

KYRGYZSTAN - KYRGYZ LAND OF WONDERS

Cost per person double occupancy \$2,950: Number of participants: 10; Duration: 10 days



Objectives: Visit remarkable off-the-beaten-path places and learn about Kyrgyzstan's history, culture, biodiversity, and conservation efforts. You'll also explore the country's plant communities, including pristine walnut forests, its birds and mammals, its nomadic traditions, and its vertical zonality and ecosystem's gradient.

Duration: 10 days

Overnight stays: Hotels, bed & breakfast in community based tourism houses

Itinerary: Bishkek – Kochkor – Bokonbaevo – Bishkek – Osh – Jalal-Abad – Arslanbob – Kara-Suu – Osh – Bishkek

Overview: This tour will acquaint you with the incredible natural beauty and proud nomadic traditions of Kyrgyzstan. A spectacularly beautiful landlocked Central Asian country with a population of about 5.3 million, Kyrgyzstan consists of over 80 different nationalities, dominated by Kyrgyz (65 percent), Uzbek (14 percent), and Russian (12 percent). In the Stone Age, cattle-breeding nomads and farming Indo-European tribes lived in the area. Distinct Kyrgyz culture is rooted in proud nomadic traditions. Kyrgyzstan is an essential part of the Great Silk Route and three branches of the route -- Pamir-Alay, South, and North -- pass through Kyrgyzstan.

Lying at roughly the same latitude as Istanbul, Rome, Madrid and New York and the same longitude as New Delhi, Kyrgyzstan sits in the heart of the Asian continent. More than half the territory is 2,500 m or more above sea level, with Peak Pobedy rising to 7,439 m. Deserts, steppes, coniferous and deciduous forests, and alpine meadows are all found within a few kilometers of each other. Lake Issyk-Kul, located in the mountains of eastern Kyrgyzstan, is the second largest salt-water lake in the world. The Sary-Chelek Biosphere Reserve is part of UNESCO's Western Tian Shan Biodiversity Project, designed to conserve lynx, maral deer and bears. Lake Sary-Chelek lies hidden in the northern flanks of the Fergana Valley amid groves of wild walnuts and fruit trees. Jalal-Abad Province is home to unique walnut forests that can not be found anywhere else in the world.



Activities: Activities will include field trips to national parks, conservation areas, environmental education centers, and ornithology and ecology research stations. We'll visit medieval historical and architectural sites, and take part in bird watching, nature photography, local and traditional food, crafts, and sports. Other highlights include an introduction to native medicinal plants and a folk festival .

Tour Leader: Dr. Slavik Dushenkov, Ph.D., a trained field biologist with over 20 years experience in leading expeditions and guiding natural tours, will be the tour leader. He is an author of several field training course textbooks and guides. Local guides will also be on hand at different locations.

Preliminary Program

Day 1: Kyrgyzstan capital – Bishkek

Arrive at Airport Manas; one night hotel accommodation in Bishkek. Upon arrival, you will have a guided tour of Bishkek, which is situated in the Chui valley in the north of the country. Founded in 1878, it originally was called Pishpek, which is the name of the wooden paddle with which the Kyrgyz make kymyz (kumiss, fermented mare's milk), the national drink. Later, during Soviet rule, it was named Frunze, after the famous Russian General Mikhail Frunze. At the time of independence in 1991, it was renamed Bishkek. The city, heavily influenced by the Russians, is built in a typically Soviet architectural style. In the city's center there are museums, an opera house, monuments, a government palace, theaters, cinemas, and parks. You will visit the National Historical Museum and Natural History Museum, and have an opportunity to enjoy the colorful oriental Osh Bazaar. After lunch, you will meet with a Kyrgyz biodiversity project representative to learn about Kyrgyz Republic history, culture, and traditions. During the welcome session, you will be introduced to the role of Community Based Tourism (CBT) in sustainable development.

