

## **Afghanistan Uncovered**

**Trip notes: EAXU**

**Validity: 01/01/2011 to 31/12/2011**

Revel in Afghanistan's history, beauty and colour on this comprehensive adventure. Journey from Kabul to the fascinating cities of Herat and Mazar-I Sharif and the breathtaking Panjshir Valley. Visit the ruined Buddhas in Bamiyan and marvel at the turquoise coloured water of the Band-I-Amir lakes. This adventure will see you meeting with US and Afghan forces at a Military Air Base, volunteering at a NGO run refugee centre and working with a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). You will also have the opportunity to go on patrol with the Afghan Army, visit Mujahideen's, spend a few nights in a typical Afghan village and watch a game of Buzkashi.

### **Itinerary Disclaimer**

The information in this dossier has been compiled with care and is provided in good faith. However it is subject to change and does not form part of the contract between the client and Babel Travel. The itinerary featured is correct at time of printing. Occasionally our itineraries change as we make improvements that stem from past travellers, comments and our own research. Sometimes it can be a small change like adding an extra meal in the itinerary. Sometimes the change may result in us altering the trip for the coming year. Ultimately, our goal is to provide you with the most rewarding experience.

**VERY IMPORTANT:** Please ensure that you print a final copy of your dossier to review a couple of days prior to travel, in case there have been changes that affect your plans. For the latest updated trip notes please visit our website: [www.babeltravel.com](http://www.babeltravel.com)

### **Cultural Engagement**

Robert Young Pelton and Babel Travel have teamed up to create the first organised entries into the World's Most Dangerous and forbidden places. Our Cultural Engagement trips have been created to challenge the intellectual, emotional, participatory and educational desires of a very select group of individuals. Our trips will maintain the highest level of personal and physical safety based on Robert Young Pelton's 30 years in conflict zones and Babel Travel's experience in the adventure travel business.

These trips are 'dangerous' because they are designed to make you think, our intention is not to scare you. Being inside a country is a completely different experience compared with watching it from the outside and it is bound to energise and engage you. You will be inspired to want to make a difference. Each group is screened, trained and tasked with creating an end product to share with the world. We do not intend to be passive observers. Stories, interviews, research, video and photographs will be combined to create a portal for the next group and the world. Communities in these regions don't have time to entertain outsiders. They are happy to engage, challenge and share with visitors but only if they take their message to the outside world.

Kevin Pollard, Founder and General Manager of Babel Travel, has long wanted to tap into Pelton's expertise and access ever since he read his best selling guide The World's Most

Dangerous Places which was first published in 1993 and is now in its fifth edition. Participants in this program will update the sixth edition and carry on Pelton's two-decade legacy of safely penetrating and making sense of the world's least understood regions.

Cultural Engagement trips for 2011 will include 11-22 day itineraries to Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, North Korea and Colombia with other destinations coming soon. Each journey will cost in the neighbourhood of EUR 5 - 12,000 per person, excluding airfare. Robert Young Pelton will not lead the trips personally, but will choose both the trip leaders (1 western and 1 local) and co-design each itinerary. Each western trip leader has a background in philanthropy, journalism, adventure travel and is considered an expert in the country they are leading trips to. There will be a second unadvertised list of trips for those return members who Pelton will accompany into selected locations.

Robert Young Pelton is the author of a number of books on survival and global conflict. He has journeyed through 36 conflicts and travelled to over 120 countries.  
[www.comebackalive.com](http://www.comebackalive.com)

### **Trip Structure**

The key elements of our Cultural Engagement trips (other than North Korea or other fixed agendas) are:

- 1) Meeting with VIPs and subject matter experts to welcome you to the country
- 2) Charitable social benefit hands on activity
- 3) Political discussions and interaction with at least two opposing entities
- 4) Exposure to authentic, non commercial and socially relevant environments
- 5) Interaction with locals, penetrating discussions and documentation of the countries situations
- 6) Formal interviews, information gathering, fact checking and publication of group's endeavours for public viewing and further discussion
- 7) Traditional interaction with social, political, NGO or other groups to understand how outsiders can engage, understand and better the situation
- 8) Cultural immersion into music, art, dancing, storytelling, history etc
- 9) Contemporary interpretation of culture, historical monuments, natural wonders, landscapes or events by experts
- 10) Trip members questions answered, flexibility in itinerary to take advantage of opportunities or invitations and constant support for unscripted discovery, interaction and follow on relationships

### **Formal Structure**

Each trip member will be sent a personal safety guide culled from Come Back Alive or Dangerous Places on survival in the specific area to which they are travelling. Members will be asked to pick 5 things that they hope to learn. There will be a formal videotape interview of your expectations or goals both at the start and after the trip. Your privacy is assured.

You will be asked to use a skill you have to contribute to a diary, wrap up, interview and query. Each person will be issued with a workbook with suggested questions, discussion points, and a do-it-yourself travel guide creation kit modelled on The World's Most Dangerous Places. The goal is to give structure to exploration and curiosity.

During the trip you will be brought into the narrative and will be filmed interacting, interviewing, photographing or helping. At the end of the trip the material will be assembled

into a web based blog. Should you choose not to be photographed, you will not be included on the public site. Those who wish to have their trip kept private will be respected.

## **Itinerary**

### **Days 1-2 Kabul**

Arrive and check into our starting point hotel – Gandamak Lodge. Your trip leader will leave a notice in the hotel reception with information for our all important welcome meeting, scheduled for 9am on Day 1. You will need to bring your passport, all vouchers and a copy of your insurance policy to this meeting so that your leader can obtain important details that are essential to the running of the trip. This meeting will give you an overview of all the exciting things you will be seeing during your stay and includes a lot of practical information on how to get the most out of your time in Afghanistan.

