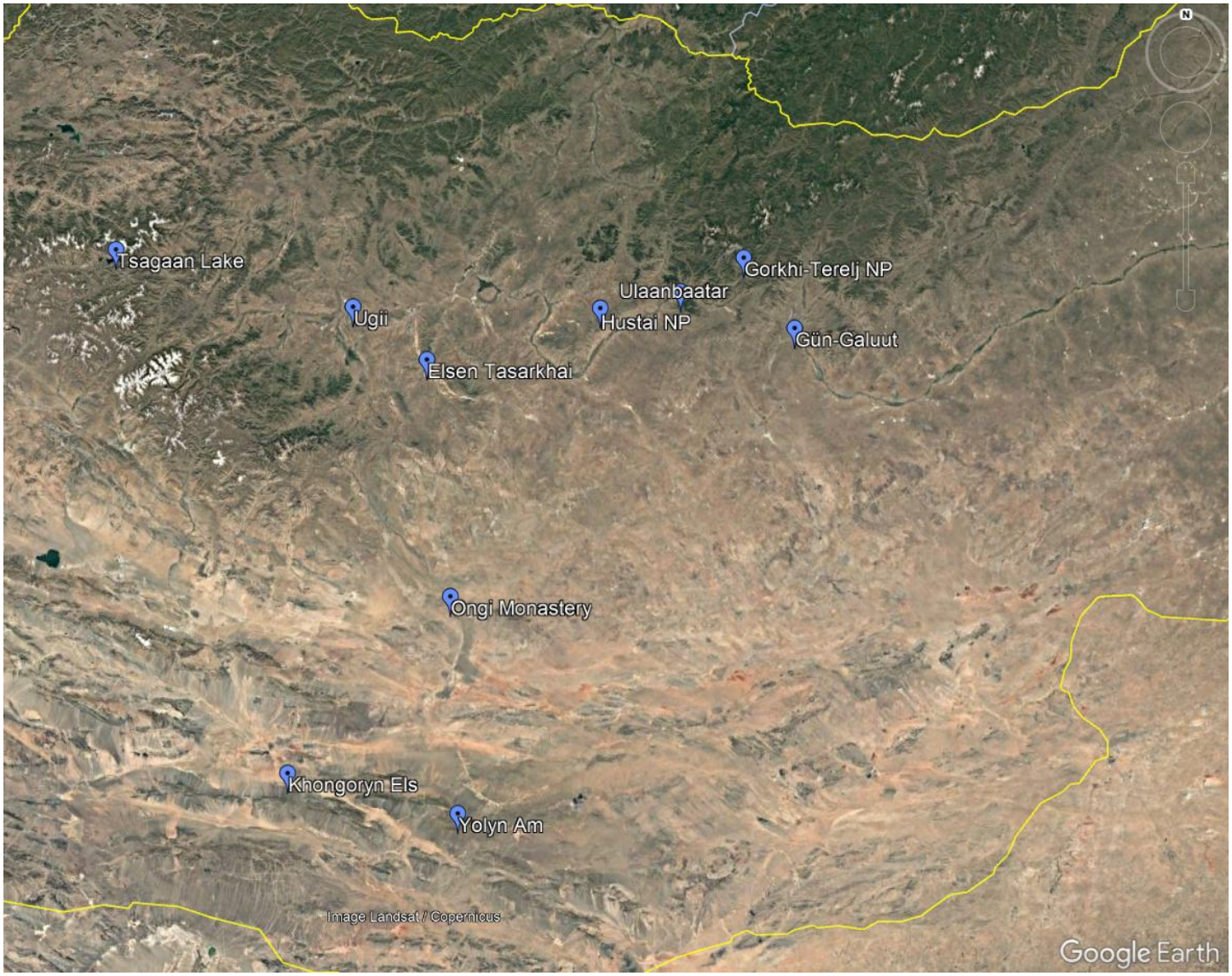
Mongolian Ground Jay by Dubi Shapiro

In the heart of remote Central Asia lies a country that conjures up images of nomadic horsemen striding across barren, wind-swept plains, with the grand Gobi-Altai Mountains rising up above the endless expanse of the Gobi Desert. This land is Mongolia, a country of fascinating legend and history; a picturesque and awe-inspiring part of the world largely unchanged over the years, the heart of the once expansive Mongol Empire and what can rightfully be proclaimed a true wilderness!

