

The Tien Shan to the Altai Mountains

The Dzhungarian Gate

A Greentours Itinerary

The eastern Kazakh border with China has been a closed book for a century or so and even with the opening up of Kazakhstan the lack of roads and even towns of any size has kept this remote region from outsiders.

For two millennia the Dzhungarian Gate was a major line of communication between western and eastern Asia and through it passed some notable armies as well as trade. A flat valley floor is hemmed in by precipitous mountains on both flanks so completely that any other route through them is incomprehensible. The adjacent peaks reach a heady 14,500 feet!

The tour leaves the eastern fringes of the Tien Shan mountains and passes through the Taukum and Akdala Deserts to the Dzhungarian Alatau. From there we pass Alakol Lake before entering the species-rich Tarbagaty Mountains. Then we head north across the Zaissan Depression before entering the more Siberian realms of the Kalbinksy Hills on the western fringes of the Altai.

Simple hotels provide accommodation throughout and we'll be accompanied by the same excellent team that looks after our groups in the Altai Mountains. There will be much travelling but always through wonderful vast central Asian landscapes, varying from endless rolling montane steppes to high mountain peaks, and from bird-rich wetlands to sandy deserts. You'll experience the largely uninhabited wildernesses of the mountains and explore what are, in terms of fauna and flora, very little-known regions. Indeed you'll soon note that several of the plant names bear the name of your guide as Vladimir has discovered new tulips and fritillarias when guiding groups through this region in recent years.

Day 1

Depart UK/Europe

Day 2

Arrive Almaty. Kaskelen Valley

After our overnight flight from the UK one can relax in the hotel or start in the mountains which rise just to the south of the city of Almaty. The high peaks will be thoroughly snowbound but the low mountains of Kaskelen have, at this season, an exceptional flora, with abundant tulips as well as the lovely *Iris alberti* and shows of pink *Primula kaufmanniana* blooming amid a carpet of gagea and corydalis species. The yellow stars of *Tulipa dasystemon* bloom among pretty pink *Primula algida*, the delicate *Corydalis glaucescens* and abundant *Gagea emarginata*. In beautiful forests of Tien Shan Spruce we can find Black-throated Accentors and Songar Tits

while snow-clad, juniper-dotted slopes offer a good chance of seeing that archetypal mountain bird, the charismatic Himalayan Snowcock. We'll also see rich butter-coloured *Arnebia tschimganica* and delicate *Viola collina*, whilst *Caragana camilli-schneideri* offers wands of orange and yellow blooms.

Day 3

Kapshagai, Kogaly valley and Rudnichnyi

We'll descend from the foot of the Tien Shan into the sands of the Kapshagai where we'll enjoy the wonderful bulbous flora of the Central Asian steppes. Tulips soon start appearing, sumptuous red *Tulipa behmiana*, often in company with elegant *Eremurus crispus*. There are myriad flowers as the summer sun will not yet have burnt the sands dry. Low growing shrubs of *Cerasus tianshanicus*, their pale and deep pink blooms perfuming the air, shelter lots of *Astragalus*, *Silene quadriloba* and white *Linaria transiliensis*. The attractive *Pseudohandelia umbellifera* with silvery foliage and tight heads of yellow flowers inhabit the semi-deserts. In this same habitat we'll find *Allium caricifolium* with spherical heads of pretty pink or white flowers, also *Allium subscapum* and *Allium tschulaktavicum*. Then we'll head up into the Dzhungarian Alatau, a mountain range that rises even sharper than the Tien Shan. It is high enough, reaching 14,500 feet, to have plenty of snow lying.

Day 4

Tekeli Valley

We'll explore the wild and beautiful Tekeli Valley in the Dzhungarian Alatau. The Tekeli is one of the deep river valleys that descend from these spectacular mountains. Here we'll find again the pretty *Primula kaufmanniana* but now it is mixed with yellow *Primula macrocalyx*. There's the local blue and white columbine *Aquilegia vitalii* and here we are likely to have our first meeting with *Tulipa corynestemon*, a tulip related to the more widespread *Tulipa kolpakowskiana* but with club-shaped stamens. Like that species it is variable in colour.

