

The Altai

Central Asia's Golden Mountains

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1 Depart Europe

Day 2 to Ust-Kamenogorsk & the Irtysh River

After our overnight flight to Astana (Nur Sultan) we connect with a two hour internal flight that takes us to Ust-Kamenogorsk's provincial airport from where we'll transfer to the lovely Dedeman Hotel beautifully situated by the great river Irtysh. Monkshoods grow amongst the willows and aspens of riverine woodlands by the hotel, and Grey-headed Woodpeckers and Golden Orioles will be amongst the first birds we see.

Day 3 Kalbinsky Hills & Zaissan

The graves of Djunar Warriors mark our eastward progress through high steppe-covered hills ablaze with vibrant displays of peonies, delphiniums, ligularias, and pink *Lavatera thuringiaca*. To the north the mountains rise higher and higher as we parallel the main Altai ranges. The large and bright 'alpherakyi' race of the Apollo floats over this finery, and Dryads and Hungarian Gliders patrol streams where many blues and skippers gather to sip salts. Imperial and Steppe Eagles soar over relict Scots Pine Forests and as we near Zaissan Lake large numbers of Rose-coloured Starlings appear. The steppe is very flowery with the tall pink spires of the Burning Bush *Dictamnus angustifolius* a frequent sight amongst several monkshoods that include *Aconitum septentrionale*, pale *Aconitum barbatum* and blue *Aconitum decipiens*. *Lilium pilosiusculum*, *Campanula volgensis*, *Scabiosa ochroleuca* and *Clematis integrifolia* are common and along streams we'll see swarms of *Dactylorhiza umbrosa* and various louseworts such as *Pedicularis amoena*. Along the route we'll see marvellous shows of *Paeonia anomala*, the first of many!

In the afternoon we'll enter the Bukhtarma Valley, a tectonic rift which separates the Altai into northern and southern halves, and some way along this we'll arrive at the stunningly situated cottages that will be our home for the next few days. Set amid flowery meadows and backed by the forested slopes of the Naryn Range, this place could hardly have a better setting for those who enjoy flowers and stunning scenery. Rare *Daphne altaica* flowers under Birches where we can see Marsh Tits, various woodpeckers, and Western Capercaillie. There's plenty of Maral in these woods, the local form of Red Deer. A prize we'll seek down by the river is a small stand of the exquisite Pink Lady's Slipper Orchid, *Cypripedium macranthos*. This stunning orchid

has extremely large pouched flowers and a common name for it is indeed Large-flowered Lady's Slipper.

Day 4

The Burkhat Pass & the Naryn Tundra

To the south of our accommodation lies a long line of high mountains, a wild region now protected as the Katon-Karagay National Park. There's one track that ascends 3,000 feet from the Bukhtarma Valley. On the slopes are beautiful Siberian Pine, birch and Siberian Fir forests. The mossy forest floor is carpeted in Twinflower, various wintergreens (including One-flowered) and the beautiful *Aquilegia sibirica*. Striking pinky-red umbels of *Primula sibirica* rise from bright green sphagnum by streams. Siberian Bellflowers, and a range of spectacular gentians and louseworts. Camberwell Beauties and Poplar Admirals join a host of butterflies along tracks through sunny glades whilst birds include Yellow-breasted and Meadow Buntings and the beautiful Long-tailed Rosefinch. White-backed and Northern Three-toed Woodpeckers inhabit primary pine forest with typical Siberian species such as Pine Grosbeak, Siberian Tit, Siberian Jay and the raucous Nutcracker.

Above is the Burkhat Pass (7,000 feet) where Siberian Tundra is surrounded by snowy peaks. 100km away to the northeast glistens Belukha, the Altai's highest mountain. Lovely Siberian Dog's-tooth Violets are common near snow patches where great blue colonies of *Gentiana grandiflora* mix with beautiful white *Anemone crinita*, *Callianthemum angustifolium* and the local windflower, *Dryas oxyodonta*. *Claytonias* and *Bergenia crassifolia* add a somewhat North American feel whilst an array of saxifrages include the gorgeous golden-yellow *hirculus*, purple *oppositifolia*, and local *punctata* and *terekensis*. The strange and beautiful blue *Ahlbergia frivaldszkyi* flies with Lapland Fritillaries and *Oensis nanna*. Ptarmigan, Willow Grouse and Dotterel breed amongst the dwarf birch and we can find abundant Bluethroats and stunning Siberian Rubythroats. Grey Marmots and Altai Pikas emit sharp warning calls from bouldery screes inhabited by Eversmann's Redstarts and both Brandt's Mountain and Hodgson's Rosy Finches. The strange tomato relative *Physochlaina physaloides* inhabits roadside rock mounds.

