

Kyrgyzia

Early Spring in the Celestial Mountains

A Greentours Itinerary

Over ninety per cent of Kyrgyzia lies above the top of the UK's highest mountain! Independent after the collapse of Soviet rule in Central Asia, this stunningly beautiful country never actually existed before the Soviet Union, rather it was invented (as an autonomous region) in the 1920s by Stalin. Perhaps not surprising then that few of us know much about this land of alpine lakes, fast-flowing rivers, rolling steppelands, conifer forests and rare walnut forests that lie between the arms of the giant snow-capped peaks of the Celestial Mountains.

Time waits for nobody and that's certainly true of spring bulbs. Hence we are offering two tours to Kyrgyzia a month apart. Quite simply there is a very different range of bulbs to be seen on the two trips. This, the first, concentrates on some fabulous Juno Irises, some of the most beautiful of all the irises, as well as some stunning Frits and early Tulips.

Day 1

Depart UK

An afternoon departure from UK/European airports.

Day 2

Arrive Bishkek. Foothills of the Alexander Mountain Range. Serafimovka and Issyk-Ata Gorges

Bishkek will provide us with a comfortable base to explore the bulb-rich Besh-Kungei Hills. By patches of snow are the white stars of *Crocus alatavicus* and more lovely *Eranthis longistipitata*. Here are botanical gems such as the wonderfully unpronounceable *Iridodictyum kolpakowskianum*. This botanical treasure has falls dressed in blues and yellows and dipped in purple ink, making it a particularly photogenic species when set against the stunning scenery in the background. Another botanical gem of the highest calibre is the gorgeous ice-blue *Juno kuschakewiczii*.

In the immense landscapes of the Serafimovka Gorges we'll find the yellow pyramids of *Leontice ewersmannii*, little *Gagea brevistoloniifera*, the floriferous shrubby dock *Atraphaxis pyrifolia*, and *Tulipa binutans* whose multi-headed blooms are white with a yellow centre and with a dusky reddish-violet wash on the outside.

Day 3

The Teo-Ashuu Pass, Suusamyr Valley, Ala-Bel Pass and Chychkan Gorge

We'll head over the Teo-Ashuu Pass into the magical Suusamyr Valley where we'll start to find the strange fritillary-like *Korolkova sewerzowii* whose tiered bells range from pale greenish-butterscotch to almost black. Here is much *Colchicum luteum* and on the alpine slopes as we approach the Ala-Bel Pass are swathes of *Tulipa dasystemon* providing a fine show.

Day 4

Village of Toluk in the Suusamyr Mountain Range

Surrounded by rugged river gorges, alpine meadows, and the towering, snow-dusted peaks of the Tien Shan Mountains is the remote scenic village of Toluk. Around the village we will again come across *Korolkova sewerzowii* as well as the impossibly gorgeous little iris *Iridodictyum kolpakowskianum*. Here is much *Leontice ewersmanni* and on the alpine slopes close to the village are massed displays of *Tulipa turkestanica* and *Tulipa ferganica*.

Day 5

To Tash-Kumyr along the Naryn River Canyon

The shiny white stars of *Tulipa jacquesii* adorn the roadside as we cross the Fergana Range en route to Tash-Kumyr. Along the scenic Naryn River Canyon we'll find the stacked leaves of *Juno graberiana* packed full of bright blue blooms, as well as the little-known *Juno rodionenkoi*. The white stars of *Tulipa jacquesii* illuminate the canyon's landscapes with yellow *Tulipa ferganica*. Newly minted *Tulipa pseudofegania* grows in dry areas alongside the unusual white sub-shrubby *Vinca erecta* and weird orange *Gymnospermium albertii*. Some fine petroglyphs can be found in the vicinity of the village of Ryazansay and we'll certainly take time out from botanizing to visit them.

Day 6

Bozbu-Too Mountain Range

Reaching the Abyshev Pass between the Kepeli and Bozbu-Too ranges we'll again find lovely *Juno narynensis* and snowmelt here is a rich hunting ground for the botanist - we'll find *Scilla puschkinoides*, more *Colchicum luteum*, and *Anemone gortschakowii*, which like *Anemone petiolulosa*, has bright yellow flowers, the undersides of the petals often red. Descending There's both *Tulipa ferganica* and *Gagea ferganica*. Fritillary-like *Rhinopetalum rugillosum* is a beautiful plant, though small in stature it is hung with numbers of stunning pink bells. Another prize plant will be *Primula fedtschenkoi* with gorgeous dark-eyed deep pink blooms.

Day 7

To Toktogul along the Naryn River Canyon

Reaching high ground we'll find some nice snowmelt species including the unusual bright yellow *Colchicum luteum*. Growing with these is the rare *Juno austrotadchatkalica* with pale greenish-white blooms. *Gagea circumplexa* and the well-named wild almond *Amygdalus spinosissima* are characteristic of lower ground where we also find masses of elegant yellow *Tulipa ferganica*.

Day 8

The Chychkan Gorge and the Ala-Bel and Otmek Passes

We'll pass through the Ala-Bel Pass and then as we approach the high Otmok Pass we'll pass through swathes of *Colchicum luteum*. Later there will be displays of tulips as we descend to the city of Talas.

Day 9

The Besh-Tash Gorge (Talas Mountain Range) and the Echkili-Too Mountain Range

Today we'll explore the Besh-Tash Gorge (Talas Ridge) and the Echkelyu-Too Ridge. Here we'll find the pinkest of the little pink Fritillaries, this one *Rhinopetalum karelinii*. The Besh-Tash gorge is part of a large protected area, the name coming from the five human-set stones we'll pass in the valley, though Besh Tash's fame is more to do with its' spectacular alpine scenery. The flora is outstanding. We'll find variable *Juno subdecolarata* which comes in palest yellows, whites and a cold blue. Even more variable is *Tulipa ostrowskiana*, with its red, yellow or any combination in between blooms. Again we'll find *Anemone gortschakowii* and *Tulipa turkestanica*, here with *Gagea rufidula*. There's quite a rich and unusual flora with *Euphorbia ferganensis*, architectural *Euphorbia rapulum*, *Astragalus aulieatensis*, and *Astragalus pallasii*.

Day 10

The Ak-tash Mountains

Exploring the Ak-Tash Mountains above Talas we'll find all manner of beautiful plants. Fritillary-like *Rhinopetalum stenanthum* offers its glorious pink bells and there are some fine colour forms of variable *Juno subdecolarata*. Many species of Tulip adorn the montane steppe. We'll be familiar by now with *Tulipa turkestanica*, but *Tulipa bifloriformis* and *Tulipa orthopoda*, the latter a perfect miniature tulip with plants hardly taller than 4cm, will be new to us. There are also yet more of the variable *Tulipa ostrowskiana*.

Day 11

via the Suusamyр Valley to Bishkek

En route to Bishkek we'll traverse the flower-filled Suusamyр Valley in between the Fergana and Talas Mountains. *Colchicum kesselringii* will be in fine form along our route. This unusual little *Colchicum* has white funnels with the outside striped in deep purple-violet with contrasting yellow anthers in the centre.

Day 12

Departure from Bishkek

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