Important Note: it is a condition of joining our trips that you are in possession of a comprehensive travel insurance policy before leaving your country of origin. For coverage in Afghanistan we highly recommend Ingle Insurance. Visit their website for more information: <https://www.ingletravel.com/en/travel/specialRisk.asp>

Kabul is a feast for the senses – an incessant cacophony of horns honking, donkeys braying and the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer; the air is filled with the aroma of qorna (a local stew that you will certainly sample); and the streets are alive with activity. You will enjoy watching the hustle and bustle of everyday life – women in burqas haggling in the bazaars, men chatting over a game of backgammon and children playing. Do not be surprised at the sound of helicopters, convoys or the occasional car bomb as this country struggles to provide security for its people. You will be briefed by security experts in an informal environment and armed guards will watch over you.

After our group meeting we'll embark on a walking tour of old Kabul. Sights include the Ka Farushi bird market, Char Chata Bazaar, Flower Street, Chicken Street (famous for its tourist fare; carpets, carvings and knives), Pul-i-Khisti Mosque, Abdul Rahman Mosque and the Id Gah Mosque (or the Blue Mosque). After the walking tour we will visit a few local charities and aid centres.

Late in the afternoon you can visit Bagh-e Babur, or Babur Gardens (AFN 300), and the female travellers in the group can visit Bagh-e Zanana which is a park and market for women only. It was designed as a place where women could sell their own products and merchandise directly.

Returning to our hotel, the Gandamak Lodge, we'll enjoy a meal together. After dinner we can stop in for a drink at the bar downstairs to meet security contractors, NGOs workers and war correspondents before drifting off to sleep in a comfortable, colonial style room.

On Day 2 we'll embark on Kabul's secret mansion tour visiting closed homes and embassies.

Later in the day we'll visit the Afghan National Museum (10am - 4pm weekdays, 10am - 1pm Fridays; AFN 250), the destroyed and abandoned Darul Aman Royal Palace and former wealthy neighbourhood. We will also visit the cemetery, the Daoud Kahn memorial, Kolola Pushta fort and Tajbeg Palace.

Late in the afternoon we'll visit the Bala Hissar fort and walk along the top of Kabul's old

walls. It's an enjoyable hike and you will be rewarded with views over the city. In the evening we'll visit an Afghan women's help group for a night of learning, food and laughter.

As there is so much to see and do in Kabul, you may want to spend another night here after the trip finishes.

Other places of interest include the British Cemetery where foreigners are buried in Kabul, along with the Memorial plaques commemorating the ISAF forces killed in recent years. Also worth visiting is the famous Intercontinental Hotel once run by the Taliban, the infamous soccer stadium and the Kabul Golf Club.

### **Day 3 Bagram**

Setting off early we travel to Istalif (35 km; 1 hour), then via the Shamali Plain to Bagram.

The first stop today is Lake Qargha. Described as Kabul's lakes district, Lake Qargha is only 11 km west of the city. The Kabul Golf Club is located here and swimming and boating are popular on the lake with plans for water sports in the future. Paghman Gardens is a popular place where people spend the weekends with friends and relatives. At the entrance is the European style monumental gate, a smaller version of Paris' Arc de Triomphe.

Previously thousands of merchants thrived here, but today Istalif is a horrible reminder of the devastation caused by conflict. Despite being nearly destroyed in the war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, pottery tradesmen have started to return in small numbers and the village has begun to come back to life. The colours typically used by the artisans are royal blue and deep turquoise. Their wares range from salad bowls and plates to jugs, teacups and saucers.

The Shamali valley is famous for its fertile plains which produce grapes, almonds and walnuts. This agricultural area is also well known for its strategic geographic location - a buffer and link between the Hindu Kush Mountains and Kabul city. Due to its position, the Shamali has been the frontline for fighting throughout Afghanistan's long history of conflict. The area was densely mined and constant clashes between the warring factions resulted in the majority of the Shamali population fleeing their homes to seek refuge in Kabul or overseas.

After spending a few hours at a children's charity we travel onto Bagram.

Bagram Air Base, or Bagram Airfield as it is referred to by US military, is a militarised airport and housing complex. It is situated next to the ancient city of Bagram, 12 km southeast of Charikar.

Bagram Air Base played a key role during the Soviet War in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, serving as a base of operations for troops and supplies. Bagram was also the initial staging point for the invading Soviet forces at the beginning of the conflict, with parts of two Soviet Airborne Troops' divisions being deployed there.

Following the withdrawal of the Soviet troops and the rise of the Mujahidin, Afghanistan plunged into civil war. From 1999 onwards, control of the base was contested between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban, often with each controlling territory on opposite sides of the base.

During the US led invasion of Afghanistan, the Bagram Air Base was secured by a team

from the British Special Boat Service. As of mid-June 2010, the Air Base has been housing more than 15,000 US and other armed services. It is the biggest military base in Afghanistan comprising of three large hangars, a control tower, and numerous support buildings.

We aim to stay at the Bagram Air Base, but if this cannot be organised then we'll stay at another military base nearby.

### **Days 4-5 Panjshir Valley**

Before setting off for the Panjshir Valley we explore the ancient town of Bagram (Kapisa). This historical town was once a key passage from India along the Silk Road, leading west through the mountains towards Bamiyan.

A further 30 minutes north is the town of Charikar. Following the Soviet intervention in 1979, Charikar was the scene of heavy fighting between Afghan guerrillas (from their strongholds in the Panjshir Valley) and Soviet and Afghan army units. The city's population of around 130,000 is mostly made up of Tajiks. Charikar is known for its pottery and high-quality grapes.

On the way to Astana we drive through the scenic the Panjshir Valley. You will feel like you're a whole world away from Kabul - the pace of life is significantly slower here. The Panjshir Valley's dramatic landscape makes it ideal for trekking. This area has been the centre of Afghan resistance against the invading Soviets and the Taliban.

The Panjshir Valley has the potential to become a major center of emerald mining. Crystals upwards of 190 carats had been found in the valley, reported to rival in quality the finest crystals of the Muzo mine in Colombia.

Before arriving in Astana, we pass through the village of Bazarak where we'll visit the mausoleum of Ahmed Shah Masood, the legendary Mujahideen fighter and Afghan national hero. An exceptional military strategist, Masood thwarted the Soviets nine times in their attempts to conquer the Panjshir Valley. He continued his struggle against the Taliban until he was assassinated by them on 9 September 2001. Masood was given the name "The Afghan who won the Cold War" by the Wall Street Journal. We will also have the opportunity to meet some of Masood's family members before moving onto Astana.

