The Heart of the Silk Road

TURKMENISTAN AND IRAN

with Julian Droogan

16 September–07 October 2014 (22 days)
Tour leader

Julian Droogan
Dr Julian Droogan is a lecturer in the Faculty of Arts at Macquarie University where he teaches in Asia-Pacific Studies, issues of Religion and Politics and International Studies.

Julian has written books and papers on archaeology, Asian history and culture as well as the role of religion in modern politics and international relations. Julian’s tours combine a focus on the art and archaeology of a region with a love of its religious, artistic and architectural heritage, while also paying attention to the dynamic forces at play in the modern world. Julian is also a visiting lecturer at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

The Heart of the Silk Road

Mid-way between China and the Mediterranean, Iran and Turkmenistan are at the geographical heart of the fascinating jigsaw that is the ancient Silk Road. Home to continuous human civilisation dating back 6,000 years these two adjoining countries will astound you with their monuments to empires ancient and recent. Whilst 150 years of Russian and Soviet occupation are still evident, Turkmenistan nonetheless offers the visitor an abundance of archaeological discoveries. Like a string of pearls in the desert, the oasis cities of Iran bear testament to the extraordinary history, culture and religions of Persia through the centuries, and the power and beauty of Islamic art and architecture at its finest.

At a glance

- Visit ancient Merv, one of the great Silk Road oasis cities
- Explore some of the major sites of the ancient world including Anau, Persopolis, Firuzabad and Bishapur
- Marvel at the glories of Islamic art, architecture, gardens and town planning in Mashhad, Shiraz and Isfahan
- Discover the fascinating history, beliefs and modern practices of the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism
- Enjoy a thorough survey of the splendid palaces and museums of Tehran
- Complete your exploration of Iran with an optional extension to Tabriz and Zanjan
**Itinerary**

**Mon 15 Sep 2014**
Depart Australia
Suggested evening departure from Australia on Emirates to Dubai.

**Tue 16 Sep**
Arrive Ashgabat
Early morning arrival in Dubai. Connect to a FlyDubai flight to Ashgabat (3 hr 30 min). NB: economy class only currently available.
Arrive Ashgabat late morning and transfer to your hotel. Afternoon at leisure before an evening welcome briefing and dinner.

**Wed 17 Sep**
Ashgabat
Enjoy a full day introduction to Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan. During the morning see the Lenin Monument, the new Turkmenbashi Ruhy Mosque, the gold-plated rotating statue of the first president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, and the colourful Russian bazaar. After lunch, visit the Ashgabat National Museum of History, containing over 500,000 exhibits particularly archaeological and ethnographical finds from throughout the country.

**Thu 18 Sep**
Ashgabat
After breakfast visit the ‘Altyn Asyr’ Market, an Oriental market where practically the entire country comes together to trade on Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays. Anything and everything is sold here from camels and cars to antiques, carpets and jewellery. Later visit the Carpet Museum, with a rich collection of Turkmen carpets from the medieval era through to the 20th century, including over 1,000 carpets from the 18th and 19th centuries, and two of the world’s largest carpets, made in Turkmenistan.
Tonight, enjoy dinner accompanied by a colourful folklore program and Turkmen national fashion show.

**Fri 19 Sep**
Ashgabat
Journey out of Ashgabat to visit Old Nisa, the capital of the Parthian Empire, mentioned in the Zend-Avesta, holy book of Zoroastrianism. Continue to Kipchak village, birthplace of the first President of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Turkmenbashi. Here is located the biggest mosque in Central Asia with an area of 7,000 sqm allowing 10,000 people to pray at the same time.

After lunch, drive to the ancient city of Anau which existed here during the Parthian period (around 500 BC). The remarkable architectural ensemble continued to attract visitors up to 1948 when it was destroyed by an earthquake.

**Sat 20 Sep**
Ashgabat – Mary
Depart Ashgabat for Mary, the second largest city in Turkmenistan (366 km, approx. 6 hr, including stop for lunch).

