

Spain

Catalonia: Ebro Delta & Steppe

2022 Saturday 7th - Saturday 14th May (8 days)
Small group tour with Fernando Enrique Navarrete



Western Swamphens are one of the many species we can expect to see in the Ebro Delta © Fernando Enrique Navarrete

Spain Birding Tours with Limosa Holidays

Our birding tour to Northeast Spain visits one of the best birdwatching sites in Europe - the Ebro Delta. A treasure trove of Mediterranean wetland species, the Ebro boasts everything from Little Bittern and Western Swamphen to Greater Flamingo and Slender-billed Gull. From there, we travel inland to the dry plains around Lleida looking for Montagu's Harrier, Little Bustard, Pin-tailed Sandgrouse and Catalonia's last population of Dupont's Larks, before concluding amid the uplands of the Pre-Pyrenees, home to Lammergeier, Citril Finch and Western Orphean Warbler. Join us and explore a very different part of Spain and for those wanting an even more comprehensive holiday, this tour can be combined with our trip to Extremadura and the Gredos to give an amazing insight into the birds of Spain.

Highlights

- Unrivalled spring birding, off the beaten track in Northeast Spain
- 3 nights in the Ebro Delta, discovering one of the most important wetlands in Western Europe
- Squacco Heron, Little Bittern, Western Swamphen, Collared Pratincole, Audouin's and Slender-billed Gulls
- 4 nights based in the medieval hillside village of Montsonís
- The Lleida steppe for Dupont's Lark, Little Bustard, Western Black-eared Wheatear, Iberian Grey Shrike
- Lammergeier, Griffon Vulture, Booted Eagle, Black Wheatear, Ortolan Bunting in the Pre-Pyrenees
- Small group tour with a maximum 10 participants
- Expertly led by Limosa's English-speaking Spanish specialist Fernando Enrique Navarrete

What's Included?

- Limosa Tour Leaders
- 7 nights accommodation in Spain, staying at two good and comfortable hotels
- All main meals and drinking water provided
- Minibus transport
- All excursions, entry fees and permits
- All tour-based tips (hotels, meals etc) & taxes
- Checklist of birds for the tour



Greater Flamingo © Gary Elton

Outline Itinerary

Day 1

Fly to Barcelona. We transfer south to our first hotel, in the heart of the Ebro Delta. Night Deltebre

Days 2-3

Exploring the northern and southern parts of the Ebro Delta. Two further nights Deltebre

Day 4

We travel northwest to Montsonís on the plains, for a four-night stay. Night Montsonís

Days 5-7

Three full days visiting different areas of the plains: Bellmunt and Lleida, plus a day in the Pre-Pyrenees. Three further nights Montsonis

Day 8

We return to Barcelona via the Llobregat Delta. Late afternoon flight home or continue onwards to Extremadura and Gredos.

Tour Overview

This exciting new tour to the Ebro Delta, Lleida Plains and Pre-Pyrenees has been designed for us by Limosa's Spanish specialist Fernando Enrique Navarrete. In some respects, it is like visiting his former 'local patch' as Fernando lived in this region for a while and knows the area extremely well.

After flying to Barcelona, we travel south to our first hotel which is right in the heart of the Ebro Delta and where Penduline Tit is a garden bird. Our base for three nights lies within a very short drive (or even walk!) of all the important local birding spots.

Although a Ramsar site, the Ebro Delta is surprisingly poorly known outside of Spain but boasts a wide range of fine habitats, from rice fields, sandy beaches, saltmarsh and reedbeds to coastal lagoons and marine bays. Over the years, more than 350 species have been recorded at this special place and such is the wealth of birdlife that we could well see over 100 species in a day!



We stand an excellent chance of seeing the smart looking Purple Heron whilst exploring the Ebro Delta © Gary Elton

Flocks of Greater Flamingos sparkle as they take flight, Little Bitterns ‘bark’ from the reeds and Great Egrets and Squacco Herons stalk openly across the rice fields. As evening approaches, Black-crowned Night Herons can be seen flying from their daytime roosts.

There are a number of observation towers which overlook some of the lagoons and reed beds and we will enjoy superb views, not just of the birds but also the fascinating delta landscape. Red-crested Pochard, Western Swamphen, Caspian Tern, Zitting Cisticola and Great Reed Warbler are common and the delta also boasts the largest colony of Audouin’s Gull in the world.