Onwards in the Naryn Tundra is a rough track frequented only by occasional Kazakh horseman that takes us through boundless sub-alpine meadows, so unspoilt that livestock are a rare sight! Valleys are carpeted with gentians, bellflowers, edelweiss, *dracocephalums*, dwarf yellow monkshoods and beautiful blue *Iris ruthenica* and yellow *Iris bloudowii*.

Day 5

Sedlo Pass in the Talovka Mountains

We pass through some very rustic villages as we head to the drier south-facing side of the rift and the glorious flowery meadows of the Sedlo Pass. A gentle walk uphill

from the road takes us through a shrubbery of the endemic *Sibiraea laevigata*, the bushes beset with spires of creamy blooms. The striking flowers of the Burning Bush are everywhere, indeed the meadows here are a picture with *Aconitums leucostomum* and *decipiens*, delphiniums, and pretty *Bupleurums aureum* and *multinervis*. Drier turf has much of yellow valerian *Patrinia intermedia*. Apollo butterflies include Small Apollo, yellow *Parnassius eversmanni*, and rare and local species like *Parnassius stubbendorffii* and *Parnassius ariadne*. Assmann's, Scarce and Asian are among a multitude of Fritillaries. There are many 'European' species - Esper's Marbled White, Mountain Argus, the beautiful Alpine Blue, stunning orange Scarce Copper, and Fritillaries such as Marsh, Dark Green and Lesser Marbled. And many unfamiliar ones - *Melitaea latonigena*, *Triphysa phryne* and *Tongeia fischeri* amongst many others - the butterfly fauna is very rich. Corncrakes call from the meadows whilst in flowery shrubberies we'll see Blyth's Reed Warblers and Scarlet Rosefinches in abundance.

Day 6 **the Bukhtarma Valley**

Today we'll follow the great rift valley eastwards almost as far east as you can go in Kazakhstan. Ruddy Shelducks patrol the sinuous streams that snake across damp fields where we can find colonies of delicate Musk Orchid, the unusual *Dactylorhiza salina*, and *Primula longiscapa*. Massed displays of pink or white *Hesperis sibirica* line the fast-flowing but already impressively large Bukhtarma River. Under huge poplars by its banks we'll come across our very own European Lady's Slipper! Turning north towards the Russian border we'll stop at an intriguing museum at Berel where we'll be able to see some of the treasures and artifacts unearthed in the nearby 'frozen tombs' notably those belong to a Saka prince who was interned in the 4th century BC along with no less than thirteen fully-saddled horses. The surrounding meadows are full of butterflies, notably various fritillaries.

As we near our destination the great snowy peak of Belukha, rising to 15,000 feet on the border with Russian Siberia, rises in front of us, a fantastic sight.

Days 7 – 9 **Rakhmanovskiye Spa Resort & Mount Belukha**

We are based in nice cottages at Rachmanovskie Klyuchi, a hot springs 'resort' built in the great mountain's foothills. This is a quite stunning setting on the shores of a lake amidst beautiful Siberian Pine and spruce forests. Siberian Chipmunks chatter around our cottages and down by the bar Eversmann's Redstarts and Pallas's Grasshopper Warblers breed. Rachmanovskie's lake has well-constructed boardwalks running along both north and south shores allowing us perfect access into what is otherwise a pristine environment. The mossy forest floor is carpeted in Twinflower, various wintergreens, and little gems such as Lesser Twayblade. Striking pinky-red umbels of *Primula sibirica* rise from bright green sphagnum by streams. European Mink hunt voles along the boardwalk edges, and Siberian Tits and Willow Tits are common in the trees.