Day 2: Kochkor village

Drive to Kochkor village, an excellent place to experience the rural lifestyle in Kyrgyzstan. You will be welcomed with a folklore show. The process of making felt carpets, in Kyrgyz “Shyrdak” will be demonstrated. Participants will have the opportunity to create their own felt carpets. The history of shyrdaks, a variety of the patterns and their meaning will be discussed, as will how to recognize high quality shyrdak.



Day 3: Bokonbaevo Village, Manjlyly-yurt-camp

Drive to Bokonbaevo. Dinner and overnight accommodations will be in the Manjlyly-yurt camp. Continue to Issyk-Kul Lake, the largest lake in the Kyrgyz Republic and one of the biggest mountain lakes in the world (6,236 km²), filled with sky-blue water that never freezes (its name means “Hot Lake”). Bokonbaevo Village on the south shore is an excellent destination for its beach, swimming and relaxation. CBT Bokonbaevo accommodates you in a yurt camp. You will experience the nomadic lifestyle, ancient customs, and erect your own yurt. You will learn the name and the function of each component of the yurt.



Day 4: Biosphere Reserve Issyk-Kul

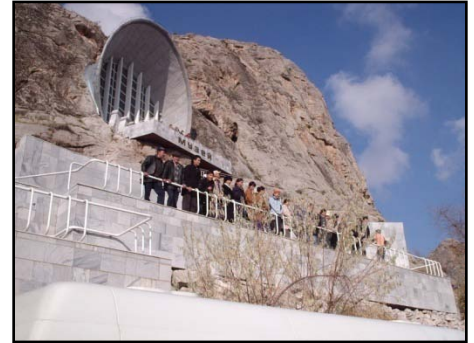
You will continue to explore the Issyk-Kul area and the UNESCO MAB Biosphere Reserve Issyk-Kul. The territory of Issyk-Kul biosphere reserve occupies 43,100 square km or 22 percent of the total area of the republic, and it is home to several species of plants and animals that are included in the list of endangered species. The biosphere includes the Issyk-Kul state preserve, which was the first protected

territory in the Kyrgyz Republic, founded in 1948 with the aim of preserving the habitat of waterfowl that

winter in the region around Lake Issyk-Kul. Find out about the challenges in preserving and sustainably developing the unique Issyk-Kul area. Walk around, swim in the lake and enjoy lunch. Drive to Bishkek. Dinner and overnight accommodations in Bishkek.

Day 5: Osh, Kyrgyzstan's second largest city

Fly to Osh, a 2,500-year-old ancient city on the Silk Road on the way from Fergana oasis to Kashgar. Situated on both green hillsides of the Ak-Bur River, Osh is Kyrgyzstan's second largest city. After lunch, visit the four-top Suleiman-Too mountain ridge, a unique historical and architectural monument. Explore the history of one of the most ancient cities in the world visited by Alexander the Great and King Solomon. Uzgen, another ancient settlement, is home to archaeological monuments: a tower and mausoleums dating from the 11th century; Chil Ustin, the site of spectacular caves; and Aravan, the home of "The Celestial Horses" depicted in petroglyphs. For Central Asian Muslims, Taht-I-Suleiman is the third most sacred place after Mecca and Medina. At the summit, an ancient mosque built by Bobur in 1510 still operates. Visit a picturesque traditional Oriental vegetable market (bazaar).



Day 6: Osh, regional environmental issues

You will learn about regional environmental issues and participate in a workshop on ecology with local school children. There will also be horseback riding/walking to a waterfall, and a picnic. Spend the night in a CBT-guesthouse. An introduction to native medicinal plants, local/region flora and fauna, birds, and bats will be presented in a guided tour. Ethnomedical use of local plants will be demonstrated.

Day 7: Jalal-Abad region, Sary-Chelek National Park



In the morning, you will drive to Sary-Chelek, where you will have lunch and dinner, and will overnight in Kara-Suu. The region is a center for growing fruits and vegetables. In the western part of the region is the long Chatkal valley.