Our Mongolia birding adventure offers the very special opportunity of venturing across the vast lake-covered steppes and through the verdant Taiga forest, with the ever-present backdrop of the lofty Gobi-Altai Mountains. We can look forward to superb birding in this gloriously scenic landscape with mouth-watering specialties including Altai Snowcock, Black-billed Capercaillie, Relict Gull, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Black Woodpecker, Amur and Saker Falcons, spectacular Wallcreeper, White-naped and Demoiselle Cranes, Kozlov's Accentor, displaying Oriental Plover, Mongolian Lark, Siberian Rubythroat, Guldenstadt's & Eversmann's Redstarts, Saxual Sparrow, Mongolian Ground Jay and many, many more! This really is a birding tour like few others and promises to be a most memorable adventure!

Itinerary & Map

Day 1	**Arrival in Ulaanbaatar; afternoon birding at Tuul River & Tuul Fishponds**
Day 2	**Hustai National Park (Khustain Nuruu)**
Day 3	**Hustai National Park to Elsen Tasarkhai**
Day 4	**Elsen Tasarkhai to Tsagaan Lake**
Day 5	**Ugii & Tsagaan Lake**
Day 6	**Tsagaan Lake to Ongi Monastery**
Day 7	**Ongi to Khongoryn Els**
Day 8	**Khongoryn Els**
Day 9	**Khongoryn Els to Yolyn Am**
Day 10	**Yolyn Am area**
Day 11	**Yolyn Am to Gün-Galuut**
Day 12	**Gün-Galuut to Gorkhi-Terelj National Park**
Day 13	**Gorkhi-Terelj National Park**
Day 14	**Gorkhi-Terelj National Park to Ulaanbaatar**
Day 15	**Final departure**


Tsagaan Lake
Ugii
Elsen Tasarkhai
Ulaanbaatar
Hustai NP
Gorkhi-Terelj NP
Gün-Galuut
Ongi Monastery
Khongoryn Els
Yolyn Am
Image Landsat / Copernicus
Google Earth

Birding sites in detail

Ulaanbaatar. Mongolia's capital city lies at an altitude of 1 300m (4 300ft) above sea level and is nestled in the Tuul River Valley. It is a relatively recently developed modern city, with around a million people, which is about a third of Mongolia's total population.



White-naped Crane by Glen Valentine

Tuul River & Tuul Fishponds. We will bird the Tuul Fish Ponds and Tuul River to the west of the city, where we will have a relaxed introduction to Mongolia's exciting and captivating birdlife.

The short drive out of bustling Ulaanbaatar will lead us into the vast countryside with farmlands, meadows and rolling pastures being dominant features. Interesting species that we may encounter this afternoon include Ruddy Shelduck, Common Merganser, Great Crested Grebe, Little Ringed Plover, Pacific Swift, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Black Woodpecker and Rook. We will particularly be on the lookout for such localized species as Azure Tit, White-cheeked Starling, Azure-winged Magpie, White-crowned Penduline Tit and Long-tailed Rosefinch. Amongst the willow and alder trees we may find migrants such as Taiga Flycatcher, Pallas's Leaf Warbler, Dusky and Arctic Warblers as well as Eyebrowed Thrush. Smart Eurasian Hoopoes and peculiar Red-billed Choughs are ever-present on rocky hillsides and open paddocks may hold Citrine Wagtail and White Wagtail of two subspecies. The occasional Black Stork and Booted Eagle may be seen overhead with the ubiquitous Black Kites.

Hustai National Park (Khustain Nuruu Reserve). The park is situated in a beautiful mountain steppe area about 100 kilometres west of the capital. The main attraction en route are the herds of Przewalski's Horses, or "Takhi" as they are called by the local Mongolians. These wild horses were reintroduced in the reserve back in 1992 and nowadays the total population exceeds 200. In this game-rich reserve, we will also be on the lookout for Wolf and Red Deer as well as a variety of other mammals. The area is also good for Daurian Partridge and Mongolian Lark, while Amur Falcon breed within the reserve and we will have a chance to visit at least one breeding colony.



Mongolian Lark by Glen Valentine

Elsen Tasarkhai. We'll explore the sand dunes, marsh land and mountains around Elsen Tasarkhai. We can expect to encounter many

of the species listed for the Ugii and Tsagaan Lake area, we will also be searching for Asian Dowitcher, Bar-headed and Swan Geece, White-naped Crane and Black-throated Loon.



Amur Falcon by Clayton Burne

Ugii & Tsagaan Lake area. Over the next couple of days, we will search for several of the rarest and least-seen birds in the world in this remote and spectacular landscape. Within this dry environment we will be amazed at the large waterbodies of Ugii Nuur and the Tsagaan Nuur Wetlands, which receive their water from the Khangay Mountains to the north. The rains fill the streams in these mountains which then filters south, filling the drainage basin of the Gobi Desert. Some of the wetlands are fresh-water but others are brackish or even saline.

