



# ROCKJUMPER

Worldwide Birding Adventures

## Georgia & Armenia Birding the Caucasus

*1<sup>st</sup> May to 14<sup>th</sup> May 2023 (14 days)*



**Güldenstädt's Redstart by Nigel Redman**

*Located deep in the Caucasus, our birding tour to Georgia and Armenia is one of the most recent additions to our birding calendar. The end of the line as far as Europe is concerned, Georgia and Armenia stand at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. For centuries both countries stood as Christian bulwarks against the Muslim tide sweeping across Asia Minor, before being dominated by the Mongols, Ottoman Empire, Persia (Iran) and ultimately the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to a rocky independence with military skirmishes and near-economic collapse. Fortunately, both Georgia and Armenia are now well on the road to economic stability and prosperity.*

Beginning in Tbilisi, we make our way northwards along the Georgian Military Highway. Originally built to facilitate troop movements, it provides an excellent thoroughfare to some of the most spectacular scenery and birding sites on Earth. Our first days around Kazbegi (Stepantsminda) offer the opportunity for some high-altitude birding and some of the Western Palearctic's most sought-after species including the splendid Caucasian Snowcock (endemic to this single mountain range), Gldenstdt's Redstart, Great Rosefinch, Caucasian Grouse, Wallcreeper, and the Caucasian (lorenzii) subspecies of Mountain Chiffchaff. These higher altitudes also support Bearded Vulture, Ring Ouzel, Red-fronted Serin and Alpine Accentor.

Heading south to Jandari Lake, we should find an isolated population of Pygmy Cormorants and our first Armenian Gulls, and will make a visit to the 6th-century rock-hewn Georgian Orthodox monastery of David Gareja. After a week in Georgia, we move south to Dilijan in Armenia, stopping en route at the ancient Haghpat Monastery.

Moving further south we will drive along the shore of the mighty Lake Sevan and over the uninhabited Selim Pass before dropping into the lush Arpa valley. From our base in Yeghegnadzor we will explore Jermuk Gorge and various sites in the Arpa valley and beyond. Using 4x4 vehicles, we will ascend Mount Gndasar to search for our second snowcock species of the trip, Caspian Snowcock. We will also spend time at Armash fishponds to search for three rare and elusive species, Marbled and White-headed Ducks, and White-tailed Lapwing, as well as a feast of warblers. Returning to Yerevan, we will visit the dry Vedi Hills and Oorts Mountains to target Grey-necked Bunting, Finsch's and Red-tailed Wheatears, Eastern Rock Nuthatch and Desert Finch.

Finally, we will drive to the sacred Mount Aragats, to the north-west of Yerevan. Here we will be on the look-out for Radde's Accentor, White-throated Robin, Bluethroat and perhaps Asian Crimson-winged Finch, before taking in the scenic Amberd Fortress built in the 11th century.

