

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 brevistolonifera*, 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

Flight Bishkek to Almaty

Days 13 & 14

Day at leisure in Almaty

You'll have a couple of days to relax and/or explore the city of Almaty before commencing the second part of your tour. The snow-capped peaks of the Tien Shan rise right behind the city, reminding you that the tulips must be nearby...

Day 15

Kapchagai

After our overnight flight from the UK one can relax in the hotel or start in the sands of the Kapchagai where we'll have our first meeting with the wonderful bulbous flora of the Central Asian steppes. Tulips soon start appearing, here are four species, and all must be seen today as they do not occur in the other parts of Kazakhstan we visit during the tour! These special species include a lovely yellow form of *Tulipa albertii* which blooms amidst a carpet of white blossomed *Spiraea hypericifolia* subshrubs. Elegant *Eremurus crispus* can be seen with sumptuous red *Tulipa behmiana*, often in company with pale *Gagea ova*, abundant *Gagea minutiflora* and local *Gagea tenera*. 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 *Rindera cyclodonta* and *Corydalis karelinii*. In the open sandy areas we'll look for *Iris tenuifolia* and both *Tulipa talievii* and the yellow-centred white stars of *Tulipa buhseana*. We'll visit a canyon where we can take our picnic between patches of *Tulipa lemmersii*, a newly described and very beautiful tulip. First described in 2008 and named after Wim Lemmers, this extremely local endemic grows only on the west-facing rocks on the top of this canyon!

Day 16

The Kordoi Pass and Merke

After a night's sleep in the Hotel Almaty we will wake to find the immense snow-covered peaks of the Tien Shan rising from the edge of Almaty's skyline - a truly magnificent sight! We journey westwards and will soon be amongst the montane steppe of the Kordoi Pass where we will find one of the finest shows of spring flowers one could wish for. The stunning open goblets of *Tulipa ostrowskyana* and *Tulipa kolpakowskiana* (and hybrids between the two) come in a kaleidoscopic show of reds, yellow and oranges, while growing amongst them is the lovely *Iris (Juno) kusakevichii*, *Iris tienshanica*, and a carpet of gageas and corydalis species. The rare *Leontice eversmanni* holds its lemon-flowered pyramids against the blue skies and overhead flocks of Demoiselle Cranes and Black Kites circle before passing northwards - this is a truly wonderful place! Later we will stop for the night at a hotel right at the foot of the Tien Shan. Our target here is the beautiful *Tulipa zenaida*, found only in a few valleys near Merke. This glorious tulip has large flowers with alternate red and yellow tepals - a quite striking effect!

Day 17

The Muyum Kum Desert and Dzhabagly

Continuing westwards along the old silk route we find the Muyum Kum Desert set right at the foot of the snow-capped peaks of the Tien Shan. It is hard to credit, but within sight of all those flowery meadows and all that snow is a sandy desert where rain rarely falls! From our road the sands stretch northwards over hundreds of kilometres of inhospitable terrain. The scorching desert heat of summer is a long way distant as we wander amongst the dunes and saxaul scrub watching Booted Warblers and Isabelline Shrikes as strange Toad-headed Agamas and Steppe Agamas catch some pleasant spring sunshine. *Eremias grammica* and its close relative, the aptly-named Rapid Runner (whose front legs keep running even when the lizard has stopped!) scurry hither and thither. All is not just sand here though - we should see the lovely blue *Iris tenuifolia* in flower and hopefully the last blooms of *Tulipa binutans* and more certainly *Tulipa bifloriformis*. We'll see plenty of the blue trumpets of *Ixiolirion tataricum* and will have our first experience of lovely *Corydalis ledebouriana*. In the afternoon we'll arrive in Taraz (formerly Dzhambul). This is where Vladimir lives. Just outside the town lies the Aisha Bibi mausoleum, an elegant 12th century structure commemorating a Persian noble woman, who never quite made it to Taraz!

Days 18-20

The Karatau Mountains and Steppe Lakes

A little to the west of Taraz lie the mysterious Karatau Mountains, their striking outline clearly visible from the city. Here are fantastic shows of spring bulbs, and once again, tulips play a major role. Three species decorate the rocky slopes. Greig's Tulips in regular reds and orange-reds is found here, but on the slopes of the Berkara Valley, you can see all the genetic diversity harnessed by those early tulip breeders from Holland. Here the blooms are yellow, white, orange or red and all combinations in between. Along with *Tulipa kaufmanniana* grow the delicate yellow and white stars of *Tulipa turkestanica*. At nearby Kizilkol we'll find the rare *Tulipa borszczowii*. *Rhinopetalum* adds shades of pink to the scene, and here we will find many superb specimens of that strange fritillary, *Korolkovia severzovii*. Lovely juno irises are a common sight. The subtle blue flowers of *Iris (Juno) willmottiana* are usually single whereas the robust yellow flowers of *Iris (Juno) orchioides* are stacked one above the other. The early flowering *Iris (Juno) subdecolorata* usually still has some of its pretty blooms on show. We think you will be very impressed with the wonderful array of beautiful *Corydalis* species on show. The glaucous foliage and red and white flowers of both *Corydalis ledebouriana* and *Corydalis nudicaulis* are prominent and we shall also see the rare *Corydalis severzovii* with its orange-yellow flowers. The prize though must go to the stunning *Corydalis schanginii*. The rare 'ainii' subspecies, only recently discovered, bears spikes of a dozen or so bright yellow, white and pale pink flowers each fully two inches long! There's more tulips too. Hardly less impressive than Greig's Tulips are the Karatau subspecies of *Tulipa abertii*, a vibrant red form, sometimes separated as *Tulipa karatavica*, and then there's lovely *Tulipa lehmanniana* in citrus hues.

