

Kyrgyzia

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2

Flight via Istanbul to Osh. Day visit to the Taldyk Pass

We'll arrive into Osh during the night and go straight to our hotel for a few hours sleep before late morning emerging to explore the nearby Taldyk Pass.

Unlike neighbouring Kazakhstan it is easy to explore many high passes by road in Kyrgyzia. Having landed at 1000m above sea level we'll drive steadily uphill, passing the magnificent pink spires of *Eremurus robustus* blooming amidst yellow roses, and will soon find ourselves above 3000m as we approach the mountain pass east of the town. Himalayan Griffons soar above alpine turf where we'll find the unusual reddish tessellated bells of *Fritillaria walujewii*. On the pass itself we'll find snow patches with a good snowmelt flora notably drifts of *Pulsatilla campanella* and little yellow *Tulipa dasystemon*. We'll see *Colchicum kesselringianum*, *Primula algida*, *Ranunculus albertii* and the little annual *Gentiana karelinii* too.

Days 3 & 4

Arslanbob steppes & walnut forests

Our route takes us across dry steppe past thousands of foxtail lilies, this time *Eremurus sogdianus* and *Eremurus tianshanicus*. We'll stop to photograph the abundant *Salvia sclarea* as well as *Achillea filipendulina* and lovely *Lindelofia macrostyla*. Soon we rise into increasingly wooded foothills with orchards and farms before reaching the famed walnut forests of Arslanbob. Much of the World's largest tract of walnut forest is protected in the Dashman Forest Reserve, a green oasis of great beauty. Red-headed Bunting and Nightingales sing as we photograph great stands of *Dictamnus albus* in perfect flower, alongside a scattering of palest pink *Eremurus robustus* with the stony ramparts of the Tien Shan for a backdrop. Drifts of Balsams, Buttercups and tall *Ligularia thomsonii* and *Euphorbia lamprocarpa* make a fine sight under the trees. Nearby a tufa clad spring is almost concealed beneath huge clumps of *Aquilegia vicaria*, a quite delightful species with thousands of delicate pale blue flowers suspended from tall stems.

Days 5 & 6

Sary-Chelek Biosphere Reserve – walnut forests & mountains

Our route to Sary-Chelek takes us through steppe dotted with *Acanthophyllum pungens*, a plant that attracts abundant butterflies, and the striking silvery-haired *Astragalus alopecias* with great balls of yellow flowers. Blue-cheeked Bee-eaters are abundant and nest right by the roadside.

Sary-Chelek is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful landscapes in Central Asia. An idyllic lake is surrounded by stunning mountains. "Sary Chelek" means "Yellow Bucket". There is a legend that a bee keeper attending his hives somewhere on the lake shore, was pouring honey into a bucket and was so taken by the colour of the honey that he decided to call the lake "Yellow Bucket". Some think that the lake derives its name from the fact that in the autumn, when all the leaves of the trees turn colour, the whole basin reminds the visitor of a "yellow bucket". *Exochorda tianshanica* and *Spirea arguta* decorate the slopes where we have fine views of the blue lake waters between slender spruces. Incredibly lush meadows are full of pink, white and blue Alliums, the cotton-wool seedpods of *Astragalus sieversianus*, *Pedicularis dolichorrhiza*, *Dactylorhiza umbrosa*, and fine pale yellow *Cousinia turkestanica*. Clouded Apollos, Large Tortoiseshell and the unusual 'heath' *Coenonympha sunbecca* float about subalpine turf where we'll find numerous *Iris albertii*. Here verdant meadows are smothered in orange *Trollius altaicus*, *Tulipa kaufmanniana* and hundreds of blue and white *Iris ruthenica*.

Day 7

To Chichkan

Today we'll largely be journeying however we'll be passing through countryside with more or less continuous interest so there will be plenty of stops. Rollers are exceptionally common all along the route and Spotted Fritillary, Central Asian Marbled White and Southern Swallowtail are all on the wing. The steppe flora will provide new species all day, notably the soft yellow *Delphinium semibarbatum*. We'll also see the lovely *Hedysarum chaitocarpum*, bushy white-flowered *Convolvulus pseudocantabricus*, and delicate white *Consolida rugulosum*. Nearing Chichkan we'll rise into a greener landscape and increasingly alpine scenery, with more and more Tien Shan Spruce and big birches appearing.

