

Kyrgyzstan: High Mountains and Ancient Traditions

What Kyrgyzstan lacks in gracious buildings and fancy cakes, it more than makes up for with nomadic traditions such as laid-back hospitality, a healthy distrust of authority and a fondness for drinking fermented mare's milk. Many travellers find Kyrgyzstan the most appealing, accessible and welcoming of the Central Asian republics, particularly as it contains the central Tian Shan and Pamir Alay ranges, Central Asia's finest mountains.



In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union left this tiny, under-equipped republic out on a limb, seemingly without the resources to survive on its own. So far it's getting by on pluck, a liberal agenda and goodwill from Western donor countries. It is doing more than any Central Asian republic to encourage tourism and streamline bureaucratic procedures for visitors – partly because tourism is one of the few things it has to sell to the outside world.

The downside is that away from Bishkek, Issyk-Kul and parts of the Tian Shan, tourist infrastructure is minimal or wretched, transport is limited, fuel overpriced, roads unpoliced and there is a growing crime rate, fuelled by alcohol and desperate poverty. There is a great temptation to hop off the bus in the middle of nowhere and hike into the hills but, except in few places, this is not recommended if you value your life.

Mountainous Land

Landlocked Kyrgyzstan is slightly larger than Austria and Hungary put together. Nearly 95% of the country is mountainous: almost half of it at an elevation of over 3000m (9840ft) and three-quarters of it under permanent snow and glaciers. The dominant feature is the Tian Shan range in the south-east. Its crest, the dramatic Kakshaal-Too range, forms a stunning natural border with China, culminating at Pik Pobedy (7439m/24,400ft), Kyrgyzstan's highest point. The southern border with Tajikistan lies along the Pamir Alay Range. Lake Issyk-Kul, almost 700m (2300ft) deep, lies in a vast indentation on the fringes of the Tian Shan in eastern Kyrgyzstan.

The mountains of Kyrgyzstan are the setting for high, grassy meadows. It is not rare to look out of a train or bus window on the open steppe and see a rushing herd of antelopes. Marmots and pikas are preyed

upon by eagles and lammergeiers while the elusive snow leopard hunts the ibex amongst the crags and rocky slopes. Forests of Tian Shan spruce, larch and juniper provide cover for lynx, wolf, wild boar and brown bear. In summer, the wildflowers are a riot of colour.



Rich Culture

Nearly everyone in Kyrgyzstan is Muslim, but Islam has sat relatively lightly on the Kyrgyz people. The geographically isolated southern provinces tend to be more conservative and islamised than the industrialized, russified north. Ancient but still important tribal affiliations further reinforce the north–south differences. The Kyrgyz language has not been imposed on non–speakers in Kyrgyzstan, and the use of Russian persists, especially in the north.

Central Asian literature has traditionally been popularized in the form of songs, poems and stories by itinerant minstrels, called akyn. But the Kyrgyz, the originally nomadic people, are also associated with something rather more complex – an entire cycle of oral legends, 20 times longer than the Odyssey, about a hero–of–heroes called Manas. The stories are part of a wider, older tradition, but have come to be associated with the Kyrgyz people and culture partly because Soviet scholars 'gave' Manas to them in efforts to create separate cultures for the various Central Asian peoples. Although the oral tradition is pretty much dead, Manas is still a figure for the Kyrgyz to hang their dreams on.

Nomadic Way of Life

Nomadic life was necessary because of the numerous flocks of sheep on seasonal pastures at different heights. Such lifestyle led to the isolation of families, who had to go up to high mountains to find enough grass for the cattle. This is also the reason for the unique Kyrgyz hospitality. Guests were always welcome because they brought news.

Ancient Dwelling – the Yurt

A skilled master can make a yurt (tent) in a month, but it will endure for decades. The yurt consists of a wooden carcass and felt. It is easily dismantled and transported from one place to another. During its assembly, first, a door is hung on it. After that, wooden trellises (kerege) which serve as wall are set in place. Tunduk (a wooden circle in the upper part of the yurt) is connected to kerege by long bent poles. Then the kerege are tightly fitted with mats, covered with ornamented felt pieces of different forms and sizes and tied around with narrow embroidered stripes and laces. All in all, yurt setting takes about an

hour.



A day in the yurt starts long before sunrise. The first rays of sun find yurt inhabitants already doing everyday chores. Women prepare breakfast and put food into bags for men, who leave for jailoo (pastures) with herds of sheep. After seeing their husbands off, women start numerous minor and major household chores. Small boys, who are barely able to walk, already learn to ride horses. Girls learn the art of cooking, embroidering, and making shyrdaks, ala-kiyiz and tush-kiyiz – national carpets made of felt and fabric that not only serve for such practical purposes as home warming, but also for decoration. Kyrgyz ornaments resemble the richness of colors and forms that exist in nature: a vivid diversity of field flowers, eagles with proudly spread wings, curved of mountain goats and ibexes, and snow-capped mountain tops.

Facts at a Glance:

Full country name: Republic of Kyrgyzstan

Area: 198,500 sq km (77,415 sq mi)

Population: 4.5 million

Capital: Bishkek (population 670,000)

People: 57% Kyrgyz, 21% Slav (Russian & Ukrainian), 13% Uzbek

Languages: Kyrgyz, Russian

Religion: Sunni Muslim

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