Resident birds include Eastern Rock Nuthatch and raptors such as Long-legged Buzzard, Black Vulture and Saker Falcon which will be busy searching out prey for their growing young. Many migrants pass this way. Steppe lakes host elegant Demoiselle Cranes, sometimes a thousand of them in a single flock. Flocks of Black-throated Thrushes will still be feeding on the rich assortment of fruiting bushes before heading north. Among the choicer species we should see are Little Bustard, Marsh Sandpiper, Terek Sandpiper and Great Black-headed Gulls.

Days 21-25

The Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve in the Tien Shan Mountains, the Karatau Mountains, and Steppe Lakes

The Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve has recently been afforded the status of Biosphere Reserve, the only one so far designated in Kazakhstan. Some 85,000 hectares of mountain reserve, ranging in altitude from 3,000 feet to over 14,000 feet, has been completely protected for 75 years and it has only been during the past few years that Westerners have had the chance to visit this pristine mountain domain. And it starts within walking distance of the village! Just outside Dzhabagly and within walking distance of the hotel we shall see the lovely pink *Rhinopetalum stenanthum* (a fritillary) in the fields.

We spend four days exploring the reserve, which starts just a kilometre from the hotel. Aksu-Dzhabagly's famous flora and fauna is, in April, concentrated on the lower slopes as above about 6,000 feet is snow-bound at this time. The lovely white stars of *Crocus alataicus*, inset with orange anthers, often appear directly through these snows! Growing with them is perhaps the most gorgeous flower of them all, the wonderfully unpronounceable *Iridodictyum kolpakovskianum*. This botanical treasure is dressed in blues, purples and yellows, making it a particularly photogenic species when set against a background of white crocuses. *Gymnospermium alberti* pushes its tubular yellow flowers and beautifully dissected leaves through the damp ground. In these areas close to the snow we can expect to find the local *Tulipa dasystemonoides* and the unusual bright yellow *Colchicum luteum*. Slopes below are awash with bright yellow *Anemone petiolulosa* and *Anemone gortschakovii*, and in shady juniper groves we will find the local aconite, *Eranthis longistipitata*. It is here that the fabulous bright red goblets of Greig's Tulip can be seen. There can be few flowers which surpass this tulip in such extravagant beauty and rarely are such strong colours seen away from the plant breeder's palate. Growing with it is the immaculate local speciality, *Tulipa kaufmanniana*, whose open flowers give rise to the local name of Water-Lily Tulip.

This reserve is justly famous for its large mammals. All the snow and ice at higher altitudes concentrates them on one long grassy ridge where they await the melting of the snows above. This gives the reserve's scientists an ideal opportunity to count these animals and assess population trends. We should see perhaps a hundred Siberian Ibex and several of the globally endangered Arkhar (a kind of Marco Polo Sheep) during our walks. Isabelline Brown Bears, of which there are now less than 200 remaining in the wild, are the reserve's other main claim to fame. Some sixty of them live here, and quite unbelievably, they spend the mid-

winter months hibernating up in the snowy peaks. With luck we should be able watch mother Bears with their cubs feeding on the fresh green growth near the snowline.

Yellow-breasted Azure Tits, Red-fronted Serins and the huge-billed White-winged Grosbeaks are establishing their breeding territories amongst the junipers, while Blue Whistling Thrush and Brown Dipper are active along the sparkling streams that cascade from the snows. Lammergeier, Black Vulture and Golden Eagle patrol the skies above whilst the eerie calls of the Himalayan Snowcock descend from the high snowy crags of the marble mountain. Bird migration can be very exciting at this time, and substantial 'falls' of migrants can occur - during our visit three years ago the village hosted several immaculate Blue-headed Redstarts, a stunning male Himalayan Rubythroat and Sulphur-bellied, Dusky and Hume's Yellow-browed Warblers.

After a day in the field we catch the evening train on Day 25 from nearby Tulkubas and arrive in Almaty at nine the next morning. From the comfortable first class sleeper accommodation you can watch the landscapes of Central Asia roll by.

Days 26

Almaty: Kaskelen

We'll spend a day exploring 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 *Primula kaufmanniana* blooming amid a carpet of gagea and corydalis species. The delicate 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.

Day 27

Departure

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our previous tours to the Tien Shan in April. The Kyrgyzia part of the tour is new. 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.

To book a place on this holiday please click on the 'Book this Tour' button on the right-hand side of the page where you downloaded this itinerary, or fill in a booking form downloadable from <https://www.greentours.co.uk/booking/> (also found in the Greentours brochure) and post to Greentours, 8 Eliot Close, Armitage, Rugeley, WS15 4UP, UK. Tel +44 (0)1298 83563. After booking your place you'll

receive a confirmation letter and a detailed information pack will be dispatched twelve weeks prior to departure. Flower, mammal and bird checklists are available.