**Sun 21 Sep**
Mary
Morning visit to Ancient Merv, one of the most important cities along the Silk Road of Central Asia. Founded around the 6th century BCE, it flourished as an administrative, trading, military and religious centre – becoming perhaps the third largest city in the world in the 10th century CE. A great centre of Islamic learning under the Abbāsid caliphs, Merv attained the zenith of its glory as the capital of the Seljuk sultan Sanjar (reigned 1118–57) and his successors.
Finish the day with a visit to the Mary Regional Museum of History and Ethnography which displays traditional Turkmen life and culture, including displays on weddings and carpet weaving.

**Mon 22 Sep**
Mary
Today you will make an ‘off-road’ day trip by 4WD vehicle to Margush (Gonur Depe), located some 70 km north of Merv. It is the centre of a great four-thousand year fire-worshipping civilisation famous for its seals and unusual burial practices. Margush is the only entirely excavated site of this size in the country and visitors can explore the ancient alleyways and shrines.

**Tue 23 Sep**
Mary – Serakhs – Mashhad (Iran)
Depart Mary for Serakhs. Here, after undergoing immigration and customs formalities, you will enter Iran and continue towards Mashhad.
On the way, stop to visit one of the oldest and most elaborate caravanserais, a masterpiece of Seljuk architecture, built about 12th century. Late afternoon arrival in Mashhad.
**Wed 24 Sep**  
**Mashhad – Shiraz**  
Iran’s second largest city Mashhad started out as Sanabad, a stop-over for trade caravans travelling to and from Turkmenistan. After the martyrdom of Imam Reza (A.S) in 818 and the construction of his shrine the city became one of the holiest pilgrim sites for Shia Muslims. During the morning visit the courtyards of the Shrine of Imam Reza, see the Gohar Shaad Mosque (exterior view only) and visit the Mausoleum of Khajeh Rab’i’ (a disciple of the Prophet of Islam).

Take an afternoon flight to Shiraz. NB: economy class, 20 kg luggage allowance.

**Thu 25 Sep**  
**Shiraz**  
Drive out of Shiraz for a morning excursion to Persepolis, one of the most important sites of the Ancient World, the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid kings with remains of the palaces of Darius the Great, Xerxes and Artaxerxes. See the famous bas-reliefs, depicting kings and courtiers and giftbearing representatives of tributary nations of the Persian Empire.

At Naghsh-e-Rostam see Ka’be-Zardosht (fire temple/sanctuary) and the Royal Tombs as well as the seven magnificent Sassanian rock-reliefs including the relief depicting Shapur the First’s famous victory over Roman Emperor Valerian.

Return to Shiraz for visits to some of the delightful gardens, including the Eram Garden, the tombs of Iran’s greatest lyric poets, Hafez and Sa’adi, both located in pleasant gardens, with a charming chai-khaneh (tea-house). Shiraz, the capital of the 18th-century Zand rulers of Iran, has many monuments dating back to this period: the Arg-e-Karim Khan, a fortress building in the now town centre, which was the seat of government of Zand Rulers and the Vakil Mosque.

**Fri 26 Sep**  
**Shiraz**  
Morning excursion to Firuzabad, which was the capital of Ardashir I (224-241 AD) who founded the Sassanian empire, the last ancient Persian empire before the arrival of the Arabs. Visit Ardashir’s great palace, probably the finest Sassanian monument in all Iran with its great iwan and domed audience halls, as well as a fine rock relief celebrating his ascension to the throne.

After lunch visit the Qajar period Nasir-ol-Molk Mosque, popularly known as the ‘Pink Mosque’ because of its colourful tile decorations. Continue to the Narenjestan Garden, also dating from the Qajar period, and the home of the wealthy Qavam family of Shiraz. Finish the day with a visit to Vakil Bazaar.

**Sat 27 Sep**  
**Shiraz**  
Morning excursion to Bishapur to visit the remains of the Sassanian city built by Shapur Ist (241-273 AD), the second Sassanian king. The building complex includes a central chamber, a large courtyard which had been covered with impressive mosaics, plus the remains of a temple dedicated to Anahita, the goddess of water and fertility. At Tang-e Chogan, on either side of a narrow gorge, there are six Sassanian rock-reliefs commemorating Shapur’s victories over the Romans and other adversaries.

Afternoon at leisure in Shiraz.

