

Prospectus for First Great Representative Tour of the Stans:

a series of imaginary tours of people called Stan(ley) to countries whose names end in –stan.

Representatives (Caricatures, if you prefer) have been nominated to take part in our First Great Representative Tour of the Stans. This tour is proposed as a stretch of the imagination, a thought experiment, a virtual bit of fiction. It is based on an interpretation of what might be possible when several people (probably a group of six), all with the name of Stanley are brought together from their different contexts to undertake a virtual adventure in the Stans.

FAQs:

Will there be flies? Swarms of them

Will there be extremes of weather? From baking to freezing; from desert to deluge

Will there be adventures? Most assuredly

Will there be servants? Yes and No. Undertaking such a tour will rely on local guides, taxi drivers etc but these are less servants more equal adventurers.

Will women be allowed in the group? Clearly so, as some of the world's most intrepid adventurers have been women, Obviously they will need to comply with the basic criteria for this tour ie will need to be called Stanley.

Will the participants be real people? In the 'real' world there are people with the names of the people selected for this tour, with their own histories and characteristics. In real life it would be almost impossible for them to have even met, never mind go on a tour together. The six people to be taken on the imaginary tour are not these real people but are representations of what such people might be in some parallel universe. Beyond the name and some basic facts of biography there is no intended similarity between the 'real' and 'imagined' Stanleys. The adventures are absolutely fictitious. (This is a fine line to write around but it is clearly stated at the outset that there is no malice or praise of any kind intended towards the people who have/had a reality in the current world)

Will there be a report of the trip? Yes. The trip is expected to cover around thirty imaginary days. At the end of this stretch of time, once the characters have exhausted themselves they will be retired and a full report written.

Actual travels, in history, through the –Stans

There is a Central Asian area made up of several countries whose names end in –stan. In the minds of ‘ordinary’ residents of places such as Britain the naming of places in this part of the map is less familiar than for the surrounding areas of China, Russia, and the subcontinent of India/Pakistan/Bangladesh. It hasn’t, for them, had a ‘presence’ as a unity in itself. Why might that be? The central set of countries has, throughout history, been subject to the comings and goings of various empires and conquerors. This has left behind a somewhat fragmented view of boundaries and areas, with smaller areas ‘lost’ under the greater banners of Empires and Republics.

To many in the western world these parts of Asia may have seemed too distant, too remote, too different (and, to some, even too unimportant seeming) to worry about what they might be called. From a western perspective it has the feel of being a ‘lost’ region.

At the same time the area had, for much of recorded history, been the main artery for trade between East and West and between North and South. It was an area that spanned a major part of the Silk Road. It contained the established routes that any traveller would take. It carried the materials, the stories, the inventions, the rumours and deceits, and the ceremonies and joys from land to land.

There are a number of well-established commercial companies that organise specific tours from the UK to Uzbekistan (because of the attraction of its heritage sites) and other places. There are also clearly visits of large numbers of UK citizens to Pakistan because of the shared populations and histories. More locally, in the –stans, there are agencies that will arrange trips throughout Turkestan, Kyrgystan, Kazakhstan, etc. Even today, travel across parts of the region is not simple. Some parts are considered too dangerous for independent travellers to journey into.

There are, however, various accounts of journeys across those regions. What follows is a small, and somewhat arbitrary, set of suggestions for further reading:

On Horseback Through Asia Minor – Frederick Burnaby

In the winter of 1876 Captain Frederick Burnaby rode a thousand miles from Constantinople/Istanbul to explore what the situation was as war was about to break out between Russia and Turkey. With his servant, he spent five months riding across winter landscape before riding the thousand miles back for a ship home to England to write a best-seller. He had already published 'A ride to Khiva'; was claimed to be the strongest man in the British Army at the time, able to carry a small pony under each arm; he had a 47 inch chest; he was fluent in a number of languages and wrote in an exciting style. (By one of those quirks of serendipity if I look out of the window of the place where this article is being written I see, in the nearby cathedral grounds in Birmingham, an obelisk memorial to Burnaby with 'Khiva' inscribed on one side and the man's face looking back at me)

More recent accounts are:

Extremes along the Silk Road – Nick Middleton

A description that connects with the history and geography of the area (and which also describes travels in China, Tibet and Mongolia), describing the Silk Road not as one superhighway but as a network of connecting overland routes built up over time.

Shadow of the Silk Road – Colin Thubron

Over eight months this modern traveller used a variety of modes of transport to cover more than seven thousand miles from China, across central Asia, across to Turkey. This describes the events that occur on the trip, the scenery and people encountered, and how the ancient world is adapting to modern changes.

A carpet ride to Khiva – Christopher Aslan Alexander

The author travelled to Khiva, in Uzbekistan, as part of writing a guidebook but ended up staying to establish and run a carpet-making business with local residents. He lived there for seven years - long enough to be able to capture

everyday life in detail, with all the contradictions and absurdities that can characterise many places.

There are many, many more for those who want to follow actual travels across the –stans.