After about 7 hours we reach the village of Astana, nestled high in the Panjshir Valley. Astana is small enough that you can easily explore it on foot.

On Day 5 we'll visit some local villages, go on patrol with the Afghan Army and meet and work with a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). American/UN reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan has sparked a development boom in the valley with the construction of new modern roads and a new radio tower that allows valley residents to pick up radio signals from the Afghan capital, Kabul

There are many landmines and unexploded ordinances (UXO) in the Panjshir Valley despite a continued presence by ISAF (International Security Assistance Force). Stay on well used paths and steer well clear of red-painted rocks. White-painted rocks indicate paths that have been cleared of mines. Also, it is important that you do not stray more than a couple of metres from the main access road.

### **Days 6-8 Bamiyan/Band-I Amir Lakes**

Leaving Astana early we travel down the Panjshir Valley to Charikar. Here, we'll board an old Russian jet bound for Bamiyan. Please note that this may change and we may travel overland - it all depends on the security situation of the day. Flying over majestic mountains we arrive at arguably the most picturesque region in the country; Bamiyan province. Bamiyan lies at an altitude of around 2, 500 m and is much cooler than Kabul.

Situated on the ancient Silk Road, Bamiyan was at the crossroads between the East and West when all trade between China and the Middle East passed through it. It was also the site for several Buddhist monasteries. During the 5th century two colossal Buddha statues were carved into the side of a sandstone cliff.

Bamiyan was a hippy trail fixture during the sixties, when Westerners came to visit the world's largest Buddha statues, the tallest measuring 53 m. In March 2001, the Buddhas became a symbol of Taliban brutality. Decreeing that statues were idolatrous the Taliban demolished them with dynamite. Even though the two large Buddhas are almost completely destroyed, their outlines and some features are still recognisable.

Day 6 is a travel day (4-12 hours). Upon arrival in Bamiyan we'll explore the citadel of Shahr-e Zohak (City of Zohak or Red City). On Day 7 we will visit the Bamiyan caves and learn a bit about the rebuilding efforts in the area through a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). If we're lucky, we may be able to take part in a landmine clearing exercise. On the night of Day 7 we'll have a meal with a local Hazara family.

On Day 8 we will visit the Band-I-Amir lakes with a quick stop at Darya Ajdabar (Valley of the Dragon). Very remote and very desolate, Band-I Amir are a stunning group of 5 turquoise lakes; their colour attributed to the rich mineral content of the water. These lakes sit high in the Hindu Kush Mountains at an altitude of 2900 m, and in 2008 were declared the country's first national park.

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### **Days 9-10 Mazar-I Sharif**

After an early morning flight we reach Mazar-I Sharif.

Mazar-I Sharif is the third largest city in Afghanistan, with a population of more than 700, 000. The Shrine of Hazrat Ali, which was later rebuilt as the Blue Mosque, was constructed on the site and the town of Mazar grew around it.

Following 9/11, Mazar was the first Afghan city to fall to the Northern Alliance. The Taliban's defeat in Mazar quickly turned into a rout from the rest of the north and west of Afghanistan. On 9 November 2001 the city was recaptured by the Northern Alliance with help from the US.

Upon arrival we'll explore Mazar visiting the Shrine of Hazrat Ali (Blue Mosque), the local markets and see a game of Buzkashi.

Early on Day 10 we'll explore Mujahideen caves at an old Russian outpost, visit the Qala-i-Jangi fortress and the ancient town of Balkh and, if time permits, we will visit the notorious

Sheberghan Prison. Please note that is activity may not be possible due to safety concerns in the region.

The Battle of Qala-i-Jangi took place between 25 November and 1 December 2001, just south of Mazar-I Sharif. It started with the uprising of foreign Taliban prisoners held at Qala-i-Jangi fortress, and escalated into one of the bloodiest conflicts of the War in Afghanistan. One of the 86 prisoners to survive the battle was John Walker Lindh, an American who had moved to Afghanistan to help the Taliban fight the Northern Alliance. Robert Young Pelton, while working for CNN, was the only journalist who managed to interview Lindh.

In the evening we'll visit a local Tajik family home for a traditional dinner and some Pattan dancing.

### **Days 11-12 Herat**

After flying via Kabul we reach the western city of Herat.

Herat is a big, relatively wealthy city situated near the Iranian border. It is the fourth largest city in Afghanistan, with a population of 600,000. Persian-speaking Tajiks make up the majority of the population. Tajiks are ethnically the same as the Persians from the eastern parts of Iran.

At present, Afghanistan's new central government have full control of Herat. The Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police provide security in the city as well as the whole province. The Italian led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) also has a presence in this area.

While in the city we'll wander through the old town, visiting the The Juma Masjid and the silk bazaar. Here you can try your hand at bargaining for a carpet! We'll also visit the Musalla Complex, about 2 km north of the Citadel. After a long day ambling around the town, why not relax and unwind in one of the huge subterranean hamams.

We'll spend the morning of Day 12 at a centre that supports street children and their families. In the afternoon we'll visit the Khwajah Abdullah Ansari shrine.

Late in the afternoon we'll travel 8 km north east of the city and visit the Khwajah Abdullah Ansari shrine, also known as Gazar Gah. The shrine is a funerary compound (hazira) that houses the tomb of the Sufi mystic and saint Khwajah Abdullah Ansari, also known as the guardian pir (wise man) of Herat.

### **Days 13-14 The Heart of Afghanistan**

Our last few days will be a unique treat. After returning by air from Herat, we travel an hour outside Kabul towards the border with Pakistan. Along the way we will visit the historic battlefield of Gandamak and the infamous Puli Charke prison. We will wind our way along dramatic mountains ending up in a small Pashtun village. Here we will be greeted by Pashtuns in traditional style. What will follow will be a night of feasting, Pattan dancing and storytelling by Mujahidin fighters.