The forest thins quickly as one heads uphill – the tree line is hardly half an hour's slow potter uphill. The flowers now take over. A blue carpet of a million *Aquilegia glandulosa* stretches out towards the snow-capped peaks, interrupted by colonies of luminous orange *Trollius altaica*. Pink *Pedicularis elata*, its flowery wands 70cm tall, and black-etched white *Pedicularis compacta* add their beauty to the show alongside orange and cream *Lathyrus gmelinii* and the local Martagon Lily, *Lilium pilosiusculum*. The strange inflated stems of white-flowered *Allium altaicum* draws the eye, it is one of many species of *Allium* we'll see during this trip. Move higher we reach the tundra and the blue turns to gentians, hundreds of thousands of them, this time mixing with the very bright yellow of *Ranunculus altaicus*, a very choice buttercup! There's abundant primulas, *Callianthemums* and all manner of tiny alpines hidden in the rocks on a pass with breath-taking views of brilliant Belukha.

Birds also include Yellow-breasted and Meadow Buntings and the beautiful Long-tailed Rosefinch. A pair or two of immaculate Black-throated Divers and beautiful Velvet Scoter, the males with striking orange and black bills, cruise the mirror-smooth lakes. White-backed and Northern Three-toed Woodpeckers inhabit primary pine forest alongside typical Siberian species such as Pine Grosbeak, Siberian Tit, Siberian Jay and the raucous Nutcracker. Pacific Swifts carve speeding arcs through the sky on the pass above our cottages where the air is so clear it seems that great Belukha is within touching distance. Red Marmots and Altai Pikas emit sharp warning calls from bouldery scree inhabited by Altai Accentors and Great Rosefinches.

Day 10

To Ust-Kamenogorsk

Today will largely be spent journeying back to Ust-Kamenogorsk and the comforts of the Dedeman, though we'll find time to stop and enjoy the flowers and butterflies on the way too.

Days 11 & 12

West Altai Nature Reserve - Ridder

Over 55,000 hectares of pristine montane environment forms one of the largest protected areas of Kazakhstan. The West Altai State Nature Reserve covers the Ivanovskiy and Lineysky ranges and the valleys of the Belaya and Barsuk Rivers and a wonderful mix of forests, tundra, and mountain meadow.

This is a fully protected area and we have to obtain special permits to enter as the landscape beyond the entrance gate is fully as nature intended and no human interference is countenanced (at least not without a permit!). The forests are superb, the Pines and the Firs immense. Blooming between them are thousands upon thousands of beautiful *Paeonia anomala*, the gorgeous blue and white large-flowered form of *Aquilegia glandulosa*, statuesque yellow-flowered *Alfredia cernua*, and tall veratrums. Walking through the open woodlands Capercaillie, Black Grouse

and Hazelhen are sometimes flushed, whilst Pine Buntings sing from larches and the somnolent calls of Oriental Cuckoo drift down to us. We'll walk up past the delightful umbels of *Cortusa altaica* and patches of yellow *Corydalis nobilis* and white *Scrophularia altaica*. By roadside are clumps of clear yellow *Papaver nudicaule*. We'll head up to a ridge where flowers litter the turf, including mauve *Corydalis pauciflora* and abundant gentians. Giant Dartmoor-esque tors are stacked up all the way along the ridges producing a very distinctive landscape. The views are sensational, looking all the way into Russia over huge expanses of swampy valley bottom where Moose might just be seen if we are lucky. This is the stronghold of the giant 'red deer' subspecies known as the Maral, the stags with antlers of truly gargantuan proportions. Red Squirrels and Chipmunks are always a-chatter, and Brown Bear, Wolf, Sable, Otter and Wolverine occur, and Lynx too, although we are unlikely to see these.

Day 13

Ridder Botanical Garden and back to Ust-Kamenogorsk

Hidden down a back street, unannounced even by the smallest of signs, Ridder's Altai Botanical Garden doesn't seem much when you pull up at the overgrown iron gate. However it has been more than eighty years in the making and there's around seventy staff employed there. There's a large tree collection but it is really the native meadow plants of the Altai that make this place so special. Carefully planted along a small winding stream are the vast majority of the Altai's fantastic flower species, it is like somebody has made the best meadows in the World!

After lunch we'll head back to Ust-Kamenogorsk, stopping in some impressively tall pine woods where the tall-forb community reaches in zenith with all the flowering plants, *Aconitums*, *Alfredias*, *Cirsiums* and *Stemmacantha carthamoides*, towering above our heads! Then it is back once more to the Irtysh River and the welcoming arms of the Dedeman Hotel.

Day 14

Departure

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our tours to the Altai Mountains. If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

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