**Sun 28 Sep**  
**Shiraz – Yazd**  
Today journey to Yazd (438 km, 7-8 hr including breaks). En-route stop in Pasargadae to visit the remains of the palace and tomb of Cyrus the Great, the Founder of the Persian Empire, located in the magnificent Dasht-e-Morghab. Stop in Abarkuh, a typical desert town, and have tea under the shade of a 4,000-year-old Cypress tree before arriving in Yazd in the afternoon.

**Mon 29 Sep**  
**Yazd**  
Full day sightseeing in Yazd, the centre for Iran’s small Zoroastrian community who, seeking refuge from the invading Arabs, found a safe haven within its fortified walls. Visit one of the two Towers of Silence (Dakhma), dating back to the 18th century, where until some 40-50 years ago, the dead were carried and left to decompose and be devoured by birds.

See the active Zoroastrian Fire Temple, the fire of which has been burning for about 1500 years. Among Yazd’s Islamic sites is the Friday Mosque (1324 AD), with the highest portal and minarets in Iran. Other notable Islamic monuments in Yazd are the Seljuk shrine dedicated to the Twelve Shi’ite Imams; and the Ziaieyeh Theological School, known as Zendan-e-Eskandar or Alexander’s Prison.

**Tue 30 Sep**  
**Yazd**  
Full day at leisure in Yazd.

**Wed 01 Oct**  
**Yazd – Isfahan**  
Today travel from Yazd to Isfahan (313 km, 7-8 hr including stops). En route stop to visit the caravanserai and Zili textile museum and shop at Meybod. Continue to the village of Mohamadiye, to see the traditional workshops weaving the camel cloaks worn by the Moslem clergy in Iran. Also stop in Na'in, another charming desert town to visit the 10th-century Friday Mosque and the 17th-century Pirnia House, containing the Ethnographic Museum. Arrive in Isfahan in the afternoon.
**Thu 02 Oct**  
Isfahan

Begin your exploration of the beautiful city of Isfahan, the 17th-century capital of the Safavids, referred to as Nesf-e-Jahan (Half of the World). Start with a visit to the magnificent Friday Mosque, with the famous Uljaitu Mihrab (Prayer Niche) of the Il-Khanid period. The Friday Mosque is considered a museum of a thousand years of Persian religious architecture and is truly one of the world’s greatest mosques.

Later visit the Harun-e-Velayat Shrine and the Ali Minaret. From here drive to the Chehel Sotun Palace, built by Shah Abbas II in the 17th century. Its wooden columns reflected in the surface of the pool give rise to its name ‘The Palace of Forty Columns’.

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**Fri 03 Oct**  
Isfahan

Start with a visit to the famous bridges of Shahrestan, Khajou and Sio-se-pol, the Armenian Quarter with several churches, including the important Cathedral of Vank.

After lunch, explore the buildings surrounding one of the world’s grandest squares, the Maidan-e-Naghsh-e-Jahan, including the Ali-Qapu Palace with its enchanting music rooms and balcony overlooking the Maidan, from where the Safavid Kings watched polo games, and two of the Islamic world’s greatest mosques, the Sheikh Lotfollah and the Shah. Finish with a visit to the Qeisarieh Bazaar with hundreds of shops displaying the arts and handicrafts for which Isfahan is world-famous.

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**Sat 04 Oct**  
Isfahan – Tehran

Full day drive to Tehran (460 km, approx.7-8 hr including stops). First, stop at the town of Natanz to visit a beautiful Islamic complex consisting of the Friday Mosque, Monastery and Tomb of Sheikh Abdol Samad Isfahani.

Continue to Kashan and visit one of the most important archaeological sites in Iran known as Tepe Sialk. Later, visit the historical garden of Fin, which was first planted during the Safavid period. This beautiful garden was expanded by the Zand and Qajar monarchs, who added many open pavilions. Also visit a fine example of a 19th-century merchant residence known as Taba-Tabai House.

On arrival in Tehran drive by the Mausoleum of Imam Khomeini en route to your hotel.