Day 5

Alakol Lake and Taskora valley

As we descend from the Dzhungarian Alatau a giant fault cuts mountain from plain as if with a knife. The flat valley floor is hemmed in by precipitous mountains on both flanks so completely that any other route through is incomprehensible – so connecting arid northwest China with the central Asian Steppes is the Dzhungarian Gate. For two millennia this was a major line of communication between western and eastern Asia and through it passed some notable armies as well as much trade. The road through the 'gate' passes through a black and gravelly desert, a forbidding place, where reptiles are the commonest form of wildlife. We'll see Sunwatchers and various 'race-runners' and the birdlife will include larks and wheatears. The wonderfully

scenic Taskora River offers relief from the stark scenery and in it we'll surely find the rather weird-looking *Tulipa annae*.

Continuing across a tectonic depression we pass a series of large lakes culminating in the 2500 square kilometre Alakol. The road takes us across the salty plains and semi-deserts and steppes between the water bodies. Only a thousand feet above sea level it is dry and warm in this lowland. Kokhtuma is a little holiday village set by Alakol Lake and provides an ideal base to explore the area and a little comfort too. The lake holds a variety of wetland birds including Dalmatian Pelicans and various terns. White-tailed Eagles sit as if they are awaiting scraps, though all they usually get is hassle from avaricious Black Kites!

Day 6

Kol-Asu Valley

When we did this trip back in 2008 we wrote "This is wholly uncharted territory for the modern botanist so we really do not know what we are going to find here. Sure there will be tulips and irises and probably *Eremurus* too, but we know not what species we'll encounter, whether widespread or local!" And so it proved to be! For in the mountains either side of the Dzhungarian Gate new plants were found. Today in the fabulous Ko-Asu Valley we may make the acquaintance of a *Fritillaria* discovered by Vladimir, newly-minted *Fritillaria kolbintsevii*. While he was at it he also spotted an unknown Tulip, now also named after him. With luck we'll find *Tulipa kolbintsevii* in good flower. We are also likely to have our first meeting with *Fritillaria pallidiflora* and by late snow patches are beautiful forms of *Corydalis schanginii*.

Day 7

Zhalanash Lake and Yrgaity River Valley

This will be our chance to explore an unknown area as Vladimir has only briefly touched upon the Yrgaity River Valley and Zhalanash Lake. Happy hunting!

Days 8 & 9

Tarbagatai Mountains

Further east is the little-known Tarbagatai Alatau, a range of mountains that provides a startling divide between the Alakol and Zaissan basins. They don't have the spectacular peaks of the Dzhungarian Alatau nor indeed the Altai, but nonetheless they have extensive undisturbed montane steppe. Heading east along the Tarbagatai Mountains we'll traverse middle altitude rocky valleys where bloom *Allium inderiense*, *Fritillaria meleagroides*, *Pedicularis dasystachys* and stands of bright pink *Paeonia intermedia*. Beautiful little clumps of the crucifer *Odontarrhena obovata* adorn the rocks. Most unusual are the pretty lilac tomato-relative *Physochlaina physaloides* and a sub-shrubby cress, *Dendroarabis fruticulosa*. Not to be confused with *Fritillaria pallidiflora* is equally pale *Fritillaria pallida* actually now thought to be a

cream-coloured form of *Fritillaria meleagris*. We'll encounter swathes of golden *Tulipa altaica*, fine purple-blue *Iris glaucescens*, and the lovely pale rose *Tulipa patens*.

Day 10

The Marble Pass

During the next few days we'll explore a wild land with incredibly varied topography where deserts, lakes and high mountains all meet. Borders do too, and we'll sometimes be close to Chinese border and also quite close to the Mongolian border too.

