# Lesser Antilles

## Pearls of the Caribbean

### *17th March to 30th March 2023 (14 days)*



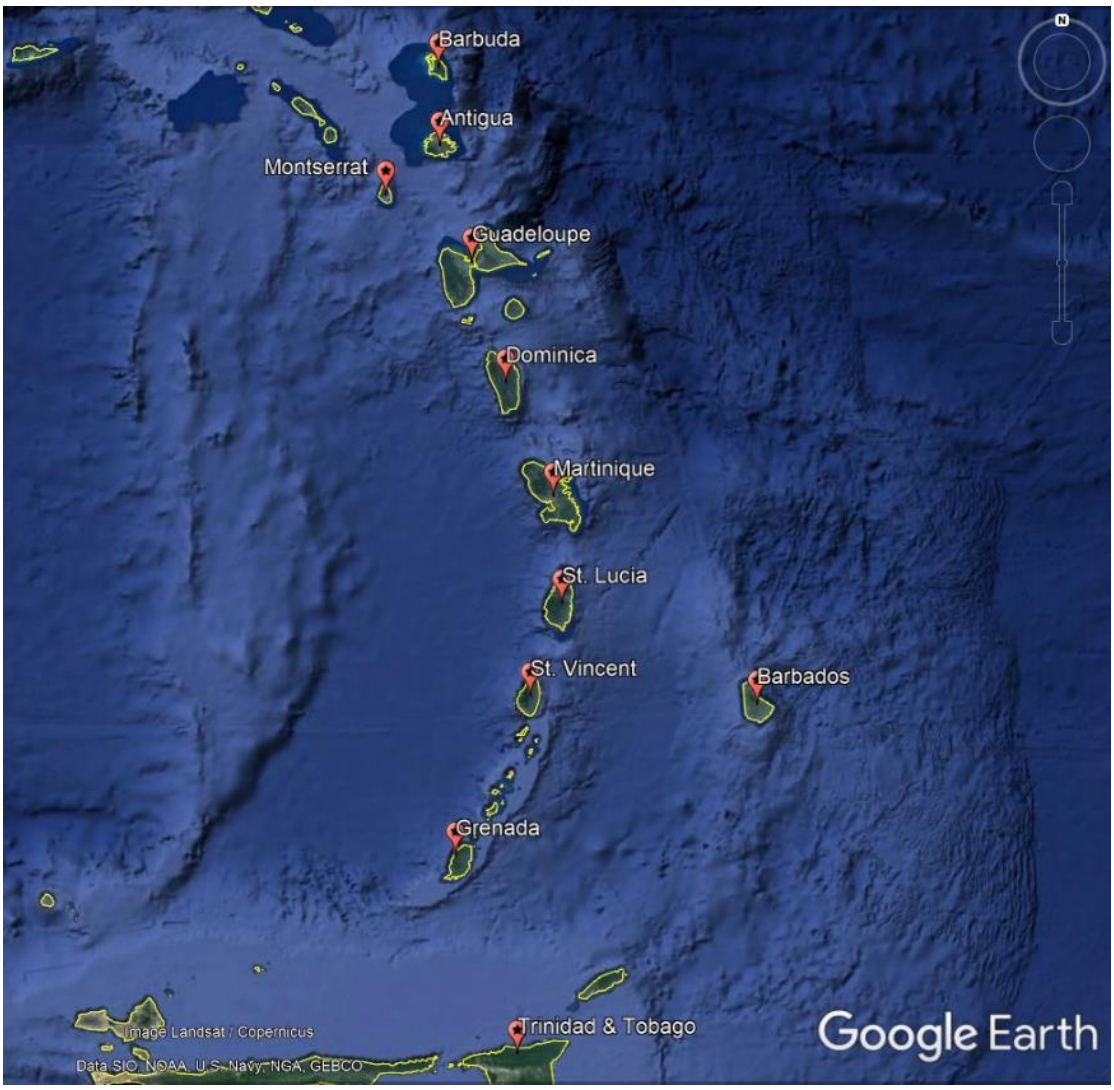
**St. Vincent Amazon's by Keith Clarkson**