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**Sun 05 Oct**  
Tehran

Begin your exploration of Tehran with a visit to the Reza Abbasi Museum displaying objects from pre-historic era until 20th century. The two galleries of paintings and calligraphy in this museum show different schools of painting and calligraphy from various periods in Iran’s history.

Continue to the Glass & Ceramics Museum with a beautiful collection of glass and pottery from different periods.

Finish at the Archaeological Museum, displaying an authentic collection of pottery, bronze and valuable pieces from millennia BC until the Islamic era.

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**Mon 06 Oct**  
Tehran

This morning visit the Golestan Palace and Museum Complex, the former residence of the 19th and early 20th-century Qajar Kings of Iran, with several museums including the Marble Throne Room and the Ethnographic Museum.

Continue to the Niavaran Palace (1968), the primary residence of the last Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the Imperial family until the Iranian Revolution.

Finish the day with a visit to fabulous Masjed-e-Jahan, including the Shah ahrestan, from where the Shah’s history.

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**Tue 07 Oct**  
Arrive Australia

Morning visit to the Carpet Museum, which has an excellent collection of Persian carpets from different regions of Iran on display.

Afternoon at leisure until evening transfer to the airport (late check-out included). Evening departure on Emirates via Dubai to Australia.

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**Wed 08 Oct**  
Arrive Australia

Evening arrival in Australia.
Optional extension to Tabriz
(escorted by local guide)

Tue 07 Oct 2014  Tehran – Tabriz
Transfer to Tehran Airport for a morning flight (1 hr 10 min) to Tabriz. NB. 20 kg luggage allowance.

In the afternoon, drive out of Tabriz (50 km) to Kandovan, a small picturesque village. The landscape is reminiscent of Cappadocia in Turkey, but the cone formed rocks cover a much smaller area. The volcanic rocks have been eroded to strange formations and are home to houses which have been carved into the rocks and inhabited for the last 1600 years.

Wed 08 Oct  Tabriz
Enjoy a full day tour of Tabriz, one of the historical capitals of Iran and the capital of East Azerbaijan Province. Situated at an altitude of 1,350 meters at the junction of the Quru River and Aji River, Tabriz was the second largest city in Iran until the late 1960s, and is rich in many historical monuments dating back to the Ilkhanid, Safavid, and Qajar periods. Following a visit to the Blue Mosque and Azerbaijan Museum you may wish to visit Bazaar of Tabriz.

Thu 09 Oct  Tabriz
Enjoy a full day trip out of Tabriz (125 km, one-way) to the Armenian church and monastery of St Stephanos, situated in the Aros River valley with a beautiful mountain scenery around. On the other side of the river is Azerbaijan (Nakhchivan).

Fri 10 Oct  Tabriz – Zanjan
Depart Tabriz for a morning drive to Zanjan (300 km, approx 4hr). Following lunch, visit the magnificent Mausoleum of Uljaitu, set like a gem in the formerly vast plain of Sultanieh, constructed during the reign of Sultan Muhammad Khoda Bandeh (1304-1330). The monument is remarkable, its huge dome is about 51 metres high and ranks amongst the largest domes in the world. The stucco-work, the tile-work, and the designs decorating this monument are unique.

Sat 11 Oct  Zanjan
Excursion to Takht-e-Soleiman, the ‘Throne of Solomon’, located in a remote mountain valley near Takab, one of the most interesting and enigmatic sacred sites in Iran. At the centre of a flat stone hill rising twenty meters above the surrounding lands, is a small lake of mysterious beauty. Brilliantly clear but dark as night due to its depth, the lake’s waters are fed by a hidden spring far below the surface. Places like this were known in legendary times as portals to the underworld, as abodes of earth spirits.

The massive stone walls and remnants of the thirty eight watch towers, together with remains of the palaces, the fire temple and the Anahita temple, built around the lake mainly by the Sassanians in the 3rd century AD, are part of what is left of the complex. The crater of Zendan-e-Soleiman (the Prison of Solomon) can be glimpsed in the distance.

Sun 12 Oct  Zanjan – Tehran – Depart
After a morning at leisure, drive from Zanjan to Tehran Airport (373 km, 5 hr) for evening departure on Emirates via Dubai to Australia.