Towards the Chinese border we'll pass by some vast sand dunes before rising up to the very edge of the great Altai Mountains, and the Marble Pass. Here is a very rich flora with all sorts of nice species including irises, corydalis, peonies and of course, tulips. Three species are found on these rocky slopes including the already familiar *Tulipa altaica* and *Tulipa patens*. New though will be yellow *Tulipa heteropetala*, a close relative of *Tulipa uniflora*. In alpine meadows above the Siberian Larch forests we'll find drifts of fabulous *Erythronium sibiricum* in fetching shades of pink and yellow. These are often mixed with *Iris glaucescens*, butter-yellow *Gymnospermium altaicum* and lovely royal blue and pinky-purple *Pulmonaria mollis*. Growing in shrubberies on the edge of the woodlands are steel-blue forms of *Clematis integrifolia* and an eye-catching ivory form of *Fritillaria verticillata*.

Day 11

Saur and Monrak Mountains and the Chilikty Valley

The Saur and Monrak Mountains offer species-rich meadows and steppe. We'll find more *Tulipa altaica* amongst plenty of spring ephemerals that include diminutive *Gagea liotardii*. *Caltha palustris* will be in flower! In the Chilikty Valley we'll encounter Siberian Larch forests in what is otherwise a tree-free landscape. Tulips are abundant and we'll find more *Fritillaria meleagroides* and *Fritillaria pallidiflora*. *Androsace ovczinnikovii* adorns rocky bluffs here.

Day 12

Kein-Kerish

Near the Kein Kerish Canyon, where erosion has revealed layers of brilliant red, yellow and silvery-grey clays, is a viewpoint that provides a marvellous panorama over more than 3,000 square kilometres of desert, mountain and lake. Though a desert, at this season there's plenty of flowers such as elegant *Allium tulipifolium*, yellow and purple *Scutellaria albertii*, and *Cancrinia discoidea*, with its yellow pompoms. The spikes of *Cistanche salsa* emerge colourful from the sands. The flora is quite fascinating with lots of *Astragalus* species, beautiful yellow *Chorispora sibirica* and pink and white *Pseudosedum lievenii* blooming amongst the curious 'bonsai trees' of the little chenopod *Anabasis truncata*. Upland Buzzards and Black Kites circle briefly over the

canyon before returning to their perches. The surrounding desert is home to Wolves though we are far more likely to encounter the Red-cheeked Susliks that sustain them. We'll cross saxaul desert where we might see Pallas's Sandgrouse and Black Larks.

Days 13 & 14

The Kalbinski Hills and Targyn Pass

We'll pass by Zaissan Lake where we can see elegant Demoiselle Cranes guarding their scruffy youngsters, and offshore are small flotillas of Dalmatian Pelicans and groups of Great Black-headed Gulls.

Bronze-age graves and cairns mark our progress into the sparsely inhabited Kalbinski Hills southeast of Ust-Kamenogorsk. The relict Scots Pine forests of the central and highest part of these hills forms a bizarre landscape - Baltic Island heaths meets Caledonian Forests! Granitic tors just like those found on Dartmoor dot the landscape and amongst the pines are *Abies sibirica* and *Juniperus sabina*. A fine flora awaits and there's plenty of birdlife too. Again we'll see *Tulipa altaica* and *Tulipa patens*. Little *Tulipa biflora* is one of the more widely distributed tulips that occurs in this region. Yellow *Primula macrocalyx* mixes with patches of *Pulsatilla patens*. On the Targyn Pass we can find the large yellow blooms of *Adonis wolgensis*, *Paeonia hybrida* and *Corydalis nobilis*. On Day 14 in the morning we'll visit the Chechek Pass. Here are good patches of *Iris scariosa* as well as *Gagea fedtschenkoana*, *Valeriana dubia*, *Potentilla humifusa*, *Orostachys spinosa*, *Nonea pulla* and *Pedicularis physocalyx*. During the afternoon of Day 14 we'll take a flight back to Almaty and settle into a hotel airport there in preparation for the morning flight back the next day.

Day 15

Departure

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our tours from the Tien Shan to the Altai (the Dzhungarian Gate). 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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