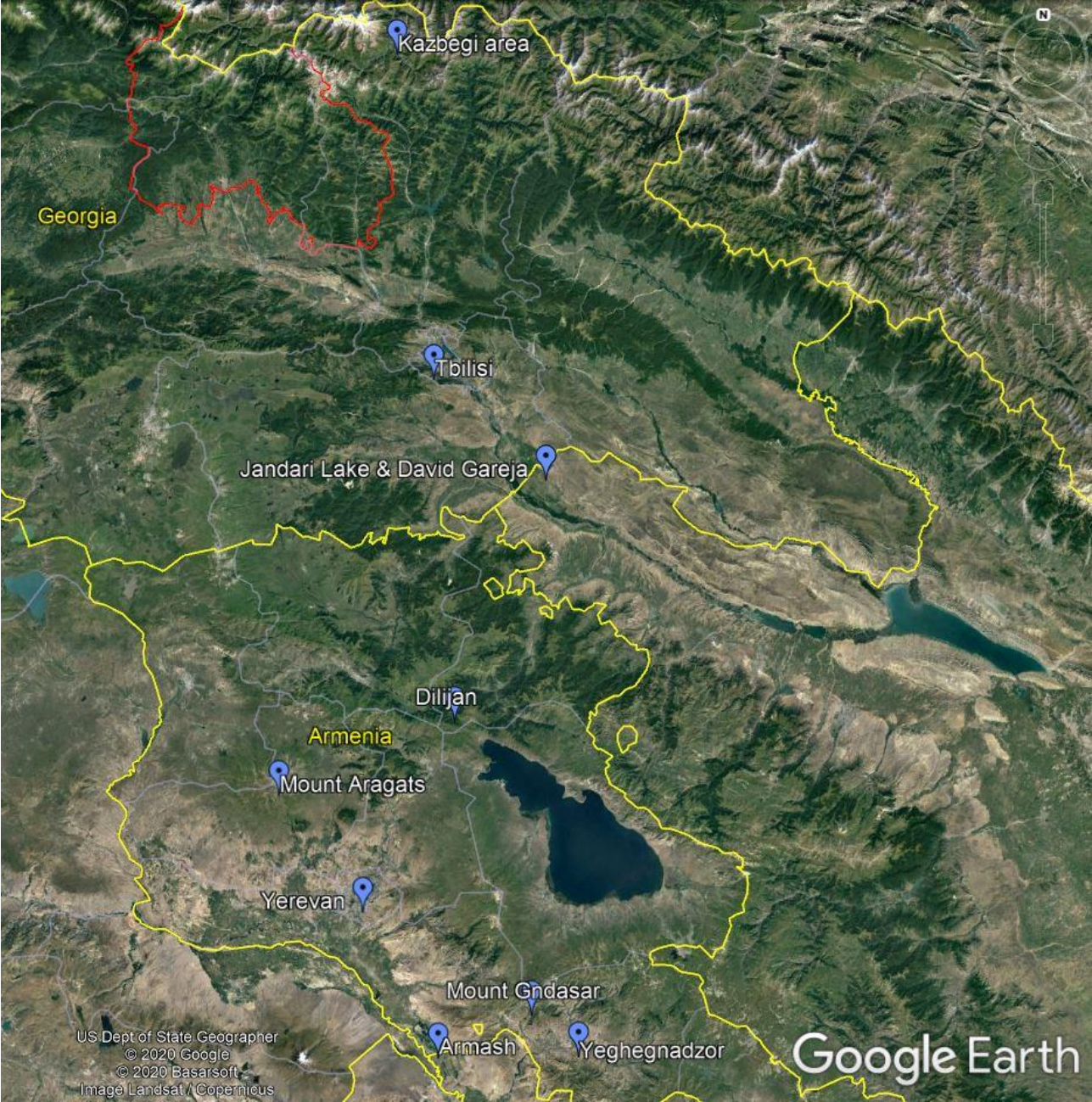
### THE TOUR AT A GLANCE...

#### THE ITINERARY

<b>Day 1</b>	<b>Arrival in Tbilisi (Georgia)</b>
<b>Day 2</b>	<b>Tbilisi to Kazbegi, Greater Caucasus</b>
<b>Day 3</b>	<b>Kazbegi area, Greater Caucasus</b>
<b>Day 4</b>	<b>Kazbegi area, Greater Caucasus</b>
<b>Day 5</b>	<b>Kazbegi to Tbilisi</b>
<b>Day 6</b>	<b>Day trip to David Gareja and Jandari Lake</b>
<b>Day 7</b>	<b>Tbilisi to Dilijan</b>
<b>Day 8</b>	<b>Dilijan to Yeghegnadzor via Lake Sevan &amp; Selim Pass</b>
<b>Day 9</b>	<b>Arpa Valley, Jermuk Gorge &amp; Agarakadzor</b>
<b>Day 10</b>	<b>Mount Gndasar</b>
<b>Day 11</b>	<b>Armash Fishpond</b>
<b>Day 12</b>	<b>Yeghegnadzor to Yerevan via Vedi Hills &amp; Oorts Mountains</b>
<b>Day 13</b>	<b>Mount Aragats</b>
<b>Day 14</b>	<b>Final departures from Yerevan</b>