This tribe once protected the region for the Soviets but when they began to bomb their villages they joined the insurgency. Today they are on the fence knowing that progress lies

with the new government but that the Taliban may return. We will learn about the code of the Pashtun; the way disputes are settled and how blood feuds work.

The following day we will hike the Mujahideen trail guided by fighters and learn about the hard life in Afghan countryside. Sit inside a Mujahideen cave, visit a Russian outpost and see if you can shoot as well as the Mujahideen. Drink from a natural spring and see how the Afghans resisted outsiders for over two decades. After a lunch overlooking a natural stream and picturesque mountains in the distance we will see why people love this country and its people.

This region is close to the Tora Bora mountain range, the former hiding place of Osama bin Laden. In December 2001, it was the location of one of the most important battles of the War in Afghanistan and was the only realistic chance the US forces had of capturing Osama bin Laden.

While here you are free to wander around the village to take in traditional Afghan life. We are introduced to Pashtun cooking and customs while enjoying traditional Pashtun meals during our stay.

We stay in our homestay for 2 nights. Basic twin share and shared facilities are provided.

### **Day 15 Kabul**

Returning to our Kabul hotel in the early afternoon, there is time for a farewell lunch and a chance to reflect on the wonders we have seen. Day rooms are reserved until 6pm on Day 15.

You are free to depart at any time after 6pm on Day 15, but please arrange for departing flights after 8pm in case of any travel delays. If you plan to linger a little longer in Kabul, post accommodation can be organised through our hotel. Arrival and departure transfers are included in the price of your trip regardless of when you depart Kabul.

### **Arrival and Departure Transfers**

Both arrival and departure transfers are included in the price of this trip. This is regardless of when you arrive or depart Afghanistan.

### **Arrival Complications**

Arrival transfers are included for all clients arriving in Kabul. If you have booked your flights separately from your trip please ensure that you inform Babel Travel of your flight details at least one month before departure. If you have not made contact with our representative (please look for the Babel Travel logo and your name) within 30 minutes of clearing customs and immigration, please contact our Afghan representative. Give this person your exact location in the airport (find a landmark) and you will be attended to promptly.

In the very unlikely event that this process fails, you can find taxis at the front of the airport. It will cost approximately AFN 600 (USD 15) to a taxi to the starting point hotel.

Please inform your group leader at the initial group meeting if this occurs and you will be refunded. No refund is available on missed transfers, or portions of your trip owing to a different flight arrival or delayed flight arrival. Any additional cost incurred in order to meet up with your group is at your own expense.

## **Starting Point Hotel**

Gandamak Lodge  
Kabul  
Afghanistan

## **Finishing Point Hotel**

Hotel Serena or the Gandamak Lodge  
Kabul  
Afghanistan

## **Trip Style: Cultural Engagement**

This is the only way professionals, intellectuals, and modern day explorers can visit the world's most inaccessible places with comfort, security and insight. Robert Young Pelton and Babel Travel have designed experiences that are both life changing and inspiring. Those who want more from their travels will understand that whilst these trips are intense, they are also engaging and rewarding by opening a window into the rapidly changing world. Accordingly these trips are never the same, never dull and will encourage further exploration. Comfort, safety and value are the cornerstones of planning and the ability to engage and interact with our hosts is critical. This is a trip for those who "do" not watch.

## **Exploratory Adventures**

Our exploratory trips are often our most exciting and memorable Babel Travel adventures. We may have designed a new itinerary or created a first-time adventure to a new land but rest assured; we've been planning this over a long period of time. Our local operators have been operating trips for a number of years in Afghanistan and we have had a team of on-the-ground staff and researchers (local and western) working hard to put this trip together. Our exploratory trip will be accompanied by a senior member of our Babel Travel team along with one of our on-the-ground managers. These trips are popular with experienced adventurers who thrive on the sense of discovery and serendipity that occur on first time forays into new places. You are part of the exploration, helping make decisions as we go, and sharing insights with guides and local people about your experience.

## **Included Activities**

Walking tours in Kabul, Herat, Mazar-I-Sharif, Istalif, entry into the Bamiyan cave complex, visit to the Band-I Amir lakes, exploration in the Panjshir valley, visit to Masood's tomb in Bazarak, homestay, various dinners/entertainment with local families, visits to 10 different charities/NGOs/PRTs/Military Bases/Political and Cultural Groups, visit to the Sheberghan prison and the Qala-i-Jangi fortress.

All other activities are optional and at your own expense. If you choose not to participate in the included activities on this itinerary, the cost will not be refunded.

## **Optional Activities**

All of our itineraries include some free time, the amount of which usually depends on the style of trip you are travelling on. Although we do not arrange any specific optional excursions in Afghanistan, there is plenty of free time for you to undertake activities not

covered specifically in the itinerary. We strongly suggest that you make any extracurricular plans after experiencing the country and after discussing with the trip leader and security.

### **Group Size**

Maximum of 12 travellers per group.

### **Accommodation**

Guesthouses/hotels (12 nights), home-stay (2 nights)

Our main criteria for choosing hotels are neatness and cleanliness. On our Cultural Engagement trips, most of the hotels are 3 to 4 stars - comfortable and sometimes luxurious! Bathroom facilities may be shared and rooms may be multi-share rather than twin. Please bear in mind that hotels can occasionally be challenged with minor problems and technical difficulties. At each hotel your leader will try to organise the rooming arrangements to suit everyone's requirements.

If you are travelling alone you will be allocated a room with another group member of the same sex. If you are travelling as a couple please note that we cannot guarantee the availability of double beds.

If you have purchased pre or post trip accommodation (if available), you may be required to change rooms for the additional nights.

### **Early Check-in Throughout the Trip**

Throughout the trip we request that our hotels prepare rooms in time for our arrival, however this may not always be possible. Instead we can store our luggage and explore our new destination.

### **Included Meals**

14 breakfasts, 14 lunches, 14 dinners. Allow USD 100 for snacks.

A typical breakfast in hotels in Afghanistan consists of bread, cucumber, tomatoes, olives, butter, jam, coffee/tea and juice. Local breakfasts are available for the more adventurous at nearby markets.