In May, many of the shorebirds will be migrants, pausing to feed on the salt pans and flooded fields before they head north to breed. Now in their summer finery, orange Little Stints and burnt sienna Bar-tailed Godwits and Curlew Sandpipers are a delight to behold, foraging alongside resident Kentish Plovers and Black-winged Stilts.

In nearby rough pasture, Collared Pratincole and Greater Short-toed Larks add to the variety, while a stand of trees near the coast can attract an exciting mix of spring migrant from Nightjars, Hoopoes and Golden Orioles to warblers, chats and flycatchers.

After two full days exploring the delta, we set off north and inland to reach our second hotel, at Montsonís. Our journey will take us through the Parc Natura de la Serra de Montsant which is one of the secret gems of Catalonia. This mountain range is seldom visited by birders but the picturesque villages sit in a beautiful landscape and the local cliffs are home to one of the highest densities of raptors in this corner of Spain with Golden and Bonelli’s Eagles, Short-toed Snake Eagle and Peregrine all breeding.

Set amidst a mosaic of Pyrenean and Holm Oaks, scrub and rocky areas in the Sierra de Montsec, Montsonís is one of the best-preserved medieval villages of the region. We spend four nights in this tranquil spot, enjoying the rich local flora and fauna, with European Nightjar, Bee-eater, Hoopoe, and Western Orphean, Subalpine and Bonelli’s Warblers to look for, along with Firecrest and Cirl and Ortolan Buntings.

Our lovely hotel at Montsonís is well situated, allowing for full three days visiting three very different habitats, yet all within easy reach.

The arid steppe around Balaguer and Bellmunt d'Urgell is home to the declining Little Bustard and Montagu's Harrier, whilst Hobby, Stone-curlew, Roller and Great Spotted Cuckoo should also be found. A veritable symphony of larks includes Crested and Thekla (don't worry Fernando will help you with your identification skills) as well as Greater Short-toed and Calandra.

The terraced landscape to the south of Lleida is home to the last population of Dupont's Lark in Cataluña. This rarely observed species is tricky to see as it often sings at night and just as the sun rises, drops to the ground and shuts up! In order to find it we will need to be at just the right spot at first light, but it is well worth making the effort to hear its curious song and for a glimpse of one of Europe's most enigmatic birds. If any further incentive is needed, both Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse also frequent the dry, sandy plains.

The Pre-Pyrenees lie to the north of Montsonís and we will drive up into the southern and lower part, close to the border between France and Spain. Here, the alpine and subalpine habitats are home to various species we will not yet have encountered on our tour. Amongst the limestone gorges of Congost de Collegats and coniferous forests of the Parc Natural de Boumort live montane specialists such as Lammergeier, Alpine Chough, Citril Finch and Ortolan Bunting.

Get off the beaten track with Limosa's English-speaking Spanish specialist **Fernando Enrique Navarrete** and discover the wonderful birdlife of Northeast Spain and by adding our Extremadura and Gredos tour enjoy a truly comprehensive birdwatching holiday to Spain.

Daily Itinerary

Day 1

TO BARCELONA & DELTEBRE

Our spring birdwatching tour to northeast Spain commences with a morning flight to Barcelona, where Fernando will be waiting to welcome us. After a short drive, we will stop for lunch at the small reserve at the Llobregat Delta, before continuing southwest towards the famous Ebro Delta, a journey of about 90 minutes.

Arriving at Deltebre, we head to our nice hotel in the heart of the Ebro and settle into our rooms. If there is time, we will enjoy a short walk around the grounds. This is an excellent location and boasts 'garden birds' such as Little Bittern, Whiskered Tern and Penduline Tit! Deltebre will be our very convenient base for the first three nights of the tour. *Night Deltebre*