**TOUR ROUTE MAP...**



## THE TOUR IN DETAIL...

**Day 1: Arrival in Tbilisi (Georgia).** After arriving at Shota Rustaveli Tbilisi International Airport, you will transfer to our conveniently located accommodation in the city. As today is set aside as an arrival day, you are free to arrive at any time you wish, but you are recommended to arrive in time to take an optional afternoon excursion to Tbilisi's outstanding botanical gardens for some introductory birding. This evening we will all get together for a welcome dinner to discuss our forthcoming plans and adventures.



**Alpine Chough by Clayton Burne**

**Day 2: Tbilisi to Kazbegi, Greater Caucasus.** After breakfast, we depart for the Greater Caucasus mountains. These mountains stretch in a north-west to south-east orientation, about 1,200 kilometres or 750 miles in length, and are defined as the continental divide between Europe and Asia, lying between the Black and Caspian Seas. En route we will have time for a stop at Ananuri, situated along the Aragvi River. This area is particularly good for migrating songbirds as well as hosting resident woodland species. After familiarising ourselves with some general birding here, we will make our way up the Krestovy or Jvari Pass where a number of high-altitude species can be found. The impressive Bearded Vulture, Water Pipit, Horned Lark, Red-billed and Alpine Choughs, Alpine Accentor, Ring Ouzel, Twite and even Wallcreeper are all possibilities here. After some successful birding, the afternoon will see us reaching the large village of Kazbegi, or Stepantsminda as the locals now call it. The village is situated below the grand Mount Kazbek with its 5,047-metre snow-capped peak. Kazbegi will be our base for the next three nights.

**Days 3 & 4: Kazbegi area, Greater Caucasus.** Birding in the Kazbegi region is excellent, and often holds surprises in terms of high-altitude species. If previous or even current weather patterns have created unfavourable conditions on the higher slopes, species partial to the upper reaches make their way to lower altitudes where the conditions are more tolerable; if this is the case, we will be in for a real treat. On our first morning we will make our way up to an altitude of around 2,200 metres. With



**Wallcreeper by Markus Lilje**

a fantastic backdrop, overlooking the valley below and the peak of Mount Kazbek towering above us, we will search for two Caucasian endemics. Caucasian Grouse maintains a low profile, maintaining near silence while displaying at group leks, but we will certainly be keeping our ears tuned in for the eerie calls of Caucasian Snowcock, which will hopefully reveal a male perched atop a cliff or boulder. High-altitude specials we will be looking for here also include the sought-after Gldenstdt's Redstart and Great Rosefinch. During our time in the Kazbegi area we should also happen across Bearded and Griffon Vultures, Twite, Red-fronted Serin, Alpine Accentor, Common Rock Thrush and Black Redstart. An interesting



mammal, the mountain-dwelling Eastern (or East Caucasian) Tur, is sometimes also seen on the rocky slopes.

Woodland on the nearby slopes holds Green Warbler and the Caucasian (*lorenzii*) subspecies of Mountain Chiffchaff, although some will not have arrived this high yet. Bushy areas in the valley below are sometimes teeming with passerine migrants, and large flocks of migrating raptors, including European Honey Buzzard, Black Kite, Common Buzzard, and Pallid and Montagu's Harriers, can be more than spectacular. Other birds that could be seen here include Alpine Swift, Eurasian Crag Martin, Red-billed and Alpine Choughs, Wallcreeper, Horned Lark, Water Pipit and White-winged Snowfinch. After a successful few days in the mountains, we shall enjoy one final night in Kazbegi before heading to lower climes.



Great Rosefinch by Nigel Redman

**Day 5: Kazbegi to Tbilisi.** Leaving this stunning area behind, we will retrace our footsteps making our way back to Tbilisi, stopping at various sites as needed. Back in the lowlands, we will make a short detour to some pine-clad hills where we will look for the near-endemic Krüper's Nuthatch, here at the eastern edge of its range. The early evening will see us arriving back in Tbilisi, ready to venture southwards after our northerly expedition.