Meals range from a gourmet dinner in Kabul to simple lunches at roadside eateries to meals with a local family. The large majority of meals will be traditional Afghan fare with between 1 and 10 meal choices in each location.

### **Getting Around**

Private vehicle, aircraft, taxi, donkey, walking and the odd camel here and there.

We travel in jeeps and Toyota Land Cruisers (and sometimes Russian made helicopters or regional aircraft) as local transport/road conditions can be unreliable.

### **Getting There and Away**

The national carrier, Ariana Afghan Airlines, is flying with a small fleet of about 14 Airbuses

and Boeings (plus Antonovs). They have daily flights from Dubai, and periodic flights from Frankfurt, Islamabad, Delhi, Istanbul, Baku and Tehran. Ariana is particularly bad at keeping to schedules, flights can be cancelled or delayed without notice.

A far better option is the independent operator Kam Air, which has twice daily flights from Dubai, twice weekly flights from Delhi and weekly flight from Almaty, Istanbul and Mashad. Some of the flights on the Dubai to Kabul route stop in Herat if you'd prefer to enter the country there. Pamir Airways is a new private airline that offers daily flights between Kabul and Dubai, some stopping in Herat.

Air Arabia flies 4 times per week from Sharjah - however they have currently suspended operations. Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) flies 4 times per week from Islamabad and 1 time per week from Peshawar to Kabul. Another route in may be via through Tehran or Mashad in Iran. Iran Air has periodic flights from Tehran to Kabul. Air India operates six flights a week from Delhi to Kabul.

The best and safest airline between Dubai and Kabul is Safi Air. They are the only safety accredited airline in Afghanistan. Safi is the only Afghan airline allowed to fly into Europe and has direct flights to Frankfurt, Germany. The service is good and planes are sound. Staff are professional.

International flights are not included in the price of the trip. Babel Travel can assist with finding you the right flight. All departure taxes should be included in your international flight ticket.

## **Visas**

It is your responsibility to arrange a visa before you travel. Babel Travel cannot accept responsibility for anyone who is refused entry because they lack the correct documentation.

Tourist visas are issued for foreign nationals who are interested in travelling to Afghanistan individually or with a group for the purpose of visiting the country or their relatives. This type of visa is issued by the Afghan Missions aboard. The type of visa is valid for one month, and can be extended only once by the Ministry of Interior with the agreement of the Afghan Tourism Organisation. You CANNOT obtain a visa at the Kabul airport or at any overland border crossings. Visa costs vary according to the nationality.

You will need a letter of introduction from your employer/sponsor stating the purpose and duration of your trip. Babel Travel will provide this letter of introduction once your trip deposit has been made.

If the visa application form requires a contact address in the destination, please give either your meeting point hotel or the address of our local contact.

A visa will be flatly refused if your passport contains evidence of travel to Israel. This is not confined to just an Israeli stamp in your passport. You will also be refused an Afghani visa if there is an Egyptian entry or exit stamp from the Egyptian/Israeli border (at Taba or Rafah) or a Jordanian entry or exit stamp from the Jordanian/Israeli border (at Wadi Araba near Aqaba, Sheikh Hussein bridge or King Hussein bridge otherwise known as the Allenby bridge) in your passport. Even without actually having an Israeli stamp in your passport, these exit or entry stamps prove that you have visited Israel and entry into Afghanistan will be disallowed.

To apply for a visa, contact the Afghan embassy in your country of origin. For more information visit: [www.mfa.gov.af/Visa.asp](http://www.mfa.gov.af/Visa.asp)

## **Insurance**

Our trip price do not include insurance. However, it is a condition of joining our trips that travellers are fully insured for any medical expenses they might incur while travelling. At the start of the trip your leader will ask to see your insurance documents and will note down the policy number and emergency contact number.

We recommend that you take out a comprehensive travel insurance policy that covers repatriation and evacuation in case of a medical emergency, kidnapping, serious injury or worse, trip cancellation or trip curtailment as well as covering lose of baggage and valuables. You may also need specific cover for expensive camera equipment.

Many credit card companies offer complementary travel insurance. However the majority of such policies offer virtually no cover and cannot be accepted as adequate travel insurance. If you are planning on using credit card insurance you must bring along proof that the policy covers medical emergencies. Failure to be able to provide such proof to the leader will result in you being compelled to purchase a new approved policy before you can join the trip. If your travel insurance was not purchased from Babel Travel or our agents, you will be required to sign a waiver absolving the company and its agents should your policy not be adequate.

Any clients unable to provide proof of adequate travel insurance cover will be required to purchase a policy or will not be allowed to join the trip.

Most insurers require a local police report to support claims for loss of or damage to personal property. Our office can only issue a letter verifying that personal items have been lost or damaged on the trip of USD 50 in value and the leader was informed of the loss or damage at the time that it occurred. We recommend Ingle Insurance for this particular trip; <https://www.ingletravel.com/en/travel/specialRisk.asp>

Please also make sure you have access to an additional USD 500, to be used when unforeseen incidents or circumstances outside our control necessitate a change to our planned route.

Babel Travel's Cultural Engagement trips are insured through Ingle Insurance. These trips cover clients in cases of traffic accidents, medical emergencies (including medical evacuation and repatriation), accidental death and disablement coverage, incidents related to war, terrorism and kidnappings but it does NOT include ransom or extortion insurance. We also do not cover for political evacuation (i.e. preemptively removing participants from a volatile situation before there is a medical emergency claim).

## **A Word About Safety and Security**

By choosing to travel with Babel Travel you can be sure that your personal safety and well-being is our prime concern.

Although the countries we have chosen for our Cultural Engagement trips are generally considered to be mostly safe, it should be known that foreign traveller safety can be associated with some risk. Local and foreign rebel groups, clan and militia rivalries and

marauding pirates all add to these risks. Babel Travel will do its best to mitigate these risks by performing due diligence, daily information gathering and security reviews in what we may consider to be "dangerous or higher risk areas" before travelling there. Babel Travel works closely with local government security forces and monitors these situations to make security determinations on a daily basis. In some extreme cases it may be necessary for our local trip operators to postpone, delay or even cancel the trip in the rare event that safe passage is not possible at that given time.