Day 8

To Suusamyr via the Ala Bel and Otmok Passes

Today we'll drive steadily uphill, passing scattered *Eremurus fuscus*, and will soon find ourselves above 2500m as we approach the mountain passes of Ala Bel & Otmok. Abundant *Phlomis oreophila*, *Pedicularis dolichorrhiza*, *Pedicularis amoena*, *Dactylorhiza umbrosa*, pretty *Ligularias*, and the striking golden heads of *Eremostachys speciosa*, populate rich alpine turf inhabited by Rock Thrushes, Red-fronted Serin and stunning Bluethroats. Pale yellow mats of *Scutellaria przewalskii* flower prolifically alongside *Anemone narcissiflora* subspecies *protracta* and strange yellow-brown *Allium fedtschenkoana*, whilst clinging to rocks is pretty little *Campanula albertii*. Citrine Wagtails are everywhere and Rosefinches sing constantly from roadsides choked with plumes of *Polygonum undulatum*. *Caragana* scrub brims with *Aconitum leucostomum*, pink bowls of *Paeonia hybrida*, and *Cortusa broteri*. Broad sweeps of colour emanate from nature's paintbrush around our

accommodation, for the steppe is vibrant with massed orange *Trollius altaicus*, vast pink carpets of *Primula algida* and blue and white splashes of *Myosotis*. The vast open landscapes take some getting used to, the immensity of the steppe, mountains and sky put into perspective by the sighting of occasional Kyrgyz horsemen. Hardly a sound except the constant song of larks, and the Lapwings scolding as we walk too close to their young.

Day 9 Kochkor

After breakfast we'll set off east driving across the expansive steppe populated with Red-headed Buntings and Isabelline Shrikes. Montagu's and Pallid Harriers quarter the grasslands as we admire clumps of deep purple red *Lindelofia stylosa*. Large populations of *Eremurus fuscus* line narrow gorges where we'll find pale yellow *Scutellaria przewalskii*, spidery *Dianthus crinitus*, and yellow-orange *Glaucium squamigerum* amongst filigree-foliaged *Ferulas*. Plenty of butterflies will be on the wing including Clouded Apollo, Spotted and Glanville Fritillaries. Golden Eagles soar above the road as we stop for mats of a superb reddish-pink *Lotus* that spread out across the granite screes together with purple-spotted bright yellow *Arnebia guttata*. White-tailed Rubythroats and Rosefinches sing from colourful stands of *Paeonia hybrida*. The landscapes are ever-changing as we pass gigantic scree fields and colourful dry hills, and steppe with a lovely mix of flowers including *Hedysarums* and the superb *Lagochilus seravschanicus* with red-striped white flowers. *Iris spuria* subspecies *sogdiana* looks great in damper places under the poplars that line the road. In drier areas are creamy *Sophora alopecuroides*, yellow *Thermopsis turkestanica* and blue *Echium vulgare* as well as plenty of Lesser Grey Shrikes and colourful Bee-eaters and Rollers. In the afternoon we'll reach Kochkor and our comfortable guesthouse with a courtyard and garden decorated with many showy peony hybrids.

Day 10 Song-Kul

Chunky Red Marmots mark our progress as we drive up to the pass above Song Kul. Near the top many alpine flowers appear; small cushions of a creamy *Androsace*, the unusual yellow bells of *Tulipa heterophylla*, the attractive purple flowered mat-forming *Oxytropis chionobia* and the yellow-flowered *Saxifraga flagellaris*. Best of all are the hundreds of superb ice-blue *Trollius lilacinus* surrounding the many snow patches. Plain Mountain Finches are common and Lammergeiers pass overhead every now and then. Gravels close to a lake have plentiful *Chorispora bungeana* as well as a pale yellow species, perhaps *Chorispora macropoda*, both exceptionally beautiful flowers. Caspian Plovers and Snowfinches feed quietly on steppes speckled with the wonderful mats of blue-purple *Dracocephalum paulsenii* and tight cushions of *Androsace sericea*. Descending a little from the plateau we'll be among remnant

patches of spruce forest which hold *Anemone narcissiflora* subspecies *protracta* and *Geranium collinum*. There are good views across the expansive landscape to distant mountain ridges before we enter a gorge with wet flushes populated with plenty of pink-belled *Cortusa matthiola*. There are some impressive shows of this fine plant by a stream alongside *Ligularia grandifolia* and *Codonopsis clematidea*, as well as long sepalled *Clematis alpina* subspecies *sibirica*.

Day 11

Tash Rabat

Across a long tract of empty steppe, and backed by the impressive At-Bashi Mountains, is Tash Rabat. This small, but perfectly formed, 15th century caravanserai hosted merchants and traders travelling this remote part of the Silk Road. As much as anything it is remote location of Tash Rabat that makes it such a magical place, set in a velvet-green valley at 3500m with tremendous landscapes all around and nary a sign of civilization on view, except perhaps the road in!

Nearby are limestone cliffs splashed with the pale-lilac cascades of *Paraquilegia anemonoides*. Many *Pulsatilla campanella* bloom in the turf beside the river with delicate little *Cortusa tianshanica*. Red Marmots whistle their warnings as in the sky there's a constant procession of Himalayan Griffon Vultures, Golden Eagles and Lammergeier, all dwarfing the many Choughs. Stands of *Cortusa matthioli* and the very delicate yellow-eyed pink *Primula serrata* inhabit damp areas by a waterfall and on the cliffs hang big fennels and *Eremurus fuscus*.