**Day 6: Day trip to David Gareja and Jandari Lake.** East of Tbilisi lies a vast semi-arid area with steppes, rocky outcrops, shallow lakes and riverine forest. We first visit the rock monastery of David Gareja, located on Mount Gareja. This monastery was founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century by St David Garejeli, one of the thirteen Assyrian monks who arrived in the country at roughly the same time. This visit will be a cultural highlight, with great frescoes still in relatively pristine condition, and fascinating living quarters hewn out of the rock face. The monastery is also a rather good birding spot, and here we will search for Western Rock Nuthatch, Blue Rock Thrush and Pied Wheatear. Throughout the day we will be passing through steppe habitat where we shall keep a look out for breeding Tawny



Displaying Calandra Lark by Nigel Redman

Pipit, Isabelline Wheatear, and Calandra and Greater Short-toed Larks, while Long-legged Buzzard and Rosy Starling are also possible during our various stops. Later we will visit Jandari Lake, a great stopover site for migratory waterbirds. The lake has a breeding population of the range-restricted Pygmy Cormorant, while we should also see our first Armenian Gulls of the trip. We will also search for one of several pairs of the magnificent Eastern Imperial Eagle that breed near the lake. Later in the afternoon we will head back to our hotel in Tbilisi.



**Day 7: Tbilisi to Dilijan.** Today we will leave Tbilisi and head south to the Armenian border. In Armenia, we will stop for lunch and a little birding at the impressive Haghpat Monastery. After a tour of the ancient monastery, we will search the surrounding area for a day-roosting Eurasian Scops Owl. Eventually we will arrive in the lush deciduous hills surrounding the town of Dilijan, where we will spend the night. If time allows, we will begin our exploration of the area.



White-throated Robin by Nigel Redman

**Day 8: Dilijan to Yeghegnadzor via Lake Sevan & Selim Pass.** In the

morning we will explore the forests around Dilijan where we hope to find a good selection of European woodland species including Great Spotted, Middle Spotted and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Treecreeper, Common Redstart, Red-breasted and Semicollared Flycatchers, Green Warbler and Hawfinch. Later, we will leave Dilijan and head south to Lake Sevan. Large colonies of Armenian Gulls breed along the shoreline, and other species we may find in the area include the black-headed race *feldegg* of Western Yellow Wagtail and Barred Warbler. The habitat becomes more barren as we drive over the Selim Pass, but we should see high-altitude species such as Twite and White-winged Snowfinch, and if we are lucky Asian Crimson-winged Finch. Eventually, we will reach Yeghegnadzor, our base for the next four nights.

**Day 9: Arpa Valley, Jermuk Gorge & Agarakadzor.** Today we will explore the incredibly scenic Arpa Valley and surrounding areas. The lowland areas here will give us a different variety of species that are refreshingly common, such as Eurasian Hoopoe, colourful European Bee-eater, gaudy European Roller, Crested Lark, Common Nightingale, and both Red-backed and Lesser Grey Shrikes. Other species that we hope to find in this area are Chukar Partridge, Levant Sparrowhawk, Lesser Kestrel, Syrian Woodpecker, Bimaculated Lark, Eastern Orphee Warbler, White-throated Robin, Finsch's Wheatear, Rock Sparrow, and Rock, Ortolan and Black-headed Buntings.

**Day 10: Mount Gndasar.** This morning will see us climbing up into the mountains in 4x4 vehicles,



Black-headed Bunting by Nigel Redman

searching for the rarely seen Caspian Snowcock. A fair amount of skill and effort is required to find a calling snowcock atop the rocky cliffs, but with plenty of eyes to help we hope for a good result. We will spend the remainder of the day birding the mountains, with good chances for other montane species including Whinchat, Ring Ouzel and Red-fronted Serin, along with a selection of raptors and other highland species.