Our local trip operators and their security force personnel have the ultimate decision in these cases and their decisions are non-negotiable and final. In the event a of a trip being delayed or an area bypassed because of security risks, Babel Travel will make every effort to keep the trip on schedule by either increasing time at one destination, eliminating or skipping an area or staying at another destination point. Your safety is our number one concern, and these adjustments may be necessary to achieve those goals.

We travel in Jeeps and Land Cruisers (and in some cases helicopters and light aircraft) as local transport can be unreliable and in parts of the country, dangerous. All of our drivers/guides are in daily contact with local security briefing services through their satellite phones to check routes for increased security risks. In addition to this, we travel with up to five armed security guards at all times.

Landmines and other UXO (Unexploded Ordnance) remain a problem across the country, so plan to stick to well-worn paths, avoid red and white painted rocks, and do not touch or move any suspicious-looking item. According to the Afghan Red Crescent Society, approximately 600-700 people are injured or killed every year in accidents due to landmines and UXO. While travelling in Afghanistan you are likely to see mine clearance organisations at work.

## **Travel Warning**

The Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs currently advises against travel to most of the countries we have chosen for our Cultural Engagement trips. Before choosing to join this trip you should first read the relevant sections of their website; [www.eda.admin.ch](http://www.eda.admin.ch). You can also check security updates in English on the following website; <http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/index.html>. It is also advisable to be aware of the travel warning issued by your own government. We ask that you take out Ingle Insurance which, in itself, will cover you against all issues other than terrorism, and can be upgraded prior to departure to cover all eventualities.

## **Your Health**

All travellers joining our trips are assumed to be in good health and to have a sufficient level of fitness to complete their chosen itinerary. If you have an existing medical condition or disability you must make this known at the time of booking. If accepted on the trip, you must also make your condition known to the leader.

When selecting your trip please carefully read the itinerary and assess your ability to cope with our style of travel. Please contact us at [info.en@babeltravel.com](mailto:info.en@babeltravel.com) should you require any clarification on what is involved on your itinerary. For travellers over 70 years a completed medical certificate is required. Babel Travel reserves the right to turn away, without recompense, any person who is found, at any time during their trip, to have concealed an existing medical condition. We also reserve the right to turn away any person who we consider incapable of completing the trip. If you are taking any form of medication,

please make sure that you bring an adequate supply to last the duration of your stay and inform your leader at the start of the trip. You might not be able to obtain suitable medication during the trip.

Although there are no particular health requirements for this trip, as Afghanistan has its fair share of health issues, we recommend you consult your doctor before you travel about vaccinations and health risks. Respiratory diseases such as tuberculosis and food-related illness are common, and malaria is a risk in many parts of the southern part and lowland areas of the country. Afghanistan is one of the dustiest countries in the world, and you should be prepared to be covered in it and breathing it for most of your stay, even in the major cities. For some travellers desert sands and dust can bring on bouts of asthma. If you suffer from asthma even occasionally, we recommend you bring your medication as it cannot be administered by your trip leader and may not be readily available while you are travelling

Insects and snakes are also something to watch out for, especially in the mountainous areas of the country. In some areas, altitude sickness is a significant risk.

It is your responsibility to bring a small supply of items such as insect repellent, aspirin, anti-diarrheals and plasters for small cuts and abrasions. Some travellers like to bring along their own emergency medical kit which may be used by local medical staff in the case of accidents or illness. Your group leader is fully trained in basic first aid and will carry a very well stocked First Aid Kit which can be used in emergencies.

### **Drinking Water**

Please DO NOT drink tap water, even in hotels or restaurants as it usually contains higher levels of minerals than the water you are used to drinking in your own country. It is fine for a local to drink water from a tap as their bodies are conditioned to it, but we highly recommend you drink bottled water at all times. Bottled water is found everywhere and is quite cheap. Upset stomachs generally occur quite quickly if you drink local water, and although it is not really serious - it can hamper your overall enjoyment of a country. Also, please aim to brush your teeth by using bottled water.

### **Extreme Temperatures**

Temperatures in the north can be below freezing for most of the winter, and snow in the higher elevations is common. In higher areas such as Kabul (1700 m), summer temperatures can be 35C and winter around 0C. The most pleasant weather in Kabul is during April, May, June and September-October. The altitude in Bamiyan is 2500 m and many of the mountain passes are between 2700 m and 3400 m. It will get cold – even in summer!

### **Are You Ready For This Adventure?**

On most of our itineraries there are long travel days and some rough travelling in areas away from main tourist routes. Mountain passes, bumpy and windy roads can sometimes make for some real challenging travel experiences. If you have experienced motion sickness in the past, we highly recommend you consider medication to help ease the discomfort. On some occasions, we depart very early in the morning to make sure we get the most our time in the next destination. It should be made clear that travel in this part of the world is not for the faint-hearted. Roads are often in a bad state of repair and journeys can therefore be tiring.

The hustle and bustle of crowded bazaars, extreme temperatures, staring crowds, dust, pollution and poverty – all this will probably lead to a dose of culture shock. However you should view these differences as a wonderful and exciting challenge, rather than a deterrent.

As a developing country, Afghanistan does not have the amenities and facilities you would be used to in your country. Semi clean squat toilets are commonplace. Overall, patience, understanding and a sense of humour will see you through and you'll no doubt grow to love this amazing place.

## **Money**

Afghani (AFN) is the currency of Afghanistan. As of November 2010, USD 1 equals 44 Afghanis, while EUR 1 trades at about 57 Afghanis. One Afghani is equal to 100 pulis. Notes are in denominations of AFN 1 000, 500, 100, 50, 20, 10, 5, 2 and 1.

Currency exchange rates often fluctuate. For the most up to date rates please refer to the following website: [www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com).