Glossy Ibis © Gary Elton

Days 2 - 3 EBRO DELTA

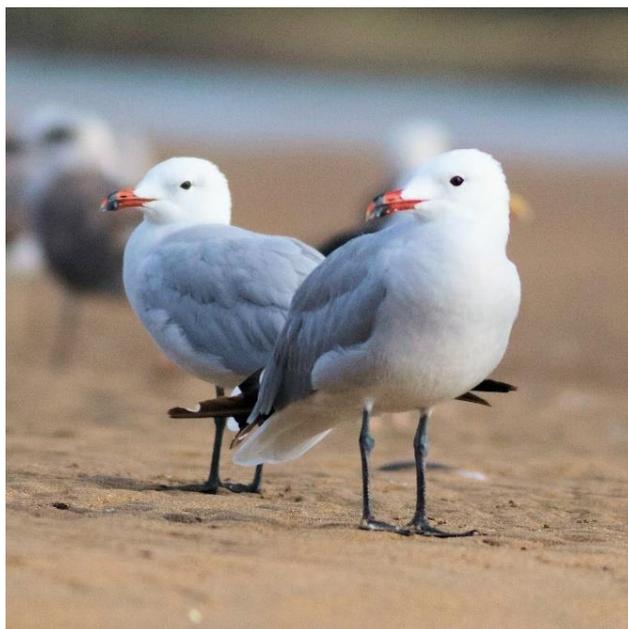
We have two full days to explore the wonderful Ebro Delta, not just enjoying the birds but also the fascinating landscape. This internationally important Ramsar site covers 320 sq. km with habitats ranging from reed beds and coastal lagoons to rice fields, sandy shores, salt marsh and marine bays.

To the south, there are a number of excellent observation towers, such as at Poblenou del Delta and en route we should pick out the fabulous Squacco Heron in the ricefields, if we have not already found one.

Looking out over l'Encanyissada Lagoon, there are often Red-crested Pochard, Little Bittern, Greater Flamingo, Western Swamphen, Western Marsh Harrier and Great Reed Warbler, while Savi's Warbler buzz from the reeds. At another observation tower, we might add Great Egret and Gull-billed Tern, with migrating Bluethroat also possible here.

The Sant Antoni saltpans are a well-known spot for gulls and is home to the largest Audouin's Gull colony in the world. In May, with the breeding season well underway, Sandwich, Little and Common Terns are especially active and 'jumbo sized' Caspian Terns can sometimes be seen loafing or flying about. Although Lesser Crested Tern also breeds nearby, finding one of these rare birds is very much a matter of luck!

Slender-billed and Yellow-legged Gulls are an almost constant presence, and spring migrant waders regularly include silver-backed Grey Plover and terracotta-hued Red Knot, as well as Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, Dunlin, Bar-tailed Godwit, Greenshank and Ruff; the majority of which are in summer dress and looking at their very best now.



Audouin's Gull – we can expect to see good numbers of this Localised species © Gary Elton

Black-winged Stilt, Avocet and Kentish Plovers all breed locally and the white-throated Iberian race of Yellow Wagtail nests in the low, scrubby vegetation - a vivid splash of lemon to be looked for atop the *Salicornia* - proclaiming its territory with its buzzing call.

La Tancada Lagoon has a hide overlooking it and is another spot good for waders and wildfowl, including Garganey. Western Ospreys can sometimes be seen hovering above the lake, while stub-billed Lesser Short-toed Larks circle in display above the saltings performing their Serin-like song-flights.

An area of rough pasture at La Tancada should reward us with Greater Short-toed Lark and the elegant Collared Pratincole, while a small patch of woodland near the coast can attract all kind of migrants at this time of the year. Everything from European Nightjar, Hoopoe and Golden Oriole to a host of warblers, chats and flycatchers



A migrant European Nightjar rests during its northward migration in the Ebro Delta © Fernando Enrique Navarrete

are possible and a number of scarce migrants (for Spain) have been found here including Icterine Warbler and Collared Flycatcher. Thanks to Fernando's contacts with the network of local birders, we should be among the first to hear the latest news if anything good is found!

To the north of Deltebre, further observation towers overlook the southern part of the Canal Vell Lagoon. This is a regular spot for Black-crowned Night Heron and Little Bittern, as well as bustling flocks of Greater Flamingos, Great Egrets and Black-winged Stilts. Great Reed Warblers sing from the tops of the reeds as tiny Zitting Cisticolas (that's Fan-tailed Warbler in 'old money') bounce across the landscape.

Lo Garxal is a shallow lagoon often alive with terns and waders, where we might find an elegant Marsh Sandpiper or coal-black Spotted Redshank. Both Little Gull and Red-knobbed Coot have become a regular sight here in recent years and we will hope to find both of these during our visit. *Two further nights Deltebre*

Day 4

INLAND TO SIURANA & MONTSONÍS

We depart Deltebre after an early breakfast, leaving behind the flat rice fields and lagoons of the Ebro Delta as we travel north towards the Montsant mountain range.