**Day 11: Armash Fishponds.** After an early breakfast, we will make our way to one of the birding hotspots in this region



– Armash Fishponds. Armash is nestled at the foot of Mount Ararat and is located on the boundary between Armenia, Iran and Turkey. Being an extensive wetland in an otherwise harsh and arid area, it is an oasis for waterbirds. Armash is made up of natural saltpans, freshwater pools, irrigation channels and even a few warm springs – all surrounded by extensive reedbeds. Two rare waterfowl are found here, namely Marbled and White-headed Ducks, and we will go in search of these two species. Birding these wetlands will almost certainly turn up the range-restricted White-tailed Lapwing while the extensive reedbeds harbour Moustached, Paddyfield and Great Reed Warblers, and numerous Bearded Reedlings. Eye-catching Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters will be seen hawking insects above us. Terns, gulls, grebes, ducks and waders will be searched through to reveal Gull-billed Tern, Slender-billed Gull, Black-necked Grebe, Ruddy Shelduck, Ferruginous Duck, Red-crested Pochard and Collared Pratincole. Larger waterbirds will include Pygmy Cormorant, Glossy Ibis, Little Bittern and Squacco Heron. Species that will require a bit more effort include Lesser Short-toed Lark, Eurasian Penduline Tit, and Ménétries's, Eastern Olivaceous and Savi's Warblers. Our tour coincides perfectly with the northerly migration, and both White-winged and Whiskered Terns will be in abundance, and with a little luck we may even find the unpredictable Black-winged Pratincole.



Red-tailed Wheatear by Nigel Redman

**Day 12: Yeghegnadzor to Yerevan via Vedi Hills and Oorts Mountains.** Today we drive from Yeghegnadzor to Yerevan, stopping at some key birding localities en route. First, we will head to the arid cliffs of the Vedi Hills. This area is characterised by low ridges and loose rocky slopes, barely covered by short semi-desert vegetation and scrub. There are several gorges with dry riverbeds in this area, and it is here that we will begin our birding. Most of our targets have very limited distributions in Armenia, such as Grey-necked Bunting, Finsch's Wheatear, Eastern and Western Rock Nuthatches, Trumpeter and Desert Finches, and Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin. If the stream bed has pools of standing water, small birds may be attracted to come to drink. Commoner species here include Eurasian Crag Martin, Blue Rock Thrush, Upcher's Warbler, Eastern Black-eared and

Isabelline Wheatears, Rock Sparrow and the striking Black-headed Bunting. Raptors that we could find soaring above are likely to include Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed Snake Eagle and Long-legged Buzzard. We will then head to the Oorts Mountains to look for Red-tailed Wheatear, here at the edge of its range.



Ménétries's Warbler by Nigel Redman

**Day 13: Mount Aragats.** Today we visit Mount Aragats, the highest mountain in Armenia, offering an amazing diversity of habitats and species. If conditions are favourable, we will drive up to an elevation of 3,200



metres, where the road eventually ends at a small lake. Migrating raptors will once again be enjoyed in good numbers here, with Short-toed Snake, Booted and Lesser Spotted Eagles being the most likely species. Radde's Accentor is one of our main target species on Mount Aragats.



Semicollared Flycatcher by Nigel Redman

Though we can expect something of a run around to find them, we will start in the best possible habitat, above the tree line in the juniper zone. This special bird is a breeding endemic to the Caucasus mountains and a few outlying ranges in eastern Turkey and Iran, undergoing altitudinal migration to lower areas in the boreal winter. Whilst searching for Radde's Accentor, we shall have many species to entertain us, including the sought-after White-throated Robin, the stunning blue-throated form of Bluethroat, Black Redstart, Siberian Stonechat, Woodlark, Rock and Ortolan Buntings, Common Rock Thrush, Water Pipit, Twite and Common Rosefinch. Horned Larks are common on the plains near the lake, with Alpine Accentor and Asian Crimson-winged Finch sometimes encountered. If time permits we shall make a stop at the scenic Amberd Fortress, built in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The name translates to 'fortress in the clouds' in Armenian, with scholars believing that it was used as a summer residence for upper nobility. The strategic nature of the fortress meant that destruction was inevitable, and the Mongols laid waste to it in 1236. Restoration work only began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the afternoon we will visit lower-altitude sites closer to Yerevan in search of any species that we may have missed. After a successful day out, we will make our way back to our hotel in Yerevan for a final celebratory dinner at a local restaurant.