Mon 13 Oct  Arrive Australia
Evening arrival in Australia.
Tour Prices

Turkmenistan & Iran
Per person twin-share  AUD 9,750
Single supplement*  AUD 1,950
Deposit per person  AUD 500 per person

Tabriz Extension
Per person twin-share  AUD 1,950
Single supplement*  AUD 425
Deposit per person  AUD 250 per person
Final payment due  17 July 2014

*Single travellers may request to share. Please advise at time of booking.

Tour code
Turkmenistan and Iran  AG1411A
Extension to Tabriz  AG1411B

Fitness level
Above average
Please see booking conditions for fitness level definitions.

Suggested airlines
Emirates / FlyDubai
Please contact Renaissance Tours for assistance with current airfares and flight reservations.

Tour price includes
• Accommodation in centrally located hotels with private facilities and daily breakfast
• Transfers on arrival and departure if travelling on suggested flights
• Meals as per itinerary (L=Lunch, D=Dinner) including special Welcome and Farewell dinners
• Comprehensive sightseeing, visits to museums and attractions including entrance fees as per itinerary
• Lectures and talks with your tour leader throughout
• Economy class flights Mashad – Shiraz and Tehran – Tabriz (if taking Tabriz Extension). NB. 20 kg luggage allowance
• Gratuities for local guides and drivers
• Hotel porterage (1 piece per person)
• Visa for Iran
• Visa permission for Turkmenistan (visa obtained on arrival)

Tour price does not include
• International airfares
• Visa for Turkmenistan (obtained on arrival, currently approx. USD 50)
• Transfers on arrival and departure if not travelling on suggested flights
• Items of a personal nature, including telephone, laundry, taxis etc.
• Drinks with meals
• Airport porterage
• Travel insurance

Your hotels
Ashgabat - Sofitel Oguzkent Hotel or Nusay Hotel
Mary - Dayan Hotel or Margush Hotel
Mashad - Homa Hotel
Shiraz - Homa Hotel
Yazd - Moshir Garden or Safeiah
Isfahan - Abbasi
Tehran - Laleh Hotel
Tabriz - Pars
Zanjan - Grand Zanjan

NB. Hotels of a similar standard may be substituted.

Visas
All travellers require visas for Turkmenistan and Iran. Renaissance Tours will arrange your Iran visa prior to departure from Australia. Because there is no diplomatic representation for Turkmenistan in Australia, visas are obtained on arrival.

Dress Code
The most visible daily expressions of Iran’s Shi’ite Islam are the modest dress code, and rules for behaviour at mosques both of which apply for men and women.

Dress code for Women: Women will be required to wear a head-scarf, long-sleeve shirt, trousers, and a trench-coat (to the knee) at all times. During visits to some mosques women will also be required to wear a special robe provided at the entrance.

Dress code for Men: Men are required to wear trousers and shirts with either long-sleeves or half-sleeves. (no singlets). Shorts are not permitted.

Food & Alcohol
Iranian cuisine is heavily based on rice, bread, fresh vegetables, herbs and fruit. Meat is mostly lamb or mutton. The national drink of Iran is chai (tea), always served scalding hot, black and strong. All sorts of delicious fresh fruit juices, milkshakes and yoghurt drinks are available throughout Iran. Alcohol is strictly forbidden. Do not take any alcohol into Iran.
**Terms & Conditions**

**How to Book**
Complete and sign return the Booking Form available from Renaissance Tours with your deposit and page one of your passport.

**Deposit / Final Payments**
Your deposit is due at the time of booking and is used to pay hotel, airline, performance tickets and/ or other deposits. It is non-refundable in the event of your cancellation.

Final payment is due 60 days before departure. Failure to make the final payment by the due date may result in cancellation of your booking and loss of deposit.

Payments are accepted in cash and by cheque, bank transfer, American Express, Diners Club, MasterCard and Visa. A 3% service charge applies for payment by American Express and Diners Club.

**Cancellation & Refunds**

a) **Cancellation by You** – Cancellation charges will be applied as shown below, calculated from the day written notification is received by Renaissance Tours. In addition to cancellation fees for tours operated by Renaissance Tours as shown below, airlines, hotels and other third parties may impose up to 100% cancellation charges.