The Parc Natura de la Serra de Montsant is one of the secret gems of Catalonia. This area is seldom-visited by travelling birders, but its picturesque villages, beautiful landscapes and excellent wines are a 'must' if you are planning a visit to this region.

The numerous cliffs in the area are home to one of the highest densities of birds of prey in this corner of Spain and species to watch for include Egyptian Vulture, Golden and Bonelli's Eagle, Short-toed Snake Eagle and Peregrine.

The journey from the coast to Montsonís isn't a particularly long one (just a couple of hours if we were to go direct), but we shall be stopping to bird along the way. Siurana is not only a clifftop village in the most beautiful of settings but also home to specialities such as Western Orphean and Melodious



Siurana is not only a cliff-top village in the most beautiful of settings, but a great place to look for birds! © Fernando Enrique, Limosa

Warblers, Firecrest, Blue Rock Thrush, Black Wheatear and Rock Bunting.

Our ultimate destination today is Montsonís, a wonderfully preserved medieval village located halfway between the Lleida plains and the Pre-Pyrenees in the Sierra de Montsec in Catalonia. No more than 20 people live in this tiny hamlet, so peace and quiet are virtually guaranteed at least until we arrive! Montsonís will be our base for four nights and on the cliff in front of our hotel there is often a pair of Bonelli's Eagles...

Having settled into our rooms, we will spend some time during the afternoon birding between Montsonís and Rubio de Dalt, enjoying the mosaic of Holm and Pyrenean Oaks, scrub, rocky areas and field edges that support a rich flora and fauna. Here we may find Quail, European Nightjar, Hoopoe, Bee-eater and Woodlark. *Sylvia* warblers should include secretive Subalpine, Western Orphean and Dartford, and there are also Western Bonelli's Warblers, Firecrest, Tawny Pipit and Ortolan, Cirl and Rock Buntings. *Night Montsonís*

Days 5 - 7

BELLMUNT, LLEIDA PLAINS & PRE-PYRENEES

From Montsonís, we have three bird-filled days to discover our new surroundings. On each day, we will visit a very different area, focusing on the various landscapes and key birds and other wildlife that inhabit them. We may vary the order in which we visit them depending on the weather:

Drylands of Bellmunt

Lying just 20 minutes to the south of our hotel, the drylands between Balaguer and the village of Bellmunt d'Urgell hold important numbers of Montagu's Harriers and the globally threatened Little Bustard which at this time of year are 'blowing raspberries' at one another as they display from uncultivated patches of vegetation.

Dryland farming and sheep herding have been the dominant land use for centuries and these plains are one of the last strongholds for many grassland birds in the region. Scanning across open steppe should reveal hovering Short-toed Snake Eagles and rakish

Hobbies (two birds after very different prey), furtive Stone-curlews, glorious turquoise Rollers and dazzling Bee-eaters as well as Great Spotted Cuckoo, Little Owl and a variety of larks including Crested, Thekla, Greater Short-toed and Calandra.

After enjoying lunch in a local restaurant, we will spend our afternoon at the most important interior wetland of Catalonia. Estany d'Ivars is a large lake that was drained during the 20th Century but has now been restored. Herons are well represented with Squacco, Purple, Black-crowned Night and Little Bittern all possible. Red-crested Pochard, Western Swamphen, Black-winged Stilt and both Black and Whiskered Terns add to the appeal. Meanwhile the reeds should be alive with birds such as Great Reed Warblers and the bandit-masked Penduline Tit.

Lleida Plains

In the fields and grassland near Montoliu de Lleida, the terraced scenery is notable for its low, table-topped hills rising from flat lowlands. The area is attractive to steppe-loving birds with large numbers of breeding larks including the last surviving population of Dupont's Lark in Catalunya.

This sought-after bird is notorious for being difficult to see, as it generally gives its song in flight shortly before dawn. Just as the first glimmers of light make you think you will finally see it, the birds drop to the ground and runs off into the brush! To have the best chance of finding it, we will need to be in the right spot at just the right time but with patience and Fernando to help, we have a great chance of seeing it on the ground and in daylight!



Great Spotted Cuckoo is only a very rare and occasional visitor to the UK but we will hope to find it on our tour © Gary Elton

As we wait and watch for Europe's most elusive lark, other key species we could find here include Stone-curlew and strikingly marked Pin-tailed and Black-bellied Sandgrouse.