Afghanistan is purely a cash economy. This means travellers cannot use their Visa Card, Mastercard, Credit Cards, ATM Card or any kind of Travellers Cheques while in Afghanistan. US dollars, Euros and British Pounds are the only hard currencies accepted at Afghani banks and money-changers. Having those notes changed into Afghani currency is a fairly simple exercise. Please make sure that all the notes are unmarked and undamaged in any way and have been printed since 2003. New and fresh notes are preferred in most banks. US currency is favoured but only new "big head" notes are accepted. These are recently printed notes with the larger photos of Presidents.

You cannot change Afghani currency into hard currency outside of Afghanistan. At the airport in Kabul airport there are a few places where you can change money (at a poor rate), therefore we recommend you change money in your country of origin. Before leaving for Afghanistan, calculate how much money you think you will need in either Euros, US dollars or British Pounds and take that and a bit extra with you.

Remember if you run out of money while in Afghanistan it can be difficult, expensive and time consuming to find banks that can transfer money over to you. There are only 4 ATMs in Kabul, and withdrawing money is often problematic and not guaranteed.

Babel Travel recommends you take at least USD 2000 with you for your 15 day trip in Afghanistan. This will cover all optional activities, snacks, special clothing requirements, souvenirs, gifts and other items. Remember that all meals are included in the price of the trip; 14 Breakfasts, 14 lunches, 14 dinners.

Please remember that all Babel Travel trip prices mean no hidden extras, no local payments or kitty and no compulsory single supplements.

If you're a big shopper (and there are so many great things to buy in Afghanistan, especially carpets) we recommend you bring more. Please take into consideration the safety issues of carrying so much cash with you so bringing a money belt with you is absolutely essential for your trip to Afghanistan.

The import and export of local currency is permitted up to AFN 500. The import of foreign currency is unlimited if declared on arrival; export is permitted up to the amount imported

and declared. There should be no reason to import or export Afghans as they cannot be exchanged outside the country.

### **Tipping**

If you are happy with the services provided by your leader, local guides and drivers, a tip - though not compulsory - is appropriate. While it may or may not be customary to you, it is of great significance to the people who will take care of you during your travels. Please consider this when budgeting for your extra expenses on this trip.

### **Language**

Dari, an Afghan dialect of Persian, is the mother tongue of about half the population. Pashto is the native language for about 35%, mainly in the South and East. About 11% speak a Turkic native language, primarily Uzbek and Turkmen, and there are also minor languages such as Aimak. Most people speak more than one language; Dari is the historical lingua franca. Today English is also widely spoken in Afghanistan. Signs in English are now common all over the country. A small language phrase book is recommended and we encourage you to learn the basics. Your leader will be happy to help you learn simple phrases.

### **Religion**

Religiously, Afghans are over 99% Muslims: approximately 80-89% Sunni, 10-19% Shi'a, and 1% other. There are about 60,000 Hindus and Sikhs living in different cities, mostly in Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Ghazni.

### **Dress**

As a general guideline, clothing should be lightweight, loose fitting and easily washed. You should keep in mind that Afghanistan has very conservative attitudes towards dress, particularly in remote areas. The way you dress will often determine the degree of respect you receive from locals. Both men and women should keep legs, shoulders and upper arms covered at all times. Long pants, dull colours and lack of logos are ideal.

Women in all parts of Afghanistan can be seen wearing the burqa or at minimum a head scarf. Western women are highly encouraged to wear a head scarf (especially outside Kabul). For men, wearing local garb is advisable. Cheap local clothing can be purchased in all the local markets in Kabul.

### **Laundry**

Some of our hotels offer a laundry service however this may not be available in all accommodation. As self-service laundries are scarce in the country, we recommend you bring bio-degradable laundry detergent in case you need to hand wash your clothes. Your leader can let you know the best places to do your laundry on the trip - usually at any 2 night stop to allow enough time for drying.

### **Communication**

Email

Internet cafes can now be found in all major cities in Afghanistan. Our Kabul hotels offer internet via wireless or cable connection. The cost for an hour at an internet cafe is approx USD 2 but it can be very, very time consuming. Internet is slow and unreliable. All communications are monitored and power can be intermittent. Your Blackberry or smart phones can access the internet and there are roaming charges.

#### Phone

The Afghan phone system is fairly good, although international calls can be expensive. A 1 minute call (to the US/Europe) will cost approximately USD 6 from a hotel and approximately USD 4 from a telephone centre. Fixed line services are available in major cities (digital in Kabul) and mobile phones in most cities. Local SIM cards are available with Roshan being the most reliable service with the widest coverage. SMS is possible to most countries and is often SMS texts are the most efficient and cost effective way to communicate with friends and family.

SIM cards cost USD 5, local calls are 5Af/minute (10 cents/min). Outside of major cities your options are limited to a satellite phone. The Thuraya sat phone is an excellent choice for continuous sat phone communications in this region. Please have your phone "unlocked" before arrival and a local "top up" card only works if you have purchased a local SIM card upon arrival. Local rates are reasonable to overseas location. Roaming is not recommended due to the extremely high surcharges. Blackberry service only works in major cities and there may be a surcharge for data. Skype is an excellent way to call both mobile phones and land lines where reliable internet service is available.

#### Post

The postal service is adequate and stamps are available in some major hotels. An overseas stamp for postcards will cost approximately USD 3. Posting of parcels can be time-consuming however, and contents of parcels normally have to pass customs inspection before they are sealed for posting. You will not be able to predict receipt or deliver of mail. FedEx, DHL and other couriers service the main cities in Afghanistan but are expensive and must clear customs.

#### **Alcohol and Drugs**

Being an Islamic country, alcohol consumption is illegal. It is, however, tolerated in some western restaurants in Kabul. Bringing alcohol into Afghanistan is a serious offense as is the importation or exportation of military, antique and other goods.

The possession or use of any illegal drugs is strictly prohibited in all the countries we visit. Drugs like hashish and opium are commonly available in Afghanistan. When overseas you are subject to local laws and the penalties for breaking the law are severe. In order to safeguard the interests of the group as a whole, our trip leader are instructed to insist that any person found to be in possession of drugs leave the group immediately. The leader's decision on this matter is final.