*An epic adventure covering 6 countries and 10 islands, taking in all the single island and Lesser Antillean Endemics. Made up of the southerly Windward and northerly Leeward Islands, the Lesser Antilles are the last frontier of Caribbean birding. These volcanic islands on the edge of the Caribbean Plate are the gateway between the harsh Atlantic Ocean and the warm, tranquil Caribbean Sea. Originally settled by the Taino of South America, the islands have played host to multiple colonisers from the Caribs to the more modern European giants of Britain, France and the Netherlands. Through multiple wars, slavery, epidemics, natural and man-made destruction, the island's wildlife has managed to escape mostly intact, but equally lives a precarious existence that can be wiped out in a single event.*

*From Barbados, the most easterly of the islands we embark on numerous short hops to Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Lucia, Martinique, Dominica, Guadeloupe, Montserrat, Barbuda, and Antigua. Hosting 14 single island endemics, 14 Lesser Antillean Endemics, 7 Caribbean Endemics and upwards of 43 endemic sub-species (with many liable to be full splits), this travel intensive, but birding relaxed tour appeals to the birder, twitcher and photographer alike. Gaudy birds, picture postcard beaches, turquoise seas, rugged landscapes, and friendly locals make this tour one of our birding highlights.*

## *Itinerary & Map*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Day 1** | **Arrival in St. Lucia** |
| **Day 2** | **St. Lucia** |
| **Day 3** | **St. Lucia to Martinique** |
| **Day 4** | **Martinique to Guadeloupe** |
| **Day 5** | **Guadeloupe** |
| **Day 6** | **Guadeloupe to Dominica** |
| **Day 7** | **Dominica** |
| **Day 8** | **Dominica to St. Vincent via Barbados** |
| **Day 9** | **St. Vincent to Grenada** |
| **Day 10** | **Grenada** |
| **Day 11** | **Grenada to Antigua** |
| **Day 12** | **Montserrat** |
| **Day 13** | **Barbuda** |
| **Day 14** | **Final departure** |



## *Birding sites in detail*

**Barbados.** We'll visit the exclusive Graeme Hall Nature Reserve, typically closed to the public. This is the perfect introduction to Lesser Antillean birding. A RAMSAR designated Wetland of International Importance, we can expect a hive of birding activity and as we stroll along the immaculately maintained boardwalk, flitting amongst the dark green leaves of the Red Mangroves are a host of indigenous regional species, including Caribbean Elaenia, Antillean Crested Hummingbird, Carib Grackle, Bananaquit, the local race of Mangrove Warbler and of course the endemic **Barbados Bullfinch**. We will take advantage of prime locations on viewing platforms and of our ideal positions behind observation hides to enjoy unparalleled views of Scaly-naped Pigeon, Masked Duck, secretive Sora and both Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night Herons. Three species of egret also inhabit the mangroves. Owing to the absence of daily visitors for the last seven years, the colony has gradually expanded towards the boardwalk, from whence one can now get excellent views of nesting Little, Snowy, and Western Cattle Egrets.



**Antillean Crested Hummingbird by Keith Clarkson**

In the evening, we'll head to the popular and bustling nearby fishing village of Oistins for a freshly caught evening meal. With such local delicacies as pickled seacat (octopus), breadfruit coucou and flying fish awaiting our palates, the tone is set for what promises to be as equally delectable a journey for our taste buds as the myriad colourful bird species will be for our eyes. Please note: a wide range of other meats such as chicken, beef, pork, as well as vegetarian options are also available at Oistins.

**St. Lucia.** We'll journey through the wilds of the island to an area close to Dennery - one of the most popular fishing villages on the island. The dense thickets of semi-arid woodland associated with this part of the island represent ideal habitat for one of the rarest birds we will see on this entire trip - the White-breasted Thrasher. This near endemic is found only on St. Lucia and one other island. Its population is thought to number fewer than 700 pairs in the wild (and is decreasing).



