

Tien Shan

The Mountains of Heaven

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Depart UK

We will arrive into Almaty in the early hours and transfer straight to our hotel.

Days 2 & 3

Big Almaty Lake & Kaskelen

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.

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*.

Glorious flower-filled meadows and pencil-thin Tien Shan Spruce trees adorn the landscapes below Big Almaty lake – a truly idyllic scene. 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 *Oensis hora*. 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 leucostonum* 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.

We'll also explore the slopes of nearby Kaskelen rich in butterflies amid a finely varied mid-montane flora. During the evening of Day 3 we'll catch the 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 night's sleep before waking up in the village of Tulkubas with the snowy peaks of the Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve in sight to the south.

Days 4 - 11

The Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve: The Karatau Mountains and the Koksai Gorge

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*.

On the fringes of the Karatau are several large lakes which are home to many birds. A few pairs of Demoiselle Cranes summer here whilst in the grasslands around the lakes we may come across the occasional Little Bustard. Ruddy Shelduck, Black-headed Yellow Wagtails and Whiskered Terns are frequent and there'll be various waders to sort through and Marsh Harriers and Barbary Falcons in the air.

We'll have four nights in Yevgenny's Guesthouse in the village to explore the Karatau and the Koksai Canyon, however the centre-piece of our visit to Dzhabagly will be a four night/five day stay in the fabulous Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve.

Here 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) orchioides* are found with white Snowdon Lily whilst pink *Primula algida* mixes with brilliant orange-yellow *Trollius altaicus*. Two apolloes, 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 alpinines such as brilliant red *Primula minkwitziae* and a beautiful display of androsaces with yellow and red-centred flowers.

Day 12

Aksu Canyon then evening transfer by first class sleeper to Almaty

During the morning we'll visit the spectacular Aksu Canyon close by Dzhabagly. This is a great spot for birds of prey and vultures and the striking scenery is also home to some very unusual and beautiful rock-dwellers such as *Scutellaria immaculata* and blue clumps of *Sergia sewerzowii*. 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.

Day 13

Cosmos Station

High above Big Almaty Lake is the Cosmos Station a relict of the Russian time here. Surrounding the rather derelict station is a high alpine world of stunning beauty. 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 Gldenstadt's Redstart, Red-breasted Rosefinch and Himalayan Snowcock, whose eerie calls will drift down to us every so often.

Day 14

Depart Almaty

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