These large water-bodies with their surrounding vegetation create fantastic feeding and breeding grounds for both passage migrants and summer breeding birds. Pallas's Fish Eagle breed here, and can often be seen patrolling and watching from vantage points along the lake shore. The very rare Relict Gull occurs in small numbers, and we will be lucky to obtain views of this highly desired and localized species, which very few foreign birders have ever seen! Also present are Whooper Swan, Great Crested Grebe, Greylag Goose, Eurasian Spoonbill, Grey Heron, Brown-headed, Vega (of the mongolicus ssp.) and magnificent Pallas's Gulls, and Caspian, Gull-billed, Little and the very attractive White-winged Terns.

A host of ducks will also be present and may include Common Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, Northern Pintail, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Teal, Common and Red-crested Pochards and, with luck, perhaps even Falcated Duck. In addition, a wide variety of wading birds also breed in these extensive wetlands or may be seen on passage, and we will be particularly on the lookout for the rare Asian Dowitcher, which can regularly be found here in small numbers at this time of the year. Other possible species include Black-tailed Godwit, Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Northern Lapwing, Common Snipe, Ruff, Dunlin, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Red-necked Phalarope and perhaps even Tibetan Sand Plover and Terek Sandpiper. Migrant Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers are not uncommon and are



Saker Flacon by Glen Valentine

often flushed from marshy patches out on the meadows, and Eversmann's Redstart nests along the drier borders of the wetlands.



Güldenstädt's Redstart by Nigel Redman

Ongi Monastery. Known locally as Ongiin Khiid, it is situated along the Ongi River. Established in 1660, it was once among Mongolia's largest monastic complexes, comprising two distinct sections: the Khutagt Monastery on the south bank and the Barlim Monastery on the north bank. At its peak, the monastery housed over 1,000 monks and featured more than 28 temples and four Buddhist universities. The complex was destroyed in the 1930's, but underwent partial restoration efforts in the the 1990's.

Time permitting, we'll bird the Ongi River edges and riparian habitat where we may find Isabelline Shrike, Pied and Isabelline Wheaters, Cinerous Vulture, Hill Pigeon, Mongolia Lark, Mongolia Finch, Chinese Grey Shrike and Pallas's Sandgrouse. This remote site has seen very few birders over the years, so there could well be some surprises!

Khongoryn Els. This is an area of impressive, huge white sand dunes that can be seen from a great distance and which are brilliantly striking in the golden light of the early morning and late afternoon. Our drive will take us through fantastic scenery of barren landscapes and gravel plains, with the Gobi Altai Mountains as a constant backdrop.

Whilst Khongoryn Els is home to some spectacular birding, our main target species today is the scarce and localised Saxaul Sparrow, which we will have to search carefully for in the saxaul bushes and stunted trees that dominate parts of this area. It is also here where we will be searching for one of the region's most highly prized and enigmatic species, the eye-catching Mongolian Ground Jay! This smart looking bird favours gravel plains with scattered vegetation and spends much of its time running across the open ground in search of invertebrates. To keep in contact, birds give a piping call from a vantage point and then fly from bush to bush,



Stejneger's Scoters by David Hoddinott

showing off large white patches on their wings. We will search hard for these charismatic birds during our time in the Gobi Desert and have an excellent chance of finding them.



Demoiselle Crane by Rob Williams

Here we will also be on the lookout for the impressive Saker Falcon, often seen perched right on the ground or on rocks where they hunt prey over the stark desert plains and steppe plains. Other exciting birds that may be seen in this open environment include Pallas's Sandgrouse (often seen in small flocks in flight), Desert and Isabelline Wheatears, Asian Short-toed Lark, Great Grey Shrike (ssp *pallidirostris*, Steppe Grey Shrike) and Isabelline Shrikes, Asian Desert Warblers and Mongolian Finch, while Goitered Gazelles are often present.

Khongoryn Els to Yolyn Am. As we traverse the vast semi-arid steppe and grassy gravel plains, we may chance upon one of the most sought-after birds in all Mongolia, namely the endangered and much desired Oriental Plover. This is a summer breeder to these parts, wintering in Southeast Asia and northern Australia, with the males having an elaborate display flight. They begin by flying high overhead, rocking from side to side on stiff wings, and then abruptly plummeting down to land. At this time of year the Oriental Plover will be in striking breeding plumage, with its pure white head and bright rufous breast band, a remarkably attractive species! More numerous on these plains are breeding Greater Sand Plovers and strikingly-plumaged Horned Larks.

