

Kyrgyzia

Flowers of the Silk Road

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1

Depart UK/Europe

Over ninety per cent of Kyrgyzia lies above the top of the UK's highest mountain! This is a land of alpine lakes, fast-flowing rivers, rolling steppelands and conifer forests that lie between the arms of the giant snow-capped peaks of the Celestial Mountains.

Day 2

Arrive Bishkek. Kegety Gorge

We'll arrive into Bishkek quite early in the morning and head to the hotel and enjoy a breakfast and possibly a short rest before heading out into the magnificent countryside that surrounds the city.

The deep Kegety Gorge cuts into the northern slopes of the main Kyrgyz Ridge. Beautiful meadows have abundant orange *Trollius dschungaricus* and one of the most magnificent floral sights of the trip, a stand of tall slender spires of *Eremurus tianshanicus*. And on gravelly ridges are some gorgeous displays of *Trollius lilacinus* mixed with bright yellow *Saxifraga macrocalyx*, gorgeous pink cushions of *Parrya stenocarpa* and *Sibbaldia tetrandra*. Among many botanical gems we'll encounter today are widespread species such as *Viola biflora*, *Pedicularis oederi* and *Astragalus alpinus*, and more typically Central Asian species such as *Androsace lehmanniana* and *Viola tianshanica*.

Days 3 & 4

Suusamyr Valley, the Teo-Ashuu, Otmek, Ala-Bel passes, and the Chychkan Gorge

We cross two high passes en route to Chychkan and return over them again the next day. We'll pass flowery montane steppe before reaching Chychkan whose green landscapes and increasingly alpine scenery are dotted with Tien Shan Spruce and Birch. We'll pass scattered *Eremurus fuscus* and will soon find ourselves above 2500m as we approach the mountain passes of Ala Bel & Otmok. Abundant *Phlomis oreophila*, *Pedicularis dolichorhiza*, *Pedicularis violascea*, *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. Mats of gorgeous grey-hairy *Dracocephalum origanoides* mix with golden *Potentillas*, glacier-white *Trollius komarovii*, and scintillating sky-blue mounds of the local 'king-of-the-alps' *Eritrichium villosum*. Pale yellow mats of *Scutellaria przewalskii* flower prolifically alongside *Anemone narcissiflora* subspecies *protracta*

and strange yellow-brown *Allium fedtschenkoanum*, 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 5 to Kochkor village

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 scree 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 platycanthus* with red-striped white flowers. *Iris lactea* 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.

Our route 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. 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 tragacanthoides*, and delicate white *Consolida rugulosum*.

In the driest steppes along our route we'll look for the strange parasitic *Cynomorium songaricum* whose deep red clubs emerge from the sandy soil looking more like a fungus than a plant. With it are *Caragana laeta*, *Verbascum songaricum*, *Limonium hoeltzeri*, *Goniolimon cuspidatum* and more *Astragalus* species including *borodinii*, *larvatus* and *kronenburgii*.

Day 6

Lake Son-Kul through the Kalmak-Ashuu, Terskei-Torpok and John-Bulak passes to the city of Naryn

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 *Chorisporea bungeana* as well as a pale yellow species, perhaps *Chorisporea 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-bellied *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*. Deep red *Allium atrosanguineum* blooms with ice-blue *Lagotis integrifolia*, yellow *Pedicularis pubiflora*, and both *Astragalus hypogaeus* and *Astragalus almatensis*.

Day 7

Tash-Rabat Gorge

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 caespitosa*. 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*. We'll find engaging green, yellow and red clumps of *Rhodiola pamiroalaica*, elegant *Ligularia narynensis*, pretty yellow *Astragalus alatavicus*, pink with a hint of lilac *Linum heterosepalum* and the beautiful white daisy flowers of the scree-dwelling *Richteria pyrethroides*. Along roadsides there's *Iris halophila* var. *Sogdiana* and the superficially similar *Iris loczyi*, *Stelleropsis tianschanica*, a strange plant related to the daphnes, and the choice 'sea-lavender' *Limonium myrianthum*.

Day 8

Kara-Unkur Gorge, Dolon Pass, Kara-Kudzhur Gorge, and Orto-Tokoi to Kadzhi-Sai on the southern coast of Issyk-Kul Lake

Today will see us being assailed by an unremitting diet of grand scenery, grand even by Kyrgyz standards. We'll pass high mountains, traverse the famous Dolon Pass, and descend through gorges and dry steppe to the shores of Issyk-Kul Lake before settling into our accommodation in the village of Kadzhi-Sai. We'll pass shrubberies with *Lonicera alberti*, high ground with *Primula pamirica* and *Dracocephalum nodulosum*, and dry steppe with *Acantholimon alatavicum* and *Hedysarum kirghisorum*.

Day 9

Tosor Gorge in the Terskei Range

We'll enter a narrow rocky canyon where the road runs close to the cascading river and thick sea-buckthorn brush. Later this opens out into wide alpine valleys before heading up to the 3893m pass. How far we'll get depends on road conditions and how much time we spend looking at the flora and fauna on the way up! We'll see fine displays of pink *Primula algida* and *Rhodiola coccinea*. *Cortusa turkestanica* is abundant in damp areas. A prize find will be the brilliant *Erigeron aurantiacus* whilst lilac *Erigeron heterochaeta* is hardly less of a beauty. Indeed the daisy family has excelled itself here – *Pyrethrum karelinii* is a dog-daisy of some distinction and *Waldheimia tridactylites* covers rocks in mounds of lovely pink blooms.

Day 10

Barskoon Gorge in the Terskei Range

The long spine of the Zailinsky Alatau reflects 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. 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* and little pink *Primula algida*, whilst attractive *Iris ruthenica* forms clumps by the roadside. Stunning Himalayan Rubythroats sit atop low juniper scrub and here we'll be 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 11

Turgen-Ak-Suu Gorge and the Chon-Ashuu 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. On the surrounding flats we'll see strange *Caragana jubata* whose little bushes have a narrowly columnar upright habit that makes them en masse as arresting sight. 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 *Cysticorydalis 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 turkestanica* and yellow *Allium semenovii*. One of the highlights of the tour will be two unusual and distinctive alpine. Blooming in mats amongst the rocks is the 'asiatica' subspecies of *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, and a very fine form of this widespread plant it is. On nearby scree we'll look for one of the most charismatic plants of high altitudes, *Saussurea glacialis*. This strange plant forms a little grey-hairy pyramid beset with deep purple blooms. Its nearest relatives are amongst the highest altitude plants in the World. Birdlife up here includes White-winged Snow Finch, Brown Accentor, Altai Accentor, and the lovely Red-mantled Rosefinch.

Day 12

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 splendid stands of *Eremurus tianshanicus*, before we reach the comforts of Bishkek.

Day 14

Return to UK/Europe

Our flight departs Bishkek mid-morning.

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