**White-breasted Thrasher by Keith Clarkson**

As we travel further inland, semi-arid woodland is gradually replaced by the lush Des Cartiers Rainforest. Here we will bird until late afternoon. Meandering along the network of easily navigable forest trails lined with a staggering array of flora, ranging from giant Tree Ferns to tiny bromeliads, we delight in the sights and sounds of a host of regional forest-dwelling species and threatened endemics, amongst them, and perhaps most coveted of all - St. Lucia's national bird, the magnificent **St. Lucia Amazon**.

After our time in Des Cartiers with such endemic gems as **St. Lucia Oriole** and **St. Lucia Black Finch**, as well as regional indigenous stunners like Rufous-throated

Solitaire and Green-throated Carib, we make our way towards Vieux Fort to explore the nearby Aupicon Wetland. This important site is populated by Pied-billed Grebe and such regional specialities as the Caribbean race of American Coot and Black-bellied Whistling Duck as well as a wide variety of overwintering waterfowl and waders from North America.



St Lucia Oriole by Keith Clarkson

We'll spend the evening at a locally run hotel, nestled within a swathe of lush forest where we can dine while overlooking the scenic coastal setting of Praslin Bay and the Frigate Islands.

We'll have time to bird a generous swathe of St. Lucia's Northern Range, dominated by the majestic 2,600+ ft Pitons. Although we are in a mountainous region of the island, it will be the van's engine, not our own power doing most of the work. We drive up a long, steady incline to the quaint hilltop village of Bouton, from where we set out on a slow-paced walk along a well-worn path, lined on one side with an extensive orchard and on the other with dense rainforest. In this idyllic setting we target such treasures as **St. Lucia Warbler**, Scaly-breasted Thrasher, St. Lucia Pewee, and Lesser Antillean Swift.

As midday approaches, we make for one of St. Lucia's loftiest vantage points. Here we can gauge the relatively short distances between the Lesser Antillean islands, as both Martinique to the north, and St. Vincent to the south are both clearly visible. With stunning scenery all around, we await the arrival of the species that nests on the cliff face that rises far below us; and are soon treated to a spectacular aerial display of Red-billed Tropicbirds battling the buffeting, swirling winds to return to their colony.

Later today we join an experienced captain and crew on a search for ocean giants! An astonishing 22 species of whale and dolphin have been sighted off the coasts of St. Lucia. Huge pods of Short-finned Pilot Whales are the most commonly seen, while other larger species such as Humpbacks and False Killers have been spotted on previous trips. Finally, although very rarely seen, there is the chance of Sperm Whale, which also dwell in these waters. Who knows what delights this 3-hour cruise holds in store for us.



Green-throated Carib by Sam Barone

**Martinique.** This small French Territory is home to several avian gems such as the near endemic Blue-headed Hummingbird and Lesser Antillean Flycatcher as well as the entertaining Grey Trembler (another near endemic), but our primary target is the sole island's endemic, **Martinique Oriole**.

The lively capital of Fort de France is our setting for dinner, where we will enjoy local creole cooking set to a backdrop of live music and the swaying of ship masts in the harbour.

**Dominica.** Dominica - an island regarded by many as the "Nature Lover's Caribbean Island". Such is the nature of touring the Caribbean that though a mere six hours earlier we awoke at dawn to bird the

coastal woodlands of Martinique, the afternoon of the same day sees us setting foot in the rainforests of Dominica in search of completely new species for the trip.



**Red-necked Amazon by Steve Kornfeld**

The island's lush forests absolutely teem with life! The latter half of the day sees us embark on a quest for such residents as Purple-throated Carib, Lesser Antillean Saltator, Pearly-eyed Thrasher, Brown Trembler, and one of Dominica's two species of endemic Amazona parrot - the charismatic "Jaco" or **Red-necked Amazon**.