If you need to carry certain drugs with you for purposes of medication, please ensure that you also carry a copy of your prescription. Local medications and health care are available with military facilities providing world class medical attention in emergencies.

Babel's philosophy of travel is one of respect towards everyone we encounter, and in particular the local people who make our destinations such special places. The exploitation

of prostitutes is completely contrary to this philosophy. Your trip leader has the right to expel any member of the group if drugs are found in their possession or if they use the services of prostitutes.

## **Ramadan**

Ramadan is a Muslim religious observance that takes place during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar; the month in which the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed. It is the Islamic month of fasting, in which participating Muslims do not eat or drink anything from true dawn until sunset. Fasting is meant to teach the person patience, sacrifice and humility. Ramadan is a time to fast for the sake of God, and to offer more prayer than usual. During Ramadan, Muslims ask forgiveness for past sins, pray for guidance and help in refraining from everyday evils, and try to purify themselves through self-restraint and good deeds.

This period is actually a wonderful time to travel to Muslim countries (we encourage you to travel then) as it gives you an opportunity to view first hand, the sacrifices people make for the sake of God. Sitting with a group of locals when they break their fast, can be one of the more rewarding aspects of your adventure. Approximate dates in 2011 are 1 August – 29 August 2011.

## **Your Fellow Babel Travellers**

On group trips you will be exposed to all the wonderful things that comes with experiencing a destination with like-minded people. Your fellow Babel Travellers will most likely come from all walks of life, and from different countries. We ask you to have patience with all travellers for the sake of group dynamics. We want every one of you to have the best travel experience of your life. Being punctual helps the group. If you are asked to be in a place at a particular time, please ensure that you do so. Being late may mean you'll miss that special cultural performance, spend less time with a local family - or in some cases completely miss an important connection or journey. The best groups are the ones that work together as a team!

## **Trip Leader**

Your Babel Travel trip leader is there to ensure that all aspects of the trip run smoothly. He/she will share their local knowledge, advise you on how to fill your free time and coordinate the day to day running of the trip, although occasionally he/she may need your understanding if things do not go according to plan. If you have any problems on the trip, please let your trip leader know so that steps can be taken to put it right.

In Afghanistan we also use the services of specialist guides at places of particular historical interest, and specialised guides for any hiking activities in mountain regions. At Babel Travel we aim to support local guides who have specialised knowledge of the regions we visit - and who better to hear it from than the locals themselves?

## **Sustainable Travel**

We strongly believe that wherever we travel, we should take a responsible attitude with us. Sustainable Travel is about respecting the country we have chosen to visit. Your enjoyment of the trip should never be at the expense of the culture or the environment of the host country. Therefore, we believe that giving back to the communities we visit is essential.

In Afghanistan we have built strong links with local communities, aid agencies, charities, women's and children's groups, hospitals - all of which directly rely on the assistance of donations and products purchased by our travellers and other visitors. We offer Babel travellers an opportunity to interact with locals at these organisations. It is the goal of this program to introduce you to people who are helping to changing the world for the better.

## **What To Take**

What you need to bring will vary according to the trip style you have chosen, the countries you are visiting and when you are travelling. As a guideline, you should pack as lightly as possible - under 10kgs is a great idea! On the vast majority of our trips you are expected to carry your own luggage over short to medium distances (no longer than 20 minutes). Packing light is also crucial as there may be weight restrictions on local aircraft.

Due to the nature of this trip, cumbersome suitcases and wheelee bags are not recommended for Babel Travellers! Most group members carry their luggage in a backpack, although an overnight bag with a shoulder strap would suffice if you travel lightly. Smaller bags with wheels are acceptable (if it has carry straps) but you will need to carry these bags up and down stairs, over bumpy roads, through muddy streets etc. You will also need a day pack/bag to carry water and a camera etc for day trips or walking tours.

It is very important that your bags can be locked. It may be necessary to store your luggage separately (and unattended) from the group.

## **Checklist**

The following is a guide as to what you should pack and is not meant to be a complete and absolute list. You are welcome to bring less or more than what is mentioned below.

Travel documents: (your passport, visa, updated travel insurance, flights tickets, travel voucher)

Health requirements and any necessary medication

Money: cash in USD, EUR or GDP, money bag or pouch

First Aid Kit

Alarm clock and torch (flashlight)

Lightweight travel towel

Ear plugs

A scarf or face mask for dust and sand

Phrase book

Sunscreen (with high sun protection factor and lip balm)

Sunglasses

A hat

Antibacterial hand gel

Tampons (can be difficult to find on tour)

Day pack to carry your personal needs during the day

A lock for any item of luggage

Conservative attire (you can purchase headscarves and traditional Afghani garb while in Kabul)

Comfortable shoes with good grip and ankle support

Warm clothes (it will be cold in Bamiyan and the Panjshir Valley, especially in April/October.

Please check recent temperatures before your trip departs.)

Babel Travel leaders collect clothing for poorer village communities. If you have room in your luggage, warm children's clothes and shoes are particularly appreciated.

### **Your Belongings**

Although it can be traumatic and distressing to lose personal belongings, remember that almost everything can be replaced. Your valuables are your responsibility so look after them. Keep items like cash, tickets and passports on your person in a hidden money belt or stored in the hotel safe. Leave all non-essential jewelry and other expensive items at home.

Once on the road you will find that most of our hotels have safety deposit boxes, which is the most secure way of storing your valuables.

### **Participation Form**

All group members on a Babel Travel trip are required to sign a participation form on Day 1 of the trip. This will take place during the important welcome meeting. Please be aware that signing this form is an essential part of travelling with Babel Travel and is a requirement of all travellers.

### **Feedback**

One of the many unique features of our Cultural Engagement journeys is that we putting together a mini documentary and website to show the world what life is really like inside Afghanistan. You are explorers and your input along with the interviews, documentation and notes is important to show our hosts how they can better understand or get involved. You are responsible for giving a voice to the new friends we make along the journey.

In addition, this trip is the first of its kind and we encourage you to provide suggestions, improvements and enhancements.

**Thank you and we look forward to welcoming you.**