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<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Cancellation Charges</th>
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<tr>
<td>60 days or more</td>
<td>Forfeit of deposit</td>
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<td>59 – 45 days</td>
<td>25% of tour cost</td>
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<td>44 – 31 days</td>
<td>50% of tour cost</td>
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<td>30 – 15 days</td>
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The above cancellation charges include applicable GST.

In addition to the above, cancellation charges may apply for additional arrangements booked by Renaissance Tours, such as air tickets, hotels and travel insurance premium. If the reason for cancellation is covered by the insurance policy, you may be able to reclaim these charges.

b) **Cancellation by Us** – We reserve the right to cancel a tour for any reason (such as failure to reach minimum tour participant numbers). Except for force majeure, we will not cancel a tour less than 60 days before departure. No further compensation will be paid in the event of cancellation by Renaissance Tours. A full refund of monies paid for tour costs will be the full extent of our liability.

Cancellation and/or amendment fees may apply for additional travel arrangements booked by Renaissance Tours.

**Passports, Visas and Vaccinations**
All travellers must be in a possession of a valid passport - most countries require a 6-month validity from your date of entry or exit. For some countries (e.g. China, Vietnam, India, Russia), visas are included in the tour cost and will be arranged by Renaissance Tours prior to travel. For other countries, it is your responsibility to ensure you have the appropriate visa(s).

You are also responsible for obtaining all necessary inoculations and preventative medicines as may be required for the duration of the tour.

**Tour Prices**
Prices quoted in our tour information are based on exchange rates, cost of services and applicable taxes at the time of publication. Prices may be subject to change in the event of significant currency fluctuations or the introduction of new taxes, up until final payment is received.

In the event of a price increase, whether because of a currency fluctuation, increase in taxes or a correction in advertised prices, we will advise you and you have the option of accepting the amended prices, inclusions and booking conditions or withdrawing from the tour and receiving a full refund of all monies paid.

Once final payment is received, all prices will be guaranteed and no surcharges will apply.

**Travel Insurance**
It is a condition of travel that you are covered by comprehensive travel insurance for international tours. Your travel insurance can be arranged by Renaissance Tours.

**Fitness and Participation**
Most of our tours require a MODERATE level of fitness. However, in certain destinations (e.g. Silk Road, Central Asia, Outback Australia, tropical destinations) or in certain seasons (e.g. mid-winter, mid-summer) or because of the nature of travel (e.g. remote rail), certain tours will require an ABOVE AVERAGE or CHALLENGING level of fitness.

If you (or we) have any doubts about your level of fitness, you may be required to have a doctor's appraisal. This would require your doctor to read the itinerary of your chosen tour, including the fitness level, and provide you (and us) with a written confirmation of your ability to participate.

**MODERATE**
For the overall benefit of the group, all tour members must possess a moderate level of mobility, including the ability to:
- negotiate airports and railway stations without wheelchair assistance
- use combined shower/bath facilities (it is impossible to guarantee walk-in shower facilities)
- undertake walking tour of 1-2 hours duration, including using stairs, walking over cobblestones and other uneven surfaces
- stand for long periods in museums and other sites
- embark / disembark coaches, trains and other methods of transportation without assistance
- handle your own luggage

**ABOVE AVERAGE**
In addition to the above, tour members must also be able to:
- Undertake walking tours of 2 – 3 hours
- climb stairs of 100 or more steps

**CHALLENGING**
In addition to the above, tour members must also be able to:
- Handle extremes of temperature (e.g. below 0 or above 35 degrees)
- handle extremes of altitudes (e.g. 4000 metres and above)

You can find the full terms & conditions on the Renaissance Tours booking form. They can also be found at www.renaissancetours.com.au/bookings-conditions/ or we would be happy to post you a copy on request.

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Renaissance Tours

**Contact Information**

toll free 1300 727 095 (AU)
toll free 0800 403 621 (NZ)
call (02) 9299 5801
dinette (02) 9299 5800
email info@renaissancetours.com.au
visit www.renaissancetours.com.au

Level 4, 47 York Street, Sydney NSW 2000
GPO Box 5068, Sydney NSW 2001

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