Anticipation will be ripe as this morning brings with it a phenomenal opportunity to enjoy stunning views of the largest and rarest of the Amazona parrots: the undisputed monarch of these forests - **Imperial Amazon**. We drive to a secluded site deep within montane forest where the Sisserou (as it is known by locals) is known to roost. Before setting out on a quest for fruiting trees the birds often preen and stretch their impressive wings, and in so doing allow one to truly appreciate the large size and unique feathering of this bird.

Although the Sisserou is undoubtedly the showpiece, this largely unspoiled region of the island is also home to a staggering array of other beautiful species. One sighting of the dazzling colours of the Antillean Euphonia can leave you in little doubt that you are in the tropics, while encounters with the resplendent Red-legged Thrush will no doubt prove equally memorable. With such treasures all around us, we spend the remainder of the morning exploring forest trails in search of other species local to the area, such as Lesser Antillean Flycatcher and Ruddy Quail-Dove, all the while being treated to the cacophony of calls for which such forests alone are reserved.

**Guadeloupe.** Guadeloupe is a remarkable island, for its forests not only provide glimpses of some of the more secretive species rarely seen on other islands (as often evidenced by the Forest Thrushes hopping amongst the tables in popular riverside parks and Bridled Quail-Doves walking at your feet!), but where one can get close (very close) to a most curious endemic indeed.



**Martinique Oriole by Beatrice Henricot**

The movements of the **Guadeloupe Woodpecker** are somewhat unconventional, with birds often seen dangling upside down directly overhead while clinging to slender swinging branches and plucking ants from clusters of berries! Odd? Yes. But it certainly offers fabulous looks!

Having spent the morning taking part in some relaxed forest birding beside crystal clear streams punctuated with crayfish and shoals of river trout, we make for a reliable site for the delightful Lesser Antillean Pewee and the near endemic Plumbeous Warbler. As is in keeping with the sedate nature of the birding on this, the larger of the two French Territories in

the Lesser Antilles, we access this site via a clearly demarcated footpath lining the forest edge - and here revel in the sights of two of the smallest near endemics in the region.

The afternoon is ours to relax and enjoy some cocktails on our individual verandas before taking a relaxing dip in the pool. Antillean Crested Hummingbirds flit amongst the tubular red flowers of Antigua Heath, while in the palms overhead, Tropical Mockingbirds and Grey Kingbirds play out an almost continuous melody of song.



**Purple-throated Carib by Steve Kornfeld**

**Montserrat.** Fondly known as The Other Emerald Isle. With its historic ties to Ireland, the beautiful and peaceful island of Montserrat is a botanist's dream. With plant life fuelled by incredibly rich volcanic soil, Montserrat's vast swathes of forest reveal flowering plants and towering emergents not seen on many other islands.

From the deck of a boat, we approach from the west and gaze in astonishment at the still smouldering crater of mighty Mt. Soufriere. As the volcano is still classed as active, no human habitation is found on this coast, and indeed we can see why - a huge lava flow being the obvious reason for the abandoned villages that line this coast. We round the southern tip of the island, enjoying views of Red-billed Tropicbirds and Royal Terns pursuing flying fish and make port at a tiny fishing village.

From here we set off in pre-arranged transport to the lush, forested foothills of the island, where deep in primary forest and amongst brilliant flowering heliconias we find Montserrat's endemic – the appropriately fiery-chested **Montserrat Oriole**. Having spent the day exploring this truly magical forest and getting to know more of its inhabitants - from Montserrat Racers and Montserrat Anoles to Pearly-eyed Thrashers and the local race of Forest Thrush.

**Antigua.** We spend a few days based on the island of Antigua. Our beachfront hotel is framed by an impressive cliff face on the shores of the Caribbean Sea. Dinner and live entertainment is on hand with which to celebrate another day's successful birding. With a shoreline pocketed by inlets and bays, Antiguans boast that they can visit a different beach every day of the year and still not see them all. This large number of beaches ensures that Antigua is an island more popular with sun-seekers than birdwatchers.