Lleida's hillsides and cliffs are covered with a mix of Mediterranean and semi-desert vegetation that supports a great variety of birds. We will spend time looking for both Black and Western Black-eared Wheatears, Red-rumped Swallow, Red-billed Chough, Iberian Grey Shrike, Spectacled Warbler and Tawny Pipit. With a little local knowledge, we might also be lucky to find Eurasian Eagle Owl, while a nearby rubbish dump attracts large numbers of both White and Black Storks, Cattle Egrets and other scavengers, allowing good photo opportunities!

Pre Pyrenees

On one day we plan to head for the hills, driving north into the Pre-Pyrenees. With peaks rising to over 2,000m (6,500ft), these southern and lower ramparts of the Pyrenees have both alpine and subalpine habitats which are home to a fantastic



Short-toed Snake Eagle © Gary Elton

range of birds we will not have found elsewhere during our tour. Mountain specialists such as Lammergeier, Ring Ouzel, Citril Finch, Crossbill and Ortolan Bunting are all possible, along with Red-backed Shrike which here is at the south-westernmost limit of its breeding range.

Driving through the beautiful landscapes of coniferous woodlands, spectacular gorges and immense cliffs, we arrive at our destination on the edge of the Parc Natural de Boumort. At this altitude, the forest gradually opens out to more scattered trees with rose bushes, Alpenrose heathland and flowery grasses that are home to Tree Pipits plus an amazing diversity of butterflies amongst which are two of Europe's most beautiful spring-flying species: Spanish Festoon and Spanish Fritillary. The cliffs around these meadows are also home to the southernmost breeding population of Alpine Choughs in Spain.

High above, the mountains and valleys at Boumort are the domain of all four European vultures: Lammergeier, Black, Griffon and Egyptian and this is the only place in the whole of Europe where all four species breed side-by-side. Other birds typical of this remote upland region include Golden Eagle, Raven, Crested Tit, Firecrest and Short-toed Treecreeper.

Following a picnic lunch, we will drive north to spend the rest of the afternoon exploring the Congost de Collegats. Impressive canyons and caves have been cut through the limestone creating an area of high cliffs that hold a healthy population of raptors and we have further chances of seeing Golden Eagle and the diamond-tailed Lammergeier, as well as Egyptian and Griffon Vultures. *Three further nights Montsonís*

Day 8**RETURN TO BARCELONA, LLOBREGAT DELTA AND FLY HOME OR CONTINUE ON TO EXTREMADURA**

Leaving lovely Montsonís after breakfast, we travel back to the coast at Barcelona and enjoy some final birding around the Llobregat Delta, close to the airport.

Llobregat is a haven for wildlife on the outskirts of the city of Barcelona and holds a surprising variety of interesting wetland birds. Although only a small reserve, it has excellent hides and a short visit here can be combined with an often profitable seawatch, with chances of Balearic and Cory's (Scopoli's) Shearwaters and Northern Gannet, plus a good selection of terns and gulls including Audouin's, Little and Mediterranean.

After a leisurely lunch, we make the short drive back to Barcelona Airport for farewells to Fernando and our return flight to the UK or continue onwards with our Extremadura and Gredos holiday.



Citril Finch, Pyrenees © Arnoud van den Berg

Trip Information

Group Size Max 10 participants and 2 leaders (or 6 participants and 1 leader)

Birds 150-170 species

Accommodation 7 nights accommodation in Spain staying at two good and comfortable hotels - beginning in the Ebro Delta with 3 nights at the well-located *Delta Hotel* and concluding with 4 nights at the comfortable *La Botiga de Montsonís*, a characterful hotel in the picturesque village of Montsonís, with its well-preserved medieval buildings and views of the cliffs to the north and the plains to the south. All rooms have private facilities.

Meals All main meals are included in the tour price commencing with lunch on arrival in Spain on Day 1 and concluding with lunch on Day 8. Breakfasts and delicious dinners will generally be taken at the hotels. Lunches will be a mix of picnics and sit-down meals in local restaurants.

Walking Overall easy on this tour. There are no long or strenuous walks, not even in the Pre-Pyrenees. We drive to most birding locations and take short walks at a relaxed pace to enjoy the magnificent birds and landscapes.

