

Kyrgyzstan

КЫРГЫЗСТАН

Kyrgyzstan is tucked into Central Asia's geographical vortex amid a massive knot of colliding mountain ranges. Monster mountains and their associated scraggy valleys, glaciers, gorges and ice-blue lakes dominate over 90% of the country.

Keen on trekking or horse riding? Just pick a range – there's plenty to choose from – and head to the *jailoos*, high-altitude summer pastures of glorious, untrammelled alpine scenery. In true nomadic style, spend the nights camped under a star-crowded sky or bed down in a yurt. Be warned though, the Kyrgyz are renowned for their hospitably and guests are often treated to fermented mare's milk and bowls of fresh yogurt.

Indeed, nomadic traditions are alive and kicking in Kyrgyzstan. You can take to the hills around Lake Issyk-Köl, the earth's second-largest alpine lake, with a trained eagle to hunt rabbit or cheer wildly alongside the locals during a game of *kok boru*, a ferocious battle in which mounted riders wrestle one another for the corpse of a headless goat.

Cash-strapped locals, struggling to eek out a living in postcommunist Asia, have turned to tourism for help. The creation of sustainable projects are revolutionising budget travel, pushing Kyrgyzstan to the forefront of community tourism and bringing in a little extra money for families. By contrast, now that the long, unyielding arm of Russian law is no longer on the scene, corruption by officials and political turmoil are part of daily life.

Kyrgyzstan may be small, it may be often overlooked but, just like the players in a game of *kok boru*, this tenacious nation packs a powerful wallop and may yet run off with the prize as Central Asia's most appealing and accessible republic.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 198,500 sq km
- **Capital** Bishkek
- **Country Code** ☎ 996
- **Famous For** Towering mountains, eagle hunting, nomadic yurts
- **Languages** Kyrgyz, Russian
- **Money** Kyrgyz som: US\$1 = 38.77som, €1 = 50.7
- **Phrases** *Salam.* (Hello.); *Rahmat.* (Thank you); *Jaqshi.* (Good.)
- **Population** 5.2 million (2006 estimate)



HOW MUCH?

- Snickers bar US\$0.40
- 100km bus ride US\$1.70
- One-minute phone call to the USA US\$0.63
- Internet per hour US\$0.75-1
- Kyrgyz hat US\$3-6
- 1L of bottled water US\$0.40
- Bottle of beer US\$1
- Shashlyk US\$0.80
- 1L of petrol US\$0.60

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Horse treks** (p343) See the Kyrgyz countryside at its best by riding high into the mountains and galloping across summer pastures.
- **Lake Issyk-Köl** (p294) Hemmed in by mountains this bizarrely un-freezeable lake is the country's premier attraction.
- **Altyn Arashan** (p306) Breath-taking scenery, steaming hot pools and the first glimpse of the secret Ala-Köl lake makes for great trekking.
- **Osh** (p334) For centuries Silk Road traders have haggled their way from one stall to the next in a bazaar that locals claim is older than Rome – join them.
- **Arslanbob** (p330) Go nuts in the world's largest walnut forest on a network of blossoming woodland treks.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Explore around Ala-Too Sq in Bishkek (p278), checking out the unabashedly pro-Soviet murals in the State Historical Museum and go trekking in the Ala-Archa Valley (p290).
- **One week** After Bishkek head east to Karakol (p300) on the shores of Lake Issyk-Köl and spend a few days hiking, horse riding or visiting local eagle hunters.
- **Two weeks** Add on Kochkor (p316), a horse trek to Song-Köl (p318) and a visit to Tash Rabat caravanserai (p325).
- **One month** Weave through the entire country. From Osh (p334), head north to Arslanbob (p330) or Lake Sary-Chelek (p329) en route to Bishkek (p278). Loop around Lake Issyk-Köl including Cholpon-

Ata (p296) before continuing to Kochkor and Naryn (p319). Exit to China via the Torugart Pass (p325).

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Siberian winds bring freezing temperatures and snow from November to February, with ferocious cold in the mountains. The average winter minimum is -24°C .

Throughout the country springtime buds appear in April and May, though nights can still be below freezing. Mid-May to mid-June is pleasant, though many mountain passes will still be snowed in. From the end of June through to mid-August most afternoons will reach 32°C or higher, with a maximum of 40°C in Fergana Valley towns such as Jalal-Abad; mountain valleys are considerably cooler. Like most of the region, Bishkek gets most of its rainfall in spring and early summer.

Of course in the mountains the 'warm' season is shorter. The best time to visit is July to September, although camping and trekking are pleasant from early June through mid-October. Avalanche danger is greatest during March and April and from September to mid-October.

Overall, the republic is best for scenery and weather in September, with occasional freezing nights in October. See the climate charts, p446, for more details.

HISTORY
Early Civilizations

The earliest notable residents of what is now Kyrgyzstan were warrior clans of Saka (also known as Scythians), from about the 6th century BC to the 5th century AD. Rich bronze and gold relics have been recovered from Scythian burial mounds at Lake Issyk-Köl and in southern Kazakhstan.

The region was under the control of various Turkic alliances from the 6th to 10th centuries. A sizeable population lived on the shores of Lake Issyk-Köl. The Talas Valley in southern Kazakhstan and northwest Kyrgyzstan was the scene of a pivotal battle in 751, when the Turks and their Arab and Tibetan allies drove a large Tang Chinese army out of Central Asia.

The cultured Turkic Karakhanids (who finally brought Islam to Central Asia for good) ruled here in the 10th to 12th centuries. One of their multiple capitals was at Balasagun