**Blue-headed Hummingbird by Beatrice Henricot**

However, although not home to any endemics, this island does offer the opportunity to see a species unlikely to be seen on any other of the Lesser Antilles - the impressively coiffured, White-crowned Pigeon (at home in the swaying palms that surround our hotel) and to explore a vast wetland for up-close views of several overwintering herons, waders and waterfowl.

**Barbuda.** From Antigua we embark on a day trip to the smaller sister of this twin-island state. We board a privately chartered sleek speedboat and after 90 minutes gliding across some of the most beautiful waters in the Caribbean Sea we are stepping onto the sands of Barbuda. Our main target here is the diminutive **Barbuda Warbler**. This charming warbler is perfectly at home in the dry scrublands of one of the Lesser Antilles driest islands, and shares the habitat with Common Ground Dove, Caribbean Elaenia, iguanas, and bizarrely, herds of feral donkeys!



**Lesser Antillean Saltator by Beatrice Henricot**

Barbuda is also home to the largest Magnificent Frigatebird colony in the entire Caribbean. These giants are most commonly seen soaring high above the waves, carefully scanning the waters for food floating on or close to the surface, so it is a wonderful treat to board a dinghy that takes us across a shallow lagoon absolutely teeming with marine life (as evidenced by the hundreds of jellyfish of every shape and size floating beneath us and clearly visible from our bough) and moors us literally within touching distance of nests, chicks and adults. We spend half an hour in the presence of these incredible birds, observing their behaviour and watching as squadrons of adults manipulate their impressive 6-foot wingspan to return with food to perch beside their young.

Driving around the island, one cannot help but be struck by the spectacular and unspoiled natural beauty of Barbuda. This is "postcard perfect", a land which offers a window into how many other islands in the chain now dominated by popular beachside condos and villas (such as Antigua) would have once looked. The water is a glistening turquoise blue, and the colours of the sands effortlessly blend between brilliant whites and varying shades of pink. With some of the most untouched beaches in the Caribbean literally on either side of us, what better way to spend the rest of the day than to head to a charming "Robinson Crusoeesque" beach bar to enjoy an absolutely delicious meal of Maxine's mahi mahi and follow it up with a relaxing swim in sparkling turquoise waters and a stroll along an idyllic white sand beach. We are in full tropical holiday mode. This is truly a case of birding in Paradise!



**St. Lucia Warbler by Ryan Chenery**

**St. Vincent.** After arrival at our elegant family-run hotel, the afternoon is ours to take part in some light "hotel-ground birding" where targets will include the fascinating all-black colour phase of Bananaquit, Spectacled Thrush, Eared Dove, Tropical Mockingbird and Lesser Antillean Flycatcher.

This can be followed by a swim in the pool, a cocktail at the beach bar, or if you're feeling adventurous why not descend the flight of steps onto the black volcanic sand beaches and go for a dip in the Caribbean Sea (don't forget to pack your snorkel!) Dinner tonight is at a local bar where we will delve into some truly delicious "Vincy" food.

An early start to our full day on the island is warranted, as it allows us the perfect opportunity for an audience with the island's national bird, and one of the rarest birds on the planet – the **St. Vincent Amazon**. There is something very sobering in the knowledge that you are watching some of the last remaining individuals of a species, in the only country where they can be found, in one of their last expanses of natural habitat. However, what a spectacle they provide as they leave their roosts and commute from one fruiting tree to another, every flit of their wings a mesmeric golden flash against the unbroken dark green backdrop of the island's dense forests. A magnificent sight!