Wear comfortable walking shoes or lightweight boots with sturdy corrugated soles for grip.

Weather In May, the weather in this part of Spain is typically warm and sunny (occasional showers or thundery rain some years). It is usually more variable in the Pre-Pyrenees, where it is often warm and sunny but can also be cool, especially first thing in the morning.

As with all mountain areas it can, of course, occasionally be cold and or wet, so do come prepared with suitably warm and weatherproof clothing, just in case. Snowfall is very unlikely at this time of year.

Flights Due to the pandemic, it is proving extremely difficult to predict future flight prices and schedules, especially when a trip is scheduled for beyond the period when flights can be booked. As a result, we have taken the decision to price our holidays as excluding all international flights.

To keep the process as simple as possible for our clients, however, we are now working closely with a dedicated agent at Travel Counsellors who will be able to advise you on which flights we are recommending for each holiday and he will be able to book these for you.

This will also give you the opportunity to travel from a regional airport if you prefer.

Ground Transport By minibus.

Photos Opportunities for incidental bird photography good to excellent on this trip.



Black Vulture is one of four vulture species we could see on this holiday © Fernando Enrique Navarrete

Tour Cost

2022 (8 days):

Land only cost: £1895

Single supplement: £295

Deposit: £500

Cost includes

- Limosa Tour Leader
- 7 nights hotel accommodation in Spain
- All main meals and drinking water provided
- Minibus transport
- All excursions, entry fees and permits
- All tour-based tips (hotels, meals etc) and taxes
- Checklist of birds for the tour.

Cost excludes

International flights, insurance, drinks, airport/in-flight meals and snacks and other items of a personal nature.

Combining with Extremadura and Gredos

The dates of our Ebro Delta trip and the subsequent holiday to Extremadura and Gredos have been deliberately set to allow clients to combine these to give you a truly comprehensive trip to Spain.

Please contact our office to discuss if you are interested in the option of doing this.

About Your Guide

Fernando Enrique Navarrete Fernando is our resident Spanish expert bird tour guide, all-round naturalist and biologist whose home is at Algeciras overlooking the Strait of Gibraltar.

As a child, he was fascinated by the flocks of raptors that formed above his home and being born in the Strait, Europe's most important bird migration route, helped shape his love of birds and nature. At 18, Fernando became one of the youngest bird-ringers in Spain, while his eagerness to learn about more and more species led him to travel widely in Europe, Africa, Asia and Central America.

He has also worked on projects with Montagu's Harriers, Lesser Kestrels, Griffon Vultures and White Storks as well as studying the effects of wind farms on birds.

Spanish is Fernando's first language but his command of English is excellent and he is a delight to travel with, earning rave reviews from participants. He leads our tours to Guatemala, as well as those across Spain. Having lived and worked in north, central and southern Spain, he knows the birds of all these regions exceptionally well.

A second Limosa guide (TBA) will be added as group size warrants.

What You Say...

"Just to thank you guys and let you know we really enjoyed the trip last week. Fernando was an excellent guide... he was extremely hard working, knew his birds and their calls inside out and held his own entertaining us in the evening and in the bus. Being a local, he was able to ensure we were well looked after in restaurants too."

M&JW, Extremadura & Andalucia tour

"Fernando was an excellent guide and he was able to pass on his knowledge very well. His local contacts with fellow local guides proved very useful while out in the field."

RD, Extremadura & Andalucia tour



We stand an excellent chance of seeing the colourful Roller on our tour © Fernando Enrique Navarrete

How To Enquire

Due to the considerable uncertainty created by the pandemic, Limosa Holidays are not currently accepting bookings for any trips, however, you are welcome to contact us either by email or phone to register your interest in any of our holidays.

Whilst some tour companies may be willing to take a deposit from you and say a trip is a “confirmed departure”, our approach is going to be to wait a little longer as we consider this both honest and realistic.

Once we are confident that the trip can run, we will be in touch to confirm your place and ask for a deposit.

We do encourage you to register your interest as we are expecting considerable demand, once the consensus is that it is safe to travel again.

Any Questions

Please do not hesitate to contact us by email or phone. Our office is generally open from 09:30-17:30 but you are welcome to contact us outside these times too. We are happy to take calls in the evening and at weekends but if no one is available the call will go to our answerphone.

Thank you for your interest in our tours. We do hope that you will be able to join us once the pandemic is over and we look forward to hearing from you.