

Tien Shan (Summer)

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1-4

Cimbulak - Small Almaty Gorge

We start by our hotel which is set amid glorious flower-filled meadows and pencil-thin Tien Shan Spruce trees that are 6,500 feet up in the Cimbulak Valley - a most idyllic place. The spruces hold birds such as Black-throated Accentors and the stunningly beautiful Blue-headed Redstart. A little more reclusive are Nutcracker and the local speciality, Songar Tit. *Erebia turanica* and *Erebia meta* float about the meadows while higher up we can see Peak White and the localised *Oenothera*. The flowers in these meadows are really something. A blaze of blue is supplied by the stunning *Dracocephalum grandiflorum* - like some glorified self-heal, and by the exquisite and abundant flowers of *Viola altaica*. Jacob's Ladder, growing in profusion, and *Aconitum leucostomum* are only slightly subtler shades. Yellows are provided by acres of *Papaver croceum* and *Viola biflora*. Really intense oranges are the province of *Erysimum croceum* and *Erigeron aurantiaca*. Delicate clematis-like *Atragene sibirica* drapes over trees, whilst shady areas are home to the lovely *Cortusa brotheri*. Grey Marmots and Red Pikas graze these meadows. Higher up we shall look for Eversmann's Redstart, Brown Accentor and the common Hodgson's Mountain Finch among rocky slopes where a whole flood of new alpine flowers can be seen, including sumptuous *Primula nivalis*, *Callianthemum alatavicum* and the strange *Tulipa heterophylla*. During the afternoon of day 4 we'll descend into the city and catch the evening train from Almaty to the Western Tien Shan. From our first class sleeper accommodation we'll be able to watch the steppe of Central Asia roll by and get a good nights sleep before waking up with the snowy peaks of the Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve in sight.

Days 5-7

Karatau Mountains & Koksai

After the twenty minute drive to Dzhabagly we'll settle into the Belousev family's excellent guesthouse and have the first of many hearty breakfasts prepared by the skilled cooks here. A typical Kazakh village, Dzhabagly is a warmly welcoming place, and we are sure you will enjoy their genuine hospitality. Across the valley from the village is a much older range of mountains than the young and vigorous Tien Shan. The Karatau's riverine woodlands harbour birds such as Paradise Flycatcher, Upcher's Warbler and Boukhara Tit. Slopes covered in fragrant ziziphora, gorgeous yellow

Delphinium semibarbatum and pungent acanthophyllum attract hordes of butterflies, many from unfamiliar groups such as neolycaena, pseudothecla and the lovely burnished hues of athamanthias. Rocky gorges are home to Saker, Egyptian Vulture, Short-toed Eagle and immense noisy colonies of Rose-coloured Starlings - the ground almost seems to turn pink and black with them! We shall visit the magnificent Koksai Canyon, actually taking one of our sumptuous picnics in the neighbouring state of Kirghizia - sadly no passport stamps though! The canyon forms the border between these two countries and descends from the Tien Shan Mountains below the shapely 14,350 foot peak of Manas. Here is a phenomenally rich flora including the delicate mauves of Iris tianshanicus and the bright yellows of the localised Eremurus fuscus.

Days 8-12

The Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve

We will stay in a house and yourtas (large traditional Kazakh tents) 6,500 feet above sea level with high snow-covered passes within easy reach. Our team from Dzhabagly will accompany us and continue to provide tasty meals along with the ubiquitous tea, compote, vodka and wine - we will even be able to indulge in hot showers each day! Some 800 square kilometres of stunning mountainous country has been securely protected for 75 years. As a consequence this really is a pristine wilderness and we shall be able to wander through untouched alpine meadows and superb juniper forest. Normally elusive large mountain mammals such as Siberian Ibex and Isabelline Brown Bear are relatively easy to see here. There are only about 200 of the latter in the world and about 60 of them are in the reserve - we shall be able to watch them feeding among the spring green turf next to the high snowfields. The house in which we are staying is also the home of the furry Forest Dormouse and in a flower-strewn meadow below, there is a small family of chubby Red Marmots. This reserve is renowned for the unbeatable spectacle of its flowery slopes where the blues of Ixiolirion tataricum, Veronica spuria and Delphinium confusum mix with the reds of Betonica foliosa and various alliums, and the yellows of hypericums. The effect is mesmerising - to us and the butterflies. Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell, Hungarian Glider, Cardinal and Odd-spot Blue are all very common. Black-veined White and its smaller relative, Metaporia leucodice are also numerous. We can see groups of Yellow-banded Skippers mud-puddling as well as a whole host of little-known blues - we have seen more than thirty species mud-puddling in one spot here! Quail and Corncrake call amongst the flowers and juniper forests hold Red-mantled Rosefinch, Yellow-breasted Azure Tit, Rufous-naped Tit and White-winged Grosbeak. Streams are home to Blue Whistling Thrush and Brown Dipper and their banks are a botanist's dream with the pale blue bells of

