



China Solar Eclipse Expedition Newsletter # 4

Hello to all the members of the ATMoB solar eclipse tour to China this July. As I write this 4th newsletter, we now stand a scant 17 weeks from departure of everyone for China, and the start of our tour to see the great eclipse of 22 July.

With a very large amount of highly critical information to convey, and again, not a lot of lead time prior to the start of the tour, permit me to now swing into the meat of this newsletter.

Final Tour Payment

As you are well aware from our 2nd newsletter that was sent out approximately a year ago, the time for final payment for this tour is now upon us all.

Thus, I need to request that you please arrange to get your last progress payment for the tour in to our offices no later than Friday, April 10th. I fully realize that 1) this is somewhat later than the March deadline I originally set for this payment, and 2) that this essentially coincides with the due date for Federal Income Taxes of April 15th, but this cannot be helped.

In extending the deadline until April the 10th, I wanted to give all the current tour registrants time to muster their finances and prepare for the final "push"

to get their tour expenses paid off, particularly in light of the current economic situation many find themselves in. If you require some adjustment of this deadline, please get in touch with me as soon as possible, to discuss how we can arrange for your final tour payment.

As a brief reminder, the final tour payment amounts are: \$400 per person for the short tour itinerary, and \$925 for the long tour itinerary.

The only exceptions to the above amounts are either those who already have paid their tour costs in full, or, those who have special rooming arrangements (triple rooming basis, single supplements/room occupancy, or those with youngsters under the age of 12 years traveling with them). If you have any questions about the final sum you owe, please get in touch with me as soon as you can to confirm the amount due.

I thank everyone for their prior cooperation and help in seeing to it that their payments reach our offices (or that we receive authorization from you for credit card charges) before or on the days the payments have been due. This has truly made our job easier and has been very beneficial to our inbound tour

operator in China.

Chinese Visa Applications

I know that many of the tour members are now “chomping at the bit” to get their visa applications in to China Travel Service, to obtain their tourist visas for our tour.

That said, I need to ask you to please be patient, and for you to refrain from getting a visa form (either from the CTS site or the Chinese government web sites) and filling it out and sending it to CTS for processing.

Cindy Fang, the operations VP at CTS has specifically asked us to hold off sending in our applications, until the week of May the 11th, as sending in the forms, your passports, and the requisite visa fees before that date will only result in an early visa issuance, and the potential for your visa to expire BEFORE we complete the tour in July.

Prior to the week of May 11th, I shall send out a separate email notice to ALL tour members, with the blank visa application form attached, which will then signify that you are free to complete the form, send it in with a passport type photo of yourself, your valid U.S. Passport, and the \$160 fee for each visa you are applying for, to the CTS offices in Alhambra, CA.

Payment by personal check is preferred for the visas, as opposed to the use of your credit card, but I shall check with CTS as to whether you can use your credit cards to pay for your visas, before the time for applying is upon us.

One task that you can certainly attend to, prior to the date for submitting your visa forms to CTS, is the acquisition of your passport type photo for inclusion with your visa application form. Remember that the photo must conform to standard passport photo format: no hat, a head and shoulders photo, plain background, simple clothing, and no unusual or weird buttons, jewelry, or indicia on your clothing...

Airline Baggage Limits

Regarding the matter of baggage restrictions for your flights both internationally and within China (for those on the long tour itinerary), I'd like to review what the general limits for checked baggage are, as of this writing (March '09). To be clear, the limits I am citing define the number of bags you may check without having to pay additional baggage fees.

The majority of international air carriers permit passengers to check a maximum of 2 bags, each one not to exceed 62 inches in combined dimensions (l, w, h), and not weighing more than 50 pounds (23 kg). These parameters apply to those traveling on economy class tickets only. Business and First class passengers have different limits, and you should check with your specific airline for those guidelines (as well, it is a good idea to still check the limits for economy class passengers, as the limits I have listed above can change quickly, and you need to stay abreast of any changes that may have taken place, or will occur, before you depart in July).

For those on the extended tour (ending on Wednesday, July the 29th), you also

need to be aware of the domestic baggage limitations for flights within China.

These limits potentially pose a problem, in that the limits per person for checked baggage on domestic flights within China are 1 bag, not to exceed 20 kg (44 pounds) in weight. Thus, participants might perceive a “disconnect” between the international air carriers and the domestic airlines operating within China, regarding luggage limits.

I am told, according to CTS, that those on the extended tour itinerary will be performing a “group check in” process at Hangzhou and Xi’an airports, in an effort to obviate potential difficulties for those having more than one checked bag. While all efforts shall be extended to get the airline to “level out” the amount of checked luggage so that NO ONE will have to pay added fees, this cannot be guaranteed, and thus you need to take this information into consideration when you plan your packing for the tour.

Regarding carry on items, the general rule for international carriers is that: 1) the item cannot exceed 45 inches in combined dimensions (l,w,h), and 2) it must fit either under the seat in front of you, or in the overhead bin above your head. Also, you are allowed one personal item to carry on the plane (laptop, coat, attaché case, etc.).

For domestic flights within China, you are allowed one carry on item, from the following type of personal goods: a small camera, a small telescope,

overcoat, reading matter/books, umbrella, or a knapsack/backpack, makeup case, etc.

Again, I urge you to check with the air carrier you are using to fly to/from China, for the latest information pertaining to checked and carry on items.