Yolyn Am. We'll spend out time exploring the wilderness of the Zuun Saikan Mountains and the bird-rich Yolyn Am Valley (which means "The Valley of the Lammergeier"). We will leave our Ger camp very early in the morning to drive for about an hour to Yolyn Am. Having driven within the mountains, we will stop and try to locate the localised Altai Snowcock, which often gives its characteristic whistling calls just after dawn. This is the best time to search for this smart and much-wanted mountain specialist and, with careful scanning, we stand a great chance of success. While exploring the valleys, slopes and ridges we will be on the lookout for a wide range of other mountain species as well, including the impressive Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier), a pair of which nests in the canyons here.



Wallcreeper by Stu Elsom

Deeper inside the canyon, we have an excellent chance of finding the

unique and beautiful Wallcreeper that is often seen flitting along rock faces in search of spiders, where its red, white and black patterned wings contrasts vividly against the grey background of boulders and cliff-faces, its preferred habitat. Other exciting birds to look for here include Chukar Partridge, Himalayan Vulture, the impressive Cinereous Vulture, Golden Eagle, Upland Buzzard, Water Pipit, Black and Güldenstädt's Redstarts, Alpine, Brown and the endemic Kozlov's Accentor, Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch, Twite, Pallas's Reed Bunting, Common Rock Thrush, Isabelline Shrike, Rock Sparrow, Barred Warbler and, with a bit of luck, Godlewski's Bunting as well as Grey-necked Bunting and Spotted Great Rosefinch. Flocks of White-winged Snowfinches are regularly seen and heard calling overhead and can be very confiding while feeding along the trail. At this time of year, we may, with a bit of good fortune, see migrating raptors such as Oriental Honey Buzzard and Amur Falcon, while mammals could include the regal Siberian Ibex, the strange and extremely impressive Argali (a type of wild sheep), Pallas's and Alpine Pikas, and Mid-day Jirds (Gerbils) that scurry in and out of the stunted alpine vegetation.



Siberian Rubythroat by Forrest Rowland

Gün-Galuut Wetland. We'll be searching this wetland for the sately White-naped Crane. This is a rare breeding summer visitor that can e found at only a few sites in Mongolia, far to the west of its main breeding grounds in China. This is also a site for the globally uncommon Swan Goose, the smart Bar-headed Goose, breeding Whooper Swans and various ducks including Eurasian Wigeon, Garganey, Eurasian Teal, Common Pochard, Stejneger's Scoter and Common Goldeneye. This wetland is also frequented by stately Demoiselle Cranes and serves as a stop-over site for migrating waders, and we have a fair chance to see Pacific Golden Plover, Common Snipe, Black-tailed Godwit (of the eastern subspecies melanuroides), Little, Red-necked and Temminck's Stints, Curlew Sandpiper and Ruff. Breeding waders include Black-winged Stilt, Pied Avocet, Northern Lapwing, Common Redshank and Marsh Sandpiper.



Black Woodpecker by David Hoddinott

Gorkhi-Terelj National Park. This mountainous area, which is actually part of the Siberian taiga coming down from Russian Lake Baikal, comprises vast expanses of larch forests and beautiful valleys surrounded by spectacular rock formations and green meadows with slopes full of wildflowers, and is bisected by rivers and small streams. At this time of the year the trees will be budding and birdlife should be prolific.



Eversmann's Redstart by Yoav Perlman

A host of new birds await us here and may include Common and Oriental Cuckoos, Common Rock Thrush, Siberian Rubythroat, Brown Shrike, Dusky Warbler, Black-faced Bunting and, with luck, if we still haven't seen Long-tailed Rosefinch, we will have another chance for it here. Other possibilities are Eastern Buzzard (split from Common Buzzard), outside chances for the intricately patterned Hazel Grouse, Japanese Quail, Red-flanked Bluetail, Red Crossbill, Long-tailed, Coal and Great Tits, Common and Daurian Redstarts, Eurasian Wryneck, Eurasian Jay, Red-throated and Eyebrowed Thrushes, Eurasian Nuthatch and Pine Bunting. Several species of woodpecker occupy these beautiful, verdant, temperate forests and include White-backed, Grey-headed, Eurasian Three-toed and Lesser Spotted, as well as the regal Black Woodpecker. In the evening, we will search a marshy area for Swinhoe's Snipe, while other nocturnal possibilities include Eurasian Woodcock and Ural Owl.