Codonopsis klematidea, wine-red Aquilegia atrovinosa and bright blue Aconitum talassicum. The high passes just above the mountain house will be a particular aim. Here the magnificent views of the snowy ridge capped by the unclimbed Bugulutor are just breathtaking. Lammergeiers and Griffon Vultures drift along the ridge so close that you feel you can almost touch them. Patches of snow water some beautiful plant communities, with swathes of yellow-green onions flowering with Tulipa dasystemonoides and the Waterlily Tulip, Tulipa kaufmanniana. The blue flowers of Iris (Juno) coerulea and the stately architectural spikes of Iris (Juno) orchoides are found with white Snowdon Lily whilst pink Primula algida mixes with brilliant orange-yellow Trollius altaicus. Two apollo, the huge Parnassius apollonius and the beautiful Parnassius maximus are a fantastic sight as they float over the flowery slopes. Rocks harbour some of the finest alpinists such as brilliant red Primula minkwitziae and a beautiful display of androsaces with yellow and red-centred flowers.

Day 13

First class sleeper to Almaty

We catch the evening train from nearby Tulkubas and arrive in Almaty at eight the next morning. From the comfortable first class sleeper accommodation you can watch the landscapes of Central Asia roll by. As the train chugs slowly east you will see Ters Lake at dusk and awake on rolling steppes laid out like a carpet at the foot of the majestic Northern Tien Shan.

Days 14-18

Big Almaty Lake

An hours drive south of Almaty the Tien Shan rises sharply to heights even greater than in the Aksu-Dzhabagly region. Here the highest peak, which is only a few kilometres away, reaches just short of 17,000 feet. The scenery is truly grand and above a stunning turquoise lake we shall have the chance to explore some of the most beautiful and majestic mountain scenery in Central Asia. There is surprisingly little fauna and flora in common between our two regions, so expect a bonanza of new species! 9,000 feet up amidst some very high mountains, we are based at the old Astronomical Observatory, now used as accommodation for visiting tourists. Derelict telescope domes stand amongst the rocks and junipers looking like something out of a 1970's science fiction B-movie. One telescope is still in use, and with the kind permission of the astronomers here (and a clear night!), we can take a close up look at the moon. A roaring river feeds Big Almaty Lake from a glacier just up the valley. These waters spread over a huge boulder-strewn delta as they enter the lake

and this is where we shall look for the rare and beautiful Ibisbill, a most strikingly marked wader. Growing amongst the boulders is the local form of Edelweiss and the stunning pink-flowered Arctic Riverbeauty. Streamsides are lined with the glorious violet-red *Primula turkestanica* and large yellow *Corydalis gortschakovii*. Roseroots include the immaculate red and green *Rhodiola coccinea*, whilst the brilliant orange flowers of *Trollius dshungaricus* are only surpassed in their beauty by another globeflower which grows higher still, *Trollius lilacinus*. This has large white flowers shot with pale blue and a colony on the edge of snow is quite breathtaking. Cliffs and screes hold domes, some of them a couple of feet across, of the beautiful *Paraquilegia anemonoides* with large deep mauve flowers set atop turquoise-green aquilegia-like foliage. Adorning high passes are the weird-looking *Saussurea gnaphaloides* and *Schmalhausenia nidulans*, the latter looking like it ought to be more at home on the Andean Altoplano! The pretty metalmark butterfly, *Polycaena tamerlana* lives on screes amid *Androsace akbajtalensis* and glorious *Papaver tianshanica*, whilst blue and red spotted *Parnassius delphius* and the oddly-named *Boloria generator* drift over slopes carpeted with blue *Gentianas*, in this case, *karelini*, *kaufmanniana* and *falcata*! Some of Asia's most beautiful birds are easy to see here. Himalayan Rubythroats, their traffic-light scarlet throats ablaze against black bibs, whilst lilac and strawberry-coloured Severtzov's Tit-Warblers inhabit dwarf juniper. Red-mantled Rosefinches and White-winged Grosbeaks are frequent whilst overhead Lammergeiers are seen on a daily basis. Further up towards the snows will be the lure of the beautiful Guldenstadt's Redstart, Red-breasted Rosefinch and Himalayan Snowcock, whose eerie calls will drift down to us even in the observatory. During the afternoon of day 17 we descend to Almaty before flying back to the UK early the next morning.

Trip reports are available from our reconnaissance trip to Sichuan. If you would like to see a copy, or to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please contact us on 01298 83563 or email on enquiries@greentours.co.uk.