Vaccines/Inoculations

A few tour members have inquired about what vaccines or prophylactic precautions they need to get, prior to departing on the tour.

According to the CDC in Atlanta, there are NO required vaccinations or inoculations for travel to the portions of China we will be visiting on either the short or long tours.

However, the CDC does suggest that you check with your personal physician about your status of the following vaccinations, as a precautionary measure, before going on the tour:

1. Polio booster
2. DPT vaccination
3. Typhoid booster
4. Immunoglobulin booster
5. Hepatitis A vaccination

I am very mindful that a large number of participants on this tour are practicing M.D.s and that their “knowledge level” far surpasses my feeble level of familiarity regarding the advisability or need for the vaccinations I have listed here.

As an overall guide, I strongly suggest that you consult with your personal physician, as to which of the

vaccinations I have listed (or other possible ones I have left out) you should obtain before you leave on tour.

Gratuities/Tips

This is a topic that I need to spend a few moments addressing, as it is both sensitive and, candidly, one that can evoke strong opinions either way, with regards to how tour members wish to handle it.

As I have previously strived to make clear, by way of both the Twilight Tours and CTS versions of the tour's terms and conditions, gratuities/tips are not included in the cost of the tour.

By way of some background, the web-based information source, Wikipedia, states the following, regarding the term "tip": *"Though by definition a tip is never legally required, and its amount is at the discretion of the person being served, in some circumstances failing to give an adequate tip when one is expected may be considered very miserly, a violation of etiquette... or even unethical."*

Furthermore, Wikipedia goes on to say that: *"The word "tip" is often inaccurately claimed to be an acronym for terms such as "to insure prompt service", "to insure proper service", "to improve performance", and "to insure promptness". However, this etymology contradicts the Oxford English Dictionary, and is probably an example of a **backronym**."*

Cutting to the chase here, my stand on this subject is as follows, and is

presented here strictly in the form of free advice, which you are at liberty to either follow or discard, at your discretion.

You may choose to contribute, or not, to the gratuity "pool" that will be collected for the local tour guides, bus drivers, and overall tour guide (who shall be accompanying you for the full duration of your tour) [long or short]. You are under NO obligation to contribute or provide gratuities to these personnel, based upon your personal decision or preference.

There shall be a small envelope in the final tour documentation package that you will be receiving from me/CTS, with a label on the front of it saying "**Gratuities**". Again, you may elect to use it or not.

For those who are curious about the customary amount for a tour gratuity (possibly not having participated in a group tour previously), \$5-8 per day is a typical sum, paid per person, to drivers, local tour guides, or the guide who accompanies the group during the entire tour.

I am told that the proceeds from the amassed gratuity "pool" will be distributed to our bus drivers, local guides, and tour group guide, sometime after the tour has gotten underway (no specific time line has been provided to me). As I have neither any control nor influence over this distribution, I cannot say with any certainty what specific mechanisms will be used to parse these funds out to those people providing services to the group.

Let me again say that I am very attuned and highly sensitive to this subject, as I know that a number of the tour members have had to plan their expenses and generally manage their resources, in order to pay for this tour. Additionally, in the light of my prior comments about the entirely voluntary nature of gratuities, I again leave it to your discretion, as to how you want to address this component of the tour.

Reminder: CTS Tour Forms

A final reminder to all of you, that in conjunction with my email notice that I sent out on March 19th, I again request that you please take the time to fill out the CTS Tour Registration form that I sent to all tour members with that email.

Be sure to include a clean, legible photocopy of your U.S. Passport pages that contain your photo and your passport information, when you return your form to **me** (not to CTS' offices, please). The deadline for this submission is, as stated in my email, **Friday, March the 27th**.

Golf Shirt Sizes

I ask everyone on the tour to China to please furnish me with their personal shirt size(s) for everyone in their traveling party, as sized for a typical golf-type pullover shirt.

The available sizes are the typical small, medium, large, and X-large sizes for both men's and women's golf shirts. Larger or smaller sizes are available upon request.

Please forward this information to me via email or fax, no later than April 10th, the day your final payments are due.

Final Thoughts

I want to take a moment to draw everyone's attention to the "big picture" --- something that I believe we often lose sight of, as we work our way towards the start of a tour such as ours.

The vast majority of our tour participants have been, in a word, terrific, in responding to my incessant emails, calls, and reminders regarding the various forms, payment installments, and other paraphernalia that I have asked for over nearly 3 years since this tour was originated.

For all your cooperation, I thank you profusely. With just under 4 months to go before we depart for China, there is just a small amount of paperwork left to address, in the form of the CTS tour registration sheet, and your Chinese visa applications.

I ask that you please attend to these items, as soon as the call goes out, to complete any forms, or send in your applications and passports, so that we can finish off these few remaining tasks with few or no issues to address.

I hope that all of you are beginning to feel the excitement build, as we march towards the impending start of our adventure.

Thanks for your attention, and please feel free to contact me/us, should you have any other questions regarding the tour, your paperwork, or other items pertaining to the trip.

Clear Skies,

Joel K. Harris
President
Twilight Tours Inc.

Twilight Tours Inc.
31555 Rustic Oak Drive
Westlake Village, CA 91361
Phone: (818) 575-9580
Fax: (818) 575-9588
Email: twilighttours@pacbell.net