One of our main targets in this area is the shy Black-billed Capercaillie. **To find this species often requires a lot of time and effort and we will spend many hours hiking in its favoured habitat of ridge-top larch forest with scattered pines and grounds covered by blueberries and mosses. These walks are however optional and it is worthwhile noting that they can be quite strenuous. It is nevertheless a much-desired bird and we will search hard for this impressive species in the extensive forests that cover much of the area.**

Tour Grading & Key

Overall Ease		Mostly comfortable. Variable weather & some long field days offset by relatively easy birding/wildlife watching.
Birding Ease		Mostly easy, in very open conditions. Some trickier species that may require much more effort.
Accommodation		Different, but mostly comfortable, including traditional gers, tourist gers & regular hotels.
Walking / Trails		Very variable, from easy to moderate for most of the tour, can be strenuous at Gorkhi-Terelj NP (optional).
Vehicles / Roads		4x4 vehicles, on both sealed and unsealed roads. Road conditions are variable, including windy, mountainous tracks and some off-road driving.
Photography		Can be good to very good, but often impacted by distance & heat haze.
Annoyances		Variable weather conditions from dry & sunny to overcast with rain or snow. Moderate to strong winds are common.

Financial Arrangements and Important Notes

Tour dates, prices, single supplement, approximate flight costs and tour spaces are displayed on our website.

Tour inclusions:

- All meals from lunch on day 1 to breakfast on day 15;
- Bottled drinking water;
- All lodgings;
- All ground transportation during the tour
- All reserve entrance fees;
- All guiding services
- Tips for local guides, drivers and services.

Tour exclusions:

- Visa fees;
- ANY flights;
- Any beverages (including mini-bar charges at hotels);
- Optional excursions;
- Camera fees in national parks
- Special gratuities;
- Telephone calls, laundry and other items of a personal nature.

Single Supplement: The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

Tipping: As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If you feel that they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them at your discretion.

- **Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing. The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates.**
- **Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registrations, a small group supplement will be offered to confirm the tour.**
- **Tour prices are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.**
- **The designated tour leader/s may be changed at short due to unforeseen circumstances.**
- **The itinerary is indicative only. Changes may need to be made to the order in which the tour is conducted, or some of the venues we visit closer to departure. We will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.**

- It is important for the comfort of your fellow travellers that you do not over-pack. Kindly stick to 20kg (44lb) for check-in luggage and 8kg (+-18lb) for hand luggage.
- A good deal of the tour will be spent camping in Ger Camps (Traditional, round shaped, portable Mongolian dwellings). Some of the camps will be permanent, but most will be set up for us before we arrive. There will be separate, shared ablutions, shower facilities and a separate dining tent with table and chairs. We try and make the tents as comfortable as possible and warm bedding is provided. (IMPORTANT: if you would prefer a tent to yourself, then please advise the office in advance. Single tent space is limited and will be assigned in order of tour registration.)

- Most of the tour will be in remote areas with no medical facilities or hospitals. Please ensure that you have all the necessary medication that you require for the duration of the tour. If you have any medical concerns, please contact the Rockjumper office as soon as possible.
- Although it will be summer in Mongolia, the temperatures can vary greatly, from warm day temperatures of 25 to 30 degrees Celsius in the deserts (but cool in the mornings), to cold with rain and even snow possible at any time in the mountains.
- Warm clothes, including gloves, woollen hat, raingear, hiking boots and thermals will come in handy for the cooler nights and mornings.
- Fitness: In general, this tour does not require a high level of fitness, but participants should be in good general health as most of the birding will be done on foot and may require walking for several hours at a time.
- Some of the walks in the mountains will be more strenuous particularly in search of Black-billed Capercaillie. Should you have any physical limitations, please notify us in advance of departure.
- Mongolia is not known for having a large variety of foods and often fresh food can be difficult to come by. We do however make a special effort to organize fresh fruit and vegetables where possible and these are regularly included in our meals on tour. In general meals consist of a variety of dishes and are generally tasty and appetizing. If you have any dietary requirements, please notify us in advance of departure.

Arrival and Departure Details

The tour begins with a welcome lunch Ulaanbaatar around midday on day 1 and concludes after breakfast on day 15. Please do arrive early on day 1, or the day prior to ensure there are no delays.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your Tour Confirmation package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

Chinggis Khaan International Airport, Ulaanbaatar (IATA: UBN) is the main port of entry into Mongolia and is serviced by several major airlines.

Visa requirements differ by country, nationality of the traveller and duration and purpose of your intended stay. It may be necessary to obtain a visa or an electronic travel authorization in advance of your travel. It is therefore vitally important that you check with your travel agent/consulate/embassy for exact visa requirements.

DO NOT book any flights until the Rockjumper Team have officially confirmed the tour.