**Grenada Flycatcher by Beatrice Henricot**

According to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, we follow up our time with St. Vincent's large and vulnerable endemic with an audience with her minute and endangered endemic - the comically attired **Whistling Warbler**. As though he were a curious monocled 19th century gentleman, the male Whistling Warbler often will flit out to fleetingly peer down upon you with a cocked head and quizzical stare, as though he were contemplating the motives behind your entry into his forest abode, before rapidly darting away again.

As well as being home to some of the rarest of the rare, St. Vincent will also provide us with the opportunity to see several species hitherto unseen on other islands, with the Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Cocoa Thrush, and impressive local race of Common Black Hawk being but a few. On our return journey from another rewarding day of birding, we gaze out the window at the changing topography of this varied and rugged land. Densely forested mountain peaks give way to sparsely vegetated plateaus and eventually grasslands and coastal flora, at which point we arrive back at our hotel, where we enjoy a candlelit dinner on the shores of the Caribbean Sea.

**Greanada.** From the air, this small and densely populated island might seem an odd destination on a birding trip, however, by virtue of our making for one of the last remaining vestiges of suitable habitat in the south of the island, we are soon provided with the opportunity to see the rarest species of the entire trip - the **Grenada Dove**. Latest counts estimate the surviving number of Grenada Doves to be as low as 140 individual birds. However, with the help of a trusted local guide, we will be treated to a sight few people have had or will ever have a chance to see in their lifetime. After visiting the last stronghold of this delicate, unassuming dove, we explore the dry woodland that represents its natural habitat and here enjoy sightings of some more of this tiny island's other inhabitants, including Rufous-breasted Hermit, Lesser Antillean Tanager and Grenada Flycatcher. We even climb a well-located observation tower to scan the skies for the local race of Hook-billed Kite.



**Grenada Dove by Beatrice Henricot**

Our lodgings for the night will be a vibrantly coloured and newly refurbished resort. Standing on our verandas looking out across the moonlit sea that for two weeks we have journeyed across, we watch as her waves gently lap against the shore and reflect on our travels. What a perfect setting to end our journey through the Lesser Antilles.

## *Tour Grading & Key*

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|---|---|---|
| **Overall Ease** |  | Moderate. Many early mornings and several short flights and transfers from one island to another. Suitable for all birding and wildlife interest levels. |
| **Birding Ease** |  | Undemanding. Most species provide good visuals, forest interior birding is limited. |
| **Accommodation** |  | Very comfortable. |
| **Walking / Trails** |  | Moderate amount of walking, mostly on flat ground, wide trails and around lodge gardens. |
| **Vehicles / Roads** |  | Limited driving, mostly on sealed roads. |
| **Photography** |  | Good to excellent. No dedicated hides. |
| **Annoyances** |  | None of note. |

## *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 dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 14;
- All lodgings;
- All ground & boat 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;
- 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 made 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.**

- We spend some of our time traversing the many islands by small to medium-sized aeroplanes. Baggage restrictions are strictly enforced even for these small hops. Please do not arrive for the tour with more than 19kg (41 lbs) of check in luggage and 7kg (+-15 lbs) of hand luggage.
- This tour requires a moderate level of fitness. There will be many early mornings, a number of flights and a fair amount of walking. However, although we cover a diverse range of terrain, there are no steep ascents and trails are primarily well maintained and relatively level. Any light to moderate ascents are conducted at a slow, steady pace with plenty of opportunities to rest along the way.

## *Arrival and Departure Details*

The tour departs from Hewanorra International Airport (IATA: UVF), St. Lucia on day 1 and will conclude midmorning of day 14 at V. C. Bird International Airport (IATA: ANU), Antigua and Barbuda.

The arrival and departure points, tour length and precise internal logistics will vary from year to year based on local airline routes and availability.

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.

Hewanorra International Airport (IATA: UVF) on the island of St. Lucia and V. C. Bird International Airport (IATA: ANU), on the island of Antigua are the primary point of arrival and departure for this tour

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. The following website provides detailed information about visa eligibility and assistance with online applications options where viable: Visa HQ for Travel

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