

KAZAKHSTAN - HIDDEN ZHETYSU WONDERLAND

Cost per person double occupancy \$4,237: Number of participants: 10; Duration: 10 days



“Altyn-Emel” – Ili River delta – Almaty

Objectives: Experience fascinating and undiscovered wonders of Kazakh nature; learn about Kazakh history, culture, biodiversity, conservation, and its animal and plant communities including snow-capped mountains and pristine apple and apricot forests; see rare birds and mammals; and observe unique local ceremonies and traditions.

Duration: 10 days

Overnight stays: Bed & breakfast, hotels

Itinerary: Almaty – Zailiysky Alatau – National Park

Background: The Zhetysu Wonderland, Kazakhstan bioexploratory tour itinerary reflects extraordinary biodiversity within Southeastern Kazakhstan and includes representative ecosystems and important cultural attractions. The area between the Lake Balkhash and the North Tien-Shan mountains, so called Zhetysu (Kazakh) or Semirechie (seven rivers in Russian), spreads over 400 kilometers from the largest Kazakhstan city, Almaty. Zhetysu is carved by pristine streams running from the mountains to the steppes, forming spectacular oases.

Activities: Field trips to national parks, conservation areas, environmental education centers, ecological and ornithological research stations. Visit important historical and architectural sites. Bird watching and nature photography. Local and traditional food and drinks, introduction to native medicinal plants. Informal discussions with biodiversity experts.

Tour Leader: Dr. Slavik Dushenkov of Rutgers University and Dr. Sergey Sklyarenko of the Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity in Kazakhstan will co-lead the tour. Local guides will be on hand at different locations.



Preliminary Program

Day 1: Big Almaty Lake



In the morning you will be greeted at the Almaty International Airport (Almaty, Kazakhstan) by your guides and given a general tour introduction. Almaty is on the route from Southeastern Asia to Europe. The Great Silk Road from China to Europe has passed through the city since the earliest times. You will then travel to the Big Almaty Lake (Bolshoe Almatinskoe Ozero), then proceed up the slopes of the spectacular Zailiysky Alatau Mountain gorge to the Tien-Shan Astronomical Observatory, 2,700 m above sea level, about 30 km from the city. Enjoy stops along the way and short guided excursions to

forest, sub-alpine, and alpine belts and explore the remarkable vertical zonality of the region. You will be introduced to the wildlife management system in Kazakhstan. After dinner meet with astronomers at the observatory and view the starry sky through the powerful telescope.

Day 2: Ile-Alatau State National Park

Guided field trips in Almaty Reserve and Ile-Alatau State National Park. Explore endemic species of trees in the vast wild apple and apricot forests. The wild fruit forests of Alma Ata (Father of the Apple) are a unique genetic pool for modern apple and apricot trees and can not be seen anywhere else in the world. Area birds are represented by a rare blend of Himalayan and boreal ornithofaunas, with a large number of resident species. You will pass through the forest, sub-alpine and alpine/nival belts and observe elevations and landscape changes along the way. Pay specific attention to



mountain ecosystems with vertical movements of bird populations (wanderings). You will be introduced to the ongoing biodiversity and astronomy research projects and to the observatory scientific staff.

Day 3: Falcon Breeding Centre Sunkar

Descend back to the foothills, visiting the lowest parts of the gorge (mixed and deciduous forest). Take part in guided excursions to the mixed and deciduous forest. Visit Saker Falcon Breeding Centre "Sunkar" and learn about its history and breeding/reintroduction programs. Learn about the noble ancient tradition of falconry. Enjoy dinner at the traditional hunting lodge settings. Travel to the state national natural park "Altyn-Emel" . While on the road, we'll discuss traditional Kazakh methods of land use that include seasonal grazing at distant high altitude pastures and the nomadic life style of some local tribes.

Day 4: Altyn-Emel Nature National Park



Altyn-Emel State National Natural Park is located on the right bank of the Ili River. Altyn-Emel is made up of desert and serenely beautiful rocky terrain. Whenever the wind blows, the "Singing Sand Dune," a large dune famous for the sounds it produces, makes a low melodic hum. Receive an introduction to the history of the Altyn-Emel State National Natural Park and to the biodiversity conservation projects in the park. Explore park's flora, native medicinal plants, local customs, and traditions and discuss general problems of nature conservation and wildlife protection in the area. Enjoy guided trips inside the park and see its most famous natural wonders. Overnight at the park.

Day 5: Altyn-Emel Nature National Park

You will continue the guided excursion in the National Park "Altyn-Emel", with visits to archaeological monuments from the stone, bronze, and iron ages. Marvel at vast unexcavated burial mounds (20 meters high and 100 meters round) dot the lowlands. Drive through the gorges of the Chulack Mountains that conceal the Grand Besshatyr Burial Complex; and observe burial tunnels in hillside rock. The area is famous for its high level of endemism of the animal and plant life. Extremely rare Prezewalski's horse, a symbol of Central Asia, inhabits the park and can be occasionally seen. Explore the bird and mammal population of "Altyn-Emel". You will receive the introduction to the ecological problems of Ile-Balkhash basin, such as assault by the invasive species.

Day 6: Sandy desert Saryesik-Atyrau

You will take a trip to the Ili River delta with lunch along the way. The road goes through clay, hilly semi-deserts, and then along the edge of the sandy desert Saryesik-Atyrau. Short guided excursions and birdwatching during the stops. You will be given an introduction to the local economy and traditions and witness the growing impact of human activities on the fragile ecosystem. Common local plants and birds will be viewed during the stops. Explore the role of the Ili River delta in nature conservancy. Overnight stay at a guesthouse on the Ili River delta.

Day 7: Ili River delta

Enjoy a boat trip into the Ili River delta and a visit to the famous pelican colonies. See the river gradually split into a series of channels and streams that empty into Lake Balkhash. Find yourself in the unique landscape of meandering channels surrounded by shrub thickets which shelter many rare bird and animal species. The delta also supports an ecosystem of the, so-called tugai forest seen in only a few places in Central Asia. It consists of dense growths of Asiatic poplar, Russian olive, several species of willow, tamarisk and salt tree tangled with a variety of herbaceous creepers, such as clematis. This almost



impenetrable vegetation fortress is of the most important wetlands of Central Asia. The remarkable diversity of water fowl in the region includes the largest nesting populations in Eurasia of Dalmatian and Great white pelicans, and many rare and endangered species. The Ili River shelters giant catfish and other trophy fish species. Learn about the invasive species management, water recourse management, the effects of global warming, and the effects of the neighboring Aral Sea disaster on the local ecosystems. Overnight at a guest house in the Ili River delta.

Day 8: Ili River Desert Ecosystems

In the morning, drive through the desert into an Asiatic poplar forest with many mature specimens having grotesque burls and large hollows on their trunks and branches that attract the hollow-breeders such as the Turkestan tit, white-winged woodpecker, saxaul sparrow, pallid scops-owl, pale-backed pigeon, and European roller. Drive back into the desert and explore its surprisingly diverse ecosystem. Observe examples of adaptations in plants and animals to the Ili River desert dominated by saxaul trees and shrubs which provide staple food for the great gerbil.

Day 9: Travel to Almaty

Travel to Almaty. Free time in Almaty. Hotel accommodations close to shopping, souvenir stores, etc.

Day 10: Depart from Almaty

Free time in Almaty. Travel to the airport.