Nestling in the Chatkal Mountains are a number of lakes, including the pristine, beautiful Sary-Chelek. The main Bishkek Osh road travels past the large Toktogul reservoir. Cotton, rice, tobacco, vegetables, fruits, and walnuts are all grown here and in Kara Suu, one of the valleys on the edge of the Sary-Chelek biosphere reserve, which has been described as "a cultural landscape

where man is important but nature dominates." Jalal-Abad, Kyrgyzstan's third largest city, sits in a broad plain of the Kugart Valley. Jalal-Abad means "the city of Jalal" and takes its name from the 13th-century warrior Jalal ad Din. Nowadays, squat hills guard the edge of the town. The abundance of rivers and springs flowing down from glaciers creates a cool and fresh atmosphere. There will be a workshop with local students on ecology. Experience the history of the Jalal-Abad region and learn about the role of the Sary-Chelek Biosphere Reserve in biodiversity conservation. Observe local flora and medicinal plants. Understand endangered species and their protection, and learn the fundamentals of glacier geology. Overnight in Kara-Suu.

Day 8: Kara-Suu

Tour the pristine walnut forest and have a picnic lunch. The national park and the surrounding area comprise river valleys and streams that flow along a winding course through almost all the territory of the reserve. Steep banks are strewn with boulders, forming rapid cascades and waterfalls up to 3 meters high. Glaciers, permanent ice fields, and high mountain lakes lie on the north-facing slopes. Explore the high mountain lake ecosystems. Participate in a guided tour with an introduction to the local fauna and flora and the general biodiversity in this remarkable national park. You will have dinner and overnight in Kara-Suu.



Day 9: Rural Kyrgyz life, drive to Bishkek

Drive to Bishkek, where you will have lunch, and a farewell dinner. Experience the rural Kyrgyz life; local crafts and souvenirs. Learn about the ecological challenges of Bishkek. Overnight in Bishkek.

Day 10: Bishkek

Free time in Bishkek to shop, then drive to the airport.

Food and Lodging

Lodging



The IBEX Tour uses comfortable hotels in cities and a combination of contemporary and traditional accommodations in rural areas. To enhance engagement with local culture you will stay in guest rooms in contemporary Kyrgyz houses. You will also stay overnight in an authentic *Kyrgyz yurt* at the Manjlyly-yurt camp where you will experience nomadic lifestyle first hand.

Food

You will experience a combination of western and local cuisines. Meals include breakfast, lunch and dinner. While breakfast and lunch are usually served in traditional European style, dinner provides an opportunity to sample local dishes.

Traditional Kyrgyz cuisine reflects the lifestyle of nomadic people and consists mainly of meat, dairy products and bread. In addition, modern Kyrgyz cuisine includes dishes common throughout Central Asia, and is heavily influenced by the cuisine of the settled people of the region: Russians, Uzbeks, Uighurs and Chinese. In Kyrgyz culture, special dishes are quite often associated with particular events and religious holidays and are presented with a ceremony given the occasion. One of the most quintessential Kyrgyz dishes is *Beshbarmak*, or eaten with “five-fingers”. *Beshbarmak* is handmade pasta with elaborately cooked lamb that is served as part of a sophisticated ceremony.



Kyrgyz dairy products are made of sour curdled milk with a distinct flavor. You will have an opportunity to taste *kumis* (*koumiss*), a drink brewed from fermented horse milk and believed to have strong health-promoting properties. *Kurut*, small balls of cheese, made from sheep milk, are very rich in protein and are extremely popular, especially in rural areas. As in all of Central Asia, bread is central to every meal and demands the highest respect. Traditional Kyrgyz homemade *nan*, unleavened flat bread in round loaves, is also known under the generic Russian name *lepyoshka*.

Known for their genuine hospitality, the Kyrgyzs traditionally serve food on a *dostorkon* (*dastarkhan*), a large cloth laid out on the ground. Nowadays, a *dostorkon* can also be set up on a low height Central Asia style table or just on a standard table.