Day 12 & 13

Tamga & the Barskoon Pass

The long spine of the Zailinsky Alatau reflect in Issyk's glass-like surface providing a memorable backdrop to many fine blooms of *Salvia nemorosa* around which fly Central Asian Marbled Whites as Nightingales sing from the shrubberies. Issyk-Kol is a huge lake that dominates the map of the country. Close to the lake some areas are covered in a pink flowered shrubby pea, and in other areas are salt-encrusted clearings with dozens of the bizarre parasitic plant *Cynomorium songaricum* erupting from the ground as thick brown columns. Lakeside birdwatching is productive with both Mute Swans and Whooper Swans, Common Tern, Ruddy Shelduck, Whimbrel, Black-winged Stilts and both Great Reed Warbler and Barred Warbler. *Lagochilus*, *Saussureas*, and the shrubby fragrant *Clematis songaricus* inhabit the colourfully eroded rock forms and clay deposits of the Fairy Tale Canyon.

We'll spend a rewarding day in the mountains to the south of Tamga starting with a drive up into the multi-tiered Tien Shan Spruce. Above the trees is a superb alpine zone with breathtaking displays of big pink *Primula nivalis*, whilst attractive *Iris loczyi* forms clumps by the roadside. Stunning Himalayan Rubythroats sit atop low juniper scrub and here we'll looking for the beautifully marked Eversmann's Redstart.

Alongside are large cushions of *Chorispora bungeana* and another handsome brassica *Desideria flabellata*, with unusually coloured flowers that vary from pinkish to bluish-cream. Barskoon Pass opens on to a broad plateau that extends for many kilometres with snow ridges on either side, large flat glaciers, and many alpine lakes, all of which will still be half frozen over. This is true tundra. The flora is amazing with the white drumsticks of *Smelovskia calycina*, the golden stars of *Tulipa dasystemon* and thousands of the buttercup *Ranunculus albertii*. The landscape photography can be sensational, the mountains reflected in the still liquid part of the lakes, the other parts of the lakes covered in sheets of pale bluish ice. On the rocks is a dwarf edelweiss and in areas of bare soil are many *Oxygraphis glacialis* and superb drifts of ice-blue *Trollius lilacinus*, whilst in the turf is yellow-flowered *Allium semenovii*.

Slate scree has 'rivers' of white flowered *Callianthemum alatavicum* running down them along with *Ranunculus rufisepalus*. Noisy groups of Alpine Choughs are common and we'll find the lovely Guldenstadt's Redstart, typically only found at these high altitudes, often in company with Altai Accentor, Brandt's Mountain Finches and Plain Mountain Finches. Around us are spreading mats of *Saussurea gnaphalodes* with attractive woolly flowerheads and a pretty lilac *Lagotis* species.

Day 14

Chonashu Pass

Chonashu, at 3822 metres, is one of the highest passes we'll visit on this tour. On the way up we'll drive through meadows full of tall herbs with green *Veratrum lobelianum*, blue *Polemonium caucasicum*, purple-blue *Campanula glomerata*, wine-red *Aquilegia atrovinosa*, and colouring the shorter turf are thousands of orange and red *Hieraciums*. The tempestuous river by the roadside has Brown Dippers posing on mid-stream rocks and along the bouldery margins we will find the unique and beautiful Ibisbill, one of the world's strangest waders. We are likely to get superb views of these birds.

Hume's Lesser Whitethroats call from the shrubs as we stop to admire abundant deep yellow *Papaver croceum* and pretty palest pink forms of *Geranium collinum* that become increasingly abundant the higher we go. Clouded Apollos and Yellow-legged Tortoiseshells fly above alpine turf brimming with flowers. There are untold thousands of *Trollius ranunculinus*, many white *Anemone narcissiflora* subspecies *protracta*, and the handsome red-orange heads of *Rhodiola coccinea*. The scree and gravel lovers take over as we gain more height with yellow *Erysimum humillimum* colouring the roadside, mixed with *Aster alpinus*, *Crepis karelinii*, and lovely *Corydalis fedtschenkoana*. Just below the pass *Chorispora bungeana* forms perfect spreading domes of pink-lilac flowers completely obscuring the foliage beneath, and dotted among them is pretty compact little yellow *Draba oreades*. There are Androsaces and near melting snow drifts of *Primula nivalis* and yellow *Allium semenovii*. Birdlife up here includes White-winged Snow Finch, Brown Accentor, Altai Accentor, and the lovely Red-mantled Rosefinch.

Day 15

Round Issyk-Kol to Bishkek

Time to say farewell to the splendid Central Tien Shan and head back to Bishkek. En route we'll stop at some superb petroglyphs. There are many on a large site that sprawls over a few acres, many quite small, but some are impressively large and all depict wild animals, mainly ibex or deer, as well as three carved figurines from pre-Islamic Turkic tribes that passed through the region in the 8th century.

The scenery becomes more dramatic as we leave the lake behind. We'll pass some fine stands of *Alcea nudiflora* with big wide white flowers. In a valley of multi-coloured strata we'll find one of the most magnificent floral sights of the trip, a stand of tall slender spires of *Eremurus tianshanicus*, before we reach the comforts of Bishkek.

Day 16

Return to UK/Europe

Our flight departs Bishkek at breakfast time.

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