**Day 14: Final departures from Yerevan.** This morning we make our way to Yerevan Airport in order to connect with our return journeys back home.

#### **FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS:**

**Tour dates, prices, single supplement rates, approximate flight costs and spaces available for this tour are displayed on our website. Please see under IMPORTANT NOTES below.**

#### **This includes:**

- All meals from dinner on day 1 to breakfast on day 14;
- Bottled drinking water;
- All lodgings;
- Ground transportation;
- Reserve entrance fees;
- Extra activities as mentioned in the itinerary; and
- All guiding services (including tips for local guides and services).

#### **The tour fee does not include:**

- Visa fees;
- **ANY** flights;
- Any beverages;
- Special gratuities;
- Telephone calls and





- Laundry and other items of a personal nature.

**Single Supplement:** The single supplement cost for this tour will be charged if you wish to have single accommodation. If RBL cannot provide you with a rooming partner for these nights although you choose to share, the single supplement will become applicable. We will make all reasonable efforts to ensure that a rooming partner is found if you do wish to share.

#### **IMPORTANT NOTES:**

- a) Due to constantly fluctuating exchange rates, we quote our tours in 4 currencies. The tour price is however fixed only in the currency printed in bold, and the actual cost in the other currencies listed will be adjusted according to prevailing exchange rates at the time of final invoicing (usually 4 months before the tour.) The same applies to approximate flight and single supplement rates, which are also quoted in the respective fixed currency.**
- b) Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration a small party supplement will have to be charged.**
- c) Furthermore, these costs are subject to unforeseen increases in tour related costs and may have to be adjusted as a result.**
- d) Lastly, we may be forced to change or alter the itinerary and / or the designated Rockjumper leader/s at short or no notice due to unforeseen circumstances; please be aware that we will attempt to adhere as close to the original program as possible.**

**Tippling:** As noted above, gratuities (drivers, hotel staff, restaurants etc.) are included on this tour. However, this does NOT include your Rockjumper leader/s. If, therefore, you feel that he/they have given you excellent service, it is entirely appropriate to tip them.

#### **Special Notes:**

- Since some longish drives are necessary to reach the best areas for birds and animals, and as space in the vehicles is limited, it is important for the comfort of your fellow travellers that you do not over-pack. Kindly stick to 20 kg (44lb) for check in luggage and 8kg (+-18lb) for hand luggage.

#### **ARRIVAL and DEPARTURE DETAILS:**

This tour **does not** include any airfares. The tour begins in the Georgian capital city of Tbilisi on Day 1. As this day has been set aside as an arrival day, you are welcome to arrive at any time, although there will be optional birding excursion to the botanical gardens in the afternoon (commencing at 14:00). A welcoming dinner will be held in the early evening, so it is advisable to arrive before 17:00 (or earlier if you wish to join the walk to the botanical gardens). The tour will conclude at Zvartnots International Airport, Yerevan after breakfast on Day 14.

The above information in respect of arrivals and departures is a guide only. Precise arrival and departure information will be sent to you in your **Tour Confirmation** package once the tour has been officially confirmed. If you wish to arrive early and/or depart late and would like assistance in this regard, kindly contact the Rockjumper office.

#### **FLIGHTS:**

Shota Rustaveli Tbilisi International Airport, Tbilisi (IATA: TBS) and Zvartnots International Airport, Yerevan (IATA: EVN) are the main ports of entry and departure on this tour and are well serviced by several international airways. **Please DO NOT book any flights until you have consulted the Rockjumper office for confirmation on the status of the tour.**

